Ngũgĩ's Hybrization of the Bible—A Literary Ivwri

Bart DiFiore

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures.

(Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 24)

Ivwri's clan of children conjure hurricanes / to sweep their blocked way, / they raise bees to smite those who taunt them, / they have forced hostile *gods* to flee the land.

(Tanure Ojaide, "Ivwri: Invoking the Warrior Spirt")

On first reading Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's, *Devil on the Cross*, his outright denunciation of the enslaving capitalist economy of modern Kenya may appear as a shallow mask of overt words and blunt disavowal. But hidden under this mask of anger infused rhetoric is a wealth of subtle literary techniques that free his novel from the confines of outright denunciation to the potency of a nuanced, inherently postcolonial, rebellion. It has been well substantiated by the scholar Stephen Slemon that postcolonial works must be read beyond their "overt thematic declarations of anti-colonial resistance" and into their "counter-discursive investments of post-colonial figuration on the level of genre and mode" (14). Only by understanding a postcolonial work through the subtle "refigurative" techniques it presents, can the reader conceive the author's subversion of the hegemonic culture (Slemon 14). Hence a reading of *Devil on the Cross* becomes a dynamic experience; not only can Ngũgĩ's words be taken at face value, they must be interpreted as specifically postcolonial responses. However explicit Ngũgĩ's rejection of the Kenyan economic situation may seem, it only gains articulation through a more

nuanced restructuring of colonial forms grounded within specific, anti-colonial literary strategies.

What then are these strategies that re-embody and rearticulate Ngũgĩ's message? Postcolonial authors, like the cultures they represent, are plagued by the persistent need to escape the polarization of the subjugator/subjugated dichotomy (Bhabha, "Critic" 58-61). A straightforward disavowal of colonial oppression only serves to perpetuate the differentiation of the oppressed—to reaffirm the Otherness of the native to the European norm. Such a paradox leaves the postcolonial author stymied: how can one assert their distinct culture without exoticizing that culture in the eyes of a European audience? How can one condemn the presentation of a divergent Other and present a "reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 86). The answer, according to the critic Homi Bhabha, lies in a mimetic hybridization of aspects of the colonizer's culture. Bhabha argues that only by conjuring the forms of colonialism within the postcolonial text can the postcolonial perspective gain articulation. Only by establishing sites of "political negotiation" ("Critic" 61) or "moments of discursive transparency" ("Signs" 109) does Bhabha believe there is the potential for the "disarticulation of authority" ("Critic" 61) and the revitalisation of the Other's voice.

Bhabha epitomizes his notions of hybridization through the historical example of the call for a "Vegetarian Bible" by the nineteenth century Indian populace. Much of the public was willing to accept the Christian doctrine on the condition that the Bible was rewritten to fit their indigenous belief in vegetarianism. For Bhabha this partial denial is a moment of hybridization, a cross-cultural redefinition of power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. He writes of how the natives are "both challenging the boundaries of discourse and subtly changing its terms by setting up another specifically colonial space of the negotiations of cultural authority" ("Signs" 119). They assert their cultural significance while "changing the conditions of recognition" (Bhabha, "Signs"

119), thereby subverting the homogenizing missionary tactics without exoticizing themselves from the colonial perspective.

While Bhabha describes the tactic of hybridization on a broad, cultural level, the technique takes on a very specific role in the discussion of postcolonial literary methods. It is here, in the conception of hydribity as a subversive literary device, that we return to Ngũgĩ's *Devil on the Cross*. Ultimately, Ngũgĩ only succeeds in expressing his disgust with the Kenyan political situation by establishing sites of hybridization with arguably the most omnipotent of Western cultural motifs: the Bible. Only by mimicking the form, the language, the ideologies of the Christian text is he able to establish a dialogue between the imperialist and worker perspective—a site of "indeterminism" at which to subvert the oppressor's authority. In using a familiar text he can speak to the dispossessed masses of Kenya and spur his rebellion to social justice through both a reiteration of biblical justice and a reevaluation of the colonizer's use of the Bible as an oppressive tool. As Margaret Masson writes, "The colonial subjects appropriate the text, perhaps mimic it, and in so doing, create a hybrid that in effect—whether as deliberate strategy or…unintended distortion—is a mockery of the authority's intention" (355). Hence, hybridization functions in Ngũgĩ's novel as that "refigurative, counter-discursive" mode Slemon describes as the only method of subversion open to the postcolonial text (14). Ultimately, despite Ngũgĩ's grotesque and exceedingly blunt depiction of the forces oppressing the Kenyan people, the weight of his message rests upon the creation of a liminal, dialogical forum—a forum established only through his cross-cultural hybridization of the epitome of colonial authority: the Bible.

Of the array of instances in which Ngũgĩ seeks to hybridize the biblical text, one of the most poignant is his re-presentation of the "Parable of Talents". In an *almost* perfect, but explicitly different, mimicry of the allegory, the master of ceremonies at the "Feast of Thieves and Robbers" recites Ngũgĩ's version of the parable set within the contexts of modern Kenyan society. While the emphasis may have changed, the details of the

biblical account are retained; a ruler is faced with leaving the nation and calls upon his loyal servants to protect and preserve his "goods" (Ngũgĩ, *Devil* 82-3). The ruler then returns to collect his profits, extolling the virtues of the first two servants who doubled the value of his possessions, while exiling the third who refused to increase his wealth into a world of "outer darkness", "weeping", "and gnashing of teeth" (*The King James Bible*, Matt. 25: 30). The parallels between the Master of Ceremonies' retelling and the Gospel of Matthew serve, however, only as the framework around which Ngũgĩ hybridizes the parable. While the narratives are the same they are expressed in explicitly different ways. No longer is the tension between the ruler and his servants metaphorically spiritual but instead becomes unequivocally economic. The "talents" (Matt. 25:20), having both monetary and metaphysical connotations, are replaced by "shillings" (Ngũgĩ, *Devil* 83). No longer is the ruler a metonomy of God, as in the Christian interpretation, but, rather, Ngũgĩ's conception of the Devil; the unfaithful servant discovers the "secret of his name" labeling the ruler "Imperialist" and castigating him as the "lifeless god of capital" (*Devil* 84-5). Yet the language the servant uses to legitimise his refusal of the master's claim remains consistent between the two accounts—the reasoning exactly the same: "because you reap where you have never sown. You grab things over which you have never shed any sweat" (*Devil* 84-5). While on the one hand the Christian view of the Bible touts these lines as a metaphorical call to service—a call to carry out God's will—Ngũgĩ ironically reclaims the literal meaning of these words and contextualises them within the struggle of the dispossessed Kenyan masses. Hence the Christian text is subverted and redefined as a site of dialogue between the imperialists and the oppressed. Both accept certain facets of the parable's ideologies yet interpret those ideologies differently—as a subject that is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 86).

By evoking the Parable of the Talents, Ngũgĩ, however, goes beyond simply hybridizing the Bible for, in doing so, he inherently demythologizes the Christian

narrative. The "Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 25:14) to which the Gospel of Matthew likens the parable becomes the "Kingdom of Earthly Wiles" in Ngũgĩ's rewriting (*Devil* 82). Heaven (or its undeniable converse, Hell) is no longer a metaphysical construct, but the present earthly reality, fraught with deception and trickery. The ruler "traveling to a far country" is not a metaphorical image of God but a tangible, oppressive facet of Kenyan daily life—the white imperialist (Matt. 25:14). In this manner Ngũgĩ is redistributing the value judgment the reader places upon the biblical myth. No longer can the parable be interpreted as a call to do good for God, but, rather, as a call to do good for the people. Hence, in *Devil on the Cross*, Ngũgĩ's reworking of the Parable of the Talents retains the biblical narrative's "potential of transformative power" (Lovesey 162). While Ngũgĩ may demythologize the biblical text, he preserves its potency as a socially influential discourse. It is only through this preservation that critics have been able to conclude that the novel, "writes history infused with prophecy, sanctioned by the masses and God" (Lovesey 159) and the reader is able to contextualise Ngũgĩ's seemingly heretical statement, "The voice of the people is the voice of God" (*Devil* 8), within the hybridized discourse of the work.

The Parable of the Talents is not, however, the only moment at which Ngũgĩ hybridizes the Bible for he also undermines the imperial conception of the biblical text by rewriting the Beatitudes from a Kenyan, socialist vantage. In language saturated with biblical allusion, the Ilmorog worker's leader places the "Beatitudes of the rich and the imperialists" in direct opposition to the "worker's catechism" (*Devil* 209-10). While the "worker's catechism" upholds the mass' vow, or, in accordance with the Biblical reference—Profession of Faith—to "struggle against neo-colonialism" (*Devil* 210), the Beatitudes of the rich are undercut by a persistent hypocrisy. As the leader prophesises of the wealthy, "Blessed is the man who burns down another man's house / And in the morning joins him in grief" (*Devil* 209). Ngũgĩ goes as far as pointing towards the Christian origins of colonial duplicity, for his beatitudes describe the imperialists as

those "who have been able to disguise our wicked deeds / With the religious robes of hypocrisy" (*Devil* 210). Yet despite this overt renunciation of the use of Christian ideals to suppress native Kenyans, this cross-cultural moment is maintained as an inevitable hybrid. Ngũgĩ is neither denying the legitimacy of the Bible nor affirming it. Only by construing his view of the Bible as ambiguous—as a discourse capable of both embodying social justice and being manipulated as a tool of colonial oppression—does the blatant message of the leader's Beatitudes gain credence. Only by approaching an assimilation of Christianity by likening the worker's credo to a form of the Catechism and subsuming an outright disavowal of imperial hypocrisy within the structure of the Beatitudes, does Ngũgĩ's message find an audience in the postcolonial pantheon.

This notion of the Bible as an ambiguously portrayed text is further grounded within Ngũgĩ's self-purported positions on Christianity. While it is obvious that Ngũgĩ views many practices of the colonial Church as anathema, he upholds certain aspects of the faith, mainly as he states, the "basic doctrine[…]of love and equality between men" (*Homecoming* 31). What he denies is the politicisation of the Church and their lack of doctrinal opposition to the "consequent subjugation of the black race by the white race" (*Homecoming* 31). He tells of how the Church allowed for poverty and oppression by preaching how the "poor were blessed and would get their reward in heaven", thereby chastising any rebellion against the real "anti-Christ"—colonialism (*Homecoming* 33-4). Hence we see a philosophical basis for Ngũgĩ's hybridization of the Bible in *Devil on the Cross*. Ngũgĩ's personal relation to Christianity has facets of inherent ambiguity—while he whole heartedly follows the basic doctrines of love and equality, he denies the subversion of these ideologies into methods of subjugation by the postcolonial, missionary based African church. Like Bhabha's cry for a "vegetarian Bible", he is calling for a specifically Kenyan Bible, or, more particularly, for a specifically Kenyan mode of religiousness—a spirituality that embraces the unity of the masses and the equality of the races in a "just socialist society" (*Homecoming* 36).

Not all critics, however, have seen the value in Ngũgĩ's ambiguous view of Christianity. The critic Lupenga Mphande argues that Ngũgĩ's treatment of religion is problematic "because it is not clear whether he is treating Christianity as an essence, or as an instrument" (358). He argues that the appropriation of Christianity as a subversive tactic "run[s] the danger of re-affirming" the religion as an "instrument of neo-colonial expansion" (Mphande 376). Yet it is exactly Ngũgĩ's ability to present Christianity as both an *essence* and an *instrument*—as a hybridized construct in *Devil on the Cross*—that allows him to escape the risk of reaffirmation. For as Bhabha writes, resistance is "the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the differential relations of colonial power" ("Signs" 110). Hence, rather than detract from the strength of Ngũgĩ's message, his dynamic, hybrid concept of Christianity actually lends itself to the potency of the text.

These indistinct notions regarding religious doctrine are perpetuated in the text of *Devil on the Cross* through Ngũgĩ's ambiguous conceptions of the Devil. In the episodic, disjointed narrative there is a common thread of reference to an indistinct, amorphous incarnation. At the opening of the novel the reader is left to question who exactly speaks to the Gicaandi Player. Is it God, or rather, could it be "the Tempter", "the Judge", the distributor of knowledge, who approaches Warĩĩnga outside the robber's lair (Ngũgĩ, *Devil* 184)? The answer, in the literal sense, is superfluous, but rather the precedent Ngũgĩ sets forth by withholding such a label becomes critical. Ngũgĩ is attempting to portray the Bible as an instable construct, open to multiple interpretations, uses, and manipulations. He is striving to escape and, subsequently, subvert the good/evil polarisation of the doctrine. This is most obvious in Warĩĩnga's encounter with the indistinct entity later in the novel. "Satan", as Warĩĩnga comes to label him, presents the "Kimeendeeri class" as the "true Christian disciples" for they follow most accurately the word of God; they accept the Eucharist, eating the flesh and blood of not

only Christ but the Kenyan masses (Ngũgĩ, *Devil* 190-1). Furthermore, they coerce the peasant class to follow the "catechism of slavery" through their propagation of the ideal, "I say unto you / that ye resist not evil. But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, / Turn to him the other also" (Ngũgĩ, *Devil* 191). Hence, the entire notion of Christian stability is undermined; Ngũgĩ portrays the Devil as both "Judge", a role traditionally likened to God, and as "Tempter", "Oppressor" and "exploiter", characteristics normally aligned with the Devil. By muddling the boundaries between these antithetical Christian characters Ngũgĩ manages to break the very pillars of traditional Christian ideologies and to push the reader to a conclusion that lays "elsewhere" and "forward" from the original "elements of the antagonism" (Bhabha,"Critic" 63). The answer Ngũgĩ poses lies in Satan's ultimate revelation to Warĩĩnga that what she lacks—the void left by the indeterminate portrayal of an eternal being—is an inherent "faith in [her]self" (*Devil* 191). Hence, Warĩĩnga's final 'transgression' in the Christian sense, becomes an act of self-affirmation, retribution, and justice. No longer is Warĩĩnga caught in the paradigms of good and evil, the devil and god, the imperialist and the peasant, but she occupies a new space—a hybridized conception of an individualistic, spiritually-grounded, socialist call to justified revolution.

During the years of the slave trade, the Urhobo people of Nigeria, created mythical sculptures called *ivwri* to protect against foreign invaders (Ojaide 248). These figurines were conglomerations of human, animal, and bird forms melded so as to focus individual aggressions on foreign enemies (Foss 225). While not tangible like these icons, Ngũgĩ's hybridization of the Bible in *Devil on the Cross* functions as a contemporary, subtler form of *ivwri*. Like these conglomerated, sphinx-like statues, Ngũgĩ blends aspects of both the colonizer and the colonized's interpretations of the Christian narrative. He dons the cloak of religiosity in order to subvert the binaries presented by Church ideologies. By the conclusion of the novel no longer do the notions

of good and evil, the Devil and God, right and wrong have credibility, rather they have been metamorphosed into a message of justified rebellion and Kenyan socialism. Ultimately, Ngũgĩ's writing inhabits the framework of the very tool the imperialists have used to subjugate the Kenyan masses. Only by inhabiting the cultural symbol of the Bible could he reveal that the oppressors do not maintain the exclusive right to the text and that Kenyan's have an equal claim to an independent interpretation of the Christian narrative. Only by hybridizing the Bible—by establishing a literary *ivwri*—could Ngũgĩ legitimise his call for a socialist Kenyan revolution and free his nation from the confines of an enslaving neocolonialism perpetuated through the rhetoric of the Church.

Literature Cited

Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man." *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. 85-92.

---. "Signs Taken For Wonders." *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. 102-22.

---. "The Postcolonial Critic: Homi Bhabha Interviewed by David Bennett and Terry Collits." *Arena*. 96 (1991): 47-63.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994.

Foss, Perkins. "Where Where Gods and Mortals Meet: Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Art". *African Art*. 36 (2003): 198-210.

King James Bible. 18 Feb. 1997. Oxford Text Archive. 12 May 2008. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/kjv/index.html

Masson, Margaret. "God and the Novelists: 13. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o." *The Expository Times*. 110 (1999): 352-57.

Mphande, Lupenga. "Ngũgĩ and the World of Christianity: A Dialectic." *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. 39.5 (2004): 357-78.

Lovesey, Oliver. "'The Sound of the Horn of Justice' in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Narrative". *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical call for Justice*. Ed. Susan Vanzanten Gallagher. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994. 152-68.

Ojaide, Tanure. "Invwri: Invoking the Warrior Spirit". *The World of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o*. Ed. Charles Cantalupo. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc. 1995. 239-48.

Slemon, Stephen. "Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial writing." *Kunapipi*. 9.3 (1987): 1-34.

Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. *Devil on the Cross*. London: Heinemann, 1982.

---. *Homecoming*. London: Heinemann, 1972.

Bart DiFiore hails from the coastal community of Gloucester, MA along the eastern seaboard of the United States. This work is the culmination of a study in postcolonial literature with Professor Chris Prentice at the University of Otago. Currently, Bart is pursuing undergraduate degrees in English and Biology at Middlebury College.