

**SEA CHANGES: POST-COLONIALISM IN
SYNGE AND WALCOTT**

by Sandra Sprayberry

Much, of course, has been written about the fascination among W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge, and other writers of the Irish Literary Revival, for the Irish peasantry. At once celebration, idealization, and abstraction, Yeats's fisherman, as the critic Deborah Fleming has noted, is a predominate symbol of the Irish peasantry. In poems such as "The Fisherman," "The Tower," and "The Meditation of the Old Fisherman," the fisherman is a symbolic figure fraught with Yeatsian polarities—perhaps illiterate, though Yeats's ideal reader; ambiguously aristocratic and peasant, active and knowing; a representative figure of the solitary poet and the communally living Irish (Fleming 7-8). Focusing on the fishing cultures of Inishmaan and St. Lucia, J. M. Synge, in his play *Riders to the Sea*, and Caribbean poet and playwright Derek Walcott, in his play *The Sea at Dauphin*, perhaps tapped into the *Anima Mundi* for their images of fishermen as representatives of cultures threatened by encroaching colonialism. Archetypal heroes and/or stereotypical noble savages, the characters dramatize stories that are more than fish tales; the plays are maps of islands.

In his influential essay "Yeats and Decolonization, a Field Day pamphlet, Edward Said speaks of the "cartographic" impulse of the post-colonial writer "to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover a third nature, which is not pristine and prehistorical . . . but one that derives historically and abductively from the deprivations of the present" (79). If the natural world, what Said would call here the first nature, has been, as the geographer Neil Smith theorized, usurped, dominated, and commodified into a second, constructed, nature (qtd. in Said 78), this third nature is equally a construct.

It is tempting to read *Riders to the Sea* as Synge's attempt to preserve a pristine and prehistorical Ireland, but his play is also contemporary mimesis, not so much a constructed or re-constructed Ireland from the historical past as a realistic account of contemporary life on Inishmaan. After all, the play was based on a story Synge heard in 1899, while on his second visit to the Aran Islands, of a fisherman whose body had washed up on the coast of Donegal and who, because of his dress, had been identified as coming from Inishmaan. Even the supernatural elements of the play depict contemporary folk belief (O'Brien vii-viii). Synge was also insistent on an accurate staging of the play, with authentic clothing and props, for instance (Kopper 41). But when Yeats, under Lady Gregory's tutelage, was intent on preserving the folk beliefs of the West of Ireland, he was on one level creating a rath to preserve the faeries. On one level, Synge is creating a similar rath. The play's syntactical echoes of Gaelic, its fierce tribute to the harsh lives of the fishermen and to the fatalistic yet perseverant women who love and nurture and bury them, its refusal to adopt the gaze of a tourist instead of the voice of a native, its criticism of sermonizing in wholly Catholic tones at the expense of acknowledging the supernatural—all attest to Synge's construction of a curagh, to use perhaps a more appropriate metaphor.

Synge's construction is perhaps most apparent in his choice of language. Preferring

for the most part to preserve the cadences rather than the nuances of the Gaelic that would, no doubt, have been spoken by the actual fisherman found dead in Donegal and by his sisters and mother, Synge is indeed constructing the third nature that Said theorizes or the third language that Declan Kiberd speaks of in his article “The Empire Writes Back”:

There are three basic phases in the process of cultural decolonization. The first is when a native elite is taught the master’s language in order to serve his interests (Crusoe and Friday, Prospero and Caliban, etc.). The second occurs when the native intelligentsia reclaims a once-despised local lore, but expresses it in the language of the coloniser. The third—less often reached—is when the artist chooses to write in the vibrant language of his or her own people.

It would seem at first analysis that Synge’s use of dialect falls somewhere between Kiberd’s second and third phases. But to write entirely in the native tongue is not necessarily all that Kiberd means by the term “third phase.” Citing the Kenyan writer Ngugi’s “farewell to English” in his 1988 theoretical work *Decolonizing the Mind* and his subsequent commitment to novels written in Gikuyu as one of the few examples of this radical recovery of the mother tongue, Kiberd includes in this third category writers like V. S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott who, in some respects, outdo the English in their written works in English. The third language, then, may be the language of the colonizer, but that English is also the language of the colonized, according to Kiberd; English may be an oppressive force for the colonizer, but also a liberating force for the colonized, a weapon, as Frantz Fanon asserts, “to liberate the enemy language from its historic meanings” (qtd. in Kiberd, “Empire”). The recovery of native languages, as in the case of many American Indian tribes, may be impossible. Kiberd notes: “Either there is a plethora of languages (as in India or Algeria) or the native language is weak (Ireland) or else nonexistent as such (West Indies). Yet the third phase has been reached by many West Indian and Irish writers, who have simply assumed that English is indeed the vibrant language of their people.” Derek Walcott is such a writer.

Walcott recounts in a 1979 interview with Edward Hirsch his early experiences as a young poet and an avid reader of the English literary canon:

I . . . felt that it was a privilege to grow up as an English colonial child because politically and culturally the British heritage was supposed to be mine. It was no problem for me to feel that since I was writing in English, I was in tune with the growth of the language. I was a contemporary of anyone writing in English anywhere in the world. (282)

Thus, for Walcott, English was not so much an oppressing and dominating language but rather one of his languages of entitlement and heritage. “‘Finding one’s voice,’” the struggle towards originality is, of course, an issue for any writer, but for a writer who is writing in a language or dialect other than that of his or her nativity or ethnicity, the issue is complicated further. The tension becomes more than that of the dialectic between tradition and individuality, as Eliot explores in his seminal essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”; it also becomes the tension between colonizer and colonized.

Walcott noticed, as an emerging writer, an interesting distinction in this regard

between the voice in which his poetry was written and the voice in which it was read. He continues in the Hirsch interview:

What is more important, however—and I’m still working on this—was to find a voice that was not inflected by influences. One didn’t develop an English accent in speech; one kept as close as possible to an inflection that was West Indian. The aim was that a West Indian or an Englishman could read a single poem, each with his own accent, without either one feeling that it was written in dialect. You know that you just ravage and cannibalize anything as a young poet; you have a very voracious appetite for literature . . . I knew I had to absorb everything in order to be able to discover what I was eventually trying to sound like. (282)

Ultimately an entanglement of fisherman’s nets, poetic voice is woven from the cords of personal, cultural, and literary influences, among others. “To come into one’s voice” may mean to give voice to those inextricably connected influences rather than to silence them.

Perhaps because plays, by their very nature, are more inclined to give voice to characters other than the poet, Walcott relies more heavily in his plays on dialect, the Creole *patois* of his native island. He notes:

for the poetry to be true, it had to be accurate, quietly accurate in terms of the sound of my own voice. In the plays I have tried to articulate the rude speech of the people I was writing about. There are many passages in the plays that move away from what could possibly be said by a St. Lucian fisherman. . . . But what I have tried to do—and I think it is the same sort of thing that lots of Third World writers have been trying to do—is to combine my own individualistic poetic sensibility with the strength of the root, the mass racial sensibility of expression. (“Interview” 288)

In Walcott’s plays dialect seems to dominate, more so perhaps than in Synge. Yet not only does Walcott combine his own poetic voice with the voices of his people; he also gives voice to the colonizer to create a conversation among texts and among cultures.

However, as the critic Irene Martyniuk has noted concerning Walcott, he does not merely reposition Western texts within a post-colonial setting to create a “counter-discourse” (142). Martyniuk asserts: “Instead, by intertextually reformulating these original texts Walcott finds acceptance and celebration of the post-colonial in the very stories Europeans have identified as specifically their own—their founding texts of ‘master narratives’” (143). When Declan Kiberd in his seminal book *Inventing Ireland* speaks of the literary invention of Ireland, he demonstrates how that invention turns back on the colonizer to re-invent it and its literature in turn (268-85), in much the same manner that Eliot, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” speaks of the poetry of the present rewriting and rereading the poetry of the past (38-9).

Thus, Walcott is in dialogue with and effecting a reinvention of the colony and its literature. But he is also in dialogue with other texts that are themselves in dialogue with the colonizer. Walcott has acknowledged that his play *The Sea at Dauphin* intentionally reinvents

Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. He states:

I've always felt some kind of intimacy with the Irish poets because one realized that they were also colonials with the same kind of problems that existed in the Caribbean. They were the niggers of Britain. . . . And then the whole question of dialect began to interest me. 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 and gotten beauty out of it, a beat, something lyrical. Now that was inspiring, and the obvious model for *The Sea at Dauphin*. I guess I knew then that the more you imitate when you're young, the more original you become. 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 fisherman 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. ("Interview" 288-9)

Literary influence, which can become a strangling knot for developing writers, was for Walcott a loophole, even early in his career. Perhaps because he chose among his models Irish writers who either directly or indirectly explored issues of colonialism and native culture—writers who were already engaged in intertextual dialogue, as it were—he continues the dialogue.

"Retranslation" is an appropriate term for Walcott's riffs on Creole, English, and Synge. The plot of *The Sea at Dauphin* is very similar to that of *Riders to the Sea*. Both plays focus on the wind-lashed lives of those who depend on the sea (and by implication a distant God) for their subsistence (the name of the fishing boat in *The Sea at Dauphin* is *Our Daily Bread*), and of those left to await and keen their loved ones' deaths. Although Walcott's reversal of gender roles in *Riders* makes for interesting contrasts in the two plays (the cast of *The Sea* is exclusively male, the only female being Rama, whose death at sea the old man Hounakin mourns), the similarities are notable. In both plays, the sea is depicted as a harsh, elemental force whose destructiveness flows more than ebbs. In both plays the sea constantly reminds the islanders of its potential force through its winds as well as waves. "There's a great roaring in the west, and it's worse it'll be getting when the tide's turned to the wind," we're told by Nora in *Riders* (19). In *The Sea* we're told "The sea is very droll[,] papa. But it not making me laugh. Some say this sea is dead fisherman laughing. Some say is noise of all the fisherman woman crying. Sea in Dauphin never quiet. Always noise, noise. It will not make you laugh, old man, every night it getting whiter" (12).

"Whiter" connotes not only the foam of the waves but also the colonizers who have oppressed the West Indians. Walcott continues in this vein, as his character Afa later again philosophizes about the whiteness of the sea:

God is a white man. The sky is his blue eye,
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. (14)

If the sea is a signifier of colonial religious and economic oppression for Walcott, it may be subtly so for Synge as well. Because the sea is part of the larger world outside that threatens the domestic world of the cottage, a “mercantile world [that] threatens, invades, and desecrates the island” (Fleming 106), it may signify the colonizer.

It is debatable that the privileged writer who speaks for the common people of his or her race is playing colonizer, as well, Crusoe to his man Friday. Walcott has also written several works that riff Defoe and has said, “We are Crusoes: as poets, as novelists, as playwrights, we survey islands, and we feel they belong to us—not in a bad, godlike manner, but with that sense of exhilaration, of creative possession. The other side is the despair of Crusoe, the despair of always being alone. That is our true condition as writers” (“Interview” 292). Albeit he felt closer to the Aran islanders on subsequent visits, still, Synge wrote in the Aran notebooks later published as *The Aran Islands* (1907): “In some ways these men and women seem strangely far away from me. They have the same emotions that I have, and the animals have, yet I cannot talk to them when there is much to say, more than to the dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog” (qtd. in Casey 7).

Yeats, of course, felt pulled between the poles of public and political vs. private and artistic expression; when giving poetic expression to the political issues of the Irish Literary Revival, he was, paradoxically, creating a kind of aesthetic distance from his subject matter. Thus critics have sometimes concluded that Yeats and Synge primarily viewed their peasant subjects as artistic symbols, poetic objects: “What was important about the peasant to Yeats and Synge was not what would interest an anthropologist, historian or sociologist; they were interested in whatever gave them images for art. . .” (Fleming 183). However, I would argue that post-colonial writers may be interested in their peasant subjects as aesthetic *and* anthropological, historical, and sociological figures. The writers may thus feel towards their subjects and, by implication, towards their positions as writers a multitude of irreconcilable ambivalences. Though both Derek Walcott and J. M. Synge map out new post-colonial territories, their works do not arrive at clear conclusions concerning the writer’s (or reader’s) place within this new territory. That they take us to this place may be risk enough.

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THE HOUSE MY FATHER LIVED IN AS A CHILD

My stomach is a stew of Prozac, Beta-carotene supplements,
 ginseng capsules; no wonder I'm awake on this paint-curved porch,

little to bother me here but a pair of hand-carved cherrywood rockers,
 a table with rings from lemonades past, the cold blare of moonlight.

I hate pill-popping, but here in this two-story Victorian that echoes
 with my father's bronchial laugh, his constant pitter-patter in the attic,

what choice do I have? And the rain's ping-ping off aluminum siding
 is a set of teeth that slowly chews its way up my arms, my spine.

I might just be swallowed whole, so I wash down some saltines
 with Nyquil, a double dose. I can't stay in my father's old room.

There's nothing there but a fold-out cot that reeks of canvas and wet.
 And the eye-widening lithograph of a 1920's Rockette, winking.

If only I could hit "pause," volume down my gloom-doom mind
 like the crank-up Victrola Grampa Morgan uses to soothe himself

to sleep, wearing out the grooves of Count Basie and Cannonball
 Aderly records. But I don't understand jazz, its syncopation swallows,

its swim of sound like a suburb of Madrid, the way it nests in your ear
 and drills you again and again with the hard lesson of metaphysics.

So I sit in a rocker and creak away the seconds, glad the breeze isn't
 too Autumn yet. It's only August after all, but it feels December.

There--in that shadow, under the branches of the drooping crabapple.
 It's a man's averted face, unable to bear my tired gaze.