Chapter 5

Walter Ralegh, England, America
and the World

Shakespeare, whose private–public exploration of language and topoi chapters 3 and 4 have examined, had a contemporary who was a very public figure, courtier and favorite of Elizabeth I, Walter Ralegh (1552–1618). This chapter examines him and then other lesser known advocates of the colonies in North America, at a crucial time in the mid-eighteenth century. The language of Ralegh and these officials or soldiers, writing a report partly in his tradition, is the focus here, with all their ambivalence and contradiction. They are full of hopes and cautions. These figures look at the local and the world in the field of empire. They represent Europeans, Natives and slaves.

Let me use Ralegh as a figure in this chapter but also for this book, a way into some of its concerns, one of which is language, that is the way the author and reader, speaker and audience, communicate, even with great difficulty. Authorship is, as discussed in the Introduction, important even if it is a textual author, a ghost in the textual machine, or a trace of human life, the voice and its representation and the ear and eye that try to apprehend it for the mind.

Ralegh and After

The authorship of Walter Ralegh’s *The History of the World* (1614) is not announced on the title page of the first edition. The book has other things in “mind.” “The Minde of the Front,” the poem that faces the title page,
sees history as keeping mankind from death and oblivion, a Ciceronian echo at the end about history the light of truth and the light of memory. For instance, the last couplet declares, “Times witnisse, Herald of Antiquitie,/ The light of Truth, and life of Memorie.”

The themes of the poem on the left side and the title page with image on the right echo each other. Moreover, the poem explains the image or the image on the title page is a visual companion of the poem. The image on the title page has the word “Providentia” over an eye that watches over the globe (map of the earth) that lies below it. The figure of Fama Bona or Good Fame—an angel dressed in white with wings and blowing a horn or trumpet of some type, stands on the left side of the viewer but the right side of Providence and the figure of Fama Mala, also with wings and a trumpet, but whose white garments and wings have black spots. Whereas Fama Bona blows her horn with her left hand while her right hand rests on the globe, Fama Mala blows her horn with her right hand and rests her left hand on the globe.

The Globe sits above the title, “The History of the World,” and rests in the hands of History (so the poem tells us but she is not identified here). Her arms, breasts and belly are bare but she is otherwise clothed. On her garment between her legs are the words “Magistrae Vitæ.” On her right and the viewer’s left is the figure of Experientia, who is fully clad and who stands between two pillars, “Testis Temporvs” to her right and the viewer’s left, and “Nvncia Vetvstatts.” She has a wand (staff) in her right hand and a rope with what appears to be a line with weight in her left hand. To the left of the figure of history and the right of the viewer, Veritas, naked, her hair covering her lap, stands between the pillar labeled “Lvx Veritatis” on her right and the viewer’s left, and a pillar that has on it “Vita Memoria.” She gestures with her right hand to the sun. History has under her right foot a skeleton labeled “Mors” or Death and her foot is under its chin. Her left foot is on the head of the figure on whose garment is written “Oblivio.”

All this appears just above “At London Printed for Walter Bvrre 1614.” The foot of the title page responds to the opening lines of the poem:

FROM Death and darke Oblivion (neere the fame)
The Mistreffe of Mans life, graue Historie,
Raising the World to good, or Euill fame,
Doth vindicate it to Æternitie.

High Proudience would to: that nor the good
Might be defrauded, nor the great secur’d,
But both might know their ways are understood,
And the rewrd, and punishment asur’d.