

INTRODUCTION

A LEGEND

MAPPING MEMORY

I have imagined Walcott's poetry as a gradual discovery. It begins with the find of a map: the salient parts of the plot of *Hamlet* reflecting some traits of his biography: a father's early death by an ear disease, the end of a colonial state and the sense of being invested with the task to make up for the deficiencies of life and history. The Platonic and Virgilian co-ordinates that frame Shakespeare's play orientate the young Walcott in the choice between the two main directions his poetry may take in following that map, history or memory. By taking the latter, he embarks on his first books of poetry after the diction and the imagery of Dylan Thomas and William Wordsworth, whose crafts, following the same route, provide reliable interpretations of the puzzling signs of the map.

The map with its two interpreters constitutes a practical handbook for the right use of the poetic word. The map in itself contains a concentrated history of the written word. Thomas's and Wordsworth's works provide complementary applications of its rules which will prove to fit the apprentice's need, namely to write the first poetic language of his Caribbean culture, as Walcott has said, to give things their names.

Here below, I will draw a 'legend' to facilitate the reading of Walcott's poetic itinerary taking place in the following pages. The 'legend' lists three main symbols which I have chosen for their association with the original sense of 'map', i.e., tablecloth. They are: Tabletalk, Wiping

Away and Redressing. The image of the cloth lying on the table renders the idea, central and recurring in this study, of poetic writing as endorsing the task to re-incise the first tablet, the first matrix to re-print the poetic alphabet of a culture which either has none or has lost its original connection between language use and meanings. The first key, *Tabletalk*, indicates the main intellectual tensions at play in the bio-literary friction. The second, *Wiping Away*, indicates the first aesthetic gesture that stems from that premise: a removal of the colonial cultural encrustations – although we will see that this ‘crust’ is not eliminated but re-employed. The third key, *Redressing*, indicates the philosophical dynamics at the basis of this poetic practice, itself a language of memory that at least some books seem to speak.

TABLETALK

Starring:

Plato as *Whitebeard*

Publius Vergilius Maro as *General & Virge*

William Shakespeare as *Globe Head & Bold Head*

Derek Walcott as *Caliban*

Dylan Thomas as *Ginger Head*

William Wordsworth as *Lace*

Thomas Stearns Eliot as *Stern*

James Joyce as *Joyce*.

There was a banquet going on. Its diners were consuming themselves with too much argument. Progressive thirst and hunger had exhausted them. Then one came out with “The mouth of my stomach widens and there is nothing left to eat. I wonder how the table tastes.” From the head of the table, *Whitebeard* started but passed unobserved. Then, with the usual composure, he replied. “The table will be soon re-decked. You don’t have to worry.” “Worry” he mumbled to himself. The sound of that word had an echo, whose sense he could yet not make out. He lingered on that wondering mood. He arched his eyebrow and seemed to enter the grotto of his mind, disappearing into his old age. Then he smoothed his eyebrow and returned to address his comrades. “Sometimes I can’t believe you haven’t dropped your old habits. How come, that you, General, cannot get rid of that rusty armour that is eating you out. I cannot stomach it. Hey guys, I am speaking to you. I am fed up with your moaning and stupid claims, you are useless.” The g-host in the attire of a Roman general, blushed. Facing *Whitebeard*, he said: “Underneath this heavy ar-

mour of my increasing fame, my wounded heart beats, faraway from the capital, in the countryside of Mantua or Naples. I say it throughout in my books as I can, though intermittingly, as my office with the Caesars allowed. I have even tried to convert him; I remember days talking in his tent before battles, telling him stories through the cracks of my epic armour. Yet did he, does anybody, care? My only fear was misunderstanding. I ended my days wishing a death by fire but nobody granted it." A mordant silence fell and the chattering stopped.

Gradually, the murmuring resumed, and a strong voice, protesting against the defeatist mood, bumped through. "Well, you should have said so more explicitly, my dear. You should have refused to put on that armour; you should have spat in the face of your Caesar rather than sit by his bed telling him his favourite fables. I suppose it was comfortable to sit among the silver platters and to have the goblet promptly re-filled. Quite to the contrary, I did reject my Khaki empire tout court." The General nodded but then, blushing, replied. "Yes, but your khaki kings and queens didn't provide you in any way with your inkwell? Does not a part of your metaphors come from that outrageous colonizing world? Isn't there any truth in the misdeeds all those readers accuse you of? Are you sure you did not smear your fingers with their dirty affairs?" A longer mortifying silence fell upon the tabletalk and its hungry diners seemed to fade in a bitter semi-darkness.

Whitebeard, curling his stony hair and beard, entered his shadow. It was a sandaled silhouette sitting in a corner on a wooden stool by a dark wall: a prisoner sentenced to death for his chronic, stubborn, anachronistic love of truth and justice. Then, he came out of his shade and interrupted the shameful climate. "OK. We cannot really afford to run out of goods. I think there is someone who is about to come to our rescue. We will not starve. Calm your monsters down. Try to be patient." The diners took heart and resumed their whispering conversations.

One angle of the tablecloth was dog-eared. The figure of a curly-crested high-brown chicken-legged young poet emerged. Before the g-hosts could distinguish his traits, the General assailed him. "Look, a stranger. He must have been ravaging the whole course of our conversation, grain after grain. This is why we have run out of everything. Sentinels (do we have any here?) take the barbarian out!" Amused, Bold Head smiled to his alarmed mate. "Virge, you're passing the mark again. The General is taking hold of you. Watch out." Then Bold Head began to interrogate the newcomer. "What is a caliban doing here?" The exotic figure replied that he came from a tropic island, once a part of several empires. He said that he got lost out of too much thinking and the study of the causes of

his existential pain. At this, the General again broke out in rage. "It can't be. We never reached that far". "But we did", Bold Head said, to dismiss him and carry on the conversation. He could not help opening a parenthesis. ("The luminaries of my age exchanged their geographical ignorance, any terra incognita, for a possible advancement of their learning, for a bettering of their intellectual being. It did not occur to them that they were exchanging one map for another. Many damned their minds for a share in a chartered company.")

Then he returned to address the stranger. "By the way, this name I am calling you, boy, comes, as you know, from those tropic islands. Many words and images that enriched our dictionaries come from those places. I took it from that dark emporium that supplied my pipes and teas and many of my themes and dreams. Perhaps there is no way not to overlap the maps! Many made a fortune out of your tropics, but I hope my work has paid for my share in it at least. To make a long story short, it is only fair if you now jump up here and claim your own. Are you in search of the right fitting words, for you must be a writer, isn't that so? Why don't you sit down and serve yourself properly? Well, actually, as you can see, there is no sign of any food left. His embarrassment lasted two seconds. Have a look at this story of mine, though. It has inspired many, ever seen it?" With his finger, he outlined a faded smear on the tablecloth. "It is a mythic story. It tells you everything you need to know, a sort of handbook for creative writing, yet not exactly like those you find around." The others began a mumbling choral protest.

He rubbed his round protuberant eyes and stretched them to focus upon the guest still crouching in the dark corner of the table. "Hum, let me see, you have very familiar traits ... have you relatives in Warwickshire?" His grandfather, the young poet replied, came from there. He had christened his son after it. "'Warwick'", his father. "You see", Bold Head said, turning towards his fellows. "Here we go again, the grids of Europe extend like a mad automatism out of control." Choral muttering. His father, the boy continued, had died very young of a disease in his ear they were not able to cure. At this, Whitebeard jumped. "'Warwick' was his name? It means the end of our worries then." Globe-Head jumped on the table. "O God. It is you who are cannibalising my play and supplying us with these few crumbs left! Come up, sit you down." Perhaps, he added, "the grid is reversible and the worst ends can be turned to some good".

All round stirring. "He has found another one", Whitebeard said, tossing his marble head. "This must be judicious though", the General added. "You can tell from the way he keeps himself by the fringes of the tablecloth: he seems to understand the purpose of my lines." Then a long-

haired g-host in a white lacy shirt showed an interest in this claim. "Virge, I too did hang on your fringes and have even found a place for your green lines to grow in peace, as you wished, by putting them in the hands of a leech-gatherer, remember?" "I know", said the General, "yet, excuse-me, how disconsolate and boring and sad a place you put them in."

Whitebeard stepped in. "You should stop arguing sometimes. He has come to bear us new provisions and to restock the table. Don't you realise he has found the map, or vice versa, God knows. It means that we will all recover our senses soon. At that point, the climate grew lighter and warmer. Globe took the word again, enthusiastically. "To be *AND* not to be" (not at all *OR*) is how this black prince should have put it. Yet fortunately, correction is always possible. What we are *AND* are not." The g-ghosts protested in a roar as if trying to stop a habitual mood before it gives vent. Too late. Globe went on. "That Irish boy giving that amazing lecture in the national library, he was right, to my uttermost delight and gratefulness. He says something like *the possibility of the possible as possible things not known*. This sentence has nourished me since." He too, like this caliban here, divests my play by stripping it to the bone of my own poor biography to leave the essence of the work lying there, naked, as God made it, like a beached castaway who lost and found himself through the map. O Palinurus!" A tall, slim g-host raised his brilliant gay eyes from his spectacles and smiled. Then in a joyful calm voice, he said. "That was the result of a long walk on the Dublin shore, when sadness makes one read through *the ineluctable modality of the visible*. It's incredible what a simple eye may do if it tries not to lose its power to see".

At this point, even Whitebeard got restless. "I hate when he goes mystic and tries to influence even his best friends!" To which Globe readily replied. "I got it straight from your down-to-earth democratic encyclopaedia, *Republic VI*, remember? To be and not to be ..." "Had I imagined the end it would have come to", Whitebeard retorted, "I would have never written it down". Then he said: "I think there are a number of reasons why we should celebrate the newcomer and use our last drops of memory." He lifted a glass and proposed a toast, "To *Phaedrus* and the cause of our being here." Globe suggested performing it as in a true happening, and he began straight away: "Ladies and Gentlemen, the history of the invention of writing by Hamlet, prince of Egypt. You play the King", he said to Whitebeard, "fair enough. I will be the prince." The table became a stage.

GLOBE (as prince): 'Here, O King is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories: my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom.' {...}

WHITEHEAD (*as king*): 'And so it is that you, by reason of your tender regard for the writing that is your offspring, have declared the very opposite of its true effect. If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls: they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks; what you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder.' (Phaedrus 275a)

The General interrupted, "what does the king mean by 'reminder?' Then, excuse the digression, but isn't there also a queen in the story?" To which Globe answered that at least on this stage, it would be better to leave the queen alone, since she is so voluble and would for sure captivate the attentions of the king's brother. Then, after a short pause, he added, "plus, *Virge*, don't forget how queens may be. Think of Hecuba and Dido. They drink like sponges, begin to stumble about, repeating each single word you have said, roaming like enflamed drunkards, making a Troy of all your issues." Whitebeard proposed to forget women of that kind and to speak of ideal lasting liaisons, not to fall down again to speak of the stupid rulers of the day. "In, fact, *Virge*, to go back to your first question, 'reminding' is a sacred union between the king and a most faithful lover. It speaks the language of love, which, as to a child, they teach to their little prince before he comes into being; they would not have him a dull ass."

WHITEHEAD (*as king*) *man needs understand the language of Forms, passing from a plurality of perception to a unity gathered together by reasoning; and such understanding is a recollection of those things which our souls beheld aforesaid as they journeyed with their god, looking down upon the things which now we suppose to be, and gazing up to that which truly is.* (Phaedrus 249b)

"Quite clear", *Virge* said. "Yet what if the king is not so limpid-minded? And what if his love gets spoiled?" "That is the question", Globe readily retorted. "That is the very rub." "Is it the reason why your prince is so confused?" "Yes", said the other smiling. Then, he continued. "You know, his brother (your Caesar, to give you a close example) replaced his royal father in his mother's bed!"

At that point, a plump ginger-haired g-host with a strong Gaelic accent got up and said, clearing his voice, "that is why sometimes princes need to linger on a hermaphrodite state. There, they would attend memory-courses, they would learn the spelling of words in order to avoid that sort of confusion they would have to face afterwards, and to be able to set things in order." Then, with a grimace, he turned towards a stern g-host

sitting at the far hand of the table. It was a tall stiff type dressed in a grey suit, who had been mumbling to himself throughout the happening. He played with his long skinny fingers with punctilious impatience, making balls with paper sheets that lay scattered on the table. At times, he aimed at a nearby basket but always missed the mark. From underneath the table, you could read his impatience and perhaps his wish to play. He wore Wales-Prince trousers rolled up to his ankles and kept putting his feet in and out of his impeccable Italian shoes as if they did not fit him properly. Then Stern Thomas said, "I had a mental habit which made it much easier for me, I quote, from myself, "to explain the miraculous in natural terms than to explain the natural in miraculous terms." The g-ghosts looked at one another perplexedly. Then the other Thomas added, "listen to what my little Welsh prince is going to say, Stern, it would help you very much to see where you get confused. He used to mumble to himself every early morning (not that early, actually), as he wanted to take his first steps but was obsessed by crucial doubts that impeded him from putting on the shoes his parents had given him. He would come downstairs, barefoot, leaving prints everywhere on the just-washed floor (to the despair of his poor mother), to question his amazed parents." Ginger jumped onto the table and switched into his part:

GINGER (as prince): when I who know you both like seal impressions in the waxen blocks, see you at a distance indistinctly and am in a hurry to assign the proper imprint of each to the proper visual perception, lie fitting a foot into its own footmark to effect a recognition, and then make the mistake of interchanging them, like a man who thrust his feet into the wrong shoes, and apply the perception of each to the imprint of the other. (...) when a perception is present which belongs to one of the imprints, but none which belongs to the other, and the mind fits to the present perception the imprint belonging to the absent one, in all such cases it is an error. To sum up, in the case of objects one does not know and has never perceived, there is, it seems, no possibility of error or false judgement, if our present account is sound, but it is precisely in the field of objects both known and perceived that judgement turns and twists about and proves false or true – true when it brings impressions straight to their proper imprints, false when it misdirects them crosswise to the wrong imprint. (...) Well, they say the differences arise in this way. When a man has in mind a good thick block of wax, smooth and kneaded to the right consistency, and the impressions that come through the senses are stamped on these tables of the 'heart' (...) then the imprints are clear and deep enough to last a long time. Such people are quick to learn and also have good memories, and besides they do not interchange the imprints of their perceptions but think truly. These imprints being distinct and well spaced are quickly assigned to their several stamps – the 'real things' as they are called – and such men are said to be clever. (Theaetetus 193c, 194a-d)

Seeing his incongruence rising in the face of his learned audience, Ginger Head stopped and addressed the amazed face of Whitebeard. “Well, I know it is not from *Phaedrus*, but my Welsh prince has important specifications to make about this ‘reminding’ business and before he touches paper. He prefers *Theaetetus*, his favourite dialogue after *Phaedo*. In the meanwhile, sulking Stern, chin on right palm, with the other making paper-balls, asked Ginger to speak louder so that he might distinguish what he says word by word. He clutched one paper-ball and unwrapped it as if he meant to follow Ginger’s performance in there. Joyce drew near him. “Don’t be too stern with yourself, Thomas. I will lend you my sandals, which I myself have borrowed. They will make you feel more relaxed. You will love them. Forget the sheet and follow by heart.” Ginger was about to continue his performance but before starting he turned towards Stern once more. “I know you won’t like it, but let me ask you whether you have attended primary school or went straight to PhD, for in your critical writings you never seem to know that each sentence, each idea, even each single word and syllable, is composed of ‘letters’. It follows that when you begin to discuss a certain topic and start by giving its definition – assuring your readers of your ‘scientific’ objectivity – you never proceed to the next stage: to confute the truth of what you say by passing from that definition to its comprising parts. Rather, you pass from that definition to a conclusion, which is a very strange way to conceive of the meaning of ‘order’. Therefore, listen to my prince in his most paranoid, adolescent mood, as he wanders about the set of standard definitions a British education expected him to accept but whose quality he would question, perusing it to its smallest item, from which he would start to recompose an alphabet, according to the form he had learnt in his parents’ native home.”

GINGER (as prince): I seem to have heard some people say that what might be called the first elements of which we and all other things consist are such that no account can be given of them. Each of them just by itself can only be named. (...) But in fact there is no formula in which any element can be expressed; it can only be named, for a name is all there is that belongs to it. But when we come to things composed of these elements, then, just as these things are complex, so the names are combined to make a description, a description being precisely a combination of names. Accordingly, elements are unknowable and inexplicable, but they can be perceived, while complexes ('syllables') are knowable and explicable, and you can have a true notion of them. (...) The syllable arises as a single entity from any set of letters which can be combined, and that holds of every complex, not only in the case of letters. (...) Is there any difference between the sum and the things it includes? (...) would not your own experience in learn-

ing your letters rather incline you to accept the opposite view? (...) that all the time you were learning you were doing nothing else but trying to distinguish by sight or hearing each letter by itself, so as not to be confused by any arrangement of them in spoken or written words (...). Then, if we are to argue from our own experience from elements and complexes to other cases, we shall conclude that elements in general yield knowledge that is much clearer than knowledge of the complex and more effective for a complete grasp of anything we seek to know. If anyone tells us that the complex is by its nature knowable, while the element is unknowable, we shall suppose that, whether he intends it or not, he is playing with us. (Theaetetus 202-205)

Before jumping down from the table, he turned to Stern again. "Is it what the dumb show of your shoes and sheets mean to say?" Lacy had been assenting throughout. He went up to Ginger Head to shake hands but the other hated his gallant Victorian manners and turned away from his face; Lacy was about to disappear again into his Victorian armchair when in a rupture of all his laces he got up to say to his friend what he thought. "Sometimes it is necessary to do as you claim: to begin again, to mark down a primer in order for each unexpressed thing to have its meaning. Yet it is not always necessary. The same criterion may work the other way round. You can start examining a detail that has seemed insignificant to the general, like a daffodil, for example (Ginger pretended to feel sick) and establish its relation with a unity of established ideas. You cannot wipe away all established definitions tout court. What matters is the substance or quality of the binding relationship you establish: what force, as you say, relates thought to word. Does it lead to the configuration of a map of national power or does it shape the reality of ideas?"

The newcomer had long fallen asleep. When he opened his eyes, his only certitude was his hunger, since he could only vaguely remember what he had seen and heard. Before letting him go, Whitebeard addressed him. "These conversations that led you here, they will confuse you when you try to use them or to remember the meaning you thought they had." The General added, "As you can see, each of us, each single word, casts a threatening shadow, the image of its own fall, or fault, which we have to suffer and fight against, for self-deception hangs on your weaknesses and can take you astray." The g-hosts too were exhausted and about to disappear, having nothing else to say. Whitebeard raised one ear from the tablecloth, indicating the passageway. The traveller entered the cave. A thick darkness devoured everything. The passage was threatening and he felt reassured as he could still depict a voice reeling behind. "Adieu" it echoed in a strange British French, "don't forget to remember us", to which another echoed shortly behind in a strong Welsh cadence.

WIPING AWAY

Walcott's early writing is a Dedalus brooding over the sense of its biographical connections. It begins with the awareness that it must wipe away the false images that years of colonialism have stamped upon the local mentality, even distorting the perception of the landscape. It is also like the child in the fifth book of *Prelude*, the icon of the romantic hero, afraid that the flood of time and history may overcome the understanding of his mission. As it pursues its aims, it becomes a Crusoe using the tools of the wrecked ship of the inherited tradition to make new conjunctions of words and meanings. It is a Hamlet, prey to history, whom a passing pirate has saved and left 'naked on the beach' near home, friend to Stephen Dedalus and to all the Palinurus-figures who, like Virgil's pilot, have dared question the flood, the wild courses of history and follow the maps that run against its grain.

From the poetry of Dylan Thomas, writing learns how to transcribe the local reality, how to draw its physical impressions, so that the role of Thomas's verse, especially in the early Walcott, fits the action of Plato's 'inner scribe', directing a first stage of recollection.

... the conjunction of memory with sensation, together with the feelings consequent upon memory and sensation, may be said as it were to write words in our souls. And when this experience writes what is true, the result is that true opinions and assertions spring up in us, while when the internal scribe writes what is false we get the opposite. (*Philebus* 39a)

Completing it, Wordsworth's work supplies what we could call a 'political configuration', which leads language to shape states of the mind that perception cannot reach. Their abstractness relies on no direct experience and, therefore, it provides the poet with the opportunity to draw the imagined features of a never-known father and of backgrounds of absence which, invisible, are integral parts of the works. It fits the action of Plato's 'painter', coming after the 'scribe' and finishing the work of re-collection.

A painter comes after the writer and paints in the soul pictures of these assertions that we make [...] when we have got these opinions and assertions clear of the act of sight, or other sense, and as it were see in ourselves pictures or images of what we previously opined or asserted. (*Philebus* 39b)

Scriber and painter chart directions in the mind. They help confute and draw ideas and hearten journeys that would hardly have seen their setting out. These leading influences are especially clear in Walcott's first books of poems. Yet generally, and even at this stage, the romantic vein is suffocated. It will surge again, up-dated, distilled, in *Another Life*, the lengthy autobiographical poem that marks the culmination of his first mature stage.

REDRESSING

Scriber and painter are the intellectual hands helping Walcott redefine his colonial culture, a redefinition which in many respects coincides with Seamus Heaney's notion of the 'redressing' power of poetry. At the core of this concept, Heaney sustains, there are both Plato's condemnation of poetry (which continues to stimulate its defence from the part of its most affectionate readers and practitioners), and 'the court of appeal' of Plato's 'world of ideas' (where in their imaginary worlds texts check the actual and balance its historical predicaments).¹

Partly in agreement and partly moving on from Heaney (a main trend in this study, therefore owing much to him), a central point of my critical investigation is that a deliberate coincidence is at work within Plato's apparent condemnation of poetry, and writing, and his programmatic defence of their moral meanings and body of knowledge. This coincidence, I believe, has provided poetic writing with a most efficacious means to preserve and convey the memory of its principles throughout the ages. It consists in a 'negative' mechanism which works by provoking the action of thought and reasoning. Such device is certainly present in the texts I am dealing with in this book, and its function is to quicken the core of their buried meanings. By using this 'meaning-preserver device', poetic thought has managed to work its changes, to pass on and modify its tradition, passing, if not undisturbed, stolidly across the battlefields of its own histories. It has enabled it to speak against the ideological burdens of its own "words words words", claiming its own opposition to 'wars wars wars', against the evidence of the secular agendas which they may have been imposed by their rulers. Let us read this memory-mechanism in the provocative vein of its inventor:

¹ Heaney, 1995, pp. 1-6.

That's the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive: but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words: they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing for ever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself. (*Phaedrus* 275e)

The 'parent' does come to the rescue, just as the story of *Hamlet* exemplifies, which we could consider as an updating version of Plato's memory-device. This explains why Wordsworth and Thomas ingrain selected parts of its plot in the structure of their poems. By the 'Hamletic chart' they find the strength to actuate their revolutions in poetic language, while at the same time marking a path through which 'a reader' may follow and comprehend their undertakings. What happens in practice? Meanings, discourses, within the unwanted limits of a given language with its pre-established ideas, come out of the 'cerements' of their defining signs to slip us a note, to whisper or hint at their real sense or wish, asking us to grant it. It seems that poetic language, or at least part of it, like Hamlet's players cannot keep secrets.

Heaney has also underlined that at certain historical moments (as the postcolonial) the redressing function of poetry is particularly in the lime-light. Then poetry endorses also a political and social mission, the sphere of the imagination oversteps its boundaries to help redefine the terrain of the actual, where human rights may have been violated. The wish to redefine the identity of a culture may coalesce with the pioneering task of one individual talent. Furthermore, a poet called to give an exact account of his own world, to fight against wrong ideas contained in the very language he is using, will have to forge a poetry able to replace standards and hierarchies yet, Heaney sustains, not before 'having started as a reader and having internalised the rules which he wishes to reject'. Such is the work of Thomas and Wordsworth within British territory, and the work Walcott does by following these predecessors who have crossed the impervious terrain, or sea, of tradition, moving through the same redressing plan but adapting it to the wider scale of his Caribbean contemporary world.