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And Have Not Mercy, I Am Waiting: Conscious Inaction as Postcolonial Resistance in Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" and Derek Walcott's "The Fortunate Traveller"

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AND HAVE NOT MERCY, I AM WAITING: CONSCIOUS INACTION AS
POSTCOLONIAL RESISTANCE IN PATRICK KAVANAGH'S "THE GREAT HUNGER"
AND DEREK WALCOTT'S "THE FORTUNATE TRAVELLER"

by

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DEDICATION

To Anne and Ed, Jenn, John, Trevor, Rebecca, and Ben. I still cannot believe how lucky I was to end up in this program, with these people, doing what I love while being supported every step of the way.

ABSTRACT

This project examines Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" and Derek Walcott's "The Fortunate Traveller" as sites of postcolonial resistance. As presented in these poems, the main characters are caught between the memories of the colonial and anti-colonial pasts and the faltering promises of postcolonial independence. Instead of choosing between being defined solely by the past or accepting an independence under contrived terms, or attempting to reconcile the two, Walcott's and Kavanagh's poems propose conscious inaction in order to resist the apparent inevitability of the choice. Written at similar moments in their respective postcolonial regions, placing these two poems together for analysis preserves the particulars of Irish and Caribbean postcolonial experiences while allowing for cross-cultural solidarities to be drawn and the lingering preconditions of postcolonial experience to be examined.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" is a poem depicting the abject misery of the Irish peasant. Derek Walcott's "The Fortunate Traveller" features a Caribbean representative caught between the World Bank and the impoverished world. By reading these disparate poems together, examining the similarities of their conditions of creation, and identifying the cultural and historical connections they evoke, we see Kavanagh's and Walcott's poems propose a postcolonial ambivalence in which the inheritances and importance of the past is held in opposition to faltering independence. Ambivalence is holding two contradictory possibilities of identity and practice without synthesis. As presented in these poems, ambivalence is a liberatory act through rejecting both centralizing the past and accepting the failing promise of independence. Instead of choosing between being defined solely by the past or accepting an independence under contrived terms, or attempting to reconcile the two, Walcott's and Kavanagh's poems propose conscious inaction in order to resist the apparent inevitability of the choice.

This project turns to poetry as a site of postcolonial discourse not only because it is relatively unexamined in academia, but because of poetic traditions of linguistic density and persistent reconfiguration. As Jahan Ramazani argues in *The Hybrid Muse*, "Postcolonial criticism is largely grounded in mimetic presuppositions about literature. But since poetry mediates experience through a language of exceptional figural and

formal density, it is a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics, and sociology of postcolonial societies” (Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse* 4). This density allows these poems to be at once personal and representative, concrete and figurative, local and cosmopolitan, reflecting many of the interests and anxieties of postcolonial examination. It is important to note here that this project does not seek to argue that these poems bridge the gaps between these pairs of dissonant concepts, but contain and perform contradictory concerns at once. For example, “The Great Hunger” and “The Fortunate Traveller” show their authors to be well aware of the discourse into which they are entering through their modernist forms and cosmopolitan interests in examining the periphery from the center, yet remain deeply concerned with local matters and local expressions of the periphery. In *Transatlantic Solidarities*, Michael Malouf argues that for Irish nationalism and black internationalisms, cosmopolitanism is “a useful critical concept for recognizing cross-cultural affiliation, but ... less as an identity and more as a mode of performing a critical nationalism” (Malouf 132). Through the cosmopolitan perspective, these poems do not seek a synthetic solution that compromises between elements of their contradictory concerns, but hold, for example, both personal experiences and nationalist concepts as valid and distinct, performing both side by side.

Placing a Caribbean writer in conversation with an Irish one may appear problematic due to the historical British Imperial interest in casting homogenizing rhetoric on its colonial subjectsⁱ. Imperial interest was in eliding difference between the dissimilar cultures and races under the British boot heel in order to justify British dominion. The interest here is to draw connections and comparisons while preserving difference and contrasting histories in order to find commonalities in the postcolonial

experience at similar moments in their respective histories. Both “The Great Hunger” and “The Fortunate Traveller” were written roughly twenty years after the dissolution of British colonialism in their respective countries, and both depict the difficulties borne of a postcolonial state. Both poems ultimately argue for a similar action and in a similar way, in asking for a detached moment of inaction and examination through alienated speakers in order to escape paralyzing practices long enough to create something new. Neither proposes what this “something new” might be, drawing attention to the complexities of paralysis and leaving it to the reader to react and act.

There is historical precedent for aligning Caribbean and Irish that demonstrate some usefulness in constructing parallels without totalization. In his 2009 book connecting Irish Nationalism to black internationalisms that came out of the Caribbean, *Transatlantic Solidarities*. Malouf details historical exchange of rhetoric and ideas between Ireland and the Caribbean. Malouf carefully uses the concept of “solidarities” to reason through why connecting the two regions can be productive and accurate, despite a British imperial history of connecting them in interest of the empire. For Malouf, the term “solidarities,” “by focusing on active modes of affiliation ... emphasizes the agency of actors in shaping their participation in any particular literary formation” (10). By using this idea of solidarity/ies, Malouf attempts to solve problems of definition when grouping works by authors with “multiple literary identities,” and shifts away from identitarian thinking and national labels. This shift allows, in Malouf’s formulation, authors to construct their own literary allegiances through active affiliation. Examining solidarities also, Malouf argues, eliminates some of the problems with conceptions of world literature, such as Moretti’s and Casanova’s, which “remain determined by center-

periphery relations and a competitive model of the literary market” (10). Solidarities, instead, allow for “interperiphery perspective” (10).

Transatlantic Solidarities tries to describe the “paradox” of “the persistence of interperipheral, cross-national histories underlying national narratives, and the persistence of nationalist discourse within transnational forms” (17). This theoretical allows for an elevation of the importance of similarities in discourse and cultural self-conception between Ireland and the Caribbean, especially in examining Walcott, while preserving difference, including racial and historical difference. The Irish and Caribbean influence and sometimes align and identify with each other, yet the distinctions are not elided due to Malouf’s examination of process, rather than identity.

Malouf’s work is the genesis of my examination of the concept of ambivalence, as his detail of Marcus Garvey’s, Claude McKay’s, and Walcott’s solidarities with Irish rhetoric depends upon it. Malouf uses “ambivalence” to describe the ways in which Garvey and McKay used Irish nationalist rhetoric to cast their own black internationalist movements in nationalist formulations, allowing the oppositions between Irish and black identity and between national and international politics to exist without resolution. Malouf follows in this mode of ambivalence, holding the similarities of two discourses, Irish nationalist and black internationalist, simultaneously with their difference without attempting to reconcile the two into a synthetic, contradiction-free, totalizing discourse. For Malouf, for colonial history, and for this project, totalization serves the interests of hegemonic imperialism, erasing localized difference in order to create a pleasing narrative of history and race. In order to avoid this, yet place Ireland and the Caribbean in productive conversation with one another, the two discourses, as well as their similarities

and differences, must be remembered at once, though one may be favored by examination temporarily.

Malouf's conception of cross-cultural solidarities lends to an examination of poetry in its resistance of homogenization. As Ramazani argues, "The homogenizing model of globalization is inadequate for the analysis of specifically poetic transnationalism. Applied to poetry and other cultural forms, moreover, it risks replicating methodologically the totalization it is meant to critique" (Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* 8). As Ramazani describes, poetry is cultural in and of itself, making approaches that seek to reconcile differences useless, even contradictory to the interests of the poems. In "The Great Hunger" and "The Fortunate Traveller," examining solidarities allows for connections to be made between the historical post-colonial moments in which they were produced without removing the cultural specifics, including the historical and racial differences of their respective authors and regions.

CHAPTER 2

PATRICK KAVANAGH'S "THE GREAT HUNGER"

Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" rejects romanticized notions of the Irish peasant and countryside, instead giving us Paddy Maguire, a hopeless, fruitless potato farmer paralyzed by unexamined adherence to inherited tradition. In doing so, Kavanagh provides a character incapable of ambivalence, as Maguire adheres to his initial decisions without re-examining them and making him single-minded. Kavanagh overlays Maguire's tale with a rejection of revivalist idealization of the Irish peasant. However Kavanagh simultaneously de-romanticizes the Irish peasant through Maguire's entropic, meaningless life, and makes Maguire's ignorance and sacrifice so complete as to make his story romantic. Maguire is both unheroic and heroic from the third person perspective of the speaker, without an attempt at reconciling the two. This is a warning against continuing to define Irishness through sacrifice; though sacrifice is appealing, it is also miserable and entropic.

In this post-revival depiction of the Irish peasant, Maguire is not the source of Irish culture and belief, as nationalist Irish revival discourse would present, but the slowly dying result of it. Joshua D. Esty argues that this is an example of "Kavanagh's excremental antipastoral poems satiriz[ing] the mythified Irish peasant." (Esty 22). Yet this satirization is not simple rejection of the pastoral; Maguire's life is mired in history. Kavanagh evokes sacrifice through the potato famine, the Irish revival, and Catholicism

as markers of Irish identity and shows that, despite these markers contributing to independence, continuing to build Irishness upon paralysis-inducing tradition will lead only to cultural entropy.

If written contemporaneously with the revival, the poem's anti-revivalist content would be seen as supporting British domination of the island, of rejecting the creation of an Irish identity to fulfill the needs Hirsch mentions. But in 1942's independent Ireland, the poem rejects not the identity and power created through the Revival or even its historical importance, but the needs themselves. With independence and 20 years, Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" is a recognition of the risks in continuing to position a romanticized rural Ireland at the center of Irishness.

The thirteenth part of Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" breaks from the rest of the poem, ostensibly zooming out from the limited third person perspective that follows Patrick Maguire through his life on his farm in rural Ireland. It explicitly decries the romanticization and heroicization of the Irish peasant with the lines "No crash, / No drama. / That was how his life happened" (669-71). In this antirevival bent, further emphasized through Maguire's emphatically fruitless sacrifice of his sexual and familial desires and overall life, the poem asserts that the Irish peasant, represented by Maguire and his dying family, is not the source of anything but a meaningless existence that carries no romance, no romantic tragedy, but "the weak, washy way of true tragedy" (673). This section responds first part of the poem, in which the first stanza sets up and immediately undercuts a pastoral tone, beginning with a romantic, religion-tinged setting and an introduction to the "heroes" of the poem, Maguire and his potato-gathering men, followed by asking "Is there some light of imagination in these wet clods?" (8). The wet

clouds here refers to both the setting and the men, inverting the pastoral conventions of rural peasants being regarded as “the source from which all cultures rise” (636), as used sardonically in the thirteenth section.

Catholicism and Maguire’s unexamined adherence to its traditions, especially in its approach to sex, sexual desire, and guilt, insidiously permeates his life. Catholicism is explicit throughout the poem, guiding Maguire’s thoughts and actions and helping to condemn him to his status as the last heir of his family farm. Daniel J. Murphy argues that “the life-affirming morality that is implicit in the Christian faith ... emerges indirectly in [Kavanagh’s] poetry from his treatment of the themes of emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and sexual deprivation” (Murphy 47). Yet the poem makes clear that Maguire’s understanding of his religion is a primary factor in his tragedy, telling of a time long past when there was possibility in building a family of his own, rather than the sterile, lingering death of being patriarch to solely his mother and sister:

Once one day in June when he was walking
Among his cattle in the Yellow Meadow
He met a girl carrying a basket
And he was then a young and heated fellow.
Too earnest, too earnest! He rushed beyond the thing
To the unreal. And he saw Sin
Written in letters larger than John Bunyan dreamt of.
For the strangled impulse there is no redemption. (196-203)

There is no affirmation of Maguire's life through deprivation. Instead, his sexual desire causes him to leap toward guilt at his impure thoughts, and the opportunity is missed. Line 203 contains the double meaning that clarifies Maguire's tragedy, implying both that Maguire's sexual desire will not be fulfilled and that, counter to Murphy's claim, Maguire gains no redemption in return for his "strangled impulse."

Elsewhere, it is likewise clear that his opportunities for romantic and sexual engagement are few and far between, as he sticks to his farm and the male-dominated pub, so one would expect that he would attempt to seize the opportunity at building toward a wife, a family. But his guilt at even thinking sexually is enough to cause him to remain celibate, alone on his farm. Clearly, this is a twisted understanding of Catholic beliefs, since, though sexual desire can be sinful, the religion also commands fruitfulness. The guilt, however, takes over, as "He rushed beyond the thing," the meeting and speaking to this girl carrying a basket, initiating a relationship that *might* result in romance and eventual sexual contact, "to the unreal," the consummation of the relationship. In his mind, Maguire skips over all of the steps that might make sexual contact acceptable within his religious beliefs. The guilt incited by his religion overshadows the rules that would alleviate the guilt, trapping him in a tautological cycle of guilt that prevents escape:

Religion, the fields and the fear of the Lord
And Ignorance giving him the coward's blow,
He dared not rise to pluck the fantasies
From the fruited Tree of Life. (219-22)

The permanent rut, in both the sense that Maguire's life and goals have no space for movement or change and in the sense that he is forever sexually excited, defines his life and his death. This contrasts with the Irish poetical imagining of the Irish peasant, related in the thirteenth part as:

He ploughs and sows;
He eats fresh food,
He loves fresh women, He is his own master
As it was in the Beginning (625-8)

In the Beginning, here capitalized to indicate Biblical origins, there was innocence. In Eden, sexual acts were not a sin, as knowledge of sin did not yet exist. Thus the final three claims are opposite Maguire's experience, and, if we are to understand this from a Biblical perspective, Maguire is fallen. However, we see that Maguire clings to the ideas of the first line in this section, using them as justification for his life:

He shook a knowing head
And pretended to his soul
That children are tedious in hurrying fields of April
Where men are spanning across wide furrows.
Lost in the passion that never needs a wife. (29-33)

Maguire's work on his farm becomes his way to be fruitful, and he tries to displace his passion onto his farmwork to excuse him from the inability to start a family of his own, that "He lives that his little fields may stay fertile when his own body / Is spread in the bottom of a ditch under two coulter's crossed in Christ's Name" (60-1). In keeping with

this, he deflects his emptiness into responsibility, his faithlessness to himself as faithful to his farm and his family: “Maguire was faithful to death: / He stayed with his mother till she died” (93). Notice, however, the ambiguity in this claim, as he is faithful both until her death and faithful to death itself. The further implication in this, evoking the traditional marriage vow of “till death do us part,” is that Maguire is, in effect, married to his dying mother, to his wilting sister, to his land. His faithfulness to death, the way in which his guilt has mired him in a slow death of a life, pervades his life, even in his “fruitful” farming life, such as “Maguire himself is patting a potato-pit against the weather - / An old man fondling a new-piled grave” (680-1). This faithfulness to death allows Maguire to feel as if actions borne of his fear and guilt are sacrificial.

The effective marriage of Maguire to his female family and his land speaks to the Irish sovereignty myth, in which the right to rule was gained by the king through union with goddesses of the land. The lines surrounding his mother’s death continue:

At the age of ninety-one.

She stayed too long,

Wife and mother in one.

When she died

The knuckle-bones were cutting the skin of her son's backside

And he was sixty-five.

Here, though Maguire enters into a pact emblematic of marriage through his self-created sanctity of death, Maguire is ruled by his mother until long after he would have become head of household, the patriarch of his own family. Once again, traditional Irish myth that

is meant to assert a productive and rightful Irish identity toward Ireland is reversed in the character of Maguire, as tradition stymies personal connections, personal choice, and productivity.

Maguire's guilt originates in his sexual desire and is the start of this Rube Goldberg Machine of deflection from guilt into fear into dedication into faith into sacrifice, the sacrificial tone is evoked through Maguire's masturbatory practices. In need of alleviating himself from his sinful desires, "Pat opened his trousers wide over the ashes / And dreamt himself to lewd sleepiness" (253-4). This habit of masturbating into the ashes of the household fire continues, apparently throughout Maguire's life, as "He sinned over the warm ashes again and his crime / The law's long arm could not serve with time" (472-3), until, as an old man, "Maguire spreads his legs over the impotent cinders that wake no manhood now" (707). Though it is a sin to masturbate, to spill one's seed, this act is a lesser sin than his desire for a woman because, as outlined above, Maguire figures himself as husband to the land, and, just in case, he sacrifices his desire and guilt to the fire. This is in keeping with Old Testament practices of burnt offerings to God. Maguire's fruitlessness becomes a double sacrifice through burning his own semen: His life belongs to his land, his desire belongs to God. Maguire himself becomes sacrificial, giving what little he has to God and country and becomes a bodily symbol of Ireland itself.

Maguire, emblematic of the Irish peasant, is refigured not as a source of the soul of the nation, but as a symbol of the physical reality of Ireland, a nation sacrificing itself to impotent subsistence and half-understood religion out of guilt, fear, and excuse. As Edward Hirsh outlines, "In postfamine Ireland, there was an increasing interest in the

rural customs and stories of the Irish country people. ... During the early years of the Irish Literary Revival ... the Irish peasant was fundamentally "created" and characterized for posterity. By placing the peasant figure at the heart of their enterprises, key Revival writers ... were participating in a complex cultural discourse motivated by crucial economic, social, and political needs, as well as by pressing cultural concerns" (Hirsch 1116). Fionntán de Brún describes its success, as, "significance has been ascribed to the Irish Revival of the 1880s to the 1920s mostly as a catalyst for bringing about the event of political independence in 1921" (de Brun 17). Maguire is a peasant figure, but Kavanagh's depiction shows him to be devoid of "some light of imagination" (8). The "true tragedy" of Maguire is the true tragedy of Ireland, with "No hope. No lust. / ... the apocalypse of clay / In every corner of this land" (749-52). He sacrifices what could be for what may have once been. While Maguire's sacrifice may be "weak" and "washy," the poem is not. The "true tragedy," especially through the persistent use of the idea of sacrifice throughout the poem, serves to undercut the anti-romantic intent, creating in Maguire a nobility and heroism through utter and complete self-sacrifice and abjection. In his sacrifices, he is resolutely not altruistic, patriotic, or self-martyring, as there is no person or object of motivation, no intended reward. The antirevivalism rails against holding up the Irish peasant as a mythological symbol, but Maguire's wretched reality is so complete as to make him mythological in his realness. Despite explicitly decrying using the Irish peasant as a symbolic source of Irish culture and belief, Kavanagh here does the same; Maguire's wretched life and bodily existence theorize a "real" Ireland, one bearing scars of hard work and misunderstood or misapplied tradition, but concrete and physical. The real Ireland, in this poem, is not a mythological land of heroes and pre-

Christian traditions to be returned to, but a physical space restricted from productivity, from fertility, from progress and fulfillment by blind adherence to half-seen tradition. Despite the apparent contradiction of using a peasant as symbolic of culture while arguing against using peasants as symbolic, the message is clear: The last thing the Irish, and especially Irish peasants, need is more unexamined tradition.

Through showing entropy borne of tradition, as de Brún argues, Kavanagh pleads for Ireland, “to look beyond the irreversible, linear plane of progress and decline and, after Deleuze, adopt a Bergsonian view of time where past and present are fully integrated and in which becoming, not being, is the thing” (de Brun 17). The fight for independence and definition is over by 1942 in this formulation, yet Ireland continues to base itself upon this struggle as if it, too, continues, and Ireland struggles against itself instead of for itself. The titular famine is no longer one of food or even Irish definition, but of the willingness to no longer be bogged in the past and, finally, grow. However, the ambivalence of Maguire’s story, in which he is both meaningless and meaningful, allows for a future independent Ireland in which the past neither defines the present nor is discarded.

CHAPTER 3

DEREK WALCOTT'S "THE FORTUNATE TRAVELLER"

Despite being the titular poem of his 1982 collection, Walcott's "The Fortunate Traveller" is relatively underexamined in scholarship. Nancy Robertson's May 1982 review in *The Christian Science Monitor* may shed some light on this tendency to overlook the poem: "The protagonist of the title poem, a long one near the end of the book, is a bitter character whose movements are hard to follow" (Robertson n.p.). It is a longer poem, though given the academic and critical popularity of Walcott's epic *Omeros*, this should not be an issue. The story of the poem is without clear resolution to the problems it presents. The speaker is miserable in England and his alienation from the world might be read as bitterness, especially when combined with the perceived sarcasm of the title. However, the ambiguities of the poem, such as the speaker's vague occupation, his sometimes obfuscated location, and the subjects of his duty, serve to widen the scope of his possible identities. Refraining from exacting identification of the speaker, yet giving him defined opposition, encourages the reader to draw solidarities within the impoverished peoples he has seen, as well as between these people and the speaker. The alienation he feels, part of what Robertson identified as bitterness, is not borne of selfishness, but empathy, duty and shame. This section argues that the inaction of the poem's speaker avoids synthetic resolution to his being caught between two terrible choices by his experience and apparent occupation. His inaction, representing his refusal to accept or compromise

between his two damning options, allows for a third, unproposed, less destructive option and is ultimately borne out of the ambiguities of the poem's use of "charity."

Walcott's work creates solidarities between the Caribbean and Ireland, both using Irish discourse to explicate Caribbean possibilities and contrasting Irish history and culture with that of the Caribbean. Malouf argues that "[Walcott] needs to use the available discourses of race and nation in order to articulate something beyond them and, like Garvey and McKay before him, he finds in Irish culture a discursive formation through which he might make this possible" (Malouf 147). According to Malouf, Irish nationalism was based at its core on racial and national claims of identity to assert the rights of the Irish to Ireland, despite taking international forms in its appeal to the Irish diaspora, especially in the United States, for recognition and support. Caribbean national and black separatist movements used this at once nationalist and international rhetoric in solidarity with the Irish colonial experience to assert similar rights, though carefully ambivalent about many of the specific differences, such as the way in which each proposed race as a uniting concept. The different formulations of race ultimately caused Irish nationalism to use international tactics to solidify nationalist rhetoric, while many of the Caribbean and black separatist movements cast internationalist interests and unity as nationalist concerns. The rhetoric justifying these racial claims also differed in that the Irish claim was one of purity and separation from the rest of Britain, while black separatist and Caribbean federalist racial discourse hinged upon a history of suffering and powerlessness in order to unite diverse cultural and racial realities. Still, by connecting race to national claims and appealing to an international system and audience, Irish

nationalism created a model and argument that was used to create solidarities among the peripheries of the British Empire that resisted imperial totalization.

As the empire dissolved during the twentieth century, prefigured partially by Irish independence in 1921 and the Irish constitution of 1937, these rhetorical solidarities fell out of favor with Caribbean and black separatist concerns, and new versions of inter-periphery solidarities took hold. Malouf argues that for Walcott and his generation, who entered adulthood with an independent Ireland in existence, Ireland figured more prominently as a site of contrast, as “[Ireland] is a country where the people are culturally and historically determined, a remarkable fact only because the Caribbean is a site where, according to Walcott, the people have escaped such a paralytic relation to history” (Malouf 171). Malouf figures this as “negative solidarity,” as the differences become temporarily more important to the discourse than the similarities, though the similarities are retained. For Walcott, Malouf argues, Ireland had homogenized itself in its assertion of identity and, despite the shared colonial past and anti-colonial rhetorical moves and Walcott’s claim that he “always felt some kind of intimacy with the Irish poets because one realized that they were also colonials with the same kind of problems that existed in the Caribbean. They were the niggers of Britain” (Hirsch 59), it is in contrast to a regionalist Caribbean positioning that the Irish become most useful to Walcott. Malouf argues, “For Walcott, the Caribbean mirrors his own poetry: a cosmopolitan culture of bricolage, where every individual part is only a figure for a larger whole located elsewhere” (Malouf 171). As independent Ireland, especially Dublin, positioned itself as more European, more metropolitan, yet remained mired in its own past, it figured itself within the larger, totalizing European conception of history. This provided contrast for

Walcott, as Malouf argues that “It is precisely this metropolitan historicism, one that objectifies the colonial subject within a developmentalist historical process, which is also under critique in Walcott” (Malouf 143). Likewise, earlier Irish nationalist efforts, including the Irish revival, which were deeply embedded with historicizing justification, provided contrast for Walcott’s figuring of “The regionalist, non-national identity [Walcott] invents for the New World writer is remarkable for being constituted by history but not being ‘in history’” (Malouf 143). These efforts also sought to concretize what it meant to be Irish in order to create a singular Irishhood to assert itself against British dominion, contrasting greatly with Walcott’s later conception of what identity and identitarian politics could assert in the cultural diversity of the Caribbean: “[Walcott] tries to reformulate identity by dislocating it rather than, as he sees it, replacing it with another one” (Malouf 143). In “The Great Hunger,” Kavanagh’s concerns with Ireland are much the same as Walcott’s, as his poem rails against Irish revivalist romanticization of the Irish peasant and the paralyzing miasma of an Irish identity built upon a sanctified and seemingly inescapable history. However, “The Great Hunger” is an inward appeal, its audience and its call to action Irish, creating a disunity of Irish identity, as insular as Walcott describes. “The Fortunate Traveller” casts a much wider audience, at once speaking to disenfranchised postcolonial subjects and those who disenfranchise, as the speaker is caught between them, alienated from both. In this project, “The Great Hunger” provides the contrast to Walcott’s work that Walcott himself identified, yet, in their similar alienations and inaction, draws solidarities across disparate postcolonial concerns.

As with Kavanagh’s “The Great Hunger,” “The Fortunate Traveller” was written in a period of local postcoloniality where nationalist rhetoric began to give

way and the consequences of independence were taking shape. As Ramazani argues, “The tension between estrangement from postcolonial community and the longing to serve and give expression to emerging national and social collectivities was discomfiting but generative for poets like Walcott ... who came of age during the post-World War II decolonization of the British Empire” (Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* 136). This tension is central to the conflict of “The Fortunate Traveller,” as the speaker is positioned to choose between financially aiding impoverished people with whom he aligns himself, thereby reinscribing foreign power over them, or allowing them to suffer through the lack of resources without aid, preventing further shades of colonialism.

The poem begins in winter, in Europe, as “Rotting snow / Flaked from Europe’s ceiling” (2-3). The exact location remains unnamed, beyond having a canal and a “white” river. (4, 15). The speaker of the poem carries a briefcase that contains paperwork for the World Bank:

In the square coffin manacled to my wrist:

Small countries pleaded through the mesh of graphs,

In treble-spaced, Xeroxed forms to the World Bank

On which I had scrawled the one word, MERCY (7-10)

These are basic details of his situation as he meets with the other men, who apparently have agreed to one or more of the agreements in his case, for money for tractors.

However, it is in this opening that we are introduced not only to the concrete situation, but to the speaker’s conception of it. He feels hunted, his “crimson buttonhole / For the cold ecstasy of the assassin” (5-6), powerless, his briefcase a “coffin manacled to [his]

wrist” (7), and empathetic toward those who agree to deals with the World Bank, as he desperately “had scrawled the one word, MERCY” (10) on the forms. The details of “Steeple, spire / congealed like holy candles” (1-2), “rotting snow” (2), “skeletal lindens” (12), and “black skins gone grey” (13), complete a funereal tone to his situation, and he regards himself as a bearer of death in Xeroxed forms. Still, he agrees to fulfill his end of the deal, justifying his decision with “I gave my word” (21). It is his duty. During the encounter, his mind moves to a memory of Haiti, “A gecko pressed against the hotel glass, / With white palms, concentrating head. / With a child’s hands. Mercy, monsieur. Mercy” (27-29). It is possible that this remembered visit to Haiti was the genesis of the deal to which the encounter refers, but his specific memory of Haiti expands to similar reasonings for dealing with him, with the World Bank:

Famine sighs like a scythe

across the field of statistics and the desert

is a moving mouth. In the hold of this earth

10,000,000 shoreless souls are drifting.

Somalia: 765,000, their skeletons will go under the tidal sand. (30-34)

This is the difficult situation in which he finds himself, as he is both bearer of death and ostensibly a preventative, seeing both the personal results of famine in the gecko’s cry for mercy and the large-scale statistics that come along with it. This is both empathy for the immediate desperation that requires his services and the knowledge that what little relief he can provide will only beget more need. He cannot fulfill both his immediate

responsibility and his broader responsibility to a broader group of people. His reverie of half-hearted and ambivalent justification is broken as the men ask “We’ll meet you in Bristol to conclude the agreement?” (35), and he feels hunted, a traitor:

Steeple like tribal lances, though congealing fog
the cries of wounded church bells wrapped in cotton,
grey mist enfolding the conspirator
like a sealed envelope next to its heart. (36-9)

He is objectified, a “sealed envelope,” no longer a player in the game, but a piece of it, transferring information in secret. This is a retreat, this objectification of himself, momentarily deflecting his horror as his impossibly contradictory position requires betrayal, in one form or another, in order to fulfill one or the other of his contradictory responsibilities. His retreat is furthered in the following lines, as he feels more secure, yet still self-judgmental: “No one will look up now to see the jet / Fade like a weevil through a cloud of flour. / One flies first-class, one is so fortunate” (40-2). He begins to justify his role, siding slightly with his official responsibility, rather than that born of his emotions, by turning to statistics, a broader view, and removing himself from emotional immediacy:

Like a telescope reversed, the traveller’s eye
Swiftly screws down the individual sorrow
To an oval nest of antic numerals,
And the iris, interlocking with this globe,

Condenses it to zero, then a cloud. (43-7)

While he is in the air, he is physically and emotionally removed from the emotional realities of the people to whom he feels responsible, retreating into the statistical rhetoric of the people to whom he is officially responsible. He can release the horror he feels. However, on the ground in London, his self-disgust returns, and his judgment is cast not only on himself, but those like him and on the system that that enables, even requires, them:

Beetle-black taxi from Heathrow to my flat.

We are roaches,

Riddling the state cabinets, entering the dark holes

Of power, carapaced in topcoats,

Scuttling around columns, signaling for taxis,

With frantic antennae, to other huddles with roaches;

We infect with optimism, and when

The cabinets crack, we are the first

To scuttle, radiating separately

Back to Geneva, Bonn, Washington, London. (48-57)

He retains his sense of powerlessness, yet casts himself and his colleagues as insects, vermin, taking advantage of being near power, yet infecting each other and ultimately

self-interested. It is clear here that he is not speaking of those who seek help, but those, like him, who negotiate with powerful European governments on behalf of those who need help, due to their scuttling “back to Geneva, Bonn, Washington, London.” These are the “fortunate” travelers who are cast as roaches in the seats of power, removed from the immediacy of need and the people and locales to whom they are ostensibly responsible. There is an element of disgust at their role as beggars, of askers, rather than equals that might negotiate properly, and, despite my description of their roles, the poem utterly lacks any language to indicate that their interests lie with anything but themselves. Still, his description makes clear that they are unwelcome, parasitic, in the “dark holes of power,” unwelcomed by those who hold the power. Taken in concert with the previous deflections of his responsibilities, of his conscious buying-in to the rhetoric of statistics, this self-disgust is a knowledge of the cowardly self-interest of his deflection.

In the subsequent stanza, the speaker walks Hampstead Heath and pores over an old letter, speaking to it: “I cannot bear to watch the nations cry” (61). This statement clarifies the distressing concerns of the speaker, as he is torn between the people and the nations. His role as intermediary between nations and the World Bank positions him so that he must see the immediate need for relief in the people, yet know the conditions of World Bank’s relief will produce further need for relief in a self-reinforcing cycle. Either way, the nations of people for which he feels empathy will “cry.” The concrete situation of choice intrudes upon his abstraction in the form of a phone call reminding him that the men he met earlier will meet him in Bristol. He retreats to his home and becomes despondent, listless, never dressing, drinking cold tea, and leaving the television on, tuned to nothing. He claims, “I was rehearsing the ecstasies of starvation / For what I had

to do.” (67-8). Combined with the earlier claim that he “cannot bear to watch the nations cry” (61), we see that he has moved toward refusing to fulfill the agreement, rather than subject the nations to the World Bank’s doubtful mercy. In order to justify his refusal to himself, he imagines the pain such a move will cause, placing himself in what he imagines to be similar circumstances as those who will starve as a result of his refusal.

The stanza concludes with the first instantiation of the poem’s refrain, always in italics: “*And have not charity*” (68). This phrase is an allusion to the King James Bible and, as the refrain, exploits the ambiguity of “charity” in Christian and modern terms. As an allusion, the phrase comes from 1 Corinthians 13 of the King James Bible. The word “charity” is a translation of the Greek *agape* in the King James version. However, “love” is now the preferred translation, as “charity” has mostly lost its meaning of divine, spiritual love in common usage. In this refrain, Walcott accepts the ambiguity of the word, using “charity” to evoke meanings of both divine or spiritual love and monetary giving to or helping of the poor. The phrase, “*and have not charity,*” comes from 1 Corinthians 13:2: “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing” (KJV). With the speaker’s experience and desperation in mind, each instantiation of the refrain can be read as an instantiation of the full verse. Respectively, the speaker believes he can foresee the long-term results of dealing with the World Bank, understands history, still believes that the world can be better, and yet cannot truly help, and so is “nothing.” At the very least, the refrain, which always ends a line, also contains the allusive echo of “I am nothing,” a reminder of the speaker’s

inability to have both love for the people with whom he has empathy and help alleviate their poverty.

The speaker follows with a recollection of how he came to empathize so deeply with the black impoverishedⁱⁱ of the world and his personal history of being an academic historian: “I found my pity, desperately researching / the origins of history, ... / seeking in all races a common ingenuity” (69-74). He poetically describes a lost African past, figuring it as a seat of the origins of civilization:

I envisaged an Africa flooded with such light

As alchemized the first fields of emmer wheat and barley,

When we savages dyed our pale dead with ochre,

And bordered our temples

With the ceremonial vulva of the conch

In the grey epoch of the obsidian adze.

I sowed the Sahara with rippling cereals,

My charity fertilized these aridities. (75-82)

Each line has portrays what has been lost between “the origins of history” and the present. Africa is figured as a land of light, a call forward to a later allusion, as Ramazani argues, that “disputes the ‘imperial fiction’ of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, ... strenuously reversing the ethical associations of dark and white” (A Transnational Poetics 125), and the second line in this section figures the “first fields” as being African, thereby

placing the first vestiges of civilization on the continent. The pale dead call back to the “black skins gone grey,” and “savages” is partially reclaimed through this romanticized musing. Temples evoke religion, another hallmark of civilization, and the “vulva of the conch,” evokes both the creation and sanctity of life and an oceanic/Caribbean connection. Grey once again serves to obscure, as the speaker figures himself into the history he’s creating, bringing the image into the present and revealing the hopes he may once have held for his current occupation.

The loss of the promise and glory of the Africa he imagines is echoed in a remembrance of his own loss of promise and glory in his academic career when he was faced with the reality of Africa. The next stanza speaks to his life between his “desperate research” and the present, drawing from the Saharan fields he dreamt of sowing to the fields he actually sowed:

What was my field? Late sixteenth century.

My field was a dank acre. A Sussex don,

I taught the Jacobean anxieties: *The White Devil*.

Flamineo’s torch startles the brooding yews.

The drawn end comes in strides. I loved my Duchess,

The white flame of her soul blown out between

The smoking cypresses. Then I saw children pounce

On green meat with a rat’s ferocity. (83-90)

These two stanzas, taken together, solve the mystery of how the speaker came to the position he is in, contrasting the history he studied and imagined, the beauty he taughtⁱⁱⁱ with the horrifying reality of starving children. His goal, at some point, was helping “fertilize the aridities,” spreading charity in both senses in order to help toward the Africa and the version of himself that he imagined.

In reaction to the memory of the starving children, the speaker decides to act, as the immediate and real need of starvation overwhelms the abstractions of love, theory, and literature. He calls the men and leaves for Bristol by train, seemingly to meet them, but returns to self-loathing, describing his “blood the Severn’s dregs and silver. / On Severn’s estuary the pieces flash, / Iscariot’s salary, patron saint of spies” (93-4). The train from London to Bristol runs alongside the Severn River, and he imagines its sludge running in his veins as he casts himself as a traitor, a spy, in going to meet the men. In the following lines he betrays this, deciding not to meet them, yet remaining self-disgusted in sarcastically justifying his turn:

I thought, who cares how many million starve?

Their rising souls will lighten the world’s weight

And level its gull-glittering waterline;

We left at sunset down the estuary. (95-8)

He boards a boat to leave England, avoiding his meeting, and proceeds to get drunk on the boat as England fades over the horizon across the next stanza. His erratic decision-making and actions show his knowledge of his culpability. He reminds himself why he

took on the responsibility that vexes him, yet he knows that fulfilling his responsibility will not, ultimately, solve anything. The speaker chooses inaction within his purview, deciding to continue without resolution to his state. His charity, at once both his empathy for the needy and his desire to help, drives him, but he recognizes that the specific form that his help can take in this situation, i.e. allowing a nation to be at the unlikely mercy of the World Bank, only deepens the preconditions of the need. He chooses delay. He travels across the Atlantic, with indications that he arrives in the Caribbean, disgusted less with himself than with European colonialism as he glimpses Floridian beachgoers:

Watching the hot sea,

I saw them far off, kneeling on hot sand

in the pious genuflections of the locust,

as Ponce's armoured knees crush Florida

to the funereal fragrance of white lilies (111-5)

Given his self-loathing and habit of deflection, this could be read as a projection of disgust and a retreat from his responsibility, but this stanza ends the first section at the halfway point of the poem, formal indicators that this stanza operates as a turning point in the narrative; this is an epiphanic recognition of the preconditions of the miserable situation of both the postcolonial world and his predicament that casts blame on the colonial creators and maintainers of European power and the piteous state of Africa and the Caribbean that he seeks to rectify. He recognizes that he is culpable, but he is not responsible.

Section II of the poem intensifies the condemnation of European power, each stanza connecting the Caribbean to the Holocaust. Walcott creates a solidarity, in Malouf's usage of the term, between the dead of the Holocaust and the dead and dying of colonialism. The Holocaust and colonialism are not conflated or totalized, just placed alongside each other with their similarities and differences laid bare. He uses a semi-colon to separate yet align the pale priest of the impoverished benediction and Albert Schweitzer, connecting the Caribbean scene to one of the Holocaust, the present to the past, and misery and death to European leadership:

black choristers

... pass a brown lagoon behind the priest,

Pale and unshaven in his frayed soutane,

Into the concrete church at Canaries;

As Albert Schweitzer moves to the harmonium

Of morning, and to the pluming chimneys,

The groundswell lifts *Lebensraum, Lebensraum*. (119-28)

Lebensraum roughly translates to “room to live,” (lit. “living room”) and was a justifying concept for Nazi expansion before and during World War II. The poem connects the state of the Caribbean and white leadership in the guise of the “pale and unshaven” priest to the horror of the Holocaust across European expansion and occupation.

The second stanza draws the most direct connection between the Holocaust and imperialism by alluding to and reversing Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* through the lens of the Holocaust:

Through Kurtz's teeth, white skull in elephant grass,

the imperial fiction sings. Sunday

wrinkles downriver from the Heart of Darkness.

The heart of darkness is not Africa.

The heart of darkness is the core of fire

in the white center of the holocaust.

The heart of darkness is the rubber claw

selecting a scalpel in antiseptic light,

the hills of children's shoes outside the chimneys (133-41)

With the first stanza's *Lebensraum*, and the transfer of darkness to Europe, and the evocation of the imperial horror of both Kurtz and the holocaust, the poem creates a solidarity of experience among those dead and dying at the expansionist whims of Europe. The word "holocaust" is not capitalized, allowing for some slippage of meaning in the term. Positioned between a denial of "imperial fiction" and specifics of the Holocaust, "holocaust" represents both the Holocaust and genocide, cataclysm, and

conflagration. This slippage furthers the connection between the Holocaust and European colonialism by evoking the disastrous loss of life both caused.

To conclude the section, the speaker places the onus firmly on those who would think themselves God, divesting the victims, including himself, of the responsibility for the horrifying state of the world:

Jacob in his last card, sent me these verses:

“Think of a God who doesn’t lose His sleep

If trees burst into tears or glaciers weep.

So, aping His indifference, I write now,

Not Anno Domini: After Dachau.” (143-7)

Time itself is here measured by horror, a horror that has been recast from the starvation and deprivation of the first section to the horror of being under the dominion of an indifferent power. This conception of time and the lack of culpability of the victims of power solidifies the speaker’s inaction by making his refusal to be complicit in the actions of European power greater than the alleviation of its symptoms.

Section III returns to the concrete situation of the speaker as he sits in the Caribbean village described in concert with the Holocaust in Section II. The recognition of the responsibility of imperial horror on the present has not absolved him of his troubles, and he claims “There is no sea as restless as my mind” (151). He has not eaten and he remains outdoors, “with the stars” (149-50). He has not lost his guilt, but he has lost his faith, both in his own efforts and in religion. The recognition of European

culpability in the deprivations of Africa and the Caribbean give him no solace, but he briefly muses on the ability for those deprived to take power, to turn the tables on the system and history that he rails against:

Like lice, like lice, the hungry of this earth
Swarm to the tree of life. If those who starve
Like these rain-flies who shed glazed wings in light
Grew from sharp shoulder blades their brittle vans
And soared towards that tree, how it would seethe –
Ah, Justice! (164-9)

The speaker reclaims the insect imagery he used earlier, the disgust lessened, the powerlessness retained. It is a recognition that the smallest, seemingly least important beings can be powerful if acting *en masse*. However, the analogy is careful in that it simultaneously recognizes that power, the tree, would seethe at being so attacked, but would still stand. The line that begins “Ah, Justice!” continues:

But fires
Drench them like vermin, quotas
Prevent them, and they remain
Compassionate fodder for the travel book (169-72)

The flies burn themselves in the lamps around him, individually dying, and the speaker draws out of the analogy to his own position as a fortunate traveller, at the mercy of numbers, yet speaking on behalf of those he encounters on his travels. He is, of course, alienated from them, his own experience and his empathy mediated through a book,

Its paragraphs like windows from a train,

For everywhere that earth shows its rib cage

And the moon goggles with the eyes of children,

We turn away to read. Rimbaud learned that.

Rimbaud, at dusk,

Idling his wrist in water past temples

The plumed dates still protect in Roman file,

Knew that we cared less for one human face

Than for the scrolls in Alexandria's ashes (173-81)

The speaker condemns not only himself, but the reader, arguing that we care less for the people, for their misery, than reading about it from afar. It is uncomfortable to directly experience human suffering, and so “we turn away to read,” caring more for our mediated experience than the unmediated of others.

In the fourth section, the speaker is found by the two gentlemen. They stride down the beach outside his room, ask around for him, and leave a message: “I tell them you

was in town. They send to tell you, / There is no hurry. They will be coming back” (196-7). He felt hunted and was found, the threat of dying or being forced to complete his responsibility come to bear. Yet he stays, secure in a benediction of his own:

They will be coming back.

In loaves of cloud, *and have not charity,*

The weevil will make a sahara of Kansas,

The ant shall eat Russia.

Their soft teeth shall make, *and have not charity.*

The harvest’s desolation,

And the brown globe crack like a begging bowl,

And though you fire oceans of surplus grain,

And have not charity,

Still, through thin stalks,

The smoking stubble, stalks

Grasshopper: third horseman,

The leather-helmed locust.

The speaker’s inaction, in the end, is not borne of fear or paralysis, but is a conscious decision to remain ambivalent toward his contradictory duties and loyalties. What is right

is not an option, and so he holds action until it is, until it might be. He refuses to enable the system that causes the situation that evokes so much empathy in him, even if refusing means he must suppress his empathy. The apocalypse looms, but he refuses to be a horseman.

In “The Fortunate Traveller,” as outlined above, it is not the national, but rather the “social collectivities” that Walcott evokes through the ambiguities of the identity of both the speaker and the “Two other gentlemen, black skins gone grey” (Walcott 13), as well as the unanswered question of why the speaker is in the position in which he finds himself. Yet the poem gives us clues to his identity through his sympathies and empathies, as well as his former or current employment as a “Sussex Don” (84). His empathic connection to the impoverished of the world creates a collectivity of the world at the mercy of the World Bank, to whom he is ostensibly responsible, despite his alienation as “The Fortunate Traveller” that lives separate from both world and World Bank. The Fortunate Traveller evokes what Ramazani argues is “The modernist topos of self-alienation, far from being ‘metonymic of the operation of imperial domination,’ [that] serves to contest the imperialist image of West Indians” (Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* 99). The speaker is separate from those he serves, on both sides, alienated to a degree from which he truly sides with neither, though his empathies and apparent loyalties belong not to the England in which he works, but with the nations that “cry” (Walcott 61). Such positioning reflects Ramazani’s assertion that “The stinging recognition that his poetry is not at one with the Caribbean common people recurs in Walcott’s poetry” (*A Transnational Poetics* 136), while retaining Malouf’s argument that “[Walcott’s] interest is in confounding the separatism of black nationalism by arguing for

a unified culture based on a common experience of colonialism and a pluralism of responses” (Malouf 142). “The Fortunate Traveller,” uses alienation, like “The Great Hunger,” as a position of detachment that still evokes empathy by allowing for observation of a realist vision of the consequences of independence and laying bare the degree to which its subjects are independent. However, in both poems, the alienation of the speakers and the resulting ambivalence, in which they observe, describe, and are responsible to contradictory discourses, prevents them from decisively acting or fully proposing an alternative. They simply presuppose that there *is* an alternative.

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NOTES

ⁱ Michael Malouf gives an overview of the imperial interest in subjugating colonial subjects through obviating difference in the first chapter of *Transatlantic Solidarities*. Malouf uses the “Anglo-Saxon messianism” (Malouf 28) in James Anthony Froude’s novels and histories, one of the English in Ireland, and one of the English in the West Indies as a primary example.

ⁱⁱ This section of the poem describes the speaker’s imaginings of Africa exclusively, yet the speaker’s later witness of deprivation in the Caribbean gives some indication that the importance of Africa in his reverie is both due to the speaker’s past witness of misery in Africa in dealing for the World Bank and a conception of Africa conceived out of racial solidarities.

ⁱⁱⁱ “The White Devil” and “The Duchess of Malfy” are tragedies by Jacobean dramatist John Webster and are alluded to here. Trusting in Walcott, I suspect there is more to the allusions than simply the names, but that would likely be another paper altogether.