

John Thieme. *Paco's Atlas and Other Poems*. Pittsburgh, PA: Setu Publications, 2018. 52pp. ISBN: 978-1-947403-00-0.

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This collection of poems by a leading international postcolonial scholar demonstrates how critical thought feeds creative thought and vice versa. Its multiple directions, topics, sites, and implicit stories show how reading and writing inform each other, and also how meaning is shaped by cultural paradigms. Cultural dialogue naturally ensues.

The metatextual “Walking Poem” leaps right off the page with the energy and beat of the opening line, “This poem walks down the street” (46). It plays with the vexed dialogue between tradition and modernity: our ambitious walking poem is tempted by instant readerships via tablet, tweet, and laptop, but feels the need to “take a taxi home” to the old-fashioned “anxious sheet of paper” where it “may never be read” (46). Also operating within the dynamics of personification and metonymy (“I aspire to become a coalition”), the tight “Body Politic” is all lightness and wit. The speaker’s “amiable arms reach out to hug [her/his] cheerful chest,” but notes the “rebellious digits” and “tepid toes” that refuse orders from above. The tongue-in-cheek discourse offers the high altitude bird’s-eye view of benevolent irony regarding the world’s transhistorical cycle of separations and fusions, truces and ceasefires. Thieme playfully interrogates dreams of geographical federation (while existing federations crumble) by reviving the dead metaphor of the body politic: the speaker’s own knees (and why not yours and mine) have formed “a power bloc of their own” (45). The poet deploys literal dialogue in “Chinese Checkers.” Readers will like his use of voice. While engaged in the board game — a *German* one *Japan* gave China, which now provides the West with the sets — which materialises the verbal joust, the second (implicitly Chinese) player tells the speaker that the West did indeed teach China “how to give and take” before continuing, “We gave, you took” (23).

A moving poem, “Grandmother,” deploys a dialogized monologue to carry the power of a personal response. One’s eye lingers on one of the multivocal opening lines: “She sat there in that seat — yes, that chair there” (41). Through the interjection and following rhetorical questions the response is strategically diffracted, notably via the ventriloquistic dramatic monologue — designed to theatrically refract the utterances of others and to substitute another’s voice for the subjective poet’s voice. Yet the response is nonetheless infused with the awareness and consciousness of John Thieme, subject and poet, rather than of Thieme the cultural thinker and critic. The humble poem showcases how story, theme, motif reach across cultures, locations, and time, and it highlights preoccupations with the notions of place, home, or self along with inheritance, memory, and change. The dramatic monologue makes language the medium through which action, preservation, and transformation work themselves out. At the same time, the poet’s choice of a form appropriated and developed by Robert Browning reconfigures the transhistorical dialogical exchange between, and interdependence of, text and cultures: a synergistic creolisation or *mélange* (Rushdie 394).

Throughout this poetry collection, which engages with issues such as the connection between territory and writing and the intersections of aesthetics and politics, Thieme sets up a dialogism with other pre-texts and contexts (see Thieme’s *Post-colonial Con-texts*), a multivocality which provides texture and depth to current debates. “Ben Gunn” with its uncharted island kingdom whose shoreline always brings you back “where you began,” its fronds of palm, forest clearing, and hidden treasure, proclaimed a “self-made nation” by a new Adam who has found the old world’s “other Eden” devoid of “rank or subjugation” (29) feels inhabited by another presence: the shadow of the Derek Walcott Thieme is an authority on (see Walcott, *Collected Poems* 195-96, 219, 231, 294). So does Thieme’s playful “The Tortoisiad” with its “fallen fantasies of Adam’s kind,” peopled by a Ulysses “shipwrecked in a box,” a Sokrates, and in lieu of Helen a mooning male Pepe “resolved to fight his own Homeric war” (50-51). Another ghostly presence or echo emerges. In the interstitial space of Thieme’s poem, Walcott conversing of sorts with T.S. Eliot crystallises how cultural discourses interact. “Spring came with its cruel flowing sap” (51) gestures to *The Waste Land*’s iconic first line, “April is the cruellest month” (Eliot 63). Thieme’s “hound” with chewed head inverts Eliot’s corpse-digging Dog. Thieme causes Eliot’s “The Burial of the Dead” and its litanic repetitions (son of man, stone/stony, rock, Dog) to collapse into “the dog, the man, the stone” (51). Three short words and *The Waste Land* rises entire just as out of Proust’s tea-cup arise the solid shapes of the

town and gardens of childhood, complete. Eliot borrowed his own dog from John Webster, namely the skull-digging wolf in *The White Devil*, and the cemetery-scouring “Man’s best friend” in “The Pragmatist” (22) is yet another avatar. “Who is the third who walks always beside you?” Eliot asks (Eliot 77). Just so, Thieme’s poems are more than double-voiced. Inhabited by that ghostly third presence, as faint as an echo, they engage us in a “discursive dialectic operating along a continuum” (Thieme, *Post-colonial Con-texts* 2).

The “dinner jacket of my mind” encountered in “Vinegar” (19) speaks to Eliot’s Prufrock (Eliot 13), and the “thousand pairs of shrouded curtains” in Thieme’s quietly sinister “Courtly Love” nods at the “dingy shades/in a thousand furnished rooms” of *Preludes* (Eliot 23). Like the chimney pots, vacant lots, discarded newspapers, and dilapidated window blinds in Eliot’s *Preludes*, the mobile phone, doorbell, blocked-up chimney, and CCTV cameras in “Courtly Love” (35) operate within an agenda salvaged from the realists: achieving a reality effect which attains a degree of abstraction. The poetics of synergistic creolisation (Boehmer 117-118; Walcott, “Muse” 36-64) are perhaps most playfully at work in Thieme’s specular, doubly intertextual flirtation, “From Dylan to Dylan.” The poem, most overtly its concluding quatrain “Dusk is now descending,/on his caravan of light,/but he snared the sun at noon-time/and he’ll rage against the light” (49), engages with Dylan Thomas’s famous villanelle, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” but also with one of its hypertexts, Bob Dylan’s homage to the Welsh poet he admired, “Let Me Die In My Footsteps.” The cultural and linguistic interplay operating in Thieme’s poetry collection, complete with reversals and recombinations, points to how our understandings are serial, cumulative, and multifaceted.

Works Cited

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