

“JOINING BY DIVISION”. A PORTRAIT OF ANTILLEAN ART IN DEREK WALCOTT’S *TIEPOLO’S HOUND*

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Faites vos hommages,
to the hills stippled with violet
as if they had seen Pissarro
(Walcott 1986: 216).

A fresco starring famous painters’ lives and the journeys they undertake to follow their call, Derek Walcott’s partly autobiographical narrative poem *Tiepolo’s Hound* depicts the unpredictable migratory nature of art fulfilling its mission across distance, separation, and loss, while making us wonder about the place of home, origins, and tradition.

Mainly recounting the artistic growth of Caribbean-born artists Camille Pissarro and Derek Walcott, the poem is also an overall reflection on the nature and dynamics of Antillean culture and its aesthetic expression. We see its perspective grow in lines that recurrently refer to the poem-fresco in progress, springing from the submerged memory of ancestral exiles, taking shape from uncertain distant beginnings, and fulfilling itself through a radiating openness to the multifarious and contradictory turns composing its cultural spectrum, not least of all its own European legacy.

Within this Creole continuum, its prismatic perspective, its iridescent language, the poem responds to a central mythical question: what happens if in a place disfigured by centuries of colonial history, at the turning-point when its culture is rebuilding itself anew, right then, young Camille Pissarro cannot see why he should stay, the opportunity offered by the still unpainted landscapes and everyday life, and decides to leave and transplant his talent in Europe?

Though unique and gigantic, Pissarro’s life-story and art loom large in the poem exemplifying a trend, a pattern, of Caribbean culture, in which departing and loss, are not antithetical to being rooted, to staying, as if the transcontinental voyage were a remembrance of the diasporic origins of this civilization. The poem brings home Pissarro’s Caribbean vision to his own paintings (his St. Thomas in the colours of French landscapes, in the chatter of his poplars, the glaring simplicity), a spectacular display of imaginative memory at work, principal engine of Antillean art.

Keywords: Antillean Art, Isthmus, Camille Pissarro, Derek Walcott

A living fresco

Derek Walcott’s narrative poem *Tiepolo’s Hound* recounts the rise and development of Antillean art illustrating it through the life and work of Camille

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Pissarro and Walcott himself. Following their stories, we also discover the image of a culture that created itself out of forced exile and the plantation system, envisioning its own position in the world. As we read, a prismatic, fractal scenario unfolds, a many-layered dynamic perspective that originates in the early diasporic and cultural fragmentation of Antillean history projecting itself through its typical dual tendency of staying and of moving away from the native soil that has characterized Caribbean literature from its very beginning (Brathwaite 29-30). The poem's rigorous structure reflects this complex, schizophrenic motion while giving it a solid crystalline form that doesn't block off its multifarious movement: its four Books are composed of five, six, seven, eight Chapters respectively (twenty-six in all, like Walcott's paintings interspersed throughout the poem), each chapter containing four sections of various length, while the poem proceeds through alternating rhymed quatrains but halved into couplets that move in different directions—compared to climbing stairs, ploughed furrows, sea-waves, the chant coming from a village church—but remaining stable like a squared landing that allows for a comfortable journey through multiple spaces and times. This overall “anchored dispersal” recalls Édouard Glissant's definition of a core dynamic in Antillean aesthetics by which, when the network of literary echoes reaches its widest irradiation, it retracts into opaque specificity, its original, unrelatable Caribbean reality (Glissant 1997: 195-196). At its greatest openness, the vision becomes anonymous, seemingly transcending its Antillean nature, as we can see in the following lines near the poem's end:

The soul is indivisible as air.
Supposedly all things become a dream,

but we, as moving trees, must root somewhere,
and there our separation shows its seam,

in our attachment to the nurturing place
of earth, a buried string, a chattering stream

or still lagoon that holds our fading face,
that wrinkles from the egret's rising scream (160).

Although the poem's rhyme structure requires the quatrains to vary its couplets, here they redouble creating an echo effect that widens the space to be shared, because the «moving trees» that define the historical-existential dimension of the Caribbean define our globalized world too (Glissant 2020: 53-71), to which the rhyming “dream stream scream” offer a creolizing “hymn”.

Recurrently the poem calls itself a «fresco» to define both its vertiginous narrative scope featuring the migration of art over the centuries with artists at work following their age’s canon and codes, and its own impressionist technique—its images and stories evolving from indelible moments that have retained a «freshness of details» (10) and which are as freshly transposed on the wet intonaco of the poem’s lines. The “fresco” displays a syncretic view of itself in progress next to the epochal changes of art from early modernity through the twentieth century, and projects the concept that ideas are, because historical, naturally fading, the epistemic borderline of each age like the worn-out paint showing the contours of the fresco’s *giornata*—the artist’s daily work on the wet plaster. Upon this art-scape the life stories of Caribbean born and raised Camille Pissarro and Derek Walcott evolve from the early nineteenth century to the present, displaying their connection with Europe and the Caribbean. Pissarro leaves post-emancipation St Thomas and settles down in France where he becomes the main founder of Impressionism, while Walcott stays in pre-independence St Lucia. But despite the great distance and difference, their art converges on the fact that «as pupils we needed both worlds for the sight» (14), that Caribbean art means «joining by division» (12) the parts of its composite legacy. The development of their art charts a Caribbean trajectory across European art history. Pissarro’s belief in the primacy of sensation challenges the orthodoxy of European art at a seemingly favorable time when—as the poem emphasizes—science was replacing Christian iconography and principles and especially Impressionism was inspired by a new scientific approach to light and colors (Snider 2001). Walcott’s art and poetry as represented in the poem join in through a fictional journey that takes him to Venice to look for and lay bare the mechanism by which European art has continued to exercise discriminative power, regardless of its epistemic changes. Sylvia Wynter, writing within the tradition begun by intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James, has explained how European culture, while changing principles, forms, schools, and styles over the centuries, not only did maintain a racist perspective, but drastically sharpened its diminishing lens in the aftermath of Emancipation, their studies anticipating the recently reopened debate among historians on the role of the enslaved in bringing about their liberation and on the need to see the Caribbean at the core of a transatlantic pan-African dimension that tightly connects Europe and the Americas (Petley 2011). Particularly, Wynter explains how at this turning point in the history of Europe’s relationship with the Americas, the newly manumitted populations were made to embody «the Abject», the non-human, creating the existential aporia by which they had to abhor their own features and bodies (Wynter 641-643). Countering this process, the poem tells the history of the rise of Caribbean art out of cancellation and disfigurement, its perspective, style, rhythm, palette,

as well as its controversial transnational scope whose distant ends are here represented by Pissarro's and Walcott's paintings.

If we wander without getting lost while reading the poem's protagonists striding centuries of masterpieces and making their own, it is thanks to a pattern of images representing Afro-Caribbean history as the vital impulse that moves the narrative forward: "wharves and moored boats", "flame-shaped trees", "mill-like flailing arms" "running gutters". They stand for the way Antillean art irrepressibly rose from colonial stagnation, pliantly adjusted to colonial constraints adapting its African forms, and continues to inspire artists who openly forsake it. These clusters of images also exemplify the self-fashioning nature of Caribbean culture which began by inventing itself anew, by making metaphors to name itself out of the shards of ancestral worlds (Walcott 2009: 69), the greater the distance of the concepts and languages brought together, the more surprising the outcome (Glissant 2020: 13).

Woof!

Book One opens in colonial St Thomas, the Pissarros on a somnolent Sunday walk to the far end of the port, an allegory of young Pissarro's sense of being stuck and of his lack of perspective, himself the image of the migratory impulse that is a common trait of Caribbean culture and literature (Baugh 6-7). There could not be a more powerful coincidence than Danish St Thomas to represent the existential doubt raised by the ghosts of threatening ancestors (Walcott 2009: 64). «They stroll on Sundays down Dronningens Street, / passing the banks and the small island shops // quiet as drawings keeping from the heat / through Danish arches until the street stops» (3). Right where the world seems to end, the Caribbean landscape takes over, joyfully painting itself over the dim view, mocking grumpy Pissarro in his uncle's shop and the tormenting legacy question that has long been resolved:

at the blue gusting harbour, where like commas
in a shop ledger gulls tick the lined waves.

Sea-light on the cod barrels writes: *St Thomas*,
the salt-breeze brings the sound of Mission slaves

chanting deliverance from all their sins
in tidal couplets of lament and answer,

the horizon underlines their origin –
Pissarros from the ghetto of Braganza

who fled the white hoods of the Inquisition
for the bay’s whitecaps, for the folding cross

of a white herring gull over the Mission
droning its passage from Exodus (3).

Caribbean people’s origins in the passage from forced migration to bondage, the opposite of the biblical Hebrew epic, may have enabled young Pissarro to gain some understanding of the culture he grew up in. His slave-owning family had employed several servants to deal with the household’s daily chores and manage the family’s shop during the years of slavery and early emancipation, and the poem makes scant but recurring reference to this. Pissarro’s early drawings capture the tension of harsh colonial relations, his mostly Afro-Caribbean society of real (not stereotyped) people—water carriers, market vendors, women by the seaside walking in different directions stopping to chat, as if at a crossway of a decision to be made (Sensbach 159-167). This Afro-Caribbean culture that Pissarro decided to leave for good is symbolized in the poem by a black mongrel that unnervingly follows the family on their Sunday walk.

A mongrel follows them, black as his shadow,
nosing their shadows, scuttling when the bells

exult with pardon. Young Camille Pissarro
studies the schooners in their stagnant smells.

His and his starched Sephardic family
followed from a nervous distance by the hound (4).

The colonial condition of Pissarro’s and Walcott’s growing up is depicted as an «engraving», a sepulchral existence in which African people deprived of their identity agreed to convert to the imposed religion and language but retained the essence of their ancestral cultures putting them to new use (Walcott 2009: 43). The poem renders this massive self-reinvention through uplifting images of hope and possibility—“rising breeze”, “tossing trees”, “rose petals that talk”, “Renaissance art echoes”, the invigorating climate that nourished the young Walcott in the fifties, when he too was trying to become a painter and saw the desolate “wharf” that afflicted Pissarro a century before, exulting with love and loyalty for the native place: “woof!” The “black mongrel” is the poem’s central image; for the moment it is a nearly invisible dot casually dropped into the story but, as dogs typically are in European painting (Farrell), it is the icon of the artist’s feeling toward his country. This black dog’s growing-up with the unfolding poem, also has the function of moving the plot across art history by dragging

the Walcott-narrator in search of the white hound of European art's influence upon him, as well as of making us see, and even partake in, the warp and woof of Caribbean art under way, as we nose out rotten questions and try to resolve the mystery of what the white hound and the black mongrel mean.

And I, walking like him around the wharf's
barrels and schooners, felt a steady love

growing in me, plaited with the strong weaves
of a fish pot, watching the black hand move,

saw in the shadow in which it believes,
in ruined lanes, and rusted roofs above

the lanes, a language, light, and the dark lives
in sour doorways, an alighting dove. (10)

Opposite to the “black mongrel” getting bigger over the pages, is the “white hound” which also appears early in the story, when the young Walcott sees it in a painting and is staggered by «the pink slash» on its «inner thigh», and reemerges at the end when a haunted Walcott goes looking for it in Venice. Does the white hound stand for the “deep tie” that “rose” up in him on seeing European art? And is its fading away while the black mongrel grows, an image of the presence of Europe and of Africa in Antillean art?

Book One closes by taking us back to Pissarro's lack of perspective, his blindness to Caribbean life exploding with future possibilities, «Every wharf a miniature Marseilles» (20), and rather acquiring Europe's diminishing gaze that like his cruise ship «left us to empty streets and the lapping wharves / and the remembering bollards where it had moored» (20). For the narrator, the invisibility of the Caribbean in Pissarro's eyes made him absent before actual departure—«I imagine him sketching the port, becoming a painter» (21), «He studies a black mongrel's cowering lope, / how he stood, out of range, assessing his tormentor» (27). His final decision is imagined as directed by his colonized mind—«He was art's subject as much as any empire's» (29), and when he finally leaves, the ship with «its black chimneys and volcanic fires» (29) is an image of bellicose antisemitic Europe, its course prologue and epilogue of the omen coming on and on. Meanwhile, hints of the unconscious motivation that caused Pissarro's voluntary exile have been cast on previous pages, like blots of paint the frescoist will get back to. Was it too hard to face the changing Caribbean society, the bitter contradiction of his class to which he too had been confined?

the warehouse darkened, an odorous prison
were he was sentenced to the labourers’ laughter.

The synonymous endurance of an insult
came with the umber and ebony of their skin,

from a sea wind that healed by adding its salt
to their wounds, from manacle, from festering chain,
[...]

Stunned, perhaps, by their sudden manumission,
they drifted like zombies from their sugar estate.
[...]

who knew his uncle, he ignored their cries. (27-28)

Lark!

Pissarro’s development of Impressionism in France is depicted as the elaboration of his loss of St Thomas. The poem imagines him translating the Caribbean into France and the consoling Antilles following him, just as a puppy would. We see him mill about alien Paris like the newly manumitted people in St Thomas: «Dazedly he wanders» (34), «he drifts and mutters, aimlessly» (35), «as once, the slow flailing of a sugar mill» (37). Homesickness makes him find paradoxical relief at the sight of black people in paintings at the Louvre—«There are no Negroes in the pantheon / [...] but in generous frescoes he grows acquainted // with hounds and turbaned Moors at the edge of a feast» (37), then outside the museum the hallucination of being in the Caribbean returns, «an unnamed chapel, a familiar frame. And then a black dog crossed it. He was home» (38).

Epiphanic moments derived from Joyce’s *The Dead* depict his art’s new beginning as a recovery from inconsolable grief, as a rite of passage spelled by the falling snow that would bury the Antilles under his canvases.

He rose. The sky was shedding flakes like a bolster
feathering the city of his childhood, the wonder

of forgotten snow. He felt his lost soul stir
as innocence whitened and crusted the window

to a primed surface. Snow inched up the sill
with remarkable thickness and speed, until

Paris was a white canvas. Its cloud was still.
He dressed, rushed out, and walked through the miracle (40).

Pissarro will fittingly settle down to a provincial life by the «branch of the coiling Seine» (52), Caribbean culture pullulating underneath and requiring stoic opposition to continuous spurts of homesickness, which the poem renders with further echoes from *The Dead*, this time interweaving the grieving wife's memories of home with her husband's ardent desire to fulfil and impose his vision, to succeed.

But on the stairs once, paused on the landing
(as I did for the hound), he heard her soft

sobbing for her language and, not understanding
why he should share her tears, climbed to his loft.

The sun fled south. Damp soaking to his soul.
The island blazed at the back of his mind (48).

With equal force, the poem provides its own vision of the “morning” atmosphere hovering over Pissarro's Impressionism by inventing a Platonic love that Pissarro nipped in the bud, and which would become the «lark» he imagines as soaring over his elegiac canvases, image of his art's actual lack (and luck).

In that epiphanic moment that passed between them,
welding in the warmth of commingling palms,

there was fear of the passing world. [...]

Years later [...]

she soared from his poplars, she was the inaudible lark [...]

The loss of St Thomas
in the hermitage of his new home: Pontoise (51).

Leader and inspirer of the Impressionists, «the Academy's outcasts, its niggers, the Refused, the Rejected» (45), Pissarro leads a combative life against art's current dogmas, his propelling source, the poem infers, the hurricane that was shaking the plantation system across the Americas and the old world's order—his wavering colors, wriggled brushstrokes, his ordinary scenes, common people peacefully performing their daily work, his capitals' renown-stripped architecture (Erickson 2005: 232). «He paints in dialect, like an islander, / in a fresh France; [...] // A prism of broken glass flashed at the roots / of an oracular oak seized by the light» (Walcott 2009: 53-54).

At the height of enthusiasm for making the Caribbean vibrate under Pissarro's famous canvases, the frescoist-narrator also portrays memories suddenly coming afloat and mixes them up with actual Pissarro portraits of the Antilles:

he remembered the straw-hatted vendors and the mounds

of earth-crusting vegetables, and his palette’s
explosion of primal colours, the African sounds
[...]

then the market women swaying down red roads
with blazing fruit, their baskets’ colours,

mangoes, orange pawpaws, shifting their loads
in steps with the drumming windmills of Pontoise (54).

Here we have reached the farthest point of the poem’s encounter with Pissarro’s art, an existential temperate climate that a shared history made them both grow into –«moderation / of self, of fame, the art of being bored / diminishes conceit, and cherishes the plain [...] things without grandeur in their modest shine» (65). Here France and the Caribbean see each other –«its talkative aspens, in their providence / sound like the vendors on old island wharves. [...] / and now both scenes are ours» (65-66). Then, the stark reality imposes itself: «Ours was another landscape, a new people / not Oise, where a wind sweeps famous savannahs, / with farms and poplars and piercing steeple, / but cobalt bays and roads through high bananas» (70).

Pissarro’s story ends with the sad epilogue of Europe’s betrayal of its “prodigal son”, its unchanged “narrative Time”, the poem’s term for Europe’s overarching ideology, irremovably running its racist, antisemitic course. A taste for a return to tradition in Cézanne who is unable to understand his «tutor’s tropical eye» (56), «This was not impression but visible syntax» (57), the Dreyfus affair, the French-Prussian war that divided the Impressionists (Nord 121) «cut to the bone» (101), opened the view that in Europe present and future reflect the past. Always painting the weather, history’s seasons, now Pissarro’s canvases show «the dead of Verdun, / open-mouthed, coiled in the trenches–this furrow» (Walcott 2009: 78), «Blood rusting the trenches of Normandy’s pastorals» (79). As lost in the tragic fall, the poem depicts him in search of a meaning –«The slaves still practiced obeah. Was he cursed / for abandoning the island» (80), until a dreadful memory springs up that may explain his exile and the uncanny presence of the Caribbean in his work: «Then the auction bell. Slaves huddled on hot sand // and the names of his family being called out / by the ragged bellman, “Peste!” The plague / was his own skin and colour; then they were brought to the edge of a wharf, in light both clear and vague» (103-104).

Stellar dog

In Book Four the narrator finds and neutralizes the spectral force that «guards memory as a real hound» (120) even in the work of radical innovators like Pissarro. The search takes place in Venice, emblem of the way European art has projected its colonizing world picture beyond its empires' end –«My gesture occupied a painted space / in the carved orb that Saint Mark's lion grips» (116). First thing, we see Tiepolo on a gondola still dazed and subdued after the night spent in a brothel with «a beauty he had seen before / [...] stretching her hand to feed an arching hound / lap-lap, lick-lick, like the obeisant water» (118). His job as unaware compulsive devotee is to reproduce his own adoration and make it act upon like admirers by unleashing the mimetic power upon the onlooker who will become a new «powerful imprinting agent [...] without once letting the conscious mind know what is going on» (Murray 521) and one so movable to be easily positioned to maintain the status-quo. «Painting releases our benign surprise / at a coal face, while we take a white hound / for granted, but what if among the three Magis / in the rush manger on lifts a black hand?» (Walcott 2009: 122). Painters and black people are assigned a similar role within an ontological discourse at whose center is a white God that only white hands can paint following fixed rules and whose view the non-human status of African figures confirms by functionally occupying a «space of Otherness» that guarantees the society's very existence and continuation (Wynter 643).

Apparently, the search fails because the searcher is unable to distinguish between Veronese and Tiepolo's hounds and because he has become increasingly amnesic about the hound's very semblance! The reality is that his understanding of colonial power has neutralized the spectral beast and allowed Walcott to move ahead into the present, where colonialism is a thing of the past. He figured it out by studying Tiepolo's paintings with their eternal twilight over empires and their depiction of domesticated painters and Africans. In *The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra*, he can see himself prey to induced excitement –«I was the grey Moor clutching a wolfhound, / tan and excitable the dog frets at her» (Walcott 2009: 124)–and in *The Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra* he realizes that the dog and the Moor on the scene's sides are instrumental to making the royal couple stand out in the ecstatic glare–«Since every figure lent the light perfection, / that every hound had its attendant Moor / restraining it with dutiful affection» (124-125). But the most revealing picture is *Apelles Painting the Portrait of Campaspe*, where Tiepolo has made a revolutionary socio-political self-portrait depicting himself at work painting beautiful “Campaspe” along with the invisible strings that align him with an African youth standing beside him voluntarily observing his work

in progress. The brushes of “Apelles-Tiepolo” leaning toward the African youth seem to be posing a twofold question: is Tiepolo «passing the brush» inviting the African to represent himself and so change the art world? (Erickson 2009: 46-49). Or are the brushes hinting at the subject position shared by the painter and the African youth, one that has now been passed on to the artist-narrator holding this catalogue of Tiepolo’s work? «We presume from the African’s posture that I too am learning / both skill and conversion watching from the painting side» (129).

From this transhistorical perspective, Tiepolo’s and Veronese’s Venice is also Pissarro’s France. So, at this point, the frescoist returns to the moment when Pissarro blotted out Caribbean people from art history —«I was being drawn / anonymous as my own ancestor, / my Africa erased if not his France» (158)—and hear the Afro-Caribbeans readmitting themselves into the picture: «placid adornments, models of the race. / Mission-accomplished, exile-humming niggers / [...] here for your practice; but don’t leave us here [...] that leafy afternoon was left unsigned» (141-142). Their voices also define the early stage of Antillean art and it is no wonder that the previously abandoned «pup» now shows up and is readily taken good care of. «Then one noon where acacias shade the beach / I saw the parody of Tiepolo’s hound / [...] A starved pup trembling by the hard sea, / far from the backyard of the village street» (139). We will see her at the poem’s end looming large in a starlit night, her collar shining next to Orion, or Actaeon the hunter, tracing the present age and the way home.

The Antillean Isthmus’ vital touch

The star-dotted night closing the poem seems to respond to an ironic passage in Walcott’s poetic autobiography *Another Life* quoted in this essay’s epigraph, where the hallucinated Caribbean landscape’s «hills stippled with violet» look as if they «had seen Pissarro» (Walcott 1986: 216). Pissarro’s painting has now been assigned its fixed place in Antillean art which began, the poem-fresco firmly insists, with people recreating and representing themselves since their arrival from Africa, and in which Pissarro’s and Walcott’s works also feature, as clearly claimed by the portraits of the two artists as old men appearing in the poem’s final pages.

It is yet for the endemic hallucination of seeing the actual presence of Europe in the Antilles, that Pissarro’s painting is visible in the Caribbean, the two-sided, prismatic perspective native to his gaze being what makes Walcott perceive an intimation of Caribbean history vibrating in his work:

Out of the Antillean crater, every ridge
looks at both seas, both worlds: Pontoise-St Thomas
[...]

And here is where my narrative must pause,
 my couplets rest, at what remains between us,
 [...]

 but the same reflections that, from a tree's noise,
 arrested him, as he stared at them,

wavering memories. Again I lift the oars
 of this couplet, my craft resumes its theme (87).

Then the poem moves ahead into the core of its matter, the space of identity formation where Caribbean people became themselves, and portrays it by envisioning itself like a rowing boat exploring the lagoon-scape painted by the American artist R.D. Hunter, particularly the marshy surroundings of the Stop River. «At that point where a river, straining to join the sea, / submerges itself in a sand bank, though its surface / corrugates from the edging wind, it contentedly / nibbles the mangrove roots (this is Hunter's place)» (87). The forced exile into bondage is the turning point where the life of millions of individuals and of entire African cultures were prevented from running their natural course and continued under cover on an alien soil, where out of the unbearable constraints a vision of self and of one's place in the world emerged that the poem identifies with «the Antillean isthmus» itself: «When from subsiding water, the bank appears / firm as an axiom, the Antillean isthmus with draining sand bridges both hemispheres, / balancing like a scale, both images. / That middle passage, that bridge the bank provides, / is one the submerged memory must negotiate» (88).

The «Antillean isthmus» is the “scale” by which one learns to balance the burden of European history and it is also a reconceived “middle passage” that joins the Caribbean to its ancestral cultures of Europe, Africa, and Asia. In this sense, the bridging archipelago can be seen as the hand and arm that have been working at the poem-fresco «joining by division» and whose touch we can also imagine like a new *Creation of Adam* that reverses the picture in Michelangelo's famous fresco. What Walcott's “Creation of Adam” shows is the Adamic New World lighting a new spark of life that is the chance of both the Old and the New World to rethink the present away from the past.

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