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“All that Romantic Taxidermy”: Derek Walcott’s Caribbean Bestiary

This article examines the genre of the bestiary poem in the context of Derek Walcott’s work, using the theories of the French philosopher Michel Pêcheux to explore the ways in which the related concepts of identification, counter-identification and dis-identification interact in Walcott’s poetry to complex and sometimes ambiguous effect.

In an essay on West Indian animal imagery, published in A. James Arnold’s *Monsters, Tricksters, and Sacred Cows*, Jeremy Poynting remarks that “if one surveys a wide range of Caribbean poetry in English, the truth is that there are really very few poems (certainly in comparison with English verse) that focus on animal life” (211).¹ Although this may be true up to recently, the publication of Derek Walcott’s *Tiepolo’s Hound* and his 2010 collection, *White Egrets*, have brought to the foreground the importance of animality in contemporary Antillean literature. In fact, animal images loom large in Walcott’s poetry from its inception: the strong presence of wildlife in the Caribbean, as well as the author’s fascination for Romantic poetry, Shakespeare and Biblical bestiary are an obvious adducible influence here, as early poems attest – for instance *Another Life*, “Pocomania” from *In a Green Night*, and “Goats and Monkeys” from *The Castaway*.

This essay takes a look at how animal imagery develops from Walcott’s early poems to his later collections. While Walcott’s early poetry stresses the physicality of animals, with a tendency to thematise hybridity, regression, self-loathing and sexuality through simian imagery and references to mythological creatures such as the Minotaur, his recent collections focus on other animals in a complex pastoralist manner. We will see why canine mongrelism is used to explore the notion of cultural hierarchy and how avian symbolism is given pride of place in his most recent collection to date.

A thoroughgoing inventory of Walcott’s menagerie might run the risk of tediousness. A brief summary of the secondary animal images would entail a mention of Shakespeare’s “politic worms” who make an early entrance in poems like “A Far Cry From Africa,” “Ruins of a Great House” or “Pocomania,” epitomising the poet’s death-related obsession and perhaps, in a more indirect manner, a Hamletian quest for the author’s dear father in the dust. A more life-enhancing, and yet simultaneously race-defeating equivalent of the diminutive worm in the early poems would be the tadpoles in the “Lotus Eater” section of “Tales of the Islands,” described as “Poor, black souls” (CP 13). I deal here with the most recurrent images and will therefore cite two more minor examples which bring out Walcott’s more central preoccupations.

Although it does not regularly return, the werewolf in the “Le Loupgarou” section of “Tales of the Islands” anticipates the author’s thematisation of hybridity in a tragic mode. Likewise, Shakespeare’s Elizabethan projection of immoral ruptures in the Great Chain of Being casts its shadow on the postcolonial *angst* evidenced in “A Far Cry From Africa”: “The violence of beast on beast is read / As natural law, but upright man / seeks his divinity by inflicting pain” (CP 15-7). The gorilla/superman antithesis that

1. Another partial account of Walcott’s use of animal imagery is to be found in James.

polarises the end of this poem provides a somewhat more dichotomised version of Walcott's later images of hybridity.

In discussing the simian analogy, one of the first major animal images that fuelled Walcott's early work, I would like to begin by recalling Helen Tiffin's adaptation of Michel Pêcheux's method of discourse analysis to postcolonial theory. According to Pêcheux's tri-partite scheme, the first mode of literary response is that of the colonial "object" who complies with the imposed discursive formation. The second, "counter-identificatory" strategy, characterises the "disobedient" reaction of the subject who refuses the image offered, but runs the risk of remaining "locked within the mode of thought they seek to deny" (Tiffin 39). Pêcheux defines the third mode as a "dis-identification" which includes a transformatory re-working "of the subject form and not just its abolition" (Tiffin 39). Irreducible to either one of these categories, Walcott's early poetry offers a complex dramatisation of the interaction between the three. This essay aims to show that Walcott often seems to experience difficulty in disentangling these three modes, which leads to an uncertainty of tone, point of view and moral stance. Ultimately, the intentionality of this blurring can be viewed in two ways. Jean-Paul Sartre's view of the writer as omniscient god suggests that the author always knows more about his work than anyone else can ever hope to discern. This would imply that Walcott wittingly intends to be self-contradictory and even incoherent at times. A Freudian symptomatic reading, on the other hand, would claim that Walcott's writing offers only a partly deliberate attempt to include the contradictory drives that lead to conflictive or paradoxical discourse.

Although simian imagery has been widely discussed in Walcott criticism, an outline of its centrality is indispensable for a thorough picture of the poet's use of animality, especially since it extends to incorporate Walcott's interaction with canonical texts and the entire notion of influence. It might be argued that postcolonial writers have a double load to bear when it comes to writerly forerunners: Jackson W. Bate's "burden of the past" piled onto Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence." The simplistic charge that colonial poets are "apprentice Europeans" condemned to ape Western models is one which appears to haunt West Indian writers. It has contributed to the inhibiting notion according to which postcolonial literatures are fundamentally derivative (which they generally were in colonial times), sometimes prompting an obsessive fear of inauthenticity.

Despite its challenging approach to the notion of influence, Walcott's early poetry has often been taxed with derivativeness. It has been castigated as subservient to British traditional models, while his later work has sometimes been condemned for imitating (and not measuring up to) American poets such as Lowell and Bishop. Although Robert Bensen defends Walcott's use of literary tradition "not as evidence of his subjugation to it, but of defining his distance from it," (36-7) Helen Vendler implies that Walcott's relationship to his literary antecedents reflects a slavish past (24). Calvin Bedient, another plaintiff, accuses him of wanting to speak as a sort of "self-naturalized US citizen" (Terada 70).

In the light of these comments, but not only because of them, simian analogies pepper Walcott's work, from his plays (especially *Dream on Monkey Mountain*) through his essays, to his poetry. Instead of rejecting the notion of mimicry *en bloc*, Walcott has worked his way through it in a manner Pêcheux would classify as both identificatory and dis-identificatory. Walcott grapples with the ape image and, turning it to both po-

sitive and negative account, ultimately gives the lie to the assumption that if the slave represents a failure in combat, "the ape represents the failure to transform" (Terada 78).

Walcott's agenda offers a complex counterpoint to the damning summations such writers as the Trinidadian novelist, V. S. Naipaul, tended to give in his early work. In *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul presents the Caribbean as that "obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous" (qtd in Ashcroft 90). Walcott has denounced Naipaul's "manic fury," dismissing it as a case of "the native going a step further than the master" (Atlas 40).² In an essay entitled "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry," Walcott extends Naipaul's curse to the whole "American endeavour" and attempts, if at times a little tortuously, to debunk the ape comparison, preferring other examples such as lizards, chameleons and insects whose mimicry constitutes "an act of imagination" (10). Instead of being slavishly apish, their camouflage is "endemic cunning" used "both as defense and as lure" (7-10).

The notion of imposed mimicry is one that is used by colonisers to a greater or lesser degree depending on the nation involved, but the imperialist's tendency to recreate the mother country abroad also causes native literary traditions to disappear, especially if they are exclusively oral. In the Caribbean, most indigenous traditions were wiped out by colonisation. As a result, the Caribbean literatures that did evolve before the twentieth century were for the most part modelled on European literature, hence the view that they are subservient and imitative. Despite its frequent longing for Adamic *ex nihilo* creation, Walcott's work maintains a Janus-faced fascination with the Old World and the New, which makes his approach to the notion of mimicry in his work particularly complex.

Although Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality suggests that every use of language is little more than a requote of previous linguistic discourse, the weight of previous European writers adds a potentially even greater "burden" for the postcolonial writer as he or she faces the charge of also having to borrow from the oppressor's language. If mimicry was originally an imperial tool which served, as the opening scenes of "The Star-Apple Kingdom" (*CP*) illustrate, to enforce the new Europe ideal of sameness, the counter-discursive strategies sometimes employed by Caribbean writers subvert this mirroring and imperceptively transform it from mimicry to mockery. As Homi Bhabha observes, "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (126). Accordingly, mimicry produces a "double-vision" that "is at once resemblance and menace" (127).

These notions of defense, lure and threat are added to in Walcott's poetry. The image of the ape, or early hominid, is represented in three main ways in his poems. Walcott considerably complexifies Michel Pêcheux's trimodal identificatory mechanisms by offering an extension of the Adamic figure of the poet as renewer of the Caribbean or humanity at large, thus turning the potentially derogatory image of the African as ape to positive account.

2. Walcott's latest satirical attack on Naipaul occurred during the 2008 Calabash Literary Festival in Jamaica. Walcott again used bestiary to lampoon the writer because of Naipaul's initial recourse to the mimetic ape image. The Trinidadian-Indian novelist was animalised on this occasion as "The Mongoose," an animal that was introduced to the Caribbean during the heyday of the British Raj – a clever, if uncharitable, way of emphasising what Walcott sees as Naipaul's colonial subservience.

In “North and South” (*CP*), however, the ape image ceases to be dealt with on a playfully creative level, and is given a grimly racist application. The poem offers a katabatic descent into Pêcheux’s first two modes. This being said, although the vision expounded in “North and South” is bleak, not to say apocalyptic, Walcott is nevertheless at pains to point out that these views may be the miserable and therefore slightly melodramatic workings of a feverish mind – he mentions influenza earlier in the poem (407). While it is ostensibly a poem about racism, the parallels he draws between the Holocaust and North American racism are somewhat hyperbolic and sometimes even faintly comical: a bread van screeches “like the square wheel of a swastika” (408). Waist-deep in history, the poet admits that he is prey to obsessiveness and paranoia: “The mania / of history veils the cleanest air” (408). Yet despite these self-evaluative moments, the preponderant tone of Dantean gloom and dis-ease comes to a head in the final verse. The irascible poet vents his anger on a clerk for what he perceives to be racist behaviour: “the cashier’s fingertips still wince from my hand / as if it would singe hers” (409). The burning metaphor that punctuates the poem comes to a climax here in his hand, figuratively scorched in the Nazi crematoria of his apocalyptic fears. The metaphor can also be read against the grain, as it were, to imply that the poet is probably so incandescent with ardently haggard prophecy and flu that he would frighten off any female cashier alone in her pharmacy. This symptomatic reading of the poem is enforced by the speaker’s fearful recoil four verses earlier. His macaronic riposte, “well, yes, je suis un singe,” (the French word for “ape” – *singe* – puns with the previous singeing) stands as a defensive accusation: “I am one of that tribe of frenetic or melancholy / primates who made your music for many more moons / than all the silver in the till” (409). These last lines charge the potentially debasing ape image with spirituality, pitting it against the mercantilist, Judas-like silver pieces collected by the racist betrayers of the human race.

The pronominal “you” in the above passage is ostensibly aimed at the cashier, but one cannot escape the uncomfortable implication that it also constitutes an address to a constructed persona outside the poem: namely, the reader. If this poem is a letter (as the eighth stanza implies) then it ends on a note of yours bitterly, Walcott.

“Forest of Europe,” a poem culled from the preceding collection, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, is a companion piece in both thematic and imagistic respects. The poem renders the ape image in an arguably more positive light. Like “North and South,” it ends on a simian self-caricature as Walcott imagines himself with his fellow poet, Joseph Brodsky, grunting “like primates / exchanging gutturals in this winter cave” (*CP* 378). In true Walcottian melodrama, the small confraternity of poets retreats to the kind of Thoreauvian cottage that Allen Ginsberg sometimes places, analgesically, at the end of his poems. The poets crouch and eat their poems for sustenance, invoking the “Golden Age” poet Osip Mandelstam, and thus provide an optatively regressive stay against all outward confusion.

Structurally, “Forest of Europe” arranges a historical review that plummets from the present to tsarist Russia and the Ice Age to stage a cosmic regression which, at the same time, constitutes a new beginning. Walcott’s self-image as an ape-like primitive is a partially positive figure in this poem. It posits the symbolic possibility of an evolutionary growth towards greater understanding brought about by an Adamic return to simplicity in the tradition of cultural primitivism. The last image provides a key to the poet’s frame of mind in this poem: the two poets shelter in a cottage while outside “mastodons force

their systems through the snow” (*CP* 378). The fact that the mastodon is a creature now extinct reveals the structure of Walcott’s somewhat quietistic hope. According to this logic, oppressive political regimes will eventually die out while goodness, symbolised by a poetry analogous to the quiescence of prayer, will survive and one day prevail. In this light, “What the Twilight Says” is worth quoting at length:

The noblest are those who are trapped, who have accepted the twilight.
If I see these as heroes it is because they have kept the sacred urge of actors everywhere:
to record the anguish of the race. To do this, they must return through a darkness whose
terminus is amnesia. The darkness which yawns before them is terrifying. It is the journey
back from man to ape. (*Dream* 5)

Although it is still problematically bound up with the ape image, “Forest of Europe” attempts to move past Pêcheux’s first two modes (self-hating acceptance and unqualified rejection of the demeaning stereotype) towards the third stage of transformative redescription. If it might be excessive to say that the poem adumbrates what I will later refer to as Walcott’s recent beak-stabbed pastoralism, it does move closer to Adamic erasure of history, even if the landscape is still too frost-bitten to be comfortably placed within the category of the Edenic. The Adam figure in Walcott’s poetry can be seen as a disidentificatory version of the ape, as the return to a previous form, perceived in positive terms.

Alongside the cavern ape of Walcott’s bestiary, we encounter Walcott as Minotaur pacing down the labyrinthine lines of certain early, and to a lesser extent later, poems. On the whole, the Minotaur image offers a representation of man as simultaneously subhuman and superhuman: it represents a melding of the gorilla/superman opposition of the early “A Far Cry From Africa,” and could thus be interpreted as a transformative revaluing of the debasing racist stereotype. In this case, however, the hybrid creature is problematically positioned within Pêcheux’s *angst*-free “dis-identificatory” mode.

While the Minotaur is a less prominent member of Walcott’s menagerie, it makes regular, if fleeting, appearances as the nameless monster that embodies Walcott and the Caribbean’s sometimes uneasy condition of cultural and racial heterogeneity. Although the Minotaur involves hideous self-presentation in monstrous form, it is in some ways a more ennobling image than the ape. Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison has also drawn on this monstrous hybrid in “The Mulatta and the Minotaur.” Like Pablo Picasso’s or Henry Miller’s depictions of the creature, Goodison’s is more valorised than Walcott’s. Although her Minotaur represents potential sexual violence towards women, the speaker’s overall attitude is one of fascination for this superhuman lover whose power radiates a sense of unity and intensity. The title to the poem suggests that the Minotaur is a companionate alter ego for the mulatta speaker. Although in the mythological story, the beast is the outcome of rape, it does not so much perpetuate the cycle of violence in Goodison’s poem as shed his supernatural energy about him, offering an image of plenitude which heals the mulatta’s sense of fracture: “And I was suckled of a great love or two / split not all the way asunder / and stuck together with glue” (239).³

3. Although this last image sounds like an echo of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Daddy” with its critical assessment of Ted Hughes, there is no apparent feminist critique of the Minotaur image in Goodison’s poem. Its mythological and surrealist affinities – “we dined by the Nile on almond eyes and tea” (Goodison 239) – push it towards celebration of gender aggrandisement and sexual union. By the end of the poem, the mulatta speaker does, however, affiliate herself with the Queen of Sheba in a bid to match the Minotaur’s power. Sheba is a traditional feminist icon because of her proverbial wisdom, independence and political strength. In some legends, she is depicted as having hooves instead of feet, thus

It is interesting to note that Goodison's attitude to Walcott himself is similar to her approach to the Minotaur myth. The positive valuation of the Minotaur in Goodison's poem could in part derive from the fact that Walcott was more of a mentor than a frighteningly Bloomian minotaur to Goodison when she took her first steps as a poet: Walcott encouraged Goodison to write. Paul Breslin points out that when he interviewed her she was decidedly reluctant to criticize Walcott:

But in 1993, when I tried to draw out Velma Pollard and Lorna Goodison on the question of sexism in Walcott's writing, they would have none of it. "I think Derek loves women", said Pollard; "We're so damn proud of him," said Goodison, "that you're not going to find anybody to say a word against him." (288-9)

In the light of these statements, it is tempting to view Goodison's Minotaur as a mythologised portrait of Walcott. As the following poems will illustrate, Walcott's repeated references to the Minotaur throughout the first part of his career aligned him with this myth in the Caribbean cultural arena. The Minotaur figure in Walcott's work stands at the two-forked intersection where some of his essays part ways with his poetry. While his essayistic prose champions the privileges of inbetweenness and the pride of miscegenation, his lyrics explore the more visceral and sombre undersides of the image. If his public statements portray him as the defiant custodian and legislator of New World civilisation, Walcott's poetry acknowledges the contradictory anxieties and (self-)hatreds occasioned by the colonial subaltern's self-directed Eurocentric gaze. Without necessarily foregrounding this scopic structure, the archetypal Walcottian persona unconsciously integrates this gaze so that it becomes part and parcel of his own psychological make-up. This accounts for the proliferation of *doppelgängers* and the frequent slippage of personal pronouns. Self-duplication bears a double bind for Walcott: it represents both prosperous ubiquity and psychic fracture.

The split between Walcott's position in his essays and his poetic practice is ultimately linked to his incomplete disambiguation of identification, counter-identification, and dis-identification in relation to racial stereotypes. He would like to present himself as having transcended history, leaving its bitterness behind for the timeless, transracial transnational community of poets, but his art betokens the difficulty of achieving this.

The poem "Goats and Monkeys," from Walcott's 1970 collection *The Gulf*, is particularly interesting as a bestiary poem in that its narrative stance is difficult to ascertain. On the surface, the speaker seems to present his tale in the didactic mode of traditional bestiaries. The naivety of the Desdemona figure is offered up for the reader's consideration:

Dazzled by that bull's bulk against the sun
of Cyprus, couldn't she have known
like Pasiphaë, poor girl, she'd breed horned monsters?
That like Eurydice, her flesh a flare
travelling the hellish labyrinth of his mind
his soul would swallow hers? (CP 83)

making her a female counterpart for the Minotaur. She is in any case an extremely protean figure of empowerment, if one thinks of the proliferating myths to which this historical figure has given rise over the centuries. Sheba's protean properties make her as impressive a figure as the Minotaur. So Goodison's poem can still be considered a feminist poem despite the fact that it doesn't puncture the potential macho stereotype lurking at the heart of the Minotaur. Her mulatta is thus ultimately given agency by both the myth of massive masculinity and by its queenly counterpart.

The question that makes this poem a fascinating one like Walcott's *Crusoe* poems is the difficulty in determining not so much the speaker's tone but who he is and who he is speaking for.

The epigraph telling us that "even now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe," is taken from a speech made by Iago designed to stir up Brabantio's racial and Oedipal rage. This could imply that the speaker of Walcott's poem is Desdemona's father or Iago. The problem with this is that Shakespeare's Brabantio lacks the linguistic wherewithal to speak with the eloquence displayed in the poem. From a psycholinguistic point of view, Iago is more likely to be the narrator of the poem, and yet it is difficult to imagine even him rising to such lyrical heights. The only character who could conceivably reach this degree of rhetoric is Othello himself and yet he is spoken of in the third person from a great distance: "Virgin and ape, maid and malevolent Moor, / their immortal coupling still halves our world" (CP 84).

It is tempting to read this poem as Walcott adopting Shakespeare's language and Iago's racism in an ironic register. But this double mask, cast in an ironic light, fails to account for the energy, eroticism and elation that drive the poem: "pulsing her chamber with raw musk" (CP 84). Just as Goodison eschews criticism of the macho myth of the Minotaur, Walcott seems to enter the racial stereotype of Caribbean/African bestiality (Othello is compared to a ram, an ape, a minotaur, a panther) in order to exalt its elemental and barbarous physicality.

The last verse of the poem evokes a rather racist and Iago-like spectator response to Othello's torture: "A bestial, comic agony. We harden / with mockery at this blackamoor / who turns his back on her" (CP 84). The average spectator might experience the old Aristotelian emotions of fear and pity as well as hatred for patriarchal or oppressive men, but derision is not the reaction of most. By the time we reach the clinching line of the poem, Walcott has pushed so far into racist response that the sudden about-face apparently intended to contradict any association between ethnic origin and animality fails to counterbalance what has come before. In other words, his twist ending falls flat: "this mythical, horned beast who's no more / monstrous for being black" (CP 84). Walcott is like an actor gone so far into the identificatory method that he emerges with too lame a disclaimer of what he has just written. The poem fails to cohere because it explores two contradictory perceptions, attempting to lyricise both fascination and disgust on the one hand, and defence of Negritude on the other hand. The speaker seems both enthralled by male domination, and full of pity for Desdemona, identifying with racist, rapist and murder victim alike.

The fascination for virile domination surfaces again in "Europa" (*The Fortunate Traveller*, CP), a poem which is far less violent in its overtones. It is probably unfair to suggest that Walcott complies with the mythological view of divine rape as natural and normal. The poem does, however, present inter-species coupling as consensual and mutually fulfilling:

Who ever saw her pale arms hook his horns,
her thighs clamped tight in their deep-plunging ride,
watched, in the hiss of the exhausted foam,

her white flesh constellate to phosphorus
as in salt darkness beast and woman come? (CP 418-9)

As well as being a highly lyrical zoophilic fantasy, this is also quite obviously a paean to the wonders of masculinity and more specifically African virility. As Walcott puts it in "Goats and Monkeys": "Bent to her lips, / he is Africa, a vast sidling shadow" (CP 83). In "Europa," Walcott's emphasis on Europa's whiteness implies it is an image for miscegenation, and on another level, a metaphor for the poet's own rigorous interaction with, and appropriation of, European culture.

Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* marks a progression towards a guiltlessly fluid Joycean appropriation of Homeric material. Yet while the tone of this long poem contains none of the previous poem's rancour, the shadow of the Minotaur still lurks in the backdrop. Helen, the archetypal cuckolding agent, the giver of horns in the popular image, is in part employed as a metaphor for national infidelity to traditions in a blind search for mercantile expansion. Walcott's bull is so amputated in certain parts of *Omeros* that it retains but the stigmata of its ignominy: "the horned island" (127).

Although the myth of the minotaur fades into the background in Walcott's recent work, it makes a brief reappearance in *Tiepolo's Hound*; this time the speaker identifies initially with Theseus, seeking out the haunting hound-cum-minotaur only to fuse with the doubly hybrid beast:

To History, a bellowing Minotaur
pursued and slain, following, as termites do,

these furrowing tunnels, couplets to where
this mixed obscenity made by the two

coupling worlds, a beast in the shaft
of light, trampled its filth, a beast

that was my fear, my self, my craft,
not the white elegant wolfhound at the feast. (127-8)

Again, such phrases as "my race from its foul lair" seem ironic in an equivocal way, in a manner that does not preclude identification.

Walcott's recent collections tend to foreground animal imagery. *Tiepolo's Hound* and *White Egrets* both highlight animals in their titles. Speaking of the first, Paul Breslin argues that "one might instead call it 'Tiepolo's Decoy,' for although Walcott's obsession with a depiction of a hound in a feast scene by Tiepolo (or was it Veronese?) sets the poem in motion, the painter most on his mind is Camille Pissarro" (280). Breslin does go on to point out the centrality of the dog image however.

Throughout this long poem, the speaker remains obsessed with the painted hound he half remembers seeing in a painting by Tiepolo or Veronese: it begins to stand for an unreachable ideal, a kind of ever-elusive Proustian madeleine, an epiphany that refuses to be captured. It haunts both his painting and his poetry ("over the strokes and words / of a page, or a primed canvas, there is always the shadow / that stretches its neck like a spectral hound" (50), representing a longing for the unattainable, for a lost perfection that keeps the speaker hankering after an impossible quintessence.

Alongside the hound, however, other more overtly allegorical animals begin to appear, deflecting attention from the centrality of the hound. When comparing the Im-

pressionists to those nineteenth-century painters officially sanctioned by the Salons, Walcott has recourse to a time-honoured figure in Hans Christian Andersen's bestiaries.

Although the speaker remains haunted by "that stroke of light that catches a hound's thigh," his "tropical eyes" (58 and 56 respectively) gradually turn away from the spectral hound of European cultural history to praise Caribbean locales, even though the poem as a whole shuttles back and forth between the Old World and the New, just as it has always done from Walcott's first published pieces.

The dog image is ultimately no less central than Pissarro since the pedigreeless dog, or mongrel, becomes a symbol for all that is marginal, rejected, maladjusted, ill-at-ease, deprived, a "failure". Walcott's later identification with the mongrel image reminds one of Mina Loy's tongue-in-cheek description of herself as "Anglo-Mongrel" in her poem "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose." As we are told early on though, Walcott views his work, as William Faulkner did, in terms of successful failures. This view of his work and its critical reception is again expressed in the language of bestiaries: "There is a kind of ecstasy to failure, / just as, at the heart of desire, is a core / of sweetness, the worm that whispered its lure / in white orchards. Crows with their critical caw" (*Tiepolo's Hound* 60-61).

In *Tiepolo's Hound*, the dog replaces the ape and the Minotaur images of earlier collections. Walcott's fascination with the painterly, pedigreed hound of European high culture is gradually deflected towards the mongrel hounds of his own native island. In this epiphanic realisation of local beauty, the speaker seems to direct his gaze away from the idealised realm of art – what he calls "the bourgeois sublime" (*Tiepolo's Hound* 64) when referring to Vuillard and Bonnard – to workaday reality and, by the same occasion, away from European art of the past to a commitment to a strictly Caribbean aesthetic: the dog at this particular juncture takes up its traditional symbolic function in that it represents a desire for fidelity (to one's homeland in this case). The notion of the mongrel is self-directed also, thus operating as an avatar for the poet's previous ape image, a metaphor which conveys Walcott's recurrent need for self-deprecation that is paradoxically inseparable from his simultaneous valorisation of the marginal, the unestablished, of natural beauty neither artificially selected by nor engineered by man. Unlike the ape image, however, the mongrel does not carry the notion of mimicry. Although it stands for nonconsensual, mundane beauty, popular rather than high art, a certain marginal illegitimacy ("bastardy"), the mongrel does not carry the debasing notion of cognitive inferiority. In fact, it is quite the opposite, as "thoroughbred" dogs are often overbred to the point of genetic deterioration.

Walcott's most recent collection, *White Egrets*, marks a shift away from these animals in that the egrets that take center stage remain untouched by the bathetic or the bestially marginal. The Minotaur in this collection is put in the back seat, so to speak, featuring this time as a rather harmless looking "grizzled satyr with your bristling sea urchin beard, / and a head grown almost as white as this page" ("Sicilian Suite" 21).

Citing Christine Craig's "Crow Poems" and Wordsworth McAndrew's "To a Carion Crow," critic Jeremy Poynting observes (arguably offering insufficient evidence to support this claim) that Caribbean animal images tend to be anti-Romantic: "In each of these poems, one sees a working out, in Caribbean terms, of an inversion of an ostensibly English romantic tradition" (212-3). In contrast to these rather grotesquely Ted Hughes-like bird images, however, most of the egrets in Walcott's latest collection

become the Caribbean equivalent of the perfection embodied by Tiepolo's hound. Both the hound and the egret are white, thus simplifying or simply circumventing the more tortured racial symbolism implicit in the human bull image. Whiteness in this collection is unrelated to human skin colour: it is employed in its traditional sense as a marker of luminosity and celestial beauty.

Birds figure with some frequency in Walcott's *oeuvre*: although they often carry a Romantic (and Joycean) transcendental epiphanic value, they are employed in several ways that go beyond the by now traditional view of them as upward-moving counterparts to downward-moving katabatic images.

Walcott's early reckoning with Romantic bird imagery occurs in chapter seven of *Another Life*. While his initial representation of "the stuffed dark nightingale of Keats, / bead-eyed, snow-headed eagles, / all that romantic taxidermy" (183) seems dismissive, the following lines inflect Romantic bestiary towards a positive, life-affirming valuation of the poetic past:

Those venerated, venerable objects
borne by the black hands (reflecting like mahogany)
of reverential teachers, shone the more
they were repolished by our use. (184)

This mildly mocking embracing of Romanticism's idealism is Walcott's way of establishing himself as a modern Romantic: one whose longing for the ideal is always laced with a certain irony.

Walcott's foregrounding of bird imagery is not new, as another of his early poems "The Flock," in *The Castaway*, also testifies. "Words" and "birds" are already rhymes in this early lyric: "words / settling the branched mind like migrating birds" (CP 77) begins Walcott's lifelong fascination with the Medieval myth of *liber mundi*, the New Testament ideal according to which the Word and the World are in complete symbiosis, and nature can be deciphered like a book.

The egret in Walcott's latest collection was already present in *Tiepolo's Hound*, appearing in section XIV as "a clerical egret / pecking through the dead leaves for our history" (88), and again at the end of the section as an even more authorial version of the poet himself. Here we see the egret as writerly alter ego initially standing in for backward-looking obsessive negativity, and then transmuting, or merely lifting itself out of the enslaving, murderous mud, out of the immanent, muddy entanglements of history in Joycean fashion to a transcendent airborne bird's eye view.

In *White Egrets*, the image of the beak as analogue for the pen's endeavours reappears. Although this may seem to be inspired by Seamus Heaney's famous pen/spade analogy, Walcott's image of "this pen's print across snow" (CP 77) in his 1965 poem "The Flock" actually predates Heaney's "Digging" by a year.

The beaks in *White Egrets* either write or stab, which is sometimes one and the same thing, especially when writing is indirectly equated with pain or with sudden flashes of inspiration. The birds become one of the great abiding influences in "White Egrets," the title poem, moving "this hand / with their feet's splayed fingers, their darting necks" (10). Although this autotelic image is a well-worn Walcottian trademark, it works effectively in each new context.

"White Egrets" gives another fine example of Walcott's metamorphic metaphors and their modulatory symbolism. At the poem's outset, the birds stand for beauty that

remains while the poet succumbs to "the quiet ravages of diabetes" (6). Yet they are simultaneously symbols of immortality and transience: "when you, not they, or you and they, are gone" (4). By the end of the first verse-section, the egret's beak is charged with a certain murderous quality. The word "stab," introduced in *Tiepolo's Hound*, again features as an objective correlative for the poet's doubt and inner torment: "the egret's stabbing questions and the night's answer" (6). The word "egrets" is also made to rhyme with "regrets" (7) but although the semantic rhyme works towards their association, the birds are said to inhabit that realm to which the poet aspires, sometimes unsuccessfully, in this collection: "that peace / beyond desires and beyond regrets" (7) which later also circles "above praise or blame" (8). The egret's flight is, in this sense, the opposite to the Minotaur's coupling in its relinquishment of both libido and cogitation. At this juncture in the poem, the egrets adopt the Romantic rendering of birds, and indeed this collection is increasingly pastoralist in its preoccupations – one poem is even simply titled "Pastoral." The fourth section of the poem presents the egrets in this personified bucolic light, only to give them a mythological dimension in the next few lines. At the end of the poem, the initial self-elegiac concern turns into an elegy for Joseph Brodsky, Walcott's Russian-American poet friend. The bird is freighted with ancient Egyptian properties, becoming "a sepulchral egret" (10) that carries Brodsky away. But this mortuary element is restored to its previously luminous angelic form in the last line: "they are seraphic souls, as Joseph was" (10).

A sure sign that *White Egrets* is fundamentally ornithological in its inspiration is Walcott's satirical description of a funeral. The end of "Sicilian Suite" contains an example of bestiary at its most traditionally allegorical, a kind of *Parliament of Fowls* that is also a congregation of fools. When the unsatirised beauties, the "flock of chattering girls" (20) has passed and words have cleared "the page / like a burst of sparrows over a hedge" (45), "the terror of a field with clamorous, cacophonous cawing" (68) has vanished, and the last "line of gulls has arrowed / into the widening harbour of a town with no noise" (89), transforming the egrets' initial stabbing into a harmless ornithological arrow shower, when all this has lifted from the collection, we are told that the page "goes / white again," white as an egret (89).

Walcott's aviary is larger than any Romantic poet's. There are noble, epiphanic soaring birds like the sea-swift and the *ciseau-de-mer*, but also large, awkward birds like geese and egrets that are frequently seen waddling about. It is a moot point whether the later poems display a marked tendency to evoke homelier birds. There is no decided jettisoning of the Romantic aviary as the post-Darwinian, anti-pastoral mode is regularly kept in tension with pastoralist depictions. The rendering of egrets contains these two antithetical strands since egrets in flight tend to be depicted in transcendent, aestheticising terms. They are at other times represented as coarse, earthy, agrarian creatures of the mud, picking ticks, stabbing or sitting atop the lowliest of bovine animals.

Walcott seems to have left behind the most demeaning or conflictive animal self-images such as the ape and the Minotaur. His stronger engagement with bird images bespeaks a turning towards the spiritual and the carefree, even though the egret's beak always stands as a reminder of pain. With this last qualification in mind, one might suggest that Walcott's recent bestiary is close to reaching Pêcheux's third disidentificatory mode.

Although one might say that the stabbing scriptorial egret offers an equation between writing and historical pain, it could also be linked to the medieval myth of the language of the birds, also known as Adamic language, something that Walcott has been longing for since the start of his career when he evoked the possibility of an Adamic poetics that annihilates history in "The Muse of History."

It is of course to be hoped that this will not be Walcott's last collection and yet it has the perfectly finished roundedness of a parting shot. Its arrow shower of white birds alighting on the empty page, its aspiration towards the monochrome of white on white, its transcendent move away from tormented animality to greater sky-borne freedom from anxiety (despite its occasional stabs of desire and grief) make it the apposite end-game that Walcott anticipates it to be.

Walcott's poems never attempt to create anything remotely close to a *Historia Animalium* in the line of Aristotle's account of the animal world, nor do they try to compare animal consciousness with its human counterpart at any length *à la* Ted Hughes. In describing animal habits and characteristics, Walcott rarely goes further than the beauty of what the eye can see from the middle-distance: "The elegance of those white, orange-billed egrets" (*White Egrets* 6). Even "Oddjob, a Bull Terrier" (*CP*), an elegy for a pet evoked in his early verse, soon turns the mourned-for pet into a universalist and rather anonymous meditation on loss and emotional attachment between species. The capacity to experience love and grief is extended to animals, but the dog named in the title remains little more than "what follows at your feet" (*CP* 334). His poetry runs the more limited gamut of animal depictions that range from brief zoological observation to metaphoric and symbolic use to occasionally explicit allegorical bestiary. Although Walcott is clearly a nature-centered poet, his *liber mundi* focuses on animals that allow the poet to decipher not so much God's plan as his own embattled consciousness and the history of the Caribbean.

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