

On late style: poetry*

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Abstract

The present paper is concerned with how “late style” works in poetry written by the two acclaimed writers, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney. The term “late style” was firstly used by Theodor Adorno in order to characterize Ludwig van Beethoven’s later work. According to him, late works “are [...] bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony [...] and they show more traces of history than of growth” (ADORNO, 2002, p. 564). In order to understand how this process works in poetry, I am going to examine the volumes White Egrets (2010) by Walcott and Human Chain (2010), by Heaney. The conclusion that is reached is that the poetical subjectivity turns into a creative force, which unites irreconcilable realities in a discourse that questions clichés of identity, post-colonialism, multiculturalism, national belonging and ethical and historical responsibility.

Keywords

Jate style; poetry; Derek Walcott; Seamus Heaney.

Resumo

O presente artigo explora o conceito de “estilo tardio” na poesia de dois aclamados escritores, Derek Walcott e Seamus Heaney. O termo “estilo tardio” foi primeiramente empregado por Theodor Adorno para caracterizar as obras tardias ou finais de Ludwig van Beethoven. De acordo com o filósofo, trabalhos tardios “são [...] amargos e espinhosos, não se rendem ao mero deleite. Não possuem harmonia [...] e demonstram mais traços de história do que de crescimento” (2002, p. 564). De modo a compreender como esse processo se desenvolve no gênero poético, examino os volumes White Egrets (2010), de Walcott, e Human Chain (2010), de Heaney. A conclusão é de que a subjetividade poética se torna uma força criativa que concilia realidades aparentemente irreconciliáveis, em um discurso que questiona clichês de identidade, pós-colonialismo, multiculturalismo, pertencimento nacional e responsabilidade ética e histórica.

Palavras-chave

Jate style; poesia; Derek Walcott; Seamus Heaney.

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*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*
Dylan Thomas

CONTRARY TO THE ORDINARY VIEW THAT POETRY IS THE ART OF OUTBURSTS of emotion and powerful feelings, the technical idea that prevails amongst poets and theoreticians is that it is a genre characterized by a craftsmanlike honing of language. Inasmuch as there is an apparent discrepancy between popular and theoretical conceptions, the public that appreciates poetry has been diminishing drastically throughout the last century. Bookshops and e-readers are littered with novels, self-help fiction and technical manuals, but just a few shelves, actual or virtual, are dedicated to poetry. Not so much due to its intrinsic difficulties or contradictions, the poetic discourse has become more of a niche genre because it also represents a residue of a remote literary heritage. In spite of all that, in particular socially distressing situations, poetry seems to renew its strength and regain some cultural space. The examples of this revitalized energy would be the work of two Nobel Prize winners, the Caribbean Derek Walcott and the Northern Irish Seamus Heaney. In addition to being exquisite masterclasses in poetic form, their work seems to appeal to the common reader, who seeks not linguistic experimentation but rather a momentary reconciliation with his or her inner psychological moment.

Both poets have been acclaimed by the Swedish academy for quite similar reasons. While Walcott was praised “for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment” (WEB, 2013), Heaney was celebrated “for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past” (WEB, 2013). The comments made by the literary judges touch on the historical and the ethical responsibility of their *oeuvres*, highlighting their commitment to difference and memory. In view of the fact that both poets are from so-called post-colonial spaces, their strength at least partially comes from their adoption of an invigorated English, one not so overloaded by Saxon, Norman and Latin origins, but rather one that introduces flavours of Native, African and Celtic languages. This is particularly true for Walcott and Heaney, because they insert lexicons and rhythms that renew their customary use of iambic pentameter and more traditional rhyme schemes. Although much has been written about their early work, especially in terms of their political engagement and ethical positions, little attention has been

devoted to their more recent poetic collections. Volumes like “Electric Light” (2001) and “District and Cricle” (2007) by Heaney or “The Bounty” (1997) and “The Prodigal” (2004) by Walcott have not posed huge problems to literary critics. However, these works, and especially their most recent ones, “Human Chain” (2010) and “White Egrets” (2010) propose another form of writing poetry, one which involves reaching an older age. While Heaney is 74, Walcott is 83.

However, what is essential about what I call the poet’s “late work” is that it reflects an intellectual and physical maturity. It also falls back on ethical and emotional positions as formal experimentations. The result is a “nonharmonious, nonserene tension... deliberately unproductive productiveness going against” (SAID, 2007, p. 7). This definition was employed by Edward Said as an expansion of the concept of “late style” conceived first by Theodor Adorno.

Adorno used the term “late style” to characterize Ludwig van Beethoven’s later work. According to him, the

maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth (ADORNO, 2002, p. 564).

Owing to the fact that the artistic sensibility is still contingent on physical reality, which constantly reminds the artist of his or her perishable condition, the poetic experimentations of a “late style” represent a bodily aesthetics. The volumes *White Egrets* (2010) by Walcott and *Human Chain* (2010), by Heaney, are a clear examples of this phenomenon, which entails a “‘embodied’ subjectivity”... “which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself, transforming harmony into the dissonance of its suffering” (ADORNO, 2002, p. 564). The poetical subjectivity, in this sense, turns into a creative force, which unites irreconcilable realities in a discourse that questions clichés of identity, post-colonialism, multiculturalism, national belonging and ethical and historical responsibility.

In order to comprehend how “late style” works in poetry, especially, the kind of poetry which is both praised by academics and the public, I am going to examine how the poetic subjectivity reconstructs itself in face of immanent death. For instance, while Walcott struggles with diabetes, Heaney suffers a trauma post-stroke. These health problems, instead of being a mere condition, become a theme and a style in their work.

In the case of Heaney, I am going to focus on the first three poems of *Human Chain* (2010). And in Walcott, I am going to examine illustrative examples from his collection *White Egrets* (2010). I believe the present study could shed some light not only on the discussion of “late style” poetry but the wider cultural dialogue about a greying population.

The first poems in *Human Chain* (2010) by Heaney represent a poetic revision of a lifetime. This revision reaches its highest point with the poem, “Chanson d’Aventure”, in which the poet, in an ambulance on the way to hospital after suffering a stroke, is forced to reflect on death. These poems form a little interlude that presents a contradiction: the vanishing nature of life and the supposedly eternal nature of literature. Interestingly enough the form used to shape this paradoxical experience is the duodecet – twelve lines formed of three tercets. Freer than the sonnet, this literary form enables the poet to be brief, while yet conveying intensity and complexity to the lines, which vary widely between twelve and two poetic syllables. The themes of these poems are non-judgmental evocations of places and figures from the Heaney’s childhood. The verse, in its complexities and strangeness, presents uncanny metaphors, Latinate expressions and internal rhymes. The preference for the duodecet and revisionist poems about his parents represents this change of style I am interested in. Heaney has discretely written about his family, but not in the same way he does here. Moreover the duodecet seems to be a new experimentation, closely related to his work with sonnet itself (*Glanmore Sonnets, Field Work* (1979)).

Perhaps the awkwardness inaccessibility of the verse is precisely what Adorno refers to when he speaks about the role of conventions in “late style”. For him, “the first commandment of every ‘subjectivist’ methodology is to brook no conventions, and to recast those that are unavoidable in terms dictated by the expressive impulse”. (565). Said also mentions this aspect when he poses three phases for the development of a late style: first the notion of birth; second, the idea of a continuity; and third the decay of the body. In order to deconstruct a cliché about one’s life, one must revisit a few moments (of birth and adulthood) and shed a new light on them. In the case of a poet with a long career, it also involves rewritings of poetical statements which made them famous. The first five poems of *Human Chain* do exactly that: they transform the clichés of the past into something unsettled and different. The unusual metaphors and the difficult verses force, simultaneously, the poet to reconsider his life and work, and the reader to rethink

his or her involvement with the verse. The identification between reader and poem is difficult it either takes long to happen or does not happen at all. Poetry is then a stance that disturbs and disrupts in a subtle, but yet precise manner.

The first poem of the book “Had I not been awake” is one that plays with this estranged identification. The title of the poem is the conditional that gives rise to the development of the piece. While the first line is completed with the second clause of the conditional, “I would have missed it”, the vagueness of the “it” is revealed in the following lines. This “it” is the noise of the wind that woke and stirred the poetic voice in the middle of the night. In the second tercet, the conditional is repeated and two unrhymed tercets, slightly shorter than the other two initial stanzas, conclude the poem. Instead of giving further information about the event itself, these last six verses describe the effect of this noise, which is to enhance the poet’s sensibility. After this sudden awakening, the ordinary experiences seem to be pregnant with meaning.

This meaning, though, is not defined through a mystical or sentimental revelation, but rather a temporal one: “After. And not now”. The concluding line shows that this poetry is concerned with the brevity of time and its vanishing nature. It seems that the “awake” refers to an awareness of imminent death, which is the condition that allows the poet to write for a bit longer. This awareness is like a parole sentence to the poet, since death can return “like an animal to the house” (HEANEY, 2010, p. 1). This comparison with the animal is then what defines human beings as biological creatures who are subject to the passing of time. However, if versifying was a consolation for poets like William Shakespeare and Wallace Stevens, for Heaney is primarily a means of gaining time over death. It is an unquiet moment that makes him “alive and ticking like and electric fence” (1), but which offers no consolation.

This lack of consolation in Heaney’s verse is perhaps what distances his work for common readers, for art does not seem to offer a safe haven from the distresses of life, and thus, the typical common-place of poetry (death) brings anguish for both reader and poet. The next poem also plays with the double -edged sword nature of art. The poem “Album” is a sequence of five duodecets that recapture snapshots from the life of the poet. They are mainly about his parents and the turbulent relationship they used to have. The choice for the name of the poem is extremely revealing, since, in an age of digital and fast reproduction, the preference for “album” represents a symbolic desire to challenge the hasty speed of life. The first poem tells of his parents’ meeting, the second,

of them leaving Heaney at St. Columb's boarding school and the third, of his parents' wedding party during which he was already in his mother's womb. The last two poems focus mainly on the relationships between Heaney, Heaney's father, and Heaney's son. Although these two poems come across as being rather sexist, this preference for the male relationship is the poet's solution for a personal reconfiguration. His subjectivity is predominantly male and this is what he is apt to write about. Other examples of poems that describe a rather male-centered subjectivity are "Digging", "Follower" (*Death of a Naturalist*, 1966) and "District and Circle" (*District and Circle*, 2005).

The motivation to write about his parents comes from Heaney's discussion of time and how it affects one's perception. In his words, "for decades, I never thought of them [his parents] as young people, they were always the parents... and you get to a certain stage yourself... and you realize that you are now much older than they were" (WEB, 2013). The inspiration to problematize the relativity of time is connected to the poet's realization of physical decay. This decay is not only shown through aging metaphors, but also natural and technological. Nature and technology are elements that transport the poet back to the past and back to the present again. The two first two lines of poem number I from "Album" oppose technology and nature:

Now the oil-fired heating boiler comes to life
Abruptly, drowsily, like the time collapsed
of a sawn down tree, I imagine them (HEANEY, 2010, p. 4).

Differently, but somewhat similar to Marcel Prust famous madeleine, the trigger of an involuntary memory is the warmth that comes from the heaters. The artificiality of the boiler is contrasted with the passing of time that turns a sawn tree into a living organism once again. Thus, the artificial physical warmth transports the poet back in time. There he imagines the meeting of his parents in the very same place where they used to take him for walks. But this memory does not last long, just two stanzas that bring the poet to the final reflection:

Too late, alas, now for the apt quotation
About a love that's proved by steady gazing
Not at each other but in the same direction (HEANEY, 2010, p. 4).

The brevity of the poet's parents' youth and the time he had with them decreases the importance of the quotation. Even though it is suitable, it is too late now to mention that cliché, since the poet himself is already at an advanced age and his parents gone.

Thus, “late style” in Heaney’s poems is constructed through the uneasiness of time and the inappropriateness of the appropriate quotation.

The second poem of the sequence represents a rupture in childhood innocence, since the poet is taken to boarding school. The use of Latin expressions and biblical verses provide a historical connection between knowledge and church. In addition to that, the presence of the Oak (*quercus*) is symbolic, since it means strength, endurance, and conjugal fidelity, for being the tree that represents Juno and Jupiter (WEB, 2013). These two different universes symbolized by the tree engender two realities, the one of the boy at school and the other of his parents when they leave their son and go back home without him. The final verses make it very clear:

Seeing them as a couple, I now see,
For the first time, all the more together
For having had to turn and walk away, as close
In the leaving (or closer) as in the getting (HEANEY, 2010, p.5).

The separation of the clauses with commas represents the final rupture of these two realities. However, the ambiguity created by the parenthesis is much more revealing, for the present temporality of the verse in the previous line questions whether or not they were closer when they got home, after leaving the boy. This is a revision of the past based on the wisdom of the present – “I now see” (HEANEY, 2010, p.5). Nevertheless, this wisdom is contrasted with the intellectual intelligence of the past. The emotional intelligence is harder and takes longer to be achieved, whereas knowledge is relatively easier and quicker. In the poem, Heaney discusses the advancement of wisdom through a rational principle. And, in order to do that, he uses his younger self as a hypothesis and as an “expressive impulse” (ADORNO, 2002, p. 565). He is not exactly touched by the memory, but revisits this moment with renewed values.

The third poem is perhaps the most imaginative of the sequence because the poet envisions himself at their parents’ wedding party, at which he was already conceived in his mother’s womb. The first period is broken with a full stop, which adds the surprising information:

It’s winter at the seaside where they’ve gone
for their evening meal. And I am at the table,
Uninvited, ineluctable (HEANEY, 2010, p. 15)

The two adjectives used to characterize the poet as an intruder who could not be avoided. And, creating a continuum with the previous poem, the emotional tone is

extinguished and substituted by simple descriptions. The next stanza works as mini photographs of the events of the evening: the gulls, the fish, the dormant silver, tears and the waitress, who is “bibbed”, like a little baby. Preventing the sentimental tone of the poem, the only reference to emotions is the tears. But they can simultaneously refer to a traumatic occasion, for, in the next stanzas, the poet mentions that the couple takes very long to reveal his mother’s unwanted pregnancy during the time of their vows. The conclusion of the poem, though, shows the coziness of intimacy with them arriving comfortably at home. It is also a reinforced statement of his parents’ closeness and trust, in spite of a situation which could be awkward for a traditional society. It is important to mention that Heaney was born in 1939, when a baby outside marriage was considered a strong social taboo. The “late style” in this poem is shown through the avoidance of the over-romanticizing of the wedding day and the precise and firm descriptions of the ceremony.

The last two poems of “Album” are predominantly male and create a quasi-epic saga built around the quest for a hug. In number IV, the poet recollects the difficulty and the time it took for him to embrace his father. But, in the following poem, he shows the tranquility with which his own son embraces his grandfather. This contrast represents the distanced relationship he had with his father and the lighter treatment given by his son. Poem IV recaptures three moments in which the hug happened or could have happened. The first and most poetic was when he was leaving for boarding school, “but it didn’t happen”. The other two are comical and grievous: one when his dad was drunk and needed help to do up his buttons and the last, when he was sick and needed help to go to the bathroom. The expressions “him in his prime”, “he was very drunk” and “helping him to the bathroom”, gives a symbolic significance to time, for it depicts different stages of his father’s life and his slow decay. In the last line the poet states he takes “the webby weight of his underarm”, the adjective “webby” is evocative because it connects the closeness and fragility of a spider’s home. Although a spider weaves its home it can be easily broken. But, the metaphor also denounces how family webs can be also suffocating, like prisons, for spiders capture their prey on them.

The last poem concludes the cycle with metaphors that compare emotional and intellectual intelligences. The poem starts with an assertion that his son could easily and quickly do what took him years to accomplish: hug his father. His attitude in relation to his son’s spontaneity is asserted by the word *verus*, a universal truth. And he connects

this truth to *very*, or the many times in which he could have done that and did not, and also the many times that his son does that, instead of him. Playing with multiple metaphors, this “late style” reveals difficult reactions in face of death and emotions. This re-visitation of past moments or even unremembered moments (of being a fetus in the womb) refers to this expressive impulse that Adorno defends. Something that reverts clichés and finds more realistic conclusions about life.

The last poem that is relevant for the theme of “late style” is “Chanson d’Aventure”. The poet is in an ambulance, on his way to the hospital, after suffering a stroke. The title of the poem is opposed to its content, for the “chanson d’aventure” is the name given to a medieval genre of poetry in which the poet, in a rural setting, reproduces the dialogue he has with a loved one. It is usually a form of poetry that talks about courtly love. However, here, the title seems to be more literal, for it is referring to an adventure: the journey from his house to the hospital. It is also a sequence of three unrhymed duodecets whose epigraph refers to the poem “Ecstasy” by John Donne. Instead of assuming the metaphysical tonality of John Donne, the poet discusses the theme of almost death in light of the tenderness and support he received from his wife. Thus, the philosophical debate of Donne’s poetry is transferred to an ordinary situation. It is as if the poet removed the aura of metaphysical poetry by placing it in a mundane environment.

The first poem of the section describes the actual journey from the poet’s house to the hospital. The first two stanzas refer to the position of the poet, his wife and the nurse in the ambulance. Similarly, Donne’s “Ecstasy” begins with two lovers sitting by a river-bed. However, the intertextuality does not cease here. In the ninth line the poet affirms “our eyebeams threaded laser-fast, no transport/ Ever like it until then” (14), while in “Ecstasy”, the poet asserts: “Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread/Our eyes upon one double string”. The difference between both is that while in Heaney their eyes are captured by the laser of the ambulance, in Donne, the lovers look at each other. Heaney also continues,

Of a Sunday morning ambulance
When we might, O my love, have quoted Donne
On love on hold, body and soul apart (HEANEY, 2010, p.14).

The experience of going through the death-like experience brings a literary reflection to the poet. Instead of focusing on the pain or the fear, he fixes his gaze on his

wife's eyes, worried, looking unflinchingly at the machine that measures his pulse. The statement that "love is on hold" completes the next period that states body and soul are apart. This separation is not only physical, but also spiritual. It is conceivable that the poet does not have a platonic or metaphysical idea of love – like Donne – since all his previous poems about the theme avoid abstraction by resorting to realistic images. The concreteness of the ambulance complements the sequence, in which the word "apart" evokes another memory: of him being a college bellman.

The musicality of the word "apart" transports him to his childhood and makes him realize his hands were firmer then. The image of the hands, instead of bringing them to "Ecstasy", brings them back to the agony of the equipment, and the last verses show his and his wife's looks at the cannulas:

And we careered at speed through Dungloe,
Glendoan, our gaze ecstatic and bisected
By a hooked-up drip-feed to the cannula (HEANEY, 2010, p.15).

The fear of death penetrates the lexicon of the poem, transforming scientific terms into poetic material. The combination of the elements cause estrangement and forces the reader to reconsider idealistic perceptions on death. The poem's fixation on the physicality, the literality and the details is very characteristic of metaphysical poetry, positing homage to Donne.

The last poem of "Chanson d'Aventure" describes the conclusion of this journey, when the poet arrives at the hospital. In the first two stanzas he observes a man doing physiotherapy. Twisting the image into a metaphor, the poet associates him with the charioteer at Delphi. This is a reference to the meeting between King Laius and Oedipus, in which, Oedipus, not knowing the man was his father, kills Laius due to a dispute on who should give way. Such is the power of the vision that Heaney compares his situation to that of the mythical encounter. However, the meaning seems to be different, since the man figures as an oracle for the poet's own future. Here, the presence of death is a projection, based on the present situation and in the Greek myth.

In order to save the city Thebes, Oedipus had to solve a riddle proposed by the Sphinx: "What is it that has a voice and walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, and on three in the evening?" Oedipus answered the riddle by saying it is a man who crawls as a child, walks as an adult as uses a walking stick in old age. The meaning of the riddle and the setting of the poem, contribute to the self-reconfiguring of the poet

and the perception that he himself is getting old. This realization is indeed his way of configuring the “late style”, one that forces himself to find new meanings to a subjectivity that is exposed to the passing of time.

The mentioning of the “hand”, at the end of the poem, is what links the second and the third sections. Here Heaney regrets not having his wife’s hand, since the only sound he hears is his “pulse in the timbered grips” (16). This is another metaphor for the aging process. Thus, the “adventure” of the title is not the platonic self-fulfillment of the lovers, but the acknowledgement that death is the final destination for the “adventure” that is life. Once more, the poet is not interested in an idealized immortality in its verses. It seems that he wishes to hang on to everything he has in life.

“Late style”, in Heaney’s poetry, is a standpoint that challenges himself and his work. Additionally, it is also a form to construct uncanny metaphors which force poet and reader to reconfigure their own positions in face of life’s eternal questions. It is also a reexamination of the “living past”, or, in other words, the characteristic for which he was praised by the Swedish academy. His memory is revisited in the light of a mature subjectivity, whose understanding is not simplistic, but littered with contradictions and paradoxes.

Similarly, Derek Walcott, in his latest volume *White Egrets* (2010) critiques the concept of multiculturalism. Although the poetic voice remains true to his plural origins, African and European, his subject matter is more concerned with a simple question: how would poetry capture the distinctive perceptions on different temporal and geographical landscapes? It is as if, in each poem of the collection, Walcott was describing a new change of light. With poems that range from political to introspective themes, his poetry remains a process of discovery and reinvention. However, this process does not imply a conclusion, but rather, a cynical reply to death. And the figure of speech used to mock the approach of death is irony.

Theodor Adorno claimed “death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art, and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory” (566). The allegory of death allows Walcott to discover other potentialities for the poetic genre. In order to examine how the poet develops this “late style”, I am going to focus on the poem eponymous “White Egrets”, “The Lost Empire”, “A Sea Change” and the unnamed 23. These poems pose a problem to the subjectivity: how does one deal with the passing of time and the changes in the landscape and in the body? The answer lies in

new self-discovery. The poem “White Egrets” proposes a revision of his life in light of the image of the egret. Throughout the eight poems of the sequence— which vary between thirteen and sixteen lines, distributed in a single stanza – the poet seeks for a new form of verse that would represent this phase of his life. Death, instead of the end, brings disclosures and buries the past anew. This is particularly true in the image of the egrets, in addition to being palimpsests of meanings they are a source of inspiration and wisdom. They teach the poet the gift of observation and selection, in other words, the gift of poetry itself.

The first poem of the sequence presents the birds like cautious creatures that are aware of the changing light in order to capture their food. The poet states they will continue doing it, even after he is gone. This is the first time death is mentioned. Nevertheless, it is not frightening, but simply natural, like the birds. This is a prelude of a series of comparisons between egrets and poet. The second comparison is between the birds facing the changing of the seasons and the poet struggling in a:

world that dampens your tired eyes
behind two clouding lenses, sunrise, sunset
the quiet ravages of diabetes (HEANEY, 2010, p. 6).

Instead of being the end, this vision and the poet’s self-realization engender a new form of poetry:

Accept it all with level sentences,
with sculpted settlement that sets each stanza; (HEANEY, 2010, p. 6).

The world that changes in front of the decaying body enables the poet to produce beauty in form of poetry. The alliteration of sibilants together with the assonant ‘e’ vowels reproduce the tranquility of the setting in which the egrets dwell. The continuation is also a statement for life: in face of the questions that stem from the vision of the egrets, the night answers them with the brightness of the lawn. This is an allegory of the soil and how the place is important for Walcott. However, place does not mean his home or a simple geographical location, but rather a locus that allows him to write and construct “sculpted settlements”, or the architecture of the verse. The second poem continues with the reassurance the egrets bring:

into that peace
beyond desires and beyond regrets,
at which I may arrive eventually (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 5).

The verses suggest a parallelism between mindfulness and place. Nature provides the self-fulfillment in which the poet is yet to arrive. The permanence of birds also a reminder that they will go on, even after he is gone:

They shall...
be there after my shadow passes with all its sins
into a green thicket of oblivion,
with the rising and setting of a hundred suns
over Santa Cruz Valley, when I loved in vain (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 7).

Worth nothing is Walcott's use of "when" instead of "where" in line 7. This changing of pronouns conveys a temporal significance to the geographical place. Santa Cruz is in California and is a biographical reference that the poet explains in an interview:

The sequence is situated in the valley of Santa Cruz, where my two daughters live next to each other. Very often egrets settle on the lawns, or take off. They are beautiful in flocks or feeding by themselves. The contrast their whiteness strikes between the lawns and the hills is naturally beautiful. Perhaps there is something associated with this and age—the hair turning white—or with permanence (WEB, 2012).

Walcott's statement reveals the natural association between egrets and old age, but he does not admit that they are an allegory for the art of "late style". The birds, like Charles Baudelaire's "Albatross" represent the "gawky" and uncertain experimentation of poetry. While Baudelaire was using the albatross as an image of the poet in modernity, whose art was displaced in a frenetic industrial society, Walcott uses the egret is an image for a self-expression at an older age. This "late poetry" is diachronically polysemic, like a palimpsest that changes feelings and opinions through the passing of days.

The fourth poem is a continuation of the other two. Like a musical continuum, it describes the egrets in different locations of the earth, like Egypt – suggesting that the poet also has been to those places as well. In the fourth poem, the poet introduces a competition. The egret has to compete for its food with a hawk that crosses the sky. Here the poet compares the soil to the blank page he has to face:

The page of the lawn and this open page are the same,
The egret astonishes the page, the high hawk caws
over a dead thing, a love that was pure punishment (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 8).

The last verses confirm the first line: "The perpetual ideal is astonishment". The ideal of love for art is also a punishment, since writing is a struggle for words and the

perfect combinations. The egret, in this battle, helps the poet to carry on with his art. The next poem describes a temporary stop: the egrets do not appear during winter and this provokes distress to the poem: “nobody told me why they had gone”. The verse turns into a child-like complaint, but this tonality does not last long and the egrets come back, being the poet’s friends and angels:

Sometimes the hills themselves disappear
like friends, slowly, but I am happier
That they have come back now, like memory, like prayer (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 8).

The return of the egrets is a symbolic desire for the return of the poet’s lost friends who have passed away. This is the reason why they are like memory, because they represent the past. But they are also like prayer, a wish for the future, or the understanding that something is about to change. Perhaps the poet will be like a prayer in a few years or even the act of writing becomes a thankful prayer for what he still has. This hypothesis is verified in the next poem of the sequence, when he reaffirms his ending while observing a leaf that falls. The egrets are shown as gawky birds, ravenously looking for their food. The poet shares their hunger, however his is for words:

We share one instinct, that ravenous feeding
my pen’s beak, plucking up wriggling insects
like nouns and gulping them, the nib reading
as it writes, shaking off angrily what its beak rejects
Selection is what the egrets teach (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 9).

The art of poetry, in this case, is a selection of words that the poet first brainstorms on the page, and then selects, composing the “language beyond speech” (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 10), that is to say, the metaphoric and abstract meaning of the words. The last poem completes this mini ‘egret cycle’ with the image of a friend, Joseph, who passed away. Instead of being taken by angels, Joseph is taken by an egret, and thus, both become angelic souls. This is the metaphysical aspect of the egret: they seem to be birds that establish a communication between the natural and supernatural world. They are a reminder that poetry is the poet’s food, but this food is “wriggling insects”, which configures a rather morbid metaphor. Since worms feed themselves on dead bodies, his pen is living off the dead body of his memories and life. This strangeness fractures the serenity of the egrets and reaffirms the brevity of one’s life. It is also defying the stereotypical view that poetry is simply concerned with beauty, stating that it can also be disturbing.

The next poem that defines Walcott's "late style" is "The Lost Empire". Without judgment or political tone, the piece seems to be written from the point of view of a witness – somebody that survived history and is able to give his personal account. However, rather than an account, this poet shows how relieved he is with the outcome of events. Towards the end, though, there is an enigmatic social and cultural assertion that supports the artistic manifestations of the post-colonial spaces. The poem is divided into two sections of seventeen verses without separation of stanzas. While the first describes the fall of the British Empire, the second is more intimate and incites reflection. For the poet, beauty is not in the "glittering cities", like "Genoa, Milan, London, Madrid, [and] Paris" (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 36) but rather in the small communities on the African coasts. The memory of these unimportant places brings joy to the poet. This happiness is contrasted with the first part, in which he describes the agony he felt studying the torrid history of African independence when he was a young boy:

The map had seeped its stain on a schoolboy's shirt
Like red ink on a blotter, battles, long sieges (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 36).

In addition to the alliteration of sibilants and plosives, which suggest the sound of bombs and battles, the images transport the reader to a childish universe. The next verses describe an Arab ship going down, a Sikh sobbing and the poet himself saying: "I see it all come about" (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 36). This verse sentence interrupts the flow of the descriptions, but as soon as it is inserted, the poet switches to describing a funeral – probably of the Empire itself. He describes the death of a general and the surrendering of "Sind, Truskistan [and] Cawnpore" (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 36). After this, the poem ends with silence in the Sahara. In the second part, the subjective voice seems to be analyzing a map, where a dragonfly lands. Being the symbol of change and maturity, the insect conveys the idea that the poet is in a wiser phase of his life. He examines the coast of Cape Point, using its original name "Pointe du Cape". The memory of its vegetation leads him to the conclusion of the poem:

This small place produces
Nothing but beauty: the wind-wrapped trees, the breakers
On Dennery cliffs, the wild light that loosens
a galloping mare on the plain of Vieuxfort make us
merely receiving vessels of each day's grace (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 37).

Contrasted with the wealthy European cities above mentioned, these places, due to their simplicity, make one more thankful for his or her life. It is also a criticism of an industrial society which is governed by the frenetic search of wealth and superfluous goods. In these verses, Walcott disregards this negative side of progress, one that produces the capitalist search for more. The end of the poem presents the poet in a state of joy in face of death in one of these small provinces. He also compares his happiness to that of Patrick Kavanagh, an Irish poet, whose most important achievement was the poem “Epic”, which talked about the grievous effects of colonization in Ireland.

I'm content as Kavanagh with his few acres;
for my heart to be torn to shreds like the sea's lace,
to see how its wings catch colour when a gull lifts (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 37).

These puzzling verses express contentment and relief. Additionally, they suggest a self-fulfillment, since death can be a symbolic unification with nature. Again, the metaphor of the gull and wings goes back to the poem “White Egrets”. The birds represent the angelic transcendence of body and soul. Walcott’s “late style” is also characterized by the continuation of one’s body and mind in nature and not exactly in the stillness of the verse.

Differently from the previous poems, “A Sea Change” is a poem I consider “late style” because it presents a doubtful view of politics, particularly party politics. The poem is about the unreliable promises politicians usually make when they ascend to power. In order to reproduce the never-ending cycle of broken promises and unchanged politics, the poet uses a ballad-like structure with a repetitive refrain: “With a change of government”. The sentence is reproduced in the first, third, eighth and eleventh lines of the 15 lines of the poem. This reinforces the idea of how similar politicians are when they promise change. Also, similar to the other poems, Walcott uses natural metaphors, contrasting mechanical and natural organizations. The first seven lines of the poem describe the will-power politics have in changing their offices, especially colours and styles. But from the eighth line onwards, he starts making associations with animals, which reinforces the idea of cycles, since animals are guided by seasonal changes. The last five verses conclude the piece with the realization that even though there was an impetus for change, politicians are irretrievably the same when they reach a powerful position:

With a change in the government, the haze of wide rain
Which you begin to hear as the ruler hears the crowd

Gathering under the balcony, the leader who has promised
The permanent cobalt of change in the government
With the lilac and violet of his cabinet's change (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 52).

The promise of change falls flat and the poet reveals the dissatisfactory nature of politics. For him, it is a vicious circle that does not offer any real change. Once more, Walcott criticizes industrial society and the false changes provided by political party. Here, the incredulous tone comes from the experience and from observing changes of government and power. For this subjective voice, change is not in promises but somewhere else. This is perhaps the most political of the poems in the volume. Differently from "The Lost Empire", "A Sea Change" uses the metaphor of the sea to convey that politics is identical everywhere in the world. This brings universalism to the idea of social injustice, since it unites post-colonial and post-imperial societies. By doing that, he avoids the Manichaeism typical of many post-colonial discourses.

The last poem by Walcott that I would like to examine does not have a title, just a number, 23. It talks explicitly about getting old. Nevertheless, the metaphysical connotation of "White Egrets" is substituted by ordinary activities and humour. First and foremost, this poem is about the skeptical discovery that it does not matter how much one tries to prolong life, death is inevitable. The poem opens with the poet exercising on a Sunday morning. The first verse already presents this idea of getting in shape. But as soon as he realizes he is losing weight, he also notices his maturing process is demanding more from him:

What? You're going to be Superman at seventy-seven?
Got your weight down? Okay. You've lost seven pounds,
but what you've also lost is the belief in heaven
as dear friends die (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 54).

Due to the death of his friends, the presence of heaven is remote to the poet. The next line shows people in their common activities, the postman and a cyclist performing their daily routine while nature remains the same. In the middle of the poem, there is a warning: "I'm sure everyone knows it will happen one day", after two transitional lines, "seven less pounds and you'll need a slimmer coffin". The matter of fact, slightly joking tone of the lines belie the seriousness of the subject matter. The poem ends with an obliteration of the fear of death:

Now you swim
early in the morning to avoid the sun; fear melts
before daylight's beauty, despite all the coughing (WALCOTT, 2010, p. 54).

The presence of light and being alive makes the poet thankful for what he still has and is able to do. The humour is a tool to kill the very fear of death. This unnamed poem may be seen as a re-writing of John Donne's "Death be Not Proud". In the same way Heaney made light of death with "Chanson d'Aventure", Walcott does as well. However, his verse is lighter and lacks the mythical associations of Heaney's poem. Death, like life, is seen in its simplicity.

As a conclusion, a principal theme of "late style" is the re-visitation of one's life based on a more mature approach. Both Heaney and Walcott review their lives and shed new meanings to old characteristics about their life and work. Once more, poetry seems to appeal to a real problem many artists face nowadays: the challenge of getting old, but yet still finding the energy and the creative means to write poetry. Maybe Heaney and Walcott's "late style" is a new understanding of what Adorno called the "process" in Beethoven's work: "his [Beethoven's] late work still remains process, but not as development; rather as a catching fire between the extremes, which no longer allow for any secure middle ground..." (ADORNO, 2002, p. 567). This is precisely what happens with the poets when they do not render themselves to an easy communication and instead make the verse rather difficult to penetrate. The use of duodecets, the references to Donne and Baudelaire, the difficulty of the images and metaphors are challenges that seduce and inhibit the reader's understanding. But they also appeals to one's sense of life. Adorno also claimed "late works are catastrophes" (ADORNO, 2002, p. 567). However, here, the catastrophe for the poets is not the end of their lives, but rather, the end of writing itself.

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