

FAUSTO CIOMPI\*

## ‘Weak’ Encounters: Walcott’s Refiguring of Crusoe in “The Castaway”, “Crusoe’s Island”, and “Crusoe’s Journal”

*Abstract:* This article examines three poems by Derek Walcott on Robinson Crusoe: “The Castaway”, “Crusoe’s Island”, and “Crusoe’s Journal”. The three texts are interpreted as an implicit sequence which, starting from the critique of the strong identitarianism of the white coloniser and of the black nativist poet, produces a ‘weak’ version of Caribbean identity based on the dialogic synthesis of nature and culture, matter and discourse, the beauty of Western poetry as finally represented by Dante’s language and the physical splendour of Tobago’s black girls.

*Keywords:* Derek Walcott. Daniel Defoe. Crusoe poems. Reactionary nativism. Intertextuality.

The Crusoe myth is re-elaborated by Derek Walcott in a lecture, “The Figure of Crusoe” (1965); a two-act play, *Pantomime* (1980); and in three poems: “The Castaway”, “Crusoe’s Island”, and “Crusoe’s Journal”.<sup>1</sup> In all of these cases, the Crusoe figure functions for Walcott as an archive of archetypes, which may include, as he anticipates in his lecture, Adam, Christopher Columbus, Daniel Defoe, Prospero, Caliban, Luis Buñuel’s surrealist Robinson, Proteus, a beachcomber, God and a missionary who converts Friday.<sup>2</sup> More interestingly, in *Pantomime* Walcott inverts the roles of the two protagonists: Jackson Phillip, the black man-servant, turns out as the master (Crusoe), while Harry Trewe, a white person, plays the servant (Friday). At the end of the story, the tension between the two is unsolved: “Jackson has demanded respect [but] Can colonialism be undone?”<sup>3</sup>

My point in this article is that, in his Crusoe poems, Walcott deploys a dialogic vision which does not fully emerge in *Pantomime*, where the us-them confrontation is more crudely displayed. In the three poems, he adopts multiple narrative perspectives and investigates diverse aspects of Crusoe as a colonial and postcolonial trope. “The Castaway” is a monologue in which ageing Crusoe reflects on his loneliness on the island on which he is shipwrecked. A different locutor is introduced in “Crusoe’s Island”, where it is the poet who recounts in the first person, singular or plural, his visit to Tobago, a place now populated by Friday’s progeny. Crusoe is here referred to in the third person, a ‘he’ who,

\* University of Pisa. Email: fausto.ciompi@unipi.it

<sup>1</sup> The three poems originally appeared, in book form, in *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965). References to page and line numbers, hereafter in the text, are from Derek Walcott’s *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*, London, Faber & Faber, 1992, where they appear in this order: “The Castaway” (pp. 57-58), “Crusoe’s Island” (pp. 68-72), “Crusoe’s Journal” (pp. 92-94).

<sup>2</sup> D. WALCOTT, “The Figure of Crusoe”, in R.D. HAMNER (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, Washington, Three Continents Press, 1993, pp. 35-36.

<sup>3</sup> B. JONES, “With Crusoe the Slave and Friday the Boss: Derek Walcott’s *Pantomime*”, in L. SPAAS and B. STIMPSON (eds), *Robinson Crusoe: Myths and Metamorphoses*, London, Macmillan, 1996, p. 235.

as linguist Émile Benveniste argued, must be regarded as a “non-person”.<sup>4</sup> In “Crusoe’s Journal”, the enunciative modalities of the first two poems are eventually amalgamated. While in “The Castaway” a solipsistic ‘I’ is the speaker and in “Crusoe’s Island” an ‘I-he’ (or ‘we-he’) enunciative mode is enacted, “Crusoe’s Journal” has ‘we’ as the collective locutor of the text. Although each of the three poems presents ambivalences and complexities of its own, my claim is then that the third poem provides a synthesis between the egoic discourse of the first text and the ‘non-person’-inflected discourse of the second. In terms of race discourse, the transition is from the white or black man’s totalising perspective to a racially and culturally hybridised situation that is achieved through dialogic confrontation. In delineating this process, I do not contend that Walcott pursues a rigorous dialectic logic. His meditation does not produce a third strong position but a ‘weak’ axiology,<sup>5</sup> which subsumes the reasons of the subaltern and the marginal while at the same time re-evaluating some co-effects of the colonial practices it disproves. The Crusoe archetype is re-figured according to the poetics of cultural meshing, which also affects the Caribbean landscape. Nature is understood not as a function of mimeticism but as an ‘agentic force’, a mixture of matter and meaning: a significance that changes according to its materialisation by different perceptrors/reconstructors.<sup>6</sup>

### *“The Castaway”: Colonial Solipsism and Native Perplexity*

The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel  
Of a sail.

The horizon threads it infinitely.

Action breeds frenzy. I lie,  
Sailing the ribbed shadow of a palm,  
Afraid lest my own footprints multiply.

Blowing sand, thin as smoke,  
Bored, shifts its dunes.  
The surf tires of its castles like a child.

<sup>4</sup> “The ‘third person’ is not a ‘person’: it is really a verbal form whose function is to express the *non-person*” (É. BENVENISTE, *Problems in General Linguistics*, Miami, University of Miami Press, 1973, p. 198).

<sup>5</sup> On ‘weak theory’, whose scope ranges from Friedrich Nietzsche’s dissolution of metaphysics to Gianni Vattimo’s “weak thought” and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “reparative reading”, see W.C. DIMOCK, “Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W.B. Yeats”, *Critical Inquiry*, 39 (4), 2013, pp. 732-35, and P.K. SAINT-AMOUR, “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism”, *Modernism/Modernity*, 25 (3), 2018, pp. 437-59. What makes this theory workable in the reading of Walcott’s Crusoe poems is that it asserts the advantages of theorising from positions of weakness, thus making dialogue between cultures possible. I assume that this is exactly Walcott’s stance in the Crusoe poems: a plea for pliant, flexible, and non-normative forms of poeticising across borders.

<sup>6</sup> For an analogous approach to the refiguration of language and landscape in Walcott, see D.E. ST. JOHN, “Writing Agential Landscapes: Making History Through Materiality in the Poetry of Derek Walcott and Audre Lorde”, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 21 (7), 2019, pp. 1015-1029. Inspired by the theory of agential realism, and, among others, by Iovino and Oppermann, St. John studies the intersections between “matter” and “discourse”: “As opposed to schools of ecocriticism that see culture as a mirror of nature, or vice versa, material ecocriticism takes a rhizomatic view of materiality as a ‘combined mesh’ of ‘matter and meaning, body and identity, being and knowing’” (*ibidem*, p. 1020).

The salt green vine with yellow trumpet-flower,  
 A net, inches across nothing.  
 Nothing: the rage with which the sandfly's head is filled.

Pleasures of an old man:  
 Morning: contemplative evacuation, considering  
 The dried leaf, nature's plan.

In the sun, the dog's feces  
 Crusts, whitens like coral.  
 We end in earth, from earth began.  
 In our own entrails, genesis.

If I listen I can hear the polyp build,  
 The silence thwanged by two waves of the sea.  
 Cracking a sea-louse, I make thunder split.

Godlike, annihilating godhead, art  
 And self, I abandon  
 Dead metaphors: the almond's leaf-like heart,

The ripe brain rotting like a yellow nut  
 Hatching  
 Its babel of sea-lice, sandfly, and maggot,

That green wine bottle's gospel choked with sand,  
 Labelled, a wrecked ship,  
 Clenched sea-wood nailed and white as a man's hand. (pp. 57-58)

In this text, the landscape is refigured from two coexisting but alternative viewpoints: that of the white coloniser and the native poet. At an obvious level, "The Castaway" is the poem of the white coloniser's solipsism and sterility. Crusoe's actions are routinely ineffectual: while lying on the beach, he scans the horizons for a sail in the vain hope of being rescued. After many years, he still feels as a foreign body in the Caribbean and strongly desires to return where he belongs. The contrast between the infinite horizon and the invisible sail is rendered through the exaggerated difference in extension between the first and the second line: "The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel / Of a sail" (p. 57, 1-2).

Crusoe remains motionless because he is "afraid lest [his] own footprints multiply" (p. 57, 6). Like Defoe's Robinson, he fears that his footprints will reveal his presence to the visiting cannibals.<sup>7</sup> Besides, he has learned that action is a useless form of resistance to

<sup>7</sup> In Paul Breslin's words, Crusoe "fears the intrusion of some unknown other into his solitude" (P. BRESLIN, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 106). In *Pantomime*, instead, "Jackson teaches that the key for Crusoe/Trewe involves not fearing the footprint, but welcoming it; not subduing the native, but meeting him 'man to man'" (B.C. MCINELLY, "Remaking Crusoe in Derek Walcott's *Pantomime*", in D. TAYLOR BOURDEAU and E. KRAFT [eds], *On Second Thought: Updating the Eighteenth-Century Text*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2007, p. 169). But a different understanding of this line is also possible. One can read it in the light of Georges Didi-Huberman's interpretation of the imprint as a reminder of destruction: "The imprint forces us to think about destruction and its aftermath and thus renounce the purity of nothingness" (G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Génie du non-lieu. Air, poussière, empreinte, hantise*, Engl. trans. B. MACADRÉ-NGUYÉN, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 2001, p. 55). For Crusoe, the contemplation of pure nothingness is a stupefying activity that saves him from coping with hostile reality and accustoms him to poetical sublimation. Conversely, to meditate on the consequences of destruction (Crusoe's ship has been destroyed as well as the lives of his fellow sailors) would revive the hermit's despair.

the nothingness he faces. For the European observer, the place is invaded by nothingness because it is devoid of history<sup>8</sup> and he has been unable to reshape it according to his own cultural coordinates. But Crusoe's real *hubris* is that he sees nothingness around him instead of natural beauty as symbolised by flowers: "A net, inches across nothing. / Nothing" (p. 57, 11-12). In the end, he further contributes to the triumph of nothingness by giving up his cultural paradigms, which have proved completely inadequate in the Caribbean context: "annihilating godhead, art / And self" (p. 58, 23-24).

He calls himself an "old man" (p. 57, 13). If we stick to Defoe's chronology, Crusoe was twenty-seven when he was shipwrecked on his Caribbean island, where he famously remained for twenty-eight years, two months and nineteen days. If Walcott's Crusoe does the same, he is now probably in his fifties and has been on the island for quite a long time. But, of course, Walcott may have imagined for his own Crusoe a completely different chronology and his hero could be older than that. However, Walcott's Crusoe is anything but the hyper-reactive, hard-working, 'context-transforming' character Defoe describes in his novel. As philosopher Sergio Givone argues, Defoe's Robinson, "[a]fter losing the world, moves to its conquest [...] Action, the dominion extended over the natural world, the submission of hostile forces to his own ends, enables him to humanise the world to the extent that man can recognise himself in it".<sup>9</sup> Even when he is about to leave the island with Friday, in fact, aged Robinson never skips his daily toil:

having such additional Testimonies of the Care of Providence over me, and the great Hopes I had of being effectually and speedily deliver'd; for I had an invincible Impression upon my Thoughts that my Deliverance was at hand, and that I should not be another Year in this Place: However, I went on with my Husbandry; digging, planting, and fencing as usual. I gather'd and cur'd my Grapes, and did every necessary Thing as before.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, Walcott's Crusoe is a lazy observer of and an inert listener to nature's manifestations. His acts are either scatological or of no practical consequence: he lies on the beach, defecates, contemplates a dried leaf or the feces of a dog, listens lazily to the sound of the sea and its creatures. Except for the green vine and trumpet flower, he is surrounded by signs of dryness and sterility: excrements, the wizened vegetation, the "bored" sand that blows on the beach. He has left no mark of civilisation in the environment. Rather, he has been visibly affected by tropical idleness. By indulging in the pleasures of contemplation, he activates a creative process of some sort and acts as a poet rather than as a tradesman, a sailor or a beachcomber. While his seventeenth-century model was a metonymical reasoner, who used practical reason and referential speech to organise the world, Walcott's Crusoe abandons "Dead metaphors" (p. 58, 25). He does try metaphor, i.e., poetry, but his imaginative efforts are those of a white man accustomed to metonymic language and they prove irrelevant in the context in which he is situated.

Here is an example of Robinson's metonymic discourse in Defoe's novel:

<sup>8</sup> On the West Indies as a place of 'nothingness', see V.S. Naipaul: "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (V.S. NAIPAUL, *The Middle Passage*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, [1962] 1969, p. 29).

<sup>9</sup> S. GIVONE, "Dire le emozioni. La costruzione dell'identità nel romanzo moderno", in F. MORETTI (ed.), *Il romanzo. La cultura del romanzo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2001, Vol. I, p. 380; my translation.

<sup>10</sup> D. DEFOE, *Robinson Crusoe*, Oxford, OUP, (1719) 2007, p. 193.

I first took a Piece of a *Leaf*, and chew'd it in my Mouth, which indeed at first almost stupify'd my *Brain*, the Tobacco being green and strong, and that I had not been much us'd to it; then I took some and steeped it an Hour or two in some Rum, and resolv'd to take a Dose of it when I lay down; and lastly, I burnt some upon a Pan of Coals, and held my Nose close over the Smoke of it as long as I could bear it, as well for the Heat as almost for Suffocation. In the Interval of this Operation, I took up the Bible and began to read, but my Head was too much disturb'd with the Tobacco to bear reading, at least that Time; only having open'd the Book casually, the first Words that occur'd to me were these, Call on me in the Day of Trouble, and I will deliver, and thou shalt glorify me.<sup>11</sup>

Robinson's speech is accurately *chronological*: "first", "then", "and lastly", "In the Interval". Defoe also resorts to metonymical quantifiers ("a Piece of", "some", "a Dose") to certify Robinson's rational use of available goods. Relying on hard work and Christian faith, Defoe's Crusoe strives to create the spatiotemporal continuity that will bring him from despair to salvation. Interestingly enough, in this passage the words 'leaf' and 'brain' serve a completely different purpose from Walcott's poem, in which they also appear at close range (p. 58, 25-26). While Defoe's Robinson accurately avoids the effects of brain stupefaction caused by tobacco leaves, the brain of Walcott's Crusoe is "rotting" because he has renounced rationality and surrendered to *tropical* (in both senses, climatic and rhetorical) conditioning. Despite his attempt at cultural acclimatisation, the Caribbean landscape remains 'inappropriate' for Walcott's Crusoe, whose metaphors are irremediably "Dead" (p. 58, 25) and devoid of cognitive power. While Defoe's Robinson excelled in "husbandry" (see first quote above) and subjugated the land for his own ends, Walcott's Crusoe proves a sterile husband, whose interaction with the land generates only his metaphorical excrements and a sort of decadent self-consumption.

However, the text is double-coded at least in another sense. "The Castaway" is also the poem of the black poet's perplexity and anxiety of influence. Crusoe is the mask<sup>12</sup> which the black poet (not Walcott, but Caliban: the nativist poet Walcott often criticises) wears to express his worries about the interference of the coloniser's language and culture with his own tradition. Accordingly, Crusoe's longing for a ship that should bring him away from a cultural desert represents the black poet's repressed attraction for the English language and his anxiety about being unable to fully express himself in the idiom of indigenous metaphors. In metadiscursive terms, this means that neither the white coloniser nor the nativist poet produce anything fertile in cultural or poetic terms. As a creator of artistic metaphors, Crusoe elaborates a fecopoetics that does not produce good fertilising dung but only such dead or calcified material as the dog's excrements ("crusts", "coral"), possibly with a recollection of T.S. Eliot's 1910 poem "First Debate between the Body and the Soul": "Imagination's / Defecations / The withered leaves / Of our sensations –".<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 80-81; emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> See, on this point, P. ISMOND, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott's Poetry*, Kingston, University of the West Indies Press, 2001, p. 46: "The purpose of abandoning dead metaphors is, accordingly, a radical new departure from his [Walcott's] quest for identity". But, as the analysis of the next two Crusoe poems shows, it is perhaps more accurate to say that "Walcott's definition of his West Indian identity determines how he relates to the literary traditions in a chronology of intertextualities" (E. BREITINGER, "Odysseus, Crusoe and the Making of the Caribbean Hero: Derek Walcott's Variations of Great Traditions", in P. NICKLAS and O. LINDNER [eds], *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012, p. 225).

<sup>13</sup> T.S. ELIOT, "First Debate between the Body and the Soul", in ID., *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, eds C. RICKS and J. MCCUE, London, Faber & Faber, 2015, Vol. I, p. 241.

In both ways, Walcott's *Crusoe* is a failing hero. He represents the coloniser's failure to interact productively with Caribbean nature and the black poet's failure to voice and celebrate the beauty of that landscape when he passively adopts the words of monologic tradition. *Crusoe* the white man assumes he is a Prospero gifted with divine power, i.e., his supposed theological and cultural superiority, although he is unable to translate it into effective action. On his part, *Crusoe* the black poet wishes to go 'natural'. As a modern Caliban, he claims he is what he eats (the natural products of the land): "We end in earth, from earth began. / In our own entrails, genesis" (p. 57, 18-19). He theorises naturalist poetry as a form of cultural monogenesis (a term by which I mean the poet's aspiration to be his own creator and the pure product of his race), but cannot help being what he reads too. In fact, he finds out he is unable to mediate between language, nature and broader cultural structures. When he sticks to monogenetic purity, he understands that nature sends him messages, but lacks the words to put what he sees and hears into successful verse. If he uncritically adopts the vocabulary of monologic tradition, his efforts produce only "Dead metaphors" (p. 58, 25), the sad outcome of what Hogan terms "reactionary mimeticism".<sup>14</sup> I therefore suggest reading "The Castaway" as a poem that represents racial and cultural archives as indelible binaries when black or white cultural identitarianism prevails. An *impasse* that can be overcome only by deconventionalising the metaphors that describe the 'tropical' situation, thus allowing the white man to understand nature and the black man to re-use culture outside the normative modes of reactionary thinking. In Walcott's representation, the *Crusoe* figure is never a holotrope (the whole figuration): it is always dichotomous or incomplete, even when it comes across as a plural construct. In "The Castaway", for example, *Crusoe* is better described by the figure of antithesis, which uncomfortably contrasts two solitudes: the white with the black one. Only by acknowledging their different weaknesses and incompleteness, they may participate in a process of field-construction in a dialogic scheme.

*"Crusoe's Island": The Humane 'Non-person' vs the Pure Tribesman*

In "Crusoe's Island" the white man's culture is more amply ventriloquised by the black poet than in "The Castaway". In fact, the poet realises that a mature art can better express its own distinctiveness by blending with the language and culture of the other. Or, more simply, he accepts *ex post* the fact that the language he is using is replete with a semiotic history of its own: a sovereign autonomy that resists all efforts of cultural cleansing. Therefore, in this poem, Walcott quotes or alludes to authors and texts other than Defoe and *Robinson Crusoe*. The phrase "God's anvil" (p. 68, 2) recalls William Blake's "The Tyger". The chapel's cowbell that "Hammers ocean" (p. 68, 3) calls back to the gong's sound and the tormented sea in W.B. Yeats' "Byzantium" as well as the "hammered gold" of his "Sailing to Byzantium". The roofs by the sea, roaring in the sun, are probably reminiscent, by contrast, of Paul Valéry's "quiet roof" in the opening line of his "Cemetery by the Sea". While it echoes Arnold's

<sup>14</sup> "By 'reactionary nativism', I mean the general inversion of colonial and racist hierarchies such that members of the oppressed group affirm their racial and cultural authority in precisely the manner of the colonizers. This is a reactionary tendency in that it is a reaction to the physical and mental brutality of the oppressors, which it denies but does not overcome" (P.C. HOGAN, "Mimeticism, Reactionary Nativism, and the Possibility of Postcolonial Identity in Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*", *Research in African Literatures*, 25 [2], Special Issue: Caribbean Literature, 1994, p. 109).

"Dover Beach", the verse "O love, we die alone!" (p. 70, 72) is in the first place a *dictum* in pure Auden style.<sup>15</sup> Auden's misquotation of a *haiku* in "Thoughts of his Own Death" (*Marginalia*, 1965-1968) is also echoed by Walcott. While in Auden's poem death manifests itself as the sound of a distant thunder at a picnic, Walcott reflects on God's death while he lies on a "picnic plaid / Of Scarborough" (p. 68, 12-13). Walcott's fear "Of being swallowed by the blue" sky (p. 69, 22) instead reminds us of Stéphane Mallarmé's analogous lament for God's death or for his hiding in the mocking blue sky in "L'azur" ("My father, God, is dead", p. 68, 19). The black girls, "Friday's progeny" (p. 72, 103), walking "in their air of glory" (p. 72, 107), retain a tinge of Byron's "She Walks in Beauty". Vulcan's forging of "Achilles' shield" (p. 71, 97) is, despite Walcott's Latinisation of Hephaistos' name, a reference to Homer's *Iliad*. The poet's standing at his "life's noon" (p. 71, 91) harks back to the *incipit* of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "In the middle of the journey of our life",<sup>16</sup> which the Italian poet wrote when he was thirty-five, about the same age as Walcott when he composed "Crusoe's Island". And, indeed, Walcott too has journeyed, not to paradise through hell and purgatory, but to Tobago, Crusoe's island. Although Tobago resembles Eden, the poet maintains he has "lost sight of hell, / Of heaven" (p. 71, 84-85). Like Dante, who got lost in a *selva oscura* (or "dark forest"), Walcott in fact goes astray "On parched, delirious sand" (p. 71, 92), but the two poets' moral and emotional situation is the same: one of uncertainty and confusion.<sup>17</sup>

It is also interesting to notice that Crusoe's name is never mentioned in this poem. Crusoe is referred to as 'he': the pronoun that, according to Benveniste, designates a "non-person". Crusoe is the "bearded hermit" (p. 69, 30) and "The second Adam" (p. 69, 43), a figure who has in large part emancipated himself from the egotistic preoccupations and irremediable homesickness that affected him in "The Castaway" and is now desperate for "human love" (p. 70, 51). It is this deep need of human contact that defines him as a "non-person", a defective subject who seeks a completion conceived along the lines of Friday's ethnic diversity and human richness.

While Crusoe strives after interracial contamination, the poet is the member of a party who came to the island "for the cure / Of quiet" (p. 70, 52-53), wishing "To be, like beast or natural object, pure" (p. 70, 60). On his arrival on the island, he is still the tribesman who anxiously debates his double heritage but has not abandoned his dream of purity. This situation persists until, in the poem's closure, he freely admits that the beauty of Friday's progeny is adequately blessed only by "the bell's / Transfiguring tongue" (p. 72, 117-18). The black girls' splendour surpasses the angels' beauty, but still needs the English language to make the girls' lower-pitched attractiveness visible. Interracial dialogue and genuine cultural amalgamation require the let go of strength and the hiving off of identitarian presuppositions. The poet is induced to renounce proud tribalism and go

<sup>15</sup> As Breslin acutely points out, "'Crusoe's Island' adopts a more formal, almost oratorical stance, and the trimeter of its third section recalls that of Yeats and Auden in such public poetry as *Easter, 1916* or *September 1, 1939*" (P. BRESLIN, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, p. 107).

<sup>16</sup> DANTE, *Inferno*, ed. and Engl. trans. R.M. DURLING, New York and Oxford, OUP, 1996, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> While I subscribe to Laurence A. Breiner's claim that "[t]hroughout his career [Walcott] has had a particular affinity for writers of nonstandard English" (L.A. BREINER, "Postcolonial Caribbean Poetry", in J. RAMAZANI [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, Cambridge, CUP, 2017, p. 24), e.g., not just T.S. Eliot but also Dylan Thomas and G.M. Hopkins, I wish to draw attention to the universal character of Walcott's intertextualism, which expands beyond the borders of anglophone poetry and contemporary literatures.

beyond the positions of those who sustain that Western knowledge is necessarily tainted by methodological Occidentalism.<sup>18</sup>

*“Crusoe’s Journal”: Between Appropriation and Amalgamation*

The epigraph appended to “Crusoe’s Journal”, an extract from Defoe’s novel, testifies to Crusoe’s estrangement in the context of the Caribbean islands: “Between thee and me is a great gulf fixed” (p. 92). But, despite the expectations originated by the poem’s title, this text is not a record of Crusoe’s experiences as a lonesome castaway. It is told by a we-subject, the poet, who speaks in the collective voice of a party of visitors to Tobago: “Once we have driven past Mundo Nuevo” (p. 92, 1).<sup>19</sup> This strong differentiation from Crusoe’s words and experience does not denounce Walcott’s subjection to tribal separatism. Rather, he tries to take cultural identity back from self-centred sectarianism and reacquaint it with an interracial baseline. The tourists’ ethnicity is unspecified and might as well be mixed. But the interracial turn may take place only through the black poet’s appropriation of the language of the other: a gift that came with the imposition of colonial power.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, a significant change occurs from “Crusoe’s Island”: in “Crusoe’s Journal” Walcott’s intertextual strategy becomes almost entirely explicit. Here, he does not allude cryptically to the coloniser’s culture, nor does he dissimulate his quotations as he did in the previous poem; he names some white authors and uses their words to describe the Caribbean context. But, intriguingly enough, he mentions only exotic and adventure writers – G.A. Henty, Marryat, Robert Louis Stevenson – and Ben Gunn, a character from Stevenson’s exotic novel *The Treasure Island*. Walcott’s issue is in fact the white man’s imagology and obsolete epistemology, the stereotypical distortion of otherness as traditionally perpetrated by the Western gaze, which in the Caribbean sees Eden, happiness and adventure instead of a complex anthropology.

Through some heavy alliterations contained in his ludicrously heterogenous list of places and things Caribbean, Walcott also parodies the mnemonic English that Crusoe brought “to savages” (p. 93, 18) as a missionary: “Choiseul, Canaries, / crouched crocodile canoes” (p. 93, 34-35). Both strategies, explicit intertextuality and parody, are forms of cultural appropriation that prove instrumental in expanding Walcott’s postcolonial poetry along lines

<sup>18</sup> On methodological Eurocentrism/Occidentalism, see I. KERNER, “Postcolonial Theories as Global Critical Theories,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 25 (4), 2018, pp. 614-28. On Walcott’s amalgamation of competing cultures, John Thieme observes: “The use of the Robinson figure foregrounds the struggle to construct a tradition” (J. THIEME, *Derek Walcott*, Manchester, Manchester U.P., 1999, p. 78).

<sup>19</sup> As rightly observed by Erik Martiny, “these autochthones are not castaways; they reside on the terra ferma of home. Theirs is not the Castaway’s rotting brain, but an ‘intellect [which] appraises / objects surely’ (4-5)” (E. MARTINY, “Multiplying Footprints: Alienation and Integration in Derek Walcott’s Reworkings of the Robinson Crusoe Myth”, *English Studies*, 87 [6], 2006, p. 676).

<sup>20</sup> In a stimulating essay, Alexander Irvine reads Walcott’s appropriative operation in the light of the “Deleuzian idea of minor literature [which] is to a large extent dependent on the concept of ‘deterritorialization’” (A. IRVINE, “‘Betray Them Both, or Give Back What They Give?’: Derek Walcott’s Deterritorialization of Western Myth”, *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 4 [1], 2005, p. 124). On the same wavelength is Fallon, who, in lieu of “deterritorialization”, prefers the expression “extreme placelessness” (A.M. FALLON, “The First True Creole’: Creation Stories in Derek Walcott and Sam Selvon”, in EAD., *Global Crusoe: Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Theory and Transnational Aesthetics*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, p. 62).



as different as transnational, planetary, and post-historical linguistics.<sup>21</sup> Crusoe's 'prose', in which "even the bare necessities / of style are turned to use" (p. 92, 5-6), is poeticised and freed from utilitarian purpose. The first instrument of poeticisation is rhyme. With very few exceptions, all lines in the poem either rhyme in /s/ or /z/ or contain the sound /s/ before a final /t/, as in 'Christ' or 'cost'. What at first glance appears as prose – an impression that is reinforced by the vast number of enjambements – is thus tacitly adjusted to "the hermetic skill, that from earth's clays / shapes something without use" (p. 93, 42-43). Once re-appropriated by the black poet, Crusoe's prosaic idiolect can be used for giving poetic form to the Caribbean landscape: from Crusoe's journals, "we learn to shape [...] where nothing was / the language of a race" (p. 94, 56-57). The Crusoe figure turns now into Proteus, the god of multiplicity and rapid change, whose 'weak' and unstable identity contributes to reprioritising the black poet's cultural agenda. While in "The Castaway" Crusoe feared multiplicity, in "Crusoe's Journal" he delights in plurality and diversification. On his part, Walcott dismisses the myth of an original primal word (we are always "second" Adams) and gives his poem a hypertextual, transnational ending. In fact, the poem's closing line – "God's loneliness moves in His smallest creatures" (p. 94, 70) – clearly intertextualises the *incipit* of Dante's *Paradiso*: "The glory of the One who moves all things".<sup>22</sup> In an audacious rhetorical move, Walcott makes postcolonial poetry end where Western poetry began, as if the two poetic trajectories were to be re-synchronised in view of a new, commonly shared origin of traditions. The weak dialogisation of opposing traditions is thus complete: Walcott's Robinson poems move from the cultural monologism of "The Castaway" to the anti-tribalism of "Crusoe's Island" through the re-appropriation of the other's language that culminates in "Crusoe's Journal".

It is under the aegis of transnational poetry, as evoked by Dante, that de-theologised Christianity can be appropriated by the Caribbean poet as a means of semi-profane celebration of indigenous beauty. Whether dead or unknown, the Christian God is alone, inaccessible in his self-contained strength. But the truly divine glory shines through the folk reinterpretation of theology by some weak subjects: those "smallest creatures" (p. 94, 70) who recall the black girls in communion dress of "Crusoe's Island". Their attractiveness is now embraceable through the Dantesque reclamation of their blackness and femaleness.

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<sup>21</sup> As Walcott observes, to lend your ear to the muse of history produces "a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters" (D. WALCOTT, "The Muse of History: An Essay", in ID., *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, [1974] 2014, p. 37).

<sup>22</sup> DANTE, *Paradiso*, I, 1, Engl. trans. A. MANDELBAUM, New York, Bantam Classics, 1986, p. 23.

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