

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 15 (2002)

**Artikel:** "Around the world each needful product flies" : England's global expansion and the poets' trade  
**Autor:** Senn, Werner  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100000>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 08.02.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## “Around the world each needful product flies”: England’s global expansion and the poets’ trade

Werner Senn

Along with the British nation-state, the British Empire constituted itself largely in the course of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries from the almost continuous wars against Holland, France, Spain and the American colonists (Brantlinger 6). In response to, and indeed in complicity with, this expansion, many poetic texts up to the end of the eighteenth century actively promoted this hegemonic and colonial project by participating in a nationalist and colonialist discourse, but above all by insisting on the country’s leading role in expanding overseas trade. This paper sets out to address the question of how English poetry has engaged with the historical phenomenon of England’s global commercial expansion and its establishment of a colonial empire. In particular, it will explore the arguments put forward in these texts in support of England’s drive to control worldwide trade, and the legitimizing strategies they developed. In “poeticizing” England’s global trade, poets in different ways endorsed the building of the mythology of the British empire, the specific British myth of hegemonic rule through securing international trade and thus liberty and peace. As Howard D. Weinbrot has amply demonstrated, one of the essential movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries “was replacement of the destructive *Pax Romana* of war by the constructive *Pax Britannica* of trade” (Weinbrot 250). A crucial modern improvement over the ancients in the neoclassical period was thus “a preference, if not achievement, of peace to war,” and this was “epitomized in the progress of trade” (Weinbrot 249-50). As Defoe wrote in *The History of the Principal Discoveries and Improvements* (1727), the Romans “planted [colonies] for Conquest, we planted for Commerce; they planted to extend their Dominion, we to extend our Trade” (*History* 169, quoted in Weinbrot 257). Defoe is of course a key figure in the consolidation of this discourse of British commercial expansion, but few poets at the time could have escaped

the intimate connection of literature and politics that existed during much of the period we are concerned with.

Against the wide-ranging poetic valorization of Britain's global commercial and economic expansion, a poetic counter-discourse that stresses the local perspective, the diversity of economies and cultures and the need for resistance to this globalization was slow to develop. A somewhat ambiguously phrased counterpoint tentatively emerged in Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village": "Around the world each needful product flies,/ For all the luxuries the world supplies" (lines 283-4). Where indeed is the line to be drawn between need and luxury? As will be seen, Goldsmith was somewhat ambivalent in this respect. While humanitarian moral objections to colonialism are as old as European colonialism itself, a strong anti-colonialist tradition did not come into being before the eighteenth century (Young 74-5) and did not often find a reflection in poetry. In a postcolonial perspective, the circulation of goods could be refigured as that of cultural capital, as a dialogical exchange in literary communication. But postcolonialism, as Robert Young has pointed out again recently, is a dialectical concept, in that it marks decolonization and the achievement of sovereignty but also the emergence into a new imperialistic context of economic (and often political) domination (57). Hence the difficulties of theorizing postcolonial literature merely in terms of discursive and cultural agency are considerable. The danger of failing to take into account the central problem, that of the asymmetry of economic and political power, is obvious.<sup>1</sup> One might wish to argue that cultural critique as a challenge to culture's determinants has always been a central preoccupation in anti- and postcolonial theory (Young 65), and that for a postcolonial writer to participate in a cultural discourse that had previously been the prerogative of the colonial ruling class constitutes in itself a major political breakthrough. However, as San Juan warns, "when the discourse/practice of exchange constitutes individuals as equal subjects, it also generates the illusion of freedom, as in 'free competition,' relative to the preceding stage" (146). Moreover, its very success might make the work liable to being incorporated in the global cultural market whose power it sets out to challenge. The present paper, while largely focusing on the colonial poetic discourse, will confine itself, therefore, to a brief consideration of one single but outstanding instance of postcolonial poetic practice, that of Derek Walcott.

---

<sup>1</sup> The question has been lucidly expounded by Epifanio San Juan Jr. in *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, 1998. Cf. also Arif Dirlik. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism."

The need for gold, as Robert Young maintains, was a primary motive of the remarkable maritime expansion eastwards and westwards in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. “For the British, the possibility of appropriating some of the booty was one reason for establishing an effective navy. [. . .] Once a single colony had been established, then it could always be argued that strategic interests required more” (21). Predating by several years such texts as Michael Drayton’s “To the Virginian Voyage” or Samuel Daniel’s “Epistle: To Prince Henrie,” George Chapman’s “De Guiana” (1596) is one of the first poems in English dealing with the theme of colonial expansion and appropriation. As its subtitle, “Carmen Epicum,” suggests, Chapman thought the epic genre appropriate for such a theme, although his text is in fact no more than 184 lines long. But it is the context which matters: the poem is a preface to Laurence Keymis’s *A Relation of the Second Voyage to Guiana* and actually addressed to Keymis’s master, Sir Walter Raleigh, though ultimately intended for Raleigh’s patron, the Queen. Accordingly, the poem urges Clio, here called “Honors Muse,” to sing and “prophecie th’exploit/Of his [i.e. Raleigh’s] Eliza-consecrated sworde” (*The Poems of George Chapman* 353). Chapman’s poem is remarkable above all for the boldness of his figurative language, which defies logic but makes for impressive forceful colonial propaganda. The speaker blithely envisages “Riches with honour, Conquest without bloud” (l. 15) to be the result of Raleigh’s exploit. This can only be achieved through peaceful trade. Guiana is personified as bowing in willing submission to her big sister England, and to England’s mother, “our most sacred Maide,” which makes Queen Elizabeth a virgin mother. By an extraordinary leap of the imagination, Chapman turns the Queen’s “barrenness” not only into an asset, but constructs it as combining origin and descent: “her barrenness,” therefore,

Is the true fruite of vertue, that may get,  
 Beare and bring foorth anew in all perfection,  
 What heretofore sauage corruption held  
 In barbarous *Chaos*; and in this affaire  
 Become her father, mother, and her heire. (ll. 25-9)

By virtue of this miraculous trinity, the Queen would thus be securing all legal, hereditary rights over the future colony as perfectly natural ones. The boldness of this construction is only surpassed by that of investing the Queen with God’s creative power:



Then most admired Soueraigne, let your breath  
 Goe forth vpon the waters, and create  
 A golden world in this our yron age,  
 And be the prosperous forewind to a Fleet,  
 That seconding your last, may goe before it  
 In all successe of profite and renowme. (ll. 30-35)

Thus Chapman's text intervenes explicitly in the political debate about colonial expansion, seeking to secure her majesty's support for Raleigh's commercial venture. Chapman's utopian vision of a "conquest without blood" culminates in a description that minimizes the violence and idealizes the beneficial effects both for Raleigh's band and the colonized.<sup>2</sup> This notion is pervasive and still informs John Stuart Mill's observation, in his *Principles of Political Economy*, that "commercial adventurers from more advanced countries have generally been the first civilizers of barbarians" (394). In a telling move, Chapman's text displaces the aggression and violence of the colonizers' physical conquest with the overwhelming but peaceful and civilizing power of Orpheus's voice and thus makes the poetic discourse complicitous with the colonial enterprise of Raleigh's men:

And now a wind as forward as their spirits,  
 Sets their glad feet on smooth *Guiana's* breast,  
 Where (as if ech man were an *Orpheus*)  
 A world of Sauadges fall tame before them,  
 Storing their theft-free treasuries with golde. (ll. 163-7)

This is the golden age to be created by the Queen's divine "fiat;" despite the image of forceful subjugation in line 164, what the text propounds is a peaceful racial harmony figured finally not even in barter or trade but in a sexual image, the honourable copulation of conquerors and natives: "[. . .] all our Youth take Hymens lightes in hand,/ And fill each roofe with honor'd progenie" (173-4). The image of interracial marriage here is certainly not to be read as a social ideal but rather as a political allegory. Yet Chapman's vision of social harmony can ultimately be conveyed only in a paradox: the mutual economic gain of both sides, as the immediately succeeding lines put it: "There makes *Societie* Adamantine chaines,/ And ioins their harts with wealth, whom wealth disioyn'd" (175-6). It is not easy to imagine this paradoxical union, or to see what exactly the colonized stand to gain in this "ex-

---

<sup>2</sup> Millar MacLure grants the poem a utopian vision yet sees it as "little more than a hymn to free enterprise and a promised paradise for younger sons" (15).

change” though it seems that Chapman is thinking of the creation of some sort of surplus value.

To naturalize these aggressive imperialist moves was one of the main poetic strategies poets engaged in throughout the period. Thus in 1655 Edmund Waller, addressing Cromwell, could proudly declare:

Our little world, the image of the great,  
 Like that, amidst the boundless ocean set,  
 Of her own growth has all that nature craves,  
 And all that's rare as tribute from the waves.  
 [. . .]  
 To dig for wealth we weary not our limbs:  
 Gold, though the heaviest metal, hither swims.  
 Ours is the harvest where the Indians mow:  
 We plough the deep and reap what others sow.  
 (“Panegyrick to My Lord Protector,” ll. 49-52, 61-5)

In the second half of the seventeenth century, “the commercial basis of English expansion depended in large part on replacing Holland as the leading European economic power” (Brooks/Faulkner 63). At the time of the Dutch wars, John Dryden in his “Annus Mirabilis” (1667) saw this hegemony threatened by Holland’s aggressive economic policy. But Dryden disguised England’s own hegemonic claim in an organic image of free trade, which he compared with the circulation of blood in the body as Hobbes had done in *Leviathan* a few years earlier (Foucault 179), an image that remained popular at least up to Edward Young (Weinbrot 264):

Trade, which like blood should circularly flow,  
 Stop'd in their Channels, found its freedom lost:  
 Thither the wealth of all the world did go,  
 And seem'd but shipwrack'd on so base a Coast. (59-60: 5-8)

The requirement of circularity of exchange, however, is negated by Dryden’s comparison of the Second Dutch War with the Second Punic War, in which the commercial ascendancy of Carthage was overthrown by the imperial power of Rome:<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The parallel between these two historical conflicts of empires over maritime predominance recurs in Richard Glover’s poem *London* a few decades later. (see below, p. 73)

Thus mighty in her Ships, stood *Carthage* long,  
 And swept the riches of the world from far;  
 Yet stoop'd to *Rome*, less wealthy, but more strong:  
 And this may prove our second Punick War. (60: 17-20)

Dryden, deeply ambivalent as he was towards classical achievements, here advocates the Roman principle of applying military force in the service of empire-building if Britain's commercial hegemony is threatened.

Alexander Pope's celebration of a *Pax Britannica* in *Windsor Forest* is too well known to need quoting here. While poetically it is indebted to the classics, its emphasis on commercial peace is decidedly modern. But like his fellow-poets, Pope seems fascinated by the "glitt'ring spoil" miraculously brought home from the four corners of the world (*Rape of the Lock*, I.132). Thus Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* is "decked with all that Land and Sea afford" (V.11). Pope's contemporary, Sir Richard Blackmore, in *Creation* (1712) promotes the widespread view of the benevolence of trade by insisting on its benefit for all concerned:

Thus mutual traffic sever'd realms maintain  
 And manufactures change to mutual gain;  
 Each other's growth and arts they sell and buy,  
 Ease their redundance, and their wants supply. (Bk II: 756-9)

But Blackmore, too, depersonalizes the commercial enterprise, allowing mere abstractions like "realms" and "manufactures" to be involved. Apart from one bare mention of "th'adventurous merchant" who is a passive object of the capricious winds, he too figures the economic and physical process of trading as entirely natural, deletes all traces of the actual negotiation and acquisition of commodities and totally suppresses human agency. In what amounts to a kind of "commodity fetishism," Britons "find" the fruit of commerce blown to London by the friendly wind:<sup>4</sup>

Ye Britons, who the Fruit of Commerce find,  
 How is your Isle a Debtor to the Wind,  
 Which thither wafts Arabia's fragrant spoils,  
 Gems, Pearls and Spices from the Indian Isles,  
 From Persia Silks, Wines from Iberia's shore,  
 Peruvian Drugs and Guinea's Golden Oar?  
 Delights and Wealth to fair Augusta flow  
 From ev'ry Region whence the Winds can blow. (Bk II:760-67)

---

<sup>4</sup> The term "commodity fetishism" is used in this context by Laura Brown (13).

While in Dryden’s time it was the Dutch, in the earlier eighteenth century it was the French navy that posed a threat to Britain’s global expansion. In 1727 James Thomson, “chief poetic exponent of the Whig commercial ideology” (Brooks/Faulkner 75) made his poem “Britannia” a rousing appeal to Britain’s “thoughtless Sons” to “keep [their] Trade intire, intire the Force,/ And Honour of [their] Fleets” (476, ll. 174-5). For Thomson, a most eloquent spokesman for the ideology of *Pax Britannica*, Britain is

the firmest State  
That e’er was seated on the subject Sea;  
A State, alone, where Liberty should live,  
In these late Times, this Evening of Mankind,  
When *Athens, Rome, and Carthage* are no more. (477, ll. 193-7)

The teleological view of Britain as the belated but greatest of the world’s empires and keeper of the world’s peace and freedom is one of Thomson’s favourite topics, and he does not shy away from celebrating the imperial makers. In his view it is Britain’s invaluable asset and ideological advantage to be, unlike other nations or empires, “unencumber’d with the Bulk immense/ Of Conquest” (ll. 208-9), since its power is merely based on its peaceful commercial navy. The *Genius of the Deep* (in his poem “Liberty”) pays tribute to the men whose heroic efforts and endurance have set Britain up as the leading commercial nation and whose merit it is,

Instead of Treasure robb’d by ruffian War,  
Round social Earth to circle fair Exchange,  
And bind the Nations in a golden Chain. (Brooks/Faulkner 77)

Like Chapman, Thomson does not seem to be troubled by the contradictions inherent in his images. This blind complicity is even more striking at the end of the Thomson-Mallet masque *Alfred*, in the vision of the hermit who spurs Alfred on to great deeds of Empire, who explicitly enlists “bards to sing them in immortal verse” (Brooks/Faulkner 80) and who celebrates British supremacy, as Alfred himself has just done in his song “Rule Britannia.” But – the question may well be asked – if Britons “never will be slaves,” do they have to go to the other extreme and subject the entire world? This is exactly what the hermit proudly prophesies:

I see thy commerce, *Britain*, grasp the world:  
All nations serve thee; every foreign flood,  
Subjected, pays its tribute to the *Thames*. (Brooks/Faulkner 80)

And thus the moral he proclaims is clear: "They rule the balanc'd world, who rule the main" (80). Thomson's liberalism is at the same time also a fervent nationalism and a strident globalism. It is obvious that the individual freedom and equality he postulates is contradicted by the reality of an economic system of circulation in which only a few profit from the commodities exchanged, or the money that represents their value.<sup>5</sup>

The central topos of the civilizing benevolence of trade also informs Richard Glover's *London, or The Progress of Commerce*. The poem was written at another critical moment in Britain's history, the war with Spain in 1739, and makes the nexus between poetry and commerce explicit. The self-conscious speaker of this poem is a merchant who implores the winds to guide his vessels home safely so that his muse is at liberty to devote herself whole-heartedly to the real business, i.e. the praise of London, "Albion's pride, /Fair seat of wealth and freedom, . . . /lov'd abode of Commerce" (17). In making Britain the heir of the Phoenicians, "the originators of trade" (Weinbrot 262), Glover, son of a merchant and a merchant himself, is echoing Defoe in the *History* and repeating a widely current view. In Glover's mythical version Neptune has fathered a child called "Commerce" on a Phoenician virgin. In a progress that takes her to Greece, Sicily, Portugal, Marseilles, the Hanseatic league, and Venice, Commerce ends up in "northern Albion's tin-embowel'd fields" (l.190).<sup>6</sup> That the goddess chooses to make England her ultimate residence is due to the decrees of Fate, which coincide with a historical telos: it means "perfecting at once/ What by Eliza was so well begun" (ll. 406-7); but above all it is the beauty of the Thames valley and the virtue of its inhabitants, their "candid manners," their "free/ Sagacious converse" and their "zeal for knowledge" (ll. 416-18) that determine the choice, make it seem inevitable and natural. The poem's immediate occasion, the Spanish challenge to British naval supremacy, arouses the speaker's patriotic and nationalistic spirit but at the same time makes him self-consciously doubt whether, as a poet, he will be able to rise to the occasion:

Thy votary, O Commerce! Gracious Power,  
Continue still to hear my vows, and bless  
My honourable industry, which courts  
No other smile but thine. (ll. 436-9)

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. San Juan 146.

<sup>6</sup> This trajectory of economic history more or less anticipates that of Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*. See Brantlinger 37.

Nowhere else in the corpus of texts discussed here are the poet's and the merchant's trade conflated with such naivety as in these lines, which leave it entirely open whether the “honourable industry” is that of trading or versifying. Like Dryden, Glover explicitly evokes the Second Punic War as he calls for military action to defend Britain's mercantile empire:

Her head commercial Carthage bow'd at last  
 To military Rome: th' unaltered will  
 Of Heaven in every climate hath ordain'd,  
 And every age, that empire shall attend  
 The sword, and steel shall ever conquer gold. (ll. 481-5)

The war propaganda and the anti-Spanish polemics are unusually loud and crass in a text ostensibly written in praise of global commerce; but then Glover does not seem to subscribe to the “theology of trade” that Weinbrot has traced in so many of his contemporaries, i.e. the commercial vision of Britain “heading a divinely ordained, mutually enriching mission of union among nations helping one another” (147). As late as 1782 William Cowper could celebrate commerce as the “band” designed

T'associate all the branches of mankind,  
 And if a boundless plenty be the robe,  
 Trade is the golden girdle of the globe;  
 Wise to promote whatever end he means,  
 God opens fruitful nature's various scenes,  
 Each climate needs what other climes produce,  
 And offers something to the gen'ral use;  
 No land but listens to the common call,  
 And in return receives supply from all.  
 (“Charity,” ll. 83-92)

In Glover's poem, by contrast, the Roman imperial spirit does not yet seem to have been completely subdued by the benevolence of trade. What is equally remarkable in *London* is the nationalist claim made for Britain: as the seat of the goddess Commerce, the British nation is “the joy of freedom, dread of treacherous kings,/ The destin'd mistress of the subject main/And arbitress of Europe” (ll. 388-90), while Commerce herself commands even vaster powers, the gifts of civilization which she bestows on the Englishman:

Thou gav'st him letters; there imparting all,  
 Which lifts the noble spirit near to Heaven,  
 Laws, learning, wisdom, Nature's works reveal'd



By godlike ages, all Minerva's arts,  
 Apollo's music, and th' eternal voice  
 Of Virtue sounding from the historic roll,  
 The philosophic page, and poet's song. (ll. 197-206)

Global trade is propagated here – as it still is in Cowper's "Charity" ("art thrives most/ Where commerce has enrich'd the busy coast," ll. 113-14) – as the source and origin of all civilizatory and cultural agency and achievement, including Glover's own. When nationalism and globalism join forces, Britain's superior status in the world would seem assured.

While Chapman saw imperial expansion mainly as inaugurating a new golden age, with gold bullion as England's main profit, the Rev. Richard Jago, in his short epic poem *Edge-Hill* (1767), celebrates the literal return of the iron age, the emergence of the steel industry of Birmingham. Its manufactured goods represent what the poem's speaker sees as England's most important export commodity. In economic terms, it seems infinitely superior to the silver and gold imported from abroad, from "Golconda's sparkling mines," or "Motezuma's [sic!] palaces." He rhetorically asks Britannia's sons whether instead of iron they would rather have silver ploughshares and golden horseshoes: the answer, obviously, is No: "Then grateful own/ [. . .] Heav'n's providential love,/ That gave you real wealth, not wealth in show,/ [. . .]. Thankful ply/ Your iron arts, and rule the vanquish'd world" (302). Jago is in fact rehearsing an argument often made, e.g. by Adam Smith, in favour of expanding foreign markets to increase production at home (Young 82). Book III of *Edge-Hill* concludes with a grand peroration on the real and the exchange value of the products of the British steel industry and their global marketing:

Hail, native British ore!

For thine is trade, that with its various stores  
 Sails round the world, and visits ev'ry clime,  
 And makes the treasures of each clime her own,  
 By gainful commerce of her woolly vests,  
 Wrought by the spiky comb; or steely wares,  
 From the coarse mass, by stubborn toil, refin'd.  
 Such are thy peaceful gifts! (302)

In spite of this apparent liberalism, Jago is not above propagating autocratic, "Roman" measures when it comes to exploiting raw materials that would otherwise be left unused. Jago's text thus unwittingly reveals a feature more typical of the heyday of British Imperialism in the nineteenth century, "the



contradictions [. . .] between the ostensibly liberal values of the Empire and the practice of its autocratic rule” (Young 40) as it goes on to admit an almost natural connection between economic and military power. If “gainful commerce” should not succeed in securing “the treasures of each clime,” England’s steel-based military power will help out. Jago’s speaker concludes his address to “native British ore” with these words:

And war to thee  
 Its best support, and deadliest horror owes,  
 The glitt’ring falchion, and the thund’ring tube!  
 At whose tremendous gleam, and volley’d fire,  
 Barbarian kings fly from their useless hoards,  
 And yield them all to thy superior pow’r. (302)

No ethical problem seems to arise for Jago from this conjunction of trade and military power. Since the barbarian owners do not know how to put their natural resources to commercial and thus civilizing use, these remain “useless hoards.” Savage fetishism seems contrasted here with British “economic rationality” (Brantlinger 186). The superior state of civilization brought about in Britain by industry and trade legitimizes the forceful appropriation of those “useless hoards” because Britain can process and insert them into the global economic system which it controls and can thus generate additional wealth. What seems tacitly understood here is the mercantilist position that gold and silver achieve their utility only as minted coinage (Foucault 175).<sup>7</sup>

As we have already seen, a tentative counterpoint to this commercial optimism emerges in Oliver Goldsmith’s “The Deserted Village.” In its rousing appeal to the “statesmen” to “count [their] gains” and to consider the difference “between a splendid and an happy land” (ll. 273, 268), it marks a critical point in the poets’ engagement with England’s global commercial expansion. Though it may be said to endorse the critical counter-discourse to the poetic glorification of English economic supremacy, it does so from a conservative-nationalist position. The text engages briefly but trenchantly with the issue of global trade and its boosting of consumerism, in lines that seem to echo Jago:

Proud swells the tide with loads of freighted ore,  
 And shouting Folly hails them from her shore;

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Brantlinger 42-3.

Hoard, even beyond the miser's wish, abound,  
And rich men flock from all the world around. (529, ll. 269-72)

It is not so much the massive increase in wealth by means of the global trade in "useful products" (l. 274) that is deplored, let alone colonial exploitation, but rather the pernicious social consequences at home: the unequal distribution of wealth and the craving it induces for luxury, for conspicuous consumption.

Around the world each needful product flies,  
For all the luxuries the world supplies:  
While thus the land, adorned for pleasure all,  
In barren splendour feebly waits the fall. (ll. 283-6)

In a manner typical of the eighteenth century, Goldsmith interweaves economic theory with philosophical discourse (Brantlinger 33). While apparently favouring a socially progressive view of a fairer distribution of wealth resulting from global trade, he seems to hold on to an outdated theory of political economy: as Foucault has demonstrated, theorists in the eighteenth century favoured the view that it is not production but consumption which generates or increases wealth (194).

The texts we have been looking at so far are all implicated in a discourse that built up a mythology of Empire, the specific British myth of *Pax Britannica*, hegemonic rule by securing international trade and thus liberty and peace. The myth was empowered by its link with the "imperatives of capitalist free enterprise" (Brooks/Faulkner 21), which in the nineteenth century promoted the idea of international free trade on a truly global scale, with beneficial effects for mankind at large. Thus John Stuart Mill, in his *Principles of Political Economy*, could claim in 1848 that commerce established "a sense of community of interest" between peoples, and conclude his chapter XVII, "Of International Trade:"

[I]t may be said without exaggeration that the great extent and rapid increase of international trade, in being the principal guarantee of the peace of the world, is the great permanent security for the uninterrupted progress of the ideas, the institutions, and the character of the human race. (395)

Such ideas of economic imperialism seem to have attracted only few poets in the culminating period of the British empire. In his study of Alfred Tennyson, Alan Sinfield has interestingly linked the themes of poetry and commerce. In tracing an unease about England's global expansion even in Ten-

nyson’s earlier poetry, as e.g. in “You ask me, why, though ill at ease,” Sinfield relates this unease to the poet’s anxiety about “the tendency of trade to intrude upon the poetic margins” (38). In his view, “the threat of destruction hanging over Tennyson’s remote places is perhaps related to his sense of the vulnerability of the marginal space allowed to poetry – because the governing centre, impelled in particular by the doctrine of free trade, was pressing continually out into the margins” (44-5). “Hail Briton!” also written in the early thirties, is openly hostile to imperial expansion, and the speaker of “Locksley Hall” (1837-8) declares that he must wander where “never comes the trader, never floats an European flag” (l. 161).

Some decades later, as Poet Laureate, Tennyson apparently felt it his duty to adopt a less individualist, more political perspective on the imperial enterprise. He did this e.g. in “To the Queen,” the poem he placed as epilogue to *Idylls of the King* in 1873. It invokes the loyalty demonstrated in public by the people of England to the Queen and her son on the occasion of the Prince of Wales’s recovery from a dangerous illness, when “London rolled one tide of joy through all/ Her trebled millions” (*The Poems of Tennyson*, 1755, ll. 8-9). What the speaker insists on is that this common voice of the people united in their loyalty to the royal family is the voice that spoke at Waterloo and “[l]eft [the English] mightiest of all peoples under heaven” (l. 21). This historical continuity is sharply contrasted in the text with the suggestion made in a recent issue of *The Times* to get rid of Canada for financial reasons (cf. Brantlinger 185; Young 91). For Tennyson this is a betrayal of the “tone of empire” (l. 18) and worse, a loss of “imperial self-awareness” (Brooks/Faulkner 22). The speaker asks himself whether the voice that made the suggestion was “the voice of Britain, or a sinking land,/ Some third-rate isle half-lost among her seas” (ll. 24-5), a possibility he immediately rejects. Loyalty to the Queen, to whom Tennyson offers the *Idylls*, affords in this poem the symbolic link between Britain and its Empire. Without any specification of its basis, an unquestioning “secular faith in imperial destiny” (Brooks/Faulkner 22) is called for, “the faith/ That made us rulers” (l. 18-19). At the same time, Tennyson’s text reflects current debates about colonial reform which saw a solution to Britain’s problem of surplus capital and population in the creation of new markets for British goods “by planting population and capital in the vast untenanted regions of our colonies,” as E.G. Wakefield put it in 1849 (Young 92):

The loyal to their crown  
Are loyal to their own far sons, who love  
Our ocean-empire with her boundless homes

For ever-broadening England, and her throne  
 In our vast Orient, and one isle, one isle,  
 That knows not her own greatness: if she knows  
 And dreads it we are fallen. (1755, ll. 27-33)

The idea of “a constantly expanding, larger Anglo-Saxon federation encompassing the globe” (Young 35) continued to be developed in the later decades of the century; James Anthony Froude’s *Oceana: or, England and her Colonies* (1886) envisaged an Empire held together by “common blood, common interest, and common pride” (Young 37).

Another poem, “Opening of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition by the Queen,” was written by Tennyson in 1886 at the request of the Prince of Wales, for an event designed to promote the idea of empire in public. The poem makes an even more fervent assertion of the one voice that holds the Empire together, and of which the poet makes himself the mouthpiece. His praise of Empire is figured in a commercial image, the rich display of products gathered from “every British zone:”

    Welcome, welcome with one voice!  
 In your welfare we rejoice,  
 Sons and brothers that have sent,  
 From isle and cape and continent,  
 Produce of your field and flood,  
 Mount and mine, and primal wood;  
 Works of subtle brain and hand,  
 And splendours of the morning land,  
 Gifts from every British zone;  
     Britons, hold your own! (1357)

The commodities here accumulated are transformed into gifts (just as Jago had represented the products of the British steel industry as “peaceful gifts”); their true function as commodities in the market is thus obscured. After celebrating the productive efforts of the “family,” the poem goes on to deplore former family quarrels, especially that which “[d]rove from out the mother’s nest/ That young eagle of the West,” thereby echoing current ideas that the U.S. “might in some way re-enter the fold” (Young 38). The poem concludes with a rallying call by “Britain’s myriad voices” to be

    ’welded each and all,  
 Into one imperial whole,  
 One with Britain, heart and soul!

One life, one flag, one fleet, one Throne!  
 Britons, hold your own! (1358)

The very stridency of the tone here may make us wonder how much faith the poet himself could still muster up for this ideal of unified strength, and whether to invoke it in this impassioned rhetorical manner was not in fact to cover up his doubts and anxieties. What it does succeed in covering up once again is the material basis of commerce and exploitation on which this construct of Empire as a global family is founded.

The poetic counter-discourse against the global expansion of British trade began to emerge in the eighteenth century. It is expressed somewhat obliquely and ambivalently, as we have seen, in a passage of “The Deserted Village.” Two further examples, about a hundred years apart, must suffice here. William Shepherd’s “Ode on Lord Macartney’s Embassy to China, 1797” constitutes a far more outspoken instance of anti-colonial discourse, in which Goldsmith’s poem is obviously a subtext. Not only does Shepherd deplore the military expansion of the East India Company in the 1790s and the slave trade in West Africa, but he also warns against the attempts “to force the opening of China to British commerce” which he sees in Macartney’s diplomatic mission to Peking in 1792-4 (Brooks/Faulkner 126). In its most incisive passage the poem has the “genius of Cathay” regard the approaching sons of Albion as “slaves of gold” with “blood-stained hands” (127). In obvious allusion to some of Goldsmith’s most famous lines, the speaker addresses these “insatiate spoilers” in profound dismay:<sup>8</sup> “Ill fare the tribes, unconscious of your wiles,/ Whose honest candour trusts your plighted word” (127). British traders are nothing if not treacherous conquerors, it seems.

For the next hundred years other critical voices made use of images of free trade and global commerce in order to denounce what they saw as the growing imperialism and aggressiveness of Britain’s foreign policy, and for which trade was merely an excuse. The notion of British commerce as a free exchange of goods circulating among free owners of commodities was thoroughly exploded by Wilfrid Scawen Blunt in his dramatic poem *Satan Absolved* (1899), a vehement polemic against the devastation wrought by imperialist politics. The main speaker here is Satan, who dismisses the ideology of the White Man’s Burden in telling God that the Englishman has utterly plundered his Creation in the very name of Christianity. Satan complains

---

<sup>8</sup> Goldsmith’s lines read: “Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,/ Where wealth accumulates and men decay” (ll. 51-2).



bitterly about the “huge impudent imposture” of the English colonialist going out there,

To teach them happiness, to civilise, to save,  
 To smite down the oppressor and make free the slave.  
 To bear the “White Man’s Burden,” which he yearns to take  
 On his white Saxon back for his white conscience’ sake.

Satan’s denunciation of British imperialists culminates in his scathing mockery of “[t]heir poets who write big of the ‘White Burden.’ Trash!/ The White Man’s Burden, Lord, is the burden of his cash” (Brooks/Faulkner 321).

In conclusion we now turn to Derek Walcott’s engagement with the poet’s trade in a truly globalized world. With English as a world language, English cultural values are naturally drawn into global circulation, and a postcolonial writer is inevitably forced to cope with a multiple cultural heritage, perhaps more so in the Caribbean than anywhere else. John Thieme has carefully shown Walcott’s attempts, from early on, to “create his own Caribbean tradition, drawing on an eclectic assortment of elements inside and outside the region” (2).<sup>9</sup> A line in “Roots” (*In a Green Night*, 1962: 60) states the insight that “When they conquer you, you have to read their books;” but even in his first volume of poems Walcott committed himself to an act of constructive resistance to the debris of colonialism, in a poem significantly entitled “Call for Breakers and Builders,” which states the situation of the budding postcolonial poet bluntly: “There are no worlds to conquer, but worlds to recreate” (*25 Poems*, 1949: 19). As Thieme has pointed out, “Walcott’s emphasis on Adamic naming as a strategy for (re)claiming one’s world from the colonizer, his career-long concern with eroding Manichean binaries and his development of a poetics of migration all strikingly anticipate subsequent developments in post-colonial theory” (198-9). From the start, Walcott indeed seems to illustrate that “in-betweenness” of the post-colonial subject which, as Dirlik argues, “is not to be contained within fixed categories or binary oppositions” (336) when he portrays himself as a poet “divided to the vein,” at a loss how to “choose/ Between this Africa and the English tongue I love:” “Betray them both, or give back what they give?” (“A Far Cry from Africa,” *Collected Poems* 18).

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bruce King’s view of Walcott as a poet “who survived by creating a Caribbean culture for himself in a British colony from imported and local materials” (vii).

The former rulers' global linguistic dominance is felt to be a very powerful one, and the poet's divided, profoundly uneasy attitude to it persists. In "North and South," the speaker, who characterizes himself as "a colonial upstart at the end of an empire," captures the dilemma neatly in the remark: "It's good that everything's gone, except their language,/ which is everything." But at once he tries to get his own back by expressing a self-conscious "schadenfreude" at the decay of empires:

And it may be a childish revenge  
at the presumption of empires to hear the worm  
gnawing their solemn columns into coral,  
to snorkel over Atlantis, to see, through a mask,  
Sidon up to its windows in sand, Tyre, Alexandria,  
with their wavering seaweed spires through a glass-bottom boat,  
and to buy porous fragments of the Parthenon  
from a fisherman in Tobago . . . (405)

It is a small but obviously not insignificant consolation to see the shards of former empires thus recirculated globally, even traded to tourists by the formerly colonized subjects. If English poets from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century were instrumental in shaping the myth of Britain's global rule through peaceful trade, Walcott's view of the poet's trade seems to be that of dismantling and deconstructing such myths of Empire and the European master narratives that helped to construct them. To this task he brings a vast knowledge of both European and American literary cultures, which allows him to develop what Thieme has called a "poetics of migration." Thus "New World" (*Sea Grapes* 1976) offers a rewriting of the myth of Creation and Man's Fall from the perspective of the "other," the colonized subaltern, which implicitly answers myths of the conquest of the new world as a return to the golden age such as that promoted in Chapman's "De Guiana." If, as Weinbrot maintains, "the theology of trade begins with the fallen nature of man," which makes man aware of the importance of effort, industry and energy for survival (265), then Walcott's poem has a specific relevance to our topic. In "New World" the snake from its "forked tree" loves to watch Adam digging the earth in the sweat of his brow and admires his labour. But then Adam and the snake discover they have an interest in common:

And both would watch the leaves  
silver the alder,  
oaks yellowing October,  
everything turning money.



So when Adam was exiled  
to our New Eden, in the ark's gut,  
the coiled snake coiled there for good  
fellowship also; that was willed.

Adam had an idea.  
He and the snake would share  
the loss of Eden for a profit.  
So both made the New World. And it looked good. (300-301)

This first-world Adam colludes with the snake coiled/coiled for good fellowship to make the New World in man's image, to turn loss into profit, which sounds like a good commercial idea and "looks good," too, but is of course both financial and verbal sleight of hand. The biblical myth is overlaid with the Renaissance myth of the golden age returned, the colonist's work ethics is revealed as based on pure greed, and money as the global signifier of debt that commodifies the world, a turn that is identified as an originary moment of rupture. The figure of Adam, however, is more complex than this in Walcott's poetry, at times also "possessed of a curious kind of innocence" (Thieme 96). The poet himself repeatedly assumes the Adamic privilege of naming the new world, "the role which Walcott himself had taken upon himself as an artist committed to making the St. Lucian landscape possible" (Thieme 79).

Another early poem with the obviously symbolic title "Ruins of a Great House" describes a planter's stately home on a Caribbean island, in a subtle interweaving of local and European elements. This decaying cultural transplant smells of "the leprosy of empire" and shows traces of hybridity, of "[m]arble like Greece, like Faulkner's South in stone." The "imperious rakes are gone, their bright girls gone." The house is indeed a figure of decayed empire, as the text makes explicit:<sup>10</sup>

And when a wind shook in the limes I heard  
What Kipling heard, the death of a great empire, the abuse  
Of ignorance by Bible and by sword. (20)

---

<sup>10</sup> The poem's epigraph, moreover (from Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*), spells out the theme of mutability and decay: "... it cannot be long before we lie down in darkness, and have our light in ashes ..." (19).

The speaker’s historical perspective is taken back further to men like Hawkins, Raleigh, and Drake, “ancestral murderers and poets,” and to their legacy of “ulcerous crime:”

The rot remains with us, the men are gone.  
 But, as dead ash is lifted in a wind  
 That fans the blackening ember of the mind,  
 My eyes burned from the ashen prose of Donne. (20)

In a bold and at the same time subtle intertextual move, Walcott shows his mastery in appropriating the text of Donne’s *Devotions* (no. 17) to his own postcolonial discourse, as the speaker recalls

That Albion too was once  
 A colony like ours, “part of the continent, piece of the main,”  
 Nook-shotten, rook o’erblown, deranged  
 By foaming channels and the vain expense  
 Of bitter faction. (20)

In allusion to John Donne’s famous global image (“no man is an island”) mighty Britain is displaced from its sovereign status and dominant role and reduced to a part of a larger whole, a part, moreover, that is far from impressive or admirable. It seems that in the different temporal and spatial perspective that the speaking subject adopts here, the local view is firmly privileged over the global. Yet he does not seek to establish a new nationalism and thus continue the binary opposition of first and third world. On the contrary: anger at the colonial oppression is balanced with compassion (Thieme 40), as the poem in its last line invokes Donne’s text again by quoting another phrase from it:<sup>11</sup>

All in compassion ends  
 So differently from what the heart arranged:  
 “as well as if a manor of thy friend’s . . .”. (21).

It may well be claimed that this poem, in its very refusal to attack Europe, expresses a new sense of power and constitutes a striking instance of post-colonial critique by challenging the limits of Western ethnocentricity from

---

<sup>11</sup> The passage from Donne’s text reads: “No Man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a *Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse, as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor* of thy *friends*, or of *thine owne* were (87).

the perspective of what Young calls the “cultures of the tricontinental world” (66).

A final example may serve to suggest Walcott’s commitment to a belief in the power of poetic discourse to span the world and bring home to individual subjects everywhere the cultural values it is able to circulate and to communicate, and thus to foster resistance to global hegemony, whether cultural or political. The poem “Forest of Europe” (*The Star-Apple Kingdom*, 1979) enters into a dialogical exchange with its dedicatee, Joseph Brodsky. In 1978, during a common period of “exile” in the U.S., as the poem puts it, the two poets found they had much in common and became friends.<sup>12</sup> Among other things, Brodsky recited Mandelstam to Walcott and talked about him and the situation in Russia. “Forest of Europe” is “about exile, friendship and writing poetry during a time of evil” (King 357) and reflects significantly on various issues of imperial power, oppression and displacement, the fate of Caribbeans as well as native Americans and Gulag prisoners. But it also reflects on the poet’s arduous task and its result, the powerful poetic discourse he succeeds in producing:

The tourist archipelagoes of my South  
are prisons too, corruptible, and though  
there is no harder prison than writing,  
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,  
when, in his forest of barbed-wire branches,  
a prisoner circles, chewing the one phrase  
whose music will last longer than the leaves,

whose condensation is the marble sweat  
of angels’ foreheads, which will never dry  
till Borealis shuts the peacock lights  
of its slow fan from L.A. to Archangel,  
and memory needs nothing to repeat. (377)

---

<sup>12</sup> In Bruce King’s own somewhat hegemonic discourse, “both were exceptionally talented outsiders from opposite extremes of Western culture, with local cultures of their own behind them, who were now at the centre of the new Western empire. Both would see themselves as the new Barbarians who had conquered the new Rome by having excelled the inhabitants in mastery of their literary craft” (359).

The visual perspective evoked here is an undeniably global one but the poetic discourse figured in the metaphors of bread and music is far from totalizing; on the contrary, it seems rather precarious though also sustaining. But the assertion of the enduring worth of this discourse is classical, and Walcott's self-aware participation in it is a measure of the poetic sovereignty he has achieved. It may be fair to say that he is in accord with some of those theorists who, like Dirlik, call for a shift of attention “from national origin to subject position” (335) and for the constitution of a “postcolonial subject that is not to be contained within fixed categories or binary oppositions” (336). Against the poetic valorization of Britain's commercial hegemony which this paper has tried to trace and assess, it may appear as no more than a symbolic gesture to insist on the importance of circulating cultural capital instead. Yet the assumption of cultural agency by those formerly deprived of it must on no account be underestimated since it may significantly diversify the perspectives in which global networks are viewed today. In this context, Walcott's endeavour to establish a different view of the poet's trade and role is of relevance, and his specific poetic strategies of coping with the dominant heritage of English culture and the rhetoric of Empire need to be studied in greater depth.

## References

## Primary Texts

- Blackmore, Richard. *The Creation*. In *The Works of the English Poets from Chaucer to Cowper*. Ed. Alexander Chalmers. Vol. X. London, 1810.
- Blunt, Wilfrid Scawen. *Satan Absolved: A Victorian Mystery*. London, 1899.  
*The Poetical Works of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt*. 2 vols. London: Macmillan, 1914.
- Brooks, Chris, and Peter Faulkner, eds. *The White Man's Burdens: An Anthology of British Poetry of the Empire*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996.
- Chapman, George. *The Poems of George Chapman*. Ed. Phyllis Brooks Bartlett. New York: MLA, 1941.
- Cowper, William. *The Poems of William Cowper*. Ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp. Vol. I: 1748-1782. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
- Defoe, Daniel. *The History of the Principal Discoveries and Improvements, In the Several Arts and Sciences: Particularly the great Branches of Commerce, Navigation and Plantation, In all Parts of the Known World*. London, 1727.
- Donne, John. *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. Ed. Anthony Raspa. Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975.
- Dryden, John. *The Works of John Dryden*. Vol. I: *Poems 1649-1680*. Ed. E.N. Hooker and H.T. Swedenberg, Jr. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956.
- Glover, Richard. *London, or The Progress of Commerce*. In *The Works of the English Poets from Chaucer to Cowper*. Ed. Alexander Chalmers. Vol. XVII. London, 1810.
- Goldsmith, Oliver. "The Deserted Village." In *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse*. Ed. R. Lonsdale. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Jago, Richard. *Edge-Hill, or The Rural Prospect Delineated and Moralised*. In *The Works of the English Poets from Chaucer to Cowper*. Ed. Alexander Chalmers. Vol. XVII. London, 1810.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Principles of Political Economy*. London: George Routledge [n.d.].
- Shepherd, William. "Ode on Lord Macartney's Embassy to China, 1797." In *The White Man's Burdens*. Ed. Chris Brooks and Peter Faulkner. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996.

- Tennyson, Alfred. *The Poems of Tennyson*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. London: Longmans, 1969.
- Thomson, James. *Poetical Works*. Ed. J. Logie Robertson. [1908]. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Walcott, Derek. *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. London: Faber, 1992.
- . *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1962.
- . *25 Poems*. Port of Spain, Trinidad: Guardian, 1948 [1949].
- Waller, Edmund. "A Panegyrick to My Lord Protector." In *Seventeenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*. Ed. Robert Cummings. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

### Secondary Texts

- Brantlinger, Patrick. *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694-1994*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Brown, Laura. *Alexander Pope*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985.
- Dirlik, Arif. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism." *Critical Inquiry* 20 (winter 1994): 328-56.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. [1970]. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Hanford, H. Robin. "Derek Walcott's 'Forest of Europe'." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 20:2 (1998): 1-8.
- King, Bruce. *Derek Walcott: a Caribbean Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- MacLure, Millar. *George Chapman: A Critical Study*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966.
- San Juan, Jr., Epifanio. *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- Sinfield, Alan. *Alfred Tennyson*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Thieme, John. *Derek Walcott*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.
- Weinbrot, Howard D. *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Young, Robert J.C. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.