

# Bringing Home, Letting Go

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Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain*, Faber, £12.99, ISBN 9780571269228;  
Derek Walcott, *White Egrets*, Faber, £12.99, ISBN 9780571254736

The happy coincidence of new books by two of the significant poets of our time, writing in the latter moments of their careers, encourages consideration of their conjoined but markedly different late style.

The two Laureates are here making by-now familiar rounds of their poetic territories. Or, rather, they are seeking to re-make them from the perspective of fragility which is old age. What is noticeable is that in neither case is there a consistently Yeatsian or Dylan Thomas-fuelled rage against the inevitable attritions; both poets strike a largely benign, plangent note which reserves and restricts its visionary range. This is poetry from assured masters which throws us back, instead, upon the well-trodden roads that they have laid across their careers, roads upon which they have come to feel comfortable, and which they feel comfortable enjoining their readers to follow once again. There are mixed benefits and disappointments, acknowledged and otherwise, from this stance in both works.

Intriguingly, each book is set in conscious dialogue with its author's previous work. And, formally, they move in different directions within that dialogue. Walcott reprises many journeyings through Europe and elsewhere, the wistful, regretful, searchings and laments for numberless muses, and the wished-for returns to St Lucia, which had made up *The Prodigal* (2004). That earlier and sprawling blank verse tour, interspersed by irregular rhyme, made meandering its theme. *White Egrets* is pulled back into chunks of sonnet-, or extended-sonnet, shape. Walcott is one of the great rhymers, and there is immense gain in this renewed tautness.

Heaney, in contrast, had underpinned his previous collection, *District and Circle* (2006), with sonnets. In *Human Chain*, he instead builds the provisional twelve-line units, first introduced in his earlier 'Squarings' sequence of 1991, into mini-sequences or separate lyrics. These twelve-liners have become a staple of his poetry (remember, perhaps most compellingly, 'A Sofa in the Forties'). Their redeployment in more concerted groupings in *Human Chain* is a mark of what one such sequence here sees as a stalwart "steady-handedness maintained / In books against its vanishing". That prepositional "against" is typical of some of the writing here, in being beautifully and tacitly weighed – "against" meaning both a bulwark in resistance to passing away, and something sustained in anticipation of that very fact. These are poems poised within that slight but absolute balance.

A further contrast: both these books seem to be much more consciously conceived as entities than the poets' previous efforts. The egrets of Walcott's title appear and reappear across the collection as surprising markers of the local, and of a permanence which comments upon the often self-conscious theatrical posturings of the poems' speaker:

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.

Later in the book, however, and after their several advents, the egrets can come to seem almost co-evals with the poet, as he reviews his recent career and admonishes himself to stand his ground:

be grateful that you wrote well in this place,  
let the torn poems sail from you like a flock  
of white egrets in a long last sigh of release.

Heaney's collection is also elaborately patterned around a defined set of images: the ghostly presences of his parents, images of weight and weighing, of clothes, of the equipment and the physical act of writing. There is an almost Dantean panoply of images around looking, recognising, seeing; as when his father on a recalled market-day uncouples his gaze from the young Heaney:

[...] his eyes leave mine and I know  
The pain of loss before I know the term.

Elsewhere Heaney, rushed along in the ambulance after his stroke, his hand in his wife's, recalls "Our eyebeams threaded laser-fast". There is, in another poem even, the typically wry but lamenting allusion, recalling his parents together:

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.

Walcott keeps any possible *schema* behind his repeated (if hardly traumatic) travellings and journeyings-back to the first place to a few hints, as when, sipping wine by a marina with his companion, he breaks out:

In this orange hour the light reads like Dante,  
three lines at a time, their symmetrical tension,  
quiet bars rippling from the Paradiso  
as a dinghy writes lines made by the scanty  
metre of its oar strokes [...]

This is one of many lovely and "quiet" bringings-home of some of the central mythologies of Western consciousness in the book, the setting of the expected and commonplace up against further symmetries. Yet it is, for the most part, not a consonance that *White Egrets* advertises.

Heaney's scheme in *Human Chain* is, though, much more dutifully and even labouredly worked-through. The revisiting of *The Aeneid* Book VI in 'Route 110', the central sequence (another re-echo of *Seeing Things* (1991)), perhaps too-deliberately underwrites the frequent encounters with death, and the familiar revenants, across the book. This sense of labouring, of the labouredness, the burdens, of life, is ever dramatically to the fore, after all. The title poem moves, in characteristic fashion for later Heaney, from a report on the TV news showing images of aid packages being passed from hand to hand at some disaster to reflection upon the poet's own situation and experience and its implications. Reminiscence about passing grain sacks "eye-to-eye" onto a trailer expands to the feeling at "that quick unburdening [...] / A letting go which will

not come again. / Or it will, once.” The poem has moved a long way, in its twelve lines, from the initial images of blighted suffering; the ending upon the personal/impersonal premonition is only awkwardly related to it. By making the strain of existence, and the delights but difficult perseverance required for writing, his subject, Heaney is deliberately sometimes provisionally in control of the implications and resonances which it sets up, and which are not accounted for in his own happenstantial forms. The poems are peopled, as one has it, by those “in need of” translation. Heaney’s synthetic style in his later work – a mixture of fusty past participles (“bestirred”, “commingled”, “ahover”, “astream”) and the colloquial – make such “need” into a unique style.

To that extent, Walcott, ever the more grandstanding presence in his own work, strikes more of the classic posture of the poet hitting his late style. *White Egrets* contains a couple of fine rants against perceived “enemies”, but, also, notably, some telling moments when the speaker turns upon himself. Questioning the constant recourse to idealising love poetry (“boring”, although this book is full of such poems), there is the sudden outburst:

Where does this sickness come from, because it is  
sickness, this conversion of the simplest action  
to an ordeal, this hatred of simple delight  
in others, of benches in the empty park?  
Only her suffering will bring you satisfaction,  
old man in the dimming world [...]

Such returns upon the self, although irregular here, make for a dazzling unpredictability between the poems. There is even a paired couple, ‘The Lost Empire’, and ‘The Spectre of Empire’, which marvellously return to Walcott’s earlier work, but on different grounds: the latter images the shade of a former colonial administrator wandering the scenes of his vanished rule, as in the famous ‘Ruins of a Great House’.

Whereas Walcott continues to retain the reader at an admiring observational distance, for Heaney, as ever, it is the writing of writing which most compels, and which forms the basis of some intriguing variations in this book. For all its more intent and careful craftedness, there are manifold bounties here also – as when, lamenting the death of the painter Colin Middleton, the poet finds himself driving along near Mount Erigal, and coining a fine Hardy-esque negative:

[...]unhomesick, unbelieving, through  
A grant-aided, renovated scene, trying  
  
To remember the Greek word signifying  
A world restored completely [...]

Both these new books are copiously quotable, a measure of the unexpectedness and freshness they bring to their paradoxically unsurprising manner and subjects.

