“His Strokes Rhyme Couplets Now”:
The “Prismatic light” of Impressionist Poetry in Walcott’s *Tiepolo’s Hound*

Claire Brislin
Senior Essay
April, 2007
The hound’s thigh blurred the smoky dyes around it, it mixed the schools of distinct centuries, fixed in its stance it stays where I had found it, painted by both, Tiepolo, Veronese; since what is crucial was not true ascription to either hand- rather the consequence of my astonishment, which has blent this fiction to what is true without a change of tense (Tiepolo’s Hound, 133).

In these pivotal lines from Derek Walcott’s Tiepolo’s Hound, a dimly remembered hound captures the prominent themes of Walcott’s complex and provocative meditation on the relationship between poetry and painting, the reconciliation of Europe and the Caribbean, and the fleeting quality of time and memory. Walcott first sees this hound, a marginal figure in Paola Veronese’s painting Feast in the House of Levi, at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art and is arrested by the “epiphanic detail” of “a slash of light on the [hound’s] inner thigh”(TH,7-8). From here the poem diverges into two parallel narratives, one documenting Walcott’s search to rediscover this hound, and the other tracing the life of the Caribbean-born impressionist painter, Camille Pissarro. As Walcott searches for this hound, its details become increasingly obscured as time, doubt, and frustration encroach upon Walcott’s memory. This “deception of memory”(Breslin, 280) is captured in the poem’s title itself, inaccurately attributing Veronese’s work to Giovanni Tiepolo, a Venetian painter of the eighteenth century.¹

¹ Veronese was also a Venetian painter but lived about two-hundred years before Tiepolo. Considered the master of his time, he had a profound influence upon Tiepolo’s work (WebMuseum). Walcott too comments upon this in his poem writing, “The prints confirmed his debt to Veronese, /his distant master; tiringly inspired,/ he learnt from him to keep his gestures busy/ and the light clear”(TH, 125). Walcott’s deliberate conflation of the two artists certainly plays upon their common (geographical) location as well as the artistic influence that connects them.
**Feast in the House of Levi, Paolo Veronese**
Through his use of catachresis, Walcott sets the stage for his own exploration of the (in)accuracy of memory and the subjective construction of history. By creating an effect of dramatic irony (the reader knows the origins of the hound as Walcott increasingly forgets and doubts this fact), catachresis opens the doors for Walcott’s own artistic experiment. More than a careless mistake, Walcott’s mislabeling speaks to the unreliability of memory while simultaneously emphasizing the powerful influence of memory on perception or “the art of seeing” (TH, 7). The paradoxical function of memory becomes even more apparent the further Walcott journeys in search of the white hound. As the poem progresses, Walcott’s desire to locate the hound escalates, even exploding into a parenthetical moment of frustration, “the dog, the dog, where was the fucking dog?” (TH, 125), while the hound becomes increasingly transparent, “a spectral, a vision/loosened from its epoch” (TH, 129). In the lines referenced above, the “loosened” vision of the hound is present in Walcott’s isolation of the hound’s thigh as the active agent in the process of blurring. This draws attention to memory’s incapability of reconstructing an entire image. Instead of a complete hound, only the inner thigh of the hound is recalled. But memory does not only fragment images. As part of its paradoxical function, while precise images fade, memory concurrently transforms an original image into a distinctly new image, though still reminiscent of its original. While Walcott’s references to “blurring”, “smoky dyes”, and “mixing” accurately capture the fading quality of images within memory, they also suggest a blending together of distinct subjects such as the artists, Tiepolo and Veronese who, though related in style and location, are from “schools of distinct centuries.”

---

2 A deliberate error (Oxford English Dictionary).
Walcott’s conflation of Tiepolo’s and Veronese’s hounds, mediated through memory, results in the creation of a “fictional” hybrid or bastard hound with no “ascription to either hand.” But “true ascription”, as Walcott claims, is not the “crucial” aspect of his dog hunt. Instead, what is imperative for Walcott is locating “the consequence of [his] astonishment” triggered by his first encounter with the hound; namely, the elusive, alluring, and ironic quality of memory. Even though Walcott admits that his search for the hound was futile, “I have never found/ its image again”(TH, 8) Maria Fumagalli insists, “This is not important…What matters is the vision, the flashing image and, most importantly, the articulation of past, present, and future that it [the hound] generates”(Fumagalli, 83). The simultaneous articulation of past, present, and future suggests what Walcott claims “is true without a change of tense”, and, paradoxically, the only truth that can transcend time is the fiction constructed in one’s memory. Walcott will never find the hound he saw in the Met because the hound that he remembers does not exist for anyone but himself.³ By purposefully dedicating his poem to Tiepolo’s hound, Walcott privileges the personal truth of the memory-blended fiction over the literal truth of the physical painting. Though “research/ could prove the hound Tiepolo’s or Veronese’s”, Walcott’s “stubborn uncertainty” (TH, 117) prevails as he insists on creating his own truth.

Catachresis is a central strategy in Walcott’s poem, most strikingly presented in his conflation of poetry and painting. Viewing a painting, a spatial experience in which

---
³ Throughout the poem, Walcott refers to the hound as “white” and describes it “nosing a forest of hose”(TH, 8). But if one looks at Veronese’s painting, The Feast of Levi (see Figure 1), the “true” hound is actually a muted white with substantial patches of brown, and far from “nosing” through the legs of the seated guests, he is positioned in the forefront gazing back at the party from which he appears to be excluded. Though Walcott claims that he “made too much of the whiteness of the hound”(TH, 121), the hound’s whiteness certainly conveys the blurring or fading effect of memory as its precise details (its brown spots) are bleached out and disappear.
the work can be immediately viewed in its entirety, is far different than reading a poem, a temporal experience in which only after moving across and down the page of text can the entire poem be grasped. But what happens when the spatial is mapped onto the temporal, when dimensions of perception overlap? *Tiepolo’s Hound* offers a rich and provocative opportunity for examining the consequence of when poetry and painting combine, through the physical juxtaposition of text and painting as well as Walcott’s own ekphrastic poetry. Taking advantage of the expansive possibilities of ekphrasis, Walcott draws from the effects of poetic imagery and visual art to explore and challenge assumed dichotomies of margin and center, Caribbean and Europe, and poet and artist.

Ekphrasis, “the verbal representation of visual representation” (James Heffernan in Fisher, 2), engages with issues of the visual and the textual and the possibility of their successful combination. By incorporating elements of visual perception into language, ekphrasis allows for the illusion of spatiality within the temporal. While space is evoked in a poetic description of art, the representation of the visual is nonetheless presented temporally. Barbara Fischer describes ekphrasis as “dialectic movement between images and texts” and praises it as “a form of critical mediation” (Fischer, 2). Amy Golahny uses similar language of motion but specifies the movement as “a verbal passage that conjures an image in the mind of the reader” (Golahny, 12, [my emphasis]). This evocation of movement alludes to the way a reader physically and metaphorically moves through text,
as well as the verbal process of visual translation. During this passage (from visual to poet, to poetry, to reader, to conjured image of the visual), the textual medium (and thus, the poet) is given power over the process of translation while the reader is invited to participate in this process. Consequently, “ekphrasis designates the text that expresses the poet-reader-viewer’s reaction to actual or imagined works of art” and not the works of art themselves (Golahny, 13, [my emphasis]). While the works of art are significant because of the history, culture or institution they represent and enforce, ekphrasis remains the tool for the poetic-observer to convey the visual in language.

Ekphrasis offers especially relevant opportunities for the Caribbean literary tradition because of the Caribbean’s complicated colonial history. Tobias Döring describes the Caribbean as a place shaped by “linguistic shifts and cultural migrations” and argues that Caribbean poetics are “principally engaged with a rhetoric of transfer and constant change” (Döring, 3-6). As a primary destination of the slave trade and colonial exploration, the Caribbean has historically been a location of human and cultural displacement. Inhabited by native islanders, a range of Europeans, and thousands of African slaves, the Caribbean islands, geographically isolated from the rest of the world, became a place of multicultural exchange. It is no wonder that the “shifting” and “migratory” aspects of the Caribbean are central to Caribbean linguistic and artistic traditions, reflecting what Döring describes as “a history of domination” (Döring, 3).

It is in the aftermath of colonial rule, however, that the possibilities of Caribbean literature become simultaneously infinite and limited. Confronted with a need to move forward but held back by an inevitable connection and indebtedness to its colonial influence and history, Caribbean writers “acknowledge the shaping influence of
European genres and English models while… they rewrite this cultural heritage through their rhetoric” (Döring, 3). The result of this balance between acknowledgement and differention is a unique Caribbean genre at once “familiar and yet defamiliarizing” (Döring, 3). Though unarguably shaped by its colonial history, the defining characteristics of the Caribbean literary genre lie in its deviation from European influence, celebrating and emphasizing the unique Caribbean landscape and multicultural inheritance. In its geographical isolation and stunningly bright light, the Caribbean offers a unique visual framework where ekphrastic writing becomes especially compelling for Caribbean writers.

Walcott has struggled to legitimize this unique Caribbean genre throughout his entire career. From his prize winning *Collected Poems*, to his powerful epic poem, *Omeros* (a rearticulation and resituation of the Odyssey within the Caribbean), Walcott has wrestled with his own dual allegiance to the European literary tradition and his Caribbean roots. In his poem, “A Far Cry from Africa”, he exasperatedly questions, “I who am poisoned with the blood of both,/Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?/ I who have cursed/ The drunken officer of British rule, how choose/ Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?” (Walcott, *Collected Poems*, 17). Caught between two worlds, Walcott finds that a choice between the two is not only unnecessary but impossible, and the solution to reconciling his fragmented identity is to claim an entire genre founded on this inevitable struggle. Using his poetic gift, for which (he readily acknowledges) he is indebted to the legacy of the British Empire, Walcott takes a realistic look at the opportunities and oppression of colonial and post-colonial Antilles as he seeks to celebrate the underappreciated beauty of the Caribbean landscape and culture.
In *Tiepolo’s Hound*, Walcott continues this project by experimenting with the creative possibilities of ekphrasis and visual art. Through his poetry he “re-enacts the mode of the visual experience” and “offer[s] opportunities for transgressing the boundary between the two domains of the verbal and the visual”(Döring, 151). He also strives to offer an alternative reading of historical European paintings, and thus European history and culture, by situating himself within the visual tradition. Döring claims that ekphrasis “engages in the making and unmaking of semiotic power, with the word seeking to rival and replace the image”(Döring, 151). This semiotic power struggle resonates with the struggle of the post-colonial Caribbean writer to “represent, reframe and counter the aesthetic manifestation of the colonial gaze”(Döring, 159). Since ekphrasis is the linguistic version of the visual, as poet, Walcott has the power to rewrite history and give voice to the issues that lie at the margins of colonial and post-colonial expectations.

Given Walcott’s interest in ekphrasis, *Tiepolo’s Hound* is crowded with constant references to famous artists and paintings. While some of the ekphrastic moments are brief glimpses: “a medal by Holbein, a Vermeer earring, every scale/ of a walking mackeral by Bosch”(TH, 8), others “paint” a more vivid picture and offer greater occasions for Walcott’s unique voice. In his account of Tiepolo’s *Apelles Painting Campaspe*, Walcott uses the interpretive opportunity of ekphrasis to call the reader’s attention to a peripheral figure:

> An admiring African peers from the canvas’s edge

where a bare-shouldered model, Campaspe with gold hair, sees her myth evolve. The Moor silent with privilege.

If the frame is Time, with the usual saffron burning of his ceilings over which robed figures glide,
we presume from the African’s posture that I too am learning both skill and conversion watching from the painting’s side (TH, 129).

In addition to the purely aesthetic quality of this poetic description, ekphrasis also allows Walcott to interpret the painting according to his own concerns and personal perspective. Though the main figures of this painting are Campaspe (the double model), her husband Alexander, and her painter, Apelles, it is clear from Walcott’s ekphrastic account that he is mostly concerned with the presence of “the Moor silent with privilege” who “peers from the canvas’s edge.” The location of the figure spying from the periphery presents the perfect opportunity for Walcott to read himself into the painting. By associating himself with the privileged Moor, Walcott re-narrates his own process of becoming a poet by “learning skill and conversion” from his literary predecessors. The silent marginal figure is now given a voice.

*Apelles Painting Campaspe*, Giovanni Tiepolo.
Even when confronting art with more glorified subject matter, Walcott deliberately calls attention to the ordinary and minor details of the paintings, often relegated to the canvases’ margins. In fact, Walcott’s moment of epiphany, consequent journey, and the title of the poem are all sparked by the parergonal figure of the white hound in Veronese’s *Feast at the House of Levi*. When Walcott first sees this painting in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, the physical space of the museum setting plays an integral role in his perception. In the introduction to her book, *Museum Meditations*, Barbara Fischer speaks of the “peripheral vision” that relates through ekphrastic writing. The space of the museum, through its architecture, framing, organization, and categorization, presents (selected) art in a sterile, unnatural environment. When encountering art within this context, a poet’s perception and memory are vulnerable to countless distractions, inevitably resulting in an original perspective influenced by the easily overlooked peripheral details. When Walcott recalls his visit to the museum, his memory of the physical building is translated into poetry (“I remember stairs in couplets”) and the space is invested with “marble authority”(TH, 7). The museum’s authority lies in its power to dictate history by selecting and displaying specific works of art by specific artists. Like the “mobile museum”(TH, 14) of Walcott’s childhood home, museums have the tendency to disregard entire artistic traditions, shutting its marble doors to the marginal and powerless.

Just as ekphrasis has the capacity to designate alternative perspectives, framing too, perhaps more obviously, controls the location of the center and the margin. In his poetry, Walcott repeatedly uses frames to describe scenery, objects, and ideas so as to

---

5 A painting term used to describe “something subordinate or accessory to the main subject”(OED).
contextualize and give meaning to that which is framed. The selectivity of framing allows for simultaneous revelation and concealment and determines, like ekphrasis, how viewers see the world, dictating what is at the center and what is, consequently, parergonal. While the artist chooses to emphasize a selected viewpoint, he also limits what can be seen. In a central passage in the poem, the hidden enters the frame and the painter, Pissarro, and poet stand face to face:

Dusk in the islands. Gusts of swallows wheeling over Paris and the furrows of Pontoise, in couplets under a Tiepolo ceiling. He enters the window frame. His gaze is yours. Primed canvas, steaming mirror, this white page where a drawing emerges. His portrait sighs from a white fog. Pissarro in old age, as we stand doubled in each other’s eyes. (TH, 159)

In this elliptical representation, not only do the painter and poet become mirror images of one another, but there is also a blending of the drastically different landscapes of the Caribbean (the islands) and Europe. This passage seems to take place in an uncontextualized space that transcends boundaries of time and geography. The contemporary poet in the islands stands face to face with his century-older artistic predecessor in Europe. In this encounter the world is measured in both visual art and language with “swallows wheeling… in couplets” under Tiepolo’s artistic ceilings. The same animation of language prevalent in the swallows’ flight is also applied to the drawing which “emerges” onto the white page. Both modes of expression have their own autonomy, moving and appearing as they please. In these lines Walcott also boldly engages with parabola, drawing parallels between the drastically differing images of
swallows, furrows, and couplets in addition to the larger comparison between himself and Pissarro “doubled in each other’s eyes.” Like ekphrasis, parabola allows Walcott to propose a new way of seeing and representing the world. The swallows and furrows, already linguistically connected through paromoisosis, are described, ekphrastically, in terms of poetic couplets in order to call attention to how the visual transforms into the textual. Similarly, the ceiling, canvas, mirror, and page are all connected through their function as blank surfaces on which these “couplets” can be written.

When the artist (Pissarro) himself enters the frame of the window, a significant boundary between art and artist is shattered as the two merge. Now Pissarro has become a subject of his own art. This is the phenomenon of the self-portrait and it is no coincidence that the last watercolor in Tiepolo’s Hound preceding this passage is a self-portrait of Walcott himself, another deliberate affirmation of their connection. In this painting, Walcott appears sitting at his easel with paintbrush in hand, staring back at the viewer. When Walcott writes “his gaze is yours”, he emphasizes the identical position of the reader/viewer and the artist (not only in the portrait, but also as the creator of the portrait). The viewer is not looking face to face with the artist (as it appears when viewing a self-portrait), but looking face to face with the representation of the artist, ironically sharing the original artist’s perspective. The effect of this confused perspective complicates Walcott’s assignment of gaze, making “his” and “yours” intentionally ambiguous and thus challenging assumptions about how the reader-viewer sees.

This comment upon perspective relies on Pissarro “enter[ing] the window frame” and forcibly positioning himself at the center of the scene. Because frames dictate meaning and privilege, they are given authority over what and how one sees, unless one
can challenge conventional modes of seeing. In another passage reminiscent of the description of Apelles, Walcott once again locates a parergonal Moor, this time accompanied by a brown hound. In the midst of searching through a catalogue of Tiepolo’s work, Walcott stumbles upon the painting, *The Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra*, and notes,

> a Moor in a doublet and brown hound frame the scene.

> This is something I had not seen before, since every figure lent the light perfection,

> that every hound had its attendant Moor restraining it with dutiful affection”(TH, 124).

Here the Moor and hound are not only marginal figures with whom Walcott can relate, but also serve as a “frame” for the scene. This function empowers both figures, suggesting that as frames they direct the viewer’s gaze, yet simultaneously maintains their marginal status as their positioning designates Cleopatra and Antony as the aesthetic center of the painting. The most compelling aspect of their stance is the way the Moor is described “restraining [the hound] with *dutiful affection*”, suggesting connection based on mutual marginality and understanding. But the fact that the Moor must “restrain” the hound implies that there is a “danger” of the marginal forcing itself upon the center. Though the Moor and hound remain parergonal elements of this scene (even the margin-obsessed Walcott confesses that he did not at first notice them), the tension of restraint proposes that the opposition between margin and center is an opposition that cannot be permanently sustained.
Walcott use ekphrasis not only to deconstruct the dichotomy of margin and center, but also to experiment with expanding the possibilities of language. Walcott’s own artistic calling to both painting and poetry, charged by sentiment and passion, is a tension that often surfaces in his autobiographical writing. While *Tiepolo’s Hound* functions as a poetic biography of Camille Pissarro and touches upon the French Impressionist movement, it is also an autobiographical account of Walcott’s personal artistic struggles. Originally contracted to compile a book of his paintings, Walcott instead found himself writing an epic poem about a Sephardic Jewish painter and an “elusive” white hound (Fulford, 14, King). But the poem is much more than this; as Paul Breslin accurately summarizes (citing the poem’s deliberately ambiguous title), “The curious displacement of the title reveals the poem’s concern with the elusive: the vanishing flash of inspiration that haunts poets and painters; the uncertain location of “home”; the disparity between a life’s meaning and its narrative form; the deception of memory” (Breslin, 280). Through the combination of poetry and his own paintings, Walcott situates himself within both linguistic and artistic traditions, but it is the parallel he draws between himself and Camille Pissarro which serves to further problematize such situation. Somewhere during his process of gathering together selections of his own amateur paintings, Walcott’s poetry seized control and illuminated an alternative project (involving fewer original paintings and relying more heavily on ekphrastic poetry) that more accurately portrays his own relationship with visual art. But why and how Camille Pissarro is such a pivotal figure for this text/artistic project bears careful consideration.

Walcott and Pissarro’s shared Caribbean origins is the most evident connection between the two artists. In the first section of Book One, Walcott “paints” two Caribbean
scenes through words. The first is Pissarro’s St. Thomas, the second, and a century later, is Walcott’s own St. Lucia. This juxtaposition affirms Walcott’s shared origins with Pissarro and brings the question of location and topography to the forefront. Though some critics, such as Peter Erickson, suggest that the parallel Walcott makes between himself and Pissarro is forced or “excessive”, the juxtaposition of their native homes draws attention to compelling similarities between the two artists, and even their differences serve a meaningful purpose. These first two stanzas are, in effect, mirrored Caribbean landscapes “doubled in each other’s eyes” (TH, 159) just as Walcott and Pissarro will be in the poem’s fourth book.

In Pissarro’s St. Thomas, a black dog (the antithesis of the white hound and symbol of the Caribbean) stalks the artist and his uncle: “A mongrel follows them, black as its shadow” (TH, 4). This black mongrel is a complicated symbol encompassing elements of hybridity and marginality and serving as a connective fiber between Pissarro, Walcott, and their shared Caribbean “home.” “Scuttling” away “when the bells exult with pardon”, the black mongrel becomes the manifestation of the shame and alienation of Pissarro’s Jewish family in a Christian colony. The silence of the two figures “quiet as drawing” (TH, 3) interrupted by the “Christian bells” further marks their separation and explains the emptiness of Charlotte Amalie’s streets (everyone else is in church). Comparatively, Walcott’s own narrative takes place on a Sunday and opens with a black dog immediately crossing in front of the poet’s visual frame: “My wooden window frames the Sunday street/ which a black dog crosses into Woodford Square” (TH, 4). Strikingly contrary to cowering mongrel who “follow[s] (Pissarro) from a nervous distance” (TH, 4), this black dog deliberately crosses in front of Walcott’s view, actively
capturing the poet’s attention as it simultaneously enforces the connection with the previous scene. But just as the mongrel serves as a connective element, the opposing postures it assumes in Pissarro’s St. Thomas and Walcott’s St. Lucia represent the artists’ significantly different relationships with the Caribbean. While Pissarro, in his attempt to assimilate to French culture, is “determined…to erase his island” (TH, 41), (his shame of his “primitive” roots portrayed in the cowering mongrel), Walcott finds his Caribbean inheritance forcibly present and impossible to ignore.

Another corresponding element between these two Caribbean worlds is the literal repetition of the “Mission slaves’” chanting “in tidal couplets of lament and answer” (TH, 3). A century later, this chanting is repeated, not by slaves, but by a congregation of “tribal voices”: “From a stone church, tribal voices repeat/ the tidal couplets of lament and prayer” (TH, 5). Powerfully reminiscent of an enslaved past, this repetition is placed in an importantly different context of Christian worship. Though Walcott’s own African roots might imply a more intimate relationship with slavery, his account of Pissarro’s own encounter with oppression and persecution marks another shared experience (or more accurately, inherited history):

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 herring gull over the Mission droning its passages from Exodus (TH, 3).

What is important to Walcott is not race or ethnicity (though both contribute to their “outsider” status) but his and Pissarro’s shared experience of displacement and continuous search for a sense of belonging. The white hoods of Inquisition may be
replaced by whitecaps on the ocean, and the emblematic cross folded into the wings of a
gull, but both sea and bird are thus perpetually reminiscent of this oppressive past,
surrounding the island above and below. Just as the couplets of lament will never be
erased from the islanders’ songs, the escape from persecution is never fully realized by
either Pissarro or Walcott, even as they journey back to Europe searching for artistic
enlightenment. By referencing the historical Exodus of the Jewish people, Walcott claims
this event not just for Sephardic Pissarro, but for all humanity, suggesting that
displacement and alienation is a universal characteristic of the human condition.

In addition to drawing a connection between himself and Pissarro, Walcott also
uses the poem’s opening two stanzas to compare and conflate actions of writing and
painting. While Pissarro and his uncle, framed by “Danish arches”, are described strolling
“quiet as drawings”, the seagulls flying across the harbour are compared to “commas in a
shop ledger” (TH, 3). In this island scene the “sea-light” is author, naming (“writing”) the
island, St. Thomas, and the seagulls punctuate, signifying the creative, generative power
of the natural Caribbean. In the stanza’s concluding lines,

Their street of letters fades, this page of print
in the bleached light of the last century recalls
with the sharp memory of a mezzotint:
days of cane carts, the palms’ high parasols (TH, 4),

Walcott calls direct attention to the function of his text (“this page of print”) in presenting
the Caribbean landscape he has just described. The words “fades”, “bleached light”, and
“mezzotint”, however, suggest that Walcott’s poetic representation is not an accurate
account of Pissarro’s reality, but an imagined and dramatized landscape whose details
have faded in the passing century. A mezzotint is a term used primarily in painting to
describe “a shade between dark and light; a half tint” (OED). This definition reveals the oxymoron of Walcott’s description of the mezzotint’s “sharp memory”, as a mezzotint is rather “a half tint” or impression. In this deliberate contradiction Walcott likens the bleached light which obscures the original images to memory itself, made unreliable with the passage of time. Paradoxically, this unreliable memory is also “sharp”, implying that what is remembered takes precedence over, and is in some sense more true than, the forever obscured original.

Walcott’s impressionist account of Pissarro’s St. Thomas becomes further accentuated in comparison to his preceding description of St. Lucia. Though he draws the parallel between the Caribbean islands, situating the scenes on the same day of the week, using the adjectives of “silent” and “empty” to describe the towns, and repeating phrases such as “the same” and “just as it was” to describe streets, shops, streets, and houses (as if to dismiss the passage of time), the description of St. Lucia is remarkably more detailed and mobile. In fact, compared to St. Lucia, the “picture” of St. Thomas, despite the minimal movement of the two men and the dog, resembles a painting itself in its stillness. Pissarro and his uncle, “quiet as drawings,” are ghostlike in their silent stroll through the empty streets of Charlotte Amalie, and even the dog is described as indistinguishable from its own (and the men’s) shadow(s).

St. Lucia on the other hand, despite being described as “a silent city, blest with emptiness” (TH, 5), is portrayed much more vividly. Even in its silence and emptiness, the palms, the grass, the hills, and the evaporating rain, all present a more tangible reality. As the description continues it becomes more and more detailed and the scene seems to fill up with movement:
under the low hills, the sun sleeved Savannah
under elegance of grass-muffled hooves,
the cantering snort, the necks rained in: a
joy that was all smell, fresh dung; the jokes
of the Indian grooms, that civilizing
culture of horses, the fin de siecle spokes
of trotting carriages, and egrets rising”(TH, 6).

Walcott’s use of the past-tense makes this passage ambiguous in its relation to time,
which is exactly what Walcott is attempting to dismiss or elude. While this stanza begins
specifically located in Walcott’s St. Lucia, by the end of this passage the time and
location is deliberately confused and functions simultaneously as a modern-day St. Lucia
and a nineteenth century St. Thomas, allowing Walcott to blur the century between
himself and his Caribbean predecessor.

Through these mirrored opening stanzas Walcott establishes his connection with
Pissarro through their shared displacement and Caribbean birthplace as well as their
artistic passions. But their preferred artistic subjects also serve as an essential point of
overlap. Walcott emphasizes Pissarro’s interest in painting scenes of ordinary and
everyday life as a point of common ground from which to move into his privileging of
the marginal and peripheral. When he comments that Pissarro “painted the ordinary/ for
what it was, not eulogies of Pontoise”(TH, 53), he clearly distinguishes between the
capturing of a moment and an exaggeration of a moment. Pissarro’s canvases do not just
praise or eulogize the surrounding landscape but include “factories, stations…bending
smoke and the raw noise/ of industry”(TH, 53). Like Pissarro, Walcott strives to celebrate
the ordinary for its simple, honest, and natural beauty. As Walcott writes,
some critics think his work is ordinary, but the ordinary is the miracle.

Ordinary love and ordinary death, ordinary suffering, ordinary birth,

the ordinary couplets of our breath, ordinary heaven, ordinary earth”(TH, 155).

The repetition of the tri-syllabic “ordinary” and Walcott’s more controlled attention to meter give these lines a rhythmic sing-song quality distinct from the rest of the poem. The effect of this rhythmic shift serves to isolate these important lines by catching the reader’s attention and thus calling for a more careful reading of this catalogue of “ordinary”. For those who have experienced love, death, suffering, and birth, the adjective “ordinary” should prove inadequate to describe such emotive and profound life experiences. Similarly, both the natural forces of earth and supernatural qualities of heaven can hardly be reduced to “ordinary”. The seemingly oxymoronic juxtaposition of “ordinary” with these extraordinary experiences and places (even describing breathing as “couplets of breath” is by no means a usual description) emphasizes the “miracle” of these experiences while simultaneously reminding the reader that the most miraculous aspects of life are those shared by all humanity.

But the miracle goes beyond commonality of experience. Another miracle lies in an artist’s or poet’s ability to portray the ordinary aesthetically, paradoxically making the ordinary unique. As Pissarro himself once said, “Novelty lies not in the subject, but in the manner of expressing it”(Pissarro in Lloyd, 4). By capturing the elegant curl of smoke from a factory chimney or touching upon the rhythmic quality of breathing in the phrase “couplets of breath” both Pissarro and Walcott transform the ordinary into art. Their
artistic camaraderie is an essential point of connection because it suggests they have similar methods of seeing and interpreting the world and encounter similar problems of representation. Though they prefer different mediums of artistic expression, they also strive for what their “sister art” (Fischer, 2) can additionally offer, desiring the impossible benefit of both art forms.

While Walcott aims to stress the similarities between himself and Pissarro, it is important to not take this parallel too far, as their points of divergence can be equally as illuminating. Just as painting and poetry cannot be completely conflated, by the poem’s conclusion Walcott and Pissarro end up in significantly different places, geographically, artistically, and metaphorically. Underappreciated, overshadowed, and burdened with a stressful family life and life-long debt, Pissarro’s domestic and professional life was virtually opposite of what Walcott has enjoyed:

Scuttering specters—debt, fear, discontent—crouched in each corner of his stifling house…

The repetition of work preserves his reason.
Hostage to debt, his seven children, his wife’s voice,

tired of painting, calls Pointoise their just prison,
rent willows trail their hair into the Oise (TH, 82).

“Cornered” by the financial burden of his large family, Pissarro watched several of his own pupils rise to fame as he never received any substantial recognition of his own. Walcott on the other hand, recipient of the Noble Prize for Literature in 1992, is hailed across the globe as one of the greatest Caribbean writers of the twenty-first century. ⁶ Additionally, as Erickson notes “Pissarro and Walcott go their separate ways”, Pissarro

⁶ Adler and King served as my main biographical sources for Pissarro and Walcott respectively.
embarking on a “one-way journey to France” while Walcott returns to commit himself to
the Caribbean. Acknowledging these important differences, the significance of their
parallel, then, lies in how Walcott is able to use both his points of connection with
Pissarro (especially in the artistic and geographical sphere) as well as their crucial places
of difference to draw his own conclusion about how the combination of painting and
poetry offers innovative possibilities for the Caribbean artistic tradition.

Walcott uses his proclaimed connection with Pissarro as a point of entrance into
the tradition of impressionist painters. Frustrated with the strict, homogeneous, and
archaic limits of European art and the prestigious Salon’s narrow artistic scope, a group
of painters (Pissarro among them) who would later be designated the impressionists,
embarked on a project to revolutionize the artistic world with their radical and
controversial approaches to painting. George Handley’s summary of what characterizes
impressionist art provides helpful insights into their artistic approach:

> The impressionists…were happy to disrupt expectations for local and stable color and for a
> finished, transparent appearance…they found their art in the perception of light in their immediate
> environment and sought to expose the prismatic quality of light when closely observed through
> brief passing moments. This in turn meant that their art violated the painterly convention of
> focusing primarily on spatial organization and turned instead to temporality, the very medium that
> two-dimensional frozen images were supposed to be unable to capture (Handley, 224).

With their quick brush strokes and lightened palettes, the impressionists aimed at
capturing “the prismatic quality of light” in order to bring a temporal dimension to what
is traditionally regarded as a spatial art form. By “blurring, dissolving, ignoring form,
outlawing/ detail” (TH, 44), the impressionists veered from an artistic tradition that

---

7 The French Salon was the only official way for artists to premier their work and the only way that they
would ever receive critical attention or exposure to the public (which would in turn hopefully lead to the
selling of their work in addition to future private and public commissions). Acceptance into the Salon was
highly competitive and most of the impressionist painters were repeatedly rejected because of their
nontraditional painting style (www.impressionism.org).
privileged dark, heavy colors and epic subject matter. In fact, the rushed style of their painting made detail and even human figures often indistinguishable from the painting as a whole. Landscapes were no longer used as romantic backdrops but were often the central element of the painting because of the impressionists’ interest in capturing the light and quality of the natural world.

In chapter seven of *Tiepolo’s Hound*, Walcott describes the hostile response of the art world to the new impressionist paintings:

Their refusers rejected this change of vision, of deities; theories

instead of faith, geometry, not God. Their accusers saw them as shallow heretics, unorthodox painters

…they were the Academy’s outcasts, its niggers from barbarous colonies, a contentious people!” (TH, 45).

By likening painting to a religious act, Walcott poses impressionism as a pagan or heretical tradition amidst a Christian nation. The term “pagan” recalls religious practices based in nature, and is an appropriate term of comparison for an art form that privileges the natural world for the majority of its subject matter. The expression “en plein air” is used to describe the particular tendency of impressionist painters to paint outside in order to be surrounded by the natural world they were expressing and catch the fleeting impressions of light and time (www.impressionism.org). By using language that categorizes the impressionists as heretics, Walcott not only sanctifies art and artists, but emphasizes the severe break from tradition that occurred with the impressionists. This new artistic perspective that approaches the content and style of painting from a
revolutionary standpoint is clearly compelling to Walcott’s own desire to challenge the way people “see” poetry and painting, Europe and the Caribbean.

Recognizing, and attracted to, the centrality of light in Pissarro’s (and other impressionists’) work, Walcott makes light a central element of his poem, and in a similar yet reversed attempt, uses ekphrasis to capture the quality of light in his poetry in order to bring a visual or spatial element to the textual. Walcott’s aim to rediscover that “epiphanic detail” (TH, 8) of the white hound resonates with the artistic goal of impressionists who strive to capture the impressions and light of a particular setting. To have an epiphany is to “see the light”, to have a “change of vision” (TH, 45) or understanding. In Walcott’s work, it is no coincidence that the detail of the hound he longs to recall is “a slash of pink on the inner thigh” (TH, 7) which “illuminates an entire epoch” (TH, 8). Stressing his connection to the impressionists through their shared privileging of light, Walcott blurs the boundaries between poetry and painting:

In that stroke of light that catches a hound’s thigh, the paint is all that counts, no guilt, no pardon, no history, but the sense of narrative time annihilated in the devotion of the acolyte, as undeniable as instinct, the brushstrokes rhyme and page and canvas know one empire only: light (TH, 58)

The first line of this passage makes it clear that light is not just an inevitable element of nature or setting, not just a random or arbitrary occurrence, but an active, autonomous, and deliberate force that directs and influences gaze and perspective. It is the light that “catches” the hound’s thigh, arresting Walcott’s gaze and inspiring an entire journey of artistic search and self-discovery. But light is even more than this. According to Walcott,
light is the “empire” of art, be it painting or poetry. Qualities of writing are given to painting (“brushstrokes rhyme”), and it is both the page and canvas that are subjects of light. Given Walcott’s Caribbean background and investment in what it means to be a product of post-colonialism, the word “empire” is an inevitably loaded term. But when Walcott speaks of an empire of light, the social, political, and culture implications of “empire” become irrelevant and “the paint is all that counts”. With the “annihilation” of “narrative time”, Walcott pushes to isolate the purely aesthetic property of art, untainted by politics of history.

While the above is a compelling argument, by freeing art from the bonds of temporality Walcott directly contradicts his concurrent mission of using his art to rewrite history and give voice to the marginalized. Far from being afraid of such contradiction, Walcott embraces it wholly and unconditionally as an inevitable and fundamental quality of life and art. He is able to balance contradictions precisely because of his willingness to confront incongruity and use it to his own advantage. Ekphrasis becomes an especially suited tool for addressing contradiction because of the way it experiments with the combination of the visual and textual, challenging assumed perspectives and privileging appearance over reality.

Though Walcott relies primarily on ekphrasis in his poem, his inclusion of his own paintings throughout the poem further complicates his project and expands the function of ekphrasis. While Walcott’s poetry is dominated by recounts of European paintings, the actual paintings juxtaposed with this text (with the exception of two) are situated within the Caribbean. The tension between European and Caribbean artistic traditions is evident in this juxtaposition, but the question of how Walcott’s paintings
relate to the poem is less clear. Peter Erickson notes what he sees as the lack of connection between Walcott’s paintings and poetry saying, “Viewed as two different narratives, the poetic text and the visual images are interestingly out of sync” (Erickson, 225). For Erickson, the function of the paintings is not to relate directly the adjacent text, but to serve as a reminder of the Caribbean landscape to which Walcott will eventually return (Erickson, 226). Erickson’s analysis depends on two problematic assertions: that *Tiepolo’s Hound* is Walcott’s poetic struggle to choose between Europe and the Caribbean, and that the paintings in this poem are structured according to a deliberate narrative strategy. His simple construction of a Caribbean/Europe dichotomy undermines the complexities of Walcott’s struggle to come to grips with multiple identities and multiple modes of artistic expression. Furthermore, forcing Walcott’s paintings into a narrative overlooks the insights that each painting has to offer and works against Walcott’s desire to free art from the strict structure of time.

It is unnecessary to go through each painting in the poem to see how it relates to the text, but there are several paintings that particularly resonate with their corresponding text. Chapter three offers the most obvious example of an intimate relationship between text and image as two paintings of Paul Gauguin accompany Walcott’s poetic praise of him. Though both of Gauguin, the paintings are strikingly different and even composed in different mediums. The first (and technically not a painting), “Gauguin’s Studio” (TH, 16), is a colorful collage, done in pastels, of Gauguin and an entourage of his models. The second is a watercolor painting titled “Gauguin in Martinique” (TH, 20) which depicts Gauguin with a halo around his head in the midst of painting.
Gauguin’s Studio, Derek Walcott

Gauguin in Martinique, Derek Walcott.
In this chapter both the paintings and the corresponding text work together to express the importance of Gauguin in Walcott’s project. In his poetic praise Walcott writes:

the light of redemption came with Gauguin,  
our creole painter of *anses, mornes, and savannas,*  
of olive hills, immortelles. He made us seek  
what we knew and loved: the burnished skins  
of pawpaws and women, a hill in Martinique.  
Our martyr. Unique. He died for our sins.  
He, Saint Paul, saw the colour of his Muse  
as a glowing ingot, her breasts were bronze  
under the palm of a breadfruit’s fleur-de-lys,  
his red road to Damascus through our mountains (TH, 16-17).

Posed in opposition to Pissarro who, though born in the Caribbean, left for France to develop his talent under European schooling, influence, and subject matter, French-born Gauguin is granted “sainthood” for reversing this outward flow and turning his and his viewers’ gaze back to the Caribbean. The religious intensity of Walcott’s language, however, taints this gratitude with purposeful irony. Despite Gauguin’s attraction to the Caribbean aesthetic, the appointed titles of “savior” and “martyr” cannot help but conjure memories of self-righteous European colonizers who have brought the great “light” of European civilization and legacy to ignorant and “sinful” slaves. Subtle references to Gauguin’s love of women and the “bronze breasts” of his Muse further recall the sexual exploitation and abuse of Caribbean women so common in the island colonies. Paralleled
with Saint Paul, whose blinding on the road to Damascus lead to his spiritual conversion\textsuperscript{8}, Gauguin’s “red road” cuts through the mountains of the Caribbean under the shelter of breadfruit leaves with a striking resemblance to the fleur-de-lys, a symbol of French monarchy.\textsuperscript{9} A tension is apparent between “his” road and “our” mountains, suggesting that Gauguin uses the Caribbean for artistic inspiration (compared to divine revelation) while caring little for the actual people and culture. Gauguin may privilege the Caribbean as his preferred artistic subject, but the suggestion that he is also guilty of exploitation is carefully woven into Walcott’s excessive praise.

With these ironic undertones acknowledged, Gauguin remains a crucial figure for Walcott. In Gauguin’s Caribbean paintings Walcott finds subject matter that he and other islanders can relate to more readily than the foreign landscapes and subjects of European paintings (which dominated his art history education). In this text, Gauguin not only disrupts but reverses the artistic flow towards Europe by making the Caribbean the subject of his art. This shifting of perspective correlates with Walcott’s own desire to give voice to his marginalized and silenced culture. But in order to reconcile his project with the ironies of Gauguin as “redeemer”, Walcott relies on the persuasion of the visual.

The second of Walcott’s Gauguin paintings depicts a haloed Gauguin at his easel with a black woman peering over his left shoulder. In this deliberate placement of the two figures, Walcott repositions the woman, presumably one of Gauguin’s models, behind Gauguin. With her hand securely fastened to Gauguin’s left shoulder (connected to his


\textsuperscript{9} The breadfruit itself has a surprisingly symbolic history, having been transplanted from its original habitat in New Guinea to the Caribbean to serve as cheap and energizing food for the thousands of African slaves on colonial plantations (National Tropical Botanical Garden). By referencing this displaced fruit tree, Walcott intentionally or subconsciously suggests that colonial influence in the Caribbean is so encompassing that it has even become a part of the natural landscape, its very leaves reminiscent of European rule.
dominant arm), the model not only oversees her own portrayal, but guides Gauguin’s artistic arm. Markedly different from the sprawled nude model in Walcott’s first Gauguin painting, this woman asserts control over the way she is seen and depicted. Though marginalized in this frame by Gauguin’s dominant presence, she too, like Tiepolo’s parergonal Moors, can be interpreted as “learning both skill and conversion watching from the painting’s side” (TH, 129). The educational element of this overseeing is critical for Walcott’s mission because in order for him (or any Caribbean artist) to rewrite or re-narrate history, he must learn and understand the tools and strategies of the colonizers who have monopolized the documentation of history. The woman standing behind Gauguin (a double for Walcott) not only supervises her narrative, but learns the skills to produce her own. In Walcott’s self-portrait near the end of the poem, Walcott represents himself, with his own paintbrush in hand, in an almost identical posture as Gauguin, effectively symbolizing the transformation of marginalized subject to artist (TH, 154).

*Self-Portrait*, Derek Walcott.
Walcott’s paintings are more than mere “placemakers” of the Caribbean throughout his poem. They clearly cooperate with the adjacent text and at times, such as those just mentioned, are even able to narrate what Walcott’s text cannot. His decision to include visual art in his poem also correlates with his interest in bringing a spatial element to his poetry through the use of ekphrasis. While ekphrasis merely implies spatiality, Walcott’s paintings literally place the spatial into (or next to) the textual. The result of this decision gives the reader an additional role as viewer and directly affects the experience of “reading”. When the reader turns the page to a painting, the visual literally freezes one’s gaze and abolishes temporality, transforming the reader into viewer and forcing a new “art of seeing.”

The purely aesthetic quality of the included paintings is another effect that shouldn’t be overlooked. The paintings’ brilliant colors beautifully capture the unique quality of Caribbean light and transport the reader to their tropical settings. They also call attention to the way Walcott aesthetically lays out the structure of his text, particularly in the way he spaces his couplets. Biographer Bruce King gives an insightful reading of how Walcott’s couplets, like the paintings, also provide a visual aesthetic:

The couplets…might be thought of as quatrains with breathing and visual space every two lines, so that Walcott’s voice and the reader’s eye and mind can move along with the story without being cramped into tightly rhymed aa couplets or blocked into abab rhymed quatrains. Space does make a difference. The poem imitates the art of Pissarro…in providing a frame…within which there is a larger portrait of apparently spontaneous impressions of life”(King, 628-629).

Walcott expands upon the already expansive opportunities offered through ekphrasis by incorporating the visual not only in his text’s content, but in the very way the text is physically presented. His intentional layout frames each pair of couplets with white
space, simultaneously blank and brimming with creative energy. As Robert Hannan points out, this design “engages the eye and the ear in a process of reading in which Walcott’s rich poetic sounds gain significance because they travel across the blank spaces between the couplets” (Hannan, 575). This blank space is where the reader engages with both sight and hearing in order to make meaning of the couplets; it is, in effect, the space of translation. Walcott recognizes the visual element of reading and exaggerates this action through his deliberate poetic spacing. Through his presentation, ekphrastic writing and the juxtaposed paintings, Walcott comes as close as possible to mapping the spatial onto the temporal.

For Walcott, “as close as possible” is not a failure but an opportunity that always leaves room for something more. *Tiepolo’s Hound* is a poem about contradiction, confusion, and conflation; of the unreliability of memory, the sudden moment of epiphany and its immediate loss, and the privileging of the parergonal. It is about being torn between one’s love of language and one’s cultural commitment; between one’s artistic passion and one’s worldly obligations. It is about the impossibility of belonging and the eternal human condition of alienation. Walcott confronts contradiction head-on, approaching it not as a barrier but as an occasion to simultaneously give voice to multiple perspectives. Similarly, Walcott acknowledges the unreliability of memory and artistic representation, saying,

My inexact and blurred biography
is like his[Pissarro’s] painting; that is fiction’s treason,
to deny fact, alter topography
to its own map (TH, 101-102).
To be an artist is to privilege representation over reality. But it is the blank space in-between reality and representation, the space of artistic transformation, which gives art its creative freedom and infinite possibilities. The “inexact and blurred” quality of Walcott’s account is like an impressionist painting, capturing essential elements of light and movement in order to create an allusion of spatial transcendence. Using ekphrasis to similarly transcend the temporal, Walcott challenges privileged points of view, disturbs the stability of assumed dichotomies, and opens a space for a unique Caribbean artistic tradition.
Bibliography

_A Treasury of Art Masterpieces, From the Renaissance to the Present Day_. Thomas Craven, ed. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1939


