Studies in Linguistics and Literature
ISSN 2573-6434 (Print) ISSN 2573-6426 (Online)
Vol. 7, No. 3, 2023
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/sll

Original Paper

Gothicised Henri Christophe: The Tocsin in Colonial Aftermath

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Received: August 3, 2023 Accepted: August 14, 2023 Online Published: August 26, 2023

doi:10.22158/sll.v7n3p65 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v7n3p65

Abstract

Henry Christophe (1949) is Derek Walcott's first play about the Caribbean history of the Haitian Revolution. It inherits consecutive concerns of the danger and anxiety of belief, power, and races in nineteenth-century gothic narratives and employs them to politically assess the post-revolution upheaval. Focusing on the gothic narratives in the play, which deal primarily with the ones of spiritual authority, the mad black king, and the fear of mulatto, this paper proposes that the gothic narratives serve to manifest the anxiety of the constant effects of former suzerain authority on the former colony and the plight of the newly independent slaves' self-identification. By this gothicised expression, this play discloses the intricated experience of the Haitian Revolution and rings the tocsin to the colonial aftermath of racial issues, and class division that continues to consume this region in the twentieth century.

Keywords

Derek Walcott, Henri Christophe, gothic narratives, Haitian Revolution

1. Introduction

Henry Christophe (1949) is one of Derek Walcott's early plays on the historical representation of the Caribbean. Adopting the only successful Caribbean slave insurrection, the Haitian Revolution, it distinguishingly focuses on its successive coups. Walcott comments on the revolution and its later upheavals as "sordidly tyrannical" ones ("Foreward" i). He shapes it in the historically continuous discourse of what Matt Clavin suggests that the Haitian Revolution was constructed as gothic since it is described as "the horrors of St. Domingo" through a wide array of historical narratives decades after the revolution (p. 2). Both in terms of the related historical events as well as an assessment of contemporary Haitian politics, *Henri Christophe* is often reviewed by postcolonial criticism as an early example of Walcott's "fever for heroic" or "nostalgia for noble ruins" (Bough 69). It is also recognised, by compiling it into *The Haitian Trilogy* (2002), as his early attempts at decolonisation and traces of

creative maturity. Chris Bongie, however, points out a crucial issue in the reading of *The Haitian Trilogy* and the historical oeuvre of Vastey: while this trajectory of creative maturity is recognisable, the writing nevertheless sincerely reveals "in good faith, the bad faith that has been a constant of his 'skeptical humanist'", in portraits of history; and his cynical disengagement from social movements that he would appear to be incapable of seeing as anything more than "necessary upheavals" (p. 106). In other words, there is an unsettled concern that haunts this historical representation.

The upheavals in *Henry Christophe* are trapped by a series of revengeful "monotonies history": the great revolutionist Toussaint Louverture, imprisoned to death in France after interrupting slavery and its rule in Haiti, is apotheosised as the spiritual symbol of Hait; appointing himself king, the brutal black Dessalines goes on a massacre spree of whites and later is assassinated by Christophe's plot; the usurping Christophe, once with the ambition to govern well, obsessing with authority in haunting slavery memory, turns also despotic. Eventually, this stubborn, insane king frustrates with the "hallucinations" of the ghostly return of mulatto Pétion and then suicide. The repeated tragedy conveys mainly the obsession with racial hatred and authority practised by two black kings who betray the belief of "Louverture", and gothically connects the trauma of slavery to the vengeful aftermath. This reminds the Atlantic Gothic's particular fascination with power and anxiety about dispossession in the nineteenth century (Doyle, pp. 215-216). A significant carrier of the colonial contexts of nineteenth-century transatlantic literature, Gothic narratives were employed by writers from postcolonial contexts in the twentieth century with a more complex landscape between colonialism, decolonisation and neocolonialism. Just as Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet suggests, these inherited narratives "have proven adaptable to diverse historical and regional specificities," at the same time preserving the concerns in gothic literature "the influence of the past on the present, the limitations of human knowledge, the ambiguities of retribution and revenge, and the dangers of powerful institutions and totalizing systems of thought" (p. 5).

What unsettled concern this play articulates, then, may be interpreted by the gothic narratives in *Henri Christophe*, mainly about spiritual authority, lunatic black kings and the fear of mixed blood race. This paper proposed that gothicised expression in the play serves to manifest the anxiety of the constant effects of European authority on the reconstruction of a new nation in a former colony and the plight of the newly independent slaves' self-identification. A complex Haitian experience is disclosed.

2. Disillusioned Belief of Apotheosised Toussaint Louverture

In the preface of *Narrative of James Williams* (1838), the famous gothicised account of slavery, Whittier provides a condemning overview of slavery, as "the peculiar atrocities of […] 'hall of horrors'" (p. xvii). He profoundly comments on the relationship between perpetrators, victims and religion that if "[t]he Inquisitors of Goa and Madrid never disclosed" their inhumane acts, "it was the escaping heretic, with his swollen and disjointed limbs, and bearing about him the scars of rack and fire,

who exposed them to the gaze and abhorrence of Christendom". The Providence's "abhorrence" refers to its supreme judgment, moral disciplinarian and spiritual guide. Yet its discontent taciturnity is exposed in the silent "gazing". It is through God's spokesmen, the Chosen Ones, the authority exercise. This gothic narrative of the abuse of religious power condenses in *Henry Christophe* through the apotheosization of absent François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture, with a form of Christianity. The Haitian leader is the empty shell populated by Christianity as a "local god", with whom Haiti and Haitians share "his" fate. Through the real spokesman, the white archbishop Brelle, the legitimacy of this ongoing control maintains an obscure influence of (or dependence on) Western religious and political formations.

The speech of Rosencrantz, the courtier in *Hamlet*, unfolds the post-revolutionary abruption in the play. He metaphors the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, implying Louverture's demise and the post-revolutionary coup:

The cease of majesty
Dies not alone but like a gulf doth draw
What's near it with it; it is a massy wheel
Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortis'd and adjoin'd; which, when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boist'rous ruin.
—*Hamlet*
(Walcott, p. 10)

In the very lament, the line between person and symbol is blurred when the "ruler", Louverture, is assimilated into the mythical "massy wheel", while the ruled "ten thousand lesser things (attach to the wheel)", laying the foundations of Louverture-centred belief.

This "wheel" mastering the destiny of Haiti, on the one hand, evokes the Christ, through which Louverture is depersonalised and apotheosised. This tied destiny is finely articulated later by the mulatto general Pétion. Before news of the death reached, Pétion, foreseeing Toussaint's fate and the Dessalines' imminent ruling, laments for Haiti: "This country that stretched, crowing to greet /The sun of history rising, will have its throat cut; /That's the truth" (p. 11). The not-yet-arrived news of Louverture's fate connects the uncertain fate of the country, that once the news of his death reaches, the country will be snuffed out. This god-figuration goes further till the "juxtaposition" of Louverture with Christianity is fully realised. Brelle, the white priest, ties the degenerated spirituality of Haiti with the loss of Louverture: "I see the country/growing looser in spirit, the clergy confused./The ancient cult is like a garden without weeds/Growing on our pruning labor [...]" (p. 15), while Christophe juxtaposes Louverture's suffering as "crucified in a winter's stubborn nails" (p. 24) as in the Calvary. His political

ideals, on the other, are set as the standards to evaluate others. Dessalines' obsolete and uncivilized monarchal ambition was judged as "…not as Toussaint taught:/He rustled and whispered, imperial ambitions./He dictates without parliament and oppresses the poor", and for his kingship, "Toussaint/never thought of that" (p. 25). Since the figure of "Louverture" becomes the Haitian Jesus Christ, his ideal is blurred to be "belief", and his faith is both a projection and a religious dogma.

His apotheosization, nevertheless, is thence torn in ambivalent discourses that Christianity eventually replaced him in a literal sense, which is confirmed later by both black and white. Dessalines, one of the black generals, is the "betrayer" of the blatant provocation, the man who usurps the throne quickly after Toussaint's death. When Brelle warns him that vengeance for vengeance is "where blood grows, blood is uprooted" (p. 16), and the thing Louveture never does, Dessalines identifies its hypocrisy: "White Jesuit fathers built presbyteries from slavery,/Swinging annulling incense over wound-humped backs,/Tired with the weight of Africa,/Baptising with a tongue in cheek…" (p. 17).

Brelle, the archbishop, who "rise gowned solely in Christian humility," though adhered to Louverture, parts the Haitian "belief" from Christianity. He claims philanthropically that he is the one "[w]ho should be beyond complexions" and "proud of this dark brood of sorrows" born from blood. Brelle compliments in a similar tone and then delivers provocatively to the "unmatured": "the blood that must no more be cheap,/The currency of gain", and the ruler should "[h]old this life precious/To tell history[…] in queer languages/By cracked columns", that "breed shall learn How men like [Christophe], Toussaint, Brelle, Dessalines, dead, /Led their people from embarrassment to insolence,/Breaking their former masters on their knees" (p. 52). For the first time, Toussaint Louverture no longer sits at the central altar in his "believers" discourse. His loftiness is reduced to the lessons of death, and his holy sacrifice is put alongside the greedy Dessalines ("[Dessalines] his death was for the merit of the nation" <p. 38>, in Pétion's words). The great wheel is only a part of Haiti and eventually leads his people to insolence/barbarity. The sorrowful and condescending speech from the white reverend tells the impossibility of the "Louveture" being on par with Christianity.

If in the accusations of *the Narrative*, the silent Providence's gaze can be perceived as discontent, in the narrative of the deified Toussaint Louverture, this gaze remains only impassive and reticent. This not only refers to the depersonalised leader of the revolution, who becomes a decontextualised symbol appearing only in conversation but also to the repudiation by the ex-slaves and white priests. "Louverture" belief is, then, an illusionary projection of Christianity, which communicates the anxiety about the continued effects of the former suzerain. Offering the central background of black kings' revenge, it is also a fatalistic tocsin that manipulates the following division of characters: the mulatto elite general Pétion and the white archbishop Brelle, who "adhere" to "Louverture", recurs the equivocation of the imperial centre. While Dessalines and Christophe leave the faith, uneducated black soldiers, after the kings, are doomed to fall. Insecure and conservative as this discourse is, one nineteenth-century gothic discourse on the belief is discussed: leaving the inherited beliefs and

practices, individuals are bound to fail and abandon the rhetoric of the wind and the impossible ideals (Clemit, p. 128). This tragedy of religious violation is expressed paradoxically through the fixated black king.

3. Revenge of Lunatic Black Kings

During the collapse of the "massy wheel" of Haitian spirituality, two black kings attempt to establish alternative authorities by revenging slavery and repeating its atrocities. Dessalines's accusation, "[y]ou think I am not aware of your intrigues,/Mulattos and whites, Brelle and Pétion" (Walcott, p. 35), tells the central conflicts. The racial obsession of Dessalines and Christophe reproduces the gothicised horror narrations of colonial expansion and slavery, which emphasises the legitimacy of "hate begets hate" by the Holocaust and the establishment of an entity of authority as the reverse conquest. In nineteenth-century Gothic literature, representations of slavery and colonisation reveal how the violence, terror and dispossession of the racialised "other" enabled white subjectivity. For instance, *Dracula* (1897) communicates the fear of external invasion, the moral crisis of colonisation (suppressive ruling), and national identities, mainly through the white community or the suzerainty. While on the same issues, *Henry Christophe* adopts the counterpart perspective - the black kings as the subject to express the fear and anger of external abuse (the mulattoes and whites) and their killing of other races - by deliberately shaping the crux of history as racial revenge. Their emphasis on legitimacy is hybrid following the white patriarchal pattern - racial categorisation, repression, and subjugation.

Dessalines's order for the brutal massacre is articulated as a communal nick by the messenger: those soldiers who once tasted blood hear "this trumpet summon like a wound" (p. 41). Yet the scars transform into an "old call" forcing them to "leapt into his arms,/And held our smoking rifles by the paws" and held them "burning through the sleeping streets". Soldiers then spontaneously "raged the city, raping, rioting", slaughtering "the chapels into brothels" and flinging "one girl in an uncertain arc /Into the bloody bosom of the pier". Even the sorrowful messenger himself "skewered a white martyr under an altar". At the end of the massacre, which was run through by Desslines's superstitious instructions, the king announced the order brought by "a necessary horror", to Haitian generals, that "Haiti/Thank him, is safe" (p. 42). The declaration of tranquillity after the massacre to other political figures was a reaffirmation of power. In denying the dominance of the "Toussaint", Dessalines establishes the prestige of his rule most simply and brutally. In the same way that the colonists established their authority, as in the gothic punishment of slaves, Dessalines emphasises the necessary discipline as the master. The desire to kill invades the marrow like a plague, following the bloody memories of slavery and revolution, "grow".

The tyranny is strangled by Henry Christophe, the ambitious black who rejects the violence and hopes to be a good ruler yet is still blinded by hatred and power. The essential differences between Dessalines' and Christophe's regimes are formed by their practices of religion. While denying the

dominance of “Louvreture” and Western religion, Dessalines “never sought to harm the clergy” (p. 37), but rather to secure his dynasty by purging whites. Christophe, however, turns his hand to the concrete symbol of supreme, and eventually, to the religious realm.

Obsessive madness as Christophe is, though, he confides to the Brelle after usurping: “I am very confused, Father...”, knowing full well that he is haunted by his past and that the pursuit of the title of the monarch is only a passing glory; he sees no true belief - neither Haitian nor Christian. Brelle thus points out his disobedience: “[y]ou pray to a God of power and glory,/No prayer is answerable till hands are meek” (p. 57). Christophe’s prayers can only be answered when he is fully subservient to God. This accusation implies the black king has neither faithfully laid at the feet of God, nor followed the democratic system of rule from the West. No hypocrisy of the white archbishop is concealed, but it obscurely echoes his haughty charge to the demise of the blasphemer.

Neglecting the didacticism of Father, Christophe obsessively conceives and builds The Citadel on Bonnet à l’Evêque, on a peak. This castle forms the highest and most enclosed space in Haiti, gloomy, dangerous and forlorn: “[T]he air is thin there, the balding rocks/Where the last yellow grass clutch whitening in sun,/And the steep pass below the sea, knocking/Like a madman on the screaming sand,/And the wind howling down the precipices like a lunatic/ Searching a letter he never wrote—against these rocks,/Wind, sand, cold, where the sharp cry of gulls beats faintly on the ears…” (p. 63). It is the place where the rights of the householder are enforced: “I will hold councils”, and “[n]ot England, Jamaica, or Napoleon/ Shall send ships to disgorge invasions, but search for/ Trade and quiet. Haiti will flourish.” Both the reinforcement of authority and the establishment of greatness, it is consistent with the Narrative’s structure of juxtaposing slavery and the Inquisition, the “powerful symbol in eighteenth-century Gothic architecture” (Guddu, p. 75), while also the shame-washing and self-preservation: “we would, there, be safe./And strong, and pretty”. Then this expectation leads to an Occidental aesthetics: “[l]et us build white-pointed citadels… pave a room with golden coins, so rich /The old archbishop will smile indulgently at heaven from/The authenticity of my châteaux./I will have Arabian horses, yellow-haired serving boys,/And in the night the châteaux will be lit/With lanterns bewildering as fireflies,/Over the lawns at night, like mobile candelabra. Building, controlling and shaping Christopher completes his quest by replicating the colonial discourse, with the haunting trauma—“[o]nce a slave…overturning/Cauldrons of history and violence on their masters’ heads, /The slaves, the kings, the blacks, the brave” (Walcott, pp. 63-64).

Christophe is unable to change Haiti’s fate. This incapability is not only lying in the paralysation of his body and the kingdom but also in the manipulation of language, in the play whose decisive force is “as much about military power…” (Davis, p. 68), a fuse to complete his profaneness. Suspicious and sceptical as he is, he is fooled by educated mulatto Vastey, his trusted lieutenant. The caustic and incredulous self-mockery has been made: “Do you mock me? fact/In a smoke of Latin expressions?” (Walcott, p. 29), yet he has to rely on the literate Vastey, the only person who “understands” him.

Vastey has the soldiers slip the coup note “from Pétion”, with the postmark of the south, into Brelle’s pocket for utilizing Christophe’s illiteracy to plot he kill Brelle. This lieutenant, who “need not be here to read it” (p. 70), instructs Christophe that he can identify the bishop’s collaboration with the enemy by the postmark. Enraged by the provoking, Christophe’s poignant monologue links colonisation, race and the deplorable state of education: Birth breaks around the lips, children learning language of error. […]/Time is the god that breaks us on his knees, learning/Our ruin and repeating epitaphs/Like a dull pupil (pp. 70-71). “Language”, in the process of colonisation, “becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (Ashcroft et al., p. 7).

Shortly after “in blasphemy” killing Brelle, Christophe suicide in fear of Pétion’s return. The Laferriere Citadel as the alarm bell that stands on top of the Bonnet à l’Evêque, “collapsed” following the fall of the massy wheel. If white subjectivity, in gothic literature, is established first as the perpetrator and then the victim, in such cases of Victor suppressing the Being who is “explicitly suggestive of the Jamaican escaped slave” (Malchow, p. 10), or in the case of Harker in the context of imperial fear of outside invasion and moral crisis, the black kings are accomplished by imitating then massacring the “white subjectivity”, first as the victim, then the obsessed, lunatic and incapable perpetrator.

4. Fears on Phantom of Mulatto

Tell him to try again the rub, that mixture,
The old herbs, the antique magic,
That breed abortions; the weeds and smoking herbs cropped,
Hemlock-harmful, lethe-lulling,
Flowers of forgetting, raped from their cradles
In smoke, mists, and weathers …
——*Henri Christophe* (Walcott, p. 81)

When Christophe judges “Christ and Damballa, or any god…” of mulatto Pétion through voodoo, the tearing experience and culture brought by colonisation takes on a gesture of domain division in Haiti. Historical themes in Gothic narratives are usually divided into official and unofficial or alternate historical versions. Historically, Pétion died before Christophe, yet Christophe, in the play, does not know about Pétion’s death and suicide out the fear of his back. What Christophe perceived is a true sense of horror through the army’s approach, because it’s an unconscious fear of the ghost. The rhetorics of ghosts or other supernatures are not for the scare, but to connect with the past and to reflect the psychological effects on the living. The ghost is a metaphor for the lingering psychological effects of past trauma and unresolved conflict. Pétion’s ghost not only is a haunted unfulfilled but wanders as a warning “belief” to the revenger.

If the “sordidly tyrannical” is practised by the two black kings, the mulatto elite Pétion against and end it. He is a character with only a few scenes but the heir of the “dark dynasty”. Pétion and Brelle share this same “belief”—rationality and fraternity when the administrative discuss the leadership after Toussaint’s death:

BRELLE

I do not descend to a question of enmity, I prefer

That the present holders of the keys of authority

Do not consider

Who must open the door first, rather, Work in an amity to put our rooms in order.

PÉTION

I agree with what Brelle says;

We should transcend these partisan rages…

The potential instability and divisions of the revolution were for them “partisan rages” that should be transcended and the national rule should be the primary concern. An imperative of Haiti is overshadowed just like the idealization of “Toussaint”.

The same voice repeats by Pétion, a character with only a few scenes but the heir of the “dark dynasty”. In the plot against Dessalines, he is duped by Christophe’s conspiration to distract Petion’s military forces and then usurps the throne by murdering Dessalines. He talks as a staunch defender of “Toussaint” with no ambition: “I will not be one and stain/The memory of Toussaint’s intention…” and “For my part, I do not care who rules,/As long as he loves his country and rules/Well”, and “I am a mulatto, the Negroes are in the majority,/Present rule is you’re your authority./Or, after he is dead, with a twin constituency/We could contest rule” (p. 38-9). He claims his mixed race, suggesting that most of the people are black and therefore Christophe is more qualified to rule. It also points out another issue that, behind his concealed sharpness, he is a hybrid threat - echoing the Gothic narrative’s discussion of vexed bloodline, of interraciality, as well as the racial obsessions of Dessalines and Christophe. The subjects of hybridity are something that can not be recognised in a specific set context. They are defined as unknown and unacceptable in real life. In Gothic narratives, the hybridity or the grotesque is subsumed by the narrative subject into a similar position - that is both unknown and unacceptable. As in Dracula, the purity of blood is the metaphor for the racial line. This perception is simultaneously mixed with the subject’s desire for exploration, conquest and fear. The mulatto Pétion then is as this kind to Christophe. The mulatto elite seems to him, firstly a threat but still a chessman who is easily played upon, and finally who is an invasional ghost with an army.

At the last moment, when the coup d'état of Pétion arrives as a metaphorical destiny, the disabled Christophe becomes a self-deluded and insane king. Vastey denies Christophe’s effable capability of coming destiny: “…you cannot tell where”, Christophe replied with “[b]ewildered and angry”: “Yes, yes, I can tell…”(p. 87-8). This self-sentiment and indignation shaping the margin blurs unabashed

repression and highlights monarchical obsession. As the ghostly drums stop playing, Christophe refuses to acknowledge his nervousness and can only tell his crony Vastey of this anxiety over and over again: "But why do they stop playing?/You say it will soon be morning/…Why do they stop? Vastey?" The last vestiges of his will were broken when he realised that Vasti had disappeared into the darkness. Spilling out to the skull, his helplessness, indignation and despair are exposed, "[s]kull, when your smile wore flesh around its teeth,/Time like a pulse was knocking in the eyelid,/The worm was mining in the bone for metal./What shall I leave?/I am alone … this anonymous skull?/What shall I?… A half-charred name?/No. A king's memory, or oblivion./ However, this very last moment was declaring his authority to enfeoff: /Tell Pétion I leave him this dark monarchy,/The graves of children, and years of silence…/And after that…/Oblivion and silence".

With his voice breaking with laughter and despair and pistol on his head, Christophe's monarchy that "cannot ripen compunction by rosaries/Or pray to Damballa, or broken gods" (p. 88) is replaced by the mulatto ghost with his "with his gods and their wooden smiles" (p. 82). If the tension in the horrors of slavery and colonial conflict once offered muses to gothic literature, this incipient pre-colonial contradiction is revealed in twentieth-century texts—in the dynamic perception—as a more complicated and contradictory as the fearful and wailed Christophe strays in the "monotonous history" of hybridity that lacerated him. They are largely keenly aware of and inherit the texts that were once colonial narratives, and continue to refine the reconstruction of postcolonial culture amid trauma, fear and anxiety. It is the paradoxical version of the white authority in gothic narratives: the authority of hybrid culture fears the hybrid race.

5. Conclusion

This play is written right in the circumstance in the mid-twentieth century when Haiti was in turmoil between noiristes, mulatto elites, and the United States, which exemplified the plight of the decolonial process. The gothicized post-revolution in *Henri Christophe* evokes the opposite gothic narration of slavery that both constitutes and denies the subjectivity of traumas: the cruelty of slave self-narrative, as in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (1852) and *Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and the proslavery racism that present "the chaos of a post-abolition world" where "African Americans" depicted "as the demonic other", as in *The Clansman* (1905) (Haslam, p. 47). By portraying black kings as both the dispossessed and the dispossessor, this play avoids the victim figures of the (former) slaves in the traditional Gothic narrative. However, while this identity serves the re-evaluation of their identity, it also serves to legality of atrocity. On the other hand, the depersonalized and apotheosized "Toussaint", Pétion and Brelle appear to share the voice of a former suzerain. Henri Christophe articulates more of Christophe's fears and wails about the "monotonous history" rather than the real experience of the Haitian Revolution and forms a warning to the colonial aftermath of racism, and class division that continues to consume this region.

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