



Walcott's poetic pronouncement: "Progress is history's dirty joke."

18

When one is in love, one tends to feel that the couple they constitute proves as irresistible to each other as an itch to a scratch.

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Studies have found that scratching your itchy ankle can feel as good as sex, as Rienzi has recently informed us.

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Indeed, the metaphor of itching/scratching has been mobilized in all sorts of ways in the history of world literature. Shakespeare characteristically explores the potential of the itch as a metaphor, or the power of the itch as a signifier that is notoriously slippery sometimes. Mark the ways in which Brutus deploys a dermatological metaphor in his exchange with Cassius in Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar* (Act 4, Scene 3):

**Brutus:**

Let me tell you, Cassius, you yourself Are much condemn'd to have an itching palm,

To sell and mart your offices for gold To undeservers.

**Cassius:**

I, an itching palm?

What does the phrase "itching palm" signify here? It signifies an avaricious disposition—to be more specific, it signifies the lust for gold or the desire for gold. In the field of Shakespeare studies, one hermeneutic excavation has already revealed that Cassius's deep, even driving desire for gold, leading to the sale (mark the signifier "mart" here) of favors, is both "unconscious and compulsive." It seems that in the hands of Shakespeare, the signifier "itch" can invite a critical intervention capable of enacting an intersection between political economy and psychoanalysis. One can surely cite other plays by Shakespeare—particularly *Romeo and Juliet* and *Coriolanus*—in which the great playwright exploits the power of the metaphor of itching, giving one the impression that the itch—like money and Vodka—can do crazy things, to misquote the Russian writer Anton Chekhov.

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Let me dwell more on the pleasure and pain of the itch-scratch cycle. Both the great essayists Montaigne and Bacon—their different contexts and locations and stylistic signatures notwithstanding—come to accentuate the pleasure of the cycle in question. As Montaigne famously puts it: "Scratching is one of the sweetest gratifications of nature, and as ready at hand as any." And Bacon, in his *Sylva Sylvarum* or *A Naturall Historie in Ten Centuries*, tells us: "The pleasure in the act of Venus is the greatest of the pleasure of senses; the matching of it with itch is improper, though that also be pleasing to the touch." But, of course, Montaigne in particular seems fully aware of the pain of the itch-scratch cycle as well: "But repentance follows too annoyingly at its [scratching's] heels." Why? The more you scratch, the more you itch, and the more you itch, the more you scratch. Thus you end up afflicting and damaging your skin, to say the least. But Montaigne moves further. He goes to the extent of invoking Socrates to call attention to what Montaigne himself calls "the close alliance between pain and pleasure:" "When Socrates, after being relieved of his irons, felt the relish of the itching that their weight had caused in his legs, he rejoiced to consider the close alliance between pain and pleasure."

22

And again I will speak of the concrete joy of scratching as an inevitable response to the concrete sensation called itching. Two statements on that topic stand out for me. First, the American poet Ogden Nash: "Happiness is a scratch for every itch." And then the American poet-critic Robert Penn Warren: "The urge to write poetry is like an itch. When the itch becomes annoying enough, you scratch it." And I am totally with the Australian journalist Katherine Feeny when she notes: "It feels good to scratch that little nub of fleshy irritation pricked by a dreaded mosquito. The moment nails collide with skin and fingers slough the needled surface is a moment of sheer bliss. The relief! The joy! The satisfaction! The — oh." Sometimes it's so important to affirm and celebrate that "oh," however fleeting or even dangerous it may appear.

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Indeed, the itch—as a topic—clamors for so many interpretive interventions. And, indeed, I did itch to write about the itch itself. But I can see now that I've even barely scratched the surface of the dialectics of itching and scratching that—among other things—defines life itself. Finally, some lines from a poem called "Itchy" by David Yezzi:

Hard to reach, so you yank your clothes getting at it—the button at your neck, the knotted shoe. You snake your fingers in until your nails possess the patch of skin that's eating you. And now you're in the throes of ecstasy, eyes lolling in your skull, as if sensing the first time the joy one takes in being purely animal.

It's so good to have a scratch [...]

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