

Reworking John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*: A Caribbean Approach

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Abstract. This study examines Derek Walcott's revision of John Millington Synge's Irish play *Riders to the Sea* into a Caribbean play entitled *The Sea at Dauphin*. Derek Walcott brought stature and world regard to the Caribbean dramatic theatre. The St. Lucian poet and dramatist, awarded the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature, has written around forty plays in verse and prose, employing both native English and French dialects. In addition to writing plays, he also founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop providing inspiration and advice for many other theatrical groups that have sprung up throughout the Caribbean. The effectiveness of Walcott's *The Sea at Dauphin* arises from his turning to the setting of St. Lucia and to the patois language he has heard spoken since his childhood. Walcott's Irish teachers at St. Mary's college drew his attention to the similarity between St. Lucia's colonial situation and Ireland's. Thus Walcott has discovered a precedent-setting model in the work of the Irish writer J.M Synge's *Riders to the Sea* which is an obvious intertext. The conclusion of this study shows how far Walcott succeeds in altering and creolizing a European text adding his own Caribbean flavour and cultural imprint.

Keywords: Assimilation, Caribbeanization, Folk language.

1. Introduction

Writing about the West Indies began with the European discovery of the New World; writing in the West Indies followed immediately upon settlement by Europeans; writing by West Indians – that is, by slaves and colonists whose home was in the islands and not in Europe – emerged in the eighteenth century. The colonizing countries Spain, England, France, and the Netherlands imposed their languages and dominated the writing of their colonies. However in spite of the Caribbean's history of enslavement and colonial domination, individual writers have risen through the West Indian milieu to establish themselves as highly competent, even outstanding, artists. The French have Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon of Martinique; whereas the Spanish have Alejo Carpentier and Nicolas Guillen of Cuba.

It is no wonder that the Caribbean is regarded as a social melting pot as a result of the cultural and racial mixture of the West Indies. First, the changing fortunes of international diplomacy and war has put most of the islands under a number of different flags at various times so it is not unusual to find the native populace of an English island speaking a French patois, playing Spanish music and sometimes living in villages with Dutch names. Moreover, further complexity derives from the importation of foreign labor for it did not take the Spanish long to realize that the native Indians were not adaptable to European working conditions. Hence, the early 1500s marked the emergence of African slavery and the middle passage: the third leg of a triangular trade route linking the continents of Europe, Africa and the Americas. Despite the rigors of the passage, disease, and dehumanizing treatment on the plantations, the Africans managed to endure; so when the British islands were emancipated, they outnumbered their white masters (Hamner 1-2).

Walcott is one of the most prominent contemporary Caribbean writers in the twentieth century. The St. Lucian poet and dramatist awarded the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature has written around forty plays in verse and prose in native English and French dialects. Walcott is one, perhaps the best, of a generation of writers born around 1930 who rapidly created new national literatures, brought their cultures to international

attention, and who are viewed as the cultural side of decolonization and the new nationalism which in turn led to post-colonialism. Walcott was born in Castries, St. Lucia which is a small mountainous island situated to the south-east of Martinique and to the north-east of St. Vincent in the Windward Islands. Its mixture of Anglophone and francophone cultures is a product of its colonial history: it has often changed hands between the British and the French before eventually becoming a British colony in 1802 (Thieme 7). In his formative years, young Walcott perceived himself as much more like the whites than those darker and lower on the social scale, until in his teens he discovered the history of slavery, became conscious that his grandmothers were descended from slaves and experienced the discriminations of racial prejudice (King 4). In his early poetry, he presents his mixed racial background as a problematic legacy – in an oft-quoted passage from *A Far Cry from Africa*, he speaks of being, “poisoned by the blood of both” (Walcott, *In a Green Night* 18) sides of his ancestry – but quickly coming to see the potential it offers for a creative fusion of traditions. Walcott’s ambivalence or at least his acute consciousness of the complexities of his situation makes his work all the more valuable. If he has been criticized for sounding too much like some of the masters of Western Literature, he is willing to admit that he has greatly profited from his predecessors. Furthermore, he has no fear of the charge of imitation; in fact, the echoes of past and contemporary artists in his work increase the resonance of his own authentic voice. He is not afraid to build where others have surveyed and laid foundations maintaining at the same time his individual integrity. Furthermore, Walcott is not only the preeminent poet of the West Indies, but he is also the area’s leading dramatist (Hamner ix-x). Walcott’s life and work inhabit a teeming intersection of cultural forces, a space that his friend and fellow-poet James Dickey described with a remarkable litany, “Here he is, a twentieth-century man, living in the West Indies and in Boston, poised between the blue sea and its real fish ... and the rockets and warheads, between a lapsed colonial culture and the industrial North, between Africa and the West, between slavery and intellectualism, between the native Caribbean tongue and the English learned from books ...” (2).

As far as Walcott is concerned, the greatest bequest of the British Empire was education, which, “must have ranked with the finest in the world. The grounding was rigid – Latin, Greek, and the essential masterpieces, but there was this elation of discovery. Shakespeare, Marlowe, Horace, Vergil – these writers weren’t jaded but immediate experiences” (Walcott, *Meanings* 50). As Walcott indicates in “What the Twilight says: An Overture”, the introduction to his collection *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (1970), this background is very important to West Indian artists, “the writers of my generation were natural assimilators. We knew the literature of Empires, Greek, Roman, British, through their essential classics; and both the patois of the street and the language of the classroom hid the elation of discovery. If there was nothing, there was everything to be made ... with this prodigious ambition one began” (4). Hence, Walcott passed through a youthful apprenticeship phase wherein he consciously traced the models of established masters. He was honest enough to disclose his intention to appropriate whatever stores he found useful in the canon of world literature. There are traces in his poetry and his drama of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Sophocles, Andrew Marvell, Tirso de Molina, Bertolt Brecht, Baudelaire, J.M Synge, the Japanese Kabuki and Noh theatres, and West Indian folktale and dance. However, assimilation not only means ingesting into the mind and thoroughly comprehending, but it also means merging as well as becoming one with a cultural tradition. Since Walcott’s culture as a West Indian is fed by multiple tributaries, he is inspired by it (Hamner 8).

Walcott’s play, *The Sea at Dauphin*, employs local registers throughout, blending francophone patois elements with anglophone Creole, and this immersion in everyday St. Lucian speech is complemented by a similar commitment to the local world in the use of a beach setting, which allows the sea to function as a major protagonist in the action (Thieme 52). The effectiveness of the play derives from Walcott’s turning to the setting of St. Lucia and to the language he has heard spoken since his childhood. These are important factors; but far more crucial to him during this apprenticeship phase was his discovery of a precedent-setting model in the work of the Irish writer John Millington Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* which is an obvious intertext (Hamner 38). Walcott’s Irish teachers at St. Mary’s impressed upon him the similarity between St. Lucia’s colonial situation and Ireland’s. Both countries are predominantly Catholic and still rooted to an extent in a village, peasant culture that no longer exists in many parts of the world (Breslin 84). In “An Interview with Derek Walcott” by Edward Hirsch, Walcott’s own account of the borrowing stresses the role of language:

When I read Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* I realized what he had attempted to do

with the language of the Irish. He had taken a fishing port kind of language gotten beauty out of it, a beat, something lyrical. Now that was inspiring, and the obvious model for *The sea at Dauphin* [...] If you know very clearly that you are imitating such and such a work, it isn't that you're adopting another man's genius ; it is that he has done an experiment that has worked and will be useful to all writers afterwards. When I tried to translate the speech of the St. Lucian fishermen into an English Creole, all I was doing was taking that kind of speech and translating it, or retranslating it, into an English-inflected Creole, and that was a totally new experience for me, even if it did come out of Synge (59-60).

Hence, in the West Indies, as in Synge's Ireland, the folk idiom and imagination continue to thrive. In prefacing his play *The Playboy of the Western World* in his collection of plays *The Complete Works of John M. Synge*, Synge acknowledges the influence of the language and folk imagination of the fishermen, peasants, and ballad singers along the Irish coast on his work, "in a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or an apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry" (3-4). Synge's main inspiration to Walcott therefore was his success to translate vernacular speech into a heightened dramatic language that brought out its beauty and rhythms. Moreover, moving the setting from the Aran Islands to St. Lucia meant not only a change of language but a change of cultural milieu. Because the most commonly used form of St. Lucian creole has French rather than an English lexicon, Walcott's first task of translation was a literal one. Thus he often makes his characters paraphrase their French creole phrases with English creole equivalents (Breslin 85).

The title suggests the central focus of the play: the sea at Dauphin. As in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, going to sea signifies a primal encounter with death. There is suspense concerning the fate of the characters. The play explores the nature of the sea and the mysterious compulsion it has for fishermen, whom young Walcott saw as a breed apart in St. Lucia (Thieme 52). *The Sea at Dauphin* is concerned with Caribbean fishermen, the precariousness and uncertainty of the profession and the bitterness they feel about the hostility of the physical and social environment. The play is set on the, "nerve-wracked Atlantic coast of a Windward Island two hours from sunrise" (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 45). The play's dialogue begins between Afa and Gacia who, while waiting for the other fishermen, comment on the severity of the wind and the sea:

Gacia: *Bon matin, boug.*

Afa: *Matin*, Gacia, *bon matin*. Wind hard, eh? ... Wind still savage.

Gacia: Ay, *oui*, the cold will drop, but this just half the wind. The next half in the sea back- pocket, by Sablisse. Where Augustin?

Afa: You know Augustin. Augustin is his woman blanket. Where Debel?

Gacia: Debel? Debel sick. [*Imitates a man vomiting*] *Rhum*.

Afa: You see, cousin? Rum is a bad wife.

Gacia: But you must sleep with it. Debel finish. Between him and his woman not much leave.

He should die, since to beg is worse. [*shivering*] I don't even take my little coffee yet.

[*Looks at sky*] Two weeks now, this sea whiter than spit, two weeks is rain.

Afa: It white like the time when Bolo drown. [*Points off-shore*] There so!

Gacia: *Garçon*, to see a next day so like when Bolo drown ... [*Shakes his head*] I remember ... (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 46-7).

Walcott's Afa is a fisherman who works hard and receives very little in return. He recounts the litany of his failures and of the fishermen who have died, but even in the face of inevitable defeat unlike the characters of *Riders to the Sea* who deeply mourn their losses and accept them as inalterable fate, Afa defies the sea as well as God who ignores his prayers:

God is a white man. The sky is his blue eyes,

His spit on Dauphin people is the sea.

Don't ask me why a man must work so hard

To eat for worm to get more fat. Maybe I bewitch.

You never curse God, I curse him, and cannot die,

Until His time. This basin men call sea

Never get red for men blood it have. My turn is next (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 61).

In both plays, the sea represents the unpredictable forces of nature with which men have to contend for their lives. The name of Afa's boat, *Our Daily Bread*, is both metaphorical and literal. Afa's recitation of the names of fishermen who have lost their lives at sea is, "a chronicle of the village's past. Growing out of this blending of metaphor and reality is an image of the cyclical nature of existence" (Hamner 39). Afa is angry, defiant and curses God for the life he has given the peasants as well as the priests for telling them to accept and be thankful for such a life. Afa makes poetic similes in which God and the awful environment are associated with the colour white. There are for example, the dangerous white waves that threaten the fishermen who must defy the rainy, windy sea or starve. Accordingly, "instead of a God of love, Walcott offers a God of life as a predatory food chain of conquerors and victims" (King 105):

That is God! A big fish eating small ones. And the sea, that thing there, not a priest white, pale like a shark belly we must feed until we dead, not no young Frenchman lock up in a church don't know coolie man dying because he will not beg! ... This scapular not Dauphin own! Dauphin people build the church and pray and feed you, not their own people, and look at Dauphin! *Gadez lui!* Look at it! You see? Poverty, dirty woman, dirty children, where all the prayers? ... Dirt and prayers is Dauphin life, in Dauphin, in Canaries, Micoud. Where they have priest is poverty (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 73-4).

However, the St. Lucian fisherman, Afa, defies the elements by going to the sea with Augustin on a particularly windy day. At the same time Afa refuses to take Augustin's godfather, the East Indian Hounakin, who has just been widowed, with them since he suspects that he is courting death. Hence, as Augustine, the younger fisherman joins them; we begin to learn more about the character of Afa and his apparent callousness in his refusal to let the old East Indian Hounakin go out to sea with them:

Afa: Old man, your wife is dead, and sorry make you mad. Go on the morne and count the birds like Ragamin, and play bamboo under the wood trees for you'goat. Is land you know, old man, you don't know sea, you know the fifteen kind of grass this land have, land hard under a old man foot and hard on old woman body, but this sea is no cemetery for old men; go on the morne behind the presbytery, watch goat, talk with priest and drink your white rum after the night come. When we come back we will talk of this sea (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 64).

Furthermore, aside from Afa, Hounakin is a memorable character in *The Sea at Dauphin*. The East Indian, "more old than Dauphin self" remembers a time "when didn't have no Dauphin, only cane, and a green river by the canes" (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 66-7). It is from those canes, rather than fishing, that he once made a living (Breslin 88). Hounakin, an old man desolate with poverty and age, but mostly with the loss of his wife, wants to take up fishing with Afa and Augustin because he does not want to beg:

When Rama dying she did want more medicine,
You know we could not beg, but then I beg
For one whole year, then she catch sick again.
And Rama say no medicine we must not beg.
I did not want to beg and Rama die.
The first time I did beg you was last night.
To work. I cannot beg or bend down to make garden.
I know have friend, but friend and pride is different ...
Is just a work to feed a old man and the dog ... (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 67)

Nevertheless, Afa, Garcia and Augustin go out to sea leaving the old man on shore while the wives of Dauphin sing sad songs of fishermen who are drowned at sea. Afa and the others return before sunset with gifts of fish for the old man only to learn from the villagers and the priest on the shore that Hounakin was found dead. He has fallen from a high cliff and died, "he fall down from the high rocks by Point Side. His face mash up" (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 73). However, what saves the plot of the play from tragedy and sends it off into another cycle, is the appearance of young Jules. Jules, son of Habal, the man who first took Afa to the sea, comes to him seeking work. At this point, "Afa, childless, an intractable curmudgeon, begins the initiation of the next generation" (Hamner 39). Delivering his acceptance to Jules's demand he says:

tell the boy it make you sour and old and good for nothing standing on

two feet when forty years you have ... Ask him if he remember Habal, and then Bolo. If he say yes, tell him he must brave like Hounakin, from young he is. Brave like Habal to fight sea at Dauphin. This piece of coast is make for men like that. Tell him Afa do it for his father sake (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 76).

Afa, looking at the sea, ruminates, “Last year Annelles, and Bolo, and this year Hounakin ... And one day, tomorrow, you Gacia, and me ... And Augustin ... (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 80). Yet, in spite of this, Afa has to set out, “[t]omorrow again. *Un autre demain ...*” (Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin* 80). But unlike the past, this time Afa will go fishing accompanied by the young boy Jules, who will become a kind of disciple and will have to learn not only fishing but also the art of living and surviving. Hence, man has, “to face the truth, to acknowledge his fundamental aloneness and solitude in a universe indifferent to his fate ... Man must accept the responsibility for himself and the fact that only by using his own powers can he give meaning to his life” (Fromm 44-5).

Finally, while *Riders to the Sea* has provided Walcott with the confidence to revise a play which engaged with the folk culture and language and took the sea as a central metaphor for the existential situation, ultimately *The Sea at Dauphin*'s powerful imaginative evocation of the distinctive apartness of fishermen's lives leaves Synge to one side (Thieme 53). On the other hand, Walcott has explored the history of Dauphin to set up a confrontation between colonizer and colonized in order to launch an attack on the discourse of colonialism. Walcott writes, “[t]he migratory West Indian feels rootless on his own earth, chafing at its beaches” (Walcott, *What the Twilight Says* 21). Afa and his fellow-fishermen provide an early illustration of those who elude social entrapment, existing as they do outside the constraints of colonial society in a daily encounter with death. Conclusively, Walcott's writing deals with the lasting scars – personal, cultural and political – of British colonialism in his native land and the opposing African and European influences that characterize his West Indian heritage. Integrating the formal structure of English verse with the colorful dialect of St. Lucia, Walcott denounces colonial exploitation and suppression of Caribbean culture, while attempting to reconcile the disparate cultural legacies that inform his literature and Caribbean history in general.

2. References

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