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Every brightening minute: *Morning, Paramin*, by Derek Walcott and Peter Doig

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Towards the end of *The Prodigal* (2004), the late Derek Walcott suggested that this collection might have been his last book. Thankfully, we were lucky enough to have four more: the poetry collection *White Egrets* in 2010 - which won the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry - followed, in 2012 by *Moon-Child*, a revisitation of Walcott's 1958 *Ti-Jean and his Brothers*; two years later Walcott published the play *O Starry Starry Night* - where he dramatises Paul Gauguin's visit to Vincent Van Gogh in Arles in 1888 - and, a few months ago, in November 2016, appeared *Morning, Paramin*, a new collection of poems.

Morning, Paramin, however, is a collection of poems with a difference: bringing together Walcott's deep and long-lasting passion for poetry and painting, the volume stages a sustained dialogue between fifty-one of Walcott's poems and fifty-one paintings by the contemporary artist Peter Doig. Walcott and Doig met a few years ago, when Walcott was visiting family in Trinidad, the island where Doig has been living since 2002. Born in St Lucia in 1930, Walcott had a very strong bond with Trinidad: not only has he frequently celebrated its natural beauty and vibrant culture in his poems, plays, paintings, and essays but in 1959 he funded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop and wrote for the *Trinidad Guardian* for

many years. From a more personal perspective, his two daughters, who were born after he married the Trinidadian Margaret Maillard in 1962, still live in Trinidad with their husbands and Walcott's five grandchildren. Born in Edinburgh in 1959, Doig lived in Trinidad between the age of two and seven, when his family moved to Canada. He returned to the island in 2000 for a short visit and two years later decided to relocate there from London, where he had been mostly living and working since he was nineteen.

Since his arrival in Trinidad, Doig has played an active role in its cultural life: amongst other things, he has held workshops for the inmates of one of the island's prisons and, with the artist Che Lovelace, son of the Trinidadian writer Earl Lovelace, he has been screening films in his large studio for a group of local viewers interested in non-mainstream cinema. Walcott pays homage to Doig's activities by including poems inspired by three of his advertising posters, two of which are for documentaries dedicated to Trinidadian culture, namely, *Van Dyke Parks Presents The Esso Trinidad Steel Band* (2004) and *Pure Chutney* (2004). Walcott's poems are affectionate reminiscences of going to the cinema in his youth, vignettes of the enthusiastic but 'broke' audiences who resorted to 'storm[ing]' the cinema to avoid paying their tickets to see Hollywood stars like Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson, Peter Lorre, or Jack Palance (59, 61, 63). The inclusion of Doig's posters and the reference to film also encapsulate the interplay between images and words which characterises *Morning, Paramin*, a collection in which the visual and the verbal 'cohere' and 'ignite,' as Walcott always hoped they would (*Another Life* 58-59). Walcott's poems, in fact, do not speak *about, to* or *for* Doig's works but, one could argue, they speak *with* them: each time we turn a page we are faced with a new composite work where words and images combine in often surprising and always engaging ways.

The opening poem, 'Dedication to S.H.' sets the scene and provides us, from the very beginning, with one of these startling combinations: as Walcott welcomes his new friend. Doig to St Lucia, the poem initially zooms in on Pigeon Island and the landscape one can view from Walcott's balcony. Then, temporality shifts between present and past and the poem zooms out of the balcony to encompass the entire island as Walcott names, in a -loving inventory, some of St Lucia's most striking landmarks and the places he used to frequent as a youth -Gros Piton, Dennery, Choc, Blanchisseuse (3). The painting by Doig which faces the poem -*J.M. at Paragon* (2004)- presents us with a beach where we can see, from a distance, a man standing, up to his waist, in the sea. The scene is rendered in colours which, as is often the case in Doig's work, suggests that we are looking at a scene which, like the one described in the Walcott poem, is partly- imagined, partly-remembered and partly a reality: the sky, for example is bright red and the horizon is a fiery yellow line. The interplay between the actual, the dreamt, and the recollected, becomes even more complex as the juxtaposition of poem and painting offers us access to a geography of home inflected by the pride of naming and belonging, the generosity of sharing, the elation of a new beginning, and the grief of loss. In this almost hallucinatory visual and verbal compound, the ghostly-white bather in Doig's painting transmogrifies into and becomes the embodiment of the benign lingering absent/presence of Walcott's friend and fellow poet Seamus Heaney, whose initials we find in the poem's dedication and with whom Walcott used to share the same view he is now offering to Doig.

The title of the collection, *Morning, Paramin*, reveals that Trinidad is the *trait d'union* between poet and painter as both their names appear on the cover next to Paramin, one of the highest points of the Trinidad Northern Range and one of its most striking landmarks. *Morning, Paramin*, in fact, sounds like the title for a landscape painting and, in a way, one could argue that the collection can also be seen as a collaborative, complex, and

multifocal landscape of Trinidad to the creation of which Walcott and Doig contribute, each in his own way. Their collaboration is predicated on trust and admiration: the opening poem in which, as we have seen, Walcott offers Doig the view from his St Lucia's balcony (and the island's scenery as a whole), is a mark of his confidence in the painter's ability to paint the Caribbean with a sensitivity which makes no concessions to the idealisation, exoticism, or insulting condescension that have often characterised misrepresentations of the region.

To appropriately represent the Caribbean has been a crucial and lifelong purpose for Walcott: in *The Prodigal*, when he was fearing that he was running out of time, he exhorted himself, once more, to 'make each place / as if it had just been made, already old, / but new again from naming it' (*Prodigal*, 99). A painter himself, Walcott knew that painting can share the burden and the benediction of naming: if, in his poetry, he has more than honoured the pact he had made in his youth, with the late St Lucian painter St Omer, of painstakingly recording 'in paint, in words ... all of [St Lucia's] sunken, leaf-choked ravines, / every ... inlet ... / each ochre track' (*Another Life*, 52), then paintings like *Boy on a Wall*, *Rat Island* (1989), *Gros Ilet Church II* (1999) or *Breakers, Becune Point* (1995) are also kept promises. In *Morning, Paramin*, Walcott's poems, the work of a Caribbean poet and painter with a deep understanding and profound knowledge of both art history and painting techniques, often highlight how truly impressed Walcott was by Doig's skills but also by his commitment to and love for the island. In the two poems which face Doig's *Cyril's Bay* (2009) and *Grande Riviere* (2001-2001), his renditions of two stunning locations on the north coast of Trinidad, Walcott argues that 'you can tell a / good painter by how much he loves the place' (93) and insists that Doig loves Trinidad's 'lowering green emptiness' as 'hard' as he does (49). This is crucial because, as Walcott has declared in his Nobel Lecture, the acts of 'loving' and 'returning' to a landscape to stay there (as Doig has done with Trinidad) is what turns a 'traveller' not only into 'the lover of that particular part of earth,' but into 'a native' (Antilles,

77). At the end of *Morning, Paramin*, however, Walcott goes even further and inscribes Doig in the Trinidadian landscape, no longer as its painter but as a constituent part of it, ‘just one of those things / that a *corbeau* passes’ (103).

A deeply-felt love for the landscape is so fundamental to Walcott because, faced with the astounding beauty of the Caribbean landscape, ‘the sigh of History dissolves’ (*Antilles*, 68). The natural beauty of the region, he believes, had a profound and salvific effect on those who had been transported to the Caribbean either as detribalised Africans or indentured Indian workers: according to Walcott, **in fact, the** never-ending promise of renewal and the daily sense of elation inherent in the region’s geography played a crucial part in enabling these slaves and servants to transcend the degrading condition in which they had been forced to descend. *Morning, Paramin* elaborates on the enduring healing power of the Caribbean landscape with the pairing of Doig’s *Music of the Future* (2002-2007) with Walcott’s poem of the same title. In Doig’s landscape painting, sky and sea reflect and mirror one another taking up two-thirds of the work while a small central strip is allocated to a human settlement. Walcott’s poem is both starscape and soundscape: as darkness falls, we are told, more and more stars become visible and, while constellations slowly fill up the sky, the sound of breakers becomes increasingly intense until it turns into an ‘ovation’ (23). Here, the combination of poem, painting, and their shared title invites us to identify the breakers’ ovation as the titular ‘music of the future’ which has sustained and inspired (and continues to do so) the people of the Caribbean, who have witnessed, and continue to witness, astonishing natural spectacles like the one described by Walcott. In other words, taken together *Music of the Future* / *Music of the Future* exemplify ‘survival,’ which Walcott considers to be ‘the visible poetry of the Antilles’ (*Antilles*, 75).

This poetry of survival, according to Walcott, is also rendered in the way in which Doig, with ‘a skill achieved by mental membership,’ paints the ‘stock poor, bareback’ streets

of Port of Spain (95). This endorsement for the painter is contained in 'A Lion Is in the Streets III,' one of the four poems in *Morning, Paramin* which face paintings by Doig in which lions are presiding over the streets of Port of Spain. Lions, representing Haile Selassie, the returned Messiah and 'Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah' of the Rastafari Movement, are a recurrent motif on the walls, billboard and galvanised fences of Port of Spain. In the poem 'A Lion Is in the Streets I,' Walcott pays tribute to Haile Selassie's dignity and courage by remembering the moving and forceful speech with which, in 1936, Selassie denounced the Italian invasion, Italy's use of lethal chemical weapons and, ultimately, the League of Nations' inability or unwillingness to protect his country and his people. Walcott's poem, however, begins with a Salvation Army choir singing about the Lion of Judah breaking every chain and leading to victory, a recollection from the time when Walcott was living with his late mother and siblings in Castries, St Lucia. Walcott lost his father Warwick, who died of mastoiditis, when he was only one year old so his mother Alix, who was headmistress of the local Methodist Infant School, took in sewing to make ends meet and support her three children, Derek, his twin Roderick and their oldest sister Pam. Praising the 'triumphant spirit' of the Salvation Army cornet, Walcott also remembers his mother's faith and determination: 'for my mother, sewing, there was no defeat' (95).

Walcott's poem, a hymn to fortitude, perseverance, and tenacity, is put in dialogue with Doig's *Rain in the Port of Spain (White Oak)* (2015) where a lion circulates freely in front of a yellow brick wall. This yellow wall, with its small green barred window and thin door, is a composite of the walls of the Trinidad's Emperor Valley Zoo and of the prison of Frederick Street, in the centre of Port of Spain (Doig 2015-16). An inmate, whose face is barely perceivable from behind the barred window, observes the lion from inside: the painting as a whole offers a powerful display of pent-up energy, might, and endurance, a mixture of fierceness, resilience and survival which characterises those who (like Selassie

and Walcott's mother, but also Caribbean people as a whole) are locked in an unfavourable predicament but do not give up or give in.

Doig has explained that the central location of this prison in Port of Spain allows the inmates to hear the carnival raging outside while they are locked inside, an observation that explains his choice of title and parenthetical subtitle which are also evocations of Trinidad's Carnival: *White Oak* is the brand name of the official rum that sponsors the Carnival and which is advertised by the slogan: 'When it [White Oak rum] pours, you reign' (Doig 2015-16; Shiff 47). In the following painting in the collection, *Young Lion* (2015) the titular lion appears to be trapped in the corner of a room of which we can see only two yellow walls and in front of a shut green door: since the colours of walls and door are those of Port of Spain's prison and zoo, the adjective 'young' might be gesturing to the fact that, distressingly, most of the convicts in Port of Spain's jails are young men between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. For a viewer familiar with the Trinidadian capital city and its streets, however, Doig's painting stages a subtle inside-out (rather than upside-down) Carnavalesque re-imagining of the world: the green door behind the lion is in fact one of the entrances to the prison seen from the outside where the yellow wall recedes and turns a corner and the costume he wears (a black hat with a turquoise feather) identifies him as a solitary but 'free' carouser. Doig's paintings, therefore, seem to suggest that, despite being confined in a disadvantaged situation, inmates can draw on the Carnival tradition, its questioning of social hierarchy and on its energising strategies in order to trigger inner individual transformation and re-envisage their own position.

The transformative nature of carnival performances is also brought to the fore by Walcott in a poem entitled 'Man Dressed as Bat' which is inspired by Doig's *Man Dressed as Bat (Night)* (2008) and revisits, re-crossing it in empowering ways, the animal-human boundary which is questioned in Doig's Carnival-related lion paintings, and was once erased

by the institution of slavery which always lurks behind carnival performances. Bats are amongst the most ancient Carnival characters in Trinidad and are creatures of the night who originally associated with formidable figures like vampires and devils and have the power to fly and 'see' in the dark. Here Walcott's poem and Doig's painting are both in conversation with a third artist, the Trinidadian Embah whose sculpture of a man dressed as a bat inspired Doig's work. Walcott's 'Man Dressed as Bat' offers a light-hearted dramatization of an encounter between a Trinidadian *mas* player (a man dressed as a bat for the Carnival celebration) and a person whose reactions to the man/bat are voiced directly in the poem.

The intense locality of Carnival and the artist Embah's commitment to his community are echoed in the colloquiality and vernacularity of the language in which the poem is composed: 'What the arse was that? [...] Get a broom and juck it,' shouts the speaker who responds to the man/bat as if it were a threat from which it is impossible to free oneself --the words with which his speech and the poem end are, significantly, 'wait, he coming back!' (41). The immediate, conversational tone of this poem is orchestrated by Walcott but the speaker's voice reaches us directly (there are no introductory lines or inverted commas), a rhetorical strategy that reminds us that Walcott was also an accomplished playwright and finds its visual echo in the fact that, towards the edge of Doig's man/bat's wings, paint is applied in a way that gives viewers the illusion of transparency without ceasing to be matter. The different 'layers' in this complex and composite artwork (*mas* player, sculpture, painting, poem and, finally, the synergistic combination of words and image) also signpost that museums and art galleries are not the only sites which can make art available to the general public: in Trinidad, in fact, important artistic forms like Carnival and its related activities are of the streets and on the streets and audiences play a crucial role in their production.

The influence of Trinidad on Doig, therefore, is evident in his choice of motifs as well as in the vibrant colours and hues of his palette, as testified by a quick look at his pre-

Trinidad paintings which have Canadian mountains and snowscapes as their subjects. Many of the paintings that enter in a dialogue with Walcott's poems in *Morning, Paramin* have specific Trinidadian villages, landscapes, seascapes, and urban streets at their core but Doig seems well aware that landscaping Trinidad also requires a sharp understanding of, and an active engagement with, not only its natural landscape but its culture too. It is no coincidence that the site that Walcott has chosen for the title of the collection, Paramin, is not just an astonishingly beautiful location but also a microcosm of the variety of languages, traditions and heritages one can find in Trinidad. Many of its inhabitants, in fact, are of French Creole descent (some still speak French Creole) and others are the descendants of Venezuelan cocoa workers who, according to some, introduced Parang, a form of popular music still sung in Spanish on the island. In December, in fact, Paramin hosts the largest Parang Festival in Trinidad, making it an important site for Trinidad's musical tradition. The subject of the painting by Doig which we find on the front cover, *Untitled (Paramin)* (2004), is a figure which embodies Paramin's social history and culture, namely a *jab molassie* or blue devil. *Jab molassie* is French patois for *diable* (devil) and *mélasse* (molasses) and the *jab molassie* is a devil who, during carnival, is smeared with a blue dye and threatens to besmear bystanders unless they are prepared to pay him not to do so.

Doig's painting captures very well the threatening aura of the *jab* but also, more profoundly, the way in which the blue devil is haunted by the legacies of slavery, oppression, and exploitation which always lurk behind Carnival performances of resistance and possibilities. Doig's *Untitled (Paramin)* also reappears in the collection, paired with a poem by Walcott which shares its title with it and in which Walcott too brings to the fore the importance of local culture. Walcott's here celebrates those creatures of the Caribbean night like *diablasses*, *loup-garous*, *douennes* who, despite being neglected in favour of classical mythology and mainstream English literature (the word 'untitled' in the title, if seen in this

context, seems to signpost this neglect), are -like Paramin's blue devils or Carnival's men/bats- powerful manifestations of local folklore but also metaphysical enigmas and disquieting muses à la De Chirico (who is mentioned in the poem), and crucial stepping stones for artists who want to confront the island's heritage and its collective memories (44).

A figure with a similar demeanour to that of the *jab molassie*, is found in Doig's *Untitled (Jungle Painting)* (2007), a painting which is juxtaposed with a poem which has 'Paramin' as a title. Doig's image is once again compelling and enigmatic: is he ambushing us or is he being ambushed by us? Have we startled him or is he emerging from the thick of the foliage to reassure us? Is the figure enticing us to follow him into the secrets of the jungle or would he like to join us? In relation to this particular combination of verbal and visual, one gets the sense that Walcott chose the paintings with which to write his poems as much as the paintings chose him, striking deep, often personal chords. If Walcott's poem rhymes with Doig's work in its intimations of lush vegetation, this time it takes a much more intimate turn: the startling presence presiding over 'Paramin,' in fact, is Walcott's ex-wife Margaret, who died in 2014. In a moving series of recollections, Walcott revisits the time when he and Margaret lived together in Trinidad and the name Paramin used to make them laugh as if it contained a "deep, deep secret" (35). Notably, 'Paramin' is the seventeenth poem in the collection but, apart from the dedication, the first one in which Walcott does not use as a title the title of the painting by Doig which accompanies it. This disruption of the, by then, established rhythm of the conversation between poems and paintings amplifies the disruption that the death of beloved friends and family members brings in the life of the living, one of the recurring themes in this collection.

The poem 'In the Arena,' for example, begins with the words 'It is five' (93) which resonate with 'A los cinco de la tarde' ('At five in the afternoon'), the opening line of one of the most famous elegies ever composed, Federico García Lorca's *Llanto for Ignacio Sánchez*

Mejías (1935, *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*), written to commemorate the death and celebrate the life of Lorca's friend, a bullfighter killed in the arena or 'plaza' of Manzanares by the bull El Granadino. In the poem, Walcott insists that 'every day is a bullfight' which claims its victims as he remembers the death of Margaret and of his own friend, the Trinidadian writer and journalist Raoul Pantin (93). The pairing of the poem with Doig's painting *Cyril's Bay* (2009), reinforces the link between contemporary Trinidad and 1930s Spain: Doig's rendering of Cyril Bay visually evokes the 'dulces nieblas y profundas orillas' ('sweet mists and deep shores') of the river which channels the lament of the men mourning Ignacio in the third movement of Lorca's elegy and who find their counterparts in the melancholy 'Pagnols' of Walcott's poem who still 'think' of Trinidad's 'hills as Venezuela' (93). In 'In the Arena,' where 'everything dies from its desire,' and nostalgia and death are powerful presences, salvation and regeneration, once again, come from the landscape: every time dusk falls, we are reminded, 'the sky puts on its suit of lights as a / glowing roar rises from the mountain's plaza' (93).

Arguably, in fact, if the title *Morning, Paramin* reminds one of a landscape painting and can be seen to contain a tribute to Trinidad's multicultural fabric, its two words also sound like a salutation where the affirmative, hopeful vitalism of "morning" (the start of a new day) is deeply intermeshed with the poet's personal mourning and the grief caused by the demise of loved ones: amongst the ones who Walcott remembers here are the poets Heaney, Joseph Brodsky (mourned in the poems juxtaposed to Doig's lion paintings where Walcott capitalises on the fact that they were exhibited in Venice, a city that Brodsky deeply loved and whose symbol is the lion of St Mark) and, as we will see, Mark Strand, the playwright Arthur Miller (who also stayed in Walcott's cottage in St Lucia), , Robert Devaux who devoted most of his life to study the history, culture and ecosystem of St Lucia and whose death Walcott refers to in 'Pelican Island,' a poem which denounces

environmental degradation), the Trinidadian Pantin and Margaret, clearly the one most intimately associated with Paramin.

The same inner contradiction between morning and mourning --which also characterises Lorca's ultimately life-affirming lament where death is counteracted by creativity and the arts-- is encapsulated in the poem 'Purple Jesus (Black Rainbow)' which begins with the poet saluting the world ('Good morning, world!') on a fine, sunny day. As the recollection of the death of loved ones sinks in, however, the poet finds himself facing a potentially soul-destroying, hard-to-believe emptiness (83). In the painting juxtaposed to this poem, *Purple Jesus (Black Rainbow)* (2006), a huge area of blue, is interrupted, only at the very top, by a rather thin horizontal line of light blue; its two focal points (a purple Jesus-like figure and a dark rainbow) are situated at two opposite angles. Since the figure, the rainbow and the thin light blue line are almost dwarfed by the 'empty' blue expanse, it is up to us to decide what to make of it or how to fill this 'void'. As the painting offers a visual illustration of the emptiness that death leaves behind, the poem reveals that it was through art and poetry (namely, the very act of writing and orchestrating his words with Doig's images in *Morning, Paramin*) that Walcott found the strength to confront the deep grief caused by the loss of loved ones (here he mentions Strand and Margaret who both died in 2014) as he was also contemplating his own mortality. The poem is concluded by an ambivalent line which, as it melancholically informs us that the 'day declines with every brightening minute,' still reaffirms that every declining day is still made up, and full of, brightening minutes (83).

The two extremes of morning and mourning also shape the way one feels when the elation with which one would like to celebrate the publication of this new work is counteracted by the desolation caused by Walcott's recent death on 17th March 2017, barely four months after the appearance of *Morning, Paramin*. Many a times one contemplates the void his disappearance has left behind in utter disbelief, like the dog who, in Walcott's

‘Purple Jesus (Black Rainbow),’ ‘shakes a slipper between his teeth, doubting its emptiness’ (83). After Walcott’s passing, each pairing of poem and painting in *Morning, Paramin* has become an even greater gift, one of those ‘brightening’ minutes we feel we should celebrate even in the face of decline or loss; at the same time, however, each of these luminous and illuminating gifts make Walcott’s death more difficult to accept: as he himself laments, after dear friends pass away, ‘light makes life harder to understand’ (83).

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