

April 2013

There is a Sob in There Somewhere

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Recommended Citation

MacDonald, Antonia (2013) "There is a Sob in There Somewhere," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol10/iss1/4>

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In a Caribbean space where the aging process has traditionally been accepted as a journey to wisdom and social veneration, Derek Walcott's *The Prodigal* breaks new ground in its self-storying of the experience of growing old and anticipating death. Walcott's poetic intervention on the discourse of aging, in its interrogation of the negative cultural attitudes that surround senescence, becomes particularly timely in a century when youth has become fetishized, and where the social and political considerations of aging are receiving much critical attention. *The Prodigal*, in its subjective perspective on later life, co-opts the textual practices of the confessional so as to foreground a complex matrix of responses to aging as a deteriorative biological process. Melded to the sorrow occasioned by the long illness and subsequent death of his twin brother Roderick is the self-confrontational exploration of the travails perceived to be part of senescence. Walcott's poetic oeuvre also exploits the creative possibilities of autobiography. Functioning doubly as the sometimes angst-laden protagonist enacting the drama of growing old and a dispassionate narrator who stands aloof observing his character respond to this experience, Walcott is able to give close aesthetic consideration to the role and value of the aging artist within the Caribbean literary tradition.

The concerns constellating in *The Prodigal* are personal—the grappling with issues of exile and return, family and death—yet in their universality have wide appeal. Given the dominance of exile as a thematic concern in Caribbean literature, *The Prodigal* also becomes an allegory of the consequences of leaving home. Moreover, in the thematic reach of this autobiographical poem, Walcott is also able to map out the artist's anxiety about his contribution to Caribbean literature, even while he is, by virtue of this poetic creation, affirming his place within this tradition. In *The Prodigal*, the autobiographical 'I' is both similar to and different from the poetic 'he.' Speaking to *Another Life*, another retrospective poem that offered the portrait of the artist—Walcott—as a young man, Edward Baugh carefully made a case for Walcott's first autobiographical poem to be read as a fiction of the self. Citing from the manuscript of *Another Life* where Walcott claims “all autobiographies should be in the third person,”¹ Edward Baugh in his book *Derek Walcott*, proposes a strategy of reading Walcott's opus as the continuing narrative of a persona “who is gradually being discovered and created through various metamorphoses, contradictions and continuities” (6). It is this logic of ongoing self-knowledge that I wish to apply to *The Prodigal*. The use of the third person reinforces the notion of Walcott as the self-cast and central protagonist in an unfolding drama about an unaccommodated old man² trying to make sense of the realization that alongside a physical decline, his artistic self is rapidly devolving into social irrelevance, “a forgotten name / as mine will be forgotten by another” (22-3). Autobiography provides Walcott with the means of rescuing his writerly self from this encroaching anonymity, for as Linda Anderson in *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom* establishes, autobiography not only provides subjectivity to the writer but the act of writing is a means of claiming an enduring literary authority, “resituating the writer in his work, thus mitigating the danger of anonymity and alienation of modern authorship” (7). The power that the poet is able to achieve through this self-storying is not shared by his enfeebled persona:

In my effort to arrive at the third person

¹ Edward Baugh establishes that this claim is made by Derek Walcott in *MS One* as he reflects on the nature of autobiography. See Derek Walcott (90).

² Here I am indirectly referring to Shakespeare's *King Lear* in order to make the point that, like Lear, the protagonist has to negotiate growing old and demitting authority.

has lain the ordeal; because whoever the he” is,
he can suffer, he can make his own spasms, he can die;
I can look at him and smile uncontrollably,
I can study the blotches on his hands,
his multiplying moles, his netted eyes
the gestures that observe the predictions of fiction. (87)

The poem therefore becomes a negotiation between the poet, Walcott, and the old man whose body is quickly losing its physical integrity. This self-dramatization seems like a natural progression for a poet who is also a major dramatist and who has continually attested to the common ground shared by those two genres. Where once he had claimed to Nancy Schoenberger that the lyrical impulse needed to be fortified by dramatic experience,³ in *The Prodigal*, the converse seems to now hold true. Walcott’s intervention on aging is tempered and ultimately made the more poignant by a quiet lyricism with which it is reconfigured; serving as a frame within which to showcase some salient modern social impulses as they relate to the place of the aged in society.

Troping on the biblical story⁴ from which it draws its inspiration, *The Prodigal* is about the consequences of the choice made—leaving home. In this long poem, the aged wanderer, having physically and mentally journeyed through Europe and the Americas, returns to the place of his inheritance— St. Lucia. Where previously Walcott had constructed his poetic self as one who returns to his St. Lucian home for renewal only to leave again,⁵ homecoming in *The Prodigal* seems to end this process of continual returns. Threaded through the poem is the notion that this footsore poet is jaded by his former errantry, and that his Caribbean home is not so much a place of replenishment as it is a place of final rest. Where once he had avowed that his island space was insufficient to the formulation of the artistic identity to which he aspired, protesting in *The Arkansas Testament* that “to have loved one horizon is insularity, / it blindfolds vision, it narrows experience” (79), Walcott now valorizes it as a place where his identity as an aging artist can be constituted. In establishing correspondences between himself and the prodigal son of the biblical story, Walcott is also assured that his *patria* will welcome him and forgive his errantry. The poet persona acknowledges the pleasures of a former traveling life: “We read, we travel, we become” (31) and seems now to accept that with this last homecoming lies the possible future of only mental wanderings. Nor does he dismiss the benefits of his past pilgrimages. In his elegiac musing about the value of coming home, and staying home, the prodigal poet overwhelms the reader with an alphabet of glorious sights he has experienced from Austria to Boston, Geneva, Genoa, Manhattan, Milan, Paris, Venice and Zermatt. So loud is his envious praise of their monuments, their columns, their bells, their citadels, their history, that it tends to muffle his ululation.

At the same time the private character of loss serves as a metaphor for the pain of exile. While he mourns the conclusion of that other life and the inevitable end of his ‘riotous living’

³ In his interview with Nancy Schoenberger, Walcott makes a case that because the long poem and a play have the same kind of dramatic structure, the poetic is naturally close to the theatrical. Four year later, in an interview with Walcott, David Montenegro makes the claim that the theatre allows for certain parts of Walcott’s voice to be expressed, where poetry had not been able to allow. While Walcott’s response does not suggest direct agreement, I am submitting that in this poem, a hitherto hidden part of Walcott’s artistic voice emerges.

⁴ Susan Jones, gen. ed. *The New Jerusalem Bible*, New York: Doubleday, 1985. Luke 15, 11-32.

⁵ In his essay “Leaving School,” Walcott articulates the paradox of loving the island and wishing he could get the hell out of it.

that these Odyssean journeys had occasioned, there is also the suggestion that his travels have taught him that his pilgrimages, however unfettered, have not brought any sustained and profound revelation. “Wandering the Village in search of another subject / other than yourself, it is yourself you meet” (6). Having once exiled himself within metropolitan spaces—the world he had enshrined in his imagination, his experiences bring him to the acknowledgement that “the point is not comparison or mimicry” (75). There is nothing new under the sun and he can now concede that western monuments and traditions are no more remarkable than Caribbean ones. The celebrated pleasures of exile are rendered fraudulent.

Like the prodigal son in the biblical story, who appreciates the bounty of home even while he accepts that by virtue of leaving he has given up all entitlement, Walcott in *The Prodigal* affirms that the creative plenitude which had always defined homespace is still sourceable. Ironically, the anxiety that constellates throughout the poem is that old age and prolonged absences make him unable to take advantage of that plenitude: “what he loved and knew once as a boy / would panic and forget him from the change / of character” (69). Accordingly, the poet equates the end of his wandering to the cessation of poetic productivity and describes *The Prodigal* as his last book: “In what will be your last book make each place / as if it had just been made, already old, / but new again from naming it” (99). The didactic purpose embedded in this autobiographical poem allows for the ambiguous portrayal of his prodigal return. On one hand, to return, penitent and prodigal, to “the enclosing harmony that [he] calls home” (82) is a celebration and a validation. It suggests the resolution of the anxieties of locatedness which had long preoccupied Walcott, anxieties that had been the source of his poetic outpouring and the cause of the tensions and ambiguities that had critically defined him. But paradoxically, with this resolution seems to come the end of the questing that was so much a part of him and that had fuelled his writing and had made him a monumental figure in Caribbean literature.

In a 2006 interview with Tony Mochama of the *Sunday Standard*, Walcott when asked to explain why he describes *The Prodigal* as his last book responds with the following qualifier: “I said that just to get pity. There is a sob in there somewhere in that statement”. While the reason for the sob is one which his interview with Mochama neatly side-steps, it is around this sob that my interest constellates. Is this sobbing real or staged? Is it both? If real, does he sob in dread of the atrophying of the imagination that may come with having to remain at home? Is this sobbing the precursor to prolonged weeping, wailing and lamentation as he faces his mortality? Is he sobbing for himself or for the family and friends now dead? “Veteran of threescore years and ten”, perceiving himself as having therefore lived out his allotted time, mourning the recent death of his twin brother and his mother’s less recent passing, Walcott in *The Prodigal* seems concerned with his own mortality, mortality that he images as the enfeeblement of a body worn out by various excursions. The price of the “untethered pilgrimages” upon which he had built a great literary reputation is exacting: “the horn of the white mountain above Zermatt / has gored you, and the lamps shine like blood drops / . . . you can feel Europe drawn slowly over your cold brow” (77). In this imaging of the physical and psychic desiccation wrought by his wanderings—travel that has wearied both his body and spirit—we are led to believe that Walcott, the constant and fortunate traveler, accepts that he is on his final journey: one that will end in the graveyard, the final abode of his dead mother and brother: “my brother and . . . mother [who] live now at the one address / so many are their neighbours” (51). Death therefore becomes the final homecoming.

In that same conversation with Mochama, Walcott goes on to describe *The Prodigal* in terms of the end of the quest that had taken him beyond the Caribbean space that has always been home – a place of origin which he may not have always valorized,⁶ a place he had always yearned to return to, yet having returned was once again anxious to leave:

"It is about the final home-coming," Walcott says. "It is the Biblical legend, the story of a life wasted in its profoundest sense. It is a metaphor of opening arms and closing arms, of a ship coming home to harbour, and the harbour is St Lucia. The island receives the figure, so yes; it is also about death, blending with travelling and home-coming."

Mochama and his readers are being persuaded to consider *The Prodigal* as a metaphoric last will and testament: the return home that allows Walcott to put his ideological house in order and to make peace with the provincial landscapes that had once stifled his artistic spirit. Moreover, Walcott seems to be suggesting that while he had been long defined as a questing figure, his knowledge quest has now changed direction. Now in this autobiographical poem, it is also an interiorized sensibility journeying through memory towards the reconciliatory acceptance of one's aging and mortality.

Reading the eighteen cantos that comprise this long poem, one questions how gently does Walcott journey into those opening arms of a St. Lucian or Caribbean home. Is this narrative of reconciliation staged? In his description of the opening and closing arms, there is the subliminal suggestion that the arms that enfold in an embrace of welcome can also be the arms that close to bar escape, thus foreclosing the possibility of further riotous living. How anxious is he to bring the ship of his life home to this final harbor—the same address as his mother, brother and friends? Or to put it most plainly, is death an event which Walcott is ready for? Through an authorial complexity created by the layering of various subject positions, Walcott's *The Prodigal* is both an interrogation of and an intervention on those issues. In *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self Invention*, Paul John Eakin posits that "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation and, further, the self that is the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3). With this in mind, I wish to propose that in *The Prodigal*, the valediction to a former life of "wanderings about" (70) is both a personal and public performance of loss where the poetic exploration of the travails associated with the aging experience moves beyond narrow introspection to a consideration of the universality of this experience. At the same time the poetic posture which he adopts in *The Prodigal*, in its ironic self-parodying, constantly dislodges and simultaneously re-inscribes these always-personal anxieties about aging and posterity.

While his interview with Mochama makes no mention of his concern for his literary reputation, in *The Prodigal* Walcott is also preoccupied with the ephemeral nature of fame purchased by various migrations to metropolitan centers. Faced with the massive shadows cast by European history, he assesses his own artistic accomplishments as insignificant and his errantry as a waste: "Prodigal, what were your wandering about?"(70) Where in his poem 'Midsummer' he had made the following forecast for himself: "The young poet who stands in the mirror/smiles with a nod. He looks beautiful from this distance/ And I hope I am what he saw, an enduring ruin" (23), his new examination of self-in-the-world reflects another kind of

⁶ ". . . loving the island and wishing I could get the hell out of it" ("Leaving School," *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, 32).

ruin, one wrought by the physical deterioration of aging, sickness, and approaching death: “toothless at sunrise with white knotted hair; / who sometimes feels / his flesh cold as the stone / that he will lie under, . . .” (87). In this amplified response to aging—the creation of a persona who manifests the various social and biological traumas associated with growing old—Walcott creates a poetic device through which he filters his own wrestling with aging; its association with illness, disability and decrepitude; its capacity to bring one to the implacable reality of one’s mortality; its impact on his self-identity; and by extension his posthumous reputation as artist. This consideration of the worth of the artist allows the poem to become a meditation on growing old and dying, which, while it is informed by autobiography, can also be read as a fictional construct which offers an elegiac framing of mortality in universal terms.

In his dramatic representation of the aging self, Walcott creates a persona against whom he measures his seventy-something self and from whom he disassociates himself. “Old man coming through the glass, who are you?” (86) This disassociation allows the poet to creatively explore the issue of aging while at the same time the distance effect of autobiographical crafting allows Walcott—the aging man-- to deflect his own anxieties onto theorizing. This contradiction is dramatized in the figure of a stationary old man, “standing in the door glass there / silent beyond raging, beyond bafflement / past faith, whose knees easily buckle” (87). It is as if the poet/man is looking into a mirror and is seeing a future self—one with which he is unwilling to identify, in spite of his repeated rehearsals of acceptance. In her essay “The Mirror Stage of Old Age”, Kathleen Woodward explains this form of psychological disassociation:

The horror of the mirror image of the decrepit body can be understood as the inverse of the pleasures of the mirror image of the youthful Narcissus. As we age we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies . . . old age can therefore be described as a state in which the body is in opposition to itself, and we are alienated from our body. (104)

In *The Prodigal*, the horror of aging, its representation as the onset of disease and decay which brings the human body to a state of decrepitude and accordingly to stasis are conveyed by the preponderance of unflattering, adjectival phrases with which Walcott loads his verses: “multiplying moles,” “mottled hands”, “watery eyes”, “netted eyes”, “diabetic and dying” and “uncontrollable spasms” reinforce the pathology of growing old. Additionally, aging is interpreted as a form of stagnation, both mental and physical. The constant shifting between transitional verbs -- *coming, standing, going, waiting* -- conveys the panic engendered by this imminent inaction. The willful melodrama of this representation notwithstanding, in a century where youth has been fetishized, Walcott provides a platform for a gerontological exploration which is simultaneously private and public, personal and theoretical.

Sandra Pouchet Paquet, in *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*, makes the point that “autobiography constructs multiple spaces where the private and the personal collapse into projections of a public self, where the individual is represented within the context of mutuality and commonality” (4-5). In the instance of Walcott, his many wanderings have changed these contexts and brought commonality with western paradigms, imbuing this poetic oeuvre with an angst that is new to Caribbean literature. The narrative stance in *The Prodigal* is further complicated by the cosmopolitanism which Walcott has acquired by virtue of his legendary migrations, a cosmopolitanism that subscribes to perceptions of aging as something to be avoided at all costs. If to be aged is to lack utility and

relevancy, then Walcott's most recent autobiographical poem reduces the complexity of aging to a dualism of health versus decay, vigor versus frailty, social worth versus social irrelevance. Thus Walcott is not completely divorced from these sentiments of valued youthfulness in so far as he has, by virtue of his many migrations, been participating in this system of value.

Walcott's depreciation of the experiences gained through his various exiles and his devaluation of his poetic worth are similarly performative. This brooding self-deprecation, while it may be a byproduct of aging, is in this instance compounded by Walcott's own perennial concern about the status of the artist in Caribbean society.⁷ In his essay, "Negotiating Aging Identity: Surface, Depth, and Masquerade," Simon Biggs makes the point that old age has no social value because it is not perceived as being productive. He argues that:

. . . the growth of consumption has added [to] . . . the fragmentation of reliable ground on which to resist the dominant construction of aging. Building on identity. . . becomes fraught with uncertainty as increasingly fluid sources of external support make personal coherence difficult to maintain. . . an aging identity [then] has to protect itself from both excess of structure and an excess of flux. (14)

While within a Caribbean context this notion of old age as engendering social incoherence may well have some applicability, in the instance of Walcott he is still the feted Caribbean Nobel laureate, and his reputation affords him many invitations and opportunities for travel. The social and economic devaluation which is part of the aging process does not therefore have direct applicability to the still-mobile Walcott even while it is an important issue in modern society. Nonetheless, this subjective portrayal resonates for other Caribbean writers who do not participate in this culture of popular consumer demand; undeniably, the fickleness of public acclaim renders tenuous the popularity of the artist in his society.

If aging is depicted as the loss of the mobility that had brought visibility to the artist and therefore the cause of present and future powerlessness, it is also the death of virility by which a hypermasculine Caribbean manhood was defined, and accordingly the re-inscription of powerlessness. In *The Prodigal*, age intersects with sexual identity and generates in these interstices the mourning of the debilitation which age brings to the desiring man who is no longer desirable. Reduced to the 'dirty old man' watching young European women on the sidewalks of Milan, appreciating the sensuous vitality of their summer-clad bodies, even while the ugliness of his aging body distances him from them, the persona resigns himself to impotent voyeurism: "I look and no longer sigh for the impossible, / panting over a cupidinous coffee / like an old setter that has stopped chasing pigeons" (86). Immobilized by old age, he can no longer chase women and in the meticulous cataloguing of the various European beauties who draw his gaze, Walcott renders this sexual obsolescence all the more poignant. The disturbing misogyny that Elaine Savory Fido had once noted in Walcott⁸ remains in this reductive objectification of women to "halters cut close to the coccyx" (86), only now it has lost some of its bite to senescence:

⁷ Walcott's essay, "What the Twilight Says," presents evidence of this concern with artistic worth - : "all we could successfully enact was a dance of doubt." (8)

⁸ Elaine Savory Fido. "Value Judgements on Art and the Question of Macho Attitudes: The Case of Derek Walcott." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 21.1 (1986).

Still there are some irreconcilable things,
 such as an implacable lust that came with age—
 as a dirty old man leering at young things
 in the name of their common, aye common, craft (32)

Inevitably, we are reminded of Walcott's own predilection for beautiful women: a pastime to which many critics had often turned a blind and often indulgent eye. Take for example Edward Baugh's interpretation of these lines in his review of *The Prodigal*:

The narrative, even cinematic verve is sharpened by the discreet thread of a sexual-romantic interest that flickers through the poem, in the glimpses of beautiful women who embody the poet's feeling for the landscape and lifestyle of the particular place. Ilse, Roberta, Esperanza, Constanzia, or the Irish actress in Pescara, playing Norah Joyce: their presence makes us smile at the pluck that's in the old boy yet, even as it sharpens the pathos of his condition. (224)

His reading is far more charitable than mine and indeed seems to carry the wink of complicity. Condemnation, complicity and sympathy notwithstanding, there are of course the inescapable social perceptions of aging as the neutering and neutralizing of the powerful and sometimes predatory womanizer. Thus in his period of retirement from life, the persona's reconsideration of former attractiveness and sexual prowess and his acceptance of sexual impotence are extended to an often maudlin discourse of psycho-social irrelevancy, "an old gentleman / with mottled hands and watery eyes, our host. / Diabetic, dying, my double" (17).

While *The Prodigal* engages with this issue of sexual fragility, it also interrogates the other social implications of aging, especially within a Caribbean context. Are the aged considered slow, inefficient, and irrelevant—or as wise, authority figures? Is there a Caribbean cult of youth? Given the context of a global preoccupation with the visual, where one is judged by the externals, the aesthetic, looks, complexions, then old age, represented in Western cultures as the onset of disease and decrepitude, irrelevance and impotence, carries assumptions of biological and social insubstantiation. In his monumental work, *Senescence: the Last Half of Life*, G. Stanley Hall submits that the anxiety surrounding aging has as much to do with the looming possibility of displacement by younger men as it has with what he metaphorically constructs as "tenantry in the great hall of discard" (367). This perception of social irrelevance and the lack of utility, he posits, can be reversed by the valorization of old age as the period when one achieves the summit of wisdom. Hall's representation of viable old age, formulated as an alternative ideology for a youth-obsessed North American audience, is *a propos* to Caribbean societies where there is still respect for the ancestral wisdom of elders. Indeed, the popular St. Lucian *kweyol* adage "*l'age ka menyen waison*" evokes the perception of age as conferring reason, power and authority.⁹ Building on the postulations of Aristotle in her essay "Against Wisdom: The Social Politics of Anger and Aging," Kathleen Woodward suggests that "in the West the time-honored association of wisdom has been with aging, with wisdom defined in various ways but almost always understood as a capacity for balanced reflection and judgment that can only accrue with long experience." (187)

But is Walcott assured that his old age will make him the wise elder, or that it will confer upon him power and authority in Caribbean critical discourse? More specifically, will it ensure

⁹ The 2006 election of the eighty-year old John Compton as the prime minister of St. Lucia confirms this.

him posterity? Walcott's preoccupation with the encroachment of old age allows for the effortless segue into a consideration of his own artistic worth, a review of his past achievements, the questioning of his relevance and an anxiety about the influence he may exert on Caribbean literature. In exploiting the performative aspect of autobiography, Walcott also represents the subject position as a no-longer-young Caribbean artist whose artistic contribution and reputation, no matter how much they are currently lauded, may not be immortalized.¹⁰ Assuming the synecdochic role, he represents an aging group of Caribbean writers—Brathwaite, Harris, Lamming, Lovelace and Naipaul, to name a few “friends in the same business” (84) who are important in their articulations of a Caribbean aesthetic, and whose theories are being revised and extended, or sometimes debunked by the next wave of Caribbean writers and critics. Accordingly, Walcott's consideration of the artistic reputation of the Caribbean writer begins with the solipsistic consideration of his critical reception:

I have seen me shift from empire to empire;
I should have known that I would end up beached
as I began on the blazing sand
rejected by the regurgitating billows
retreating with their long contemptuous hiss
for these chaotic sentences of seaweed. . . . (95)

It then moves on to an exploration of the chimerical quality of artistic recognition, renown and cycles of taste, and the potential reduction of the artist to “a name cut on a wall that soon/ from the grime of indifference became indecipherable” (102). In the instance of Walcott, literary worth rests heavily on the identity he has worked so hard at creating: subjectivity which has been painstakingly constructed and made manifest through art. The ongoing anxiety is that in spite of these self-framings, there may not be sufficient communities of readers to guarantee posterity.

In his essay, “On Posterity,” Andrew Bennett explores the ways in which creative writers have sought immortality through their works by writing for a future, rather than a present audience. He argues that:

The artist or philosopher no longer produces the work simply for money, contemporary reputation, status, or pleasure. Instead he (this is primarily a masculine narrative) attempts to ensure that his identity, transformed and transliterated, disseminated in the endless act of reading or aesthetic contemplation, will survive. (132)

In the instance of Walcott, current reception and readership seems to make his poetic identity less assured. Bracketed between the early and encouragingly exuberant response to his privately published “25 Poems,” and more recently his loud acclaim as Nobel laureate, are years of being unread though famous, his books placed “faced down upon sunlit seats...trees lifting in lament for all the leaves of the unread books” (5). In *Essay: Supplementary to the Preface*, William Wordsworth suggests that the poet must create the literary taste by which he is to be

¹⁰The ability of Caribbean autobiography to speak for the community as well as for the individual has been well documented in Sandra Pouchet Paquet's essay “West Indian Autobiography” in *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. William L. Andrews. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993. p. 196 - 211

appreciated.¹¹ However, within the context of a St. Lucian home, Walcott cannot claim to have fully developed this taste because in that small and relatively underdeveloped island, the aesthetic sensibility required for this appreciation rests too heavily on an educated imagination. Instead, it is the journey away from home that has brought visibility to the poet: it has accorded him the privilege to continuously construct his identity; it has allowed him the reassurance that his apprehensions of the world matter and that his craft is significant and important. It has authorized him to create a critical legacy in Caribbean *belle lettres*. But, in Walcott's surrender of his odysseys to senescence lies the loss of this celebrity and potentially the death of the hard-earned literary reputation purchased by these various migrations. Poetic immortality is in no way guaranteed and the anxiety remains that his literary production has not sufficiently assured him posthumous fame.

It is not that this concern with posterity is peculiar to Walcott. Echoes of his lament can be found in writers such as W. B. Yeats—another Nobel laureate in literature. In 'Sailing to Byzantium', Yeats considers poetic art and creative imagination as attributes which will, in what is "no country for old men," allow him alternative and productive citizenry. In the cycle of human life decay is inevitable; and in time, man is reduced to a scarecrow-impotence, "a tattered coat upon a stick." Byzantium, epicenter of religion and art, is the mythic destination of an aging poet who seeks validation in "the artifice of eternity." Yeats believes in the immortality of art: it not only staves off this decay but also offers escape from this harrowing cycle of living and dying, of productivity and degeneration. Byzantium becomes that spiritual space which allows him asylum, and confers on him status beyond a mere "paltry thing." There in this holy city, his soul can "clap its hands and sing, louder sing/for every tatter in its mortal dress" (217). In *The Prodigal*, Walcott approaches mortal transcendence from a less optimistic angle. There is no consolatory Byzantium, no "sages standing in God's holy power" pointing him to the transformative potential of the imagination to stave off the annihilation that old age brings.

Where poets such as Keats had been reassured of the capacity of art to immortalize human life, Walcott is less certain. Reflecting on his earlier monumental ambition, when his world was young, when he felt as artist that he had the time, space and privilege to paint his Caribbean space into being, he now considers the quality and validity of his craft: "were your life and work simply a good translation?" (61), and questions his way of envisaging his world: "and have I looked at life, in other words, / through some inoperable cataract" (61). He considers too the possibility that having left, he has been forgotten, now that he has returned with "the smell of cities in his clothes" (59) and "the change / of character that the grunting swine could smell" (60). Self-styled as the "remorseless revenant" (97) Walcott offers a brutal review of his artistic endeavors, this derogation of later life marking the aging body as a sign of loss, be it of identity or of kinship ties. If once he had believed that he could be immortalized through art, now looking back at his poetic achievements, the persona resorts to a somewhat disconsolate assessment of his *metier* and submits a querulous summary of his artistic life:

. . . all delight exhausted in the craft,
 and from a life-long siege of the theatre
 dull detonations of bewildering failure,
 limpness and lassitude, the mockery of power,
 paralysis of the unfinished draft. (96)

¹¹ William Wordsworth, *Essay: Supplementary to the Preface*. Quoted in Andrew Bennett's "On Posterity", p. 131

He is aware too that while he has been called the “Greatest living poet writing in English”, great praise indeed, this rings of what Don Chaisson in his review of *The Prodigal* called an epitaph. Even while he claims this to be his last book, the very act of writing is his way of reaching for immortality.¹² Thus in spite of the encroachment of physical death, there remains always the possibility that art will render him eternal.

However, should the critical reception to his art fail in that respect, Walcott takes comfort in another kind of reception—that bestowed on the prodigal son returning home. In the earlier cantos of *The Prodigal*, there was the constant thematic vacillation between regret at having left home (“frequent exile turns into treachery” (6)) and the defiant justification that leaving was essential because “there is no echo in the name Gros Ilet, no literature, no history. . . ” (28). Rehearsed or real, the resolution to this debate occurs in the last two cantos of the poem, the quiet settlement into an appreciation for the place of origin, what Walcott in his conversation with Mochama explains as the satisfying of “the subliminal urge . . . to return to your home, especially if it is an island.” Sense of self is now being constructed in relation to home, the familiar environment, whose anchoring signposts allow reconnections when travel has rendered all else unfamiliar. *The Prodigal* can be read as both a cultural and mental travelogue—a reminiscing of European cities he has visited, the metropolitan spaces he has inhabited and the Caribbean places he has made himself at home in. But it is also in the present—the poet’s journey around the island of St. Lucia and the reaffirmation of landscape. He is able to glory in the wild beauty of the precipices of Les Cayes, the reefs of Praslin, and the spray of the insomniac Atlantic. These constitute part of what he had once referred to as “the enclosing harmony” (93) and evoke as much wonder as the experience of visiting historic European cities that he had always longed to see. Thus as the poem establishes, old age has not hindered Walcott’s capacity and ability to travel; albeit he may not be able to travel to faraway places, but he is still able to do some traveling in and around his island home.

Now this autobiographical poem, through a series of rhetorical maneuvers, gradually arrives at a reconciliatory position which, in accepting aging as inevitable, comes to terms with the vexing socio-cultural implications of aging so as to celebrate the life now being lived in a Caribbean space. Biting critique of the cost of fame passes into stoic reflection, and the final canto is a taking stock as it were of what he had done as artist and the appreciation that he is still able to produce. The constant shifts from the first and third person, subjective to the objective, devaluation to testimony suggest the dichotomy which exists between the impulse to eulogize and the tendency toward self-pity. It marks the tension between the poet who declares himself unafraid of death, who understands very clearly that death does [not] mutter: “maybe I will skip this one” (86), and the persona who reads the aging process as an adventure from which there is no return. The poet knows that he ought to be celebrating past accomplishments -- “Be happy; you’re writing from the privilege / Of all your wits about you in your old age” (99) -- even if this celebration occurs within the context of questionable posterity, “the death-mask of fame” (84) which he perceives to be gradually hardening. In this final canto, on the boat trip from the northernmost town of Gros Islet to the bay of Soufriere, he is guided by the indulgent smiles of the captain, towards an appreciation of island wonders:

. . .the young captain kept on smiling, I had never

¹² In 2010, Derek Walcott published *White Egrets*, a collection of poems that returned to the themes of aging and death. Grateful that he is still writing at eighty, in this latest collection Walcott seems to be writing his own valediction –albeit one that is muted by anxiety about a withering poetic voice.

seen such belief in legend, and then, a fin-hint!
 not a crest and then splaying open under the keel
 and racing with the bow, the legend broke water
 and was reborn, her screams of joys
 and my heart drumming harder, and the pale blue islands
 were no longer phantom outlines and the elate spray
 slapped our faces with joy and everything came
 back as it was . . . (103)

Accepting of transience, Walcott's *The Prodigal*, comes dramatically to rest in the concluding affirmation of angels and dolphins that accompany one to journey's end, what in the fury of his young and impatient life, the poet had dismissed as myth. The evocation of dolphins, known to be super-intelligent creatures and celebrated in many cultures as having divine properties, becomes a metaphor of renewal, the valorizing of an artistic self that will always live in the aging poet—a self who is continually inspired by the sea. Walcott now returns to a vision of his young and optimistic self, one who looked with wonder at his world, who can express child-like enthusiasm. These reactions undo his previous moroseness about the diminishing mobility of an aged body. The act of memory transliterated into art brings an end to the earlier dejection about the place of the aging artist in Caribbean society. The soaring language deployed in the description of the dolphins confirms the artist's powerful and undiminished imagination. If, as Walcott had mentioned to Mochama, there was a sob in his claim that *The Prodigal* was his last book, that sob seems to be silenced here. Reinvigorated by seascape, his once-alienated self is now reconnected to the land, to the people, and to his essential self through a form of journeying which in its circumnavigation evokes what, in *Poetics of Relation*, Edouard Glissant had described as a circular nomadism, one that makes every periphery into a center and one that ultimately abolishes the idea of center and periphery (29).

Defined constantly by journeying, *The Prodigal* now embarks on yet another excursion, one that is itself infinite and maybe harbor-less. If Shakespeare's Hamlet had feared death as an undiscovered country from which no traveler returns, Walcott seems to anticipate this final adventure as one that cannot be interrupted by the debilitation of old age, one that is impelled by what Wordsworth in *The Excursion* describes so aptly as "the sublime attractions of the grave" (116). At the end of the poem we are left with the sense of resolution born out of the process of what in "Fragments of Antillean Memory" Walcott described as excavation and self discovery. In his circumnavigation of his island, the poet is once more reminded that the sea washes clean the travails of the past, and that the sea has always been a major source of his poetic energy.¹³ Acceptance, appreciation and gratitude now wipe clean the jaundiced eyes of a self-pitying persona:

. . . are washed clean in the sea-wind, I feel
 Brightness and sweet alarm, the widening pupils
 Of freshly familiar things that have not moved
 Since childhood, nouns that have stayed

¹³ In Walcott's works, the sea has been a powerful and elemental force that connects life and art. It has provided him with what Patricia Ismond identifies as "fresh indigenous metaphors". In a 2010 interview with Christian Campbell, Walcott again attests to the refuelling that occurs when he sees the sea. He goes on to connect landscape to artistic inspiration.

To keep me company in my old age. (99)

Aspects of the provincial life that he had once discounted, had once thought needed ennobling by ascribing to them a classical vocabulary are now valorized because of their constancy; these have not changed even while his traveling had changed him. It is these newly brightened eyes that now provide poetic record of the beauty of the island to which he has returned—an island painted richly with memories of life with Roddy, the twin brother who waits for him on that shore of death. The poem's concluding lines evoke the last light to which the ship of life now carries him, one where "there was only one subject—Time" (90), one which he happily sails to, if only because he is the incurable vagabond who is glad to still be traveling.

It also evokes the light which Walcott in an interview with Nancy Schoenberger in 1983 had explained as the poetic clarity which the artist arrives at when he is finally reconciled with home. Speaking to the necessity of exile as a revolt against the authority of his antecedents, Walcott had conceived of a circle of rupture and reconciliation: the artist needed to "delineate himself from his background so that he can be in it distinctly, so that he could be outlined within that background" (88). Return however was the final curve of the circle, and was what moved the artist to greatness. More than twenty years after this interview, Walcott offers *The Prodigal* as a poetic rendition of this discourse of return. The poet persona is, as he had propounded to Schoenberger, initially governed by a "bleakness beyond nostalgia" but in the end achieves "a kind of powerful radiance, very serene and very clear, which is the completion of return, and not the senility of a return to second childhood" (88 – 89).

The Prodigal nonetheless allows Walcott to explore more than the completion of circles of artistic identity formation. In his current establishment of old age as shaping and defining his identity as a poet, this long poem provides Walcott with the theoretical platform from which to explore Caribbean age studies – that is the theorizing of how age as an identity category interfaces with culture within Caribbean societies. While his wrestling with his mortality, in playing to all the negative, culturally-derived preconceptions we have of aging, can hardly be described as a constructive approach to senescence, by virtue of it being thematized in *The Prodigal* as a prominent concern, Walcott allows us to extend our interpretive horizons to address an issue that has yet to receive critical attention within Caribbean literary discourse: "Old man coming through the glass, who are you? / I am you. Learn to acknowledge me" (86). *The Prodigal*, in spotlighting the aged, makes this acknowledgment possible. The challenge remains for Caribbean writers to free the aging process from biomedical, sociological, historical and in some instances, colonial regimes of knowledge and to recalibrate it in terms of our sociocultural particularities. Place attachment and the power of familiar landscape offer such a freedom. In imaging a new old age, Walcott represents home in a way that fills out any remaining gaps in his identity, in the process fashioning for himself another form of self representation. Place of origin does not define him, nor do his migrations explain him. Instead at seventy-something his identity is constructed as ongoing, ". . . getting no nearer, or nearer, the more/ the bow's wedge shuddered towards it, prodigal / that line of light that shines from the other shore"(105).

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