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Abstract
When Sonali, the Western-educated senior civil servant of Nayantara Sahgal's novel of the Indian Emergency, Rich Like Us, first sees a reproduction of Antoine Watteau's Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère, she regards the aristocrats depicted in the painting, 'dressed up and romping around pretending to be peasants, living in a little dream world' (204) as fit only for the guillotine, to which history and the French Revolution will inexorably and justifiably condemn them. For her, Watteau's image is an icon of the European ancien régime, perfectly expressing its mood of arrogant complacency with 'powdered hair and rouge', 'silly fantasies', and 'mythical nonsense' (204). Sonali's elderly friend, Rose, the 'Cockney Memsahib' (33), sees Watteau's painting rather differently as a 'wonderland' of 'regal satin splendour' and as a testament to her belief that 'myths were the most indestructible of all things. They're what we're made of (204). At the end, the image works its effect on Sonali also; from scoffing at its 'operatic make-believe' she comes to regard the landscape as a 'love[ly] remembrance' of Rose with 'its impossible trees, its charmed foliage, its invitation to fantasy' (254).
DAVID RICHARDS

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When Sonali, the Western-educated senior civil servant of Nayantara Sahgal’s novel of the Indian Emergency, *Rich Like Us*, first sees a reproduction of Antoine Watteau’s *Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère*, she regards the aristocrats depicted in the painting, ‘dressed up and romping around pretending to be peasants, living in a little dream world’ (204) as fit only for the guillotine, to which history and the French Revolution will inexorably and justifiably condemn them. For her, Watteau’s image is an icon of the European ancien régime, perfectly expressing its mood of arrogant complacency with ‘powdered hair and rouge’, ‘silly fantasies’, and ‘mythical nonsense’ (204). Sonali’s elderly friend, Rose, the ‘Cockney Memsahib’ (33), sees Watteau’s painting rather differently as a ‘wonderland’ of ‘regal satin splendour’ and as a testament to her belief that ‘myths were the most indestructible of all things. They’re what we’re made of’ (204). At the end, the image works its effect on Sonali also; from scoffing at its ‘operatic make-believe’ she comes to regard the landscape as a ‘lovel[y] remembrance’ of Rose with ‘its impossible trees, its charmed foliage, its invitation to fantasy’ (254).

The novel repeatedly returns to Watteau’s image of languid ostentation in order to register the potency of ‘other mythical places’. It appears as an unattributed postcard reproduction, the centrepiece of a room ‘full of light and memory’, where its thinly applied colour and delicate glazes act as a ‘poignant’ representation of ‘the dreaming, yearning heart’ in contrast to the vulgar brutalities of state and capital (254). The painting makes its first entrance into the novel accompanied by Rose’s inevitable question: ‘Where is Cythera?’ Not even recourse to Ram’s dictionary provides a definitive answer: ‘Greek island associated with Aphrodite. Southern-most and eastern-most of the Ionian islands, off southern coast of Peloponnesus … Well, anyway it was an island, a real place … but it was unreal too, an island for believers in love’ (74). Zafar Khan’s drunken answer to Rose’s question is accurate, but hardly more revealing: “Nowhere. Everywhere. Like Pakistan,” said Zafar. “It’s in your dreams, the rosebud. Cythera is where you embarked for when you left your native shores”’ (73). Watteau’s painting occupies an important place in the aesthetics and politics of Sahgal’s novel. It is, variably, a representation of decadent European culture, of longing for romance, of a bond between women of different histories and cultures, and, most remarkably given its refined delicacy, it acts as a powerful
Watteau, l'Embarquement pour Cythère or Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère, canvas, 129cm x 194 cm, INV8525 Louvre.
critique of the post-colonial state. But although the passage from Rococo fête galante to the Indian Emergency is a considerable journey, Sahgal is not the only writer to see the capacity of Watteau's 'masterpiece of French masterpieces' to articulate other, post-colonial concerns. Nor is Sahgal unique in sustaining and amplifying the painting's enigmatic subject matter in these new cultural contexts. Cythera remains 'nowhere, everywhere' to the end of the novel, but Rose is not the only one to ask 'where is Cythera?'. For Derek Walcott also, Watteau's painting and the location of its subject matter has been an abiding question in many of his writings.

Bruce King comments on Walcott's play, *In A Fine Castle*, that '[f]or a play that was never published as such ... *In A Fine Castle* occupies a large place in Walcott's career'(285). An excerpt from the play was published under the title 'The Conscience of a Revolutionary' in *Express*, Port-of-Spain, 24 October 1971, and the play was produced, and earned mixed reviews, in Los Angeles in 1972, and by the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1973. Walcott also wrote a film script and scenario for television, (neither of which were commissioned), and *The Last Carnival* (1982), all of which were derived from versions of *In a Fine Castle*. As King has shown, Walcott has worked intermittently on drafts and versions of the play from the early 1960s, producing yet a further draft in 1992 (283–87). The play debates a central theme of Walcott’s work: the significance of art in hybrid Caribbean society. The artwork which is the symbol of European imported culture, and which dominated the set of *In a Fine Castle*, was Watteau's *Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère*.

The role the painting plays can be gauged by the central position it occupies in a key passage from his seminal essay, 'The Muse of History' (1974). Walcott declares that 'history ... is becoming absurd'. In the Caribbean, he explains, a statement such as this should not be taken for existentialism:

Adamic, elemental man cannot be existential. His first impulse is not self-indulgence but awe, and existentialism is simply the myth of the noble savage gone baroque. Such philosophies of freedom are born in cities. Existentialism is as much nostalgia as in Rousseau's sophisticated primitivism, as sick as recurrence in French thought as the isle of Cythera, whether it is the tubercular, fevered imagery of Watteau or the same fever turned delirious in Rimbaud and Baudelaire. The poets of the 'New Aegean', of the Isles of the Blest, the Fortunate Isles, of the remote Bermudas, of Prospero's isle, of Crusoe's Juan Fernandez, of Cythera, of all those rocks named like the beads of a chaplet, they know that the old vision of Paradise wrecks here.

(1998b 41–42)

This is, of course, familiar territory for Walcott and his readers. The New World poet is the 'Adamic', historyless inheritor of a fragmented 'culture of references, not of certainties' (1997 239). The Old World, of which Watteau's image is a symptomatic product, is burdened by history and driven 'delirious' by its exotic 'self-indulgent' myths of paradise. After nearly thirty years, the passage still has
the ability to startle, as much, perhaps, for the extravagance of its claims, which are just as 'baroque' in their way as the myths Walcott rails against. Walcott would seem to disagree with Sahgal's Sonali; the Revolution did not put an end to the myth of the voyage to Cythera but, fed by the exotic fantasies of Rousseau, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Nerval, it grew monstrous with new and deadly significance in an age of colonialism. Watteau's image has no 'regal satin splendour'; it is the delicate mask of empire, 'sick', 'fevered', and 'delirious'.

Having delivered such a damning rebuke to Watteau, Walcott nonetheless returned to the painting ten years later in a short poem in *Midsummer*, 'Watteau', where he asks Rose's question again:

So where is Cythera? It, too, is far and feverish,
it dilates on the horizon of his near-delirium, near
and then further, it can break like the spidery rigging
of his ribboned barquentines (31)

Here, the poem seems hardly to have advanced from the passage in 'The Muse of History' in its critique of Watteau as the arch-mythographer of colonialism's exotic delirium. Once again, Walcott sees Watteau's 'disease' also infecting Baudelaire with 'the tropic bug in the Paris fog'. The painting is an image of 'life repeated spectrally', a vision of 'emptiness'. The painting celebrates its culture's decadent colonial fantasies of escape. However, Walcott's answer to the question, 'So where is Cythera?', also recalls Sahgal's treatment of the myths of Cythera, which contained both Sonali's radical critique and her subsequent acknowledgement of the painting's 'charmed' effects. Walcott echoes Zafar Khan's 'Nowhere. Everywhere' in the lines, 'it is as much nowhere/as these broad-leafed islands'.

Cythera and St. Lucia share at least some of the same imaginary geography, since for Walcott the Antilles, too, are 'nowhere', 'a green nothing', and, in that sense, they are similar in their 'historylessness' (1990 192; 1993 n.p.). The poem executes a thoroughly self-reflexive turn which at the same time as it denounces the delirious myths of paradise, acknowledges the potency of those myths in enunciating the 'Adamic' qualities of the Antillean experience. Certainly Walcott and Watteau would seem to share similar themes — islands, sexuality, mythology and pastoral. They both clothe antique narratives in contemporary dress; they both subject ancient texts and contexts to new uses. It is by these processes of reinvention and transformation of 'mixed metaphors', alternative cultural worlds are brought into being (Fernandez 1991 12).

Walcott's argument with Watteau, which continued for over thirty years, prefigures his later more ambitious engagements with Homer, in that he fitfully located Cythera by mapping it onto St. Lucia, just as he will later map the Aegean onto the Caribbean in *Omeros*, or Tiepolo's landscapes and Martinique in *Tiepolo's Hound*.
A ceiling from Tiepolo: afternoon light will ripen the sky over Martinique to alchemical gold,

a divided life, drawn by the horizon’s hyphen
and no less irresolute as I grow old (97)

For Walcott, colour is its own language and has its own logic: ‘the brushstroke’s rhyme/and page and canvas know one empire only: light’ (58). Colour is ‘faith’, which is ‘like a visible wind’ (83). In this language, different from the language of the postcolonial polemics of ‘The Muse of History’, Watteau’s Cythera is a place like St. Lucia, where ‘the amber spray of trees feather-brushed with the dusk’ produces an ‘unreapable, alchemical harvest’ (1984 31), or like Martinique’s with its ‘alchemical gold’, or where the ‘saffron fire’ of Tiepolo’s ceiling reflects the sky of Pissarro’s island, both the colour of ‘rusted palms’ (2000 42). These hybrid locations, simultaneously ‘everywhere’ and ‘nowhere’, are connected by neither history nor shared culture, but by the capacity of the observing eye of the poetic persona to compel the connection through the language and logic of coloured light. They are also ‘rooms full of light and memory’ (Saghal 254). Walcott’s poetic prospect of painted islands ambiguously encompasses both a critique of the colonial exotic and an insistence that enigmatic ‘paint is all that counts, no guilt, no pardon,/no history, but the sense of narrative time/annihilated in the devotion of the acolyte’ (58). So, returning to the painting through the speculum of Walcott’s Caribbean vision, his poem asks again, where is Cythera?

There is little agreement among critics and historians of painting about the answer to that or any other questions concerning Pèlerinage à l’ilé de Cythère, but on one thing they are unanimous: Watteau’s painting has been regarded as a glorious puzzle ever since he submitted it to the French Académie Royal de Peinture et de Sculpture as part of their membership requirements in 1717. Even its exact title has been a vexed question. The modern Louvre catalogue lists it as Pèlerinage à l’ilé de Cythère, but it has been variously titled L’Embarquement pour Cythère (although another work by Watteau also bears that title) depicting pilgrims leaving for, or alternatively, departing from Cythera; or, simply, a fête galante. The painting refers to the ancient, pre-Hellenic cult of Aphrodite on the island of Cythera where, according to Hesiod, Lucretius and Pausanias, she rose from the sea, and where one of her oldest and most important shrines marks the event (Graves 15). Yet although the painting may depict a classical subject, it is neither classical in execution nor antique in its sensibility, but wholly contemporary Rococo milieu. Peter Wagner places Watteau’s painting at the beginning of a period in painting and engraving that made love and sexuality its paramount subjects (270–71). Watteau contributed significantly to a developing Rococo sensibility which, as in the works of Boucher, Fragonard, Greuze, Baudouin and Gravelot, displayed a willingness to present the erotic in varying degrees of frankness from sentimental titillation to the graphically libertine. The classical allusion in Watteau’s painting to the rites of Aphrodite
subtly underscores and initiates that erotic turn in French Rococo, yet curiously for a painter regarded as one of the founding figures of the moment, it isn’t erotic, or sentimental, or libertine. For Donald Posner, Watteau’s fêtes galantes, ‘while about love, tell no love stories. There are no tragic heroines, no happy endings, no events to galvanise the players. And the players themselves seem ever the same, engaged in the same or similar activities from one picture to another’ (151).

Posner’s observations on the painting’s lacunae echo throughout the critical writings on the painting, which repeatedly emphasise the evasiveness or elusiveness of Watteau’s images. For James Elkins, Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère is a ‘monstrously ambiguous painting’ (234): are these figures coming or going? Staying or leaving? A pilgrimage to where? For what? The picture’s narrative presents us with questions for which no answers are provided, leaving us in a state of uncertainty and unsure our direction. Watteau’s Cythera is, simultaneously, for Elkins, a place, a non-place, and an allegory of place, and these ambiguities are the primary characteristics of his painting. Elkins quotes Count Caylus’s remark in relation to Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère that it is characteristic of Watteau’s paintings which ‘had no object’, they were ‘pure painting’, and present us with a ‘narrative of successive concealment’ which evokes only ‘the feeling of meaning’ (231–39). Hermann Bauer is similarly perplexed by Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère and declares that since ‘nothing is happening’, it ‘needs no commentary: it describes nothing’ (1980; qtd in Roland 1984 192). A more linguistically-determined analysis is offered by Norman Bryson who sees Watteau as ‘inaugurating’ ‘the tradition of the reticent sign’ (115) which ‘infinitely suggests but never directly transmits meaning’ (91–92). The paintings have ‘no signifier to pin them down’ (88), and consequently they ‘are experienced mysteriously, as moods, or atmospheres’ (88), ‘a boundless semantic expansion, a kind of centrifugal rippling of meaning that knows no boundary … a machine for the infinite expansion of the signified’ (84). Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère emerges from his discussion as the koan—‘the question without closure’ (74). Critics repeatedly depict Watteau’s Cythera as a ‘floating signifier’ drawing classical myth, French eighteenth-century aristocratic society, and landscape painting into a heteroglossia of converging and divergent narratives circling around vacancy. The critics seem to have arrived at a Cythera where anything and everything — the shape of a gesture, the fold of a gown, the colour of leaves — is of consequence, but nothing is of significance.

Watteau’s critics measure the painting against a version of istoria, that is, figurative representations which convey important historical and moral truths (Gent and Llewellyn 1990 3). Watteau’s indeterminate myth of Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère refuses to allegorise these Rococo bodies into an ideologically-laden istoria. Indeed, to Wattueau’s critics, the painting seems an exercise in anti-istoria, in that it denies the possibility of moral authority being invested in
its subject. Elkins, Bauer, Bryson and others analyse the painting as a radical blurring of all boundaries — an activity which requires the viewer to find ‘a way to read his paintings outside ... of genre’ (Elkins 235). Ultimately, the proliferating ambiguities of the image lead Elkins to refuse ‘to read his paintings at all’ (239). When those reading strategies fail to lay a hold on Watteau’s painting and, quite literally fail to locate it, Watteau’s critics appeal to a discourse which places the painting beyond analysis: it becomes a ‘reverie’, ‘nothing’, ‘monstrously ambiguous’. Walcott, however, brings a postcolonial eye to the canvas.

Unlike Bryson, Walcott does not see ‘reverie’ in the painting but ‘fever’ and ‘near-delirium’. ‘Reverie’, while appearing to offer the painting up to an endless but inexpressible realm of sensations, in effect marks an end and a closure; there is, quite simply, nothing more that can be said. Walcott’s ‘delirium’, on the contrary, offers a diagnosis of a febrile condition, which characterises the strategies of composition and opens the painting to an alternative interpretation of its cultural history. To Norman Bryson, ‘Rococo has no horizon, and no vanishing point’ (96), and the eye is forever frustrated in its quest to see further into the subject; but for Walcott, ‘Cythera ... dilates on the horizon’, it enlarges its compass to become ‘the mirror/of what is’ — a spectral repetition of the real (1984 31). To Walcott, Watteau’s Cythera is not the ‘nothing’ that Bauer sees — a brilliant optical illusion which feigns meaning — but ‘emptiness’, ‘the hollow at the heart’ of the myths of paradise. These are not merely casual semantic differences of emphasis — ‘delirium’ for ‘reverie’. ‘Emptiness’ is not ‘nothing’, but something entirely different — post-colonial difference — and to see Watteau’s painting through post-colonial eyes is to see a different image entirely. The painting inaugurates a fantasy of a voyage to ‘otherness’ which will sustain colonial ambition, but it is also ‘paint [which] is all that counts, no guilt, no pardon,/no history’ (58). Walcott insists upon this simultaneous and paradoxical vision which sees the painting as an example of culpable colonial caprice and, simultaneously, as ‘paint’ and therefore innocent of the charge of historical complicity. In my reading of *Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère*, there are grounds for supporting Walcott’s vision in that the compositional strategies employed in the image lead the viewer into a series of contradictory viewpoints.

Art historians liken the arrangement of the figures in Watteau’s paintings to a dance (Cohen 1994), but *Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère* is not simply dance-like because of its disposition of bodies: all of the canvas contributes to the rhythm of the scene through an extraordinary compositional strategy. Two great sweeping compositional gestures divide the canvas diagonally. One trajectory brings us to the gambolling *putti* (cupids), and to the milky, purple and gold colours of the exterior: the other draws us into the earthy, dark-russet hues of the trees and shadows which shroud the right, and to a child of a different kind. Small triangular groupings produce a sense of internal complexity, rhythm and cohesion: the man in red and his companion carry staffs that create a triangle of enclosed
space mirrored in the other two pairs of figures within that group. These triangular arrangements are repeated throughout the image building larger blocks of interlocked painted space. The foreground, the raised bank, each of the two groups of pilgrims, the left-hand mountainscape, the flying putti — all create triangular or wedge-like arrangements and sections which are stacked, balanced or laid beside each other in a complex geometry of forms. The effect of these tesserae of spaces is to direct vision along simultaneously opposed clockwise and anticlockwise lines of sight. The anticlockwise motion projects sight out to the far distance of the painting and to the luminous, ‘dilating’ landscape. The reverse, clockwise motion in the image, the ‘prodigious urging toward twilight’ (Walcott 1984 31), channels sight down a series of interior visual tunnels until it pauses on the half-naked child sitting in the shadowy foreground. The painting’s rhythm seems to move bodies through space, like a minuet or gavotte, but only to leave them in precisely the place where they started. Watteau’s brilliant composition creates the impression that everything is moving, everything has altered, and yet everything remains the same. He has created what Walcott refers to in relation to Seventeenth-Century Dutch genre painting as the ‘brilliant lie’ of the hallucination of narrative (Walcott 2000 58) while simultaneously the image works to annihilate narrative time.

In my reading, the painting enacts a visual paradox, both in its composition and its subject. The pilgrimage can take different turns, left or right, out or in, light or dark. Watteau places his pilgrims on the threshold between ‘light’ and ‘dark’ raptures, between ‘reverie’ and ‘delirium’. These figures are eternally caught, frozen, between these contradictory states, and their ‘narrative’ has neither a beginning nor an end. They exist, ‘divided’ and ‘irresolute’, between a real contemporary milieu to which they belong and a past mythical domain to which they have come. The painting hesitates between these simultaneous worlds of modernity and myth, and it is precisely at these hesitant junctures, these ‘intraconceptual’ moments of fissure from, and exchange between, near and far, mythical and actual, past and present, that Watteau locates Cythera.

Walcott’s writings not only create a different way of looking at Watteau, they also share a great deal with those images. Walcott and Watteau possess an interest in visual correspondences, mixed metaphors, and ellipses. They both untie the bonds of metaphor, detaching vehicle from tenor, to create the obscure association, the lost connection, and the shards of ‘fragmented memory’ (Walcott 1993 n.p.). Walcott’s poems, like Watteau’s images, are ‘outside of genre’, in their concatenation of ‘Greek’ and ‘old African babble’ (1990 18). Walcott is, like Watteau, a ‘monstrous ambiguity’, but Walcott is as ambivalent to Watteau’s image as the opposed views of the painting expressed by Rosie and Sonali in Sahgal’s novel. Their ambivalence reveals a shared postcolonial perspective, arising in very different cultural and historical contexts, on the uncertain legacy of European art. Walcott’s postcolonial critique of the painting positions it as an
exemplary type of exoticism which had effects beyond European Rococo in a world of colonial dominions mythologised as ‘islands of the blest’. The Cythera of Watteau’s painting is a flight from history into the delirium of the exotic, but the Antilles, Walcott claims, have no history to flee from. Yet, Walcott’s repeated insistence that the ‘language of painting precedes and pre-empt the particular subject matter it represents’, also asserts art’s claim to an existence free of the blame of history (Harris 296). It is in these paradoxes that Walcott forges his responses, not only to Watteau, but to the art of Tiepolo, Pissarro, Gauguin and the writings of Homer, Joyce, and Dante. In some respects, Walcott’s paradoxical positions are similar to the dilemmas Watteau depicted in Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère; like Watteau’s pilgrims Walcott is ‘divided’ and ‘irresolute’ to the bone.

NOTES

1 Fêtes galantes are images of aristocrats in an outdoor setting which celebrate their cultivated elegance against a natural backdrop. Posner traces the origins of fêtes galantes to manuscript illustrations and chivalric poetry of the late middle ages (especially Roman de la Rose), to the allegorical gardens and islands of love, the myth of Arcadia, and realistic depictions of contemporary Netherlandish and French fashionable society (128).

2 The phrase ‘masterpiece of French masterpieces’ has been attributed to the Goncourts Brothers (182).

3 In showing Watteau’s image on stage, Walcott returned the painting to at least one of its origins since Watteau probably took his subject from his contemporary theatre. ‘Le pelerinage à l’île de Cythère’ enjoyed something of a minor vogue on the early eighteenth-century Paris stage where, between 1713 and 1716, a pilgrimage to Cythera was shown or mentioned at least five times, but was most likely suggested by a play of 1700 by Dancourt, Les Trois Cousins. See Posner (187) and de Fourcaud cited in Levey (182). See also Watteau’s paintings Gilles, Les Comédiens Français, Les Comédiens Italiens.

4 To add further to the confusion, there are two versions of the painting: his first, the piece submitted to the French Academy in 1717, hangs in the Louvre and is reproduced here; the second, painted in 1718 is in Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin. For a full discussion of the debate on the title of the painting see Levey and Elkins.

5 Karl Toth remarks that ‘at the centre of Rococo culture is woman’ (qtd in Hart 129).

6 I have taken the term ‘intraconceptual’ from Eisenstein (86); but see also Bryson (84) who argues the connection between Watteau’s effect on the viewer and Eisenstein’s ‘third sense’.

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