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*Narrative Rewritings and Artistic Praxis in Derek Walcott's Works:
Caribbean Decolonisations*

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Narrative Rewritings and Artistic Praxis in Derek Walcott's Works: Caribbean Decolonisations provides an exhaustive approach to the figure and work of the dean of Caribbean letters, Derek Walcott, awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. This distinction won him global recognition, and turned the St. Lucia writer into the voice of the anglophone Caribbean, in the midst of such a wealth of extraordinary literary talents that naming just a few here would be certainly unfair. Suffice it to say, then, that Walcott was not alone in his effort to vindicate Caribbean cultures and explore their artistic and literary endless possibilities, although he was definitely unique in his multifaceted idiosyncrasy. An idiosyncrasy, that of Derek Walcott, which Mantellato decodes beautifully, as I would like to briefly discuss.

The study is, I was saying, exhaustive. It is so because, although it focuses on a (necessarily) limited number of the many works published by Walcott in his extended literary career, it provides an extensive, kaleidoscopic view of the poet's trajectory, work and interests. Interspersed with the specific focusses of the different chapters that compose the book, we find a wealth of information about Walcott's trajectory and complex artistic development. In this way, the artistic evolution and relevant life events occurring between the production or publication of the different works under scrutiny are addressed in full. The gaps are filled, so to say, and Mantellato's study, besides an appropriately specialized academic artefact, results in a very informative and readable approach to Walcott's literary oeuvre more broadly. I testify to this, being only an occasional reader of Walcott's poetry and plays.

The text begins with an inviting introduction, which discloses the main reading clues and announces what is to come. Besides sketching the theoretical frame and methodological standpoint as well as the overall structuration of the study, these pages announce what I find to be the most valuable aspect of this book, which makes it an extraordinary contribution, not only to the exegetical corpus on Walcott, but to the academic archive at large. I am referring to the creative and multimodal component of Mantellato's interaction with Walcott's work, which, as he advances here, will be developed in the third and last chapter. We should mention at this point that, besides an academic, Mantellato is a professional dancer: he studied at the La Scala Ballet Academy in Milan before going on to become part of the National Ballet Theatre of Prague for a number of years, and at present he combines his scholarly work with his dedication to dance and choreography. As I shall discuss later, this double specialization infuses his work in surprising ways, and distinguishes his scholarly and artistic interventions. But let us begin where we should.

The study is structured in three parts. Chapter One, "Derek Walcott from a Decolonial Point of View: Theoretical and Methodological Approaches," provides a solid basis for the analytical and creative development of, respectively, Chapters Two and Three. Regarding Mantellato's chosen theoretical foundations, there is, to my mind, a good balance between three related yet different strands: the decolonial proposition, some key Caribbean theoretical developments, and the bio-cultural partnership model. To begin

with, what has been termed the decolonial option is the main frame which helps Mantellato decode Walcott's work in a certain direction, namely, the decentring of what Peruvian anthropologist Anibal Quijano famously baptized as the colonial matrix of power. Quijano's ideas, together with those of Mignolo, Dussel, Lugones and other decolonial thinkers, are put forward only after a sound revision of the shortcomings of a more traditional postcolonial approach. According to Mantellato, Postcolonial Studies reproduce certain structures of Western colonial modernity even if sometimes reversing them, and thus cannot be entirely useful to him in his diffracting approach to a body of literature which is, in itself, diffracting. The decolonial approach, by contrast, in proposing itself as characterized by openness and inconclusiveness, in its endless creative and self-multiplying quality, provides a fertile theoretical ground which may be more faithful to the endless diversity and unpredictability of the Caribbean region, so vividly represented and reverberated through Walcott's work. Thus, Mantellato's study reproduces rather faithfully, one would say, the very Caribbean writer's obsession with de-centring and abating the colonial matrix of power in different ways, from multiple stance-points, in different works, and in different moments of his creative life. Also, a crucial concept within the decolonial framework is that of praxis, significantly absent from the theoretical disquisitions of the strictly postcolonial thinkers, mostly devoted and limited to textual politics. Indeed postcolonial disquisitions mostly remain in the theoretical, and do not reach the level of practical intervention preached by decolonial theoreticians. In this context, Gayatri Spivak's translations into English of the short stories written by tribal author Mahasweta Devi from Bengali come to mind, and one wonders whether that activity does qualify as praxis. Whatever the answer to this question, it is remarkable how, not only in his analysis of Walcott's artistic praxis, but also that of his own, Mantellato's line of action is in tune with the decolonial option, in the sense that it gorgeously and continuously allows the "re-imagining and re-moulding of its own definitional boundaries" (33). This is a politics present in Mantellato's own multimodal, intersemiotic translations of Walcott's work, as we shall see.

Together with the decolonial approach, the study brings in the genuinely Caribbean reflections of Édouard Glissant, linking the analysis to what the Martiniquais writer chose to call a Poetics of Relation. This is a philosophical, even cosmological configuration where concepts like the rhizome, tout-monde, chaos-monde and the right to opacity become relevant. They are an appropriate bedding to Walcott's artistic efforts in their ambition to incorporate the vast, multiple and heterogeneous traditions which mingle and coalesce in the rich Caribbean region. In the later analysis I perceive that this theoretical body appears less prominently than the decolonial and partnership ones, although it is by no means absent (especially in the analysis of *Tiepolo's Hound*, the third work under study). In any event, its inclusion provides a theoretical sense of Caribbean locatedness which solidifies the study as a critical artefact. The third and last theoretical leg is the bio-cultural partnership approach, proposed and elaborated by Riane Eisler. This approach has long been used by the Partnership Studies Group of which Mantellato is part. While not limited to this specific body of literature, the untiring work of this group, founded by Antonella Riem in the late 1990s with commendable foresight, has shown to be highly productive when it comes to the study of postcolonial literatures. Mantellato never loses sight of the partnership horizons of both Walcott's literary and artistic output and of his own critical and artistic praxis. Partnership is bound to remain at least partly utopian in a world directed by imperfect human laws and impulses. But these horizons are symptomatic of the deep political commitment of both the writer-artist and the critic-artist, and this is something to celebrate.

The second part of Chapter One is devoted to a revision of Walcott's trajectory, summarily debriefing his most celebrated works, especially *Omeros*. These pages familiarize the lay reader with the figure under study through a comprehensive explanation of his personal development and artistic motivation, constantly sustained with appropriate and timely bibliographical support. The familiarity with the copious body of academic work around Walcott is remarkable, not to say astounding. The themes of history, representation, colonial language and the process of naming, identity (through revision, among others, of the productive idea of "Caribbeing" as proposed by Van Haesendonck and D'Haen), or the indisputable weight of carnival (and calypso) in the Caribbean, and particularly in Trinitarian culture, are incorporated as well. Altogether, they compound a more than solid basis from which to undertake the detailed analysis of the selected corpus in the following chapter.

Entitled like the book, "Narrative and Artistic Decolonisations in Derek Walcott's Work", Chapter Two begins by explaining the critical method, which is two-fold. On the one hand, the discussion carefully deconstructs the texts under study, in order to expose the myriad ways in which they work against the indissoluble duet formed by European modernity/coloniality represented by the European texts they depart from, and shows how they debunk this axis through endless textual decolonial strategies. Together with this, the most innovative aspect of Mantellato's exegesis is his focus on the multimodal aspects of Walcott's narrative writings, that is, the interaction of the word (or, to use the critic's expression, the wor(l)d: a systematic highlight in the text of the close interconnection and reciprocal inter-action between language and reality) with other artistic forms, namely the theatrical, music, dance and pantomime, and painting. The three texts chosen for analysis are pregnant with aspects of these artistic multimodalities: the plays *The Joker of Seville* and *Pantomime*, and the narrative written in verse form, *Tiepolo's Hound*. Thus, the pick is not just on Walcott's poetry, which has received the bulk of critical attention. The reasons for this are laid bare once and again: what interests the scholar is not only the textual import, but most especially the multi-genre and multi-disciplinary character of Walcott's production, its involvement and fusion with the multiplicity of languages and forms of expression which coexist in the Caribbean. Both *The Joker of Seville* and *Pantomime* are plays which, for one, depart from their European intertexts in order to render them out of place in the wor(l)d of Caribbean complexity. But, together with this, they constitute a thorough sampler of performative moments and scenes, representative of the acutely visual and aural character of Caribbean cultures. This is especially true of *The Joker of Seville*, with its impressive musical libretto, but also of *Pantomime*, where body language and dance play a key role, taking a text which revels in mimicry and mockery close to the area of Music Hall, as Mantellato explains.

Walcott never renounced being a total artist, nor accepted being limited to one single form of expression. After his important incursions in the world of theatre, in the last period of his career he published the third of the picks of the study, *Tiepolo's Hound*, where he expounded on his life-long relationship with art. He did so through a suggestive mirror-game analysis of the figure of Caribbean-born Impressionist artist Camille Pissarro. Mantellato carefully unpacks this figure and the way Walcott uses it as his own double, to foreground the decolonizing strategies of both artists, marginal in their own ways and living in so different contexts – yet both traversed by the colonial matrix of power, which they strive to undo. In this complex exegetical excursion, other artists from the Venetian Renaissance splendour are visited, namely Veronese and Tiepolo, and emphasis is laid on how these artists incorporated neglected peoples and motifs in their work, thus

deconstructing the modern/colonial strategy of Otherization as a form of political control and of keeping hegemonic ideas of power in place.

As advanced before, the critic himself, as an artist, becomes a lynchpin in this profuse decolonial/ising network of names and agendas, this long list of artists attempting to effect political change. Indeed, after the successful tour de force constituted by this multidisciplinary exercise in criticism, we move on to Chapter Three, “The Dancing Wor(l) of ‘The Schooner Flight’, an Intersemiotic and Multimodal Translation/Adaptation.” This chapter contains a detailed account of Mantellato’s own creative process, born out of the wish to go in the direction, as he insists, of promoting by all means possible more decolonial and partnership-oriented forms of being in the world. It is therefore the icing of an altogether excellent approach to the multidisciplinary work of Derek Walcott. It constitutes a proposal entirely original in academia, and deeply remarkable: an artistic response to the work of the great Caribbean poet through the language of dance-theatre. Again evincing impeccable scholarly savoir-faire, the chapter opens with a revision of the terminology and possible methodologies which may better fit Mantellato’s attempt to re-create Walcott’s texts and ideas. Leading the reader by the hand in an inviting excursus around theories of performativity and multimodality, the author eventually concludes that the combination of intersemiotic or multimodal translation as developed by McCormack and applied and social theatre as deployed by Boal among others can provide an appropriate theoretical backing to his proposal. As in previous chapters, a wealth of references and cross-connections is to be enjoyed, ranging from the innovations of dancers Mary Wigman and especially Pina Bausch (among others), to those of linguists Austin Searle and Mikhail Bakhtin, in their crucial conceptualizations, respectively, of speech acts and heteroglossia – always such a productive notion when it comes to understanding the Caribbean. All these concepts find a place in the composite theorization underlying Mantellato’s final product: the multimodal embodied translation of Walcott’s alleged literary manifesto, “The Schooner Flight”.

After a timely critical unpacking of this manifesto, then, and to conclude, the text goes on to present and decode in detail Mantellato’s multimodal, intersemiotic translation of this work. This is the author’s most outstanding achievement: the successful integration of literature, dance-theatre and video-production – a genuine form of multimodality – in entirely original ways. Further, the fact that the scholar-artist himself provides the clues of his work, offering a sound academic explanation of the political *cum* metaphorical keys of his attempt (the cooperative nature of the production, the purposefully slippery and multi-located set of meanings, the meditated attempt behind each dance gesture and technical choice, etc.), turn this study, overall, into a decidedly original success.

To conclude this long yet well-deserved comment of this captivating book: There is something prescient in Mantellato’s praxis, in his exceptional approach to both art and academia, in the infinite possibilities his work opens for the rest of us. Like Walcott, he is crossing, playing around with, deconstructing and abating unexpected and unwanted borders. The book is a jewel. A joy.

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