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Alessandro Vescovi – ‘*Ti-Jean and his Brothers*’



Poetry and narrative techniques in *Ti-Jean and his Brothers*

In *Ti-Jean and his Brothers* Walcott’s poetical skill and narrative technique come together in a powerful self-enriching interplay. Plot elements are treated as poetical images and combined by means of metaphors and other *figurae*. I will try to show how a rather rare device known as hypallage is extensively applied to both words and characters, making *Ti-Jean* a highly elaborated narrative. However, in order to explore *Ti-Jean*’s narrative devices, it is almost inevitable to forget for a while that it is a play, and think of *Ti-Jean* as a novelette. Is this legitimate?

I think Walcott himself recently provided an answer in the affirmative to this question, when he decided to paint three watercolors of Ti-Jean portraying the boy leaving his mother in one, in the Planter’s field in another and with his mother and brothers in the third one¹. These pictures are by no means representations of a staging, but illustrations of the story as a reader could imagine it. In the pictures we see a boy of more or less twelve, some 40 centimeters shorter than his mother, wearing a hat, short pants and a bright yellow jacket.

By depicting his hero in this way, Walcott takes him off the stage and into the realm of the short story. I can recall more than one cover illustration of *Tom Sawyer* where the protagonist looks quite similar. And in fact, Ti-Jean bears a certain resemblance to Twain’s most famous trickster. Let us consider the second chapter of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, when Tom, one Saturday morning, has to paint a fence and subtly convinces the village boys that painting is a privilege, thus getting the job done by his friends and gaining in addition a certain amount of “valuable” objects. The episode – which ends with a moral reflection on the subjectivity of the notion of work and leisure – is not far in its conception from a folk-tale, particularly a story of ordeals, such as the one *Ti-Jean* is built on. It is also interesting to note that both Tom Sawyer and Ti-Jean stem from the oral tradition. Tom Sawyer is a child of the American West trickster tradition, whose antecedents can be traced back to anecdotes such as Twain’s own “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”. What is probably less known is that the folk-tale structure of *Ti-Jean* is in fact modeled on an oral tale brought to the Caribbean by the East-Indians who settled in the West Indies as indentured laborers after 1838².

The story I am referring to was transcribed by the Trinidadian writer

Focus – Derek Walcott (1930-2017), Nobel Laureate (Literature)

Editorial Note

[Jaydeep Sarangi](#)

Articles

[Alessandro Vescovi – ‘*Ti-Jean and his Brothers*’](#)

[John Thieme – ‘Painting & Metaphor in Walcott’s Poetry’](#)

[K Pankajam – ‘Walcott vs Jayanta Mahapatra’](#)

[Leonard Dabydeen – ‘Musings on Walcott’s Life and Work’](#)

[Mahuya Bhaumik – ‘Bridging the Gap between Two Selves’](#)

[Namrata Chaturvedi – ‘Orient and Immortal Wheat’](#)

[Pinak Sankar Bhattacharya & Avishek Deb – ‘The Star Apple Kingdom’](#)

[Ruchi Singh – ‘Individuation of Achilles in Omeros’](#)

[Sudipta Mondal – ‘Vestiges of Colonial Past’](#)

Poems Dedicated to Walcott

[Jaydeep Sarangi](#)

[John Thieme](#)

[Raphael d’Abdon](#)

[Sunil Sharma](#)

Kenneth Vidia Parmasad under the title "Sakchulee and the Rich Gentleman" in the mid-Eighties, though, as Markham maintains, such Hindu stories – sometimes referred to as *kheesas* – "would be known to everyone in the community, certainly up to the mid-1950s". The tale begins with a deal between Sakchulee's brother and a rich gentleman: the former becomes the latter's servant, but "agrees he would cut off the gentleman's ears and nose if the gentleman were to dismiss him from the job". On the other hand "should the gentleman dismiss the servant, he would be entitled to do the same". Sakchulee's brother is given the impossible task of filling a barrel with a hidden hole in the bottom and eventually goes back home without his nose and ears. Sakchulee therefore decides to try his luck and makes the same deal with the planter. Soon he discovers the leak in the barrel and fixes it, then he kills and eats his master's cattle and plays a whole series of Chaucerian tricks, among which he cheats his master into killing his own wife, after swapping his bed with hers.

Here is the description of one such trick which inspired a similar episode in *Ti-Jean*:

On this day, the gentleman was somewhat worried and could not bear to hear their happy singing. He called Sakchulee and asked him to tell the women that their singing did not please him. "Tell them that I can't hear their singing today" he said to Sakchulee.

Sakchulee approached the women and said to them, "my master is not pleased with your singing. He cannot hear you well. Could you please sing louder?"

The women were only too happy to please the gentleman. They did as Sakchulee advised. They raised their voices and sang as loudly as they could. The gentleman called Sakchulee again and asked him to give the same instructions to the women. Sakchulee told the women just what he had told them before. And again the women tried to sing as loudly as they could. A few more times this happened until finally the gentleman told Sakchulee in disgust, "Please tell them to stop!"

"Of course, master" replied Sakchulee, "I shall do as you say".

Sakchulee then hurried back to the women and told them to stop grinding the wheat. The women stopped right away. They left the gentleman's grain undone and went their way.

In his study on the tale and the novel, Šklovsky studied this kind of plot and described it as one of the simplest structures of narration, characterized by a potentially endless series of adventures. These are, according to the author, strung on one another³. In such tales, *peripeteias* are interposed between the beginning and the end of the story, as in the Greek romances studied by Bakhtin in his essay on *chronotopes*⁴. The Russian scholar notes that such narratives are characterized by the use of vast spaces and almost no reference to time. The former are required by the necessary variety of the adventures, whose scope would be limited by an enclosed space. The time sequence is particular in that it is implied only by the events taking place in each episode; in Greek romances there are "befores" and "afters", more rarely "whiles". What we miss, both in Greek romances and in *Sakchulee*, is the sense of passing time, the time that affects the characters and their consciousness, the time of the *Bildungsroman*, or the time that overturns Rip van Winkle's world during his sleep, to mention a shorter narrative.

Irving's *Rip* is no casual allusion at this point as, like Walcott's *Ti-Jean*, it is a complex text with a children's tale as a subtext⁵. After his twenty-years' sleep, Rip actually finds a place in society as a historian, "an artist". Rip becomes a storyteller: the keeper of the village's past. It is perhaps also worth noticing that, in accordance with a well-established folk-tale tradition, at the beginning of their stories, both *Ti-Jean* and *Rip* are accused of being lazy – by brothers and wife respectively.

If analyzed through the well-known functions of the tale proposed by Vladimir Propp and later revised by Greimas, Sakchulee's story is

disarmingly simple: there are only a single protagonist and an antagonist. There is no such thing as a helper or a bride, no real ordeals, and the very reward is rather dubious. It is therefore interesting to note that whereas Walcott is borrowing the folk-tale scheme from "Sakchulee", he nevertheless adds a variety of fairy tale devices, such as the number three (three brothers try to beat the devil), a number of helpers (animals, mother), actual ordeals to overcome. In fact, Walcott takes his plot beyond the realm of the fairy tale as he assigns a triple role to the antagonist (the same actor plays the Devil, papa Bois, the Planter). However, Walcott's narration is far more complex than the archetypal *Sakchulee*.

Thus, it is patent that *Ti-Jean* cannot be considered the theatrical transcription of a folk-tale, as a casual reader, misled by the prologue performed by the animals, might think. Such hidden complexity is probably relevant in explaining why the first stagings of *Ti-Jean* received a rather cold welcome both in Trinidad and abroad⁶. In fact, while it is no wonder that young Afro-Americans could be bewildered by the references to the Caribbean folklore contained in the text, the same cannot be said of the Trinidadian public, which did not prove enthusiastic either.

The beginning of the play, when the Frog acts as narrator telling the story to the bird and the cricket, contains numerous literary references. Thus, from the very beginning, Walcott's text shows a certain degree of complexity. The prologue works on three reading levels. As for the structure of the play, the main hypo-text seems to be the folk tale, the apologue with talking animals. The presence of the cricket beside the narrator recalls Dickens' *Cricket of the Hearth*. In fact, the melodramatic sense of pity present in the narration is Victorian in tone – though not in style.

Oh that was poverty, bird!
Old hands dried up like claws
Heaping old sticks on sticks,
Too weak to protect her nest.
Look, the four of that family
Lived in a little house,
Made up of wood and thatch,
Etc...

On a second level, the animals onstage create a sort of frame for the story, not unlike the frames of earlier story collections, such as *The Canterbury Tales*. Likewise⁷ the frame is a device used to give an oral tale a written form. The frame recreates the original setting for the telling of the story and offers a fictional model reader. Thanks to the tale frame, the actual reader is guided in his own response to the narrative, thus avoiding mistakes due to over-interpretation or to lack of information.

The fictional audience of animals presented by Walcott, from this point of view, is rather misleading. The story is far more complex than the animals of the forest seem to think. Nevertheless, the animals' instinct appears capable of understanding and of distinguishing between good and evil, albeit by intuition rather than by deduction. If such an animal quality is to become a model for the reader, then his approach to the text must be symbolic or emotional rather than intellectual and allegorical. According to the definition provided by Giorgio Melchiori⁸ (1960) a symbol is not "a metaphor for an accepted Idea, for a single and definable object, with one specific meaning, but the image that summarizes in itself a number of possible meanings. The overall meaning of a symbol is therefore in itself indefinable: separated facets of it can perhaps be separately explored; but the symbol in its complex unity can be apprehended only through the emotion it communicates". Robert Hamner's "Mythological Aspects of Drama"⁹ is a step in the direction of symbolic rather than allegorical interpretation of *Ti-Jean*. Although Ashaolu talks of five allegories in the play – namely that of art, politics, morality, religion, social class – it would seem better to consider the symbolism of this text as a starting point for interpretation. An allegorical reading would call for an extra-textual logic in the play, which cannot account for the complexity of the text. The main allegory (that of the Caribbean nation that must be given life to, like the Bolom, after the discomfiture of the Devil-Planter-colonialism) can serve as an underlying structure, like

Sakchulee's story. But there is more to the play is not than a mere stage transcription of either a folk-tale or a political issue, though both may be central to the understanding of the text.

On a third level, the very first word of the play, "Greek", suggests that the talking animals are a sort of tragic chorus, whose wisdom is above the characters' heads. This adds to the mythical perspective of the play and places it in the stream of a highbrow theatrical tradition. Again, symbol rather than allegory seems to be the richest interpretive strategy. The pun on the word "Greek" and the following "Aeschilus me!" are Joycean puns, like the later compound-word "wood-shaking", which is both Homeric and Joycean. The following description, however, is more Walcottian, at least in that there is a predominance of the pictorial element:

Though no moon is here tonight,
There is a man, no, a boy,
Bent by a weight of faggots
He carried on his shoulder,
A small dog trotting with him.

The frog's tale begins with the image of the moon. The dog mentioned here does not appear elsewhere in the play. This indicates that the author starts with a visual image rather than adopting a narrative principle. Ti-Jean is not on stage here. Walcott seems to rely more on the impact produced by *diegesis* than on the impact produced by *mimesis*.

The following description of the setting, the wood where Ti-Jean's family lives, is achieved through imagery mostly wrought by means of figurative speech – here shown in italic:

Look, the four of the family
Lived on a little house,
Made up of wood and thatch,
On the *forehead* of the mountain (metaphor)
Where night and day was rain,
Mist, cloud *white as cotton* (similitude)
Caught in the dripping branches;
Where sometimes it was so cold
The frog would stop its singing, (hyperbole)
The cricket would stop rattling (hyperbole)
And the wandering firefly
That *lights* the tired woodsman (hypallage)
Home through the *rainy trees* (metaphor)
Could not strike a *damp light* (hypallage)
To *star* the wanderer home!
(metaphor/hypallage?)

Again Walcott seems to rely more on the impact of words. Indeed, the scenery here is Dantesque, especially in the last four lines. A similar forest and a similar situation appear also at the beginning of W.B. Yeats's *Princess Kathleen*, one of the Irishman's early plays. Here Yeats relies much more on poetical than on dramatic devices. No mimetic character in *Ti-Jean* could be able to express himself thus: hence the necessity of a narrator, an authorial voice that is able to depict the images as they should be seen with the mind's eye.

Actually, the mother seems to be in command of the English language, but her modesty and wisdom would not allow her to describe her home in the words quoted above. In fact, she is often given a "poetic" language, sometimes reminiscent of Walcott's own lyrical style. When talking about the dead, Ti-Jean's mother expresses herself in a way that reminds us of "the warm colonel of carrion" of *A Far Cry from Africa*: "Now, they bury in small grass,/Just the jaws of the ant/Stronger than them now".

The animals also play a role in the story. The two losers, Gros-Jean and Mi-Jean, insult them at the beginning of their quests. Ti-Jean, on the contrary, listens to them kindly and wisely. Their voice is the voice of Nature and of instinct. It is probably useful to point out the important role Walcott ascribes to nature as a foundation for the Caribbean nation and art in his seminal essay "What the Twilight Says".

The range of suggestions further widens with the apparition of the Bolom. References to the devil had been, so far, rather vague, but the Bolom actually brings him to the foreground. Given the Dantesque setting, the devil had seemed to step out of the Western tradition, but the Bolom links him with Voodoo lore. The Bolom – the aborted child – is called here the angel of the devil. This formula that recalls a Miltonic tradition, and resumes the Greek echo, as “angel” means emissary. Moreover, the humble attitude of the mother toward the unborn child, and his message suggests a parody of the evangelical annunciation. This is also reflected in the language of the Bolom, who uses Biblical expressions like “kingdom of the night”, “fowls of the air”, “one shall inherit”. Coming from the devil, this annunciation is a message of death, not a message of life, as it was in the Gospel. Though reversed, the terms of the scene are very much the same.

A dramatic device commonly used is that of showing the main character only after having introduced him by some minor characters. Such is the case of, say, Hamlet and of Ti-Jean himself. The same happens to the Devil, who is the most complicated character in the drama, in which he plays three roles, namely, Devil, Papa Bois and Planter.

By way of metaphor, I would like to compare this triple role played by the devil with cubist poetics. In fact, like cubists,¹⁰ Walcott makes the most of the difficulty in describing a “round” character on a “flat” surface, substituting the folk tale setting for a canvas. Thus, the different two-dimensional sides of the character are represented as juxtaposed in one figure. On one hand, the devil takes on complex human characteristics, but, on the other, he must play the role of Ti-Jean’s antagonist in the simple relationships of Sakchulee’s hypo-text. It is also obvious that the personification of evil cannot be dismissed with an easy identification with the white Planter, as the allegorical reading would do. Besides, it would be awkward to have a Sakchulee play against a Mephistopheles, and win. It was probably Walcott’s intent to merge the different myths regarding the devil into one person. Hence, the idea of splitting the devil into three different characters – each wearing a mask according to yet another tradition, that of Nô theatre. Thanks to this strategy the Planter is an equal opponent for Ti-Jean, the trickster. But also the Voodoo folklore and Ti-Jean the pious and wise new man have their counterpart. The White Planter is not identified with Evil tout court. Evil, as the mother says, “can hide in several features.”

The development of Walcott’s narrative technique seems highly influenced by his practice of poetry. A very frequent figure in Walcott’s poetry is the hypallage. It consists of a transposition of two natural elements of a proposition, for example when an adjective is grammatically linked to a noun semantically different from the one it would naturally refer to. Some instances of hypallage are in the above-quoted frog’s discourse. When the frog says “damp light”, for instance, he makes a shift as it is not the light that is damp, but the wood that makes it. An extension of hypallage is sometimes read as parallelism, but in Walcott every parallelism seems to stem out of a hypallage. Let’s take for instance another house and another mother: Walcott’s own house and mother in *Another Life*. At the end of chapter 2, the mother’s illness is described through references to the decay of the house. “Constellations of carcinoma” affect the old timber. A similar movement from one element to another related is to be found in a narratological rather than rhetorical shift in the creation of the Devil. In fact this Devil is actually Faustian. Like Faust, he wants to live, to experience human feelings. He longs for an *Erlebniss*. “He is dying to be human”, like Cassiel, one of the angels imagined by Wim Wenders in his *Sky over Berlin*. In fact, this is also the Bolom’s desire. Indeed, as is the case with Wenders’s film, the whole play can be read as a celebration of humanity.

Papa Bois is a strange character whose function in the economy of the play is rather difficult to assess. Originally he comes from the Voodoo pantheon where he is considered a divinity of the forest. Like an Elf, Papa Bois is particularly dangerous for wayfarers and hunters, who are sometimes found dead in the morning on the edge of the forest after having met him. Here he is one of the Devil’s *Doppelgänger*. He plays the part of the devil as a shrewd hypocrite who cheats the brothers into their own ruin. His shrewdness is

rather interesting, since he pretends to be old and wise and is reticent in giving the information that he seems to offer. In his soliloquy after the meeting with Gros-Jean, the Old Man (alias Papa Bois) seems to recognize in the philosophy of the young man some of his "values". Gros-Jean praises violence (scaring the animals): "There went the spirit of war: an iron arm and a clear explanation, and might is still right...". Gros-Jean has not only failed to recognize the wisdom of nature, of innocence, here expressed by the wood's animals; he has also taken the devil in the forest for a wise man, and mistaken a worldly value, his might, for a spiritual one. His path is doomed.

Mi-Jean makes the same mistakes for symmetrical reasons. He despises the same creatures that his brother had ill-treated, but he knows that brute strength will not help him. Eventually, he fails to recognize the devil because he thinks he knows better. Like his older brother, Mi-Jean does not have the moral stature to win. We would say, in mythological terms, that he is unworthy. For those who remember St Paul's words Mi-Jean's failure is, in fact, highly predictable:

Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness.¹¹

On the contrary, Ti-Jean plays the fool, and shows appreciation for the creatures – a sign all the more eloquent as they are both the narrators and the fictional audience of the story. Eventually he unmasks the devil disguised as papa Bois: "worldly wisdom" in the definition of the mother. He scores a point in his battle against the devil. For Ti-Jean's instinctive and pious wisdom, Papa Bois, the Devil and the Planter are not different entities.

The encounter with the animals and the Old man before actually starting the fight with the Planter is, therefore, highly proleptic. It suggests who is going to lose and who is going to win. In their encounter with the Old Man, the three brothers are forced to expose their set of values and the limits of their cunning. This is not, however, the only prolepsis in the story. In fact, three other prolepses preceded this one. The first one is probably suggested by the folk-tale genre. The knowledge of Sakchulee's story or, at least, the awareness of the role of number three in most tales helps the reader understand that two brothers will fail and the third will succeed. The second prolepsis is set up when the Frog begins his tale describing Ti-Jean who "beat the devil". The third prolepsis is the most straightforward: it is the Bolom's speech in the hut. He says that two brothers must die and the third will beat the Devil. In fact, from the very beginning, no doubt exists as to who will be about to win the contest. Knowing this in advance, the reader can concentrate on the qualities that allow Ti-Jean to win and on the reward for his success.

His reward is, in fact, very strange, as it defies the expectations provided by the mock-tale structure. Here, political commitment seems to prevail on folkloric elements. Again, there is a shift from one character to another: another narrative hypallage. The reward that should be given to Ti-Jean – the money the Bolom had spoken of when he first met Ti-Jean's family – is converted into the Bolom's right to obtain his own life. What is strange is the fact that, whereas Faust and Mephistopheles are easily associated with one another, the Bolom and Ti-Jean are not, unless we consider them on the rather loose common ground of being part of the mankind. In fact, Ti-Jean has gone through the ordeal; the Bolom has done nothing, but has become a man. This shift from Ti-Jean to the Bolom shows how complex the character of the hero is. Like his antagonist – the Devil – the protagonist, too, seems to be a cubist character, whose facets are represented by his two brothers and the Bolom, a sort of "brother in nature". In a later play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, Walcott will deal with a round character, Makak, who takes upon himself the roles of the three brothers and of the Bolom.

Hamner (1977) states that *Ti-Jean* is a turning point in Walcott's

production. In fact, I think it is the point where Walcott's poetical and political commitments meet on equal level. Later on Walcott will develop both narrative and lyric skills in *Omeros* and *Tiepolo's Hound*. But it is probably no exaggeration to say that his apprenticeship in handling both poetical and narrative material can be traced back to *Ti-Jean and his Brothers*.

¹ Ti-Jean's Family is printed in *Caribana* no 4, p. 36, the other pictures can be seen on the internet in the exhibition site of the Albany University (http://www.albany.edu/museum/wwwmuseum/island_still/walcott7.htm).

² On the origin of the story see Markham's introduction in E.A. Markham, *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Short Stories*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1996.

³ Viktor Sklovsky, "La struttura della novella e del romanzo" in *Teoria della prosa*, Torino, Einaudi, 1976.

⁴ Michail Bakhtin, *Four Essays by Bakhtin*, ed. M. Holquist, Austin Texas, 1981.

⁵ For a discussion of Irving's sources see Alessandro Portelli, *Il re nascosto*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1979.

⁶ See Bruce King, *Derek Walcott and West Indian Drama*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 4.

⁷ See the first chapter of Alessandro Vescovi, *Dal focolare allo scrittoio*, Vercelli, Mercurio, 1999.

⁸ Giorgio Melchiori, *The Whole Mystery of Art*, London, Routledge, 1960, p. 15.

⁹ Robert Hamner, "Mythological Aspects of Derek Walcott's Drama", *Ariel*, 8, 1977.

¹⁰ I am speaking of Walcott as a poet. As a painter, he does not employ any technique other than realism.

¹¹ Paul, 1 *Cor.* 3, 17-18.

[Top](#)