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# Audubon, Another Vision

## Derek Walcott's "White Egrets" and Adam's Task of Giving Things Their Names

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### Abstract

In Derek Walcott's "White Egrets" (2010) the titular birds play a central role in the conversation that the poet opens up with the ornithological artist John James Audubon. Audubon's work is the fruit of complex negotiations between life and death, humans and animals, real presences and emblems. Walcott's examination of these negotiations enables him to reconsider Audubon's poetics and ethics of representation whilst rearticulating his own. Walcott referred to poetry (and painting) as "Adam's task of giving things their names": a statement that might be taken to suggest an exploitative perspective and an anthropocentric approach which dismisses the need to treat nonhumans ethically. "White Egrets," instead, emphasizes interaction rather than prevarication, showing that "naming" the world can only be significant and regenerative if the "things" to be "named" play their part in the creative process rather than being sealed off from the human world in order to be reified and exploited.

### Keywords

Walcott – Audubon – environmental imagination – animals – *White Egrets*

Derek Walcott's *White Egrets*, his latest collection of poems, has often been described by reviewers as a book preoccupied with aging and death. *White Egrets* does in fact contain many poems dedicated to late friends and public intellectuals such as the playwright August Wilson, the Barbadian journalist, diplomat and jurist Oliver Jackman, the Jamaican novelist and journalist John Hearne, the Martinican poet, essayist, and politician Aimé Césaire; in a poem

where he remembers the Caribbean actors Wilbert Holder, Claude Reid, and Ermine Wright, Walcott highlights the importance of making “a shrine” in his head for those he perceives to be vulnerable to the ravages of time: “quick, quick, before they all die” (71). Walcott also bravely faces his own mortality throughout the collection: in the sequence of eight poems entitled “White Egrets,” which will be under scrutiny here, he contemplates his own “ending” “with the leisure of a leaf falling in the forest, / pale yellow spinning against green” (9) whilst looking at the beautiful Santa Cruz valley in Trinidad. The *genii loci* of “White Egrets” are the birds which give it its title and play a central role in the conversation that the poet opens up with John James Audubon, North America’s iconic naturalist and ornithologist and the artist for whom, Walcott writes, the white egrets in front of him “keep modelling” (8). Audubon’s work is the fruit of complex negotiations between life and death, destruction and creation, brutality and beauty, humans and the animal world, the outdoors experience of the wilderness and the indoors reality of the studio, real presences and emblems: Walcott’s close examination of the nature of these negotiations, as we will see, provides him with an opportunity not only to reconsider Audubon’s politics and poetics of representation but also to rearticulate his own.

Walcott’s engagement with Audubon’s drawings is not an exploration of the differences between poetry and painting but a reassessment of the ethics which underpin all forms of representation, as it seems to be calling into question what shaped Audubon’s artistic endeavor both in terms of methodology and experience. I will be arguing that, despite being concerned with death in many ways, “White Egrets” forcefully reiterates Walcott’s belief in the power of renewal of the natural, or, more specifically, animal world: rather than presenting the nonhuman world as inert, dispensable and, ultimately, at the disposal of his artistic vision, Walcott’s “White Egrets” restates Walcott’s commitment to a poetry and poetics which reflect, respect, and enter in an interactive dialog with it. Walcott has referred to poetry (and painting) as “Adam’s task of giving things their names” (Walcott 2009:152), a statement that might be taken to suggest a domineering and exploitative perspective as well as an anthropocentric approach which disregards the need to treat nonhumans ethically. George Handley has compellingly argued against a reading of Walcott’s adamic imagination (he uses the lowercase purposefully) as a neocolonial claim for possession of the land or as a simplistic yearning for innocence which refuses to engage with history (Handley 2010); here, I will show how “White Egrets” casts the creative process as interaction rather than prevarication and makes it clear that naming and renaming the world can only be a truly significant and regenerative activity if the “things” to be “named” play their part in the creative process

rather than being artificially sealed off from the human world in order to be tamed, reified, silenced, exploited, mastered and, ultimately, forced to lose their "nature" in more ways than one. Anthropocentrism and speciesism are unsurprisingly central to Audubon's vision, and they can also be seen as different manifestations of the discourses which, in Walcott's Caribbean, have sustained colonialism, the practice of slavery, the destruction of the environment and, more broadly, as Val Plumwood insists, the obliteration or occlusion of alternative modes of understanding the interplay between humans and nonhumans (Plummer 2001). Elaine Savory has brilliantly investigated the role played by flora in Walcott's environmental consciousness and aesthetic decisions (Savory 2011): I will focus here on the way in which Walcott challenges the "natural" prioritization of human interests and attempts to readdress this power imbalance by acknowledging the ability of the animal world to contribute to the shaping of human-animal interactions and to affect and mold aesthetic choices.

In the opening poem of the "White Egrets" sequence, the egrets "wiggle their beaks and swallow" while the poet contemplates a future when "the morning shadows [will] lengthen across the lawn" and when "you, not they, or you and they, are gone" (6). The pronoun "you" refers to the poet who is addressing himself ("the quiet ravages of diabetes" the "you" suffers from have troubled Walcott for years) but, implicitly, it also forces readers to share, at least momentarily, the poet's own sense of impermanence and precariousness. The word "gone," in fact, can be interpreted in different ways: first of all, the poem explains that the lawn in question is in the Santa Cruz Valley in Trinidad, an island Walcott often visits but where he does not live permanently.<sup>1</sup> However, the reference to a time when his "shadow passes with all its sins / into a green thicket of oblivion" (7) suggests that Walcott might also be thinking of a form of absence which has more to do with his own demise than with his transient life. As for the egrets, we are told that they too tend to appear on the lawn intermittently: "I hadn't seen them for half of the Christmas week ... but they are back" (9). When he predicts a time when the egrets might be "gone," therefore, he might be alluding to their migratory pattern, to the natural death of the specific flock he is observing or, since he is alert to the degradation of Caribbean biodi-

1 Walcott has close links with Trinidad: in 1959 began to write for the *Trinidad Guardian* and founded the Little Carib Theatre Workshop (later Trinidad Theatre Workshop) in Port of Spain which he ran until 1976; in 1960 he married the Trinidadian Margaret Ruth Maillard, who had a keen interest in the cultural life of the island and was key to the success of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. While his son Peter (from his previous marriage with Faye Moyston) lives in St Lucia like Walcott, his two daughters Elizabeth and Anna, who were born in Trinidad, live in the Santa Cruz Valley.

versity, even to the possible disappearance of that particular species. According to Caribbean Birding Trail, there are currently seventeen critically endangered birds in the area, four of which are probably already extinct. Egrets are not currently listed amongst these disappearing birds—in *White Egrets* Walcott writes that they “speckle [all] the islands” (8)—but in the late nineteenth century they were on the verge of extinction in the United States because the plumes of some subspecies like the Snowy Egret or the Great Egret were in great demands for decorative purposes.<sup>2</sup> The National Associations of Audubon Societies—founded in 1905 to safeguard North American birds—played a crucial role at the time in the protection of egrets and other birds from plume hunting and other forms of threat.

The nineteenth-century onslaught of egrets and herons is not directly discussed in “White Egrets” but, as we have seen, Walcott writes that the birds in front of him “keep modelling for Audubon” (8), namesake of the Audubon societies and author of, amongst other works, *The Birds of America*, described at the time as “the most magnificent monument ... yet ... raised to ornithology” (Irmscher 1999:189). *Birds of America* consists of a collection of 435 images engraved, between 1827 and 1838, in aquatint on huge sheets of paper measuring 29½ × 30½ inches called double elephant folio sheets. The plates of *The Birds of America* are complemented by *Ornithological Biography*, a five-volume series of essays published between 1831 and 1839 and considered by some to be “the single most influential work of natural history and art in the nineteenth century” (Tyler 1993:2). Audubon’s 1821 and 1832 drawings of egrets, “the most delicate and ethereal of American herons”, were considered particularly poignant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century precisely because the species was on the verge of extinction (Slatkin 1993:208). Walcott’s interest in Audubon’s work is not surprising: he is a keen painter and a fine connoisseur of art history and many of his poems, plays, and essays contain references to artists whose aesthetics and politics he reinterprets from his unique perspective. Walcott has been familiar with Audubon’s work since he was a teenager: one of the texts which introduced him to art and deeply influenced him, namely, Thomas Craven’s *A Treasury of Art Masterpieces*—a book Walcott identifies as his personal ‘museum’ (Walcott 2009:78)—does contain reproductions of Audubon’s work, including one of the “Snowy Heron or

2 It has been reported, for example, that in 1902, “about a ton and a half of Great Egret plumes were sold in London to decorate women’s hats, a quantity that would have required the slaughter of close to 200,000 adult Great Egrets and thus the destruction of two or three times that number of eggs and young to which the adults were devoting themselves during that season” (Slatkin 1993:210).

White Egret" (Craven 1939:451). Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh have astutely observed that this particular color plate from Craven's book might have inspired some of the lines of the long autobiographical poem *Another Life*, even though Audubon is not directly mentioned in it; they also point out that the young Walcott might have been struck by Craven's evaluation of Audubon as someone who "brought to his birds the imagination of a poet and the hand of an artist" (Baugh & Nepaulsingh 2009:213-4). I will argue that the older Walcott might have returned to Audubon in his latest collection because the artist represents to him more than a felicitous fusion of poetry and painting.

Many features of Audubon's drawings are naturally appealing to Walcott-the-poet but also to Walcott-the-painter and Walcott-the-man-of-theater: for instance, they are impressively dynamic and deeply dramatic in essence, movement is always perfectly balanced, space composition is carefully calibrated, and both group arrangements and representations of a single specimen are skillfully staged.<sup>3</sup> Audubon's drawings are also characterized by a very distinctive rendition of light: he believed that his representation of birds "ought to be entirely devoid of shades in all their parts" (Audubon 1999a:756) and it has been noted that his egrets in particular appear as if immersed in a tropical light at noontime where the intense brightness illuminates each detail equally (Gopnik 1991:96). In his Introductory Address for his *Ornithological Biography*, Audubon declares: "I received *light* and life in the New World" (Audubon 1831-1949:vol.1 p.v; emphasis mine) and in his writing he repeatedly refers to the United States as his "native land" (i.e. Audubon 1831-1849:vol.2 p.1;vol.4 pp. 8, 37;vol.5 p.11) but it is worth remembering that he had been exposed to the distinctive light of the tropics in the first six years of his life when he lived in the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Born as Jean Rabin in 1785, the illegitimate son of Jean Audubon, a French plantation owner, and Jeanne Rabin, a creole woman who died shortly after his birth, Jean Rabin moved to France after the first stirring of the slave rebellion of 1791 to join his father, an ex-planter who had left the colony four years earlier. His father's French wife promptly adopted him and he was rechristened Jean Jacques or Fougère Audubon. In 1803, Jean Jacques Anglicized his name to John James to avoid being drafted into Napoleon's army and relocated to the United States to look after his father's property in Mill Grove, near Philadelphia (Rhodes 2004:3-4). The reference to Audubon in "White Egrets," therefore, also allows Walcott to continue his

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3 It is no surprise that George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein for a long time entertained plans for creating a ballet based on Audubon's life and work.

engagement with artists whose Caribbean origins tend to be forgotten as it is the case for the St Thomas-born Camille Pissarro whom he has celebrated in *Tiepolo's Hound*.

Audubon's immensely ambitious task of illustrating all the birds of North America was carried out with remarkable stubbornness. His project, unprecedented both in scope and detail, remains unique to this day and both his unflinching commitment and his remarkable achievement resonate with Walcott's urge to record every minute detail of his native island, a decision he took very early in his life. When he was still a teenager in St Lucia, Walcott began to paint under the guidance of the artist, historical researcher, and amateur botanist Harold Simmons, who tirelessly promoted the study of the island. In *Another Life*, we are told that Walcott and his friend Dunstan St. Omer—who also studied with Simmons and is now a prominent St Lucian painter—“swore” that they would never leave St Lucia “until [they] had put down, in paint, in words ... all of its sunken, leaf-choked ravines, / every ... inlet ... / each ochre track” (Walcott 2009:52). St Lucia's geographical sites, its flora, its fauna, and its people, however, are not systematically cataloged in Walcott's writing as mere illustrative entries but appear in his work in accordance with, and as a result of, his personal engagement with each particular place, group, or individual at specific moments of his life. A similar autobiographical impulse also governs Audubon's *The Birds of America*: it is worth noting, in fact, that his birds are not listed according to any particular order or status but in relation to Audubon's own fieldwork journeys. The *Ornithological Biography*, the textual counterpart of what is represented in the drawings of *The Birds of America* and which has been described as Audubon's own diary or as “a kind of autobiography written in birds” (Gopnik 1991:102), also follows Audubon's own movements and is interspersed with references to his travels and peculiar experiences (“The Ohio,” “The Prairie,” “Improvement in the Navigation of the Mississippi,” “Kentucky Sports,” “A Flood,” “The Earthquake,” “The Hurricane”). If Audubon's ambitions do chime with those of the young Walcott, however, the immediate contexts in which Audubon and Walcott operate are dramatically dissimilar. Audubon's nineteenth-century North America, which was mythologizing “the wilderness” whilst also affirming its triumph over nature, differs in important ways from a contemporary Caribbean increasingly vociferous about the many threats posed to its environment. These contextual dissimilarities, enhanced by the ongoing production of literary works and ways of reading increasingly shaped by what Laurence Buell (1995) has called the “environmental imagination” and by what many perceive as the current widespread and urgent need to rethink and resituate the species boundary at the center of one's enquiry (Huggan & Tiffin 2010:6), contribute to affect the artists' perspectives and shape their

attitudes toward their subject matter, their artistic sensitivity, and, ultimately, their aesthetics.

"White Egrets" indicates that Walcott remembers seeing Audubon's egret "in a book / that, in [his] youth, would open like a lawn" (8). The analogy between "book" and "lawn" can be explained if one considers the size of Craven's 1939 edition of *A Treasury of Art Masterpieces* which, as Walcott points out in *Another Life*, was a "large black book" (approximately 13"×10"×2").<sup>4</sup> However, it is possible, indeed likely, that Walcott's memories of Craven's book might have blended with those of the images contained in the even more oversized *The Birds of America*. In "White Egrets," in fact, Walcott mentions directly only Audubon's "Snowy Egret or White Heron" (8) but he swaps Audubon's (and Craven's) nomenclature: in *The Birds of America*, in fact, the bird was cataloged as *Snowy Heron or White Egret* (plate 242<sup>5</sup>). This (conscious or unconscious) chiasmus seems to suggest that Walcott's visual referents are in fact all the three plates of white egrets/herons included in *The Birds of America*.<sup>6</sup> We know that Audubon found egrets a very challenging subject to "imitate" and that he produced three different drawings for the *White Heron*: in the one which was finally engraved as plate 386, he worked very hard to render in great detail the bird's breeding plumage which, at the time, was becoming increasingly sought after for ornamental purposes (Slatkin 1993:210; Stebbins 1993:19–20). In both Audubon's *Snowy Heron or White Egret* and *White Heron* some of these feathers are shown in all their beauty and have an almost three-dimensional quality because of the white heavy impasto which was applied in narrow and dense lines to reproduce them (Audubon 1999b:763; Fishman Snyder 1993:60–61). The bird's tail in *White Heron*, for example, looks like a "cascade of plumes ... sufficiently translucent to reveal the dark marsh grasses behind them" (Slatkin

4 Baugh and Nepaulsingh suggests that Walcott was probably using this edition in his youth (212–13).

5 All the plates for *The Birds of America* have been made available online by the University of Pittsburgh as part of the Darlington Digital Library [<http://digital.library.pitt.edu/a/audubon/plates.html>] and are accompanied by the text of Audubon's *Ornithology Biography* from which I quote in this essay. In the entry for *Ornithology Biography* in my bibliography I follow the classification of Darlington Digital Library and include the name of the Scottish naturalist William MacGillivray next to Audubon's because he edited the text, corrected the grammar, and helped to write the scientific descriptions (Rhodes 2006:345).

6 Namely, plate 242 *Snowy Heron or White Egret*, plate 281 *Great White Heron*, plate 386 *White Heron*. Notably, in the title of the poem and the collection Walcott follows the nineteenth-century ornithologist's nomenclature: *Snowy Heron or White Egret*.

1993:214), a depiction that might have triggered the line in Walcott's poem, "the egrets are the colour of waterfalls" (9).

Audubon was largely self-taught as a painter—in *Ornithological Biography* he refers to Jacques-Louis David as his master but this connection has been repeatedly disputed (Audubon 1831–1949: vol.1 p.viii; Irmscher 1999:198,313n19; Stebbins 1993:3). He began his career by drawing birds motionless and in profile following the conventions of natural history illustrations. However, he always restrained from portraying more than one species in a single image as it was customary at the time but opted instead, from the very start, to individualize his specimen and their actions: in many ways, in fact, Audubon was a man of his time, a time when individualism and self-reliance were emerging as cornerstones of the American way of life and the scope of opportunity represented by the open frontier (Irmscher 1999:195; Rhodes 2004:57). Audubon, who was not a university-trained naturalist, considered himself legitimized (and vindicated) as a "student of nature" (Audubon 1831–1949: *passim*) by his intensive fieldwork and his first-hand experience in the woods.<sup>7</sup> In his introductory address to *Ornithological Biography*, in fact, he openly identifies himself as an "American Woodsman" (Audubon 1831–1949: vol.1 p.v) and the subtitle of the book clearly specifies that it is *An Account of the Habits of the Birds of the United States* which he personally observed and studied before drawing (emphasis mine). The life-size drawings reproduced in the engravings for *Birds of America* are also testament to his centering of fieldwork experience as they revolutionized the traditional format for zoological books: rather than showing animals on a blank page and removed from their natural habitat, Audubon often portrays his birds surrounded by carefully selected and appropriate branches, flowers, fruit, and insects and engaged in some of the activities Audubon had been able to examine during his numerous travels.

In order to complete *The Birds of America*, Audubon explains that he had to leave both the comfort of his home and the warmth of his family behind and "t[ake] to the woods" (Audubon 1999c:3–4). Wilderness and the human world, instead, are not as dramatically separated in "White Egrets", where Walcott does not have to move from the settlement in which he finds himself in order to admire the birds: the egrets come to visit him on a "bright lawn" (6) in the Santa Cruz Valley, at the edge of Port of Spain. Port of Spain is Walcott's "ideal city" because, amongst other things, it is surrounded by "accessible country-

7 It is worth mentioning, however, that he was proud to include an impressive list of fellowships and memberships to learned societies in the title page of both *Birds of America* and *Ornithological Biography*.



side ... spacious plains," "mountains" and "the sea," and animals—he mentions birds and horses—still live in close proximity to humans (Walcott 1998:74). "White Egrets" is shaped by this sense of continuity between "home" and "the wild," by "an understanding of place-making as a culturally inflected process in which nature and culture must be seen as a mutuality rather than as separable domains" (Buell 2005:67), and by an environmental imagination which depends on and celebrates this reciprocity between nature and culture: as we will see, Walcott appears transformed by his encounter with the egrets that co-shape the poem with him just as much as his transformative art turns them into a poem. Echoing Audubon, Walcott depicts his egrets—mostly referred to as a collectivity rather than as self-reliant individuals—as immersed in, and as constituent parts of, their complex and hybrid environment: the birds appear on a lawn near the house in which the poet is staying but also next to olive trees or cedars, on river-banks, in mangrove marshes, in cattle pastures, flying over ponds, fleeing from hurricanes or as part of ensembles which also feature other animals such as parrots, hawks, ibises, heifers, worms, and grubs (6–10).

As noted above, the focal point of both Audubon's descriptions and his drawings is the birds' behavior rather than their appearance. Aptly, the continuity between what Walcott sees on the lawn in the Santa Cruz Valley—namely, egrets that seem aware of "how well they look, strutting perfection" (8)—and what he remembers of the book/lawn of his youth—that is the elegant egrets immortalized by Audubon—is underlined by the recurrent adjective "stalking" which describes Walcott's egrets when they first enter the scene in poem i and then again in poem ii, vi, and viii. In Audubon's plate, the *Snowy Heron* or *White Egret* remembered by Walcott is slow pacing by a marsh in order to take its prey by surprise. Audubon was fascinated by the Great White Heron or Great Egret's stalking style, "its steps measured, its long neck gracefully retracted and curved" (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.4 p.601) and in his 1832 drawing of the *White Heron* (plate 386) he depicts the bird bending and pulling its neck back in order to quickly lunge it at one of its prey, possibly one of the shrimps, fish, or frogs hidden in the pond at the edge of which it is stalking. Audubon's drawing chimes with Walcott's description of his egrets that, in poem vii, are "dip[ping] their necks undulant, bending, / stabbing at worms," and have "darting necks" (9–10).

Audubon's *Great White Heron* (plate 281) goes further than his other drawings in showing these birds' predatory nature: the plate, in fact, does not match the initial description of the Great White Heron as a "newly finished statue of the purest alabaster" that we find in *Ornithological Biography* (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.3 p.546), but presents us with a bird intent in capturing its meal, an activity during which they "wait until [their prey] comes near [then] strike

it or swallow it alive or, when large beat it on the water, or shake it violently, biting it severely all the while" (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.3 p.547). *Great White Heron* is only one of Audubon's numerous drawings of hawks, eagles, and various birds of prey caught in the act of capturing or eating defenseless animals: the *Fish Oak* (plate 81), for example, is portrayed in flight whilst holding a fish firmly in its claws, the *Winter Hawk* (plate 71) is carrying a bleeding frog in its talons, the *Golden Eagle* (plate 181) is clutching a white rabbit with one of its nails stuck in its prey's eye, the *Great-footed Hawks* (plate 16) are devouring a Green-winged Teal and a Gadwall and the *American Sparrow Hawk* (plate 142) is immortalized whilst it is about to eat a dead sparrow. Sometimes, birds which appear as predators in one plate return as preys in another, and, in his works, Audubon also records various examples of violent intraspecies competition.<sup>8</sup> In *Ornithological Biography* too, narratives of predatory behavior like the one which describes the Great White Heron fishing habits are not difficult to find: for example, the Red-tailed Hawk is described whilst "fall[ing] upon [a squirrel], [it] seizes it near the head, transfixes and strangles it, devours it on the spot, or ascends exultingly to a branch with the yet palpitating victim in its talons, and there feasts at leisure" (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.1 p.266). Overall, therefore, it is fair to say that Audubon did not restrain from revealing the fragility of life in the natural world or what has been called the "pitilessness of nature" (Hughes 1997:153).

When Audubon commented on birds' habits, however, human and social relations were never far from his mind: critics have observed that he often anthropomorphizes his birds, turning them into emblems of human behavior much like the allegorical fables of Lafontaine which he deeply admired; many believe that in his work he was "rarely able to move beyond the structure of the moral tale" and have found in both his drawings and in their textual counterparts "the cad, the ardent lover, the bully, the faithful spouse, the good parent, the buffoon, and even the gout-ridden old gentleman" (Meyers 1993:53,50). Audubon's explanation for his interest in the avian world also seems to be colored by the consequences of the political and social unrest that he and his family had witnessed both in Saint-Domingue and in France. In the autobiographical "Myself" (which, it has to be said, is not altogether reliable account of his life and origins), Audubon recalls a bizarre "incident" which apparently happened when, as a child in France, he was attended by "one or two black servants" who had followed his father from Saint-Domingue, and which he

8 Irmscher (1999:223–25) explains that this aspect is particularly emphasized in the Royal Octavo edition of *Birds of America* where the plates were rearranged in a different order.

identifies as "one of the curious things which perhaps did lead [him] in after times to love birds":

My mother had several beautiful parrots and some monkeys; one of the latter was a full-grown male of a very large species. One morning ... "Pretty Polly" asking for her breakfast as usual, "*Du pain au lait pour le perroquet Mignonne,*" the man of the woods probably thought the bird presuming upon his rights in the scale of nature; be it as it may, he certainly showed his supremacy in strength over the denizen of the air, for ... he at once killed it with unnatural composure. The sensations of my infant heart at this cruel sight were agony to me. I prayed the servant to beat the monkey, but he, who for some reason preferred the monkey to the parrot, refused. I uttered long and piercing cries, my mother rushed into the room, I was tranquilized, the monkey was forever afterward chained, and Mignonne buried with all the pomp of a cherished lost one (*italics in the text*).

AUDUBON 1999d:765-66

The circumstances of Polly's death are (suspiciously) similar to many of the accounts of the behavior of black and white rebels during the French and Haitian Revolutions, as well as of the actions of the Jacobins during the Terror. Audubon's sympathy for the brutalized aristocracy (represented by Polly and the other "denizens of the air") is not surprising, given his father's position in Saint-Domingue and France and for someone who, for decades, actively encouraged the rumor that he was the lost son of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI (Gopnik 1991:97). The killer monkey, however, is called "man of the woods," an appellation that follows the way in which orangutans were named in popular natural history books of the time (Irmischer 1999:206), but also reminds one of Audubon's self-fashioning as a "woodsman" (Audubon 1831-1949:vol.1 p.v): arguably, this disallows easy identifications and self-identifications and also represents a (perhaps unconscious) admission that, later in life, the little child crying inconsolably for the dead parrot actually turned into a birds' killer, a change of role which, as we will see, Audubon did ultimately embrace but not entirely without deep anxieties.

In the drawing mentioned (but mis-entitled) by Walcott in "White Egrets," namely *Snowy Heron or White Egret*, the relation between the stalking bird and its prey is in fact further complicated by the figure of a hunter in the background who, rifle in his hands, seems to be stalking the bird in order to shoot it. In the *Ornithological Biography*, Audubon informs us that in 1832, when the drawing for the *Snowy Heron or White Egret* was made, egrets were often hunted for their meat: "when in good condition its flesh is excellent eating, especially in

early autumn when it is generally very fat. Some may be seen for sale in the markets of New Orleans and other southern cities" (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.3 p.320). Great Egrets and White Herons, as I anticipated, were also "shot in great numbers" for their plumes; in order to give an idea of the number of specimens which were killed for what he calls, somewhat disparagingly, "ornamental purposes," Audubon recounts the story "of a person who, on offering a double-barrelled gun to a gentleman near Charleston, for one hundred White Herons fresh killed, received that number and more the next day," and reports the words of one of his friends who, in one day, killed forty-six Great Egrets for stuffing and to provide "the ladies" with "feathers for their fans." Many more were killed during that expedition, Audubon's informant continues, but the hunters did not retrieve them because they fell too far; apparently indifferent to this gratuitous waste, he also adds that "many more might have been killed" but he and his companions simply "became tired of shooting them" (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.4 pp.603–4). The hunters' "tiredness" might have derived from the fact that Great Egrets were not very difficult to capture during their breeding season when they became "more careless of themselves": as Audubon explains, at that particular time they "allow themselves to be approached, so as often to fall victims to the rapacity of man, who, boasting of reason and benevolence, ought at such a time to respect their devotion" (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.4 p.602).

It is not unusual for Audubon to represent humans less favorably than birds but it would be wrong to take his condemnation of "the rapacity of man" as an indictment of what we would now call speciesism and as a reevaluation of the placing of humans and human priorities in relation to other species. One should remember, in fact, that if James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*, published in 1823—when Audubon was beginning to realize his dream to draw all the birds of America—does contain a harsh criticism of indiscriminate slaughter of pigeons, the first laws for the protection of game were introduced in parts of the United States in the late 1930s–early 1940s (Irmscher 1999:214). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, shooting birds was still common practice for bird painters as it was not easy otherwise to study them close-up: telescopes were not entirely accurate and photography had not been invented yet (Hughes 1997:153). All in all, however, Audubon was an enthusiastic hunter: he did very occasionally capture birds to sketch them while he kept them in captivity but, for the most part he killed them, and, most disturbingly, he killed them in great quantities, very often, by his own admission, in far greater numbers than necessary (Irmscher 1999:227–31,207–8). The hunter (or woodsman, or, indeed, "man of the woods") with his shotgun in *Snowy Heron* or *White Egret*, therefore, might well be him: after all, Audubon has been

often immortalized by others as a hunter clutching his rifle.<sup>9</sup> In *Ornithological Biography*, in fact, only a few lines after his disapproval of man's "rapacity," Audubon readily admits to have taken advantage of the egrets' imprudent tendency to allow humans to come near them during the breeding season and even provides some tips (as he does repeatedly in his books) for those who, for whatever reasons, are "intent on procuring" them:

Make for some tree, and desire your friend to start the bird. If you are well concealed, you may almost depend on obtaining one in a few minutes for the Egrets will perhaps alight within twenty yards or less of you. Once, when I was desirous of making a new drawing of this bird, my friend John Bachman followed this method, and between us we carried home several superb specimens.

AUDUBON 1831-1949:vol.4 p.603

Evidently, hunting birds for Audubon was both a pleasure and a duty: some might have been part of his diet when he was out in the wilderness but he mostly killed to be able to carefully measure, weigh, and examine birds and to acquire a better understanding of their appearance and diet. In *Ornithological Biography* he explains that many of the Snowy Egrets he had "opened contained nothing else [but shrimps] in their stomachs" (Audubon 1831-1949: vol.3 p.319) and concludes his description of the Great Egrets with a detailed drawing of oesophagus and stomach (Audubon 1831-1949:vol.4 p.606). The importance of his task, he believed, required him to put aside any feelings he might have had for his prey:

We shot a Spruce Partridge leading her young. On seeing us she ruffled her feathers ... and rounded within a few feet of us to defend her brood; her very looks claimed forbearance and clemency, but the enthusiastic desire to study nature prompted us to destroy her, and she was shot, and her brood secured in a few moments.

AUDUBON 1972: vol.1 p.401

9 See, for example John Syme's portrait (1826), George Peter Alexander Healy's portrait (1838), John Woodhouse Audubon's portraits (1841—with Victor Audubon—and 1843), and Thomas Waterman Wood's portrait (1893). It is possible that the hunter in the background in *Snowy Heron or White Egret* (plate 242) might have been drawn by Audubon's assistant George Lehman whose work, however, was rarely credited by Audubon (Stebbins 1993:19). Incidentally, the "wild" protagonist of Cooper's *The Pioneers*, much like Daniel Boone, the settler of Kentucky, was an inspiration for Audubon (Irmscher 1999:214).

Predictably, Audubon has been seen as someone who represents “in a particularly acute way, the paradox of early-nineteenth-century Americans in the face of nature” because, as a naturalist and a hunter, “he assume[d] the pitilessness of nature, but this d[id] not diminish his respect, even his love, for his prey” (Hughes 1997:153). In the poem *Audubon: A Vision*, Robert Penn Warren presents us with an Audubon who was as “merciless” as his birds when he “slew them ... with his gun”: like them, the poem insists, he lacked “compassion” (Warren 1969:30). Yet, Warren continues, Audubon was also motivated by an intense “passion” (3), which not only implicitly distinguished him from the animal world (“what /Is *man* but his passion?” 3 emphasis mine), but was also a specific form of “love”: “What is love?”, Warren explains, “Our name for it is knowledge” (30).

In “White Egrets,” Walcott explores this ethical paradox but also complicates it by triangulating Audubon-the-hunter and Audubon-the-naturalist more immediately with Audubon-the-artist. The sequence, in fact, includes Walcott’s own description of a typical violent encounter between predator and prey. All of a sudden, in poem v, “a thought” surprises both poet and reader: “a hawk on the wrist / of a branch, soundlessly, like a falcon, / shoots into heaven, circling above praise or blame, / with the same high indifference as yours, / now dropping to tear a field mouse with its claws” (8–9). It is evident that Walcott’s hawk-and-mouse vignette is not something the poet witnesses on the Santa Cruz lawn but a “thought,” probably shaped by some half-remembered plates and descriptions from Audubon’s books and from the works of the writers who have engaged with them before him. In point of fact, if Walcott’s choice of words (“thought”) does rhyme with Audubon’s account of a Red-tailed Hawk moving as “quick as *thought*” in order to seize a squirrel (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.1 p.266; emphasis mine), there are no drawings of a hawk feasting on a mouse in *Birds of America*. Warren’s Audubon, however, is instead repeatedly presented as a *thinking* being whose thoughts shape, transform, and classify the world around him and establish his position in it:

Thought: “On that sky it is black.”

Thought: “In my mind it is white.”

Thinking: “*Ardea occidentalis*, heron, the great one.”

...

He leans on his gun. Thinks

How thin is the membrane between himself and the world.

3

Whilst playing fast and loose with his cultural references, Walcott’s hawk-and-mouse “thought” offers him and his readers the opportunity to *rethink* the

"thin membrane" that in Warren's poem separates man from the animal world he preys upon whilst confronting a situation which, indirectly but accurately, reassesses Audubon's activities as a hunter and, ultimately, his artistic practices and attitude to his subjects.

In *Ornithological Biography*, Audubon explicitly and unproblematically collapses important differences between himself and some of his birds when he equates the delight he got from securing his specimens to the satisfaction of birds of prey when they capture their dinner:

I prepared my double-barrelled piece, which I constantly carry, and went slowly towards [the Bird of Washington] ... I fired and he fell. With what delight did I survey the magnificent bird! Had the finest salmon ever pleased him as he did me?—Never. I ran and presented him to my friend, with a pride which they alone feel, who, like me, have devoted themselves from their earliest childhood to such pursuits and who have derived from them their first pleasures.

AUDUBON 1831–1949:vol.1 p.60

In "White Egrets," significantly, the aim of the hawk is "dropping" to "tear ... the mouse with his claws," not to eat it (9): the bird, in fact, is never portrayed while devouring its prey. Arguably, therefore, the dismemberment of the mouse that Walcott includes in his poem casts the death of the little rodent more as an unnecessary waste than as a particular level in the food chain, disallowing readers from dismissing it simply as another example of nature's feral but survival-driven "mercilessness." The hawk-and-mouse vignette in "White Egrets," moreover, ends with the prey being turned into "a dead *thing*" (9) and is further complicated by the use of the pronoun "yours" in relation to "high indifference" (8): in other words, both poet and readers are forced to ponder whether *their* "high indifference" toward what is conjured up in front of their eyes, namely the (seemingly unnecessary) capture, mangling, and reification of the mouse, is, in any way, defensible or even acceptable.

Walcott's use of the pronoun "yours" duplicates—but with a fundamental difference—a technique used by Audubon himself in many of his drawings where the focal point is a violent interchange between predator and prey and where viewers are also implicated in the killing. In *Great White Heron* (plate 281), for example, the bird's neck appears still contorted by the effort while the bird triumphantly holds in its beak a fish it has just captured: the composition is dominated by the arch formed by a diagonal line which goes from the claw of the bird's longest toe in the lower middle area of the painting to the tip of the beak, the highest point in the painting. This straight diagonal

line works as a counterpoint of the curved trajectory traced by the rhyming vertices of the progressively acute angles formed by the backward pointing heels of the egret, the bend of its neck and the junction of the upper and lower mandibles of its beak. While the bird's dynamism and energy are fully captured, the fish looks inert; its small, lifeless yellow eye creates a formidable contrast with the bird's bigger, fierce and sharp yellow eye, which is directed at, and implicates, the viewers. Clearly, Audubon presents the act of capturing the fish as, literally and metaphorically, the crux of the painting: both the straight diagonal line and the curved trajectory point upward and culminate in the dead fish, while the body of the fish traces a much shorter diagonal which goes in the opposite direction of the one which climaxes in the bird's beak. The encounter of the two diagonals forms an x or crux which the fact of being off-centered renders even more compelling. While the prey is presented as unimportant and expendable, one could argue that this crux signposts the predator's triumph which, according to Audubon, is supposed to bring delight and pride to the captor and, by extension, to the hunter/naturalist who identifies with him, and, ultimately, to the implicated viewer.

In some of the textual descriptions that accompany his drawings, Audubon involves (and implicates) his readers by resorting to the second-person pronoun: for instance, he opens his "Introductory Address" to *Ornithological Biography* by addressing his readers directly: "Kind Reader," he begins, "Should you derive from the perusal of the following pages ... a portion of the pleasure which I have felt in collecting the materials for their composition, my gratification will be ample" (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.1 p.v). Audubon's aim, however, is profoundly different from Walcott's as, in "White Egrets," the poet seems to encourage us to reject, or at least to question, our acquiescence to the expendability and reification of another being. Audubon's effort to reduce the distance between viewers/readers and birds, instead, is aimed, as noted above, toward a validation of his unique and extensive experience as a fieldworker; after conflating the pleasure that (according to him) birds take in capturing their prey with the delight he takes in procuring his specimens, he further conflates with both gratifications the enjoyment viewers might derive from his drawings. Audubon's collapsing of perspectives, therefore, works hand in hand with his endorsement of a specific aesthetics and narrative which have at their core the painter/hunter's decision to assume the "pitelessness" of nature as its own and to naturalize his actions by occluding the crucial fact that, unlike those of the birds he depicts, they are not directly dictated by survival instinct.

In "White Egrets," not only does the hawk-and-mouse interaction indirectly expose this fundamental slippage in Audubon's deceptive comparison between himself and his birds of prey, but it also challenges simplistic, let alone, tri-



umphalist, readings of the predator-prey exchange and foregrounds the pitfalls of an aesthetic predicated on prevarication. Audubon did cast his work as a whole as "the love-tale of a naturalist" (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.1 p.x) who, despite feeling occasionally sorry for his prey, felt perfectly entitled to sacrifice them to his urge to collect, classify, arrange, draw or, ultimately, to his "long[ing] to," as he puts it, "possess" his birds (Audubon 1999a:753). In *Audubon: A Vision*, Warren does not object to Audubon's sense of entitlement: according to him, "our name" for this longing or "love" is "knowledge" (30)—the possessive "our" clearly includes and implicates only the human readers—and, in an interview, he insouciantly referred to Audubon as someone "who destroyed beauty to create beauty and whet his understanding" (Sitt 1977:475). After inviting readers to question the "high indifference" toward the prey that Audubon seems to encourage in *Great White Heron*, Walcott's poem posits instead the violent and gratuitous end of the mouse as the consequence of "a love" which fosters nothing positive and that he equates solely with "pure punishment" (9). This "pure punishment," intriguingly, does not only affect the mouse: arguably, Walcott's predator, his hawk "caw[ing] on a dead thing," is more forlorn than triumphant (9). Walcott, therefore, illuminates some of the contradictions at the core of Audubon's enterprise as well as the nineteenth-century artist's own painful awareness of these contradictions. Interestingly, in *Snowy Heron or White Egret*, the human predator (who, as we have seen, could well be Audubon the "woodsman" or "man of the woods" himself) appears minuscule, vulnerable, and on the margin of the composition; the bird (his potential prey) is instead as a majestic creature which dominates both landscape and painting and seems almost impossible to "capture" for the human figure. As a matter of fact, if, as a naturalist and as a hunter, Audubon paradoxically assumed the "high indifference" of nature whilst still "loving" his prey, Audubon-the-artist uncomfortably struggled with another paradox: while he "wished for the entire possession of all [he] saw," he also realized that "the moment a bird was dead, however beautiful it had been when in life, the pleasure arising from the possession of it became blunted" (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.1 p.vii). "Possession" is obviously a crucial term, conjugating, as it does, the relationship between hunter and prey, man and animal—but also between the artist and his/her subject—in terms of domination, ownership and, ultimately, reification. Audubon's words, however, also alert us to the disappointment that this possession brings: arguably, the artist who "possesses" the (dead) birds sounds as miserable, frustrated, and disappointed as Walcott's hawk "caw[ing] on a dead thing" (9).

Walcott is not the first one to investigate Audubon's frustration: in a short story entitled "A Still Moment," Eudora Welty imagines the young Audubon

holding in his hands a beautiful and defenseless snowy heron or egret that he has just shot. In so doing, he meditates on the way in which his drawings, albeit beautiful, invariably fail to turn “a dead thing”—incidentally, the same words used by Walcott to describe the mouse killed by the hawk—into a “live thing” (Welty 1936:92). Audubon, we know, desperately wanted *his* dead birds to be “alive”—he insists that he “wished life with them” (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.1 p.vii)—and adds that what blunted the pleasure of ownership also triggered his desire to draw birds, a desire that further frustrated him because he was painfully aware that shooting (and possessing) specimens did not immediately translate into fully “capturing” them with his pencil: he admits, in fact, that for a long time, he was “giv[ing] birth to a family of cripples” (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.1 p.vii–viii). Audubon’s groundbreaking decision to portray life-size birds engaging in daily activities with “every portion” of each bird in its “natural size” (Audubon 1831–1949:vol.1 p.xii), therefore, might have been governed by his desire to depict nature “in her own Way, alive and Moving!” (Audubon 1999b:760), but it can also be seen as a strenuous attempt restore life into those creatures his “love” and urge to “possess” had both killed and reified—incidentally, the full title of *Ornithological Biography* refers to his subject matter as “the *Objects* Represented in the work Entitled *The Birds of America*” (emphasis mine).

In order to counteract death and reinstate movement and vitality in his works, Audubon experimented with “grotesque” “mankins” made of wood cork and wires; he also tried positioning dead birds in specific attitudes on a table where, unfortunately, they remained “dead to all intense and neither Wing, leg or tail could [he] place according to the intention of [his] Wishes” (Audubon 1999b:760). Audubon eventually created a new and unique method which rendered his specimen more responsive to his needs but, arguably, also further reified them: he arranged the freshly killed birds in his possession on a wooden board and fixed these numb and inert things with wires and pins in various postures and activities he had observed and was interested in portraying. Here is how he describes his first attempt at this macabre avian death ballet:

I pierced the body of the Fishing bird and fixed it on the board—another Wire passed above his upper Mandible was made to hold the head in a pretty fair attitude, Smaller Skewers fixed the feet according to my notions, and even common pins came to my assistance in the placing the legs and feet. The last wire proved a delightful elevator to the bird’s tail, and at last—the last Wire proved a delightful elevator to the Bird’s Tail and at Last there Stood before me the real Mankin of a King fisher ... Reader

this was what I shall call my first attempt at Drawing actually from Nature,  
for even the eye of the King fisher was as if full of Life before me whenever  
I pressed its Lids aside with my finger.

AUDUBON 1999b:761

Ironically, death, which he so passionately wanted to conquer (and occlude), continued to dictate the very modalities in which his work could be carried out: his new method of representation, in fact, obliged Audubon to finish his work very quickly, often in one setting which could last as long as fourteen hours, in order to limit as much as possible his own exposure to the stench of decomposition which emanated from his dead specimens (Irmscher 1999:218). The American woodsman's reconstruction of the wilderness and the wildness of birds in the domesticized space of a studio reduced formerly living birds to lifeless "mankins" soon to be surrounded by various props such as trees, shrubs, flowers, reptiles, insects (Audubon 1999b:753–54,757), but Audubon's tone is as triumphal as his *Great White Heron's* demeanor after the capture of the fish: in the above-quoted passage, it is evident how Audubon tries to manipulate his readers/viewers to regard his experiment as a complete and unquestionable success. In his "Introductory Address," however, with what sounds like boastful false modesty, Audubon invites his readers to "judge" for themselves how successful his drawings are at preserving what he calls "the *appearance* of nature" (Audubon 1831–1949: vol.1 pp.viii–ix,vii my emphasis): it is telling, in this respect, that he admits that the eye of what he calls the "real Mankin" of a Kingfisher is not "full of life" but "*as if* full of life" (Audubon 1999b:761). It has been noted how "drawn from nature"—the label Audubon appended to his watercolors—is an appropriately ambiguous definition: if "drawn" means "sketched," in fact, it can also mean "withdrawn" or "removed" from its natural context (Irmscher 1999:206–7). Audubon's crucified and carefully staged (dead) birds, fixed in "real-life" postures chosen by the artist because scientifically informative and pleasing to the eye, are strategically disconnected from the immediate circumstances of their capture (they hunt but, apart from very few exceptions, they are not hunted by men) and as removed from life and nature as they could conceivably be: they are representations of representations, ultimate emblems of an unbalanced power relation between man and animal and between artist and subject matter which refuse to lay bare the device.

In section v of "White Egrets," the deadly "thought" of the rapacious hawk is counterbalanced by what appears to be the actual sighting of a living egret "sailing into the frame then teetering to rest / with its gawky stride, erect" (8). Walcott calls this egret "egret-emblem," a compound that deserves attention (8). The word "frame" signposts that Walcott is aware that his egret is a com-

posite literary and artistic creation both of his own and of others—not only Audubon, but also, presumably, Welty and Warren. More surprisingly, however, in Walcott's dramatization of the encounter between himself and the egret, the bird is presented as a being which participates in the creation of this network of references and in its representation, a fact that significantly alters the power relations underpinning Audubon's work. Throughout the poem, Walcott's egrets have freedom of movement: they come and go as they please and their arrivals and departures impart a certain rhythm to the poem and affect the poet's mood. They are also creatively reimagined as having some form of control on the way in which they are represented: as we have seen, they seem to be self-consciously "modelling for Audubon" and are described not as "dead things" or as "mankins" arranged in postures chosen by the artist but as living agents willingly striking poses in order to actively participate in their immortalization. The egrets' demeanor, moreover, is capitalized upon also to broaden, in significant ways, the framework of the cultural references which the birds' presence might evoke, an inclusive move which, subtly, de-centers Audubon, Welty, and Warren as well as the haunting of death that their works contain. Walcott's egrets, in fact, are beings absorbed in the "mythical conceit / that they have beat across the sea from Egypt" (8) where, in ancient times, primeval herons with long feathers growing from the back of their head were representative of creator sun-gods and were considered symbols of anticipated rebirth in the Underworld (Hart 2005:48)

Clearly, Walcott here is projecting on the birds purposes and intentions which cannot be objectively verified as being their own, especially if one reads the reference to Egypt (plausibly) as an attempt to signpost the importance of African cultures in the Caribbean make-up. Walcott's anthropomorphism, however, is not necessarily anthropocentric, since it is mobilized to question the right of humans to be the only ones who can establish the parameters of their relationships with animals and to undermine the assumption that this is "naturally" the way things are. In Walcott's sequence, in fact, the human and the animal world, culture and nature are not posited as completely separate; consequently, his egret-emblem is not only a complex cultural echo but, *simultaneously*, also a living creature strutting around the poet as the landscape in which the bird moves—"cool green lawn," "forest / on the hill" (8)—situates it firmly in the Santa Cruz Valley's lawn with him. Walcott's "egret-emblem," therefore, emblemizes an energizing bond between the animal world and the poet's world and a fertile exchange between artist and subject matter in which both participate in the creation of a poem that, amongst other things, honors the continuities and reciprocity between the "wild" and the "domesticized": always in poem v of the sequence, in fact, an egret "astonishes" both

the "open page" of the book that the readers are holding in their hands and, simultaneously, "the page of the lawn" in the Santa Cruz Valley (8). For Walcott, "astonishment" is "the perpetual ideal": what is promoted and celebrated here is the ability to be "astonished" by the world rather than the urge to "possess" and master it and, at the same time, the necessity to stay faithful to the "nature" of what astonishes when the poet engages in the "naming" process. "Genuine people," Walcott has pointed out, must not be "patronize[d] ... by making them anthropological specimens" (Walcott 1996:271) and he has always warned himself and others against the "risk of submitting to the arrogance, to the spiritual vanity of transforming ... people into 'emblems' ... the danger [is] to presume that it is [the poet's] duty to make emblems or epitaphs out of people" (Fumagalli 2001:265).<sup>10</sup> This sensitivity to human reality here clearly also extends to the animal world.

In section vi of "White Egrets," the focus shifts, once again, from a single individual to the flock or species. After a short absence, the egrets are back on the Santa Cruz lawn where they continue to "stalk through the rain / as if nothing mortal can affect them" (9). Once again, Walcott does not set out "to hunt" the egrets, they come to him and, while he welcomes their return, he accepts and celebrates their independence and freedom of movement as they enter and exit the lawn as they please. Walcott's egrets appear unaffected by mortality not because the poem itself immortalizes them but because they seem to live according to their own rhythms, as if death itself did not exist. While Walcott carefully observes their behavior like a keen naturalist, the interplay between the human and the animal world (and between artist and subject) becomes rather complex. As we have seen, in Warren's poem, the "membrane" which separates man from the animal world is inextricably linked with Audubon's ability to *think* its existence; in "White Egrets," instead, Walcott recasts Warren's thin membrane (the poet's ability to think and, by extension, to establish similarities and to create metaphors) as a connector rather than as a separator. Lack of a common language between animal and humans has been identified as what guarantees distance, distinctness and exclusion from and of animals (Berger 2009:6). Walcott seems determined to bridge this distance and keen to learn and treasure the lesson that these birds, unbeknownst to themselves, may silently and freely impart to him with their "language beyond speech" (10):

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10 Walcott's (self-)warning against a writer/artist's "arrogance", or "spiritual vanity" is further complicated by the fact that, in the collection, the word "egrets" often rhymes with "regrets."

We share one instinct, that ravenous feeding  
 my pen's beak, plucking up wriggling insects  
 like nouns and gulping them, the nib  
 reading as it writes, shaking off angrily what its beak rejects,  
 selection is what the egrets teach

*White Egrets* vi:10

The line on which Walcott walks is a very fine one but the verb “to share” *rethinks* Warren’s membrane by underlining continuities between humans and animals; arguably, rather than anthropomorphizing the egrets, Walcott animalizes himself and his pen (an extension of his body) to the point that he seems to become part of the flock (“we share”). If, like Audubon, Walcott assumes the “pitilessness” of nature (the birds’ killing and eating of worms), the poet’s alleged mercilessness does not affect his subject matter—the egrets carry on unmolested—but is directed toward his own creative process as he discards inappropriate “nouns” whilst refining the expression of his vision. The emphasis here is not on individualism and self-reliance but on the poet’s longing to operate as part of a collectivity which teaches him how to find adequate words, images, and rhymes to portray his experience and enhance his individuality (“my pen’s beak”), an individuality which, crucially, is not synonymous with individualism and anthropocentrism. In lines that almost present us with a concentrated version of his *ars poetica*, Walcott expresses gratefulness to the egrets for teaching “selection” rather than destruction, and the patient, painstaking, slow process of “excavation and ... self-discovery” at the basis of poetry which is “perfection’s sweat” (Walcott 1998:70,69). Later in the collection, it is precisely the principle of selection embodied by the egrets that undergirds the association between a bunch of “torn poems” and a flock of white egrets “sail[ing]” from the poet “in a long last sigh of relief” (65).

The closing poem of the “White Egrets” sequence presents us with another egret or heron which Walcott remembers seeing in the Caribbean island of St Croix with the poet Joseph Brodsky. Walcott and Brodsky became friends in New York in 1977, after the death of Robert Lowell who was a mutual friend; Brodsky had open-heart surgery in 1979 followed by two bypass operations, and, as a consequence, his health was frail for many years: he died in 1996. Walcott and Brodsky’s awareness of the latter’s fragility turned “death” into the “unutterable word” which, as the poet reveals, always haunted them like “a third companion” (10). In Walcott’s poem, when a huge egret appears in the vicinity of the two friends, Brodsky immediately identifies it as a sepulchral harbinger of death whose arrival signposts the irruption of the unutterable into what would have otherwise been an idyllic afternoon by the pool. The

huge egret in question is “not still or stalking / but fixed in [a] great fruit tree” (10): the verb “fixed” reminds one of Audubon’s “dead things” fixed (or crucified) on wooden boards in suspended animation while the difference in size between the bird and the humans recalls Audubon’s *Snowy Egret or White Heron* (plate 242)—the image mentioned by Walcott in section iv—which presents us with an enormous bird and a minuscule man. It is significant, however, that for Brodsky the visual referent here is not Audubon: in fact, he describes the “huge bird” as “out of Bosch” (10).

Like Audubon, Bosch believed in the importance of showing reality in the most convincing and detailed way but one could argue that if Audubon offers us a shadowless world where terror and cruelty are presented as “natural,” Bosch instead parades in front of us a shadowy world where the supernatural power of evil is often visible (but not immediately decipherable) in all its might. Bosch’s subjects belong to a visionary and often diabolical and nightmarish reality and have been “interpreted” resorting to different explanations: Rosicrucianism, alchemy, astrology, Jewish gnosticism, utopianism, *avant-la-lettre* surrealism, the Adamites’s system of belief, as the expression of moralizing proverbs or songs, and as visual translations of well-known verbal puns and metaphors circulating at his time (Bosing 2012:7–9). Birds, either natural or imaginary, often feature in Bosch’s paintings: it has been estimated that his bird scenario surpasses his contemporaries tenfold and that he had an extraordinary knowledge of bird species (Cuttler 2012:183). Bosch’s triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*—which represent the Garden of Eden (left panel), the Garden of Earthly Delights (central panel), and Hell (right panel)—is the work that contains the greatest number of birds (Cuttler 2012:183). In the central panel, Bosch includes various gigantic birds: a robin, a goldfinch, a hoopoe, a mallard, a kingfisher, an owl, and a woodpecker, but no egrets. However, at the back of the same panel, on the top of the mid-left tower—which, following traditional iconography, probably marks one of the river flowing from the central fountain of life—one can spot a white bird much bigger than the humans it is portrayed with. A flock of egrets is also seen perching on the sharp, menacing, and bulbous poles extending from the blue tower in the front right. No specific symbolic value has yet been attached to these birds which are however associated with two of the four towers which have been interpreted as “forebodings of dark things to come” (Falkenburg 2011:152–53). Crucially, the egret which suddenly appeared to the two friends on the St Croix lawn and was read by Brodsky as a “sepulchral” messenger of mortality *à la* Bosch, is not a complex and composite egret-emblem like the “astonishing” one described by Walcott, but rather a mere emblem which has ceased to be a living creature in its own right in order to become a stand-in for the much-feared third

companion (death): it is significant, in this respect, that it is described as “something” out of Bosch (10; emphasis mine). In other words, that day in St Croix “the book of the lawn” was resolutely shut and, as a consequence, the garden and the pool could turn into a version of Bosch’s reinterpretation of the allegorical love garden in the central panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*: here oversized birds and fruits are portrayed similarly to—and anticipate the presence of—the everyday objects which, in the third panel of the triptych, assume gigantic proportions and turn into instruments of torture in Bosch’s “most exalted vision of Hell” (Bosing 2012:57).

What prevents the power of darkness and death evoked by this reference to Bosch to overcome and dominate the end of Walcott’s “White Egrets,” is, crucially, a flock of living egrets which forcefully reclaim their right not to be mere symbols but themselves. Their presence causes a dramatic change in the poet’s mood and urges him to reposition himself in the here and now: recovering from his flashback, Walcott observes the egrets while “now” they soar together in “noiseless flight” from the very lawn where the sequence started or “tack, like a regatta, the sea-green grass” (10). As a result, Bosch-based dark forebodings are substituted by a vision in which both the late Russian poet and the birds themselves are described as “seraphic souls” (10) and their benevolent influence on the poet’s mood is acknowledged and celebrated: the paradise lost of St Croix is replaced by the paradise regained of the Santa Cruz Valley where egrets are not just mere emblems but self-standing actors able to deeply affect humans and cause important changes in the way they feel and rethink the thin membranes which might (or might not) separate the animal from the human world but also the natural dimension from the spiritual one. Once again, “White Egrets” highlights the shortcomings of an aesthetics which considers the artist’s vision as something for which living creatures are to be “naturally” sacrificed, either by being slaughtered or, more subtly, by being transformed into stand-ins for something other than themselves, and offers instead an alternative approach which repositions man and animals together in the world in a relation which does not depend exclusively on the domination of humans, is not shaped to fit only their needs or to take into account solely their position, and does not consider the poet/artist as the only agent capable of influencing the process of representation. Walcott, as we have seen, has famously defined poetry (and painting) as “Adam’s task to give things their names”: the (usually neglected) possessive “their” in “*their* names” does not only highlight the importance of accuracy but, arguably, limits the absolute power and arbitrariness of the “namer,” challenges the fact s/he is to be perceived as the sole agent responsible for, and in charge of, “naming,” and questions and further complicates the ethical position of those who still



consider the extrahuman world and their subject matter merely as silent, disposable "possessions." Arguably, with 'White Egrets,' Walcott demonstrates that the poet cannot really give "things" *their* names if s/he is not prepared to rethink, interrogate, and reconfigure their "thinginess" and the act of naming does not rely on the namer's ability to tune in to their "language without speech" and be affected (or, indeed, "astonished") by the very presence and vitality of the "things" he is about to name. Or, as Walcott himself has put it: "No one is Adam. A noun is not a name you give something. It is something you watch becoming itself, and you have to have the patience to find out what it is" (Bruckner 1996:397).

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