

This volume in memory of Bernard Hickey, intended as a tribute to his writing activity of ambassador of Australian culture in Italy and Europe and promoter of postcolonial studies, collects critical essays and creative writings by scholars and writers from all over the world. The book is a synthesis, inevitably incomplete, of the various interests cultivated by this intellectual through his multifarious conversations that are echoed and developed in this collection. Among the topics explored, reconciliation, in its widest connotation, acquires a central role as a guideline along which to explore subjects such as migration and diaspora, the crossing of ideological and cultural barriers, multiculturalism and interculturalism, contaminations and processes of identity definition. Prominent scholars in the field of linguistics, literary and cultural studies examine these complex themes in relation to different geographical contexts, from the Caribbean to Canada, from Ireland to Africa, with special focus on Australia with its complex histories and cultures.

Rather than subdividing the essays into rigid thematic areas, a more flexible interdisciplinary approach has been chosen in order to facilitate the interaction and insightful dialogue between different fields and methods of analysis. The second section of the book is dedicated to creative writing by both emerging and well-known writers. It gathers poems, short stories, translations and personal memories.

MARIA RENATA DOLOE is Professor of English Literature at the University of Salento, Lecce, Italy. Her main interests are in Postcolonial Literatures and diasporic writing; she promotes events and meetings with writers, artists, and experts in the field of postcolonial studies. Among her publications a monographic work on Peter Carey and a book on the relationship between literatures in English and the canon.

ANTONELLA RIEM-NATALE is Professor of English Literature and Dean of the Faculty of Modern Languages at the University of Udine, Italy. She coordinates cultural events on World Literatures in English, and has published books and essays on British and Australian literature, on myth and fable connected to nation and narration, and on the influence of Hinduism in English Romanticism.



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Bernard Hickey, a Roving Cultural Ambassador
Essays In His Memory

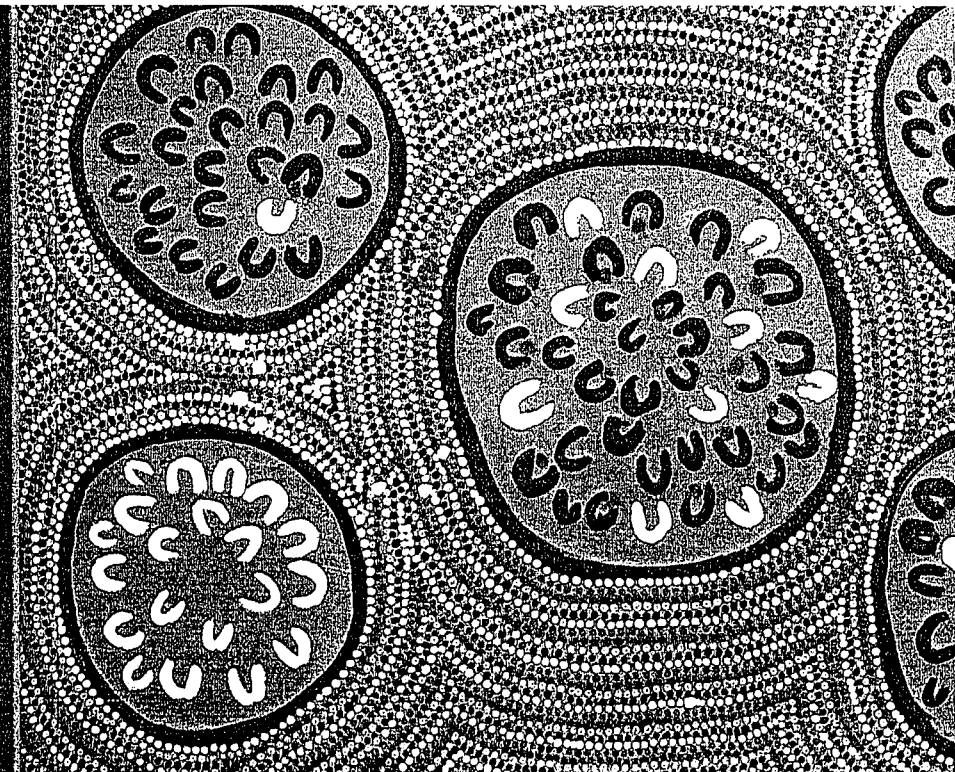


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all@uniud.it
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Shabine's Voyage through Language and History in Derek Walcott's 'The Schooner Flight'

Marco Fazzini

"That's all them bastards have left us: words". Shabine's curt observation about his linguistic patrimony lies at the very core of his personal drama both as a seaman and a poet, something Derek Walcott uses both to endorse a geographic and linguistic re-enactment of the Caribbean history and to suggest a possible path through the use of the English literary language for inter-textual purposes. Published in 1979 for the first time, and included in his volume *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, the long poem 'The Schooner Flight' is probably the most touching work ever produced by Walcott, a dissertation about a people's destiny, and a poet's destiny, in one of the many Caribbean islands where colonization has interfered with place, time, people, lives, and so to bed, determining earthquakes in language, race, power, and trade. But let us see first what the poem is about, and meet the protagonist of this work, Shabine, and his background.

Shabine is one of the many mulatto inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, a mixed race outcast who sets out to ship as a seaman on a schooner, definitively leaving his woman, Maria Concepcion, for whom he has earlier left his wife and children. It is clear from the very beginning that Shabine's personal history can stand for all those people whose identity has been obfuscated first by his forefathers' deportation out of Africa and, secondly, by the post-colonial wrongs perpetrated by the new political classes who have taken over in those islands. Here is Shabine presenting himself to the reader:

I know these islands from Monos to Nassau,
a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes
that they nickname Shabine, the patois for
any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw
when these slums of empire was paradise.
I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation... (Walcott, 1979: 4).

In these lines are concentrated several problematic issues, such as: the relationship between race and national identity; the corruption of ex-colonised areas of the world where political and geographical appropriation have determined both ecological and cultural conflicts; the overlapping of the writer's voice with the persona's dramatic voice; and the relationship between culture, language and the many *auctoritates* which form both a literary canon and a personal set of influences on the writer. Walcott himself, commenting on Seamus Heaney's review of *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, had to recognise that something inter-textually relevant filters both into this long poem and, probably, into all his poetical production. Walcott's comment on Heaney's observations is particularly relevant here: "You have your debts to your predecessors; your acknowledgment is a votive acknowledgment. Seamus Heaney recognized in a review that 'The Schooner Flight' opens like *Piers Plowman*. You put that deliberately: "as this reminded me of that, so let it remind you also" (Baer, 1995: 92).

Since 'The Schooner Flight' is not only a poem about a sea-voyage, an escape from a corrupted island (Trinidad in this case) and a flight to some sort of new dimension of being, but also a meta-poetical work about writing and poetry, it can be read as a long and scholarly improvisation on English language and literature, so as to show that "a sound colonial education" serves here to construct a refined-texture through which we can see, as in a watermark, both a rhythmical and thematic counter-discursive re-elaboration of sources. So we perceive here not only the alliterative rhythms of Langland's *Piers Plowman* when, as observed by Heaney, weary of wandering, the protagonist goes for a rest: "In summer season, when soft was the sun,/ I rigged myself up in a long robe, rough like a sheep's,/ With skirts hanging like a hermit's, unholy of works,/ Went wide in this world, wonders to hear./ But on a May morning, on Malvern Hills,/ A marvel befell me – magic it seemed./ I was weary of wandering and went for a rest/ Under a broad bank, by a brook's side;/ And as I lay lolling, looking at the water,/ I slid into a sleep..."; but, also, all the murky atmosphere linked to the *tristesse* of the Anglo-Saxon elegies, especially of the 'Seafarer' when, as a forced exile, the speaker has to move towards a kind of dramatic and final dislocation. 'The Seafarer', like 'The Schooner Flight', works through a soliloquy: a *wraecca* (also meaning "wretch", "stranger", "wanderer" "pilgrim", "unhappy man", definitions we could use and apply to Shabine likewise) "tells of the many winters (years) he has spent in exile on the sea, and the hardships he has borne. His mind then moves to the future, and his trepidation at the thought of a new sea-journey he has to make" (Alexander, 1991: 46): "Driven to talk of myself, a true story,/ I have to tell of journeys, and how I/ bore the brunt of hard days with bitter/ sorrow of heart, and went with my ship/ through regions that whiten the hair, and there/ felt the terrible under-sway of the waves" (Bantock, 1972: 20).

Yet the Anglo-Saxon musical and thematic presence in Walcott's poetry is interrelated with many other inter-textual grafts, so as to render 'The Schooner Flight' a real summa of sources and re-writings. Heaney, again, has observed that "Africa and England beat messages along his blood. The humanist voices of his education and the voices from his elemental inarticulate place keep insisting on their full claims, pulling him in two different directions" (Heaney, 1993: 305). This enables us to go back to the quotation which opened this brief talk: "That's all them bastards have left us: words". 'The Schooner Flight' is undoubtedly a hybridization of voices, rhythms and languages, as Walcott demonstrates in the sixth section of his poem, a part dedicated to the different names of the "casuarinas" and to the process of linguistic mimicry which stands at the very core of the relationship between coloniser and colonised. This kind of double, triple or multi-linguistic bind, responsible for a conflicting alternation between a feeble auditory remembrance of lost languages and the everyday use of the colonisers' speeches, determines both a linguistic and political schizophrenia where, after the amnesia of African histories and languages, English must be appropriated and poetry and life must re-begin, as Walcott says in a beautiful poem published in *The Castaway*:

Schizophrenic, wrenched by two styles,
one a hack's hired prose, I earn
my exile. I trudge this sickle, moonlit beach for miles,

tan, burn
to slough off
this love of ocean that's self-love.

To change your language you must change your life (Walcott, 1992: 55).

The broken English Shabine uses all through 'The Schooner Flight' is intended to be a clear reminder of a people's linguistic dispossession, of an unconscious rhythmical pulse which, as Walcott himself has observed, is "a matter of the accent, a matter of the tone" (Baer, 1995: 128), coming directly from Africa. Here is Shabine's voice describing his encounter with some of the great admirals responsible for the colonisation of his land and for the violence perpetrated against all those Shabines who were forced to contribute to the conquistador's enterprises:

Man, I brisk in the galley first thing next dawn,
brewing li'l coffee; fog coil from the sea
like the kettle steaming when I put it down
slow, slow, 'cause I couldn't believe what I see:
where the horizon was one silver haze,

the fog swirl and swell into sails, so close
that I saw it was sails, my hair grip my skull,
it was horrors, but it was beautiful.
We float through a rustling forest of ships
with sails dry like paper, behind the glass
I saw men with rusty eyeholes like cannons,
and whenever their half-naked crews cross the sun,
right through their tissue, you traced their bones
like leaves against the sunlight; frigates, barkentines,
the backward-moving current swept them on,
and high on their decks I saw great admirals,
Rodney, Nelson, de Grasse, I heard the hoarse orders
They gave those Shabines... (Walcott, 1979: 10-11).

Yet this broken English is some sort of English after all, which Shabine defines as "my common language". Having to come to terms with a history of linguistic dispossession, Shabine's (and Walcott's) appropriation in 'The Schooner Flight' attracts strategic and showy stands against and towards the coloniser's language. As Ned Thomas has observed, "common" must have "a wider reference to the international currency of English, and 'my' must represent the poet's individual attempt to wrest it to his own purpose, an ambitious, individualist undertaking" (Thomas, 1991: 88).

English cannot be disclaimed in the Caribbean context, as happens in other post-colonial contexts, so that all the conscious and learned voices appearing in 'The Schooner Flight' clearly remind one of the "humanist" side of Walcott, made up of large quotations and remembrances from Coleridge, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Edgar Allan Poe and W.B. Yeats. This inter-textual, and often parodic process of re-use and quotation in Walcott's 'The Schooner Flight' has been clearly heard in the previous quotation, where the poet has rewritten the Ancient Mariner's encounter with a ghostly ship when Death and Life-in-Death were casting dice to win the Mariner's soul: "Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud)/ How fast she nears and nears!/ Are those her sails that glance in the Sun,/ Like restless gossamers?// Are those her ribs through which the Sun/ Did peer, as through a grate?/ And is that woman all her crew?/ Is that a Death? And are there two? Is Death that woman's mate?". Yet, it is not the only Coleridgean appropriation in 'The Schooner Flight': the storm is a threatening and vivid presence both in Walcott and in Coleridge; in the eleventh section of 'The Schooner Flight', called 'After the Storm', a moment of resolution seems to bring some release to Shabine's peregrinations: despite the decadence of the Caribbean landscape and of its political situation commented on by Shabine in the opening sections, he manages to bless "every town,/ the blue smell of smoke in hills behind them,/ and the one small road winding down

them like twine/ to the roofs below... ", in the same way as the Ancient Mariner accepts the water-snakes, and blesses them: "O happy living things! No tongue/ Their beauty might declare:/ A spring of love gushed from my heart,/ And I blessed them unaware:/ Sure my kind saint took pity on me,/ And I blessed them unaware".

There is always in Walcott an alternation between the luscious beauty of the Caribbean islands and the depressing decadence linked to their neo-capitalist corrupted situation, so as to suggest that any idealised dimension (linguistic, environmental and economic) is not only lost forever but also part of a dreamed past where a personal and national childhood cannot really face this new historic, psychological and economic violence determined by imperialism:

But they had started to poison my soul
with their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl,
coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole,
so I leave it for them and their carnival... (Walcott, 1979: 4).

And again on Trinidad:

I have seen things that would make a slave sick
in this Trinidad, the Limers' Republic (Walcott, 1979: 7).

Or on the myth of the western progress:

Progress is something to ask Caribs about.
They kill them by millions, some in war,
some by forced labor dying in the mines
looking for silver, after that niggers; more
progress. Until I see definite signs
that mankind change, Vince, I ain't want to hear.
Progress is history's dirty joke.
Ask that sad green island getting nearer (Walcott, 1979: 14).

On the other hand, through Shabine's "sea-green eyes" we are often offered images from a time when "these slums of empire were paradise", when "emerald water, whose ceiling rippled like a silk tent" was probably devoid of all the bones of his dead forefathers, and when he could enjoy Maria Concepcion's "round brown eyes like a marmoset, and/ till the day when I can lean back and laugh,/ those claws that tickled my back on sweating/ Sunday afternoons, like a crab on wet sand". All this, together with the vista of the Barbados green "casuarinas", "bracing like windbreaks, needles for hurricanes,/ trailing, like masts, the cirrus of torn sails...", belongs to Edenic past which Shabine links to

his childhood years, using a famous phrase taken from the poem 'Fern Hill' by Dylan Thomas: "As I was green like them..."

So, while losing faith in the love of his woman, Shabine no longer believes in the possibility of a revolutionary change: the only alternatives left are a spaghetti western with Clint Eastwood or dedication to his poetry. Now we are approaching the very end of the poem where, after the storm and the realization of the artificiality of nationality ("I had no nation now but the imagination"), Shabine has decided to accept the historyless reality of his islands and start from there for a new discovery, a new re-thinking for his people's identity. So, if probably we agree with Walcott when he says that the only epic thing in 'The Schooner Flight' is the width of the sea, there he can still see or dream of "the veiled face of Maria Concepcion, marrying the ocean", of "the white clouds, the sea and the sky with one seam" which are clothes enough for his nakedness and of a poem where "each phrase go be soaked in salt". What is more disconcerting here is to discover that Shabine has sung for us (and written for us) from the depths of the sea after a long journey which has led him through all the main islands of this Caribbean sea: Trinidad, Barbados, St. Lucia, Dominica, and finally the Bahamas. Like a new version of Eliot's Phoenician Sailor, Shabine is, at the same time, both one of the many Shabines scattered from Senegal to San Salvador, corkscrewed "to the sea bed of sea worms", falling in the middle of an inevitable and terrifying eddy, like the one described by Poe in his 'A Descent into the Maelstrom', and a symbolic presence awaiting to bloom with the coming spring to bring regeneration and fertility. The little exercise book where Shabine has written his poetry, defended by him against the Schooner Flight's crew's derision, is now his only weapon and hope. Against the amnesia of history and a dramatic past of dislocation and violence, Shabine has been given the choice between revenge for the past and nothing: "if there was nothing, there was everything to be made" replies Walcott in one of his core critical essays (Walcott, 1970: 4). This new beginning comes after Love and after War: at a certain stage of human history, they must fall and leave blank pages to be written with the aid of the poet's imagination, a creative "flight" moving not only "from" a place to be left but going "to" a place which can harbour and frame a new life for all the dispossessed, an entire people deserving a new epic and a new blooming:

But things must fall, and so it always was,
on one hand Venus, on the other Mars;
fall, and are one, just as this earth is one
island in archipelagos of stars.
My first friend was the sea. Now, is my last.
I stop talking now. I work, then I read,
côching under a lantern hooked to the mast.

I try to forget what happiness was,
and when that don't work, I study the stars.
Sometimes is just me, and the soft-scissored foam
as the deck turn white and the moon open
a cloud like a door, and the light over me
is a road in white moonlight taking me home.
Shabine sang to you from the depths of the sea (Walcott, 1979: 20).

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