When Will the Poetic Violence End?

by Con Chapman

Some corners of the world seem to be consigned to an eternal hell of never-ending strife. The Middle East; Northern Ireland; the faculty lounge at Oxford University.

"You call that bloody crap a sestina, do you?"

What's that you say—one of those three seems out of place? Well you're wrong. A Catholic soccer fan was beaten to death by Protestants not long ago in Coleraine.

Voltaire and Diderot at the Cafe Procope: "You're full of escargots!"

Oh, you meant the faculty lounge at Oxford. Well, as Voltaire once said to Diderot, "Ding, dong—you're wrong."

An article posted on The Guardian's web site last year reported that Ruth Padel, the first woman appointed Professor of Poetry at Oxford University since the position was established *in 1708,* resigned after acknowledging that she aided and abetted an email smear campaign—albeit a truthful one—against her rival for the position, Caribbean poet Derek Walcott.

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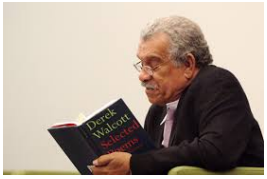
Ruth Padel: "Yeah I did it—so bloody what?"

Padel, the great-great-grand-daughter of Charles Darwin, has limpid blue eyes the color of a robin's egg and an antic aspect that lends her an air of--all right, I'll turn off the bubble machine. She's an iron fist in a velvet glove, and when a rival poet gets in her way, she whacks him.

Lawrence Welk: "Turn off-a dah bubble machine, please."

Walcott is a Nobel Prize winner who, to paraphrase Wordsworth, leaves trailing clouds of sexual harassment behind him where e'er he goes, at least in the 617 area code. He has been accused of pressuring female students at Boston University in 1982 and Harvard in 1996 to have sex with him.



Derek Walcott

You would think that, if you were Walcott, you wouldn't have to pressure anybody into anything. Just walk into a bohemian bar and say "Hey—which one of you ladies wants to make the beast with two backs with a Nobel Prize-winning poet? If your last name begins

with the letters A through M, line up on the left, everybody else on the right."

But apparently that's not how it works. You have to buy drinks and make small talk, just like all the other non-Nobel Prize-winning schlubs in the joint. I'm sure it's a gigantic pain in the ass.

"C'mon Mr. Nobel Prize—it's your turn for karaoke!"

So Padel decided to send a few harmless little emails to reporters to make sure Walcott's, uh, resume was complete. Walcott withdrew from consideration as a result of an anonymous letter-writing campaign that revived the story of his chequered past, and Padel got the job. A more facile mind than mine has pointed out that this represented--poetic justice.

There is an axiom, often attributed to Henry Kissinger but actually the discovery of political scientist Charles Sayre, that goes as follows: "In any dispute, the intensity of feeling is inversely proportional to the value of the stakes at issue." This principle, known as "Sayre's Law," has a corollary: "That is why academic politics are so bitter."

I wonder where's Kissinger now?

The post of Professor of Poetry at Oxford comes with a salary of 6,901 pounds sterling, which at current exchange rates is equal to

the grand sum of—$10,972.59. That works out to a buck and a quarter *less* than the U.S. hourly minimum wage.

William Blake

In *Auguries of Innocence,* William Blake wrote of the ability to “see the world in a grain of sand.” Well, perhaps. But don't lose sight of the rest of the beach.