

‘I arise and go with William Butler Yeats...’: Cultural Dovetailing in Lorna Goodison’s *Country Sligoville*

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Abstract

This paper presents a reading of Lorna Goodison’s poem ‘Country Sligoville’, published in 1999. The value of this poem rests in the condensed articulation and juxtaposition of a myriad of cultural allusions, imagery and references that belong to Irish and Jamaican contexts. It is argued here that this articulation stems both from the poet’s personal affiliation for the works of W. B. Yeats, as well as an active presence of the two cultures in Jamaica. The powerful embracing of the multiple elements with which the region’s cultural history is invested moves away from the extremes of ‘revenge’ and ‘remorse’ warned against by Derek Walcott. Moreover, the eloquent voice which the narrative persona in the poem is endowed with creates a balance between the diverse Irish and Jamaican elements. The ability to embrace such diversity in a creative way without privileging one side over the other allows the poet to break away from traditional hierarchical perceptions in favour of a serenity emanating from reconciliation.

The works of contemporary Caribbean women writers display their remarkable abilities of putting in play the myriad of diverse cultural elements embedded in the cultural history and contexts of the region. The rich heterogeneous cultural toolkit they use makes their texts an ideal site for tracking/locating the interactions between such diverse elements. Lorna Goodison’s poem ‘Country Sligoville’, published in the anthology *Turn Thanks* (1999), presents a condensed instance of such interaction as Caribbean traditions and icons are placed side-by-side with Irish ones through evoking the figure of William Butler Yeats.

Speaking of this poem, Goodison talks of her Irish grandfather:

... I had an Irish great grandfather. There is a great deal of Celtic influence in Jamaica and the Caribbean. ‘Country Sligoville’ is a pun on ‘County Sligo’ in Ireland, because Jamaicans refer to rural Jamaica as ‘country’, and there is a place called ‘Sligoville’ in Jamaica. Maybe my work is informed by many of the things which also informed Yeats’ work. I am deeply committed to a place-Jamaica, its people and all aspects of its culture, and things temporal and spiritual play important roles in the life of Jamaicans. [...] perhaps all I was attempting to say is that these two cultures have things in common (Email Interview 2004: 2).

Indeed the cultural similarities between the two ‘Sligos’ has prompted a recent call for a ‘twinning’ of the two. In a ‘twin town’ initiative Sligo’s namesake in Jamaica has been making an effort to organise official visits and cultural exchange with Yeats’ county (‘Twinning Suitors 2007: 1). Incidentally, in 1996 a plaque was laid by Jeremy Ulick Browne, the 11th Marquess of Sligo, in commemoration of the abolition of slavery in Jamaica - the emancipation having been initiated by his ancestor Peter Browne (1)

Goodison’s ideas on Irish lineage, recounted in more detail in her recent autobiographical work *Harvey River* (2007), echo a general atmosphere of Irishness that permeates Jamaica. This includes Irish place names such as Irish Town and Dublin Castle in St. Andrew, Irish Pen and Sligoville in St. Catherine, and Athenry and Bangor Ridge in Portland to name but a few; added to this is a proliferation of typically Irish surnames.

The capture of Spanish-held Jamaica by the British took place in 1655. Irish men and women were shipped to Barbados by Oliver Cromwell, followed by his son Henry, through a system of forced labour akin to slavery. From there an Irish workforce was forcibly brought to Jamaica.

The historical similarities between how African and Irish people came to the Caribbean set the scene for the cultural give-and-take performed

by Lorna Goodison in her poem. The towering figure of Yeats as a canonical literary icon from the West is adorned with new meaning engendered initially from a personal experience of the poet:

...I began to write poetry in response to my father's death. I was taught a great deal of poetry in school, mostly the romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth. As part of this teaching I was made to memorize poems and I think I learned from early about the 'charm' effect that some poems can have. My father died when I was fifteen years old. I had no idea how to cope with such a devastating loss, so I turned to poetry. I read widely in the year following my father's death, from John Donne, George Herbert and Rupert Brooke to Edna St. Vincent Millay and all the poets in the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, edited by W.B. Yeats. I believe that reading those poems helped me to deal with my father's death. I believe that good poems all have some 'medicine' in them, and I hope that my poems do (Email Interview 2004: 1).

Using Yeats' book as a refuge from the pain of loss brings to mind the first line of the poem at hand: 'I arise and go with William Butler Yeats/ to country, Sligoville' (47) -also a rewriting of Yeats' poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' (*Modern British Poetry* 1920) 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree'. The setting is also rewritten as the speaking voice takes Yeats for a stroll in the Jamaican Sligoville: 'in the shamrock green hills of St. Catherine' (47). Bringing the colour of the Irish flag to the Jamaican landscape is the beginning of an intricate dovetailing of the two worlds.

Dovetailing

The term 'dovetailing' as used here indicates a balance in the use of imagery and icons, as well as a reconciliation and affinity between the two cultural bodies. Rather than explain this as a form of 'translocation' or cross-cultural exchange as Jahan Ramazani does (*Modernist Bricolage*, 2006: 446), the present reading seeks to establish the notion of intentional embracing of diversity *within* Jamaica and the Caribbean at large - a process grounded in the daily lives of Caribbean people. Modernist notions such as 'mosaic' are often used to refer to texts that

juxtapose diverse elements with the implication that these heterogeneous elements form, or should form, a sense of unity. Yet, in this case no unified picture is sought. The poem comes closer to being a cultural patchwork where contrasting flavours stand out and compete for the reader's attention.

Denise deCaires Narain views the process that takes place in this poem as an act of refusing unconditional devotion to canonical texts imposed by the education system, one that redefines the terms of a new relationship (2002:166). Yet this argument fails to acknowledge the unique bond that Lorna Goodison retains with Yeats as a poet, associated both with the moment of crisis in her life and the moment at which she began to write poetry.

Consideration of the non-conformist inclinations of Yeats as an Irish poet, as well as the historical bond between Irish and Jamaican transplanted cultures mentioned above, calls for an alternative reading of this poem. It is necessary in this case to adopt a method of reading that combines both external and internal devices. In other words it will be necessary to take into consideration, on the one hand, the above-mentioned personal link between Goodison and Yeats, and hence the 'intention' of the author in creating the poem, and on the other the multiple cultural allusions made by the poet, stemming from the context. These two dimensions will be continually traced and analysed at the level of the crafting of the poem.

This technique is based on the proposal made by French theorist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, of a literary analysis that brings together internal and external methods of reading (*Other Words* 1990: 147). Such a technique takes into consideration both the mental, subjective directions of the author and the objective, social context within which the text takes shape - both of which are manifested at the level of the crafting.

The persona in the poem metaphorically takes Yeats by the hand as they roam the landscape of Sligoville:

*We walk and palaver by the Rio Cobre
till we hear tributaries
join and sing, water songs of nixies (47)*

The Jamaican river Rio Cobre is set in the mind's eye against Yeats' 'lake water' in the above poem: 'I will arise and go now, for always night and day/I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore'. Goodison's 'water nixies' similarly bring to mind a myriad of Yeats-created creatures.

Next a process of storytelling is begun, where yet more cultural symbols and icons are juxtaposed:

*Dark tales of Maroon warriors,
fierce women and men
bush comrades of Cuchulain.*

*We swap duppy stories, dark night doings.
I show him the link of the rolling calf's chain
And an old hige's salt skin carcass. (47)*

Caribbean Maroon warriors and the legendary Irish Cuchulain share common qualities of courage and awe-inspiring fearlessness and are thus set side-by-side as comrades. Duppy (ghost) stories are also exchanged in another point of affinity where the rich corpuses of Caribbean and Irish ghost stories are dovetailed. A figure from a Caribbean duppy story is brought to life as the narrative voice shows Yeats the 'rolling calf's chain'- a goat-like duppy with glaring fire-breathing eyes that has a chain on its back producing a characteristic sound at its approach. The rolling calf in duppy stories does not hurt humans.

The voice then shifts to personal references connected to the lives of both Yeats and the narrative persona:

*Love descended from thickets of stars
to light Yeats' late years with dreamings
alone I record the mermaid's soft keenings. (47)*

The reference to Yeats' famous poem 'The Mermaid' adds to the intricate web of intertextual references made throughout the poem. Reserving the right to trace the 'keenings' of the mermaid is an attempt by the narrative voice, not to overpower Yeats, but

rather to establish a strong affinity between the poet who created the mermaid and the Jamaican persona who can 'record' her presence.

Intertextual links thus continue to permeate the poem, including a reference to Yeats' 'Salley Gardens'. Incidentally this reference is present in an earlier poem by Lorna Goodison as follows.

*O Africans
in white dresses
in dark suits
at pleasant evenings.*

*Singing of the flow
of the sweet Afton
warning of false love
down by the Salley Gardens. (Flowers are
Roses 1995: 62) [2]*

Africans appear in the same setting as that of Yeats' poem, wearing 'white' dresses contrasting with their blackness, bringing to mind the snow-white feet of Salley in Yeats' poem. There is a sense of mingling between the cultures of Africans and Europeans: 'To the melodies of Europe/roll the rhythms of the Congo', and a bringing together of the constructs of both cultures by this juxtaposition: 'a marriage mixed/but a marriage still' (62).

The ultimate expression of affinity appears in evocation of the persona's dead mother:

*William Butler, I swear my dead mother
embraced me. I then washed off my heart
with the amniotic water of a green coconut. (Turn
Thanks 1999: 47)*

Leaving out the last name of Yeats while referring to this profound moment of reconciliation with the memory of the dead mother, followed by the quasi-ritual cleansing process with the sweet-tasting water of a coconut, presents a supreme moment of amalgamation of the two cultures. The fact that the coconut is green retains that link that is preserved throughout with one of the colours

of the Irish flag transferred to the Jamaican landscape.

Yeats himself is also made to experience a similar sense of resolution:

*In December Sally water will go down
to the Salley gardens with her saucer
and rise and dry her weeping orbs.*

*O to live, Innisfree, in a house of wattle and daub
[sic].*

In Yeats' poem it is the narrative voice that cries: '...But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears', yet here a personified 'Sally water' will visit the Salley gardens and dry *her* tears. This sharing and ensuing resolution complete the sense of serenity that is established in the poem. The reference is then returned back to Yeats' first poem in the line 'O to live, Innisfree, in a house of wattle and daub' that alludes to Yeats' lines:

*...And a small cabin build there, of clay and
wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the
honey bee
And live alone in the bee-loud glade*

This sets up the above lines as a suitable sequel for 'Down by the Salley Gardens' - one that involves an overwhelming serenity and sense of resolution.

The condensation of imagery and cultural allusions in this poem sets it apart as an ideal

example of the ability to dovetail seemingly contradictory elements to create a new type of beauty. The patchwork of traditions intricately woven together without privileging one colour or flavour over the other is testimony to the craft of Goodison. The poem represents a reflection of the close bond between Irish and Jamaican cultures - a bond that is part of the context from which the poet emerges.

This poem reflects Derek Walcott's historical call for a rejection of both the literatures of 'revenge' and 'remorse' through a powerful embracing of the multiple elements with which the region's cultural history is invested (Walcott 1974: 354). The strength with which Goodison articulates the elements retrieved from her cultural bag-of-tricks is admirable as she creates an eloquent persona that shows Yeats a new path of serenity and reconciliation - a favour that Goodison is returning, many years after herself finding peace in Yeats' book.

The success in not privileging either one of the two cultures represents a case of 'aesthetic detachment' called for by Pierre Bourdieu (*Rules* 1996: 75). This success provides testimony to a high level of skill on the part of the poet as she objectively utilises all the resources available in the space within which she exists.

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Notes

[1] The author's research interests include Caribbean women's literature, postcolonial literature, and gender and power manifestations in texts.

[2] 'Down by the Salley Gardens' is published in *An Anthology of Modern Verse*. Ed. A. Methuen. London: Methuen & Co., 1921. Available online: at Poetry-Archive.com (2002) (http://www.poetryarchive.com/y/down_by_the_salley_gardens.html) accessed January 2006.

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