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The Anti-Functional Creativity: Obsolete Objects in "The Castaway"

Luo Anyi[1*]

[1] Department of Foreign Language, Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China

[*] Luo Anyi, E-mail: sinenrttt@hotmail.com

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Abstract

In Derek Walcott's "The Castaway," the ambiguous images and isolated castaway evoke the sordid colonial memory and its aftermath of the Caribbean cultural predicament, while, in poetic creation, they also elicit a sense of creative vitality. The interreaction between the negative content and the positive effect is activated, intriguingly, right by those images—sandflies, feces, entrails, decaying objects, etc., whose meanings are often degraded since their disvalued representations in the tangible world. Francesco Orlando once discusses functionally repressed physical things, basically capitalistic-evaluate, as "obsolete objects", and proposes that these objects can achieve an anti-functional return in literature. This suggests the disvalued images can be excited artistically by their ambivalences. Based on Orlando's discussion, this paper focuses on the ambiguous images, proposing that these "obsolete objects" subvert the pervasive negation, through their multiple connotations and the intertextuality in Walcott's works. Besides the postcolonial echo of self-help communicated by the poet's appropriation of Robinson Crusoe, it is these images replace the predicament presented in the poem with the artistic newness of natural self-sufficiency. This also raises a reflection on utilitarian and anthropocentric ideas of the highly commodified and functional today.

Keywords

Derek Walcott, "The Castaway", obsolete objects, intertextuality

1. Introduction

Around the disintegration of the Federation of the West Indies (1958-1962), Derek Walcott cast a harsher light on the Caribbean experience surrounded by regional division and neocolonial situation. This refers not only to his realisation of the need and predicament for political and economic unity in West India but also to his reflections on the new direction of the regional culture and art in the bugle of independence.

His poem "The Castaway" (1965) written right around the time illustrates this anxiety of isolated cultural moment.

By appropriating the figure of Robinson Crusoe, the poem assimilates the Caribbean artist, or Walcott himself, to the shipwreck survivor—the castaway who lives alone on a "deserted" island. Reacting to images of excrement, decaying matters and mutilated corpses, the castaway's current perplexity evokes the ravages of sordid, epidemic, and atrocious colonial history, which seemingly, as Patricia Ismond suggest, suffuses "a pervasive mood of negation" in the whole same-name collection (p. 43). On the other, by discussing the evolution of the figure Crusoe in Walcott's oeuvres, Paul Breslin implies that this early poem may be an example that makes the "isolated maker of West Indian consciousness […] a man vulnerable, in his isolation and his protean incorporation of contradictory identities, to the psychic wound of madness", and this uncertain rhetoric is furthered by the poem's ambiguous images (pp. 105-107). This unfavourable isolation of Crusoe, nevertheless, seems by Burnett, a very moment "to present art as a craft, an honourable toil, requiring patience and humility" (p. 118), of Caribbean aesthetics. These concerns on the cultural quandaries and creativity centre around the figure of Crusoe, thus affirming the artistic accomplishments underpinning the poet's appropriations. However, the emanation of creative vitality in this poem transcends the mere inspiration derived from the persistent presence of Robinson Crusoe throughout his career; it also emanates from other imageries frequently employed by Walcott—as previously elucidated yet commonly disregarded, the poetic images—feces, entrails, decaying objects, and "mutilated bodies," etc., that are often interpreted in negative connotations. They not only function as the non-functions to present the cultural predicament and confrontations in postcolonial significance, similar to the refiguring of Crusoe; but more importantly, they are organic replenishments for the poet's self-sustained creation.

Employing Francesco Orlando's concept of "obsolete objects" to define negative images in "The Castaway"—vapid environment, feces, decaying objects, and "mutilated bodies," etc., this paper suggests that these images achieve anti-functional creativity in rich intertextuality and images' culturally encoded meanings. They are important parts of the poet's "ideal of self-sufficiency" for indigenous culture (Burnett, p. 118) and give inspiration for anti-commodity and anti-anthropocentric art in the highly commodified and functional 21st century.

2. The Definition of the Obsolete Objects

In his work *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination: Ruins, Relics, Rarities, Rubbish, Uninhabited Places, and Hidden Treasures* (2012), Orlando pertains the "obsolete objects" to "physical things represented as having been, or in the process of being, deprived of or diminished in their functionality" (p. 2). In the historical context of "the rise of the European bourgeoisie" (p. 13) ideology, this "functionality" is accentuated through the relationships between objects and humans, rather than manifesting functions of objects themselves. Being non-functional and anti-functional, the obsolete objects, encompassing discarded, exhausted, useless or dead, have undergone and been suppressed in a

state of oblivion (pp. 2-3) and anti-commercial in a capitalistic sense. Taking the excrement as a typical of this sort—"the least likely of the discarded objects to be commercialised," he proposes, in Freud's sense, the ambivalences of obsolete objects: "As feces are the first thing produced by one's own body, for a very small child they represent a first, symbolic gift to adults—the first occasion for being considered worthy or unworthy, for social exchange or ransom. Initially important, attractive, and fragrant to the child, the feces are destined to become equally shameful, repugnant, and stinking as its upbringing proceeds. […] What is a worthless piece of trash for the conscious mind will, in the unconscious, be tantamount to gold as the substance of supreme splendor, and to money as overall mediator of value" (pp. 12-13).

These "two ambivalences concerning these unformed, primordial 'things' called feces" are first pleasure and aversion, while the second offering and rejection.

Orlando posits literature as the space where the value of the repressed returns. This refers to the transgressive nature of literature, which "is most inclined to represent will contradict a moral or practical imperative—one that dictates law to desire itself, of every kind, erotic or political (in the broad sense), even before restricting actions" (p. 5). Attaching to the literary transgression, objects that have been functionally repressed, then, can be resurgences in their meaning within the literature. Drawing an analogy to Marx's statement on capital commodity production, Orlando likens literature to the "immense accumulation of anti-commodities" (pp. 15-17), while the obsolete objects in literature to "anti-commodities." Combining ambiguous connotations of these objects, literarily and tangibly, they can thus resurface as a manifestation of the suppressed anti-functionality, challenging prevailing non-functional associations in the real world.

In a semiotic and intertextual sense, on the other, certain symbols and metaphors associated with obsolete objects (though not necessarily in an anti-capitalistic sense), including excrement, corpses, and entrails, have historically existed in European folklore and religious narratives as well as literary works such as Chaucer's poetics of excrement, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Rabelais' novels. Susan Signe Morrison once discusses "filths," in which the most common image of excrement "[…] was present in the literature; discussed in arguments about the body, purgatory, decay, and growth; and was at issue in problems ranging from urban growth to maintaining soil fertility. Fecal theory touches on matters as diverse as the ideology of city versus country and of resurrection. Excrement had social, cultural, and even theological repercussions…Fecal discourse can be read as a culturally coded and determined event (p. 7)."

Orlando's discussion provides a nuanced exploration of the interconnectedness and contradictions between material culture and the material content within the literature. He contends that the "obsolete objects", as perceived within the ideological construct of societal "uselessness," can be recontextualized through literature to unveil their creative potential. In this light, these discarded elements possess the capacity to transcend their conventional societal implications. Overlapping research constants with Orlando's, Morrison's research further elucidates their creative potential's historical and cultural depth. Back to the Caribbean context of "The Castaway," the resonance between the images and the region can

be discussed. The island the castaway stays, as a crucial historical locus in the development of Western capitalism, invokes the history of economic, social, and cultural devaluation, and non-functionality after the imperial process of colonization and commodification. Elucidated by Morrison and Orlando, if the representation of obsolete objects or "filths" mirrors the binary opposites between the valuable and degraded, urban and rural, metropolis and periphery, functional commodities and non-functional anti-commodities, it is also consistent with the poem's postcoloniality. Beyond this, this dichotomy of impasse is resolved when these non-functional images are harnessed for poetic expression. It is through the anti-functional return, the latent values and meanings resurface the prospect of transcending its negative and ambivalent undertones.

3. A New Beginning in Boring Sceneries and Sandfly

Drawing on the castaway's first-person view, the first six stanzas of the poem show the scene on the isolated island, and the man's progression from a hungry prayer for rescue to his awareness of nature and creatures in the deserted space. Being isolated, the man's longing for help is like a hungry stomach "devours the seascape for the morsel/ of a sail. The horizon threads it infinitely" (Walcott, "The Castaway", p. 67), which implies the emergence of Western culture's succour that may never occur. To relieve the anxiety, he lies down and "Sailing the ribbed shadow of a palm, / Afraid lest my footprints multiply." The castaway uses the tropical palm to imitate the sailing ship of the civilised, and unconsciously begins the process of anxious "creolisation." Caribbean artist of isolation after the withdrawal of colonisation is clearly shown in the verses. The images of the sea, sail and palm are functional carriers of desire and imitation for the castaway/artist. The anxious imitation immediately turns to the confusion and exasperation of nothing：

Blowing sand, thin as smoke,
Bored, shifts its dunes.
The surf tires of its castles like a child.
The salt-green vine with yellow trumpet-flower,
A net, inches across nothing.
Nothing: the rage with which the sandfly's head is filled.
Pleasures of an old man:
Morning: contemplative evacuation, considering
The dried leaf, nature's plan.

Vapid sceneries meeting the eye are humdrum: sand, waves, vines, and flowers boringly conform with natural law; man's thoughts, hoping to catch some inspiration from them, seemingly ends up with nothing. It is when a sandfly, whose mind is filled with nothing but rage, comes into view does the castaway starts to change: the boring landscape seems to be liberated from its non-functional state—on the island of salt-green vine, with yellow trumpet-flower and sandfly, the old man finds his pleasures of evacuation and meditation, no longer looking vacantly at island objects, but thinking of a "nature's plan."

Merely normal bugs in the Caribbean, the sandfly proliferates prolifically in wetlands, feeding on fruit, sometimes blood, and spreading disease. Though trivial pest as it is in the tangible world, it disrupts the bewildered thoughts and the silence of non-functionality, and interweaves intertextually in Walcott's other works, as an image that maps the historical context and regional sensibilities of the Caribbean. In the poems "North and South", sandfly directly links to the imperial and colonial theme:

despite the critical sand flies, I accept my function
as a colonial upstart at the end of an empire,
a single, circling, homeless satellite.
("North and South", p. 283)

The sandfly here may be an insignificant echo that reminds the poet of the colonial past; its habitat, on the other hand, is more profoundly metaphorical in "The Fortunate Traveller":

Cetus, the whale, was Christ.
The ember dies, the sky smokes like an ash heap.
Reeds wash their hands of guilt and the lagoon
is stained. Louder, since it rained,
a gauze of sand flies hisses from the marsh.
("The Fortunate Traveller", p. 318)

"Cetus" is the word for "whale" in Latin Vulgate Bible. Burnett argues that "as expounded by Melville in his chapter on the mythology of the whale"—"Cetus was Christ," the dead whale echoes Moby Dick - "The story of the urge to kill the great white whale, is often read as a spiritual parable, reenacting the crucifixion" (p. 199). Thus these sandflies, living in the marsh, probably transformed from a defiled lagoon, hiss in the sin of deicide, while directly in *Omeros* (1990), fly "[…] soon washes the hands of slaughter" (p. 38).

As in *Another Life* (1973) flies is the spokesman for Beelzebub, perhaps the sandfly is in Walcott's sense the Beelzebub of the West Indian. Its metaphorization of colonial slaughters in "devil's wrath" (or the sandfly filled with rage) also appears in his play *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1957). The devil here bets with three brothers that any who can make him angry will be rewarded, otherwise, eaten. The devil embodies the divided coloniser - both sinful and weary - who cries out at the end of the play:

Farewell, little fool! Come, then,
Stretch your wings and soar, pass over the fields
Like the last shadow of night, imps, devils, bats,
Eazaz, Beelzebub, Cacarat, soar! Quick, quick the sun!
We shall meet again, Ti-Jean. You, and your new brother!
The features will change, but the fight is still on.
(*Dream on Monkey Moutain and Other Plays*, p. 164)

Ti-Jean wins the bet, and the angry demon leaves with the sorrow of sin and ambivalence. But it foretells a future reunion—the demon may stalk and unpredictably disguise as the evil spirits, the bats, the Lord of

the Flies, which suggests that the legacy of colonial history will take on various aftermaths, lurking in the seas and lands of the West Indies, waiting for an opportunity to rise.

Whether it is the hisser reminding colonial past, the slaughterers or the Caribbean version of the devil, the "sandfly" carries the specific symbols of Caribbean history and indigeneity. It seems to be the poet's examination of postcolonial sentiment: the devil intertwines into the postcolonial world hissing the ineradicable sin and lingering hatred. This "shame and awe of history possess poets of the Third World who think of language as enslavement and who, in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia" ("The Muse of History", p. 37). The rejection of the humiliating colonial history and cultural composition, in turn, drives the birth of an angry sense of nothingness. Once the hiss of the sandfly wakens the castaway to look around the touchable flesh of the Caribbean island, all the nonfunctional objects'—vapid sceneries and the sandfly itself—functions are stimulated. The repressed value of these images urges the castaway from bewilderment to meditative planning, and the return of the "anti-functional" becomes the new beginning of West Indian art.

4. Creation from Excrement, Entrails and the Decayed

Escaping from vacuity, the old man's contemplative evacuation follows his awareness of "the dog's feces" ("The Castaway", p. 70). The moving footage may embody his freedom from the burden. Once isolated and in despair, the old man is both a castaway and a Caribean who carries a heavy history that needs to be purified through "contemplative evacuation," mentally and physically. Physical evacuation, as early as 13th-century Europe, is associated with mental purgation and purge of spiritual cleansing. In a religious sense, "[p]urgatory, spatialized as an actual location where the dead purged their sins…[w]hile the body in hell is a victim of digestion, generation, and corruption…purgatory represented a liminal space, a region of the in-between, a site of bodily and spiritual purgation" (Morrison, p. 41). The old man is pleased to purge his mind and body "filth" of the past, then he is able to rethink the planning of nature, for "excretion is both the primal creative…and the primal act of revolt and repudiation of the past" (Auden, p. 86). Through this process, the object of "evacuation" is reprogrammed and recreated through the evacuation of history to the "purification".

The production of evacuation (curiously the dog's feces not the man's) and the man construct the picture of coexistence, in which memory of the past, purified form and the vehicle for both are the raw materials for the primary moment of creation:

In the sun, the dog's feces
Crusts, whitens like coral.
We end in earth, from earth began.
In our own entrails, genesis.
(Walcott, "The Castaway", p. 70)

The "dog feces" morph beyond the image of biological excrement into coral under the tropical sun, which follows Genesis begins in the entrails. The image of feces produces two distinct effects on the

beach: the dirty waste and the fertiliser used in farming to nourish the new life. Walcott describes the dung of dual characters in *Another Life*, in the same way:

And those who gild cruelty
who read from the entrails of disemboweled Aztecs
the colors of Hispanic glory
greater than Greece,
greater than Rome,
than the purple of Christ's blood,
the golden excrement on barbarous altars
of their beaked and feathered king,
and the feasts of human flesh,
[…]
("Another Life", p. 244)

In this verse, Bloodthirsty killing and sacred sacrifice appear both in the symbolism of feces. On the one hand, the "golden excrement" may refer to the Aztec cultures' belief of the golden as the feces of the sun (qtd. in Hong Kai, p. 1164), which suggests its sacredness; on the other, it is pejorative to the Spanish colonists.

This dualistic meaning of excrement is recognized by Bakhtin in folk culture. Attaching to a carnival nature, as all images came from the body's lower stratum, the excrement's ambivalence is: simultaneously debasing, destroying, regenerating and renewing (*Rabelais and His World* pp. 148-50); the filthy excrement is also fertiliser, and can be "conceived as something intermediate between earth and body, as something relating the one to the other. It is also an intermediate between the living body and dead disintegrating matter that is being transformed into the earth, into manure. The living body returns to the earth its excrement, which fertilizes the earth as does the body of the dead" (p. 175). In this context, the production of evacuation/dog feces in Caribbean coexistence, as raw material, infused in "[w]e end in earth, from earth began," in which the creative impetus recalls T S Eliot's "[i]n my end is my beginning" (p. 20), and the love of the Caribbean earth, in a religiously ritualistic rise of death and life, evokes Whitman's verse of "I bequeathe myself to the dirt, to grow from the grass I love" (p. 104). The paradigm of "life to death" is thus replaced by the anti-functional "dead to reborn."

The reborn proceed in ritual, the Caribbean "genesis" was carried out in "entrails." These entrails were sacrificed as offerings, the same as the entrails of the disembowelled Aztecs that again formulate the brutal past of massacres. Alongside excrement, the pulled-out entrails has semantic connections with death and decay, while the animal entrails relates to atonement and sacrifice in the ritual of Leviticus. Being Yahweh's chosen nationality, the Levitical rite was carried out: the piles of animal offerings were placed from the bottom to the top in the order of the head and meat sections, Midriff area, dense fat covering, kidneys and liver lobe, etc., finally the entrails and legs. The distribution of the piles is symbolically consistent with the diagram of the tabernacle, and the mythic pattern of Mount Sinai. The

entrails, at the summit of the pile, aligned to the top of Mt. Sinai - access for Moses, likewise paralleled to the interior of the tabernacle which symbolises "Holy of holies, cherubim, ark, and testimony of covenant" (Douglas, p. 79). Creation in the entrails tied to the religious sacrifice represents the sacredness and holiness of the new birth in the Caribbean, because "…the innermost part is scrutinized by God; compassion resides in the bowels…the analogy of the inner sanctuary with the centre of creation is intelligible" (p. 80). The sacrifice required for the Caribbean creation, in the same way, as the Levites' sign of faithfulness to God, "…invokes the whole cosmos, life and death……expresses its doctrine of blood, of atonement, of the covenant between God and his people." (p. 67).

In the creation process of "purification" and "sacrifice", the poet hears that the polyp is building—these tiny halobios inspire the poet to explore the power inherent in the Caribbean element:

If I listen I can hear the polyp build,
The silence thwanged by two waves of the sea.
Cracking a sea-louse, I make thunder split.
Godlike, annihilating Godhead, art
And self, I abandon
Dead metaphor. the almond leaflike heart,
The ripe brain rotting like a yellow nut
Hatching
Its babel of sea-lice, sandfly and maggot,
(Walcott, "The Castaway", p. 68)

The genesis begins with the unique Caribbean geography, environment, and culture. The poet who became the Caribbean god pinches the sea lice, instead of Zeus's thunderbolt, to make the thunder striking, declaring that Western-constructed divinity, art, and self no longer reign: "I abandon/Dead metaphor." The long colonialism, to some extent, indistinct contours between the Caribbean and the Western cultures, while culturally making the Western sequences "dead metaphors" in West India. In another sense, metaphorically, if the "dead," coinciding with those obsolete images, refers to the colonial past, and the "metaphor" to the ideological legacy of Western culture, the "abandonment" may indicate a beginning of absolute independent regeneration.

Nevertheless, as the creation goes on, the creator's/poet's brain rots on the Caribbean earth. The decaying process is once regarded by Snyder as culture renewal. He likens poets to "mushrooms or fungus…[who] digest the symbol-detritus" (qtd. in Morrison, p. 111), that is in the process of culture changes (rot/decay), new forms develop in a composting, fermenting mode, it is the poet who reconciles the decay, growth, and renewal. This rot then may indicate that the former "abandonment" of the dead metaphor never stands for absolute discard. The poet's creative brain of "yellow nut" hatches the Babel, the Caribbean bazaar of multi-ethnics and multi-cultures, where realizes the coexistence on "a national and regional, and just as much, on a hemispherical and transareal scale" (Ette, p. 160).

Through the renewal powers of indigenous creatures and plants, the poem's self-sufficiency of the obsolete objects pushes new germs through the earth. It is an Adamic unification between the Caribbean "nothingness" and "everythingness," which communicates the anti-functional return that inconspicuous natural elements can form an epic-like Genesis. Within this poetic section, the creation of anti-functional creativity reached its zenith. This endeavor exhibits a state of self-forgetfulness or an ecstatical uncontrollability propelled by the Caribbean milieu. Responsive to and contemplative of Western "dead metaphors," it however maintains an inherent ambiguity, or as articulated by Ismond, may still bear a resolute abandonment. In the concluding segment of the poem, the poet engages in direct contemplation of this matter in a confrontation between the Caribbean creation and the Western legacy, which presents a thought-provoking panorama of reconciliation.

4. Legacies of Wine Bottle and Remain-Like Ship

Besides the euphoria of creation, the last stanza shifts to the approach of the castaway—the coastline. Along the shore, there are remnants of vessels, perhaps once embarked upon by castaways, merchants or colonialists, strewn on the beach. Through the array of obsolete imageries, the legacy of the West appears to be delineated:

That green wine bottle's gospel choked with sand,

Labeled, a wrecked ship,

Clenched seawood nailed and white as a man's hand (Walcott, "The Castaway", p. 68).

The gospel of discarded bottles and the remain-like wrecked ship evoke the "dismembered, crucified Christ" (Ismond, p. 46), a static picture of the Passion. They religiously sear their figure of dead metaphors, which refers to the deep-rooted ideological and cultural sequence left behind in this region, the "older values, concepts, order – all of what has so far defined the concept man/humanity - enshrined in the traditional, inherited metaphors." For mid-20th-century Caribbeans, the gradual withdrawal of traditional colonialism and its concomitant aspects is shared experiences. During this tumultuous era of national identity crystallization, on one hand, voices denouncing Western culture surged intermittently, while on the other hand, these cultures had already become indelibly integrated into the local populace, constituting an inseparable facet of life. Within this context, these legacies resemble stranded remnants that elicit emotions of rejection, lamentation, or discomfort. Yet, they persist as tangible vestiges embedded in the sands of the Caribbean shoreline, and may transform into, in Walcott's practising, "[…]twigs, dead thoughts, fragments of memory, all the used parts of [the appropriated Crusoe's] life to keep his contemplation pure and bright" ("The Figure of Crusoe", p. 34).

The burning of "twigs" is also the burning of the entire ideology of past/historical culture and experience, in the same way as "Abandoning the / Dead metaphors," in which the remains of Western legacies are both raw materials and consumables. The castaway picks up and "discards" them, as Breslin put it:

To take the bonfire metaphor seriously is to see everything that comes from the Old World—and not just Europe, but Africa and India as well—as dead wood. It is necessary to the West Indian writer only as

firewood is necessary to the fire: by burning away the vestiges of the Old World, the West Indian imagination gives heat and light. Instead of assimilating old forms, the imagination must consume them in order to release its energies (p. 110).

Contrary to Ismond's comments, the waste wine bottle and the remain-like ship do not bring the oppression of the Western denial that defeats the poet's creation or a radical new departure from his apprenticeship,

By this, the images of allotopia, though ending up the poem ambiguously, raise more imagination about their transformation on the shoreline: the bottle of "gospel" longer filled with the creed of the Bible, but with sand, suggesting the legacies of culture and language not only instils its doctrine but also is input with the nature of tropical Isles. The stump of Christ may rebirth in a form that transcends flesh in this very region.

6. Conclusion

"The Castaway," affirmingly, contains postcoloniality through the poet's consistent appropriation of Crusoe, in his faith that the "evacuated" and "abandoned" European culture can be embraced by Caribbean art and that the "painful memories" of the past also fuel the renewal (Ashcroft, p. 47). More significantly, it shares the actual experience, or a going-on process, of the Caribbean unification between the milieu and the isolated artist. Stripping off utilitarian and capitalistic functionality, but inclusively employing the objects that are unsettled in the tangible world, this poem realizes the anti-functional and anti-anthropocentric meaningful return, to present creative vitality. This power of destroy, oblivion and renewal, as his frequent invocation of the "flame" image—the imprint of the Castries fire—"the insistent repetition of 'burnt' and 'broken,' images of regeneration," is the beginning of "the grid of stars budded with lights" and "refugees began another life" (Breslin, p. 177).

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