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“That Light Beyond Metaphor”: Derek Walcott’s Ekphrases

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Abstract This article looks at Derek Walcott’s ekphrastic writing, i.e. its combined use of poetry and painting, from a twofold perspective: 1) the primal employment of a densely visual language for descriptive purposes which carries out the proverbial Walcottian ‘naming’ of the Caribbean reality, often in conjunction with the memory of Walcott as a young painter; 2) the transforming dialogue with actual paintings of the European canon in mature works like *Tiepolo’s Hound*, *The Prodigal* and *White Egrets*. I will especially explore the dramatic figure of the ‘failed painter’ that first emerges in the poetic autobiography *Another Life* as a ‘self-portrait’ of Walcott’s ekphrastic writing itself and the ways ‘the failed painter’ subject evolves assuming a functional role to accomplish an overall dismissal of the received ‘colonial visuality culture’ and the establishment of an Antillean aesthetics.

Keywords Walcott. Ekphrasis. Caribbean. Painting. Failure.

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1 Introduction: Derek Walcott's Radical Ekphrasis

All readers of Walcott's poetry know that his writing is deeply infused with painting, from themes to form. The function of his 'painting lines' is to contribute to the expression of Caribbean reality, starting from "that light beyond metaphor" (Walcott 1990, 271) that pre-exists material expression. The weaving of 'seeing and saying', of images and words, enacts an antique wish for utter mimesis and Walcott's astounding realisations derive from the fact that he has always been a trained and active painter with a visceral attachment to the Caribbean. Open his poetry books anywhere, and you most likely enter a meticulously organised space filled to the smallest details and defined to the slightest nuances. Typically, ultra-accurate descriptions project a Creole view so vertiginously transcultural in its blends and mixes of the various strands of Caribbean cultural legacies that, especially if you are from the so-called Western world, they display insights that often urgently concern us. The reasons why this is so and the way Walcott's poetry creates this vision is this article's main theme.

The founding reason is better defined by Walcott himself who in 1957, at the dawn of his artistic life and of his country's political independence, has no doubt that the future of the Caribbean lies in a thorough reconception (that reminds him of ancient Greece) that can only be fully accomplished through the arts. Paradoxically, freedom is in the hands of those that the state leaves on the margins anywhere, but more intolerably so in a country that is liberating itself from the ways it has been 'looked at' for centuries:

> Where history is being made now, in these islands, is not in the quick political achievements, […] but in the deepening stream of the way we are now learning to think. To see ourselves, not as others see us, but with all the possibilities of the new country we are making. […] a people who possesses the land in thought and share it. All except the inevitable minority, their artists. […] Without them Greece would have been a tourist resort, and these islands will be beautiful but dumb. (Walcott 1991, 15, 17)

A few years later, as an art commentator for the *Trinidad Guardian*, Walcott laments that Caribbean artists and educators have assumed the posture of a declined age not their own, since they actually live in a new renaissance with the same "vigour for exploration" and "sense of discovery" that characterised early-modern Europe:

> the new world that England itself helped to discover, and of which, spiritually, she is still part, is not offered as an alternative. […] But in small, germinal cultures, unformed because they are so new,

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> the process has to begin again. […] The artist in the West Indies […] has a strong urge to re-create the visible world, which is, in terms of art history, undocumented. (Walcott 2013, 69-70)

Walcott’s words contain in embryo the large project that he was working on and which he would develop in the following decades. It entails a direct engagement with present and past visual representations of the Caribbean, along with its cultural legacies especially in Europe, Africa and the Americas. This constitutes the visual-epistemic space whereby Europe first imposed its so-called “visuality complex”, starting from the colonial plantation that was the originating space of a ‘visuality surveillance system’ that would vary and interweve in its main forms over the centuries (Mirzoeff 2011, 1-31).

Relatedly, one important aspect of Walcott’s poetry’s engagement with art, is the historical record it offers of the ways in which the Caribbean has been seen by artists who have provided liberating means to face and gradually obliterate the heavy burden of the European ‘visuality complex’. Such Caribbean art history is especially on display in *Tiepolo’s Hound* (2000), which opens with the Caribbean sea-scape joyfully depicting itself as it is beginning to portray the parallel stories of Pissarro and Walcott’s artistic lives. They will take us to see the formation of a Caribbean aesthetics, its role and relations with European art, from contemporary through early-modern painting. In *Tiepolo’s Hound* this large scenario is tellingly defined as a ‘fresco’, and so also in other poems, like *The Prodigal*, where painting has a primary role. The image of painting as a ‘fresco’ renders the idea of art as a shared ongoing activity where each epoch is like a frescoist’s *giornata* and like a happening comparable to an *al fresco* feast, an open-air convivial event. Still, inside this art world the air may get heavy, for instance when one’s gaze falls upon ‘European black portraiture’ or on Pissarro’s sketches of Caribbean ‘subjects’. However, a readiness is always there to capture a deeper creative intention, to understand the artist’s condition of servitude to historical times (as we can see, for instance in *Tiepolo’s Hound* where the narrator comprehends Tiepolo’s acritical service to Venice). This openness to review and change one’s biased perspective is depicted in the essay “On Hemingway”, where Walcott greets the American writer’s rendering of the Caribbean in his novel *Islands in the Stream*. The essay features the shift of perspective, the pivotal change of the Caribbean reader’s preconcept as reading discloses a surprisingly unprejudiced prose, where the representation of the Caribbean mirrors the existential relief that Hemingway found in its environment, “in the service of the natural world” (Walcott 1990, 113). This is how the essay begins with an ekphrastic description of the socio-political difference between the U.S. Virgin Islands and those of the southern Caribbean, which reports the kind of racialist view that Walcott expected to find in Hemingway’s writing:

> The light in the Virgin Islands is almost temperate and the islands’ flatness intensifies the glare. Their hills are not as lush as the islands to the south, and there is a Dutch sanity to their architecture that has nothing of the ramshackle adventurousness of the Catholic islands. Such differences are as imperceptible to the tourist as distinctions between the shires of England or the New England states. But the difference for me may have been more political than anything else. After all, they were American territory and their history was as recent and simple as American history. The low bare landscapes and white houses guarded by wispy trees, the marshes and the brightness of the coral-bottomed water *were* the climate of the Gulf Stream, *were* the territory of Hemingway. (Walcott 1990, 69; italics added)

The single tiny word ‘were’ marks Walcott and Hemingway’s changed point of view. And the essay, in a final ekphrasis, describes the new scenario in which Hemingway’s prose takes this difficult reader by surprise as his prose did perfectly catch the sense of his islands and to the point that reading feels like being there in the early morning light:

> ‘You know how it is in the morning …’ […] and you not only know how it is, it resembles what he wrote if you have gotten up before the sun comes over the hill-roofs of Christiansted, and the light then begins to paint the closed shacks and the harbour with its white yachts and the reef line beyond the harbour make you believe that you are walking in the same light that comes off his prose. (Walcott 1990, 114)

This deeply conceptual and identity-involving engagement with the visual-verbal expression of the Caribbean makes Walcott’s poetry ‘ekphrastic’ in the twofold sense that this term has had in European culture since ancient times. Ekphrasis was first theorised and employed in classical rhetoric for composing effective ‘mimetic descriptions’ and only later became a poetic genre in which poetry, competitively, relates to and renders artworks, especially paintings (Krieger 1992; Verdonk 2005; Neumann, Ripple 2020, 13-33). Also, Walcott’s writing’s eagerness to grasp reality by creating illusive sameness in which life and its artistic expression transparently overlap, resembles the typical ‘miracle-mirage’ approach in Western aesthetics. This has been described as the concept and practice by which poetic writing makes use of artworks to maximise semblance, to create the illusory correspondence between language and reality, to make the poem be what it is saying. Poetry’s perennial aspiration to become palpably real via a fusion of language and painting has led critics to define ekphrastic writing as “the poet’s marriage of the two within

the verbal art” (Krieger 1992, 22). Ekphrasis theory defines this as a tendency to stop the temporality and arbitrariness of language in order to bestow upon it a spatial stillness and a plastic presence that only belong to the applied arts (Krieger 1992). This does not quite apply to Walcott’s ‘pictorial writing’ because it often inscribes the paradoxical realisation of this very illusionary aim. As we read in an early essay, also reminiscent of his juvenile work, this time in the theatre, “Imitation *was* pure belief” (Walcott 1970, 6; italics added). In Walcott’s ekphrastic writing the concomitance of space and time never stops the temporal dimension of the linguistic sign. Quite on the contrary, a performative use of language, which often features painting as underway, opens the doors to the live dimension of the ongoing discourse traversing the edge of the page to involve us. This twofold radical engagement with ekphrasis has perhaps been taken for granted by the several major studies of Walcott’s ekphrastic writing, whose scholarship may be divided into two main trends. One is based on postcolonial and world literature critique and mainly focuses on the poems’ engagement with actual paintings and artworks, especially as rewriting genre that counters the European pictorial canon (Mitchell 2015; Neumann 2016; Neumann, Ripple 2020; Herbertson 2024). One is specialised in Walcott’s entire work and mainly explores the way his ekphrastic writing developed out of the specificity of Caribbean culture (Baugh 1978; 1980; Hamner 2000; Fumagalli 2006; 2018) and through Afro-American affiliated contexts, as exemplified in its latest must-read monograph (Fumagalli 2023).

In what follows, I will linger on two aspects of Walcott’s ekphrastic poetry in approximate chronological order. I will first focus on what I call its primal ekphrasis period by reading some passages from the poetic autobiography *Another Life* ([1972] 1992) to explore how the poem portrays the topical moment when the young Walcott seems to be quitting painting for poetry. I will then explore the development of the ‘failing painter’ motif as it re-emerges in *The Prodigal* (2007) and in *White Egrets* (2011) in further and amusing dramatisations of ‘failure’. The ‘failing painter’ comes to display a problematic relation with European art and history, to feature a related psychologic condition and especially the way they have been transformed to play a part in a reconceived ‘Antillean visuality’.

2 Primal Ekphrasis: Memories of an Apprentice Painter

Since the juvenile poetry collections through the mature work, Walcott’s poems embed memories of Walcott in his teens training to become a painter in the St Lucia of the early 1940s. That early experience meant a full immersion, a deep contact, with the territory and the society, a perception that would root and nourish poetic writing,

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in the way we can see in the early poem *Solo*. The poem displays the primeval formation of Walcott’s ekphrastic language as it takes place in conjunction with the memory of his apprentice years. The “villa” of his teacher Harry Simmons, where Walcott along with his bosom friend and future painter Dunstan St Omer studied painting, is literally embedded into the lines through the word “mention” whose sound allows the ‘villa’ as ‘mansion’ to flow into the lines, so that the cherished time and place coincide with the poem in progress. The memory of early painting that it represents has extended its creative life into the poetic remembrance which has realised their conflation.

> but o the *mention*
> Of easy days of light, when
> You, my friend, armed with a calm brush,
> Long past lunchtime, in the lightning
> Sketch, flattened the landscape from ambush.
> […]
> So recollecting this
> The white and green *villa* on the dry hill
> […]
> How I see all that *villa* hurt with leaves.
> (Walcott 1949, 31; italics added)

In *Tiepolo’s Hound* the memory of the continuity between art and reality as experienced in those apprentice years is declared to be the energising motivating force of writing. The reminisced early days when the young painter saw the St Lucia environment look like the landscapes and the scenes of Renaissance and Impressionist paintings is nourishing the composition of this very poem:

> especially if, across the harbour, noon
> struck its rings of waves, and the ochre walls
>
> of the old cantonment in the still lagoon
> reflected their Italian parallels.
>
> Hill towns in rock light, Giotto, Giorgione,
> and later the edges of Cézanne’s L’Estaque,
> not for these things alone, and yet only
> for what they were, themselves, my joy comes back.
> (Walcott 2000, 10-1)

This bifocal vision that poetic language absorbs and that came so natural to the young painter is the legacy of his father’s work. Warwick Walcott, an amateur poet and painter, would imitate and take inspiration from European artworks and, “joining by division” (30) paint the

St Lucian reality. The same range of vision literally defines that of the two young painters: “as pupils we need both worlds for the sight” (34).

We learn in the poetic autobiography *Another Life* that, as the apprentice years draw to an end, this unconditioned belief in art’s power to redefine the Caribbean soon crumbles and the disenchanted ex-student begins to feel the weight of colonial history, to see its seemingly unstoppable massive episteme overwhelm his artistic ambitions, “the sea’s huge eye” with its “pelagic eyelid” (Walcott [1973] 1992, 198). Yet, while the poem makes us hear the promise of the disenchanted apprentice, “Never such faith again, never such innocence!” (203), the mature artist is already at work forging his ekphrastic writing that seems better equipped than painting to face the huge challenge. *Another Life* is the depiction of this fusion that is represented through a synaesthetic intensity and a scope that remain, arguably, unmatched in Walcott’s work (Burnett 2006).

> Verandahs, where the pages of the sea
> are a book left open by an absent master
> (Walcott [1973] 1992, 145)

Another Life opens with the shocking display of the colonial vision as system of knowledge inherited through colonial history, rendered through the combined effect of ‘the verandah reading the book of the sea’. Verandahs were among the first architectural elements built by European settlers to protect themselves from the heat and whose view-capturing expanse represented the centre of the plantation surveillance system. The poem’s first word, therefore, compresses the colonial worldview which immediately afterwards the poem convincingly starts to demolish, starting from the young painter’s persistence to depict his position at the end of empire. This is rendered through the repetition of the word ‘begin’, whose present tense unifies young painter and mature poet showing them together at work: “I begin here again, | begin […] | Begin with twilight” (145). The demolition and replacement of the ‘verandah vision’ and knowledge structure, “a landscape locked in amber” (145), is the poem’s central theme. It features as the enterprise taking place in front of us, resulting from the joined forces of apprentice painter and mature poet’s mind and craft. So, if the young painter in the mid 1940s is shown as failingly trying to draw the declined colonial epoch he lives in, the Walcott of the late 1960s can forge that vision in detail, as “transfigured sheerly by the student’s will, | a cinquecento fragment in gilt frame” (146). The two words closing the second line a master stroke that captures the sense of modern history also from the perspective of those who suffered it.

The poem depicts the epochal transition as occurring through the merging of contemporary local life and European paintings in which

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Caribbean and European history are made to blend. In one of these emblematic episodes, the death of a girl named Pinkie is associated to that of a wealthy Jamaican girl of the eighteenth century who died in England where she was sent to school and who became famous for the full-body portrait done by the Thomas Lawrence:

> But was it her?
> or Thomas Alva Lawrence’s dead child
> another Pinkie, in her rose gown floating?
> (151)

What the uncertainty of the lines performs is the vision of Caribbean-English history and culture that is brought about by the same sense of loss and felt absence that strike the community across the racial divide, forming the new picture of the still unexpressed transcultural reality. It is the time and space of this unacknowledged reality that the poem has set out to represent through lines that join painting into poetry.

However, the blending takes place hiddenly, to the point of misleading readers.

> There are already invisible on canvas,
> lines locking into outlines. The visible dissolves
> into benign acid.
> (197)

These lines show the apprentice painter disappointingly looking at his just-finished landscape and noticing how his version of it is strangely continuing off the canvas, sliding into a poetic space. Then, as ambiguity widens, we are made to follow all stages of his growing disappointment until we reach the most tricky lines of all, where the young painter speaks of “this failure” (200). Understandably, this passage has led most scholars to see the episode as Walcott’s capitulation, as representing the turning-point moment that saw Walcott choose poetry as his privileged expressive means:

> Where did I fail? I could draw,
> I was disciplined, humble, I rendered
> the visible world that I saw
> exactly, yet it hindered me, for
> in every surface I sought
> the paradoxical flash of an instant
> […]
> I hoped that both disciplines might
> […] cohere
> and finally *ignite*,
> but I lived in a different gift,

> its element metaphor.
> (200-1; italics added)

The fiasco consists in the executioner’s gaze that sees reality as many-sided and which his brush strokes indulge on, led by the wish to capture that complexity, thus failing to accomplish a realistic depiction of the actual landscape. To express the multidimensional world he lives in, the student has to combine poetry and painting and adopt a metaphoric approach, of the kind we saw before, which allows him to capture all aspects of his complex reality in one stroke through an uncompromising figurative, realistic, rendition. In this respect, the poem subtly shows us how painting has not failed but is being combined with poetry, where the boy’s vision of the subtleties composing the Caribbean reality can be expressed metaphorically and in ways by which ‘the two disciplines can in fact ignite’. The poem shows this in a previous passage that closely renders the metaphorising process as taking place in the young artist’s mind and in the mature poet’s language:

> April *ignites* the immortelle,
> the leaf of a kneeling sapling
> *is* the yellow flame of Lippi’s “Annunciation.”
> Like the scrape of a struck match, *cadmium orange*,
> evened to the wick of a lantern.
> Like a crowd, surrounding the frame,
> the muttering *variegation of green*.
> (1992, 197; italics added)

The first three lines show the way metaphor works by joining seemingly disparate elements, in this case an immortelle tree with its sapling and a Renaissance “Annunciation”. The metaphor seems an image of poetic creativity, of the way it can blend poetry and painting. ‘April’ is a mythical word in Walcott’s language, emblem of his art’s imaginative union with that of his father who died on that month leaving his son with the sense of having the mission to complete it (Walcott 1990, 68). It indicates Walcott’s primal imaginative formation, here rendered through the image of the ‘immortelle tree’ in full bloom, as vividly illumined by the April sun, traditionally a symbol of rebirth, of a new beginning, that is also the book’s main theme. The two following similes explain how the imagination makes the ‘leaf of a young tree’ correspond to ‘the flame of the Annunciation’: both are representing the exceptional birth of a third ‘term’, a new ‘word’. The first simile compares the equation to the flame produced by “a struck match”, which along with the several meanings of ‘match’ (suitable correspondence, competitive relation), renders the idea of a third element emerging from the friction, i.e. of the vision rising through the combination of poetry with painting as ignited by the father’s

art. The nature of this friction is qualified in terms of painting, as “cadmium orange”, which is also the colour of the immortelle tree in bloom. The resulting flame is then “evened” as if it were inside of a lantern whence it diffuses its light as if to form ‘a sunlit background’. The second simile shows the vision as it continues outside the picture as a nativity with people come to see the newborn, which also inserts a temporal development into the space of the representation. This too is then rendered in pictorial terms as “the muttering variegation of green”, which may refer to the grown-up sapling as well as to the community inside of which it is developing.

Furthermore, details of the ‘failed painting’ take us to see how its ‘devious representation’ is informed by elements that compose a previous epiphanic episode (when at fourteen the boy first senses that he belongs to his country and people) and which we also see in a following sequence where the young Walcott is discovering the complexity of Caribbean history.

In the epiphany (1992, 184-5) the boy is at “the edge” of a hill, standing by a steep cliff where he can see the “smoke” from people’s cooking and therein “dissolved into a trance”, “seized” by the sense of ordinary life as constrained within a heavy past that is simultaneously going on: “climbed with the labouring smoke”, “drowned in labouring breakers of bright cloud”. Anticipating the image of the “kneeling sapling” that we saw above, the boy “felt compelled to kneel”. Relatedly, in anticipation of the “cry” audible on the ‘failed canvas’, the boy can hear “above the labourers’ houses like a cry | for unheard avalanches of white cloud”. The ‘cry’ is the mute shout of history into which he feels to be as imprisoned as anyone: “but in that ship of night, locked in together, | through which, like chains, a little light might leak.” All the key elements contained in the ‘failed painting’ episode are part of the epiphany. The boy ‘dissolves’ into a ‘trance’ and in the failed painting episode the visible also does, indicating that they are the same. Similarly, key elements like ‘cloud’, ‘smoke’, ‘cry’, ‘silence’, are present in both scenes which so joined indicate the boy’s vision that is being projected onto the canvas, causing the impossibility to draw a realistic two-dimensional landscape.

In the ‘failed painting’ episode, the poem describes the young artist to ‘be’ the landscape: “The mountain’s crouching back begins to ache”. As we saw, the landscape moves outside the canvas – “lines *locking* into outlines. The visible *dissolves*”. Although “the *cloud* cannot go further”, “eyes sweat, small fires gnaw at the *edge* of the canvas”, and “a bird’s *cry* tries to pierce the thick *silence* of canvas” (197-8; italics added). We can but deduce that it is poetry that can effectively render the deepest vision which the epiphany describes in ways that figurative painting cannot.

Similarly, following passages that recount the young Walcott’s discovery of local history and the way he reconnects it to that he

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is learning in school, contain words that link the broadened understanding of the past to both the epiphany episode and to that of the ‘failed painting’. Evidently, the poem exemplifies how the new comprehensive vision is being formed through the blending and the metaphoric accretion that poetry can afford. The poetic representation of reality can include history. For instance, the boy studying history is depicted as “Tranced […] Redcoat ruminant”, so as to remind us of the ‘epiphanic trance’ and to further expand his mind’s vision in progress. Furthermore, as the student explores local history, and so its several courses and perspectives, the boy’s will to fuse and forge a veritable sense of reality is described in terms that remind us of the ‘failed painting’ episode, as here too he enters a “green furnace” as “smoke climbs” (211-12). The poem makes the connection even clearer when it employs the same word ‘translucent’ to define both the boy’s sense of history and his painter hand: “Deep in the trees a glow-worm army haunts | […] | translucent yeomanry” (215); “my hand […] shared […] the translucent soul of the fish” (201).

The ‘failed painter’ episode ends on the same ambiguous lines by which it had begun: “Nothing will show after this, nothing | except the frame which you carry in your sealed, surrendering eyes” (200). The ‘frame’ is the just formed vision, the new perspective whence from now onward reality would be looked at. The newly forged complexities have replaced the colonial visuality complex.

3 The ‘Failed Painter’ Self-Portraits

By the time several decades afterwards another dramatisation of the ‘failed painter’ appears in *The Prodigal* (2007), the ‘frame’ that Walcott developed in *Another Life* has broadened to explore its relations with the European tradition and with Afro-American and Caribbean art, through the study and use, primarily for the stage, of Watteau’s series *The Embarkation for Cythera*, the paintings of Horace Pippins, Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden’s collages (Fumagalli 2023, 138-289). At this later stage, the ‘failed painter’ self-portrait contains the scope and the knowledge gathered through this research and experimentation. They must have helped form the sense of the Caribbean as connoted by European ‘visuality complexes’ and by their ‘countervisualities’ which for centuries have shaped the epistemologies of the Atlantic world (Mirzoeff 2011). The ‘visuality complex’ comprises visual forms that are imbricated with deep-seated cultural meanings and procedures that compactedly render the sense of the real from a specific authoritarian perspective that is disciplined in the Foucauldian sense.

> Visualized techniques were central to the operations of the Atlantic world formed by plantation slavery and its ordering of reality.

> The plantation complex as a material system lasted from the seventeenth century until the late nineteenth, and affected primarily those parts of the globe known as the Atlantic triangle: the European slave-owning nations, Central and West Africa, the Caribbean and the plantation colonies of the Americas. (2011, 10)

Crucially, this highly connoted space comprises both material exploitative processes but also their interiorisation that further weighs upon the oppressed, in the ways theorised by Fanon. Mirzoeff explains, that the first European ‘visuality complex’ as developed in the Caribbean plantations consisted of three main elements: 1) “naming, categorising and defining, a process that Foucault calls ‘the nomination of the visible’”; 2) the utter separation of human beings into segregated groups that impedes alternative meanings; 3) the visual planning of space and its aestheticisation, i.e. the sense of this imposed order as correct and desirable, and as such ideally reproduced, “the aesthetic of the proper, of duty, of what is felt to be right and hence pleasing, ultimately even beautiful” (3-4).

It is this massive body of ‘visuality knowledge’ that Walcott faces and tries to change in some passages of *The Prodigal*. Here he makes use of a new version of the ‘failed painter’ figure to create new surprising pictures whereby to read the European painting tradition and European history from his new world’s perspective.

3.1 The Prodigal’s ‘Diptych’ of Rembrandt’s *Syndics of the Drapers’ Guild* and Velázquez’s *The Surrender of Breda*

In *The Prodigal* among the several paintings used to describe Walcott’s travelling experiences in Europe, where as a Nobel Prize winner, he has now become an authority, Rembrandt’s *Syndics of the Drapers’ Guild* and Velázquez’s *The Surrender of Breda* are made to form a sort of ‘diptych’. Through the two paintings the poem translates Walcott’s sense of his presence in Europe, the way he initially perceives it and the way he comes to review it by changing Europe’s ‘visuality frame’ and its notorious exclusion and diminishment of Afro- and Asian-European people.

Rembrandt’s *Syndics of the Drapers’ Guild* shows the startled faces of the guild’s executives supervising the cloth business and being interrupted by the arrival of a clearly unexpected newcomer that they all turn to look at. The bad surprise is the main subject along with the intruding newcomer who, outside of the painting, and based on the directors’ gaze, coincides with the painting’s viewers. In her acute analysis of Rembrandt’s oil and of its relation to Walcott’s ekphrastic version in *The Prodigal*, Fumagalli has explained that the newcomer must have discovered some kind of secret of which, perhaps, even

the directors are unaware. This must be their indirect involvement in the slave trade and the plantation system from which the cloth business that they are supervising derives. This removed reality suddenly emerges with the newcomer’s arrival, unsettling the scene (Fumagalli 2023, 398-407). The painting may also indirectly depict Rembrandt’s own view, along with the projection of a wish for laying it bare and bring about a change. We can imagine it as provoked by the figures that are acting in the invisible (but very material) space that joins the Atlantic world to a room in the heart of Europe. Rembrandt’s painting, therefore, challenges viewers to see the wider reality in and on which they live, as well as the painter’s own position about it.

In *The Prodigal* the Walcott-traveller has just arrived in Europe when at the formal lunch in Lousanne, most likely given in his honour, he sees the convenors as the congregation of directors in Rembrandt’s oil: “Then the old gentlemen at lunch in Lausanne | with suits of flawless cut, impeccable manners, | update of Rembrandt *Syndict of the Drapers’ Guild*” (Walcott 2007, 16). The guest imagines them as beheaded, their heads like that of St John’s the Baptist laying on the tray of their starched collars, which, as Fumagalli explains, may symbolise the announcement of an upcoming message of truth (Fumagalli 2023, 398-407). Meanwhile, in the live picture in Lousanne, the guest is straining to see, but in vain, if the marginal figure of an ancestor from the Dutch plantations appears, “greeting me | a product of his empire’s misgenation | in old Saint Martin. I could find no trace” (Walcott 2007, 16). Importantly, a master stroke at the beginning of the Lousanne episode indicates that it occurs ‘after’ Walcott arrives in Europe with a load of preconceived knowledge that has haunted him since childhood: “*Then* the old gentlemen at lunch in Lausanne”. The haunting presence and interiorisation of Europe’s ‘visuality’, both at personal and collective level, is vehicled through the reference to a popular fairy tale and a poem that feature the glacial snowy world which terrifies him: “polar rigidities that magnetized a child | these rocks bearded with icicles, crevasses | from Andersen’s “Ice Maiden”, Whittier’s “Snow-Bound,” | this empire, this infernity of ice” (14). The fairy tale and the poem seem to be used as narrative metaphors that allow us to visualise Europe’s cancellation of its Atlantic history and identity. We can see it, if we are curious enough to read, or if we remember, the fairy tale and the poem and notice how they relate to the traveller’s European journeys, including the vertigoes that Walcott shares with Andersen’s Rudy. And the fact that both Rembrandt and Velázquez’s paintings are contained in Thomas Craven’s *Treasury of Art Masterpieces* (Fumagalli 2023, 398-407), Walcott’s primary art book during his apprentice years, a conservative-traditionalist guide that excludes and discourages any interest beyond the ‘western canon’, broadens the picture rendering the sense of cancellation that the poem is addressing.

It is only several pages afterwards that Rembrandt’s painting reappears. Significantly, it does at a moment when the Walcott-traveller reflects on the way the poem is translating and merging actual and imaginative facts through a relentless grinding of references to European paintings which de facto appropriates them. The poem depicts its sweeping passage and the logic whereby its apparent defeat is ‘the feat’ of re-drawing the scenes that Walcott is experiencing. “It is only afterwards that these things are ours: | […] | Complete possession. And Europe? | Surrender it as the waves render the idea” (2007, 32-4). To some extent, the poem is saying, this pictorial writing victoriously depicts, reframes and appropriates everything that is being seen and re-presented. However, it then looks critically at its conquering enterprise and addresses it. It first limits its poetic conquest to what it can legitimately claim from historical descent, “from illegitimate or legitimate blood” (34). Then, as the lines go through an endless list of things that they are getting hold of, as a reverberating self-image, Rembrandt’s oil (the guild’s executives and the missing Caribbean-Dutch ancestor) comes to mind. And right here the poem changes it: “a young blackamoor brought in my ancestor’s head | to the orange-fleshed burghers of the Drapers’ Guild | at that luncheon in Lausanne” (33). So, finally, the sight which Walcott had hoped to see at the lunch in Lousanne and in Rembrandt’s oil does enter the picture and does materialise, if through poetry.

Still, this does not satisfy the traveller who starts brooding over a sense of vacuity that his artistic transactions and ‘sur-rendering’ technique arise. He compares it to the vanquished expression of the Dutch governor in Velázquez’s oil *The Surrender of Breda*, “the deeper truth of failure, deeper than triumph” (34). Not by chance does the poem conflate the serene expression of the surrendering governor with that of the conqueror of Breda, although it is for the Spanish victor that Velázquez’s oil is famous, for inaugurating the theme of fair play in war painting (Fumagalli 2023, 405). The poem seems to be considering that in the large picture, there is no difference between winner and loser, that there is a deeper truth that needs to be seen. What really attracts this viewer of Velázquez’s oil, and so comes to the foreground, is the battle that is still being waged at a distance. He identifies this far and apparently insignificant fight with that going on in the making of his own work, where he shares the field with Rembrandt and Velázquez. The battle is now shown as infuriating in a “fresco”, which, as I mentioned earlier, stands for the live collective effort of art, which here is depicted as pursuing justice, regardless of one’s cultural lineage: “Meanwhile, on the high corner of the fresco, look – | […] | another battle is waging its own business, | inaudible and tiny, negligible | […] | We fill the same perspective, Mantegna, Uccello, Signorelli, | in the central mass and meaning of the world” (2007, 34). In this war one is always defeated by the executor’s

intransigent gaze, present and past. “And no smile of encouragement from della Francesca” (35). The fact is that painters’ political opinion has played but a very small role on the stage of world art history. We only need to think that we are still organising art exhibitions around the presence or the portraitures of Afro-Europeans, that we still consider these as ‘special events’, where museum experts downplay the reasons why a Rembrandt may have wanted to do *A Portrait of Two African Men* at all (see Jones 2021 about a recent exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and his conversation with the museum’s head historian). Along similar lines, Velázquez’s portrait of the painter Juan de Pareja (on display at the Metopolitan Museum of Art in New York) is still considered as enshrining the exceptional story of the Spanish artist’s life-like portrait of his African-Spanish artist mate, which so intensively renders the humanness of the portrayed to reach its purpose and liberate him from bondage. However, as the exhibition’s co-curator claimed, the value of de Pareja’s paintings that the show has made a bit more known, has been questioned by experts in ways that would never happen for a white artist. Also, she pointed out, we still know too little about Afro-European artists and their actual contribution to the making of ‘European’ art (Kassam 2023).

3.2 Poems “18” and “19” of *White Egrets* (2011)

Poems “18” and “19” contained in *White Egrets* are two more portraits of the failed painter. The first poem depicts Walcott as a Dorian Gray facing the portrait which mercilessly returns his actual age. The poem intends ‘to be’ this very portrait and as such it shows the irreparably “scabrous surfaces” (2011, 51) of the two canvases that Walcott has worked on for a long time. These are ‘a landscape and a portrait’ (in all likeness representing Walcott’s entire artistic oeuvre) appearing in all their ‘ugliness’ the moment “the late afternoon light” (51) falls upon them, that is to say, as soon as the artist’s gaze looks down upon his work. But Walcott’s drama surpasses that of Dorian Gray’s picture, since the declining light shows both canvases as more than decrepit. They have reached the stage of putrefaction, a view that mirrors the painter’s paranoia: “were like some dread disease the paint had caught | […] | that shows the self for what it is” (51). The poem thoroughly revels in this revelation. Its actual subject is the accomplished way whereby the drama is performed, the way it makes us smile. It includes the implacable depiction of the painter’s self-indulgent excuse which follows his bleak ‘realisation of failure’: “At least the grief I felt was my own making, | determined to find purity in putrefaction, | still one that cracked the heart and left it aching” (51).

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In the second poem Walcott exits his studio gasping for “blue air | that has no edges”, upset by “still another failure” (52). The poem tells us that the cause of the flop was a sudden ‘hinder’ that withheld the brush from following instinct and whose imitative turn also blocked the pleasure of self-expression: “The usual bristling halt, my joy upset | by some rhetorical passage in the painting” (52). This very much resounds like the ‘hindrance’ of spontaneity and the concomitant ‘circuitous’ course that caused the young painter’s ‘failure’ in *Another Life*. The reference to Walcott’s apprentice years – “with faith that youth had once | that it would soar” (52) – sends us to think of his brush’s “circuitous instinct” proceeding “sideways” in a “classic condition of servitude” (1992, 200-1).

These self-portraits depict the ‘failed painter’’s ekphrastic work, its exhilarating self-irony, its power to move us, and its subtle poetic accomplishment. However, the second poem also points at the ‘halting tendency’ which was his art’s weak spot and which the fusion of painting and poetry turned into magnificent artworks making good use of that very ‘hindrance’.

3.3 The Pond Picture in Tiepolo’s Hound

In *Tiepolo’s Hound* this blockage is depicted in pictorial lines that translate Antillean history and its psychological effects in naturalistic terms. The pictorial lines show a river whose course, interrupted by a sand bank, turns on itself forming a pond, or a lagoon, which at times, woven in heavy rains and tossed by a strong wind, breaks onto the shore:

> At that point where a river, straining to join the sea,
> submerges itself in a sand bank, though its surface
>
> corrugates from the eddying wind, it contentedly
> nibbles the mangrove roots (this is Hunter’s place).
>
> At high tide in the rainy season they both bear one
> into the other, to share the thundering shore
>
> but now the wind-grooved lagoon, ark of the heron
> […]
> is damned by the sand bank to a circular motion
> (Walcott 2000, 174-6)

It may be that ‘the failed painter series’, as I have called the dramatic self-portraits that occasionally appear in Walcott’s work, exemplifies a poetry that blends with painting in ways that express and speak

to a collective aesthetic response to ‘European visuality’ in the extended material-historical sense of this word. The ‘hindering’ may be read as the psychological side of the ‘visuality complex’ and represent the repression of self that the plantation system exercised and handed down as a form of interiorised violence that entailed a self-imposed block to the free course of self-expression.

> Authority thus counters desire and produces a self-conscious subject who experiences both internal desire and external constraint as ‘reality. […] I take the existence of this doubled complex to be the product of history, as opposed to a transhistorical human condition, specifically that of the violence with which colonial authority enforced its claims. From the dream-world of the Haitian and French Revolutions and their imaginaries to the imperial investigation of the ‘primitive’ mind and Fanon’s deconstruction of colonial psychology, producing and exploring psychic complexes and complexity was central to the labour of visualization. Needless to say, visualization has in turn now become part of the labour of being analysed. (Mirzoeff 2011, 10)

More important, however, is the liberating externalisation of this blockage and the way it has broken new ground and opened a new horizon. As we saw in the quote above, this perspective, literally sited at the centre of *Tiepolo’s Hound*, is translated into an emblem: “(This is Hunter’s place)” (2000, 174-6). The parentheses stand for the pond’s breaching movement and “Hunter” is the realist American painter R.D. Hunter who is evoked here for his paintings of the low marshy course of the Stop River in Massachusetts. Together they figuratively render the idea of European history and its psychological impact. However, this is far from being a remissive vision. It is an icon of the poem itself, specifically, of the victorious conclusion of one of its two main plots, in which the Walcott-protagonist tries to track down the elusive and alluring white hound, across the forest of European masterpieces and their variations of the same ‘visuality complex’, from Renaissance through Neoclassical times, from Veronese to Tiepolo. The failed chase in *Tiepolo’s Hound* and the failing painter are the same: their achievement consists in questioning and shifting the constraining continuity of the European ‘visuality complex’ which has perdured well past its historical end. Both the ‘failed chase’ and the ‘failed painter’ reframe it by reading its parable in contemporary terms, so that it may definitely look like, and so result to be, a thing of the past.

To conclude this brief survey of Derek Walcott’s ekphrastic writing, it is worth noticing that his most recent poetry book, *Morning, Paramin* (2016) is fully ekphrastic, culminating a lifetime spent perfecting the combined use of poetry and painting. It features 51

paintings by renown contemporary artist Peter Doig and 51 poems by Walcott which variously read the pictures while creating their own plots and stories, all along making a transgressive use of ‘paragon’ by which traditionally ekphrastic poetry has challenged its sister art. As Fumagalli explains, here, instead, the world of Glissant’s ‘poetics of relation’ applies (Fumagalli 2023, 408-32). The book, as the title suggests (with its pun on ‘morning’ and the reference to ‘Paramin’, a place in Trinidad, which the book uses for the fun and the cherished memories its sound brings), marks a strange new beginning. It contains and irradiates with Walcott’s ‘new world’s renaissance’. In one poem, referring to his lifelong ekphrastric enterprise, he even defines himself as “some renaissance master” (2016, 101). His Antillean renaissance ‘visuality rules’ are: 1) ordinary life realism; 2) ongoing conversation with the reader-viewer; 3) imaginative narratives that combine autobiographical reminiscences and ‘descriptions’ of Doig’s paintings; 4) a minimalist vision of European history; 5) a love for the Caribbean and a gratitude for having lived there.

The closing poem relates to Doig’s *Cave Boat Bird Painting*. It is a self-portrait of Doig sitting in a boat inside a cave, wearing a thrust pink cap worn backwards covering his eyes, a big bird passing over his head – a mirror image of himself, and not the object of the painter’s gaze. The poem ties in with the idea of the artist as identified with the bird, opposite to the typical anthropocentric posture whereby the artist captures the bird’s image (sometimes, in the past, the bird was literally caught and killed, to better paint it as a still sitter). A sense of equality, of mutual *laisser-vivre* ordinariness ‘dominates’, with all the excitements that this brings, and which the poem relentlessly expresses. The poem transforms the painting’s simile – the artist is like a bird – into a realistic live metaphor. It first describes the “open life of birds” which it starts to name until, perhaps to portray the message in Doig’s painting, the namer stops short and says he has used up all of the words he knows: “(then I run out of words)” (2016, 103). It also depicts Walcott’s past flop as a ‘bird-namer’. We are clearly assisting at a last failing scene: “Before our new craze for bird-feeding, I once thought I’d | take up bird-watching in Petit Valley, in Trinidad, | but the furthest name I got to was “the fork-tailed flycatcher” (103). Then the birds ‘become’ the writers and artists that over the years have been guests at the Walcotts’: “on the balcony’s edges or on the hot concrete path | to the cottege where (did you ever stay there?) some famous | others have, Arthur Miller and, indelibly, Seamus” (103). What the poem seems to be saying is that no language can portray either art’s ineffable nature or the human forms it takes. The unquenched urge to catch “that light beyond metaphor”, whatever its achievements, can only ultimately, and even happily, fail. The good thing is that this always leads one to a new start.

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