"The Freedom of the Thief": Derek Walcott's *The Joker of Seville* as a Cross-cultural Dialogue with Tirso de Molina

Giuseppe Sofo

Things do not explode,
they fail, they fade, [...]
till we are left
with the silence that surrounds Beethoven's head.
Derek Walcott, "Endings"

In memory of D. W.

Abstract
This paper discusses Derek Walcott's *The Joker of Seville* (1979), an adaptation of Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla* (1630), commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and in particular by Roland Bryden, literary advisor to the Company. Reading the text and the process of writing this new version of *The Joker* in the light of the unpublished correspondence between Walcott and Bryden, I analyse the dialogues between the two and between Walcott and Tirso to reveal what these meant for Walcott's creation of this play and for his own theatre. The category of closeness to the original will also be analysed under a different perspective; textual and linguistic closeness will in fact be paralleled by a physical closeness, as an alternative practice of feeding the author and the director 'original material' to work on, rather than simply original text. Through Walcott's own words, we will discover what 'the freedom of the thief' and the dialogic tension generating the play have brought to his rewriting of a classic *with* the original author, rather than *back* to him, a process which brings the text and the performance of this work to embody all the proximities and the constant dialogue between Tirso's Spain and Walcott's Trinidad.

Keywords: rewriting, drama, Derek Walcott.

1. Introduction

Rewriting in the postcolonial context has been mostly analysed as a counter-discursive practice of reshaping the Western literary

canon to alter or at least disrupt the cultural grounds of European colonialism and imperialism, as the fortunate and almost obsessive formula of 'writing back to the Empire' suggests. As Gilbert and Tompkins write: "rewriting the characters, the narrative, the context, and/or the genre of the canonical script provides another means of interrogating the cultural legacy of imperialism and offers renewed opportunities for performative intervention" (1996: 16). The 'subversive' role of rewriting in postcolonial literatures had already been pointed out by Helen Tiffin, when she stated that "the rereading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record are vital and inescapable tasks" and that "post-colonial literatures/cultures are thus constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices, and they offer 'fields' of counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse" (1987: 18). These textual practices correspond to a stage in the formation of national literatures in the postcolonial space outlined by Albertazzi, who, following the Brazilian school of De Andrade and De Campos, defines it as the "absolute *rejection* of the Western canon", in which "what has become [...] a taboo for the colonial subject (the literature of the Other) is turned into a totem, devoured, assimilated, totally absorbed and reshaped, rendered unrecognisable through a sort of *cultural anthropophagy*" (2013: 48, my translation).

Though it is undeniable that this has been one of the most productive strategies of literary, cultural and even physical re-appropriation for writers of the postcolonial era, it could be reductive to see rewriting only as a rejection or a negation of the European canon. On the one hand, even the most deeply counter-discursive kind of rewriting can be seen as "an act of love, just as necessary as irreverent" (Albertazzi 2013: 48, my translation) – a "homage", as Walcott states when he writes about this play: "I consider that any playwright, at any point in time, is paying homage in some way to the original text by admitting or realising how much it generates his own adaptation of it" (1986a: 8). Furthermore, as Döring points out commenting on Walcott's Nobel speech:

> Walcott also shows that the literary echoes haunting him [...] are neither random nor gratuitous. They are 'predictable' as part of the poetic diction which underlies his own work and which underlies the presence of its historically shaping influence. (Döring 2002: 2)

There is a profound relationship with the canon in Caribbean writing that does not depend on imitation, or mimicry, but which is rather engendered by the necessity of assimilating tradition – rather than rejecting it – in order to create something completely original, and Walcott's words in "The Muse of History" (1974) are possibly the best explanation for this process: "They know that by openly fighting tradition we perpetuate it, that revolutionary literature is a filial impulse, and that maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor" (1998: 36).

On the other hand, and perhaps even more importantly, it is fundamental to understand that rewriting is not always a 'writing back'. Gilbert and Tompkins state this when they say: "not all texts that refer to canonical models are counter-discursive. Intertextuality […] does not necessarily entail a *re*writing project. While all counter-discourse is intertextual, not all intertextuality is counter-discursive" (1996: 16).

Derek Walcott's drama presents a very complex pattern of rewriting, which shows how heterogeneous the reasons and the results of this practice can be. He, in fact, rewrote or reinterpreted several works of the Western canon, especially in his drama, although *Omeros* (1990) and poems like "Crusoe's Journal" and "Crusoe's Island" in *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965) are there to inform us that rewriting is part of his poetry as well. He drew inspiration for *The Sea at Dauphin* ([1954] 1978) from J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* ([1904] 2003), inverted the roles of Crusoe and Friday (Defoe [1719] 1999) in *Pantomime* (1980) and wrote a play on staging Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* ([1607] 2005) in the Caribbean with *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1986). He was also commissioned to write two adaptations of works from the Western Canon by the Royal Shakespeare Company: *The Joker of Seville* and a stage version of *The Odyssey* (1993). Although the latter was the only one to be produced for the RSC, Walcott's *The Joker of Seville* (1979a), adapted from one of the founding texts of Spanish theatre, *El burlador de Sevilla*, attributed to Tirso de Molina[1], is probably the most relevant example available to explore

[1] Tirso de Molina's authorship of *El burlador de Sevilla* has been widely questioned, and Alfredo Rodríguez López-Vázquez has suggested that it was Andrés de Claramonte who wrote *Tan largo me lo fiáis*, the proto-text of what we now know

the author's relationship with rewriting. This text will therefore be discussed in the following pages, in light of the unpublished correspondence between Walcott and Ronald Bryden, literary advisor to the Royal Shakespeare Company. Their exchange will reveal the complex patterns of rewriting entailed in this work, and the constant dialogue between Walcott and Bryden, and Walcott and Tirso, and, ultimately, between individual playwrights and the literary canon.

This will also show how literature, and theatre in particular, can offer a textual and physical embodiment of the proximity and inter-exchange between Western and West Indian cultures, histories, and literatures.

2. Rewriting *El burlador de Sevilla*: an Alternative Closeness

Walcott's work on *The Joker of Seville* began in the early 1970s, when he was commissioned to write an adaptation of the play by Ronald Bryden, a theatre critic born in Trinidad and Tobago who worked as literary advisor to the Royal Shakespeare Company, and who has been defined as "one of those rare theatre critics who influences the art he writes about" (Billington 2004: n.p.). We know that Walcott had already agreed to consider the idea in October 1972, when he received an enthusiastic letter by Bryden confirming the proposal: "Hurray [...] that you don't say no in principle. So I've put you forward as my recommended adapter for 'The Joker of Seville'" (Bryden, October 4, 1972: 1).[2]

To understand Walcott's work on Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla*, however, we first need to understand his role in this adaptation of one of the masterpieces of Spanish theatre. I will try to do this by using the category of 'closeness' to the original, which informs most literature on rewriting and translation. Three different kinds of closeness are to be considered here: besides the usual

as *El burlador*. However, the play is mostly still attributed to Tirso, and Walcott never doubts the attribution of the play during his own writing.

[2] All letters quoted in the article are taken from folder 1119 (formerly 1120), box 1A, of the Derek Walcott Collection hosted by the West Indiana section at the Alma Jordan Library of the University of the West Indies, Saint Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.

category of 'textual closeness', we also find a 'linguistic closeness' due to the passage from Tirso's Spanish to Walcott's English and Creole, and a 'physical closeness' due to the process of bridging the distance between the lands and landscapes in which the two plays are set.

The question of how 'close' the new work is to the original, on a textual basis, is usually at the heart of any analysis of a rewriting. It comes as no surprise that this matter is also one of the recurring underlying questions that accompanied the whole process of reinvention of Walcott's *Joker*. At first the author leaves to the Royal Shakespeare Company the choice of his role in the adaptation of the play: "You will need to decide whether what you want to do is a very free-wheeling adaptation by me, amounting to an original work virtually, or a tighter, dutiful, more beautiful, more tutti-frutti-full translation of Tirso" (Walcott, May 9, 1973: 1). The question is fundamental, because it could obviously lead to completely different results: "a crib via some expert on Tirso's language […] following the structure of the scenes […] with fidelity"; "a refreshed (possibly) but exact cleaning of an old masterpiece, to which I serve as an enthusiastic restorer"; or "a combination of an old work approached differently but with a distinctly recognisable structure, a work repainted in brighter colours, or an irreverent, egotistical yet homage-paying repainting of an old work" (Walcott, May 9, 1973: 1).

However, it is very interesting to notice that the question arises only after Walcott has already begun writing his own *Joker*, between April and May 1973. The first time Bryden discusses with Walcott the matter of 'closeness' to the original is in his letter dated April 21, 1973, after reading the first drafts sent by the Caribbean playwright:

> I hesitate to recommend getting any closer to the original in case it inhibits you – my instinct is simply to say go, go, go – but I think probably the next step is for us to get together to establish a few definitions: I mean, whether we ignore the original entirely, or stick to a few of its limitations. I think we probably have to keep a few […] God knows, you'[r]e[3] obviously in a stride I'd hate to throw you off in any way. But I think we ought to

[3] "you've" in the typescript.

discuss the line of the whole thing before you go much further, in all sorts of contexts. (Bryden, April 21, 1973: 1)

Bryden, nonetheless, is not completely sure of the direction the play should take with regards to the original, and he never does make up his mind about this matter throughout the whole process. And although Bryden and Walcott spent years discussing the direction of both the literary content and production details of this new *Joker*, the question of the closeness to the original work always remained open and unsolved. What is even more startling is that Walcott seems to have started working on his own *Joker* without having fully read the original play, neither in Spanish nor in translation, as Bryden's words in the same letter confirm:

Wow! Fantastic! The samples (as you obviously know, you dog) are amazing, stupendous and made my scalp cold with excitement [...]. What I can't understand is how, working from whatever summary of the plot you found, you've got right to the gut of the matter. (Bryden, April 21, 1973: 1)

As happens in other cases as well, the authority of the original is therefore dismissed by Walcott right from the beginning. Although he produced two rewritings of Homer's works, *Omeros* and *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*, in *Omeros* he had his persona in the poem state that he had not read Homer, or at least not all of it: "'I never read it', / I said. 'Not all the way through'" (1990: 283). Right after, however, he also states: "I have always heard / your voice in that sea, master" and "Master, I was the freshest of all your readers" (pp. 283). The two things rather point to Walcott's peculiar relationship with both Homer's and Tirso's works, a proximity which is not due to subordination to the authority of the original, but rather to an engagement with it, engendered through a listening to the voice of the original and to the new author's response to this voice.

This becomes clear in the case of *The Joker* when we read Walcott's proposal of how to approach Tirso's original, and see how he suggests a combination of several possible directions. In so doing he gives himself a great freedom that does not, however, derive from a decision to ignore the original. He writes to Bryden:

My own feeling is for a combination of all of these, following the design of the Tirso-Campbell fairly rigidly, I mean the scene-breaks, the plot-sequences, but with an immediate and just understanding of a Juan who is alive now. […] This is the Juan that jumped out of my head […]. He can exist within the world of Tirso […], and anything I say about him is not new, but if we move in his head and see that world through his eyes, it will be hallucinatory […] Tirso's characters, locations, and I hope his swift, turbulent narrow drive both in rhythm and pace will be visible. (Walcott, May 9, 1973: 1)

In this passage, Walcott writes about "the design of the Tirso-Campbell", placing on the same level the original text and one of its translations into English. Translation clearly plays a fundamental role in the process of rewriting canonical texts originally written in another language, especially in the case of an author like Walcott, who does not speak the language of the original and is therefore forced to read translations to understand it fully. Thus, a discussion of the relationship between Walcott's rewriting and English translations of the original is needed to understand this role and its influence on Walcott's rewriting.

Walcott confirms that he does not speak Spanish in the preface of the published play (1979b: 3) as well as in a letter to Bryden, who replies: "Just forget, will you, about not knowing Spanish?" (1972: 1). This was not in fact a one-off, as Walcott rewrote or produced translations from various languages he did not speak, including Russian. At first, he did attempt a translation from Tirso, writing in the preface that he "began laboriously by trying to translate into alternating rhymes of eight-foot lines directly from the Spanish, but soon gave up" (1979b: 4). In an article in *Carib*, which functions as a response to "an expression of surprise and concern at the freedom with which he had adapted the Tirso de Molina play and at the 'violent way' in which he had changed it" (Walcott 1986a: 8), he clarifies this process even further:

I used to do some translations; I took some sections of a speech by Tirso and began to adapt very painfully, actually trying to translate the Spanish and going way off. And I just felt that that was going to be a waste of time, because if they wanted somebody to do an adaptation, they should have got someone who knew Spanish. […] When I began to translate the Tirso, to adapt it, within the formula of an a-b, a-b octosyllabic

rhythm, it was agony, because I would spend two days and get four lines. (pp. 9-10).

Some proofs of these translations are still kept in the Derek Walcott Collection. Here is an example of a translation taken from Don Pedro and Octavio's dialogue in Tirso's work, which shows how freely Walcott had been working on the piece:

Don Pedro *Cuando los negros gigantes*	**Don Pedro** When the gigantic negroes? When the gargantuan negroes
Octavio He's crazy?	**Octavio** *Estoy loco!*
Don Pedro *Como es verdad que en los vientos* *hay aves, en el mar peces,* *que participan a veces* *de todos cuatro elementos* *como en la gloria hay contentos...*	**Don Pedro** Just as it's true that the four winds (a) have birds and the ocean has fishes (b) that they function from nature's wishes (b) both blindly and in their turn (c) and that function brings peace to their minds […]. (Walcott 1972: n.p.; my italics)

When Walcott agrees to work on *The Joker*, Bryden immediately says he will send him the existing translations of the text: "I'd like to load you with the various English translations I've got, as well as the Spanish original. Then there's a second Spanish version discovered only in 1879 with a lot of improvements" (Bryden, October 4, 1972: 1). However, this probably never happened. In fact, only one of these translations is actually mentioned in the following correspondence between Walcott and Bryden and in Walcott's writings, and that is Roy Campbell's (de Molina [1630] 1959; de Molina [1630] 1960). Walcott's reaction to this translation is not positive:

I bought the Campbell translation of the Tirso and have now read the play. I read it through once very quickly, on purpose, and frankly don't like it

much. The language is dead. […] But the Campbell is there to buttress me, the information, the weight, bulk, feel of the time. The pace of the Tirso is missing, because those octosyllabics, rhymed already, sure swash their buckles around, and I think a swift, rhetorical prose is really our parallel, not a limpid and forced pentameter. (Walcott, May 8, 1973: 2)

The critique is not only directed at the translator, but at the original as well, as Walcott writes: "Tirso chickens out about the actual techniques of seduction […] we should have that shown, not the Last Tango in Seville, but we must show men at work, even Don Juans" (Walcott, May 8, 1973: 2), interestingly using the name of the main character of the play in the proverbial meaning of 'seducer' it has assumed over time. In any case, whether it is Tirso's or Campbell's fault, it is certainly notable that the first reading by Walcott is through Campbell's translation, and that he does not enjoy it fully. Walcott states in September 1973 that he has "avoided using any of Cambell's lines whatsoever or even of Tirso's" (Walcott, September 10, 1973: 2), and he has also declared about the play: "the language is my own" (1979b: 3) and "all the words are mine" ([1973] 2013: 201). However, in the published version, he has the play begin with a direct quote from Tirso:

Sevilla, a voces me llama El Burlador, y el mayor gusto que en mi puede haber es burlar una mujer y dejarla sin honor, y dejarla sin honor. (Walcott 1979a: 7)[4]	Sevilla, a voces me llama el Burlador, y el mayor gusto que en mí puede haber es burlar una mujer y dejarla sin honor. (de Molina [1630] 2009: 193)

The direct quoting from Tirso, though, is absolutely minor for what was initially thought of as an adaptation, and Campbell's translation is never mentioned directly. This is quite evident when reading the two works in parallel. The texts differ in almost everything, starting

[4] This passage is also repeated in the last scene, where "y dejarla sin honor" appears only once, as in the original by Tirso (Walcott 1979a: 149).

with the very translation of "*burlador*": a "joker" for Walcott, a "trickster" for Campbell (de Molina [1630] 1959: 233; de Molina [1630] 1960: 287). In the same way, in the published version of *The Joker*, Walcott features different names from Campbell for several characters: Campbell's Thisbe becomes in fact Tisbea, as in the original text by Tirso de Molina. Campbell's Isabel becomes in Walcott Isabella rather than Tirso's Isabela, Catalinón becomes Catalinion, and Campbell's Marquis of la Mota, or Marquis de la Mota is for Walcott the Marquis de Mota, differing both from the original and Campbell's translations. In the case of Batricio, Walcott uses this spelling, the same used by Tirso and by Campbell in one of the versions of his translation; in the other version[5] Campbell uses Patricio (de Molina [1630] 2009: 138; de Molina [1630] 1959: 234; de Molina [1630] 1960: 287; Walcott 1979a: 5). Although the reasons for Walcott's choices remain unclear, it is revealing that he decides not to follow the only translation we are sure he has read, and in some cases not even the original text, showing that these are not the only sources he is relying on. A parallel close reading of Tirso's work with the retranslation of Walcott's *Joker of Seville* into Spanish (Walcott 2014) does not show great proximity in the language either and there is almost no direct intertextuality, apart from the passage mentioned, revealing that Walcott's work is a completely new creation rather than mere translation. He is therefore neither 'writing back to' nor copying Tirso's work, but rather moving in its direction, reducing the distance between Tirso's drama and his own, between Tirso's culture and his own.

Then there is a third and less expected kind of 'closeness' or proximity, which could be described as a 'physical closeness'. The idea is to have the rewriter and the director share the same space as the author, in order to provoke a poetic and imaginative proximity rather than a textual one. Bryden suggests Walcott visit Seville to

[5] It is fundamental to understand that the fact that two versions of Campbell's translation exist does not mean that he revised them, since Roy Campbell died in April 1957, before the first version was published. In the 1959 version, editor Eric Bentley writes: "Campbell was killed […]. The translations were done, but, as they were not revised, let alone polished and fully prepared for the press, the responsibility devolved upon me of editing manuscripts without being able to consult their author" (Bentley 1959: viii). No indication about a revision by Bentley or by Flores is given in the version edited by Angel Flores.

find out how the city might inspire him and feed him with "lots of original material", rather than original text:

> I think it would help, if we're to keep any of the original at all – I mean, if we're to bill it as a version of Tirso de Molina – to see the city at this stage. […] It seems to me that if we could set you down in Seville and shake those two speeches in your imagination, we might get the link between Tirso's Don and yours. Anyway, it would be bound to help keep the fire going in your head, and feed it lots of original material, in a way less limiting than telling you to stick closer to Tirso. (Bryden, April 21, 1973: 2)

In the same way, at a later stage, Bryden suggests that the British theatre director chosen to direct the play for the Royal Shakespeare Company should see Trinidad, in order to relate to Walcott's theatrical and cultural background, and to get an understanding of this creolized version of Tirso. "He must see Trinidad", Bryden writes to Walcott, to find "a way of keeping your enlargement of Juan into the New World drugstore-cowboy reflection of himself in terms that will apply in Europe too" (Bryden, September 11, 1973: 1); an aspect which Bryden sees as Walcott's "greatest addition to the myth" (Bryden, September 11, 1973: 1) after his language. Although there is no proof that Walcott visited Seville while writing his *Joker*, Terry Hands did visit Trinidad, and after what Hands defined as his "Trinidad adventure" (Hands, December 13, 1974: 1), Bryden wrote to Walcott: "Terry […] fell completely for Trinidad – his one disappointment is that he can't stage the show here in a POS-type 'tent', with children hanging over the fence and drinking-coconuts for sale at the door" (Bryden, February 21, 1975: 1). This shows how important this experience of discovery of West Indian performance practices would have been if Hands had in the end directed the play.

Walcott's Trinidad and Tirso's Spain, after all, might not be as far and as different from each other as it might seem. Edward Baugh writes that "Walcott's *Joker* 'carnivalizes' Tirso's *El Burlador*" (Baugh 2006: 122), while Renu Juneja states that "in *Joker*, Walcott has set out to creolise Tirso's play, a task which comes easily to him because of the similarities he perceives between the culture of seventeenth-century Spain and contemporary Trinidad" (Juneja 1992: 257-258). Walcott himself lists some of these similarities:

> The wit, panache, the swift or boisterous élan of his period, and of the people in his play, are as alive to me as the flair and flourishes of Trinidadian music and its public character. […] There was no artifice in relating the music and drama of the Spanish verse to what strongly survives in Spanish Trinidad, or […] to the thrum and cry of the parang, in which, with typical Spanish duality, the song of praise has the same pitch as the lament. (Walcott 1979b: 3-4).

Walcott teases out these similarities by connecting the rhythm of the Spanish verse to the rhythms of Trinidadian music, mainly the parang, brought to Trinidad by Venezuelan migrants, and calypso, which is apparent especially in the marriage scene. He said:

> If you can have somebody playing the guitar and keeping that beat going, and if the verse column is the same metre as your own rhythm that you are working in, in the parang, in your singing, then out of that a character is going to be affected by the language. Therefore, you will get a Batricio, who will sing a calypso, and you will get a Raphael, and so on. You will slide into it. (Walcott 1986a: 11)

The kind of musical verse chosen by Walcott, however, is not the only aspect showing the proximity between his own culture and Tirso's. It comes spontaneously to Walcott to write that the play should be staged in "a bull ring, a cockpit, or stickfighters' gayelle" (Walcott 1979a: 7), drawing together Caribbean and Spanish spaces, which share the same material characteristics, but also imply the same environment and atmosphere, and host comparable fighting rituals. The performances by the Trinidad Theatre Workshop also turned the Little Carib (and the various open spaces in which it was performed, including San Fernando's Naparima Bowl and a 72-feet-by-24-feet stage in Port of Spain's Savannah) into something much more similar to the seventeenth-century Spanish *corral de comedia* than the Aldwych Theatre in London could possibly be.

In the same way, Walcott could readily have the action take place in the "New Andalusian estates" (Walcott 1979a: 7), San Juan, Valencia, Aranguez/Aranjuez, all Trinidadian villages which bear the names of Spanish towns, and the choice of framing the play within a single night, the eve of All Souls', also responds to Spanish tradition. In fact, although Thieme writes that "since this is the day in the Catholic calendar when prayers are traditionally offered

for the souls of the faithful departed, this would seem to be the ultimate joke in the reworking of the traditional material", because "Juan, the trickster [...] is now resurrected as one of the faithful departed" (Thieme 1999: 155), both stickfighting and Don Juan's story are strictly related to All Souls' Day. As Brereton writes, in fact, "popular festivals were held [...] on All Souls' or All Saints' Day" in the Caribbean islands, and on these occasions, "in the French islands and French-influenced British colonies (Trinidad, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Dominica), the main traditional dances were the Calenda, the Bamboula, and the Belair" (Brereton 1989: 106), where 'Calenda' (or 'kalinda') defines "the stickfight, the stickfight dance, the songs and other performances that accompanied it" (Liverpool 2001: 162) that were also performed during Carnival. Furthemore, one of the most famous reinterpretations of Don Juan's story, José Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio*, "is performed around All Souls' Day, the second of November, in the entire Spanish-speaking world" (Mandel 1963: 465), while "at Vienna, up to 1722, an improvised 'Steinerne Gastmahl' [The Guest of Stone] was regularly given during the octave of All Souls" (Jahn [1891] 2013: 155); a long-lasting tradition which shows once more how often West-Indian rituals interlace with European ones, and how Walcott's writings were able to unearth this connection.

Walcott's final words in his preface to the published play show us how the play even opened his eyes to the country he had chosen to live in, as he writes: "The more I worked on this play, the closer I got to a feeling for the Spanish Creole life in Trinidad" (Walcott 1979b: 4). As Thieme notes, this feeling of proximity is further complicated by the natural hybridity of the Caribbean folklore and imaginary:

> The process of cultural cross-pollination is further complicated by Walcott's incorporation of folk elements which are themselves hybrid. These are of two kinds: he suggests affinities between Trinidadian and Hispanic culture by drawing on Spanish elements in Trinidadian masquerades, such as the *burroquette* and *parang*; and he utilizes syncretic elements from Trinidadian customs, such as the stickfight and the mummers' play, which have origins both in Africa and Europe. (1999: 106)

This closeness of Tirso's Spain to Walcott and Bryden's Trinidad brings an alternative, poetic proximity between author, rewriter and his collaborators. Walcott, in fact, wrote that he was interested

in a Don Juan who had "the same exuberance of performance as existed, I would imagine, in Tirso de Molin[a]'s[6] time. And that is in the aura, the audible idea of the music, the pace of the performance, the jokes [...] and so on" (1986a: 15). This resulted in neither a translation nor a close rewriting of the original, but rather a text which draws on several equally important sources (the original text, the translation, the Spanish and West Indian imaginary, folklore, and landscapes) of inspiration to reinvent a classic character for the contemporary stage without any clearly established hierarchy. A reinvention in which a large role was also played by Ronald Bryden, whose importance was clearly stressed by Walcott and is demonstrated by the correspondence between the two.

3. "This Is Our Play": Walcott and Bryden's *Joker*

The collaboration with Ronald Bryden was fundamental for Walcott's writing of *The Joker of Seville*. Not only for the obvious reason that Walcott would have never written *The Joker* if he had not been commissioned to do so by Bryden, but especially because Walcott himself states the huge value of starting from somebody else's "imagination":

> Ronnie, I feel a joy about writing *The Joker* which has never happened before, or at least, not since I was nineteen, when I wrote the Christophe play, because that joy is the freedom of the thief escaped from the prison of his own disciplines. I feel as if, in this play, I can do what the hell I want, and I write with a singing feeling under line and scene that I can hardly keep up with. […] In my case, as my brother did once in suggesting that I write a play about the Christophe era, I was ignited by another's imagination, yours, and I simply feel, okay, yes, brother, thank you, I'm going to turn out the sweetest, singest, strongest fucking thing I can do as thanks and for your fucking astonishment. […] that is how I feel, and I won't risk killing it with love. (Walcott, May 8, 1973: 2)

Walcott is "ignited" by "another's imagination", his brother's in the case of his first play, *Henri Christophe* ([1949] 2002), and Ronald Bryden's in the case of *The Joker*. And if his aim was to

[6] "Molino's" in the original text.

achieve Bryden's "astonishment" he certainly succeeded, as is clear from Bryden's comments: "Everything you've sent has been perfect and enormously exciting and I've absolute faith in what's to come" (Bryden, September 5, 1973: 2), or: "we're going to have a masterpiece!" (Bryden, September 11, 1973: 2). He even addresses Walcott at the beginning of one of his letters with the words: "Dear Tirso" (Bryden October 8, 1973: 1), and he even writes: "It's beautiful, a work of genius, and ten times more worth having than Tirso's original" (Bryden, September 11, 1973: 1). This confirms that the reasons behind rewriting a canonical text do not always correspond to the political choice of repositioning an identity or a culture, and at times the very simple intention is that of reinvigorating a text, of expanding its meanings and producing a play that is "more worth having" than the original.

The last letter cited is the only one in which Bryden acknowledges his own work, saying: "You'll have to forgive me if I can't smother a tiny pride at having arranged the marriage" (Bryden, September 11, 1973: 1). Walcott, though, does it much more often, especially later on in the process of creating *The Joker*. At the very beginning, in fact, Walcott had shown some reluctance towards the deeply collaborative process of theatre-making, as if it were bound to create confusion in his own work. In May 1973, Walcott was supposed to fly to England to meet with Bryden and Terry Hands to discuss both textual, staging and production details. Because of the very short time available for his stay in England, and because of very urgent matters regarding a production by the Trinidad Theatre Workshop at Little Theatre in Kingston in July 1973, Walcott decided at the last minute to postpone the meeting. However, in his letter to Bryden from Jamaica, he also mentioned the collaborative aspect of the theatre-making process as a possible "danger" to his writing at that stage:

> I have tended of late […] to show drafts of plays when, at the back of my mind, dimly, and unformed, and growing out of its own chaos, the play is, bluntly putting it – unfinished. […] Despite my strict urgings that these are drafts, the result is everything becomes bewilderingly co-operative, and I can stand still, baffled by those clearly urged directions, at a loss, missing the wild, impulsive fits of shaping. […] I'm really in the middle of an unfinished work, and that's the most dangerous part. In other words, I can dry up after a spell, in my own enthusiasm for what is half-arsed. After

the drive and the elation comes the exacting discipline of reshaping and rejecting, etc. So I think, after a tormenting argument with myself, I feared that possibility too. (Walcott, May 8, 1973: 1)

Later on, however, when the play starts to take form, Walcott is more than open to a direct collaboration with Bryden, as the correspondence between the two clearly shows. In February 1974, when the play is still "like a sculptor's studio with speeches, and fragments and scaffolding all over the place, but [it was] getting shapelier" (Walcott, February 23, 1974: 1), Walcott writes to Bryden: "I worked on the prose passage you sent me about Seville months ago, and I'm quite pleased with it" (Walcott, February 23, 1974: 1), referring to a passage which Bryden defined as the "Seville speech" (Bryden, May 17, 1974: 2). In June 1975, Bryden also sent Walcott a letter accompanied by "four pages of detailed queries and small suggestions for cuts" to "go on chipping and re-fiddling because it deserves nothing less than final perfection", although he believed it was "already a great and beautiful play" (Bryden, June 23, 1975: 2). The four pages of comments mentioned by Bryden (pp. 3-6) contain more than thirty suggestions for cuts and corrections, several of which have been incorporated into the final version by the author. Although this in itself would be enough to prove the importance of Bryden's collaboration, we also have the words of the author to confirm the role played by the RSC's literary advisor:

I now see why you got a job with the R.S.C. because your feeling for the correspond[e]nce[7] of Tirso to Spanish Trinidad is a flash of genius, that perception has done more for our parang culture than all the years of bureaucratic culture of our National Council. [...] thank you for your phenom[e]nal[8] instinct. […] You can see what all this has done for me and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. (Walcott, September 10, 1973: 1-2)

These words come very early in the process, when Walcott is working daily on his *Joker* and discovering the proximity between Tirso's theatre and Tirso's Spain on one hand, and his own theatre and his adoptive Trinidad on the other. However, a similar feeling

[7] "correspondance" in the typescript.
[8] "phenominal" in the typescript.

of gratitude and acknowledgement of Bryden's role is expressed even more clearly years later, in August 1975 when, after a visit to Stratford and London, Walcott realized "how deeply [his] doubts were about the R.S.C.'s plans for 'The Joker'" (Walcott, August 15, 1975: 1), because of a "general feeling of vagueness and uncertainty about 'The Joker' […] tied with the very existence of the R.S.C." (Walcott, August 15, 1975: 1). Walcott had started to consider withdrawing the play to have somebody else produce it, after two years of postponements due do the financial restraints of the Company, and to difficulties including the choice and availability of the director, and "the casting, style, music, the whole rightness of it for the R.S.C." (Walcott, August 15, 1975: 2). The first person he told was Bryden, in a letter which shows the importance of this personal and artistic relationship in the creation of the play:

> Ron, I feel that since the "Joker" is virtually your creation, and because we remain such close friends, I must continue to be as frank with you as I always try to be. […] This is a painful[9] letter to have written you, because I feel that this is our play, I mean yours and mine […]. If you were not at the R.S.C. say, Canada now, I think I would move the play to wherever you are, just as some writers follow their editors when they change houses. The beautiful things that you've said about *The Joker* are very warming, but I wrote that play because of your faith in me and to show off for you, because you believed that I could do it. It will remain, spiritually, as much your property as if it were done by any other Company. (Walcott, August 15, 1975: 1-2)

From that moment on, Walcott's *Joker* and the Royal Shakespeare Company did indeed part ways. However, Walcott's dedication of the play ("for Ronald Bryden") (Walcott 1979a: 1) shows that he had certainly not forgotten his contribution, nor its importance to this creolized version of *The Joker* and to his own theatre.

4. A New (World) Don Juan: Rewriting as Dialogue

The Royal Shakespeare Company never produced Walcott's *The Joker of Seville*. After seeing the première of *The Joker* at the Little Carib in Trinidad, director Terry Hands "decided it could not be

[9] "painfull" in the typescript.

duplicated in England", and he "told members of the RSC that the Little Carib *Joker* was modern theatre history, but had outgrown what they planned and was not for them" (King 1995: 212-213). Ironically, this was probably caused by the fact that "Walcott was perhaps too successful in transforming what began as a translation of an old Spanish play into a West Indian theatrical experience, a local happening" (King 1995: 212) which turned the meta-theatrical celebration in the play into a performance, which "encouraged the audience to make a celebration of the occasion by serving shark and bread, souse, coffee, oranges, sweetbread and juice" (Thieme 1999: 108).

Whether or not these were the main reasons behind the decision of the Royal Shakespeare Company not to produce the play, what is certain is that *The Joker* had in fact become deeply West Indian, as Walcott himself confirms in a letter to Bryden: "You've given us if not the R.S.C. a new work which we will all enjoy doing, and which by its discipline and flex[i]bility[10] begins to feel as our own work as without any modesty, Dream on Monkey Mountain and Ti-Jean" (Walcott, September 10, 1973: 2). This process of 'Caribbeanization' of the play, however, was not intended to restrict or displace the setting and meaning of the work, but rather to add something to the legend created by Tirso. According to Hamner, "Don Juan provides an ideal vehicle for demonstrating the fact that Walcott's West Indian experience is neither as isolated nor as unique as its exotic appearance might suggest" (Hamner 1993: 89). Walcott's *Joker* becomes perhaps the best example of what he has defined as the need for the West Indian writer of "an electric fusion of the old and the new" derived from "making creative use of his schizophrenia" (Walcott [1970] 1998: 16). This leads both the acts of translation and of rewriting to be perceived as a "dialogue", in which the translator is "an all-powerful reader and a free agent as a writer" (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 5).

The concept of dialogue is fundamental to understanding the process of adaptation of *El burlador de Sevilla* for several reasons: on the one hand, there is the material dialogue between Walcott and Bryden, The Trinidad Theatre Workshop and the Royal Shakespeare

[10] "flexability" in the typescript.

Company, and the exchange of letters, drafts, sketches for costumes and setting, which makes Walcott's *Joker* a collaborative work; on the other hand, there is the constant poetic dialogue with Tirso, his poetry and his culture. As Juneja affirms about *A Branch of the Blue Nile*, with words that apply just as well to *The Joker*: "On one level, this is a fusion of traditions; on another level, the two traditions exist in a creative, and what in current literary jargon has been termed a 'dialogic', tension" (Juneja 1992: 244). This fusion of traditions accompanied by a dialogic tension is precisely what allows Walcott to bring a seventeenth-century Spanish play to the West Indian stage as if it were a theatre piece of his own.

What Thieme defined as "cultural cross-pollination" (1999: 106), and Döring as "cross-fertilizations" (Döring 2002: 8) is the very essence of this encounter between Walcott and Tirso. It is an encounter between two poets and two playwrights, that has helped unveil some of the meanings hidden in Tirso's original, and at the same time, Derek Walcott's own theatre, since the author admits to Bryden: "The discipline of this play has wrung me out completely, but it has reaffirmed what not only I, but R.S.C. believe in, that […] finally the only great drama is poetry" (Walcott, September 10, 1973: 2). Through the dialogue with Tirso, Walcott has discovered his own drama, and what the Royal Shakespeare Company intended as a simple translation of a seventeenth-century Spanish play, "may turn out to be Walcott's masterpiece" (King 1995: 301).

If we read Walcott's words on the inspiration he drew from another work, J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, for the first play he wrote with dialogue in Creole, *A Sea at Dauphin*, we gain an insight into how dialogue with another author, and even imitation of some aspects of his work, can engender original material in the poetics of Walcott's own writings:

> 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 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. (Walcott in Hirsch 1979: 288-289)

When Walcott talks about "the freedom of the thief" he enjoyed in writing *The Joker of Seville* he is therefore talking about the possibility that imitation offers him of becoming original, of discovering his own work and revealing his own style of writing, rather than adapting somebody else's. This might be why he gave in to the temptation of rewriting Tirso's work, just as he did when he adapted *The Odyssey* for theatre, again commissioned by the R.S.C., though his first "reaction was to refuse", because he "didn't want to rob a poor blind bard [he] couldn't even pay the rights to" (Walcott 2005: 372), as he said in an interview on the Italian radio. The best description of this process is by Walcott himself: "the discipline of working closer to Tirso's model has been exacting but very exciting" (Walcott, September 10, 1973: 1). Like any personal and literary encounter, Walcott's work on Tirso's *Burlador* is a challenge, but also an exciting opportunity to establish a dialogue with the Spanish poet and playwright that 'pollinated' or 'fertilized' Walcott's drama.

For all these reasons, it would be extremely reductive to see *The Joker of Seville* simply as "a counter-discursive reworking of the Don Juan myth" (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 197), without acknowledging that Walcott wrote this play *with* Tirso rather than back to him. Walcott's *Joker* does not function as a writing *back*, but rather as a writing *forth*. It brings the text – its linguistic, literary and cultural meanings – onward and outward, in time and space, and it reveals once more that the real essence of all theatre is dialogue, and that this is even more true in the Caribbean space, since – as the Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot rightfully stated – "the Caribbean is nothing but contact" (1992: 22). Döring fittingly uses the metaphor of 'passage' when he writes that "Caribbean literature is shaped by a poetics of passages, of cross-cultural connectedness and spatial relocation" (2002: 7), and his definition of the term specifies that "a passage is a figure of connectedness, of transport and traversing. It signifies a movement across space [...] but 'passage' also has a temporal and textual meaning" (p. 7).

Nonetheless, "the play contains all the qualities of the kind of integrated theatrical performance that Walcott speaks of as being necessary for West Indian expression", in fact, "the meaning and the language belong to a larger world" (Hamner 1993: 96). A larger world that Walcott has contributed to shape, together with Tirso and all the other interpreters of the Don Juan myth. Rather than trying to cut a universal myth down to fit the smaller environment of the Caribbean, what Walcott has done is in fact enlarging it through yet another particular experience, by 'creolizing' it or rather 'carnivalizing' it, because "the more particular you get, the more universal you become" (Walcott in Hamner [1975] 1996: 24). This particular process contributes to shaping both sides rather than just one (Caribbean rewriting) through the imitation or rejection of the other (Western canonical texts), and inextricably connects them to one another. As Döring concludes, "postcolonial intertextuality engages both sides of the Atlantic and concerns the so-called Old Word no less than the New" (2002: 209), and the result is the embodiment in the written form and on the stage of all the proximities and constant dialogue that have engendered stories and histories which belong to the "New World" just as much as to the "Old World", because they are – like the English language for Walcott, "nobody's special property" but "the property of imagination" (Walcott in Hirsch 1993: 73).

The "freedom of the thief" – which set Walcott's imagination in motion and led him to a poetic, literary and cross-cultural dialogue with Tirso de Molina – is the freedom to interact and play *with* tradition, engendering a creative dialogic tension which drives the text, drama, and ultimately literatures and cultures towards new and unpredictable destinations. If Walcott is a thief, he is a 'gentleman thief', and we can be sure that a man of the theatre like Tirso would use Shakespeare's words to respond to his 'theft': "I do forgive thy robb'ry, gentle thief" (Shakespeare [1609] 2005: 784).

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