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Mapping Roots in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

Like most epic poetry Derek Walcott's *Omeros* concerns itself with the fate of a nation or people, in this instance 'our wide country, The Caribbean Sea.' Engaging with the epic genre, a form commonly identified as an 'imperial genre' highlights a problematic area for the postcolonial writer whose identity is necessarily 'split' or 'hybrid' as a result of the vicissitudes of colonial history. Marking an inner struggle, his troubled relationship to Western canonical texts has proved a most fruitful zone of inspiration for the poet whose own divided heritage causes him to frequently question how to choose 'between this Africa and the English tongue I love?' Seamus Heaney has made the point that Walcott has made a career out of the impossibility of choosing either. *Omeros* then, maps a program of cultural integration that has been a fundamental theme of his writing for decades. Assuming an entitlement to all the diverse cultural traditions available in the region he freely draws from African and European sources, and is irreverent in his ironic reconfigurations of mythic themes and figures. This article examines the role of the sea-swift as both transatlantic guide and as a central transcendent metaphor for cultural integration within the poem. Crossing east-west meridians the swift explores the cathartic potentiality of the journey, a trope that the poet continually invokes in his writing. For Walcott, the swift is a comfortable hybrid able to inhabit a mixed society, without forgetting the individual cultures that compose its heritage.

Derek Walcott's *Omeros*¹ is an epic poem concerned with the cathartic potentiality of the journey. This journey poem charts physical and metaphorical passages brought about by the colonial encounter and in response to it. Blending his own poetic odyssey with that of the Caribbean more generally it allows Walcott to sing of "our wide country, the Caribbean Sea" (320). *Omeros* therefore is concerned with the disparate strands that comprise a hybrid Caribbean identity and how these components interact. This concern with the fate of a nation or people is a typical feature of epic poetry

1. All parenthesised references are to this edition: Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).

whilst the simultaneous tracing of a more personal quest where “the ‘I’ is a mast; a desk is a raft” (291) marks a more autobiographical departure from the form. It is therefore an epic in the manner set out by Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, who defines epic as a literary form in which the “personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea.”²

Marking an inner struggle, his troubled relationship to Western canonical texts has proved a most fruitful zone of inspiration for Walcott and one that highlights his own literary and personal evolution. Homeric analogies proliferate in his work and the figure of the Odyssean wanderer bears a particular significance to his conception of a Caribbean culture that has been already diasporised:

Omeros can be read as the culmination of Walcott’s life-long and continuing engagement with classic models and prefigurations for local St Lucian realities, an engagement both resolute and reluctant in its canonical implications.³

This precarious affiliation to the European literary tradition serves as a muse that Walcott simultaneously invokes and rejects throughout his writings. The poet’s tie to his other Old World heritage, that of Africa, is rendered problematic as a result. This study then, seeks to outline the manner in which postcolonial cultures create identities in response to the historical violence and rupture of a colonial past.

Walcott’s epic poem is divided into Seven Books with 64 chapters and is written in three-line stanzas. *Omeros* weaves three main strands into its narrative. The first strand on which the poem opens concerns itself with the poorer black St Lucians, in particular the fishermen Achille and Hector who are rivals for Helen, and Ma Kilman who is attempting to heal Philoctete of his wound. The second story line deals with Major Denis Plunkett and his wife Maud, and the relationship this white couple have with the island. Finally the third thread traces the ‘I’ narrator, Walcott himself, his views, attitudes and autobiography. The naming of the protagonists in the Greek tradition along with the insistent paralleling of events in their lives with classical episodes seems to invite comparison to Homeric works. The British Major and his Irish wife on the other hand point to a more recent history while Walcott’s personal narrator bridges the distance between the artist and his art. Walcott discloses his

2. Tobias Döring, “Writing Across the Meridian: Epic Echoes in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*,” in *Caribbean-English Passages: Intertextuality in a Postcolonial Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2002), 169–202, p. 179.

3. Döring, p. 174.

own personal investment in the narrative by the intermittent collapsing of the fictitious space between the poet persona (introduced in the form of the 'I' narrator) and the poet himself:

This wound I have stitched into Plunkett's character.
He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme
of this work, this fiction, since every "I" is a
fiction finally. Phantom narrator, resume. (28)

As the above quote would suggest, many of the characters in the poem are wounded. Though manifesting in diverse ways, this wounding is recognized as being a consequence of colonization and draws no distinction between oppressors and oppressed. This essay will follow these intertwining elements of epic and autobiography that inform the composition of *Omeros*.

The journeying epic represents for Walcott his own colonial education in the Western tradition, what he might term his European inheritance. This legacy embodies a problematic for the postcolonial writer whose identity is necessarily "split" or "hybrid" as a result of the vicissitudes of colonial history. Walcott identifies this innate self-division in his 1962 poem "A Far Cry from Africa":

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?⁴

Themes of exile and hybridity come naturally to Walcott. His own complex heritage informs much of his work and the wellspring of his inspiration. As Seamus Heaney writes of this conflicting dual allegiance, "Africa and England beat messages along his blood."⁵

For Stuart Hall the Caribbean is the "purest diaspora,"⁶ a place where everybody comes from somewhere else. Bruce King supplements this observation by stating

4. Derek Walcott, "A Far Cry from Africa," in *Collected Poems: 1948–84* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 17–18, p. 18.

5. Seamus Heaney, "The Language of Exile," in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (USA: Three Continents Press, 1993), 304–309, p. 305.

6. Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," in *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, ed. Gregory Castle (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 280–293, p. 284.

that “No one is indigenous to the West Indies but they belong no where else.”⁷ One of the more interesting features of Walcott’s work is his insistence on hybridity, on being a “mulatto of style.”⁸ His work testifies to a recurrent refusal of a single, unitary identity, like Shabine, another Odyssean figure who features in Walcott’s poem “The Schooner *Flight*” and who proclaims “I had no nation now but the imagination.”⁹ Colonization in the Caribbean resulted in the forced migration of vast numbers of people from Africa under the control of four European powers. Laws introducing the emancipation of slavery led to the introduction of indentured servitude bringing Chinese and Indian workers to the region, many of whom were stranded after their contracts were reneged upon. These peoples, combined with what was left of the indigenous tribes that had been decimated by the Europeans have resulted in a Gordian knot of identity – impossible to unravel. The poet’s mixed heritage is alluded to in the character of Shabine whose background seems to mirror his own:

I’m just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
And either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.¹⁰

For John Thieme the character of Shabine emerges as a “Caribbean Everyman, who is self-conscious and at the same time skeptical about his representative possibilities.”¹¹ What this entails for the poet is not a rejection of inheritance but an embracing of it, in all its forms. “This did not mean the jettisoning of ‘culture’ but, by the writer’s making creative use of his schizophrenia, an electric fusion of the old and the new.”¹²

7. Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 519.

8. Derek Walcott, “What the Twilight Says,” in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (Kent: Faber and Faber, 1998 [1970]), 3–25, p. 9.

9. Derek Walcott, “The Schooner *Flight*,” in *An Anthology of African and Caribbean Writing in English*, ed. John J. Figueroa (New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982), 280–291, p. 283.

10. Walcott, “The Schooner *Flight*,” p. 280.

11. John Thieme, *Derek Walcott: Contemporary World Writers*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 162.

12. Walcott, “What the Twilight Says,” p. 16.

The fragmentation of traditions by colonialism does not make him bitter but rather emboldens him to take possession of the diverse cultural resources available to him. Focusing on the inequities of colonialism can only create a “literature of re-creation and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters.”¹³

He therefore lays claim to the various traditions that compose his “mongrel”¹⁴ identity, maintaining that “maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor.”¹⁵ Walcott’s hybridity then, is strategic, a deliberate attempt to add his signature to a long list of literary forbears. It does not follow though that he sets his own mixed heritage in opposition to an assumed purity of any other cultural form. Rather his work acknowledges that “cultures are not discreet phenomena; instead, they are always in contact with one another, and this contact leads to cultural mixed-ness.”¹⁶ Recognising that all hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or “purity” of cultures are untenable, all cultural resources are fair game. His poetic practice assumes that “representations of all cultural forms are equally derivative and therefore equally permissible.”¹⁷

However, one of the main criticisms that has been made of Walcott and his concept of a New World classicism is, that while espousing an all-embracing multicultural aesthetic, the tone of much of his earlier writing tended to emulate only European models. “The multicultural rhetoric of Walcott’s ironic New World classicism reflects this diversity promisingly, but his poetic practice relies too heavily on Western cultural resources to match that rhetoric.”¹⁸

In fact, in some of his earlier critical essays he appears to be openly hostile to African influences in the Caribbean. His attitudes show a strange contradiction at the core of his work: appropriating Western influences being seen as the claiming of a natural inheritance, the use of African models being a “spectacle of mediocre talents raising old totems”¹⁹ or a “degeneration of technique.”²⁰ This anxious denial of Afri-

13. Walcott, “The Muse of History,” in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (Kent: Faber and Faber, 1998 [1974]), 36–64, p. 37.

14. Walcott, “What the Twilight Says,” p. 9.

15. Walcott, “The Muse of History,” p. 36.

16. David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 7.

17. Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 35.

18. Pollard, p. 58.

19. Walcott, “The Muse of History,” p. 43.

20. Walcott, “The Muse of History,” p. 55.

can influence in his earlier work is perhaps not altogether surprising, given the nature of St Lucian society of his youth. Though culturally mixed, a hierarchical relationship was maintained in a society where colour gradation was a visible indication of social ranking and “such distinctions as straightness of hair were carefully observed and could form the basis of marriage and jobs.”²¹ Stuart Hall contends that “[y]ou only have to look at the Caribbean to understand how for centuries every cultural characteristic and trait has its class, colour and racial inscription.”²²

Asserting a hybrid identity entitled him to regard his assimilation of European modes as a legitimate birthright. Yet, it is not until the publication of *Omeros*, however, that Walcott can truly allege to represent his diverse heritage.

“L’hirondelle des Antilles”

In *Omeros* two journeys map the internal division of the Caribbean subject that Walcott’s “A Far Cry from Africa” outlines. In the first Achille imagines himself reversing the Middle Passage to return to Africa and to the village of his ancestors. The second sees the poet-persona, embarking on a Grand Tour of Europe under instruction from the ghost of his dead father. The swift acts as a transatlantic guide on both odysseys. On a more symbolic level the swift exemplifies the divisions created by colonial history. Forever vacillating between two cultures it resembles the predicament of dislocation inherent in a Caribbean culture:

One of the most interesting migrant figures in the text is the sea-swift which, like the Odyssean poet and Achille who *dreams* of a return to Africa, travels east-west routes across the Atlantic.²³

Thieme makes the point that the “swift occupies much the same role as Athena, Odysseus’s guiding deity in *The Odyssey*.”²⁴ Indeed there is much to support this observation. Athena operates throughout *The Odyssey* as a benevolent force within the life of the protagonist keeping him safe on his voyages and ensuring that he arrives safely home. Guardian and protector of Odysseus, moreover, Pallas Athene elects to take the hero’s loved ones under her wing giving strength and inspiration to Penelope and Telemachus at critical junctures. The goddess serves also as a plot-

21. King, p. 32.

22. Hall, p. 284.

23. Thieme, p. 185.

24. Thieme, p. 186.

propelling device, rousing characters from their apathy and spurring them on to meet their fates. Akin to her favourite Odysseus, she too is a master of disguise and frequently appears in various human forms. Significantly she appears in bird form on no less than three separate occasions in *The Odyssey*, transforming in Book 22 into a swallow.

Echoing Homeric instances Walcott's sea-swift, like the goddess, functions to bring both Achille and Walcott home after their sustained wanderings. For Walcott, it is the sea-swift, "*l'hirondelle des Antilles*" (88) that links these various quests and provides a central transcendent metaphor for cultural integration. It is the swift that can "carry the cure / that precedes every wound" (239) and return the wandering writer home to the seat of his inspiration: "slowly traveling hand / knows it returns to the port from which it must start" (291). The swift who carries the seed to St Lucia of a herb that Ma Kilman later uses to cure Philoctete of his "ancestral wound." At Maud Plunkett's funeral the swift that she had sewn into her shroud of birds of St Lucia lifts off the silk and flies into the air with "all the horned island's / birds, bitterns and herons, silently screeching there" (267). The swift thus links the lives of all the island's inhabitants regardless of their origins. As the fates of the lead-actors in Homer's verse seem propelled forward by celestial forces greater than themselves so Walcott's poetic practice seems ordained from the outset by external powers. Seven Seas informs the poet-persona in Chapter 58 that this is "why the sea-swift was sent to you: / to circle yourself and your island with this art" (291). A benevolent companion the swift pours benediction both on the poet and his art, guiding him and his creations through outward odysseys and internal migrations.

Therefore if the swift is representative of division it also operates as a symbol of unity, crossing east-west meridians and thus linking the disparate aspects of a Caribbean heritage into one coherent identity. Persistently traversing lines of longitude its journeys enact a "monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice."²⁵

This New World identity is a space where "each man was a nation / in himself, without mother, father, brother" (150), bereft of the crippling weight of history. King suggests that if epic poetry is a celebration of the nation and nation building than *Omeros* is a fragmented epic about a fragmented society:

Fragmented in the sense of mosaic, something composed of distinct parts, something put together from bits to make a society, nation, culture, in which the bits will show, the divisions are still there, distinctive, and are

25. Walcott, "The Muse of History," p. 64.

likely to remain so, but this is the essence of the situation, its being together and whole despite the apparent differences of which it is made.²⁶

For Walcott, the swift is a comfortable hybrid able to inhabit a mixed society, without forgetting the individual cultures that compose its heritage.

Africas of the Heart

In Book Three of *Omeros*, Achille is “lured by the swift” (130), who “touched both worlds with her rainbow...this dart of the meridian” (130), “the mind- / messenger” (131) who prompts him towards his future and his past – “for the first time, he asked himself who he was” (130). The fisherman, in his sunstroke delirium travels back to Africa and through the historic journey of the slaves’ Middle Passage to the Americas:

For Achille the swift is a transatlantic muse who prompts him to question “his name and origin” and who figuratively pulls his canoe “home” to Africa.²⁷

The sea-swift is also invested with the power of bestowing blessings, its cruciform shape in flight bestowing benediction on those who encounter it.

And God said to Achille, “Look, I giving you permission
to come home. Is I send the sea-swift as a pilot,
the swift whose wings is the sign of my crucifixion. (134)

Yet though this quest seems blessed from the outset, it does not mark a uncomplicated re-union with a ruptured tradition. Though welcomed into the village of his ancestors he finds he cannot simply be re-inserted into that society. Another potential father figure is provided in the character of Afolabe with whom he discusses the meaning of names. Here the postcolonial trauma of the loss of a language is alluded to as Achille admits that “[e]verything was forgotten” and that as Caribbeans “we yearn for a sound that is missing” (137). He sees the villagers dancing and hears their music, recognizing those aspects of culture that survived the Middle Passage, managing to maintain “an umbilical connection with the African homeland and culture”:²⁸

26. King, p. 518.

27. Pollard, p. 185.

28. Hall, p. 285.

"The same, the same." (143) He takes part in their customs but remains removed, tears filling his eyes "where the past was reflected / as well as the future." He tries to invoke the gods of the trees but they ignore his incantation. When war came he finds he cannot fight and 15 slaves are taken. He considers changing the course of history, of becoming their deliverer but, in epical fashion, his hubris pre-empts a fall. "Then a cord / of thorned vine looped his tendon, encircling the heel / with its own piercing chain. He fell hard" (148). Nature fashions her own shackles to chain those who would impede the inexorable march of history. Walcott argues here as elsewhere that the past must be accepted – it is time to move on.

To such survivors, to all the decimated tribes of the New World who did not suffer extinction, their degraded arrival must be seen as the beginning, not the end, of our history.²⁹

It is time to shirk off the weight of an all too burdensome history, the shame of a degraded past and embrace a new horizon. "[T]hey crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendour" (149).

This psychological return to Africa that Achille embarks on is overshadowed by a problem that every postcolony must face. In truth the return to a pre-colonial past is utopian. One of the main problems is that the Africa that is imagined is one that no longer exists. The roots to which the colonized direct their gaze are withered and dead. This imagined, pure, pre-colonial Africa cannot be addressed as a presence; rather it is a narrated and created absence. This spiritual quest of Achille is a quest for self-knowledge – "His name / is what he out looking for, his name and his soul" (154). However having healed a wound brought on by a colonial past, the "homesick shame / and pain of his Africa" (134), Achille must now return to his hybrid present. If Africa is a necessary port of call on a journey to self-knowledge it by no means constitutes the destination. The roots to which Achille "returns" are imagined and based on a need of the fisherman to renegotiate his identity as opposed to a firm point of origin from which this culture derived. Achille's journey therefore is into an "Africa of the heart." The artificiality of this imagined homeland is emphasized in that the scene which Achilles' delirium conjures up "was like the African movies / he had yelped at in childhood" (133). The culture he must create belongs in the future not in the past:

Silencing as well as remembering, identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narra-

29. Walcott, "The Muse of History," p. 41.

tive, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they come from.³⁰

Achille's journey highlights Walcott's position on the formation of cultural identity: while celebrating the manifold sources of cultural inheritance, there is no going back, to Africa or anywhere else. Informed by a long held view that writes "amnesia is the true history of the New World"³¹ he contends that "cultures can only be created by this knowledge of nothing."³² The offshoot of this is his contention that cultures must be created out of this void:

Walcott recognizes that this loss of cultural origins threatens any collective sense of identity in the Caribbean; however, rather than engaging in what he sees as a futile project of cultural recovery, he claims the right to create a Caribbean cultural identity from this absence.³³

Rather than "wailing by strange waters for a lost home" the castaway must look into the future, inventing a culture from the various crates and broken vessels washed up on the shore. *Omeros* is a significant milestone in the poet's career in that it achieves a larger incorporation of African cultural sources into the poet's multicultural vision of New World classicism. However while acknowledging Africa as a potential fatherland it is also read in measured terms as being but one of the possible horizons that the New World castaway can look to for clues to the past. As Achille travels to Africa the poet persona admits that only:

Half of me was with him. One half with the midshipman
by a Dutch canal. But now, neither was happier
or unhappier than the other. (135)

If Africa provides the poet with one aspect of his cultural composition, Europe must equally provide another.

30. Hall, p. 283.

31. Walcott, "The Muse of History," p. 39.

32. Derek Walcott, "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (USA: Three Continents Press, 1993[1974]), 51–57.

33. Pollard, p. 108.

“The Echo in the Throat”

The figure of the “castaway,” the “eternal wanderer” or the “fortunate traveler” recurs throughout Walcott’s literary career. The trope of the journey is repeatedly invoked in his writing to signify an evolution or an ability to cross boundaries, transcend binaries and achieve a more holistic vision. The poet relies on

[t]ropes of traveling to express how art can unite the fragments of experience to create the possibility of a transnational, interethnic, cross-cultural sense of individual and collective wholeness.³⁴

A Caribbean appropriation of Homer’s *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, the most obvious trans-Oceanic crossing in *Omeros* involves that of the poet Homer—here reclaimed as “Omeros”—and of his epic works. Already seasoned travellers, *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* are, as George Steiner reminds us, the “two texts most frequently translated into English. Surpassing even the translations of the Bible”:³⁵

Since his very first collection of verse, *25 Poems*, Walcott has repeatedly found Homeric analogies for his Caribbean experience and virtually all his published volumes of verse to date contain references of one kind or another to *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*.³⁶

As the above quote would suggest Derek Walcott has found resonance in the Odyssean figure to describe his own Caribbean experience. Indeed the figure of the eternal wanderer or castaway, whether an Odysseus or a Crusoe or indeed in any other form has appeared repeatedly in his poetry, drama and prose. Charles Pollard asserts that “[i]n Walcott’s New World each person is a ‘craftsman and castaway,’ a creator as well as a casualty of his or her history.”³⁷

As we shall explore later, Walcott’s odyssey shows not only an awareness of Homer’s epic but also acknowledges a debt to Joyce’s *Ulysses* in providing a literary precedent of appropriation. Returning to Homer his Greek name “Omeros” Walcott both “reclaims Homer from his assigned role at the headwaters of Western European culture” and “propounds an altogether different etymology”³⁸ for him:

34. Pollard, p. 12.

35. Quoted in Döring, p. 203.

36. Thieme, p. 151.

37. Pollard, p. 43.

38. Thieme, p. 154.

O was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was
 both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
 os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes. . . (14)

This move, Thieme suggests, both restores Homer's own cultural specificity as Greek, while reinventing him as a Caribbean poet. This reinvention is compounded by the conflation of the figure of "Omeros" with that of "Seven Seas" throughout the poem. In fact Walcott's Homer seems to possess a Protean capacity of metamorphosis whose identity slides between his reassigned Greek personage as Omeros, his Roman counterpart Virgil, his indigenous Caribbean counterpart Seven Seas, Walcott's close friend the St Lucian painter Dunstan St Omer, the famous American painter Winslow Homer, the African griot, a blind barge-man encountered in London. These fluid character mutations highlight the ambitious project of cultural integration that Walcott has engaged in. In effect he is actively "creolizing" canonical Western texts and their authors. As Irene Martyniuk argues:

by intertextually reformulating these original texts, Walcott finds acceptance and celebration of the post-colonial in the very stories Europeans have identified as specifically their own- their founding texts or "master narratives."³⁹

Walcott therefore freely draws from the well of the traditions that have preceded him. *Omeros* for example contains a myriad of allusions and references that include the work of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Eliot, and Joyce. Does this make the writer, as Bruce King suggests, "Telechamus in search of a literary parent?"⁴⁰

Also, if epic is, as Döring⁴¹ reminds us, an "imperial genre" that "typically sides with winners and with narrative teleology" can an epic of the Caribbean ever be written? The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* remind us that the Caribbean is the "crucible" of history as it is here that "worst features of colonialism throughout the globe" are all "combined in one region."⁴² Can this tendency of epic be merely reversed to voice the vanquished as the title of Robert Hamner's *Omeros: Epic of the*

39. Irene Martyniuk, "The Irish in the Caribbean: Derek Walcott's Examination of the Irish in *Omeros*," *The South Carolina Review: Ireland in the Arts and Humanities* 32.1 (Fall 1999) 142–148, p. 143.

40. King, p. 519.

41. Döring, p. 172.

42. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin eds., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 144.

Dispossessed would seem to suggest? Or are the genre and the actual experience inherently at odds? My reading of *Omeros* finds that for Walcott the genre is employed with a knowing nod to its own built-in obsolescence. The epic scaffolding represents the tools that the New World 'craftsman' utilizes to create something entirely new. So while "[e]pic references and meanings are first established by means of topoi, names and rhetorical strategies that render the scene on the St Lucian beach in a recognizably classical manner"⁴³ they are ultimately dismissed as "[a]ll that Greek manure under the green bananas." (271) In characteristic Walcott fashion this renunciation is itself loaded with contradictory meaning- manure it must be remembered fosters growth. If at times Walcott's ironic reconfigurations display an irreverent and light-hearted approach, at other points they suggest a more uneasy sense of self-doubt as the poet yearns to "enter that light beyond metaphor" (271):

When would the sails drop
 from my eyes, when would I not hear the Trojan War
 in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop?
 When would my head shake off its echoes like a horse
 Shaking off a wreath of flies? When would it stop,
 The echo in the throat, insisting, "Omeros" . . . (271)

The Homeric influence here is a haunting that not only intimidates and burdens the poet but also affects his ability to perceive his present reality on its own terms, "to mark itself outside 'Greek' canonical coordinates."⁴⁴ This passage marks a point of self-chastisement where the poet chides himself for relying too heavily on the Western tradition and not being able to see his St Lucian world as it really is: "The displacement of Homeric works into Caribbean worlds is being questioned not just for its complicity with the western canon but, more fundamentally, for its constant mistaking and misnaming of St Lucian realities."⁴⁵

Walcott's fear of complicity with the colonial mission is illustrated in the poem by his providing a parallel to his poetic project of writing a Caribbean epic in his character Plunkett's historical assignment. Like Major Plunkett who has decided to write a history for St Lucia the poet too is engaged in an attempt to distill the life essence of the island in art. "So Plunkett decided that what the place needed / was its true place in history" (64) and the poet decides to "give those feet a voice" (76).

43. Döring, p. 178.

44. Döring, p. 181

45. Döring, p. 181

Plunkett's history is inspired by his attraction to his housemaid Helen. The poet's project is for his Helen – St Lucia we are told is commonly referred to as the "Helen of the West Indies." In Chapter 54 both attempts are taken to task for failing to see the wood for the trees:

there was no real need for the historian's
remorse, nor for literature's. Why not see Helen

as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,
swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone,
as fresh as the sea-wind? (271)

This section of the poem calls the integrity of the entire project into question. The poet challenges himself for failing to celebrate his island for its own inherent worth, its "green simplicities" (187). Self-doubt is rife as Walcott assesses the ethical dimensions of his poetic tribute to the island:

The last third of *Omeros* is deconstructive, anti-myth, anti-metaphor, as both Plunkett and the narrator are found to be wrong. Joyce is the model because he is an Irish realist and an Irish internationalist (beyond nationalism), who created his race from daily life without mythic inflation.⁴⁶

However, this doubt is assuaged somewhat at the end of the chapter as Walcott accepts that his inherited forms of expression are his only means to express his island experience and therefore possess a lived validity. "[I]t was mine to make what I wanted of it, or / what I thought was wanted" (272). In other writings he compounds this assertion: "The language I used did not bother me. I had given it, and it was irretrievably given; I could no more give it back than they could claim it."⁴⁷

In Chapter 56 the poet-persona in conversation with Omeros makes clear that he has never read *The Odyssey* in its entirety: " 'I never read it,' / I said. 'Not all the way through' " (283). Whether or not this statement is true, it is telling of the anxiety of the poet that his work be seen only in the light of derivative influence. Such assertions mark Walcott's sustained commitment to create "a Caribbean world of parallel status and originality with little sense of vicarious dependence on Homer."⁴⁸ Walcott's work therefore illustrates both a sustained engagement with and a firm disavowal of the European literary tradition in the Caribbean. He achieves this through

46. King, p. 517.

47. Walcott, "The Muse of History," p. 63.

48. Thieme, p. 153.

a process that simultaneously “reverses and honours” (68) the tradition that has proceeded him. “This poetic practice both ‘reverses and honours’ the past, the pun on *reverses* (both a rewriting and a redirecting) suggesting his resistance to the past and the word *honours* conveying his indebtedness to it.”⁴⁹

As readers we are advised to be alert to this process in the writing of Walcott lest we mistakenly take the myriad of allusions and references to European literature and culture as a sycophantic mimetic gesture. Pollard reminds us “[f]or Walcott, an allusion is never tantamount to an endorsement.”⁵⁰ Walcott freely and ironically reconfigures Western influences because he is entitled to. If it is in Europe that he finds his “multiple epic father-figures” his poetic project links them into a “literary genealogy whose lines he transfers to the New World.”⁵¹ His practice therefore deliberately smashes such simplistic binaries as colonizer and colonized. This deconstructive technique of highlighting opposing positions only to reveal their inter-relatedness is characteristic of Walcott. King rightly contends that his “life and work were to be marked by the creative coexistence of antagonistic opposites.”⁵²

Prompted by the ghost of his father and accompanied by the swift, the “I” narrator sets off on his own Grand Tour of Europe. He is under instruction to ‘enter cities / that open like *The World’s Classics*’ but “[o]nce you have seen everywhere and gone everywhere, / cherish our island for its green simplicities, / enthrone yourself” (187). To travel beyond his island home is a necessary journey for the poet if he is to better represent it. From Boston, he travels to Lisbon and London, and then on to Dublin. This Irish visit is particularly significant as it is here that he encounters James Joyce in a pub by the Liffey, praising him as “our age’s Omeros, undimmed Master / and true tenor of the place! . . . I blest myself in his voice” (200). Acknowledging a debt of inspiration Walcott generously proclaims “Mr Joyce / led us all” (201) but significantly if it is the “gaunt, // cane-twisting flaneur” (200) who leads in song he is accompanied by Maud Plunkett, a character created by Walcott in *Omeros*. Thus Walcott both honours Joyce and declares his right to alter the tune. The interaction between fictive, actual and historical figures throughout the poem highlight the fluidity of Walcott’s conception of identity and indeed the fictive nature of all identities.

49. Pollard, p. 153.

50. Pollard, p. 82.

51. Döring, p. 184.

52. King, p. 34.

Integration

Arrival in the New World marks not an ending, but a new beginning, the start of a new journey, a point of departure. This new beginning will only take place when the evils of colonialism are first acknowledged, and then passed over. As the poet states in the first section of the poem, “affliction is one theme / of this work” (28), and *Omeros* is a poem where all the characters, colonizer and colonized alike, are forced to bear the wounds inflicted by colonialism. These afflictions need to be dealt with and although the scars may never fade, Walcott promotes a cleansing forgiveness for his characters to allow the pain to wash away. Cultural integration is for Walcott the mode in which the wounds created by colonialism begin to heal. As the poet dissolves his own life into the narrative of the poem so his work seeks to dissolve the diverse cultural ties of the peoples of the Caribbean into a broader Caribbean that simultaneously embraces its own hybridity. This is a hybridity that celebrates the permutations and fluctuations of an all-inclusive but never homogeneous self. As mentioned previously the swift, forever vacillating between cultures, yet remaining true to the disparate cultures that compose its heritage embodies this process. This inclusive vision of a Caribbean identity is marked by that fact that almost all the characters in the poem are wounded. Like the characters and “I” narrator of *Omeros*, the poem charts a movement from affliction to cure: “We shall all heal” (319).

Then Philoctete

waved “Morning” to me from far, and I waved back;
we shared the one wound, the same cure. (295)

If colonialism is the common experience in the New World, uniting Caribbean peoples, Africans, Europeans and Asians it is time to conceive the world anew. Walcott envisions “the great poets of the New World” whose “vision of man in the New World is Adamic” (37). Walcott’s *Omeros* characterizes a tribute to both inheritance and re-invention answering his own question posed in “A Far Cry from Africa” by *not* choosing “[b]etween this Africa and the English tongue I love.”⁵³ As Heaney reminds us “[h]e did neither, but made a theme of the choice and the impossibility of choosing.”⁵⁴ This self-described “mulatto of style”⁵⁵ chooses not to privilege one inheri-

53. Walcott, “A Far Cry from Africa,” p. 18.

54. Heaney, p. 305.

55. Walcott, “What the Twilight Says,” p 9.

tance over another: “so that mongrel as I am, something prickles in me when I see the word ‘Ashanti’ as with the word ‘Warwickshire,’ both separately intimating my grandfather’s roots, both baptising this neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian.”⁵⁶

This essay has focused solely on the African and European aspects of Caribbean identity. It is clear that Walcott’s odysseys, both poetic and literal envisage a broader inclusiveness. In an essay he read on accepting the Nobel Prize for literature Derek Walcott writes:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars.⁵⁷

It is clear that Walcott is aiming to achieve a wholeness of identity, though one that acknowledges a fractured past. In this speech Walcott freely admits that he has not yet managed to integrate all the diverse cultural resources available: “I am only one-eighth the writer I might have been had I contained all the fragmented languages of Trinidad.”⁵⁸ However Walcott’s vase metaphor remains somewhat problematic in its implications that the original vase, being whole and untainted might be thought to imply a notion of culture as originally pure. Thus the cultures that existed prior to the colonial experience and subsequent transformations maintain a hierarchical relationship to the hybrid cultures that emerged. However the fact that “the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole”⁵⁹ would seem to counteract this potential hierarchy. *Omeros* testifies to a strong commitment to cross-cultural inclusion: “[T]he mirror of History / has melted and, beneath it, a patient, hybrid organism // grows in his cruciform shadow” (297).

This marks the development of Walcott’s own writing: his earlier writing tended to concern itself with division and oppositions, his later aesthetic moves towards resolution and wholeness. As Walcott’s narrator tells:

56. Walcott, “What the Twilight Says,” p. 9.

57. Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (Kent: Faber & Faber, 1998 [1992]), 65–84, p. 69.

58. Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” p. 69.

59. Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” p. 69.

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I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text;
her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking
basins of a globe. . .

One, the New
World, made exactly like the Old, halves of one brain. (319)

While celebrating his 'Old Worlds' of Europe and Africa, Walcott finds, ultimately, there is no place like home – "the place held all I need of paradise" (320).