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“Not walled facts, their essence”: Derek Walcott’s *Tiepolo’s Hound* and Camille Pissarro

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Abstract

Life-writing — a genre which goes beyond traditional biography, includes both fact and faction, and is concerned with either entire lives or days-in-the-lives of individuals, communities, objects, or institutions — has always played an important role in Derek Walcott’s work, from *Another Life* (1973),Walcott’s autobiography in verse, to his last play *O Starry Starry Night* (2014), where he re-imagines Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh’s (often tempestuous) cohabitation in the so-called “Yellow House” in 1888 Arles. In *Tiepolo’s Hound* (2000), Walcott’s life rhymes with that of the Impressionist painter Jacob Camille Pissarro, who was born in the Caribbean island of St Thomas in 1830. In this work, biographical and autobiographical impulses, fact and fiction, are productively combined, as “creation” (what “might have happened”) shapes Walcott’s life-writing as much as “recreation” (what “actually” happened). Walcott’s Pissarro is an individual immersed in a set of historical networks but also a figure at the centre of a web of imagined relations which illuminate the predicament of present and past artists in the Caribbean region and the ways in which they articulate their vision vis-à-vis the

metropolitan centre, their relationship with their social and natural environment, and their individual and collective identity. *Tiepolo's Hound* is enriched by the inclusion of twenty-six of Walcott's own paintings which engage in conversation with the poet's words and add complexity to his meditation on the nature and purpose of (re)writing and (re)creating lives. Extending the catholicity of life-writing to animals, in this case dogs and, in particular, mongrels, *Tiepolo's Hound* also entails a careful, if counterintuitive, evaluation of anonymity.

Keywords

Derek Walcott; *Tiepolo's Hound*; Camille Pissarro; painter; life-writing; fact and fiction

In a 2005 interview, Derek Walcott explained that his 2000 poem *Tiepolo's Hound* "is about Pissarro, too, principally about Pissarro, almost" (Handley, 2005: 104). The tentativeness of this statement is intriguing as it locates the Impressionist painter Jacob Camille Pissarro simultaneously at the centre but also at the edge of the poem which, in its title, refers to another artist, namely the Venetian Gianbattista Tiepolo. Walcott's words also identify the poem as a sort of biography or, rather, as what Virginia Woolf has called "life-writing" (1985/1940: 80), a genre that goes beyond biography and, according to the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing (n.d.: n.p.), "encompasses everything from the complete life to the day-in-the-life, from the fictional to the factional. It

embraces the lives of objects and institutions as well as the lives of individuals, families and groups".

Postcolonial studies and life writing are of course deeply interconnected: both investigate the relation between identity and agency, memory and history, individuality and collectivity, often sharing the need to revisit and contest (colonial) discursive practices in order to configure new possibilities. Life writing also played a major part in decolonization, foregrounding the assertion of previously marginalized and muted subjectivities embedded in broader narratives of historical, social, and political change. It is not surprising therefore that life-writing always had an important role in Derek Walcott's work, from *Another Life* (2009/1973) — Walcott's autobiography in verse — to his last play *O Starry Starry Night* (2014), where he re-imagines Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh's (often tempestuous) cohabitation in the so-called "Yellow House" in 1888 Arles whilst bringing to the fore the customarily overlooked impact of Gauguin's 1887 journey to the then French colony of Martinique. Walcott's *Tiepolo's Hound*, for its part, is a complex poem that includes biography, autobiography and collective biography, and, in its hardback version, twenty-six of Walcott's own paintings. I will argue, however, that *Tiepolo's Hound* also constitutes a meditation on the nature and purpose of (re)writing and (re)creating lives which extends the catholicity of life-writing also to animals, in this case dogs and, in particular, mongrels, and entails a careful, if counterintuitive, evaluation of anonymity.

Life-writing as anatomy of loss and belonging

Walcott's poem begins with a focus on the Impressionist artist as it describes the Pissarro family walking along Dronningens Street in Charlotte Amalie, the capital of St Thomas, one Sunday afternoon of the late 1840s–early 1850s. The young Pissarro, who had spent six years in France in order to study, had returned to St Thomas in 1847; he was going to leave again in 1852, this time forever. The Pissarros depicted by Walcott are followed by a black dog who, like the poet biographer, "nos[es] their shadows […] from a nervous distance", trying to piece together, with the (sensory) data at his disposal, who they really are (Walcott, 2000: 4). Seemingly following the linear chronology of the cradle-to-grave biographies, Book One of *Tiepolo's Hound* explains that the Pissarros were Sephardic Jews (originally from the ghetto of the Portuguese city of Braganza) who arrived in St Thomas to flee the Inquisition. As "the horizon underlines their origins", we are told that, together with "the bank and the small island shops" of Charlotte Amalie, they form an ensemble which is as "quiet as drawings" (Walcott, 2000: 3–4). This observation introduces us to one of Walcott's points of interest in Pissarro's life, namely his early drawings of St Thomas, its people, its landscapes, and seascapes.[1]

Zooming in on the young Pissarro, the poem presents him as someone who carefully "studies the schooners" in the busy free port of St Thomas's capital (Walcott,

2000: 4). However, far from being concerned with the mercantile value of their cargo — which would have been the main preoccupation of his business-oriented family — the young Pissarro studied the schooners as subjects for his own artistic work. In fact, unlike the Danish artist Fritz Melbye who (like his brothers Anton and Vilhelm) painted marines and with whom Pissarro worked as a young man in St Thomas and Venezuela, Pissarro preferred to paint ships in harbour, as testified, for example, by the collection of his drawings at Olana, the former home of the Hudson River School painter Frederic Church.[2] Book One of *Tiepolo's Hound* also provides readers with more details on Pissarro's family and genealogy: we are told that Joseph Pissarro, his grandfather, was born in Bordeaux in 1799, where the family had escaped from Braganza. After marrying Anne Félicité Petit, Joseph moved to St Thomas with his wife and Anne's brother where they established an import-export business (Walcott, 2000: 21–22).

Walcott's familiarity with the basic facts of Pissarro's life as they are set out in the painter's numerous biographies and the poet's acquaintance with the genre's traditional conventions are evident throughout the poem, substantial sections of which are in fact devoted to historical events and well-documented moments of the painter's life, such as his involvement with the *Salon des refusés*, the *Affaire Dreyfus*, the death of his daughter Jeanne, the Franco-Prussian War, or Pissarro's collaboration with Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin. Walcott's life-writing, however, also relies on invention and creation: he openly confesses that in writing Pissarro's life in verse he "had pursued

a melody of error” with “Memory changing to Imagination” and “Reason into Rhyme” (Walcott, 2000: 134).

In Book One, chapter iv, for example, Walcott lays bare the device when he begins a description of Pissarro at work in Charlotte Amalie with the words “I imagine him” and develops a fictional dialogue between the young and ambitious Pissarro and his ancestors who, frowning from their portraits, urge him to “follow the business, not turn into a painter”, advise him to flourish in St Thomas where “business is good” but, at the same time, never to forget the old world (Walcott, 2000: 21–22). Walcott’s Pissarro, in fact, often appears torn between two homes and two worlds as the poem/biography becomes an anatomy of loss and belonging: in Book Two, chapter viii, Walcott describes a fleeting romantic encounter between Pissarro and the waitress of a Parisian café where the impoverished artist finds occasional refuge. Walcott admits to having imagined this *affaire* (“I painted this fiction”: 50) and then explains his choice with the need to find a personification for the “medieval *memento mori*”, or the shadow of “a skull and a pierced heart” which, the poet argues, is always lurking behind “the strokes and words || of a page, or a primed canvas” (Walcott, 2000: 50).

In Walcott’s poem, Pissarro quickly tires of this promiscuous young woman. Nevertheless, we are told, even years later, she continues to haunt the painter: “she soared from his poplars, she was the inaudible lark || lost in a canvas cloud” (Walcott, 2000: 51). The excitement produced by her absence/presence and predicated on the

alternation of possession and dispossession, loss and claim, provides Walcott's Pissarro with a key to make sense of his multiple "exiles", namely, his decision to leave St Thomas and the forced migration of his ancestors from Portugal to France, and then from Europe to the New World. Ultimately, in fact, it is as he hears the young woman's voice "carried by a swallow" in the "dark" French sky, that an excited and nostalgic Pissarro learns how to relate to Paris and its suburbs as he realizes that "[t]his [new] landscape was | to be looked at tearfully […] || […] The loss of St. Thomas | shone in the hermitage of his new home: *Pontoise*" (Walcott, 2000: 51). Two opposite forces, dispossession and possession or dispossession and *re*possession, create a compelling tension in this couplet poised between rhyme and reason: if, following reason, St Thomas resonates with "loss" and (eye)rhymes with "was" (the simple past tense signposting the fact that after 1852 Pissarro never returned to his native island), St Thomas still reverberates with Pontoise, as the poem pursues what can be called a compelling "melody of error" that reveals an alternative truth and an arresting continuity between past and present.

"There is no such thing as an objective biography"

Walcott's insistence on Pissarro's attachment to his native island has been criticized by some as exaggerated and unpersuasive while others have argued that his early years in the Caribbean had a huge impact on his art and life. According to Peter Erickson (2005:

230–31), for example, Walcott's insistence on the influence of the Caribbean on Pissarro is both unconvincing and wishful while Richard Brettel (1996: 14, 21–60) argues that Pissarro's paintings of the ports of Le Havre, Rouen, and Dieppe, his market scenes of Pontoise and Gisors, his genre studies of women with agricultural produce, his landscapes portraying human presences and experience all have precedents in his paintings of St Thomas. Kathleen Adler (1978: 13) also insists that when Pissarro was at school in France, he would constantly be drawing scenes from St Thomas. Walcott's decision to give St Thomas centre stage reveals that, when he set out to recreate Pissarro's life, he must have realized and, indeed, gladly accepted, that, as Hermione Lee (1997: 3) has blatantly put it in her opening pages of Woolf's biography, "there is no such thing as an objective biography". Furthermore, Walcott's scepticism for what Woolf herself (1928: 46) has called, derisively, "the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth" also appears to lurk behind *Tiepolo's Hound* where, experimenting with truth, as Gandhi did in his autobiography, Walcott openly admits that he "shifted" Pissarro's "biography as he shifted houses in his landscapes" because his main preoccupation was not with "walled facts" but "their essence" (Walcott, 2000: 70).

Arguably, the main features (or "essence") of "Pissarro, too, principally […] Pissarro, almost" surfacing in this portrait of the artist as a young (and old) man also capture the main lineaments of Walcott himself but, more broadly, those of other

Caribbean artists and writers as well. *Essentially*, in fact, if Walcott's Pissarro is immersed in a set of recreated historical networks, he is also engaged in complex imagined relations which resonate with Walcott's own life, his aesthetic choices and his political concerns. Walcott, who was also a painter, establishes a strong connection with Pissarro at various points in the poem: for example, we are told that the St Lucian artist too walked "around the wharf's | barrels and schooners" meticulously examining his surrounding with a painter's eye (Walcott, 2000: 10). The poet might be referring to the very wharfs of Pissarro's island as, in the late 1970s, Walcott spent time in St Thomas and St Croix which, by then, had become part of the US Virgin Islands; he also became Distinguished Visiting Professor at the College of the Virgin Islands and many of his plays were performed there. Moreover, as memory changes into imagination and reason to rhyme, Walcott seems to replicate Pissarro's and the Impressionists' daring decision to grant themselves the "privilege | of blurring […] [and] dissolving" (Walcott, 2000: 44) by experimenting with the exact rules of scansion of design and the urge of painting with colours, and his version of what "objectively" happened to the painter appears alongside, blurs with, and is dissolved by what the poet imagines might have happened.

The "affliction" and "benediction of light": Writing Caribbean lives

In terms of what actually happened, Pissarro's birth in the Caribbean island of St Thomas was obviously a major point of attraction for Walcott but, from the very first

book of the poem we are presented with a restless young man growing impatient with drawing his island and its people and who begins to long to return to the Paris where he had studied as a youth (between 1841 and 1847) and the Europe his ancestors had left behind. Walcott imagines how Pissarro's love for the new world and what it could offer him "in faith, in form, in feature | in blaze and shadow, in tints beneath black skin" was soon confronted by "necessity" and the appeal of a metropolitan centre where one had the opportunity to follow a career (Walcott, 2000: 23, 24). In other words, Walcott (2000: 29) argues, Pissarro had no real choice: he was, ultimately "Art's subject" and, as such, he must have been affected by "the same crisis" experienced by Walcott and "every island artist" whose love for the Caribbean, "despite the wide benediction || of light", soon turns into "affliction" (Walcott, 2000: 24). As the poem presents us with a colonial artist longing for the metropolitan centre in order to learn how to use and build on his talents, the line between biography, collective biography, and autobiography becomes increasingly blurred. Walcott, who refused to relocate permanently outside the Caribbean and always identified the archipelago — and, in particular, St Lucia and Trinidad — as his source of inspiration, has often criticized the lack of opportunity that the Caribbean offered to writers and artists of his generation. In his autobiography in verse, *Another Life* (Walcott 2009/1973: 52), Walcott explains that as a teenager he swore allegiance to his island and to "all of its sunken, leaf-choked ravines, | every neglected, self-pitying inlet". Yet, *Another Life* was written while Walcott's life was

increasingly becoming that of a traveller who had to leave the Caribbean regularly in order to be able to work. In a late 1970s interview he explained this condition in these terms: “one cannot make a living as an artist [in the Caribbean], yet, one is aware of the vitality that comes from living in certain root areas” (Ciccarelli, 1996/1979: 39).

Thirty years later, in the same 2005 interview where he discusses *Tiepolo’s Hound* as a poem “about Pissarro, too, principally about Pissarro, almost”, Walcott welcomed the fact that things appeared to be changing: “there is another generation of Caribbean writer and artist now”, he adds, “who feel that they can be where they are from” (Handley, 2005: 104). “There are practicalities”, he admits, “like you have to get published, you have to be in a gallery” but, he continues, some of the most respected artists and writers have often gone through “hell” (Handley, 2005: 104). Significantly, he refers to Pissarro as a case in point. As if to encourage and support the new generations, in *Tiepolo’s Hound*, Walcott seems to recreate Pissarro’s difficult life in France in order to debunk the myth of the metropolitan centre as an artist/writer’s Eden. Pissarro’s name, we are told, is “*hidden* in the word Paris” (Walcott, 2000: 36; my italics): the choice of the word “hidden” can be taken to indicate that, before emerging as one of the most revered and celebrated “French” artists, Pissarro lived most of his life in precarious financial conditions, was not granted the fame or recognition he deserved but felt alienated and marginalized as a dissident artist. Walcott (2000: 45) provocatively calls him and his fellow “*refusés*” the “Academy’s outcasts, its niggers |

from barbarous colonies”. As a matter of fact, Walcott (2000: 34), making his own psychological conjectures, insists that as an “island boy” Pissarro felt overwhelmed and “demean[ed]” by museums like the Louvre.

“The weight of history’s shadow” and the poetry of “what might have happened”

Museums and art books feature (repeatedly) in Walcott’s work and are often approached with a mixture of excitement and diffidence: Book Two of *Tiepolo’s Hound*, for example, describes Walcott’s encounters with the Phaidon series of artbooks as the opening of the gates of an “empire” which humbled talented “applicants” who, like him and Pissarro, came “from its provinces and islands” (Walcott, 2000: 57). At the same time, however, Walcott praises these marginalized artists because, despite the tangible risk of being crushed by what he calls “the weight of history’s shadow” (Walcott, 2000: 36), they were creative enough to absorb the lesson of the masters and to develop and establish their own aesthetic. According to Walcott (2000: 53), in fact, Pissarro “paints in dialect”: “you catch an accent in [his] leaves”. Walcott, moreover, also insists that Pissarro’s surname contained an “oracular secret […] that enclosed || [the] city as his very own” while his first name, “Camille”, could be heard in the sounds of “twigs on the tremulous Seine” (Walcott, 2000: 46, 36). In other words, the island boy from barbarous colonies is recast as a constitutive element of what Paris has come to represent as the cradle of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism — the “Caribbean”

Pissarro, after all, was the only artist who, from 1874 to 1886, exhibited his paintings at all eight Impressionist exhibitions. Writing Pissarro's life, therefore, Walcott complicates the notion of "centre" and its relation to the "periphery", and questions received accounts of who is entitled to claim as his or her own both what the so-called "centre" has to offer and what it produces while rethinking the very basis of this claim (for more on this see Fumagalli, 2009: 105–34).

As we have seen, Pissarro's birth in the Caribbean, his hardship in Paris, and the hostility of the Academy are amongst the many facts of the painter's life that Walcott utilizes in his experimentation with the truth and with "what actually happened" to the nineteenth-century master. Yet, Walcott admits that he was equally intrigued by "what might have happened" had the painter stayed in the Caribbean. Walcott was not interested in producing an alternative fictional biography of a Pissarro who never left St Thomas but argued that, had the painter stayed, he "inevitably" would have produced "masterpieces […] of the Caribbean landscape which [Caribbean people] would have been eager to claim as something belonging to [them]. And", Walcott wondered, "what might [these masterpieces] have looked like if they were painted in the Caribbean?" (Handley, 2005: 104). According to the acclaimed biographer Michael Holroyd, writing about writers means offering one's subject "the opportunity to write one more book, posthumously […] and in collaboration with you" (Cohen, 2013: n.p.). One could argue, therefore, that, in recreating Pissarro's life, the poet and painter Walcott was offering

the deceased master the opportunity to "collaborate" in order to "put down, in paint, in words" — to quote his pledge to record every corner of St Lucia in *Another Life* (2009/1973: 52) — the Caribbean "masterpieces" he regrets Pissarro never had a chance to create.

Life-writing and the "absolute search for anonymity"

In *Tiepolo's Hound*, this productive "collaboration" between Walcott and Pissarro is acknowledged on different occasions. Walcott (2000: 156) admits, for example, that his descriptions of Paris come out of Pissarro's canvases — as a matter of fact, Walcott had not yet visited the French capital at the time of writing the poem. However, one of the most poignant instances in which cooperation is directly foregrounded is in Book Four where Walcott imagines himself being sketched by Pissarro with "trousers | rolled to the calves" and "in a sisal hat at the market || […] anonymous as [his] own ancestor" (Walcott, 2000: 137–38). A few pages later, Walcott feels "a line enclose [his] lineaments" again; he "keep[s] [his] position as a model does" but his figure "emerg[es]" to remind the painter (and the reader) that the drawing in question "is edged with a kindness [Walcott's] own lines contain" (Walcott, 2000: 140–41). Put it another way, the model whose *line*aments are captured in the sketch is in fact the author of *lines* of poetry which are inspired by, and simultaneously envelop, Pissaro's drawing. Ultimately, therefore, Walcott's voice "contains" Pissarro's drawing in a move that

seems to reverse the pattern that according to John Sekora (1987) shapes most slave narratives. Often being the product of manipulation by white abolitionists and also texts where the line between biography and autobiography, fact and fiction, is frequently blurred, slave narratives, Sekora argues, end up sealing "black messages" in "white envelopes". Walcott, however, seems to complicate raciological underpinnings as his identification with the black model is concomitant with his identification with the white Pissarro. In the last chapter of *Tiepolo's Hound*, Walcott highlights his partnership with the St Thomas-born painter once again when he imagines him working on his own self-portrait: as Pissarro paints, Walcott writes, addressing himself, "his gaze is yours […] || as we stand doubled in each other's eyes" (Walcott, 2000: 159), creatively re-imagining their mutual involvement in the creation of Pissarro's self-portrait and, by extension, his (and Walcott's) biography.

The cooperation between Walcott and Pissarro, however, goes beyond portraiture. In Book One of *Tiepolo's Hound*, Walcott also strengthens his connection with Pissarro's topography taking advantage of the fact that, due to its colonial history, St Lucia's landscape emerges in French (Walcott, 2000: 19). Despite the British finally having the upper hand, the island changed hands fourteen times between the French and the British; as a result, the people still speak a French-based Creole and many toponyms are in French or Creole. Walcott here takes as primary exemplification St Lucia's Dennery — a small town on the windward coast of the island whose name recalls

Ennery, a commune in the Val-d'Oise in northern France near Pontoise which repeatedly features in Pissarro's paintings. Walcott here seems to be really seeing the St Lucian landscape through Pissarro's eyes. In Pissarro's *Route d'Ennery près de Pointoise* (1874) a winding road takes centre stage; similarly, Walcott's landscaping of Dennery foregrounds a coastal road which "giddied down precipices" (Walcott, 2000: 18). In a different version of the same locality, Pissarro's painting *La vieille route d'Ennery à Pontoise* (1887), one can see a large haystack dominating one side of the painting while another appears farther into the background (on the opposite side) with some trees providing horizontal continuity. In his poem, Walcott focuses the readers' attention on two "sea-gnawed islets" visible from the coastal road by Dennery which are also covered in trees and bushes, and visually remind one of Pissarro's haystacks and trees (Walcott, 2000:18). Notably, however, the St Lucian town and the French commune also share the fact that they are ordinary places which would be "anonymous", in the sense of unnoticed (or indeed, neglected as the St Lucia inlets of *Another Life*), if the two artists had not decided to immortalize them in their own way.

Ordinariness and anonymity play a crucial role in Walcott's appreciation of Pissarro. Walcott, for example, praises Pissarro for "paint[ing] the ordinary | for what it was […] red rutted roads, the lanes of Louveciennes" and sets out to copy him in his approach to painting and writing: "Paint a true street in Anse la Raye, Choiseul || the roasting asphalt, the bleached galvanise roofs […] paint the violet bruise || of reef under

water […] | paint the thick flowers too poor to have a name” (Walcott, 2000: 53, 156–57). Furthermore, Walcott reveals that, as he was writing *Tiepolo’s Hound*, he became increasingly impressed by the modesty and humility with which Pissarro painted the ordinary and approached the landscape, celebrating its simplicity without “distortion” and not trying to turn it into something different to satisfy an “egotistical” nature. “The category you would have to put him”, Walcott continues, “is a search not for the true thing or for an expression of identity, but as an absolute search for anonymity […] the annihilation of the ‘I’ that is there in the presence of nature” (Handley, 2005: 105). One could argue, in fact, that one of the driving forces of Walcott’s poem — or, rather, of Walcott and Pissarro’s collaborative “Caribbean masterpiece” — is the desire to arrive at a better, more profound, articulation of “anonymity” and that both Pissarro’s and Walcott’s lifelong aesthetic and political concerns combine into an excellent preparatory study for this particular masterpiece.

Writing the lives of others: Hounds, mongrels, and underdogs

One of the ways in which this collaborative work explores and articulates “anonymity” is through the foregrounding of various dogs (living mongrels and painted hounds) with whom the (sometimes blurring) figures of Pissarro and Walcott share the stage. The hounds and mongrels’ appearances and disappearances create a visual motif and a sense of continuity between biography, autobiography and fiction, reality, memory and

imagination, creation and recreation, past and present, Old and New World. Their presence in the poem can be explained by the fact that, in some of the great works of the past referenced by Walcott, dogs and black people share the same marginalized status in the representation of aristocratic households (see, for example, Dabydeen, 1985; Buck–Morss, 2000). *Tiepolo's Hound*'s reference to painted "hounds and turbanned Moors at the edge of a feast" (Walcott, 2000: 37), for example, illuminates a condition which evokes the alienation of the provincial Pissarro and Walcott in demeaning museums and resonate (albeit in different ways) with the status of the mongrels which punctuate the narrative, with the predicament of the Jews, the blacks, and the anti-establishment artists featured in the poem and, more broadly, with the "mongrel culture" of the Caribbean (Walcott, 2000: 154) or, rather, with the consequences of its "mongrelization" by metropolitan centres that Walcott has harshly criticized in his Nobel Speech and elsewhere (Walcott 1998/1992: 65–84, particularly 67). The white hound in the painting Walcott thinks he remembers seeing at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, is not the central figure in the painting in question but a detail lurking from "the cave of a table" (Walcott, 2000: 7). The mongrels which follow Pissarro in St Thomas and Paris and which appear to Walcott in various "mongrel streets" of the Caribbean "[cower] || through a park's railing", "[pant] for entrails near a pirogue", "miserably [shake] their dank fur | in a spray of diamonds, and [slope] […] towards the dark || holes under the shacks"; they are abandoned pups with "swollen bell[ies] […] shivering from the heat |

of starvation" and "[shaking] with local terror" or "skeletal" figures "foraging garbage" (Walcott, 2000: 16, 4, 23, 39, 138, 14).

Stretching to the limit the argument put forward by the acclaimed biographer Lytton Strachey in *Portraits in Miniature* (1931), these exact, compelling, and revealing sketches of (stray) dogs in *Tiepolo's Hound* can be seen as experimental and purely essential biographies. In his miniature portrait devoted to John Aubrey, Strachey (1931: n.p.) encourages biographers not to have half-measures: "the method of enormous and elaborate accretion which produced the *Life of Johnson* is excellent, no doubt", he writes, "but, failing that, let us have no half-measures; let us have the pure essentials — a vivid image, on a page or two, without explanations, transitions, commentaries or padding". Broadly speaking, however, if Strachey can be invoked as a promoter of "pure essentials and vivid images", one must note that (his satiric approach notwithstanding) *Eminent Victorians* (1918) is devoted to notable and important — indeed, "eminent" — people, namely Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr Arnold, and General Gordon. Holroyd (1994: n.p.), instead, claims that in *Portraits in Miniature* Strachey's subjects were the "victims of history" (n.p.), a pronouncement which sounds particularly strident when one takes into consideration the wider history of the British Empire. On the one hand, Strachey did focus on less prominent, slightly eccentric or neglected figures, like the charming Elizabethan courtier and poet Sir John Harington, inventor of the water-closet, or the "totally forgotten" but once "man of

eminence" John North, "prebend of Westminster, Professor of Greek at Cambridge, Master of Trinity College, and Clerk of the King's Closet" (n.p.). Nevertheless, unlike Walcott or Pissarro, he did not concern himself with the life of thoroughly ordinary, let alone the same kind of "victims of history" which are central to their works. Walcott, it is well-known, often praised the resilience and endurance of Caribbean people who survived slavery and indentureship and often gave centre stage in his works to "ordinary" characters like fishermen, waiters, maids, peasants. Notably, according to Joachim Pissarro (Camille's great-grandson) in an interview with the *Times Herald*, Pissarro was profoundly affected by the hardship and difficult living conditions of his fellow islanders (many of whom were still slaves): his "dedication to unglamorous human reality" and the fact that "all he cared about were people of very simple, very ordinary backgrounds" is a reality that finds its origins in his life in St Thomas (Associated Press, 2000).

In 1933 — that is, only three years after Strachey published *Portraits in Miniature* — Woolf published *Flush*, her biography of Elizabeth Barret–Browning's pet dog which, like *Orlando* (published five years earlier), was intended as a gentle parody of nineteenth-century biographies but also of the new biography practised by Strachey, his interest in psychological insight, and, possibly, his anthropocentrism: famously, in *Eminent Victorians* he asserted that "human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past" (Strachey, 1918: viii). In *Flush*, Woolf experiments with

the non-human perspective of Flush, a pet with pedigree, “a pure-bred Cocker of the red variety marked by all the characteristic excellences of his kind” (Woolf, 1933: 18). In London, where Flush realizes that dogs “are strictly divided into different classes” (Woolf, 1933: 39), the Cocker is hardly able to venture outside his mistress’s apartment (and when he does he is kidnapped for a ransom by a gang). In Pisa and Florence, instead, he is free to happily roam the streets with stray dogs. Indeed, the pet observes, “in Pisa, though dogs abounded, there were no ranks; all — could it be possible? — were mongrels” (Woolf, 1933: 120). Woolf’s exposure of class division and her satire of the Victorian obsession with a respectable lineage is evident — “Everywhere rank is claimed and its virtues are asserted” (Woolf, 1933: 15–16) — but it is perhaps worth noting that the mongrels Flush meets in Italy are not deemed worthy of a single vivid image (let alone a biography): “they were dogs merely – grey dogs, yellow dogs, brindled dogs, spotted dogs” and, their differences of colour notwithstanding, they are condemned to anonymity and, ultimately, irrelevance (Woolf, 1933: 120).

In *Tiepolo’s Hound*, instead, one of Walcott’s most essential, compelling, and unadorned essential biographies of an “underdog” is, significantly, the description of an (imagined) sketch by Pissarro which displays, in Walcott’s writing, the same spontaneity and boldness of first impressions that characterizes Pissarro’s drawings. In a few masterful strokes, this collaborative effort encapsulates the mongrel condition and illuminates the past, present, and future life of the mongrel in question: Pissarro

"studied a black mongrel's cowering lope, | how it stood, out of range, assessing its tormentor, || ribs panting, its eyes with no fleck of hope, | resigned to its limits, the doors it could not enter" (2000: 27). Like Woolf's Flush, whose canine nature gives the author an ideal perspective to interrogate and denounce Victorian hypocrisy, Walcott's anonymous mongrels are also uniquely positioned to provide the right frame for both Pissarro's and Walcott's search for anonymity, for their articulation of what Walcott calls the annihilation of the "I" in the presence of nature.

Life-writing and "the surrendering of the 'I'"

For all its references to portraits and self-portraits, *Tiepolo's Hound* is always attuned to the fact that Pissarro was a committed *paysagiste*. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the paintings by Walcott found in *Tiepolo's Hound* are in fact landscapes. The last painting included in the poem, *Breakers, Becune Point* (1995), features as a focal point an anonymous rock as it emerges from the sea in front of Walcott's own garden. It is crucial that this painting is positioned just after Walcott's own self-portrait in the collection, as if to underline his own elation and his surrender of the "I" in the presence of (Caribbean) nature. Pissarro's self-portraits and his death in 1903, moreover, are described a few pages earlier (Walcott, 2000: 161) while, on the page opposite this last painting, Walcott anticipates the end of his own life as an embrace of the anonymity which shapes *Breakers, Becune Point* and that he so admired in Pissarro's work: "I shall

finish in a place whose only power | is the exploding spray along its coast" (Walcott, 2000: 162).

It is clear therefore that Walcott's interest not only in the "walled facts" of Pissarro's life but in "their essence" was strictly connected with Pissarro's ability to surrender his "I" in front of the natural landscape, an interest that explains why Walcott was so reluctant to write a traditional biography centered on one particular subject/self. "About Pissarro, too, principally about Pissarro, almost" is a pronouncement which acknowledges Pissarro's humility and modesty, honours the "absolute search for anonymity" which shapes the Caribbean "masterpiece" that Walcott and Pissarro are producing in collaboration, and chimes with the poem's foregrounding of mongrels and other kinds of underdogs. *Tiepolo's Hound*, however, does not only reset the balance by writing these underdogs and mongrels a life in short but very vivid sentences; it also subtly suggests that, ultimately, the entire poem is shaped by anonymity as it seems to adopt the perspective of the mongrels and underdogs it depicts. As we have seen, at the beginning of the poem, Walcott conflates himself as the biographer with a mongrel "nosing" the shadow of Pissarro's Charlotte Amalie; in the closing pages, when Walcott's autobiography culminates with his acceptance of old age and mortality and the renewal of his commitment to his St Lucian landscape, a dog, as anonymous as its nineteenth-century counterpart and the other mongrels that have followed poet and

painter in various places and times, "barks in an unchanged neighbourhood" (Walcott, 2000: 162) perhaps to signpost that his job as (auto)biographer is coming to an end.

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Endnotes

[1] See, for example, the following drawings: *Market Scene*; *Figures along a Shore*; *Buildings amidst Tropical Vegetation*; *Long Bay at St Thomas* (1852); *St Thomas, Beach Figures* (1852); *St Thomas, 8 juin 1852*; *Sketch of Three Women* (in Brettell et

al., 1996: 21, 26, 27, 30, 58, 59), or *Wooded Landscape on Saint Thomas* and *Frederick David*, *Two Studies of a Young Boy* (at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), or *Lovers Well* and *Black Woman Washing* (in Harper and Shikes, 1980: 24).

[2] See, for example, the drawings *Harbor Scene: Ciel pluvieux*; *Loading/unloading a Ship*; *Ship in Harbor* (in Brettell et al., 1996: 35, 36, 37).