



“A language of wet stones and mists”: The Caribbean Poet as a Traveller in Wales and England

MARIJA BERGAM PELLICANI 

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
MINORITISED
LANGUAGES AND
TRAVEL

ARTICLES – GERMAN
STUDIES



ABSTRACT

This article examines Derek Walcott’s “travel poems” about Wales and England from the collections *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981) and *Midsummer* (1984) through the prism of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of *littérature mineure*. As a Caribbean poet, Walcott is placed both outside the centre of “majority”, post-imperial civilisation and within the scope of its literary and linguistic heritage, which he has *detrterritorialised* in his long endeavour to articulate a specifically Caribbean poetics. However, Walcott brings about the decentralisation, or “minorisation”, of English not by means of the oppositional poetics characteristic of avowedly revolutionary poetry (through disruptive linguistic practices or the exclusive use of Creole), but rather through immersion in the English literary tradition and a keen interest in contemporary “provincial” Anglophone poetic production. His tentative gestures of identification, accompanied by contrary motions of distancing and critical self-awareness, complicate and deepen his troubled encounter with Europe. In their engagement with the Welsh and English “Elsewhere” these poems ultimately participate in transvaluation of the relationship between centre and periphery, a dynamics that marked the most significant Anglophone literary currents in the second part of the twentieth century.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Marija Bergam Pellicani

Unaffiliated scholar, CH

marija.bergam@gmail.com

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bergam Pellicani, Marija 2023
“A language of wet stones and mists”: The Caribbean Poet as a Traveller in Wales and England. *Modern Languages Open*, 2023(1): 26 pp. 1–11.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.198>

In his early 1980s collections, *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981, 1982) and *Midsummer* (1984), Derek Walcott published several travel poems recording his short visits to Wales and England. This article offers a reading of these texts based on the premise that Walcott is a peculiar sort of traveller: an errant postcolonial poet creating within a minor literature. The latter phrase was famously, if controversially, employed in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 1975 study of Franz Kafka to indicate "a literature constructed by a minority in a major language" (1986 16), exemplified by Kafka's writings and his distinctive use of German. According to Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature shows three defining characteristics: the language employed is "affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization"; it is necessarily political; whatever an individual author thereby expresses has a collective function and value" (1986, 16). They then proceed to draw a parallel between Kafka's treatment of the German language and the situation of Irish or black American writers who are in a similar position with respect to Standard English. Indeed, what they have to say elsewhere about the global dominance of English is highly relevant to the Caribbean linguistic milieu, within which Walcott was pre-eminent as playwright and poet for more than seven decades:

if a language such as British English or American English is major on a world scale, it is necessarily worked upon by all the minorities of the world, using very diverse procedures of variation. Take the way Gaelic and Irish English set English in variation. Or the way Black English and any number of 'ghetto languages' set American English in variation. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 124)

Walcott employs to great effect both creole *englishes*—predominantly St Lucian and Trinidadian—and St Lucian French Creole (often spelt *kwéyol*, in an instance of the orthography that he himself rejects). However, on the printed page and in terms of orthography, most of his poems appear as Standard English. For this reason it bears repeating that by "minor literature" Deleuze and Guattari do not refer to the works written in languages of linguistic, ethnic and other minorities, or even to dialects, but to particular uses of the "major language" itself:

It is certainly not by using a minor language as a dialect, by regionalizing or ghettoizing, that one becomes revolutionary; rather, by using a number of minority elements, by connecting, conjugating them, one invents a specific, unforeseen, autonomous becoming. (1987, 42)

The dynamics between major and minor linguistic practices is very complex in Walcott's case, as a poet of mixed African and European ancestry—thus belonging to a racial minority—who grew up in a Methodist household on a predominantly Catholic island, speaking St Lucian English at a time when the majority of population used French Creole. Around the time he published his first poems, in the late nineteen-forties, the percentage of the population speaking exclusively French Creole was, according to linguist Mervin C. Alleyne, 43.4 per cent, while only 0.2 per cent spoke exclusively English (4). Deleuze and Guattari's distinctions conform to the linguistic situation described by Alleyne, as the language of the numerical minority nevertheless preserves the function and the "oppressive quality" of a major language (1986, 27). In the St Lucian context, Alleyne describes the relationship between the two languages as extremely hostile, reflective of economic, social and cultural distinctions that characterised the island society. Yet he makes allowance for a range of unpredictable and creative individual attitudes that challenge the rigid divisions implied by the pyramid model, or rather, point to its nature as a linguistic continuum.

Walcott's choice of English rather than French Creole may have been inevitable, but it has generated the long internal conflict that fuels his poetry. He repeatedly gives expression to this creative and political dilemma, including in the collections under discussion, for example in the poem "LII" from *Midsummer*, where he refers to a "division of dictions, one troop black, barefooted, / the other in redcoats" (72). He questions his own "service" to English as the language of the occupier, while identifying, in the parlance of Deleuze and Guattari's Kafka essay, a potential for variation and deterritorialisation within it:

No language is neutral;
 the green oak of English is a murmurous cathedral
 where some took umbrage, some peace, but every shade, all
 helped widen its shadow (Walcott 1984, 72)

These lines are emblematic in their pronounced ambiguity: “umbrage” can be understood both as shade cast by the trees—hence shelter or protection—as well as offence, resentment. Consequently, the widening shadow of English may indicate both the deterritorialisation brought about by centrifugal minority usages, and the always present potential for reterritorialisation this may imply. In other words, no matter how unorthodox and revolutionary the minor usage, it still might be seen as furthering the linguistic hegemony of one standard over another, thus ultimately reinforcing the literary canon and the relative worldview instrumental in the imperialist project. Walcott’s literary idiom, characterised by an unapologetic, if often embattled, embrace of Western literary tradition, has been particularly susceptible to this kind of criticism. The following discussion of his travel poems focuses on this inextricable interplay of the centrifugal (or deterritorialising) and centripetal forces in Walcott’s “European” travel poems, and its implications for his wider work. I argue that in these texts Walcott successfully steers clear of the Scylla and Charybdis of ideologically motivated rejection and reterritorialisation, in that he does not allow his poetic persona to entrench himself in one identity, to take root in one soil or assume a distinctly antagonistic position, choosing one “appropriate” side of the linguistic and cultural divide. Instead, the divisions are multiplied and constantly crossed; heterogeneity is the norm.

Rather than seeking to circumscribe a highly polysemous, refractory term such as “deterritorialisation”, for the sake of the present argument it is more expedient to conceive of it as indicating the always ongoing processes by which a language changes, explodes into variants and resists attempts at systematisation. In the 1930s, the ideal implied by the synchronic Saussurean notion of *langue* was submitted to a critique by Mikhail Bakhtin, whose argument anticipates Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis: “Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward” (1990, 272). The present discussion of Walcott harks back to both these theoretical frames, in an attempt to illustrate his shifty positioning within the English-language literary tradition, exemplified by the ambiguous figure of the “fortunate traveller” he ironically projects in these collections.

The critical assessment of Walcott’s poetry from a perspective of *littérature mineure* is not unprecedented. In her work exploring the relevance of Deleuze’s philosophy for Caribbean poets and thinkers, Lorna Burns writes with regard to *Omeros*: “because Walcott’s definition of imagination envisions a process of actualization and in his work he demonstrates the creative potential of this process as becoming, his constitutes a minor literature” (75). Alexander Irvine examines Walcott’s “deterritorialization of Western myth” by applying Deleuze and Guattari’s criteria for the status of minority authorship to his poems. It is worth noting how Irvine’s account of Walcott’s poem “Origins” becomes troubled by its closing ambivalence, by what looks like a reterritorialisation or “an unwillingness to completely forget the received ideas and categories” (129). In viewing Walcott’s work as a linear evolution, however, he neglects to remark on a similar movement in the closing stanzas of *Omeros* (1990). Here, the narrator, who has critically taken apart and repudiated his own use of Greek Homeric parallels, refers to his black, quiet fisherman Achille as “[a] triumphant Achilles” (Walcott 1990, 324, emphasis added), once again clothing him in the halo of epic light in which he was presented at the outset. Both these works, on their very different scales, allow us to make a case for Walcott as an agent of deterritorialisation, but as always with his poems, it is the self-contradicting movement, a circularity that nevertheless eschews the perfect closure of the circle, that makes them ideologically impure, textually unstable and therefore more open-ended and engaging.

The lyrical poems here analysed present a different challenge. As an itinerant persona, Walcott explores the position of a provincial traveller and minority author removed from the Caribbean environment and placed outside the framework of “writing back” to the canon, so often invoked in analyses of postcolonial poetics. He does so in a language that is self-consciously literary and politically disengaged. In doing so, he lays claim to all its available resources, but in contrast to *Omeros* or “The Schooner Flight” (Walcott, 1979), his English appears unmarked from a socio-linguistic and grammatical point of view—insofar as one can properly say that about poetry. Moreover, there is no manifest stretching of the language beyond the limits of signification, no proliferating paronomasia such as one finds in passages of *Omeros*. Hence, it seems the opposite of the “agrammatical”, “asignifying”, ascetical language of pure intensities preferred by Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 22ff.; 1987, 99 and 104ff.). Walcott purposefully lays claim to

all the multiple resources of English, its rich and conflicting “word-hoard” (in Seamus Heaney’s phrase from “North” 1975, 20), for himself as the poet of the periphery. Put differently, he is taking the problematic Joycean path of deterritorialisation, alluded to in Deleuze’s essay (1986, 19). Adam Kirsch’s commentary on Seamus Heaney in a *New Republic* review equally applies to Walcott’s work: “He refused to be subversive so that he could permit himself the felicity of the aesthete” (par. 27), a poetic stance that turns out to be equally provocative.

The opening poem in the “North” section of *The Fortunate Traveller* (1982) takes as subject the poet’s visit to Wales. A valuable point of access into the text are lines 7 to 10, which evoke certain qualities of “Welshness” through a particular kind of formal poetic means:

Down rusty gorges, cold rustling gorse,
 over rocks hard as consonants, and rain-vowelled shales
 sang the shallow-buried axe, helmet, and baldric
 before the wet asphalt sibilance of tires. (Walcott 1982, 87)

The marked iconicity achieved through emphatic consonance—recalling “The soft consonants / Strange to the ear” of R. S. Thomas’s “Welsh Landscape” (37), to which we will shortly return—the initial percussive beat and then the liquid, then sibilant phonemes establishing onomatopoeia, all these suggest linguistic choices that are supposedly “organically” related to the properties of the landscape and the history that permeates it. A similarly organic notion of language features in “Streams”, one of Walcott’s later Welsh poems, whose autobiographic speaker apprehends “a language / built of wet stones and mists / in each stubborn bilingual sign / in the cloud-lit country of [Henry] Vaughan” (1987, 80).

Jeremy Hooker writes with reference to R. S. Thomas: “The organic metaphor of speech containing ‘the source of all poetry’ implies a close connection between people, language, and land; indeed that a culture is part of the land, as natural as water” (35). This argument may easily be extended to many other Welsh poets writing in English. In their discussions of language, Hooker, Thomas and to a certain extent Walcott refer to Welsh, or Cymraeg, rather than English—the hegemonic language of the outsider and his “machine” (the term recurs both in R. S. Thomas’s poetry and in Ned Thomas’s *The Welsh Extremist*). The rift between Welsh-speaking and English-speaking Wales was acutely felt by Anglophone Welsh authors of the twentieth century, and dramatically exemplified by R. S. Thomas’s lines on how he had “sucked their speech / in with my mother’s / infected milk, so that whatever / I throw up now is still theirs” (“It Hurts Him to Think” 262). This is a far cry from Walcott’s avowed love of the English tongue. But in the Caribbean, the interpenetration of land and culture of which Hooker speaks is much more problematic and, in a sense, yet to be firmly established. In striking opposition to Thomas’s rooted peasants, Walcott writes about “the migratory West Indian [feeling] rootless on his own earth”, the “sprout casually stuck in the soil” (1998, 19). He cannot recover his ancestral African languages, but instead lives in the midst of extraordinary polyglossia. While similar conditions may favour the explosion of creative expression, for an individual they can also prove thwarting. In retrospect, these considerations qualify the seemingly essentialist, reterritorialising character of similar associations between speech, climate, land and the people inhabiting it. There is poignancy in the fact that Walcott is forever seeking a poetic expression that could render the qualities of light, weather, topography and botany of a particular locale, while writing in a language that was violently imposed on transplanted and enslaved peoples and on a conquered territory. Indeed, there is a link between Walcott’s creative quest and the history of the language he uses, striving to bend and reinvent it so as to make it correspond with the local environment, where the truly creative expression must be achieved: a poetic imperative that Walcott calls “faith in using the old names anew” (1998, 9). This enterprise is complicated by the dichotomy between English and Creole. The latter emerged in the crucible of the plantation but is nevertheless felt by Walcott to be more “organic” and more poetic of the two. It is perceived as a closer equivalent in the poet’s unceasing work of “translation”: “like the leaves of the trees whose names are suppler, greener, more morning-stirred than English” (1998, 80). Yet, like James Joyce and Aimé Césaire, Walcott embraced the metropolitan language in his poetry (his plays are a wholly different matter).

In his review of the *Fortunate Traveller*, Calvin Bedient notices with regard to “Wales” that “[t]he authority of the writing seems uncanny, since Walcott can only have visited the country. It is with a ferreting genius that this Caribbean deprived of history goes after its insignia in other

lands” (321). First of all, it should be noted that Bedient’s phrase “deprived of history” takes up Walcott’s own trope of the Caribbean as a place without history. As such, it is not to be taken literally but rather as a strategic position from which Walcott constructed, particularly in the 1970s, his subtle New World politics and poetics. To accept amnesia as an empowering force and to reject official History along with a purely counter-colonial “revolutionary” stance was a necessary stage in his eschewal of the dualities inherited from a history of imperialism (cf. Walcott, “The Muse of History” 1998). As for his grasp of Welsh landscape, it is not so much the outcome of a single trip to Wales but rather the result of his previous readings and the imaginative empathy they made possible, as reflected in his reference to Henry Vaughan. This is also signalled by the sustained correspondence between the outside world and the poetic text, for Walcott often envisions landscape as a printed page. The language of his apparently straightforward rendering of Welsh landscape may evoke Vaughan himself but also Dylan Thomas (a significant formative influence), R. S. Thomas or even Seamus Heaney, Walcott’s peer and another eminently regional poet. This is not to diminish the acuity of his perception, but instead to acknowledge the substratum of poetic echoes that his own view of intertextuality—a term Walcott never uses—would render unavoidable. Nevertheless, this is reminiscent of Deleuze’s remarks against the always possible lapse into reterritorialisation, since his receptivity to past and contemporary poetic records of a place may work both for and against his “minorisation” of English. Jahan Ramazani addresses similar misgivings when he asks about Walcott’s poetic procedures in *Omeros*: “Is Walcott recolonizing Caribbean literature for Europeans by using this and other Greek types?” (63). He convincingly argues the opposite case, but it is the following passage from *The Hybrid Muse* that perfectly chimes with the present reading of the very different poems from earlier collections. Ramazani comments on

the slipperiness and polyvalence of poetic discourse that circulates between races, crossing lines of class and community, bridging differences between West Indian fisherman and Greek warrior. With its resonance and punning, imagistic doubling and metaphoric webbing, Walcott’s poetry demonstrates the kinds of imaginative connections and transgressions that have ironically made poetry a minor field in postcolonial literary studies. For poetry, at least in Walcott’s hands, is less respectful than prose fiction of racial, regional, national, and gender loyalties. (68)

Indeed, these texts deliberately stress circular motions, territorial, textual and figurative, as well as a refusal to be bound by loyalties, constantly exploring and enacting the process of “becoming minor” considered so vital by Deleuze (*Kafka* 27).

Bedient’s remark about Walcott as a poet without history usefully points out the deliberate contrast built into the poem. He is a Caribbean writer who bases his vision on the Adamic “newness” of his own world and who, in Wales, faces a landscape steeped in “History”, a land long inscribed in the historical annals and mythical imaginary. Walcott may have been familiar with R. S. Thomas’s controversial lines:

There is no present in Wales,
 And no future;
 There is only the past,
 Brittle with relics,
 Wind-bitten towers and castles. (37)

There is no doubt that he read Thomas’s work, for in a 1965 review of the poetry of Jamaican Eric Roach, he mentions the Welsh poet-priest twice, placing him in the category of “[r]egional, landscape poets that also includes Edward Thomas, Thomas Hardy, and, ‘on occasion’, Dylan Thomas” (2013, 212). In contrast to R. S. Thomas’s poem, Walcott often refers to the Caribbean archipelago as defined precisely by the lack of ruins, a condition that he judges as beneficial to his poetic project. As a traveller, however, he is not interested in uncovering the Welsh past as an archaeologically minded poet might, and despite the familiar romantic echoes in his description, he would be wary of clichéd escapist narratives for the tourist. Neither is he composing an elegiac reflection on the overbearing presence of history to be contrasted with the “deep, amnesiac blow” (Walcott, “Laventille”, *Collected Poems* 88) suffered by his own community, although this contrast certainly underlies the poem. When he brings in the “historical insignia”, he does so as someone fascinated by the possibilities and problems of language, the point that clearly emerges at the close of the poem: “a language is shared / like bread to the mouth, white flocks to dark byres” (Walcott, “Wales” 1982, 87). This is equally true

of his careful rendering of weather conditions and geography. The apparently unmarked lexical choices are, in fact, employed as tokens of a place and its historical legacy. Such permeability to the potentialities of another's idiom and a fascination with foreign places sometimes disturb more categorical readers. [Helen Vendler's](#) and, in part, Calvin Bedient's reviews of this collection represent a case in point, but see also Gerald Guinness's comments reproduced below.

Before more is said about Walcott's poetic strategy, the closing phrase merits further attention. "[L]ike bread to the mouth" reiterates the terms in which poetry was defined in the twelfth and thirteenth stanzas of "Forest of Europe", dedicated to Joseph Brodsky in exile:

what's poetry, if it is worth its salt,
 but a phrase men can pass from hand to mouth
 From hand to mouth, across the centuries,
 the bread that lasts when systems have decayed. ([Walcott 1979, 40](#))

Arguably, the resistance of the Welsh people, who strive to preserve their cultural and above all linguistic heritage from the encroachments of history and technological progress, should be associated with the moral courage of persecuted and exiled poets, such as Osip Mandelstam and Joseph Brodsky after him. However, it is not entirely clear whether—apart from the possibility of extending the term to refer to the language of poetry itself—this "shared language" is to be understood as Cymraeg or rather Welsh English. That the latter possibility should not be excluded becomes clear in the wider context of these collections, as the sense and deep value of this "sharing" is repeatedly alluded to, notably in the above-quoted poem from *Midsummer*, where Walcott formulates the question: "but what mortar can size / the broken stones of the barracks of Brimstone Hill / to the gaping brick of Belfast?" (72). Indeed, choosing one of the languages as the only valid instrument of resistance would go against the grain of his own poetics.

"Wales" is dedicated to Ned Thomas, the academic, journalist and publisher who introduced Walcott to a Welsh audience. Thomas's analysis of the rift in Welsh literature offers an indirect comment on the West Indian situation: he posits the central problem for Welsh Anglophone writers when he asks how to find a style in which to write about one's country in a language that "carries the weight of another culture" ([1971, 110](#)). It is the same problem that haunted the emergence of West Indian literature. In the bilingual introduction he wrote to Walcott's work, Thomas himself suggests that "[b]ecause Derek Walcott has seen his situation as an opportunity rather than as a burden, he may offer in Wales a direction; and because we have some small affinity with his situation we may identify with him beyond the obscuring guilts and stereotypes" ([1980, 2](#)). Those final words are particularly apt in any discussion of Walcott's work. Akin to Thomas's recognition of the important differences and empowering analogies between the two postcolonial cultures, Walcott's poem is not simply a descriptive travelogue piece, or a purely aesthetic meditation on language, but an example of cross-cultural solidarity and the possibilities for political, linguistic and artistic resistance. This includes his own choice to write in "beautiful formal English", as [Bedient says \(317\)](#), to immerse himself in its complex history and align himself with marginal traditions, thereby actively quickening the always ongoing deterritorialisation of the traditional grounds of English letters.

The following two poems are chosen from the English sequence in *Midsummer* ([1984](#)): they are both reminiscent of "Wales" in that they both tell of a car drive along wet roads, both draw on medieval imagery and display an interest in the way language and landscape shape each other in the poet's vision. Unlike "Wales", however, they explicitly bring to the fore the autobiographic speaker's personal relationship to Britain. Walcott widens his linguistic resources to embrace the poetic, and partly political, undercurrents acting as "centrifugal" energies at work in British englishes. He makes effective use of sounds and imagery in an account of two epiphanies experienced while journeying through Wales and England. The account of the travel is, once again, both recognisably literary (even intertextual) and sensuously concrete:

Mud. Clods. The sucking heel of the rain-flinger.
 Sometimes the gusts of rain veered like the sails
 of dragon-beaked vessels dipping to Avalon
 and mist. ([Walcott 1984, 68](#))

It should be noted how the tension here between consonants and vowels, the mimetic monosyllables evoking steps trudging through mud, the imagery splicing Vikings and Arthurian legend recall Heaney's verse. In the terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin, Walcott's "word" is often

manifestly “dialogised”, especially in his “travel poetry”: it is a word that projects towards its “object” aware that it is enveloped in other people’s words (294). This point bears on the third characteristic of minor literature mentioned above, namely the fact that for Deleuze and Guattari there can be no question of a subject or even two subjects of enunciation, for there are only “collective assemblages of enunciation”:

the collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I take my proper name [Deleuze’s English reader will recall Walcott’s description of English as “murmurous cathedral”, 1984, 72], the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice. I always depend on a molecular assemblage of enunciation that is not given in my conscious mind. To write is perhaps to bring this assemblage of the unconscious to the light of day, to select the whispering voices, to gather the tribes and secret idioms from which I extract something I call my Self (Moi). (1987, 84)

As that last sentence demonstrates, this does not necessarily invalidate the reading of these poems that would presuppose an autobiographic persona employed by Walcott, a travelling Caribbean poet and a shifting “subject” constituted by these particular, interconnected instances of language use. Furthermore, whoever Walcott’s actual companion, whose presence is implied in the poem, might have been, the inkling that Heaney can be glimpsed behind these lines is reinforced when the ghost of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* appears to accompany the car crossing from Wales into England. In 1979, Heaney wrote a review of Walcott’s recently published collection, in which he claimed to hear “the murmur of Malvern” in the opening lines of “The Schooner *Flight*” (1988, 25), an intentionally deterritorialising gesture. For their generation of poets, Langland had become the emblem of a tradition posited as an alternative to the unifying linguistic and social forces concentrated in London.

The history of this conflict of poetic traditions has received the most sustained attention in the Englishman—or, more specifically, Yorkshireman—Ted Hughes’s writing, culminating in the essay “Myths, Metres, Rhythms” (1994). Indeed, in a contribution deeply resonating with the subject of the present article, entitled “Regional Forecast”, Heaney described the poetry of the best contemporary English poets active at the time (including Hughes) as self-consciously, even defensively regional, and in that sense close to the problems and sensibilities characteristic of postcolonial authors (1989, 20). The same point is argued in “*Englands of the Mind*”. As his own essay about Ted Hughes testifies, Walcott was well aware of the provincial, centrifugal traditions that energised contemporary English poetry by emphasising its historical stratification and regional particularities (1998, 176–81). The increasingly provincial profile of English letters and the rediscovery of sidelined traditions allowed him to conceptually refine and complicate his own “England of the mind” (the phrase is used by Heaney in the eponymous essay), usually posited as the monologic centre of a dismantled Empire, and to reimagine his personal relationship to it. In other words, this helped him to deterritorialise the English language not from the default position of a Caribbean dialect or straightforwardly anticolonial rhetoric, but by burrowing deeper into its literary history and moving sideways between its multiple peripheries, like his emblematic creature, the crab.

To an extent, this movement is enacted in poem “XXXV” from *Midsummer*. The speaker momentarily assumes a nostalgic, elegiac outlook, which derives from a sense of a history partly shared:

the world was new
 while the cairns, the castled hillocks, the stony kings
 were scabbarded in sleep, yet what made me think
 that the crash of chivalry in a kitchen sink
 was my own dispossession? I could sense, from calf
 to flinging wrist, my veins ache in a knot. (Walcott 1984, 48)

The alliterative use of the consonants (k, s, l) marks out the tokens of an older world now gone out of use (“scabbarded”), but it is the word “dispossession”, which phonically echoes “crash” and “chivalry”, that most attracts attention. The term “dispossession” is easily associated with the aspect of Walcott’s work that expresses the experience of the colonised, but in this case the term is recontextualised and employed in a way that challenges readers’ expectations. In fact, “dispossession” here not only refers to a lost “freshness” of English letters, but possibly

also to a loss of spiritual values and a diminished political consequence on the world stage, as Walcott implies that he has a share in that loss. Nonetheless, the reference to the aching veins could be also taken to mean quite the opposite, as if the flash of imperial nostalgia and a harking back to a long-gone world were nothing more than a preposterous, conditioned impulse of a former colonial. Either way, this intricate, ambivalent feeling results in a moment of fresh vision, signalled by the closing metaphor that fuses the medieval, aristocratic, imagery threaded through these texts with a modern and wholly mundane image. The sun “brightened like a sign”, as he wiped the mist on the café window to discover “helmets of wet cars in the parking lot” (Walcott, “XXXV” 1984, 48). The tentativeness of this inspired moment of perception is underlined by contrast with the impossibility of capturing the landscape behind the motel windowpane in a later poem.

The actuality of a lineage that is not only cultural—and hence part and parcel of a “sound colonial education”, as Walcott’s Shabine famously puts it—but also biological, is addressed again in “XXXIX”, in a context redolent with Anglo-Saxon and Middle English cultural traces. The poet recounts a vision of his “bastard ancestor” (Walcott, “XXXIX” 1984, 52) met by a white hare that now reappears on the road, like the proverbial rabbit in the headlights. Yet it is uncertain whether this account is to be read as an epiphany belying the initial hostility and rejection of his early “England of the mind” (“I hated fables”, he also writes in “XXXIX”, 52). It remains, too, a question how exactly the speaker may be reintegrated into the fabled English countryside, the system of customs and beliefs underpinning its language, and his own white ancestry. The text does not yield any obvious key for unlocking the meaning of the imagined encounter, nor any pointer as to how this might change the nature of the interaction between the traveller and the colonial fatherland he visits. In the composite image of branches, blood and roads, one can sense the interplay between multiple *roots* and *routes* whose entanglement (“my veins ache in a knot”) made this brief moment of re(ve)lation possible (“XXXIX” 1984, 48). This pun can be justified in light of Édouard Glissant’s concept of relation: the epiphany of the errant poet is precisely that “image of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation” (18). Nevertheless, as seen in other poems, these moments of recognition remain provisional and are often resisted, more ambiguous even than the characteristically self-contradicting closing lines of “The Train”: “Like you, grandfather, I cannot change places, / I am half-home” (Walcott 1969, 24).

The most visible trace that the movement through the English countryside leaves in the poet’s travelogue is to be found in his choice of vocabulary and in his tangible fascination with the evocative power of such words as “hare”, “weald”, “croft”, “atheling” (incidentally, also found in Heaney’s “North”), “beech”, “woad”, “peat”, “byre” (cf. Walcott, “XXXIX”, 1984). To read them with an eye to etymology is to step into a rich repository of recorded history, which ties the sound to the land diachronically, in a way that is impossible to achieve when using English in the Caribbean. Although Walcott has often pointed to the instrumental, manipulative use made of the imagery associated with the English countryside in the education of the Caribbean person indoctrinated as a child, who comes to regard it as the measure of what is natural and desirable, these words nonetheless function as an incantation that calls forth his white grandfather: it was there that he once stood. Yet there is no exchange between the two men, no gesture of clarification is proffered, no movement towards integration in the landscape and its history. One reason Walcott does not fall into the trap of reterritorialisation is that he does not allow his poetic persona, or his text, to settle on one definite, untroubled synthesis; he never completely resolves the tension. If he displays the lexical richness suggested to him by the landscape, he does this from an ironic distance, constantly reminding the reader how he stands out against this background. His rhetorical figures also work to deterritorialise that landscape: for instance, in the second and third lines of “XXXIX” he compares the hissing noise of the tires on a wet road to the sound of the foam mixed with island rain, while Berkshire’s roads are said to be “brown as blood”, a reference to his mixed heritage.

Jonathan Bate seizes on the motif of the retracing of predecessors’ steps in the closing paragraph of his *English Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, a rare critical comment on these two poems from *Midsummer*. This is significant not just because of Bate’s prominence as a critic, but because in a short space of less than 170 pages he selects these two rather neglected texts in order to discuss the “Englishness of English Literature” and Walcott’s work in particular.

Bate's closing paragraph is an especially forceful statement of Walcott's place as a purveyor of the tradition of English literature:

Walcott is on a midsummer pilgrim's progress into his cultural inheritance. ... Witnessing a landscape "scabbarded" in what George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia* called "the deep, deep sleep of England", he discovers that he has been possessed by his reading.... He tracks the feet that in ancient times walked upon England's mountains green. Langland's feet, Milton's, Bunyan's, Blake's. He keeps alive their vision of a new earth, a new Jerusalem, now and in English literature. (166)

Bate draws on the traditional idea of divine possession while recognising the decisive imaginative pull of Walcott's readings on him, readings that are reactivated in the context of the English landscape. He transposes Blake's religious imagery of the "Preface" to *Milton* as a punning reference to actual walking—in "XXXIX", Walcott imagines his ancestor walking on the same "ridge of earth" (1984, 52)—to the proverbial following in someone's footsteps, and as the retracing of the poetic feet of one's predecessors. Many of Walcott's poems and interviews second this view of poetic tradition, and he would certainly not disdain the company of visionary authors in whose hands, in spite—or even because—of their social marginalisation, the English language transformed and survived. Yet it should be observed that Bate overstates his case for Walcott as a pilgrim on the road to the heart of his cultural inheritance. Although in Walcott's "English poems" there is recognition of vital bonds with England, especially its linguistic legacy (cf. "XXXVI" 1984, 49), his voyage never takes on the meaning of a return to the wellspring of his personal and poetic identity. On the contrary, he is careful to undercut this reading (a potential reterritorialising movement) by framing the above-examined sequence with two poems in which he sees himself—or rather, through indirect speech presents himself as others might see him—as a travelling salesman assuaging the post-imperial guilty conscience by peddling "coloured" verse (Walcott 1984, 53).

The last poem of the sequence, written in a different, rather Larkinesque mode, is set in a motel room, a non-place par excellence, where his estrangement, isolation and incapability of grasping the language of his surroundings seal the experience of England on a less than affirmative note:

through the clear, soundless pane, one sees a speech
 that calls to us, but is beyond our powers,
 composed of O's from a reflected bridge,
 the language of white, ponderous clouds convening
 over aerials, spires, rooftops, water towers. (Walcott 1984, 53)

Arguably, he cannot capture this "speech" because the landscape is alien to him. This recalls Walcott's remark that had he left for England earlier in life, he would never have become a poet ("The Muse of History" 1998, 63). There is a suggestion that, Antaeus-like, his verse is nourished by contact with the soil and with the peculiarities of the Caribbean seascape and light. One is reminded of his ties to the islands even in the description of the English motel room whose furniture darkens "Like palms outlined against the hill's oasis" (Walcott 1984, 53). The simile is literally out of place, but it reveals a subdued nostalgia that permeates virtually all the poems from the "North" section. This goes some way towards qualifying his own "performance" of rootlessness in these collections, as well the readings that present Walcott as a cosmopolitan who is equally at home in different places. The way he situates his autobiographic speaker in *Midsummer* never suggests that he is in England except as a traveller: on the roads, crossing borders, on a reading tour, in roadside cafés, in the proximity of car parks, in motel rooms. He enters England obliquely, avoiding the famous landmarks and cultural institutions. In a 1977 interview with Edward Hirsch, Walcott expressed a curious reticence about facing English and European cities:

In terms of my poetry I felt it would be a very, very long time before I could feel secure enough as a West Indian to see or to experience the culture that England and Europe represented. I still have a subliminal fear of Europe; I think I would feel dislocated, alienated, or uprooted if I had some of the traditional great experiences like seeing the Colosseum or Chartres. (Hirsch, 52)

Gerald Guinness employs this argument as proof that Walcott experienced the "Anxiety of Elsewhere" (153ff.) and compensated for it by writing deliberately difficult or rather, tonally and figuratively muddled verse. However, the stylistic qualities of the above-discussed passage,

or of poems such as “Wales”, contradict Guinness’s argument. From a socio-linguistic point of view, verbal choices are not marked, and the figurative expressions are plentiful and sensuous but functional to the poem, not uncontrollably profuse. If Walcott’s much-travelled *Midsummer* narrator eschews the monumental and the urban, and dwells on its language rather than its landmarks, and on the anonymous province instead of the metropolis, this should not be interpreted as the timidity of a provincial but rather as a programmatic reappraisal of the relationship between centres and peripheries, including in Britain. It may also demonstrate, however, a preference for engaging with an aspect of England beyond its metropolis, namely Blake’s pastoral “green & pleasant Land”, which he would have remembered from his preferred readings or from church hymns. This is an original position: while the metropolis is strongly associated with a tradition of “minor”, postcolonial literary production that has had a radical impact on textual representations of the city, in the collective imagination of Walcott’s generation the English countryside would still be perceived as a repository of “Englishness”. While he intentionally draws on this commonplace association, he also modifies it through his own poetic intervention.

In “Streams”, a poem about Wales from the 1987 collection *The Arkansas Testament*, Walcott writes that on visiting the country he “recognized the colonial condition” in what he elsewhere calls “the wound of language” (for the treatment of this potent figure see *Omeros*, and the above-quoted essay by Ramazani, in particular) in the exploitation of the land, the anodyne of popular religious practices and the depredations of tourism (80). However, he also shows that as a poet he first travelled imaginatively, while listening to his mother recounting the tales of Taliesin. He used to envision Wales “[w]henver the sunlit rain / has trawled its trickling meshes / on the dark hills back of the brain” (Walcott 1987, 80). This sort of imaginative displacement constitutes one of the sources of Walcott’s poetic word, although he went on to radically question it in his most famous poem. As a minor literature author, however, he acknowledges that what makes possible this act of creative superposition of places, this poetic transport, may in fact look more like a form of submission (Walcott 1987, 81). Yet his mastery lies precisely in the decentralisation, or minorisation, of English not by means of the oppositional poetics of militant poetry, disruptive linguistic practices or the exclusive use of Creole, but through a strenuous poetic effort of creative repossession.

This article has sought to demonstrate how this process plays out in Walcott’s “minor”, travel poems (to inflect the term once again, not in the qualitative sense, but with reference to the established “canon” of critical readings). The poet’s “becoming minor” is brought about through the use of standard language, which even hints at the presence of a *genius loci* and immerses itself in poetic traditions of Britain, seen at once as the seat of the Empire and itself a periphery. One is reminded of his essay on Naipaul’s *Enigma of Arrival*, written just three years after *Midsummer*, in which Walcott points to the contrast between the geographical extension of the British Empire and the “provinciality” of the poetry that is “its pride” (1998, 121–2).

These are poems of personal alienation, less easily subsumed under the nation-building project of a text such as *Omeros*, hence less evidently showcasing the inescapably political nature of minor literature as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari. It bears repeating that even in works such as *Omeros* or “The Schooner Flight”, which can be taken as deterritorialising projects on a grand scale, Walcott’s poems do not deterritorialise English in the way suggested by Deleuze and Guattari—namely through sobriety, subtraction and paring down of figurative and symbolic resources of the major language. Rather, this is accomplished by foregrounding intertextual relations, by poetically mapping the territory of different linguistic communities, by assimilating the often contradictory multiplicity of voices each language contains, and last but not least by the very audacity of undertaking a similar project. The same qualities can be appreciated in these travel poems from a reversed perspective. The trajectory they describe corresponds with that outlined by the Martinican theorist Édouard Glissant in his *Poetics of Relation*: the errant poets do not seek the exotic difference, a political or cultural opposite, nor do they travel to settle in a centre and appropriate it as “a source of [their] imaginary constructs” (Glissant 29). Instead, they take a detour, circling from the periphery to the centre and back, between periphery and another periphery. Through strategic figurations of an “Elsewhere”, both alien and strangely familiar, Walcott achieves the necessary distance from which he is able to re-approach and reimagine his own home in later collections, while forging unexpected solidarities and uncovering correspondences that redefine the poetic configurations of centres and peripheries.

REFERENCES

- Alleyne, Mervin C. "Language and Society in St. Lucia." *Caribbean Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, Apr. 1961, pp. 1–10, www.jstor.org/stable/25611645. Accessed 30 Oct. 2019.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. "Discourse in the Novel." In *Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. U of Texas P, 1990, pp. 269–422.
- Bate, Jonathan. *English Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2010. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199569267.001.0001>
- Bedient, Calvin. "Derek Walcott: Contemporary." *Critical Perspectives*, edited by Robert Hamner. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997, pp. 313–23.
- Burns, Lorna. *Postcolonial Literatures and Deleuze*. Continuum, 2012. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137030801>
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan. U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- . *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. U of Michigan P, 1997. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10257>
- Guinness, Gerald. *Here and Elsewhere: Essays on Caribbean Literature*. Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1993.
- Heaney, Seamus. "Englands of The Mind." *Preoccupations*. Faber and Faber, 1980, pp. 150–69.
- . *North*. Faber and Faber, 1975.
- . "The Murmur of Malvern." *The Government of the Tongue*. Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 23–9.
- . "The Regional Forecast." *Literature of Region and Nation*, edited by Ronald P. Draper. St Martin's Press, 1989, pp. 10–23. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19721-7_2
- Hirsch, Edward. "The Art of Poetry XXXVII: Derek Walcott." *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, edited by William Baer. U of Virginia P, 1996, pp. 95–121.
- Hooker, Jeremy. *Imagining Wales: A View of Modern Welsh Writing in English*. U of Wales P, 2001.
- Hughes, Ted. "Myths, Metres, Rhythms." *Winter Pollen*, edited by William Scammell. Faber and Faber, 1994, pp. 310–72.
- Irvine, Alexander. "'Betray Them Both, or Give Back What They Give?': Derek Walcott's Deterritorialization of Western Myth". *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, vol. 4, no. 1, Fall 2005, pp. 123–32, www.jstor.org/stable/40986176. Accessed 30 Oct. 2019.
- Kirsch, Adam. "In the Word-Hoard." Review of *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* by Dennis O'Driscoll, *The New Republic*, 4 Mar. 2009. <https://newrepublic.com/article/63941/the-word-hoard>. Accessed 30 Oct. 2019.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*. U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Thomas, Ned. *Derek Walcott: Poet of the Islands / Bard yr ynysoedd*. Welsh Arts Council, 1980.
- . *The Welsh Extremist: A Culture in Crisis*. Victor Gollancz, 1971.
- Thomas, Ronald Stuart. *Collected Poems 1945–1990*. Dent, 1993.
- Vendler, Helen. "Poet of Two Worlds." *Derek Walcott*, edited by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, pp. 25–33.
- Walcott, Derek. *Collected Poems 1948–1984*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.
- . *Midsummer*. Faber and Faber, 1984.
- . *Omeros*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.
- . *The Arkansas Testament*. Faber and Faber, 1987.
- . *The Fortunate Traveller*. Faber and Faber, 1982.
- . *The Gulf and Other Poems*. Jonathan Cape, 1969.
- . *The Journeyman Years: Occasional Prose*, edited by Gordon Collier and Christopher Balme, 1957–1974. Rodopi, 2013.
- . *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.
- . *What the Twilight Says: Essays*. Faber and Faber, 1998.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bergam Pellicani, Marija 2023
"A language of wet stones
and mists": The Caribbean
Poet as a Traveller in Wales
and England. *Modern
Languages Open*, 2023(1):
26 pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.198>

Published: 13 July 2023

COPYRIGHT:

© 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Modern Languages Open is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Liverpool University Press.