

## Playing the Prodigal: Walcott's Variations on a Biblical Parable

Thomas Austenfeld\*  
University of Fribourg, Switzerland

### Abstract

The biblical parable of the prodigal son as told in the Gospel of Luke, ch. 15, provides Derek Walcott with a narrative frame and a literary convention within which to express his desire to return home to his Caribbean origins after a lifetime spent abroad. Walcott's volume *The Prodigal* (2004), especially in its third section, playfully alludes to Luke's text as the voice of the poet alternates between the positions of the son and the father in dramatizing a return to one's roots at the close of life.

**Keywords:** Caribbean poetry, parable, Walcott, prodigal son, postcolonial

*Frequent exile turns into treachery.*  
*The Prodigal, 6*

*"Anyway I can see Martinique from here."*  
*The Prodigal, 79*

Derek Walcott's 2004 book, *The Prodigal: A Poem*, discusses travels, returns, old age, love and loss, beauty, history, and the act of writing. Today, I want to focus solely on the thematic aspect of the title that demands we interpret the text biblically. A poem of both individual journeys and of a life's journey, this book plays with the biblical trope of the prodigal son, altering it in imaginative and irreverent ways to shed light on Walcott's large and recurring poetical topics; the familiar questions of exile, inheritance, history, ancestry, identity, relationships, and home. *The Prodigal* is also, like many long poems, a reflection on the craft of poetry itself.<sup>†</sup> Finally, it is consciously a poetic testament as the poet admonishes himself:

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\* Thomas Austenfeld is Professor of American Literature at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. He holds MA and Ph.D. degrees in English and American Literature from the University of Virginia and taught at American universities for twenty years before returning to Europe. Austenfeld is the author of *American Women Writers and the Nazis: Ethics and Politics in Boyle, Porter, Stafford, and Hellman* (2001) and the editor of *Kay Boyle for the Twenty-First Century* (2008) as well as *Critical Insights: Barbara Kingsolver* (2010). He has co-edited *Writing American Women* (2009) and *Terrorism and Narrative Practice* (2011). He has published scholarly articles on authors as diverse as Lord Byron, Wallace Stevens, Katherine Anne Porter, Peter Taylor, Thomas Wolfe, Josef Pieper, Derek Walcott, Louise Erdrich, Philip Roth, and Frank Norris, as well as bibliographic essays in the annual *American Literary Scholarship*. He is currently at work on a book about American poets' memoirs. Email: [thomas.austenfeld@unifr.ch](mailto:thomas.austenfeld@unifr.ch)

<sup>†</sup> Walcott always calls it a craft, never an art, always invoking both the artistry and the vessel, or, the idea of a little ship, as in 17, III, p. 96; also IV, p. 98. See also 95, line 1.

In what will be your last book make each place  
 as if it had just been made, already old,  
 but new again from naming it. (99)\*

As is appropriate with a poet whose theme is exile, it is the *places* that need naming. Since Aristotle, poets have been considered "makers"; in particular, they "make" by naming and thus renewing. Walcott, the ageing poet, once more renews himself in relation to the places he invokes in this poem.

"Naming" is an intrinsically biblical act, starting with Adam who names the animals. Naming continues from the Hebrew to the Christian Scriptures whenever Jesus is proclaimed to be something, whether he is named "king" by the magi visiting the manger, or "son" by the voice of God emerging from the clouds at his baptism in the Jordan or at the transfiguration, or "King of the Jews" by the inscription over the cross at Golgotha. Naming also concludes the parable of the prodigal son, as the father renews his relationship with both his sons by confirming their respective individual sonship. Exploring the exegetical details of Luke's parable allows us to consider the significance of the biblical trope within the many other topics raised in Walcott's poem, evaluate the results of focusing the narrative portion of the poem on a model antecedent story, and decide whether the title is, in the end, useful or merely overdetermined. A biblical parable is a clearly defined literary genre that observes certain conventions. Knowing those conventions allows us to see *The Prodigal* more clearly as a conscious act of literary reception and adaptation.

In the ongoing debate about Walcott's status as more Caribbean or more European poet, heightened by now into one of the key predicaments of his fame and status, a fuller understanding of *The Prodigal* can assist us as well. In his introductory essay to the special Walcott issue of *Callaloo*, Robert Hamner summarizes (and I paraphrase): Since the 1950s, Walcott has been the subject of a critical controversy—European or Caribbean, epigone or innovator, assimilationist or revolutionary—for which the poet himself "has never seen any viable substance" (1). While some Caribbean writers, like writers everywhere, may struggle with the problem of intellectual provenance, Hamner properly describes the situation as more of a critic's quandary than a writer's dilemma. In the case of *The Prodigal*, the quandary of influences actually yields useful information without detracting in the least from Walcott's poetic genius.

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\* Walcott has continued writing, of course, and in 2010 published *White Egrets*.

In addressing and elucidating this paradox, then, my side-by-side reading of the biblical parable of the prodigal son and Walcott's poem *The Prodigal* may reveal Walcott's particular genius that manages to assimilate without being assimilated, to learn through observation, and to teach without pedantry. The poet gently ironizes the postcolonial scholar's favorite term, mimicry:

To ascribe complexion to the intellect  
is not an insult, since it takes its plaid  
like the invaluable lizard from its background,  
and if our work is piebald mimicry  
then virtue lies in its variety  
to be adept. On the warm stones of Florence  
I subtly alter to a Florentine (70-71).

The European literary heritage has always been Walcott's playground for the exercise of his imagination, but extensive, sustained reference to the Christian scriptures, including parable, is uncommon in his earlier work. Clearly, Walcott isn't looking for spiritual comfort; at the rare moment when he utters words that sound like a prayer, "*e'n la sua volontade è nostra pace*," he immediately puns, "in His will is our pizza" (87). Instead, he exploits the trope of departure and return that the biblical story suggests. And the journey of the prodigal is qualitatively different from other journeys he has evoked in his work. Unlike in *Omeros*, for example, the underlying master narrative of *The Prodigal* is not an accidental yet ultimately heroic journey home to wife and hearth, but rather a journey begun in rebellion and completed in humble submission. For Homer's Odysseus, as for Walcott's Achille and Hector, it's the journey that counts. For the prodigal, instead, it's the homecoming, and especially the unexpectedly gracious reception, that marks the end of the journey and the intended goal of the narrative. When the father lavishes a feast upon his returned son, prodigality, the wasting of resources, has become prodigiousness. Walcott's absorption of the European literary tradition has been equally prodigious: far from remaining sterile or only imperial, the tradition in Walcott's poetic mind is the nourishing ground for a personal voyage of epic proportion.

For most English speakers, the word "prodigal" references specifically the story of the prodigal son told in Luke's gospel, chapter 15. We know the plot: a younger son asks for his inheritance, his father pays him off, the son leaves and wastes the money in a foreign

country, is miserable to the point of wanting to eat the food given to the pigs he is watching, determines to return and throw himself on his father's mercy, and arrives back only to be welcomed by his father before he has even uttered all of his apologies, and has a sumptuous feast celebrated in his honor. His elder brother, who has stayed with the father and toiled in his employ, is jealous and complains, but the father assures him that he is equally loved and justifies the lavish festivities.

The story is among the most famous of a series of parables told by Jesus and has inspired more literary responses than most others.\* The genre of the story is a parable. In the literary context of Luke ch. 15, it is one of three parables that address the return of the lost: preceding the prodigal son are the shorter tales of the man who goes after one lost sheep leaving the other 99 in the wilderness and of the woman who loses one of ten silver coins and proceeds to sweep the house until she finds it. "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Lk 15,10)<sup>†</sup>. The dramatic, extended tale of the prodigal son is the chapter's centerpiece. It is followed by the story of the dishonest steward who, called to account by his master, reduces the debts of his underlings so as to curry favor with them. The dishonest steward is praised for his cunning, since "in dealing with their own kind, the children of this world are more astute than the children of light" (Lk 16,9). Such a poignant and humorous conclusion, which acknowledges the imperfection of the denizens of our world, who are no angels by a long shot, is in keeping with Walcott's temperament as he uses the biblical text now jokingly, now in elegiac and mournful strains.

Walcott uses the word "prodigal" at least nine times, with the preponderance of instances occurring in the third and last portion of the poem, from sections 10 to 18; and he alludes to plot elements including inheritances, brothers, returning home, and pigs in many more places.<sup>‡</sup> Throughout the poem, the narrator performs gestures that oscillate between

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\* From anonymous late medieval dramatists via Voltaire, Lessing, Schiller, and Rilke all the way to André Gide's 1907 prose narrative *Le retour de l'enfant prodigue*, poets have considered themselves addressed by this tale (see Bovon 61-65).

<sup>†</sup> All biblical quotations are from the *Oxford Study Bible*.

<sup>‡</sup> "You did not venture far from your hotel. / Prodigal, in your untethered pilgrimage, / your shadow was your tutor and your guide" (30).

"...were like an umber study for a fresco / of The Prodigal Son" (59).

"A sow and her litter. Acknowledged prodigal" (60).

"Prodigal, what were your wanderings about?" (70).

"...psalms and pivot for the prodigal" (81).

a confessional "I" and a more distant, observant "he"; this prodigal is capable of self-abstraction: "In my effort to arrive at the third person / has lain the ordeal" (87). Calling himself a "prodigal" at those self-ironical, distancing moments affords Walcott a handy label; "prodigal" is one of those "nouns that have stayed / to keep me company in my old age" (99).

Luke's parable offers Walcott a thematic model. Following on his earlier autobiographical masks of Crusoe, Odysseus, and others, he now uses the prodigal son as a final pattern through which to illustrate his life as a poet. The story of *The Prodigal* is the story of a return. The prodigal son returns to his home, chastened by his experiences abroad, remembering that the place he came from wasn't so bad after all. He had gone abroad with gifts and funds but had squandered them—some biblical commentators seize on the elder son's observation that his brother has wasted the inheritance "with loose women"—and not gained the happiness he wanted. Above all, he remained an outcast when he became a hireling. His foreign master gave him work but disregarded his culture, his heritage, his religion, his dietary requirements: the prodigal son, you will recall, was offered pig's food for sustenance; an intolerable imposition on a Jew. Throughout his poetic history, Walcott has rarely evoked a sense of exile so beset with negative implications! Consequently, he celebrates his home island with an almost swaggering assurance in one of the poet persona's conversations with the rustling trees that suggest "the sound of Paris" (78): "You think here is enough?" "For me it is." / "Fine." "Anyway I can see Martinique from here" (78-79). What an ambiguous, multivocal reference! It's not Paris perhaps, but it is a reminder of French colonial power extending to the current day, isn't it?

Luke's parable also offers Walcott a didactic model. Parables customarily teach certain virtues arising from an unusual situation but with a generalized validity. The plot is specific but its characters are nameless, defined only by the family relationships of the actors to each other, and in this lies the story's power to do its didactic office. The younger son has not just left home in a headstrong act of self-assertion, he has ruptured the family. The family is torn apart by his decision to claim a portion of his inheritance and impetuously

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"Museums are the refuge of the prodigal" (93).

"O prodigal, / your momentary statue made by a traffic light" (93).

"...the prodigal's home / was the horizon" (104)

"the bow's wedge shuddered towards it, prodigal, / that line of light that shines from the other shore" (105, the concluding lines of the poem).

disappear with it, and the family's dissonance continues in the elder brother's petty jealousy upon learning what their father does to celebrate the unexpected return of the younger in reduced circumstances. In the end, the father has a great deal of persuading to do in order to keep the family peace as he gently addresses his older, more conventionally obedient son. Turning from the "I" to the "he" allows Walcott to play the father as well, to return, as it were, as the *paterfamilias* of Caribbean poetry.

Biblical parables, as a literary genre, are differentiated from allegories—in which the *tertium comparationis* yokes together the tale and its intended expression—and from examples, intended for imitation or avoidance. According to current exegetical scholarship, the parable narrowly defined employs the past tense in its narrative, relates an unusual rather than a typical event, and contains a dramatic protagonist and up to two additional main actors (see Dschulnigg 1357). As such, the parable is the most dramaturgical of all of the literary forms employed by Jesus in the gospels, further enhanced by the pointed use of direct speech on the part of the actors. Showing, not telling, is the name of the game. Note that in the biblical text, the key turns in the plot are enacted rather than narrated: The son speaks a petition although he manages only to utter the repentance, not his offer to work as a hireling and to relinquish his sonship before his father interrupts him. The father speaks comfortingly and immediately issues commands to servants, including justifications for said commands, "for this son of mine was dead and has come back to life" (Lk 15,24a). The older brother complains after first speaking with the servant who relates the events, truthfully, again in direct speech. The climax of the story is the direct exchange between father and older son—the prodigal is out of the picture by this time!—about the continued sonship of the older, again with the repeated assertion, the key idea of the parable, "Your brother was dead and as come back to life; he was lost and has been found" (Lk 15, 32).

Yet the central point of the biblical story of the prodigal son is not the plot or its verisimilitude. In focusing on the younger son and only one of his activities, wasteful spending, the parable has been conventionally misnamed. Prodigal means "Given to extravagant expenditure; recklessly wasteful of one's property or means" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), but this description applies to the son only in the first third of the text. The point of the parable isn't the prodigality. There are two "peaks" or "Spitzen," as German-language exegesis has it, to the narrative. The first is the son's determination to return and humble himself before his father not only to acknowledge his foolish transgressions but,

moreover, to offer himself as a servant to his father, thereby relinquishing his rights as a son. Filial rights are the backbone of transmission of authority in both the Old and New Testaments: one need only think of Abraham and Isaac vs. Ishmael, or Jacob and Esau's deal over a mess of pottage, or David and Jonathan, or Joseph and his brethren, or, indeed, Jesus's sonship confirmed during baptism in the Jordan. Giving up one's sonship is equivalent to giving up one's identity and reducing oneself to the status of servant, bondsman, or slave. Once we begin hearing these overtones of the parable's narrative intention and cultural significance, we may see Walcott's late-in-life anxiety about having left his cultural roots to hire himself out in foreign countries, glorious and tempting though the employment may have been.

The second "Spitze" or "peak" is the father's immense mercy. If we can manage to hear the text as if for the first time—a difficult proposition with a staple narrative long familiar to all of us—we will feel the surprise the original hearers must have felt at the apparently excessive welcome offered by the father. The son barely manages to get the first part of his intention articulated: he acknowledges his sin and offers to relinquish his sonship. But he does not get around to offering himself as a servant before the father interrupts him and surprisingly, rather than responding to *him*, speaks to his servants to bring a robe, a ring, and kill the fatted calf, all of this "quickly" as the text insists. In some recent editions of the New Testament, the parable is titled "of the merciful father," well cognizant of the unusual actions the parental figure performs; actions which thus make the brothers both ordinary sinners—both exhibit forms of pride—but render the father an impressive figure of God the father.

There is considerable emphasis in the biblical text on material goods: an inheritance, the imprudent wasting of resources, the lavish festivities including the fatted calf which awaken the older brother's envy, the father's assurance to the older brother that he shares in his father's wealth. Some early Latin church fathers who commented on this tale, interestingly, did not mind the younger son's requesting his portion; they saw in it a legitimate refusal of slave-like conditions and a justified desire for freedom (see Bovon 55). The status of the younger son would likely have been lesser than that of the older—if anyone has a right to rebel and leave, it is the younger son.

Walcott specifically invokes the biblical story at the half-way mark of his poem, in section 10, part I, when he paints a scene in Italy—he "paints" it in words but with all the

love for setting that a painter like Walcott can muster—that is "like an umber study for a fresco / of The Prodigal Son" (59) and concludes it with the striking image of the pigs that appear in the biblical text:

The rock-brown dove had fluttered from that fear  
that what he loved and knew once as a boy  
would panic and forget him from the change  
of character that the grunting swine could smell.  
A sow and her litter. Acknowledged prodigal. (60).

As the poem moves towards its conclusion, the overt references to Luke's parable increase in frequency. In retelling the story of the prodigal son, in donning the mantle of that son, so to speak, Walcott places himself once again in the tradition of the Western cultural heritage, this time not in a Caribbean rewriting of an existing national epic (such as *The Odyssey*) or in the adumbration of an existing literary hero (such as Crusoe) but in a very personal story that forms a portion of the Christian New Testament heritage. Accordingly, *The Prodigal* is not primarily another poem about Caribbean history, colonialism, mimicry, or any other of the large topics that Walcott tackled in "The Schooner *Flight*," *Omeros*, or even *Tiepolo's Hound*. Rather, it is an introspective poem, a psychological character meditation on the poetic self.

But there are other features that make the enforced parallels between Luke and Walcott seem unnaturally forced. The biblical prodigal son is still a young man when he returns. His impetuous departure, profligate spending, and self-humbling return have all the earmarks of youthful folly. By contrast, the narrator of *The Prodigal* is old: he has "white hair" (7), the narrator tells us, "it is an old man's book / whenever you write it" (8). The older brother of the parable has as his counterpart Derek Walcott's twin brother Roderick Walcott, the playwright whose death in March 2000 the poet mourns in section 9, particularly pp. 50-53. There is no father in the poem, and it would seem far-fetched indeed to equate the absent father with the motherland, St. Lucia, to which the speaker returns.

Walcott's choice of a biblical foundation for what he termed his last book (99) might be seen as a peace offering in the debate over whether he betrayed his Caribbean roots when he mentally departed for Europe long before he did so physically. Walcott's adumbrations of Western myth and Western literary tradition—be it the metaphysical poets, or Dante, or Homer, apparently preferred by him in lieu of a deeper exploration of



native origins, such as performed by Edward Kamau Brathwaite of Barbados or others—have been seen by some as insufficiently critical embraces of imperialist traditions. The choice of a biblical text carries a different intention. Sure, major portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, are historical narratives of empire and domination. Sure, the cultural roots of both Hebrew and Christian scriptures are in the Middle East, not the Middle Passage, and certainly not either Caribbean or Western African in origin. Sure, Christianity has had its less than salutary share in empire-building, enslavement, and domination of colored peoples and island nations. But the parable is not a story of domination or empire. It is a deeply personal enactment of emotions generated by familial bonds. Biblical parables, as noted above, tell an unusual story in dramatic fashion. The scenic qualities of the encounter between the father and his two sons surely must have struck a chord in the man who wrote *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*.

Walcott's adaptation of the story performs several acts of interpretation itself: in his effort to give shape and lasting significance to his own backward look, in his attempt to make the episodes of his life conform to a larger, mythic pattern, he establishes half-serious, half-mocking parallels between his fate and that of the prodigal son. He binds his personal journey into a narrative familiar from the Christian tradition without making it thereby Christian, and he casts a sense of light self-ridicule over the narrator's love interests evoked throughout the text.

What, then, does the title metaphor of the prodigal achieve for this poem? It seems to me that Walcott can here claim three things; a narrative, a persona, and a tradition. First, Walcott claims a narrative in which he can recognize aspects of his poetic self. Drawing only on the cast of characters contained in the biblical parable and disregarding its message, Christian or otherwise, he can use the story as a shell within which to pour his own story. His impetuous departure and his eagerness to connect with a larger world notwithstanding, he can construe his physical home, St. Lucia, as a place that welcomes him back despite his temporary abandonment of his home during his varied adventures. He can pay homage to his brother and re-claim a "home" in relation to which every other place is "abroad." This explains why Switzerland and Italy, in the earlier portions of the poem, are constantly—though incongruously—compared to Caribbean locales. The Caribbean remains the standard by which the poet measures, not just the landscapes he encounters, but the women he

meets: "At breakfast on the white terrace in Rimini / the young waitress was a replica of my first love ... / Christ, over fifty years. Half of a century!" (89).

Second, the persona of the prodigal himself is an effective vehicle for emblemizing Walcott's particular giftedness and his use of that gift. He recognizes how rich an inheritance his native land gave him. He playfully acknowledges his relationships with women, his temporary attachments to places that yet do not provide a home. Foreign places stay foreign when they speak different languages:

Were your life and work  
 simply a good translation? Would headland,  
 haze and the spray-wracked breakwater  
 pronounce their own names differently?  
 and have I looked at life, in other words,  
 through some inoperable cataract?  
 "What language do you speak in your own country?" (61)

Third, Walcott claims a tradition. He claims the subject matter, though not the spiritual comfort, of the Christian tradition. He also claims the poetic tradition of his predecessors who have undertaken circular journeys. A prodigal is an exile who returns home. Early in the poem, the Walcott persona in Italy compares himself to James Joyce (22). But Joyce endured permanent exile.

Walcott has given us what the biblical prodigal did not, namely a detailed description and appreciation of the foreign lands he visited. In the final section of the poem, as the speaker returns home to St Lucia, Walcott displays veritable fireworks of allusions: Like Robert Lowell before him (in his late book *The Dolphin*) and like William Butler Yeats (in "that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea" in "Byzantium"), Walcott invokes dolphins in the concluding image of the poem, a journey in a small boat. The journey, this time, is *not out* to sea. It goes *in the other direction*, towards the shore. But mysteriously, the shore does not get closer, though a light beckons to the traveler.\* Before death catches up with him and deposits him firmly on the other shore, the poet experiences a moment of suspended time and calls himself "prodigal" once more. The title of the poem is never more powerfully moving than at this concluding moment:

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\* Perhaps the ever-romantic F. Scott Fitzgerald is in this line as well: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past," the concluding line from *The Great Gatsby*.

Angels and dolphins. The second, first.  
 And always certainly, steadily, on the bright rim  
 of the world, getting no nearer or nearer, the more  
 the bow's edge shuddered towards it, prodigal,  
 that line of light that shines from the other shore.

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