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Σύγκριση

ΤΗΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΜΕ ΤΙΣ ΞΕΝΕΣ ΛΟΓΟΤΕΧΝΙΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΤΙΣ ΚΑΛΕΣ ΤΕΧΝΕΣ

COMPARAISON / COMPARISON

ΤΙΜΗ ΣΤΟΝ ΕΜΜ. ΚΡΙΑΡΑ

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"Fruit of the loom": New spins on Penelope in Walcott and Márquez

A common trait between Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez and Caribbean poet-playwright Derek Walcott, besides their emergence from the margins into central international fame, is the professed influence, and pervasive use, of classical myth in their works. "A constant feature of García Márquez's style has been his fusion of Greek, Spanish, and American literary models and mythology", writes Mary Davis,[1] while Walcott, author of *Omeros*[2] and *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*,[3] "has often been praised for his ability to fuse the classics, folklore and history..."[4]. In a New York interview, Walcott affectionately mentions writing under the influence of "the two great Caribbean artists, Hemingway and Homer."[5] This mythical element has become an indisputable basis for scholars dealing with either writer, and has produced research not only on direct parallelisms between characters in their works and mythical figures, but discussions on the larger theoretical-structural aspects and uses of myth as well.[6]

Myth interpretation being an evolving and many-faceted operation, even a "minor" detail can prove a pivotal part of the interassociative web of mythemes that orders the underlying schema. One such "web", both literal and figurative, is the focus of this essay, which seeks to establish a further significant tie between the 1967 masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude (OHYS)* by García Márquez[7] and the 1992 *Omeros* by Walcott, on the basis of the two writers' use, in these works, of the story of Penelope's weaving ruse as delineated in Homer's classical epic, *The Odyssey*. What will be examined is the way the Homeric parallelism is incorporated in each text, how interpreting this image of Odysseus' faithful wife negatively in García Márquez and positively in Walcott serves each writer's specific point, and what this mythic symbol of the weaving woman reveals about the overall work; for, as Robert Sims reminds us, "[Márquez's] emphasis on myth holds the key to unlocking the plenary vision which he finally synthesizes in CAS. "[8]

Penelope's famous ruse with the shroud of her father-in-law, Laertes, may involve what is deemed a typical female activity, weaving, but its importance in the epic is attested to not only by its triple mention in *The*

Odyssey (2.89-110; 19.131-56; 24.128-48), but by the immense scholarship on the subject as well.[9] The story is first presented in the beginning of the epic by Antinoös, leader of the suitors, and it offers both an early characterization of Penelope and an evaluation of the importance of her trick:[10]

> "For it is now the third year and the fourth will soon pass, since she has been deceiving the hearts of the Achaeans in their breasts... And she devised in her heart this guileful thing also: she set up in her halls a great web, and very wide; and straightaway she spoke among us:
>
> "'Young men, my wooers, since goodly Odysseus is dead, be patient, though eager for my marriage, until I finish this robe – I would not that my spinning should come to naught – a shroud for the lord Laertes, against the time when the fell fate of grievous death shall strike him down;... '
>
> "So she spoke, and our proud hearts consented. Then day by day she would weave at the great web, but by night would unravel it, when she had let place torches by her. Thus for three years she by her craft kept the Achaeans from knowing, and beguiled them; but when the fourth year came as the seasons rolled on, even then one of her women who knew all told us, and we caught her unraveling the splendid web. So she finished it against her will, perforce."

Thus Penelope is introduced, first of all, as a female Odysseus, full "of many wiles." Like her hero-husband, she is steadfast in her single-minded purpose to await faithfully his return; and she is able to manipulate the flow of the plot to achieve her goal: she freezes the action of the story for almost four years, at the end of which, we are told by the now-dead suitor Amphinomus in the third narrative of the web ruse, Odysseus appears, as if on cue. Penelope is thus seen, through her *metis* (craftiness) and *dolos* (trickery), as formulating her own narrative to "suit" her wishes. In the same line of thought, Nancy Felson-Rubin comments:[11]

> Uncertain over her marital status and pressed to take some action, Penelope imagines various strands of plot, projecting what could happen and examining, as it were, the possible lives she could lead. Homer depicts her nature as introspective, self-reflexive, scheming, improvisatory, and perspicacious. Whenever she previews her destiny in dreams and fantasies, manipulates her suitors'

desires, and chooses a pathway with deliberation, she seems to control her own destiny.

The association of weaving and devising schemes/plots is, of course, not new, as the three Moirae of Greek mythology are also portrayed as weavers. Linguistically speaking, moreover, "[i]n Homeric thought, 'weaving' implies more than making a garment. What a person weaves... is of course often a cloth or a garment. But it may also be a 'plan', 'trick' or 'counsel'."[12] It is not incidental that Penelope also weaves herself into the circle of queens and goddesses of *The Odyssey*, in the sense that every first (and often subsequent) appearance of a famous female character in this text is marked by a. a weaving activity and b. the offering of clothing to a male hero (as Helen does for Telemachus, and Calypso, Circe, Leukothea, Arete, Nausikaa, and Penelope do for Odysseus). In this manner, Penelope repeats herself in multiple *loci* in the text as a supra-human symbol of the weaver, the femininely fertile plotting mind, the ubiquitous presence equivalent only to that of the omniscient, omnidirecting poetic mind itself, Homer – or Homer's actual ghost-writer, the Olympian goddess Athena: *ergane Athena*, patron of weaving arts and wise subterfuges, who by her sole personal initiative and ceaseless ingenious efforts "weaves" Odysseus's story and final triumph (24. 479-80).

But if Penelope has her thesis in Athena, the story also provides us with her anti-theses: the now-domesticated but still infamous Helen of Sparta, her sister and Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra, and Penelope's own young maidservant, Melantho. Faithless Helen's invocation by Penelope as a way to excuse her initial reluctance to recognize Odysseus (23.218-24) might suggest, as many critics claim, Penelope's unindulged escapist fantasies of sexual and moral release which she has had to suppress for twenty years. Clytemnestra is also portrayed as a polar opposite to Penelope by Agamemnon's ghost (11.423-66). These two queens have thus also been "weavers," but, unlike Penelope, of evil plots that lead to their infamy. Finally, of Melantho, the servant-girl who reveals to the suitors Penelope's web-ruse ("unraveling" thus Penelope's plot and forcing her to "weave" her shroud to the end), Felson-Rubin commends:[13]

> This disloyal maidservant, who "used to sleep with Eurymakhos, and she was his sweetheart" (18.325), is rebuked first by Odysseus, then by Penelope. Each thereby repudiates female boldness and perhaps even female wantonness... Their common, like-minded disapproval of Melantho unites them. In addition, Melantho is a metonymic sign of Penelope (acting out

> what Penelope could be doing but is not); through a scapegoat mechanism, their coordinated vituperations against a blameworthy Melantho enable them to interact positively at the hearth venting their excess, negative energy.

Thus the shroud-trick mytheme in Homer's Penelope is revealed as first a device for controlling the plot, and secondly as a characterization tool for various characters in the story. The forced completion of Laertes' shroud marks the beginning of the action in the *Odyssey*, which is simultaneously, however, the beginning of the end, Odysseus final step home: thus the weaving becomes the plot. And finally, by basing her characterization on her weaving ruse, the obvious (as contrasted to the invisible *prima mobile* Athena) central weaver, Penelope, can be seen as a synecdoche for both text and the art of text-making, as implied also by the etymology of her name: *Penelopeia*, she whose works/deeds are of the *pene*, the "woof" or "loom."[14]

Having set the mythic basis for the comparison, we can proceed with the way the story appears in Walcott and García Márquez. *Omeros* could be considered the epic of the Caribbean, not in the sense of a war-poem;[15] but as a testament to the character and culture of a people. Robert Hamner sees *Omeros* as a hybrid genre of Euro-Afro-Caribbean origin:[16]

> The juxtaposition of such disparate points of reference has grown familiar enough in Walcott's work, but nothing heretofore approaches the scale of his epic-length Omeros (1990). In this 325-page poem, he does for the dispossessed peoples of the New World what epic poets from Homer to James Joyce have done for their countries. Yet despite the presence of certain traditional literary conventions, Walcott avoids ennobling characters beyond the enduring beauty of their simple lives. It is an eloquent tribute to the island of his youth.

This story of a St. Lucian fisherman, Achille, who is transported during a sea-adventure into his ancestral Africa and back to self-realization is replete with Homeric imagery, from the names of the book's characters (Achille, Hector, Helen, Philoctete), to the natural landscape (e.g., the Cyclops imagery of pp. 12-13), to Homer himself guest-starring in several parts; but, as most critics observe, these identifiers are also subverted by the postmodernist ruse of flirting with them only to move beyond them, into an identity Caribbean and universal: "Mr. Walcott's epic is a significant and timely reminder that the past is not the property of those who first created it; it always matters to all of us, no matter who

we are or where we are born."[17] Therefore, to find the rationale behind the allusions, we have to look at the infrastructures of mythical patterns, at the metalanguage of symbolic values and how these are grafted in the new poetic meaning.

The Penelope character of *Omeros* is Maud Plunkett, the middle-aged Irish wife of Major Dennis Plunkett, an English officer who, after many wanderings, has decided to make St. Lucia his home, trying to establish a connection with the local spirit. Yet this "Odyssean" form of continuity is rejected in the story, as Robert Hamner observes, as too easy a way of bringing the western past and the nonwestern present together:[18]

> At the beginning of the poem, [Plunkett] assumes the burden of legitimizing Helen [a local beauty and the Plunketts' ex-housemaid] by creating around her a history of the island. thus he might grant St. Lucia the kind of written narrative that provides Western nations their confirming textuality. Politically correct as this gesture might be, were it to succeed, it would contradict Walcott's determination in *Omeros* to subvert traditional forms of ennobling marginalized peoples.

A surface identification, therefore, is exorcised both inside and outside the book; yet the question remains why the poet deliberately chose to build a work with Homeric allusions on all levels. If neither Dennis Plunkett nor the archaically – named islanders, nor even the self-doubting poetic persona himself, are to be avatars of a viable reconciliation of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, then it is perhaps the weaver who must tighten the unraveled threads.

Like Penelope, Maud Plunkett appears at first sight a match for her husband, the typical respectable *memsahib*: she manages Plunkett's tempers, gardens assiduously, sympathizes patronizingly with the locals but can't understand them, and misses Ireland with an intense colonial *nostos* worthy of an Odysseus. This apparent simplicity has elicited, in critical texts, no more than polite references to her as an appendage to Plunkett, as in Brown: "Maud Plunkett, one of the book's most sympathetic characters, is a gardener from Ireland in St. Lucia because her husband is there looking for a son and for a connection with history."[19] Yet Walcott's wish to talk not about warriors but simple people dictates all the more the examination of this helpmeet.

Maud is contrasted to what appears to be the main female character in the story, Helen, the enigmatic St. Lucian beauty who lives a bohemian life but does not for a moment yield her pride (making her all the more beautiful). Helen is the object of desire and contest between Achille and

Hector, the two fishermen: she abandons the former for the latter, much like Helen of Sparta had become Helen of Troy for ten years. Her casual and exotic sexuality upsets Maud's "Victorian" morals, who thinks of Helen, much like Penelope did of the original, as a lost, misguided soul (122-25). But as Helen is also the Plunkett's former maid, dismissed because she was accused of stealing one of Maud's dresses, the colonial aspects of Walcott's parable are honed into the image of Melantho as well, the servant who usurps the habit of her mistress.

This poem is, however, not about domestic morality, as Walcott indicates *a posteriori* by having his Melantho, in his stage version of his Odyssey, be forgiven her misguided path, while the original Melantho was hanged by Telemachus. But in *Omeros*, even exculpation is out of place, for Walcott embraces and celebrates the manners of his St. Lucian people, whose fate inescapably led them to wear at some points the castoffs – cultural, political, moral – of white colonialism; but who have risen with pride, beauty, and dignity (or, according to the poet, with the inevitable digestive motions of time and history) to live again. This is also indicated through Walcott's use of the Penelope myth: although Maud is the one to blame Helen, she is also the one to alter – a handiwork connection – the dress to fit Helen's body, and the first to openly admit that "[s]he looks better in it," as the V opening of the dress on Helen's back becomes a sign of the victory of black beauty over the minds of the white onlookers (29). Helen herself blends into her Penelopean identity, not as a model housewife but at the moment when, as a human being in need of understanding and love, she expresses her desires and loneliness through a very sensual masturbation, while she fantasizes about the missing Achille: "Not Helen now, but Penelope, / in whom a single noon was as long as ten years, / because he had not come back..." (153).

Maud's main trace in the story is given *via* a magnificent embroidery she works on throughout the narrative, and which is completed right before her unexpected death, to serve as her memorial shroud. It is a tapestry depicting all kinds of birds, Caribbean and English, with their scientific names tagged under them; an artful, peaceful coming together of two worlds, joining the natural kaleidoscope and the human ordering mind:

> ... Maud with her needle, embroidering a silhouette
>
> from Bond's *Ornithology*, their quiet mirrored
> in an antique frame. Needlepoint constellations
> on a clear night had prompted this intricate thing,

this immense quilt, which, with her typical patience,
she'd started years ago, making its blind birds sing,
beaks parted like nibs from their brown branch and cover

on the silken shroud. Mockingbirds, finches, and wrens,
nightjars and kingfishers, hawks, hummingbirds, plover,
ospreys and falcons, with beaks like his scratching pen's,

terns, royal and bridled, wild ducks, migrating teal,
plovers (their fledgling beaks), wild waterfowl, widgeon,
Cypseloides Niger, l' hirondelle des Antilles
(their name for the sea swift). They flew from their region,
their bright spurs braceleted with Greek or Latin tags,
to pin themselves to the silk, and, crying their names,

pecked at her fingers. They fluttered like little flags
from the branched island, budding in accurate flames.
The Major pinched his eyes...

... and saw her mind
with each dip of her hand skim the pleated water
like a homesick curlew...

... How often had he admired
her hands in the half-dark out of the lamplit ring
in the deep floral divan, diving like a swift

to the drum's hoop, as quick as a curlew drinking
salt, with its hover, skim, dip, then vertical lift.
Tonight he shuddered like the swift, thinking,

This is her shroud, not her silver jubilee gift. (88-89)

This passage offers us several important clues to Maud's significance, beginning with the reason for the making of the quilt: like the mariner Odysseus consulting the constellations to find his way home, "homesick" Maud metaphorically navigates across "the pleated water" of her fabric to Ireland. Patient as a Penelope, she creates a world of "blind birds" singing and migrating: and if blindness and the poetic or prophetic gift are two sides of the same coin, as Walcott's "blind Omeros" espoused archetype suggests (in Homer, his counterpart old sage Seven Seas, and the Joyce/Tiresias/Virgil figures) then we must take this odd epithet to indicate Maud's poetic capacity in creating through her art, like Walcott and like Homer, a world to suit her own needs and desires. As Walcott

writes this poem to exorcise the postcolonial curse of his "double mind,"

> I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text;
> her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking
> basins of a globe in which one half fits the next
>
> into an equator, both shores neatly clicking
> into a globe; except that its meridian
> was not North and South but East and West. (319)

equally Maud makes her embroidery not simply a pastime, but a means of healing, a mosaic of races transported to the Caribbean and finally growing beautiful there:

> And those birds Maud Plunkett stitched into her green silk
> with sibylline steadiness were what islands bred:
> brown dove, black grackle, herons like ewers of milk,
>
> pinned to a habitat many had adopted.
> The lakes of the world have their own diaspora
> of birds every winter, but these would not return.
>
> The African swallow, the finch from India
> now spoke the white language of a tea-sipping tern,
> with the Chinese nightingales on a shantung screen,
>
> while the Persian falcon, whose cry leaves a scar
> on the sky till it closes, saw the sand turn green,
> the dunes to sea, understudying the man-o'-war,
>
> talking the marine dialect of the Caribbean
> with nightjars, finches, and swallows, each origin
> enriching the islands to which their cries were sewn. (313-14)

In the manner that Homer, Penelope and Athena are identified in their "weaving" of *The Odyssey* plot, thus Maud-Penelope is identified with Walcott-Omeros in stitching together the fabric of their voyage to fulfillment: "... and the ghosts I will make of you with my scratching pen/ like a needle piercing the ring's embroidery/ with a swift's beak, or where, like a nib from the rim/ of an inkwell, a martin flickers a wing dry" (266). The symbolism of the bird spanning distances (real and metaphorical) is ubiquitous in the poem, creating another spun web of associations with Maud-quiltmaker as the pivotal metaphor: "If there is an equivalent to the epic simile, it must be figured in the sea swift that stitches horizons together, adorns Maud Plunkett's quilt, leads Achille to

Africa, and finally symbolizes the poet's circular journey overseas and back again to his green island for renewal."[20] Birds also figure largely in the Athena and Penelope-related passages of *The Odyssey*, as either the goddess transforms into various birds, among them a sea-swift (3. 372), or Penelope formulates her wish for Odysseus' return in her prophetic dream of an eagle-Odysseus swooping down out of the blue to eat her twenty pet geese-suitors (19. 535-58).

But as the first full description of Maud's quilt suggests, this, too, will serve as a shroud. Moreover, as the completion of Laertes' shroud brings about the ending of *The Odyssey*, and in a masterful reversal serves the young suitors instead of the old man, while resurrecting at last a wife who had interred herself willingly for the sake of her husband, so the final application of the quilt surprises us more than Maud's death – and in a similar fashion. It is understood early in the poem that Maud sacrificed her own homeland happiness for the sake her husband's quest for a personal *mythos* and history: in all the numerous instances where the poem transcribes Maud's thoughts, Ireland figures prominent. This lack of fulfillment on her part annoys Major Plunkett's conscience – all the more because he loves her – to the point where, irritated by Maud's playing of Irish songs on the piano, he hurts her feelings mortally by slamming the piano lid shut, "missing her fingers" (56-57). Soon after, Maud expires just when she has finished her quilt. This negative climax leads to a death fraught with images of remorse on Plunkett's part, and what seems like a failed parallel to the Penelopean enterprise, a fear of the spinning-wheel (of the Fates?) in Maud's last thought: "The gold wheel frightened her" (260).

But does this Penelope truly run out of patience before her Odysseus finally finds his home? When Maud dies, Walcott's and the poem's resolution is far from accomplished; but he uses her remaining quilt to create his own web-stratagem, for this release to come at the eleventh hour and disguised like an Odysseus: "We do not have a straight line of development, but rather like Penelope's weaving, under pressure from suitors, or Maud Plunkett's knitting of birds – those animals of wonder to the Greeks, and of shame to those moderns who long to be *rooted* somewhere or in some Nowhere – we have complicated patterns and some puzzling juxtapositions..."[21] The first sign of this unhoped-for resolution comes, appropriately enough, at the moment of Major's last glimpse of his wife's face at the funeral:

> We watched the Major lift
>
> his wife's coffin hung with orchids, many she had found

> in the blue smoke of Saltibus. Then Achille saw the swift
> pinned to the orchids, but it was the image of a swift
>
> which Maud had sewn into the silk draping her bier,
> and not only the African swift but all the horned island's
> birds, bitterns and herons, silently screeching there. (267)

As Maud's bier becomes the symbolic ground on which the island's flora and fauna are spread, as she is finally identified with the St. Lucian ground that had alienated her so in life, all the characters of the book – poet included – erase their differences and come together, not with the clash and slaughter that marks Odysseus' reclamation of his home, but in simple islander humility. Helen in her quietly regal air announces to Achille that she is coming back to him, after Hector's death, as she is to prepare for the birth of her baby: Maud's gesture shows Helen for the first time not as a symbol, but as a human being. As his grief subsides day by day, the Major comes to realize the magnitude of Maud's sacrifice, understanding her stance as the outcome of their long-ago marital vows, which she had kept in a paradigmatically Penelopean fashion only to allow her husband his final chance to find a "port of entry" he had been denied because of his wars (304-06). Maud, not St. Lucia, had been Plunkett's Ithaka all along, and only now that the two are one can he finally find peace: he lets go of his colonial hauteur to ask of the local obeah woman, Ma Kilman, if his wife is happy in the other world, and he receives the description of a happy Maud in a place that looks exactly like Ireland. Ever a foil to her Odysseus, she reaches her native home at the same time he discovers his, both finally in peace.

Thus Maud's labor – the quilt – serves its function both as a decisive device for "weaving" and controlling the overall plot, even when she, like Penelope, is laboring against all odds; and moreover, though she does not unstitch her real work at any point, her ruse, her buying of time is suggested by the way Plunkett's tightly woven world of colonialist patronage comes unraveled in the dénouement. Maud's progress, unlike Penelope's, is not palindromic – but when it is time to unravel her own mystery, the action is both redeeming of time lost and literally coming alive:

> Ma Kilman opened her eyes, took her spectacles
> off, and rubbed their cracked lenses. She was no sibyl
> without them.
>   "She happy, sir." Like you oracles,
>
> so would I be, he thought. A twenty-dollar bill

as an extra. He was rising from her table
of sweaty plastic when a white hand divided

the bamboo-bead curtain, and calm as Glen-da-Lough's
vision, Maud smiled, to let him through. The wound in
his
head froze him in the scorched street. Innumerable flocks

of birds screamed from her guidebook over the shacks
of the village, their shadows like enormous fans,
all those she had sewn to the silken quilt, with tags
pinned to their spurs, and he knew her transparent hands
had unstitched them as he watched them flying over
the grooved roofs till they were simply the shadow of...
of a cloud on the hills. He sat in the Rover
and looked back at the No Pain Cafè. Maud closed the door
and sat next to him with the bread, beaming with love.
(307-08)

Like Penelope unraveling a death-symbol to buy life, Maud stitches the means to unravel death, physical and spiritual, with her own transformation into an Athena-like swift. The cosmic importance of this symbolism is noted by Bruckner, who however does not perceive the final image of unraveling in the poem: "[s]ome of the most memorable, dazzling characters are birds. Sewed into a quilt that becomes the universe by an old woman – who, unlike Penelope in the *Odyssey*, doesn't unravel her work every night – they take flight and fill the skies of the book the way old gods filled the skies of Homer."[22] Like Odysseus, Maud returns to a spouse grieving for her, who is "trembling at his return" (308) and guides him home:

His wound healed slowly. He discovered the small joys
that lay in a life patterned like those on the quilt,
and he would speak to her in his normal voice

[...] he liked taking orders

from her invisible voice...

... He read
calmly, and he began to speak to the workmen
not as boys who worked with him, till every name

somehow sounded different; when he thought of Helen

she was not a cause or a cloud, only a name
for a local wonder. (309)

Thus finally not only Walcott's and Maud's vocation coincide, but the patchwork of world views, black, white, or mixed, in and out the text, are stitched together in this quilt of harmony. Maud's body unraveling as her quilt is being stitched have been the means to achieve this happy ending to the poetic Odysseus' Caribbean voyage.

In Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, however, there is no happy ending, not in the conventional sense of the word. Like Walcott after him, García Márquez returns to the theme of Odysseus and Penelope later on, in *La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Erèndira y de su abuela desalmada* (1972), but without changing the pessimistic undertones fraught with black humor he adopts in *OHYS*: the boyish, blonde Ulysses loses his naiveté along with his innocence, while his supposedly-faithful Erèndira runs off on him with the hard-earned wages of sleeping with thousands of "suitors," the customers of her grandmother's wandering (i.e., anti-Ithacan) brothel. Yet though this burlesque ending carries its own weighty share of philosophy, it but summarizes the detailed psychological examination of the mythical model the earlier epic novel presents in the person and deeds of one of the book's more ambivalent characters, Amaranta Buendía. It is proposed here that she exemplifies the Homeric paradigm of a Penelope-weaver figure, although critics usually disregard the Homeric undertones in this work in favor of more apparent or "central" mythical figures that appear in this work: as Arnold Penuel observes, " T. S. Eliot once expressed an opinion to the effect that a writer should write with a knowledge of all Western literature in his bones, from Homer on down to the present. García Márquez certainly complies with Eliot's dictum in starting with Homer, though this is less well known than is his admiration, for example, of Sophocles' plays, or his knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology."[23] Still, as the analysis of the treatment of the Penelope myth in Amaranta aims to show, nothing could be further from García Márquez's intentions than Eliot's eurocentrism.

Amaranta, the daughter of Ursula and José Arcadio, the founders of Macondo, dutifully waits for her groom to come while typically schooling herself to become a fitting wife and housekeeper (much as Penelope or Maud minister to their wifely duties). But when her desired man, the blonde Pietro Crespi, finally arrives, Odysseus-like, from a distant land, he rejects Amaranta in favor of her prettier, restless antagonist, Rebeca-who in turn rejects Crespi for her Herculean adoptive brother, José Arcadio. The scandalous assertion of character strength and sexual

freedom make Rebeca a Helen figure, and in the same foil/kin position that the original Helen is placed *vis-à-vis* Penelope in *The Odyssey*. The alternative of Odysseus forgetting his faithful wife for the charms of any of the numerous seductresses in *The Odyssey*, twists the myth into an unforeseen direction, which however continues to conform to basic elements in the Homeric myth: like Penelope, Amaranta methodically dupes and then rejects her suitors, from the rebuffed Crespi to Colonel Gerineldo Márquez – but her motives are bitterness, vengefulness, and a deep trauma caused by her fear of teratogenesis and another betrayal by her fiancé:

> "Irrational fear" seems a little casual – with a heart like Amaranta's fear seems entirely rational – but there is an important insight in the picture of love and the terror of love fighting it out, making Amaranta some kind of Latin American cousin of the Princess of Cleves, or any of the world's great, frightened renouncers. The cowardice and the love are significant, only great love makes the cowardice moving, and not merely abject. Amaranta's vocation is to miss love, and painfully to cherish the knowledge of all she's missing, to maintain intact her raw, intentional regret...[24].

The tragedy of this Penelope, therefore, becomes the irremediable fact that her biding for time has been for nothing. Even the second Odysseus-figure, Colonel Gerineldo, who is more like his mythic predecessor, a seasoned and tired warrior returning to his native place to find "his only refuge" at "Amaranta's sewing room" (166), is a disappointment:

> When the news of his return reached her, Amaranta had been smothered by anxiety. But when she saw him enter the house in the middle of Colonel Aureliano Buendía's noisy escort and she saw how he had been mistreated by the rigors of exile, made old by age and oblivion, dirty with sweat and dust, smelling like a herd, ugly, with his left arm in a sling, she felt faint with disillusionment. "My God," she thought. "This wasn't the person I was waiting for." (166)

This very down-to-earth episode is actually a direct parallel to two of the episodes in *The Odyssey*, both reflecting an ambivalent, if thoroughly human, side of Penelope in her conduct regarding her husband. The first one is her dream after her interview with the disguised Odysseus, in which she sees her husband as he was twenty years ago, right before he left for Troy (20. 87-90): like Amaranta, Penelope's natural reaction in

picking up the subconscious signs of her returned husband is to project her own wishful memories of him on the present reality. It is not difficult to understand then why, when she first sees the bloody, beggarly-clad Odysseus standing amidst the slaughtered suitors, she is reserved and unrecognizing, disappointed, as Odysseus remarks – and it takes more than a good bath and restored appearance for him to win her recognition and acceptance back (23. 88-172). Gerineldo proves himself true to form, but disastrously not so in the essence of the homecoming husband.

García Márquez goes even further to measure the effect of this frustrated homecoming, and the excess energies of a Penelope that can no more be satisfied by diverting them to weaving and weeping. The issue of incest, one of the most prominent themes of the novel, can be neatly fitted in the Homeric subversion as well. There seems to be an incestuous obsession ruling Amaranta, which is clearly attributed both to the particular Buendía genetic penchant, but also to her sexual frustration. The fact that she only engages in near-incest (or very serious foreplay) with members of her family that are minors, almost her "sons" (like Aureliano José and Fernanda's José Arcadio) could be interpreted as Márquez's overture to consider a peculiar tangent of the Telemachus-Penelope relationship developing in their dysfunctional Ithacan household. At the beginning of the contest of the bow (*toxou thesis*, in Part 21), whose sexual connotations and parallelism to weaving make it an apposite finale to the shroud-ruse,[25] Telemachus, although aware of his father's presence, first makes a speech in praise of Penelope and then proceeds to try stringing the bow himself, in order to prove a worthy heir to Odysseus' battle gear. He almost succeeds the third time, "but Odysseus nodded in dissent, and checked him in his eagerness" (21.106-129). This act on the part of Telemachus could be simply the outcome of his freshly-kindled manhood in the light of his father's return; on the other hand, in openly praising Penelope as an erotic and spousal object, and then engaging in a contest not only against her suitors, but to an extent against his own father, he becomes quite suspect to the modern, Freudian reader of the text. In setting up the deliberate conflation of maternal and erotic bonds between Amaranta and the Buendía youths, García Márquez could be one of those readers.

To continue setting the points of "comparative deviation" from Homer, instead of forgiving Helen/Melantho, as Penelope and Maud do, Amaranta becomes deadly jealous of Rebeca (as later of the uncannily beautiful Remedios, another Helen figure); or, instead of rejecting her in a socially-sanctioned manner, Amaranta vows to kill her step-sister, a decision she is nevertheless unable to carry out due to apparent lack of both Penelopean courage and resourcefulness, though, as Carmen Arnau

observes, she does not lack characteristics that match Odysseus' determination and practicality, being one of García Márquez's domineering, "masculine" women who "are firmly rooted in the land they tread on".[26]

On the other hand, Rebeca does suffer social ostracism and dies a lonely death, deformed and bitter: this has led critics to identify Amaranta with the punitive virgin aspect of Athena, as she appears in the Medusa or Arachne myths.[27]

Curiously enough, however, the myth of the monstrous birth, Amaranta's (and the entire family's) deterrent and bane, is an element of the Penelope myth, only not one that appears in mainstream *Odyssey*, but as early as Pindar. According to Marylin Katz:[28]

> Servius, in his commentary to the *Aeneid*, summarizes the scandalous tradition that was common in antiquity: "For when he [Odysseus] returned home to Ithaca after his wanderings, it is said that he found among the household gods Pan, who was reported to have been born from Penelope and all the suitors, as the name itself Pan seems to indicate; although others report that he was born from Hermes, who transformed himself into a goat and slept with Penelope. But after Odysseus saw the deformed child, it is said that he fled [again] to his wanderings"
> (Servius in *Aen.* 2.44).

Although the alternate myth is probably too obscure to have been picked up by García Márquez, Katz notes (77-78) that ambivalent attitudes in and about Penelope incorporated in the text's language have been consistently picked up by scholars. In that sense, the subversive reading of the Penelope myth in *OHYS* is within the classical commentary tradition. One wonders, though, at the author's reasons of introducing a Pan-creature in his narrative, not once, but twice: as the persecuted monstrosity appearing at Ursula's death (the woman whose fear of the beast-child is largely responsible for Amaranta's neurosis), but also as the son of Amaranta-Ursula, a woman who, by virtue of *OHYS*'s onomatic tradition, to be connected to Amaranta both as a foil, but also as a derivative. Amaranta-Ursula fleshes out all of the repressed desires of that frustrated Penelope, the incest (which will be dealt with later) and the Odyssean fantasy of coming back to one's native land, leading one suitor by a love-leash, and finding the ideal lover waiting for her all these years in wise seclusion.

But what leads critics such as Samuel García to identify Amaranta with Penelope is, undoubtedly, her trademark sewing work, especially the

shroud she weaves for Rebeca that ends up, in the reversal mode of the earlier examples, as her own biercloth.[29] When an aged Rebeca is discovered still alive in her own house, expected to die at any moment, Amaranta, who has been diverting her time of solitude and waiting for her hated rival's death with a proto-Penelopean ruse of pulling off buttons "to sew them on again so that inactivity would not make the wait longer and more anxious" (283), devises the ultimate revenge on Rebeca, and goes to it with the same crafty secrecy that Penelope went about her shroud-trick:

> No one in the house realized that at that time Amaranta was sewing a fine shroud for Rebeca... She had decided to restore Rebeca's corpse, to disguise with paraffin the damage to her face and make a wig for her from the hair of the saints [which is Remedios the Beauty's shorn hair]. She would manufacture a beautiful corpse, with the linen shroud and a plush-lined coffin with purple trim, and she would put it at the disposition of the worms with splendid funeral ceremonies. She worked out the plan with such hatred that it made her tremble to think about the scheme, which she would have carried out in exactly the same way if it had been done out of love, but she would not allow herself to become upset by the confusion and went on perfecting the details so minutely that she came to be... a virtuoso in the rites of death. The only thing that she did not keep in mind in her fearsome plan was that in spite of her pleas to God she might die before Rebeca. That was, in fact, what happened. (284)

The text then goes on immediately to relate how Amaranta was forewarned by Death herself, who is a fellow embroiderer (a supernatural parallel to Athena and the Moirae), that the set date of her death would be the exact day she would finish her shroud (thus destining her shroud for Rebeca to become her own). It also chronicles the desperate attempts of Amaranta to stall the progress of the shroud, by spinning the thread herself, and making the pattern infinitely complicated; and her final resignation in the face of her unalterable fate. Of particular interest is the last phrase in this segment, for it denotes the nonlinear compositional style characteristic of García Márquez in this work, but which, as mythical patters go, is adopted both in *The Odyssey* and in *Omeros*. The *schema prothysteron*, the chronological disruption of the narrative in Homer, with the past events coming in the middle of the epic, is mirrored in Achille's trip to the Africa of his ancestral past and back in *Omeros*, as well as the interweaving of subplots, points of view, lands and chronological events.

As for *OHYS*, many chapters begin with the formula "many years later" viewed from a time-displaced perspective. Yet this manipulation of time can also be seen as resembling the mythical weaving pattern, where criss-crossing threads are tightened together in an overall fabric that creates sense and controls its separate elements (by stalling, speeding, or revisiting an event in time); as Williams notes on this authorial choice, "[t]he creation of a mythical time contributes to the mythical level of reality. This concept of time negates the linear progression of normal chronology and history."[30]

Penelope longs for a release through death from her predicament when her ruse "fails," while Maud Plunkett death upon completion of her quilt is a self-willed act of liberation. In both cases, death is seen as the ultimate ally, controversial yet effective, evoked through the women's shroud-work. Amaranta, too, perceives death as a fellow seamstress who allows her to reach the resignation of her hatred against Rebeca through a realization of her own finitude. But for her death is not a controllable, or desirable option: although she calculates the date of her death, and arranges her own funeral to every detail, Death frustrates Amaranta's vengeance twice: first by Remedios' unexpected end, and finally by taking Amaranta before her rival. Although she tries to shape her own plot as Penelope did, Amaranta surrenders to the pointlessness of her life: instead of slowing down her stitching, she actually speeds up the work, for "she understood the vicious circle of Colonel Aureliano Buendía's little gold fishes" (285). "In the magnificent tapestry of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, whose fabric is studded with glistening carnivalesque reversals..." Amaranta, unlike the weaver-author, takes of Penelope only the twenty years of solitude without possibility of engineering her own release, or literally "hanging by a thread" any longer.[31] Devoid of a perspective of an Odysseus, Amaranta dies devoid also of hope, "the corpse of the aged virgin, ugly and discolored, with the black bandage on her hand and wrapped in the magnificent shroud. She was laid out in the parlor beside the box of letters" (288). However, the Homeric identification of the traits of the weaver with those of her work works here as well, though in a twisted fashion. As Penelope's web-ruse is the basis for her *kleos*, and Maud's bird-quilt her altruistic lifework in the service of reconciliation, the final juxtaposition of Amaranta's shroud with her black bandage reveals her true nature, her great potential for beauty that was deformed into a perpetual attempt to heal a wound, a lack that could not be redressed. As José Bedoya observes, "con relación a ella y por ella, se puede tener una actitud *religiosa*, es decir, se puede tener una relación con el poder cósmico que dirige la *vida*. Amaranta teje una mortaja que es símbolo de su vida, pues cuando la haya acabado morirá ineludiblemente."[32]

The box of letters to the dead, which of course will never be delivered, as well as Amaranta's previous unsent letters to Pietro Crespi, are the dead text, the negation of authorial control that Penelope-Athena-Homer had, and Walcott saw in himself and Maud. In what is yet a clearer indication of Amaranta's failure of ruse and life, moreover, García Márquez underlines the Penelopean paradigm constructed by Amaranta's kin/foil, Amaranta-Ursula, in her relation to the quintessential text woven inside the text of *OHYS*, Melquíades' scroll prophecies.

As noted before, Amaranta-Ursula can be interpreted as a fleshing out of Penelope's most secret fantasies of role-reversal with her wandering husband. The energy and resourcefulness of Ursula and the determination of Amaranta are united in her to create a character worthy of an adventurer "driven on a sailor's breeze" (382). In an interesting parallel with Maud Plunkett, Amaranta-Ursula is also connected to bird imagery: but, unlike Maud's successful reconciliation of difference, Amaranta-Ursula's attempt to rekindle the destroyed bird population of Macondo fails, for the birds cannot adapt and take off in mad nostalgia for their native island. Her pointless return to the sterile and doomed Macondo, the dead past, is culminated by the fact that she and Aureliano in a sense finish another shroud much like Amaranta's, for they mesh together in their doomed offspring (himself an interweaving of Aureliano and José Arcadio' traits) the last two remaining threads of the Buendía family, that will, true to the Homeric form, spell their immediate end-tale. But on the other hand, only when her pig-tailed son's body is literally unraveled by the ants is the Sanskrit text that has been the double fabric of both book and prophecy finally unraveled, revealed, and released from waiting (a parallelism made clearer by the description of the scroll formula, whose juxtaposed odd and even lines in two different codes resemble the interweaving of two threads that makes a fabric). In that sense, Amaranta-Ursula stands in the middle of a myth-control gesture that has Amaranta on the one hand, and the wise gypsy on the other. Melquíades' control of the narrative is revealed as the work of a master-weaver, a person that can look at patterns of the past, and through them, synthesize both the image of the future – much as the author does – and the penultimate Aureliano's unique chance to true understanding and an identity. Yet Melquíades' weaving is also a ruse, for its revelation comes too late to save the doomed family, itself having kept the generations of the Buendías occupied – and thus, like the suitors, fixed to their solitary fate. A wanderer like Homer and a wielder of superhuman powers like Athena, a man who dies and comes back to life to offer advice (like Maud), Melquíades stands in contrast to Amaranta, who has been unable

to let go of her rancor-filled past and weave an Ithaka for herself and those men who have needed it.

The setting up and then deconstruction of the weaving Penelope myth is perhaps García Márquez's way of pointing to the dangers of the (post-)modernist search of rejuvenation of one's culture through myth: although it is a viable tool, as Walcott's *Omeros* and even García Márquez's short story "El ahogado más hermoso del mundo" prove, one must always be selective of the mythical elements one returns to. Amaranta, as her name implies, is changeless, is dead form, a wishful restorer of corpses to a very epidermic, unconvincing beauty: similarly, the use of myth/tradition for tradition's sake brings sterility and perversion to what should be informed, but predominantly timely. By presenting three different web-spinners, the novelist indicates that myth affords multiple interpretations, some better left dead. Walcott's optimistic view urges a journey into myth without forgetting that the enrichment of the present is the final goal:

> to mimic, one needs a mirror, and... our pantomime is conducted before a projection of ourselves which in its smaller gestures is based on metropolitan references. No gesture, according to this philosophy, is authentic, every sentence is a quotation, every movement either ambitious or parathetic, and because it is mimicry, uncreative. The indictment is crippling, but, like all insults, it contains an astonishing truth.[33]

The question of authenticity, which Walcott inherits as a dialectic between him an V. S. Naipaul, must balance itself out between the organizing principle of the past and the energy of the present. García Márquez, working towards the same goal from the opposite point of view, shows us the evils of suppressing one's present time on earth by insisting on the settlement of old scores. Even though things do repeat themselves and presumed-dead spouses return, the irrepeatable finitude of time in *OHYS* indicates that the capacity of myth to rejuvenate and enrich the present should not interfere, as Amaranta's puritanical superstition does,[34] with the capacity to surprise and alter fate that is the very myth of myth, the way Penelope's ruse shows us. To weave successfully, to weave beautifully, one must first learn to unweave.

Notes

[1] Mary E. Davis, The Voyage Beyond the Map: 'El ahogado más hermoso del mundo,' in pp 159-68 of George R. McMurray (ed.), *Critical Essays on Gabriel García Márquez*, Boston, G. K. Hall & Co., 1987: 165.

[2] Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990. All subsequent quotations of the poem are taken from this edition and are given by page number in parenthesis only.

[3] Derek Walcott, *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993.

[4] D. J. R. Bruckner, "A Poem in Homage to an Unwanted Man," in pp 396-99 of Robert D. Hamner (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, Washington, D. C., Three Continents Press, 1993: 397.

[5] Bruckner, "A Poem in Homage" p. 398.

[6] See, for example, Samuel García, *Tres Mil Años de Literatura en Cien Años de Soledad: Intertextualidad en la Obra de García Márquez*, Medellin, Colombia, Lealon-Paragrama, 1977, on the Freudic-Olympian parameters of García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Robert Lewis Sims, *The Evolution of Myth in Gabriel Garcìa Márquez from* La Hojarasca *to* Cien Años de Soledad, Hispanic Studies Collection, Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1981, on applications of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural theories on myth; Raymond L. Williams, *Gabriel García Márquez*, Twayne's World Authors Series 749, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1984, on the Oedipus myth in *OHYS*, a view supported also by Lewis, undoubtedly due, in part, to García Márquez' declared admiration for Sophocles. On the other hand, Walcott is seen as an essentially "Homeric" poet, for example in Bruckner; the texts in Stewart Brown (ed.), *The Art of Derek Walcott*, Chester Springs, PA, Seven Books-Dufour, 1991; and Robert D. Hamner, *Derek Walcott: Updated Edition*, Twayne's World Authors Series, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1993.

[7] Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gregory Rabassa (trans.), New York, Harper & Row, 1970. All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition and are given in parenthesis only by page numbers.

[8] Sims, *The Evolution of Myth*, p. 9.

[9] For further bibliography on the subject, see Marylin A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in* The Odyssey, Princeton, PUP, 1991: 25 n. 9.

[10] Homer, *The Odyssey*, 2 vols., A. T. Murray (trans.), The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1960: I. 43-44. All subsequent translated quotations are given from this edition by Part and line number(s).

[11] Nancy Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*, Princeton, PUP, 1994: 18.

[12] Agathe Thorndon, *People and Themes in Homer's* Odyssey, Dunedin: U. of Otago P., 1970: 94.

[13] Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope*, p. 29-30.

[14] For the etymology, see Didymos, *Schol. Od.* 4. 797, and Eustathius, *Od.* 1. 343ff.

[15] Walcott in Bruckner, "A Poem in Homage" p. 396 contests this sense:

"'I do not think of it as an epic... Certainly not in the sense of epic design. Where are the battles? There are a few, I suppose. But 'epic' makes people think of great wars and great warriors. [...] I was thinking of Homer the poet of the seven seas.'"

[16] Hamner, *Derek Walcott; Updated Edition*, p. 19.

[17] Mary Lefkowitz, "Bringing Him Back Alive" in pp. 400-403 of Hamner (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 403.

[18] Hamner, *Derek Walcott, Updated Edition*, p. 146.

[19] Brown (ed.), *The Art of Derek Walcott*, p. 199.

[20] Hamner, *Derek Walcott: Updated Edition*, p. 145.

[21] John Figueroa, "Omeros," pp. 195-96, in Brown (ed.), *The Art of Derek Walcott*, pp. 193-213.

[22] Bruckner, "A Poem in Homage," p. 397.

[23] Arnold M. Penuel, *Intertextuality in García Márquez*, York, South Carolina, Spanish Literature Publications, 1994, p. 120.

[24] Michael Wood, *Gabriel García Márquez; One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Cambridge: CUP, 1990, p. 81.

[25] On the relation between shroud-ruse and bow contest, Helene P. Foley, in p. 104 of "Penelope as Moral Agent," claims:"... her choice as a contest of skill and strength leaves open, in a fashion characteristic of Penelope, several possibilities. The Suitors may demonstrate that none of them is equal to Odysseus; [...] The contest with the bow has the potential to serve, like the web, as a tricky device to delay the remarriage." In Beth Cohen (ed.), *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's* Odyssey, New York and Oxford, OUP, 1995, pp. 93-115.

[26] Carmen Arnau, *El mundo mítico de Gabriel García Márquez*, Nueva Colleccíón Ibérica 36, Barcelona, Ediciones Península, 1971, p. 25.

[27] Samuel García, *Tres Mil Años de Literatura*, pp. 28, 33, and 55, respectively.

[28] Katz, *Penelope's Renown*, p. 77.

[29] Samuel García, *Tres Mil Años de Literatura*, p. 33.

[30] Williams, *Gabriel García Márquez*, p. 80.

[31] David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*, Lexington, The UP of Kentucky, 1995, p. 51.

[32] José Ivan Bedoya, *La estructura Mítica del relato en la obra de Gabriel García Márquez*, Medellin, Colombia, Lea Editorial, 1987, p. 99.

[33] Derek Walcott, "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" in pp. 51-57 of Hamner (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 53.

[34] On the subject of dead vs. viable tradition, Penuel in *Intertextuality*, p. 66, notes: "Symbolically, Amaranta's shroud is a womb. Ursula's words ironically suggest that Amaranta, out of her fear of life, has really never lived, has never left the womb. Amaranta's hypocricy is transparent. Not only has her overevaluation of virginity led to a life of sterility but she has manifestly harmed those around her. Traditionally treated as a symbol of purity, innocence and virtue, virginity metamorphoses in this context into a symbol of sterility and death."

Περίληψη

Χριστίνα Ντόκου: *"Fruit of the Loom": Νέες προσεγγίσεις της Πηνελόπης στους Walcott και Márquez*

Το άρθρο εξετάζει συγκριτικά τη χρήση της Ομηρικής μορφής της Πηνελόπης, πιστής συζύγου του Οδυσσέα, στα κλασικά αριστουργήματα δύο συγχρόνων κατόχων του Νόμπελ Λογοτεχνίας: τα *Εκατό Χρόνια Μοναξιά* του Κολομβιανού μυθιστοριογράφου Γκαμπριέλ Γκαρσία Μάρκεζ και το μεγάλο ποίημα *Όμηρος* του ποιητή της Καραϊβικής, Ντέρεκ Ουώλκοτт. Η ανάλυση επικεντρώνεται στα στοιχεία που αφορούν στο περίφημο τέχνασμα της Πηνελόπης να κερδίσει χρόνο από τους μνηστήρες υφαίνοντας και ξε-υφαίνοντας το σάβανο του πεθερού της, Λαέρτη, δείχνοντας το πώς τα στοιχεία αυτά, οι ερμηνείες και οι συνδέσεις τους αξιοποιούνται από τους μεταγενέστερους καλλιτέχνες για να αναπλάσουν την – θετική για τον Ουώλκοττ, αρνητική για τον Μάρκεζ – εικόνα της ανυφάντρας που περιμένει και κάνει σχέδια σε έναν αγώνα ενάντια στο χρόνο και τη δύσκολη θέση της. Μέσα από αυτή τη διαδικασία, η Πηνελόπη αναδεικνύεται από δευτερεύων χαρακτήρας σε μετωνυμία όχι μόνο για πανόπτες προφήτες και θεότητες μέσα στα ίδια τα κείμενα, αλλά και για τον ίδιο τον ποιητή-δημιουργό που υφαίνει την ιστορία του ως τέχνασμα μέσα στο χρόνο, χρησιμοποιώντας το (μυθικό) παρελθόν για να εμπλουτίσει το παρόν και το μέλλον.

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Ελένη Γκίνη
Χουάν Μαγιόρκ
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FATED TO UNORIGINALITY
The Politics of Mimicry in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

by Paul Jay

I.

In his essay on Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, Joseph Farrell points out that "when it comes to the assessment of postcolonial literature, the critical discourse of epic poetry acquires a racist tinge," since it "speaks with the voice of the accumulated authority of generations of White imperialist culture" (251). For this reason, debates about its status as an epic have played a key role in structuring the critical discourse about *Omeros*. Critics tend to take one of four critical positions. Traditional classicists, Farrell points out, have been attracted to the poem's epic structure, see it as a major strength, and are untroubled by its supposed Eurocentric roots.[1] Another set of critics, including Dougherty and Farrell, affirm the poem's status as an epic, but insist that it foregrounds elements of the classical epic the traditionalists have ignored and which link it to oral or folk traditions within and outside the classical tradition.[2] A third set of critics, including John Figueroa, Patricia Ismond, and Walcott himself, have played down or denied altogether the poem's epic qualities.[3] Finally, a fourth set of critics argue that while *Omeros* draws on conventions of the classical epic, it remakes the form into something specifically Caribbean and postcolonial. Jahan Ramazani, for example, insists *Omeros* "contravenes the widespread assumption that postcolonial literature develops by sloughing off Eurocentrism for indigeneity" (405), that by "exemplifying the twists and turns of intercultural inheritance," the poem "belies the narrative of postcolonial literary development as a progression from alien metropolitan influence to complete incorporation within the native cultural body" (409).

This critical debate about *Omeros*, which raises the question of whether its reliance on the form of the European epic undermines its status as a Caribbean and postcolonial text, is hardly surprising. For three decades critics and reviewers have argued about how to reconcile Walcott's St. Lucian roots and his undeniable interest in Caribbean culture with his absorption of the Western canon, his propensity for grounding poetry in something very close to the kind of Great Tradition espoused by Leavis and Eliot. Indeed, the bulk of negative criticism aimed at Walcott argues he is a Eurocentric poet too deeply committed to Western humanism.[4] In his introduction to *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott* (1993), Robert Hamner reviews Walcott's early indebtedness to Hopkins, Auden, and Dylan Thomas (4), and notes the extent to which his early poetry was criticized as an "academic exercise" (4). Long associated with Western humanism and universalism (5), Walcott's poetry, Hamner points out, seems to address a "foreign, elite audience" (5). He includes in *Critical Perspectives* J.D. McClatchy's review of Walcott's *Collected Poems* (1986) which

"brands them rhetorical, consciously derivative, and literary" (9). No wonder Farrell observes, "the epic element in *Omeros* threatens to reopen an old debate over Walcott's relationship to the European and African elements in his personal heritage and in the culture of the West Indies as a whole" (251–2).

While Farrell seems puzzled about why Walcott would risk reopening critical debate about his poetic identity, I want to argue that this is precisely the aim of the poem. *Omeros* does not inadvertently open old wounds. It is *designed* to open and explore them. For this reason it is hard to take Walcott too seriously when he complains that the poem's critical reception has been marked by "stupid historicism" that sees him "reinventing the *Odyssey* [. . .] trying to make it via Homer" ("Reflections on *Omeros*," 232). Given the history of criticism Walcott has taken on this score, what else could he have expected? The poem, in fact, seems quite consciously calculated to elicit the kind of "stupid historicism" that finds Walcott's poetry Western, derivative, academic, and universalist. By writing himself into the poem as a figure I will call "Walcott," playing "Walcott's" writing off of Plunkett's (the exiled British Major is writing a history of the island while "Walcott" is writing his own poem about it), and by using the last quarter of the poem to critique its own epic pretensions, Walcott designs *Omeros* to explore, negotiate, and try to come to terms with many of the major issues extant in critical debate about his work. As such, *Omeros* is less a poem about the Caribbean than a poem about *writing about the Caribbean*, one that embodies the various stands of Walcott's identity—African, European, Caribbean, American—in a range of characters and scenarios carefully orchestrated to explore critical debates about Caribbean writing and Walcott's relationship to it.

As Isidore Okpewho has pointed out, there is nothing new in Walcott's use of Homer, who has been "the commanding guide in Walcott's explorations of classical European literature" and a "model" he had deeply internalized long before he came to write *Omeros* (5). Images and allusions to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, she reminds us, are replete in Walcott's poetry, and "the Odyssean journey may be seen as the commanding paradigm in most of Walcott's middle period—*Gulf, Sea Grapes, Star-Apple Kingdom, Fortunate Traveller, Midsummer*, and *Arkansas Testament*" (6). Seen in this context, *Omeros* traverses familiar territory, setting up a web of Homeric analogies in its epic structure that reinforces just the kind of reliance on Homer Okpewho calls attention to. *Omeros*, for all of its breadth and originality, does not mark the beginning of some new Odyssean phase in Walcott's poetry. It marks the culmination of that phase, a culmination in which Walcott actually criticizes his reliance on Homer and the epic structure he has borrowed from both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. Walcott reopens the old critical wound caused by his indebtedness to European literature in order to heal it, creating a profoundly paradoxical poem that uses a classical Western poetic structure to argue against using classical Western poetic structures.[5]

Of course, this reliance on Homer, particularly for a Caribbean writer, has its problems: one is the imperialist and racist tradition it is invariably connected with; the other, its being so thoroughly unoriginal. After Dante, Wordsworth, Whitman, Joyce, and Hart Crane, why another epic poem based on tropes from Homer, especially from a postcolonial location? Such a project seems fated to unoriginality. However, the project's unoriginality is its major premise, because the condition of the Caribbean poet Walcott wants to explore in the poem is unambiguously that of the mimic man. "The moment [. . .] that a writer in the Caribbean, an American man, puts down a word," Walcott writes in "The Caribbean:

Culture of Mimicry?" (1974), "at that moment he is a mimic, a mirror man [. . .] fated to unoriginality" (54). The argument in this essay is, in my view, crucial to our understanding of Walcott's aim in writing *Omeros*.

The concept of the mimic man, of course, was developed by V.S. Naipaul, and Walcott sees in it both a "crippling indictment" and an "astonishing truth" (53):

> To mimic, one needs a mirror, and, if I understand Mr. Naipaul correctly, our pantomime is conducted before a projection of ourselves which in its smallest gestures is based on metropolitan references. No gesture, according to this philosophy, is authentic, every sentence is a quotation, every movement either ambitious or pathetic, and because it is mimicry, uncreative. The indictment is crippling, but like all insults, it contains an astonishing truth. [. . .] Once the meridian of European civilization has been crossed, according to the theory, we have entered a matter where there can only be simulations of self-discovery. The civilized virtues on the other side of this mirror are the virtues of social order, a lineally clear hierarchy, direction, purpose, balance. [. . .] Somehow, the cord is cut by that meridian. Yet a return is also impossible, for we cannot return to what we have never been. (53)

The notion this is a "crippling indictment" is literal for the poet, who seems in this scenario condemned to subservience, learned repetition, and academic exercise. "Self-discovery" is figured here as merely a path to the realization that one's subjectivity has been wholly constructed by the insidious operations of colonization, that one is caught between the realization that, on the one hand, "order . . . direction, hierarchy and purpose" derive from the West, and on the other that one's genealogical connection to, or "racial memory" of, some other identity, principles, hierarchy, and purpose are lost to time and memory. Subjectivity and behavior seem condemned to colonized mimicry.

Bleak as this seems, the "astonishing truth" Walcott wants to salvage from Naipaul's formulation is that "mimicry is an act of imagination" and "cunning" (55), a generalized condition in the Americas, a hemisphere which is itself fated to unoriginality.[6] Walcott attempts to take Naipaul's most stinging dismissal of his world—"nothing has ever been created in the West Indies, and nothing will ever be created" (54)—and turn it into a positive, even an enabling, truth:

> Precisely, precisely. We create nothing . . . Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, for quite a long time, because what will come out of there is like nothing one has every seen before. The ceremony which best exemplifies this attitude to history is the ritual of Carnival. This is a mass art form which came out of nothing, which emerged from the sanctions imposed on it. The banning of African drumming led to the discovery of the garbage can cover as a potential musical instrument whose subtlety of range, transferred to the empty oil drum increases yearly, and the calypso itself emerged from a sense of mimicry, of patterning its form both on satire and self-satire. The impromptu elements of the calypso, like the improvisation and invention of steelband music, supersedes its traditional origins.[. . .]

> From the viewpoint of history, these forms originated in imitation if you want, and ended in invention. (55)

The stress on mimicry as imitation that leads to invention is based here on culture, art, and social action's grounding in found things, in the disorder of what is left over, what has been discarded. In this reading of Naipaul, mimicry gets rehabilitated; its status as something secondary to originality is complicated by a kind of loosely deconstructive analysis, which argues for the central role of mimicry in originality, and vice versa. There are no pure origins in the West Indies; being fated to unoriginality is simply the realization that all imaginative creation involves mimicry.

As Arjun Appadurai has shown, mimicry as appropriation and imaginative reinvention has in fact been central to the construction of diasporic identities throughout the history of modernity, particularly in Walcott's West Indies. Appadurai sees the accelerating transnational flow of cultural commodities in late modernity, for example, not as a homogenizing force (11), but as a set of processes in which "different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently [. . .] the genealogy of cultural forms is about their circulation across regions," and the "history of these forms is about their ongoing domestication into local practice" (17). Central to this process of circulation, appropriation, transformation, and domestication in local practice is what Appadurai calls "the work of the imagination" (5). In modernity, the imagination has "broken out of the special expressive space of art" to "become a collective, social fact," a "practice" of everyday life (5). The subordination of local practices to the commodities and culture of Western—and now global—capitalism may lead to the kind of paralysis Naipaul writes about, but for Appadurai it also "provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general, *agency* . . . a staging ground for action, and not only for escape" (7).[7] It is precisely this kind of agency Walcott has in mind in his reformulation of mimicry as a creative, inventive force, and the processes of selectivity, irony, and resistance Appadurai calls attention to are at work in Carnival, calypso, and the steel band as Walcott describes them.

Taken together, Walcott's rereading of mimicry and Appadurai's analysis of how diasporic subjectivities are constructed suggest an important context for understanding what the poet is trying to get at in *Omeros*. Walcott opens himself up to accusations that he is a "mimic man" because he wants to use the poem to explore such accusations and to rethink their meaning. In the analysis that follows, I will be arguing that Walcott's poem simultaneously uses and critiques the structure of the Homeric epic in order to think through the politics of mimicry, and that he divides his poetic persona between Achille, the descendent of African slaves, and Dennis Plunkett, the exile from England, in order to explore the African and European roots of his identity. The autobiographical figure in the poem, the writer/narrator "Walcott," dramatizes the struggle to negotiate a kind of reconciliation between these two figures, a hybrid or bastard figure who is at once African and European, Caribbean and American, local and metropolitan, resistant and co-opted, and fated to unoriginality, but an unoriginality redefined in terms aimed at underwriting a positive Caribbean poetic.[8]

II

Omeros is an insistently self-reflexive text, a poem about writing and historiography. Although the story of Philoctete and Achille's rivalry over Helen places an overtly Homeric narrative at the poem's center, it is actually dominated by Plunkett and "Walcott," both of whom are writing historical narratives about St. Lucia based on their erotic-mythic fascination with Helen (formerly Plunkett's housekeeper and a waitress at various tourist bars and restaurants). As a number of critics have pointed out, Walcott uses Plunkett and his autobiographical protagonist to foreground different strategies for writing about the Caribbean.[9] Major Plunkett's approach is ostensibly empirical and historical, informed by dogged research and a pretense to impartiality, while "Walcott's" is, of course, overtly poetic, steeped in metaphor and symbol and drawing regularly on a range of Homeric parallels. It would be a mistake, however, to reduce these two approaches in too schematic a way, to see Plunkett's as exclusively historical and "Walcott's" as purely poetic or mythic. Ted Williams has argued, for example, that "Walcott"

> utilizes both historical and mythical modes of representation precisely in order to foreground the way in which one discourse relies upon and cancels out the other. [. . .] Instead of privileging one mode of discursive production over the other [. . .] the relationship between history and mythology [in *Omeros*] is mutually constitutive and radically nullifying [. . .] the truth of one discourse is dependent upon and rendered intelligible by its repudiation of the other. (277)[10]

While Plunkett and "Walcott" seem to "signify discrete modes of literary representation" (Williams 277), over the course of the poem their modes of writing intersect. Plunkett becomes increasingly aware that his historical narrative is driven by erotic desire for Helen ("As the fever of History began to pass [. . .] He had come that far / to learn that History earns its own tenderness / in time; not for a navel victory, but for / the V of a velvet back in a yellow dress" [103]) and that his narrative is structured by the same Homeric parallels that drive "Walcott's" poem.[11] For these reasons, Plunkett comes to realize his "history" is in fact derived from mythology, or, as Williams puts it, he comes to "question the idea that history operates in a space of representation independent of myth" (280). "Walcott," on the other hand, increasingly criticizes his reliance over the course of the poem on "Greek manure" (271), the mishmash of myth, history, and poetic metaphor that drives an epic structure and undercuts any genuine connection with the history of the island:

> All that Greek manure under the green bananas,
> under the indigo hills, the rain-rutted road,
> the galvanized village, the myth of rustic manners,
>
> glazed by the transparent page of what I had read.
> What I had read and rewritten till literature
> was guilty as History [. . .]

> [. . .]When would it stop,
> the echo in the throat, insisting, "Omeros";
> when would I enter that light beyond metaphor? (271)

Plunkett's historical narrative and "Walcott's" poetic one seem at cross purposes—the one "historical" and empirical, the other "poetic" and metaphorical—but they intersect at the point each recognizes his poetic project is infected by the discursive principle driving the other. Plunkett's positivist, research-based history is, in the end, driven by a reliance on the same mythic parallels underwriting "Walcott's" project. Plunkett ends up having to find a way to reconcile the "historian's task" with fiction and emotion, while "Walcott" worries that his literature might be guilty of history. His desire to move "beyond metaphor," moreover, has its parallel in Plunkett's desire to move beyond history.[12]

Of course these conclusions do not have to be derived from a fancy theoretical or critical analysis of the poem. *Omeros* is quite clear about this ironic set of insights and what they mean:

> I remembered that morning when Plunkett and I,[13]
> compelled by her [Helen's] diffident saunter up the beach,
> sought grounds for her arrogance. He in the khaki
>
> grass round the redoubt, I in the native speech
> of its shallows; like enemy ships of the line,
> we crossed on a parallel; he had been convinced
>
> that his course was right; I despised any design
> that kept to a chart, that calculated the winds.
> My inspiration was impulse, but the Major's zeal
>
> to make her the pride of the Battle of the Saints,
> her yellow dress on its flagship, was an ideal
> no different from mine. Plunkett, in his innocence,
>
> had tried to change History to a metaphor,
> in the name of a housemaid; I, in self-defence,
> altered her opposite. Yet it was all for her.
>
> except we had used two opposing stratagems
> in praise of her and the island . . . (270)

The "opposing stratagems," one based on design, charting, and calculation, the other on impulse and metaphor, turn out to mirror one another because they are grounded in the same romantic idealization of Helen. She cannot stand as a metaphor for the island because the island must be seen without the light of metaphor, beyond the "Homeric shadow." All of this is made quite explicit in the poem:

> [. . .] 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? Why make the smoke a door? (270)

The important point here is that the poem is *designed* to cancel out its structuring premise—that a Caribbean epic can be fashioned out of the stuff of Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. The poem stages its epic parallels in order to undermine them. This is why Walcott finds criticism of his use of the epic structure so galling. The "stupid historicism" of critics who think he is simply "reinventing the *Odyssey*" results, in his view, from the fact that these critics do not take "the last part of the book seriously" (232):

> [T]he last third of it is a total refutation of the efforts made by two characters. First, there is the effort by the historian, Plunkett, to make a woman he has fallen in love with grander and nobler. [. . .] The second effort is made by the writer, or narrator (presumably me, if you like), who composes a long poem in which he compares this island woman to Helen of Troy. The answer to both the historian and the poet/narrator—the answer in terms of history, the answer in terms of literature—is that the woman doesn't need it. ("Reflections on *Omeros*," 232–33)

Williams argues that Walcott stages this confrontation between the historian and the poet for epistemological reasons and that this contestation over reading and meaning is meant to focus our attention on a fundamentally theoretical point. "The poem," he concludes, "embodies two meanings, both of which are mutually exclusive. [. . .] The simultaneous affirmation and refutation of historical and mythical discourses in *Omeros* mean that 'two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings' are both possible and impossible" (283–4). The quoted material here is from Paul de Man's "Semiology and Rhetoric," a text which determines—and limits—Williams's reading of the poem as an undecidable text, implying "that new questions must issue from the contested field of critical theory itself" (285). As valuable as Williams's analysis is, this critical contextualization is, in my view, too abstract and limiting. The Plunkett / "Walcott" relationship has to be read in terms of Walcott's desire to explore his own identity and impulses as a writer, to come to terms with his mixed identity, and resolve some of the critical debates about the orientation and politics of his writing. It cannot be limited to an epistemological or hermeneutical exercise.

For this reason it is important to connect the poem's self-reflexive focus on writing the Caribbean to its exploration of Caribbean identity, an exploration clearly driven by Walcott's desire to come to terms with the criticism that his poetry is compromised by its Eurocentric focus. This criticism most often surfaces in unfavorable comparisons with the Barbadian poet Kamau (Edward) Brathwaite. Brathwaite himself drew a sharp line between his poetic orientation and Walcott's as early as 1965, when he sought to distinguish between his own grounding in local "folk" culture and Walcott's Western-oriented "humanism." "The humanist poet," Brathwaite argued, "naturally takes his inspiration from his society,

and his [Walcott's] voice is often speaking away from that society rather than speaking in towards it" (quoted in Morris, 177–78). Brathwaite, Breslin reminds us, makes a distinction between "little" and "great" traditions in the Caribbean, the first rooted in Africa, the second in England (Breslin 3). The "Euro-creole élite," according to Brathwaite, was "unable or unwilling to absorb in any central sense the 'little' tradition of the [African] majority"), a division he believes persists in writers like Naipaul and Walcott (Brathwaite 309). In her essay, "Walcott versus Brathwaite," Patricia Ismond notes this kind of distinction came to harden into "cliché attitudes" towards these two poets, with "Brathwaite [. . .] hailed as the poet of the people, dealing with the historical and social themes that define the West Indian dilemma," while Walcott "remains Eurocentric," hampered by "European literary postures" that continue to assert themselves throughout his career (220). [14]

This argument about competing Caribbean poetic identities and strategies (one that is both aesthetic and political), gets written into *Omeros* in a number of ways, and is complicated by Walcott's own divided genealogy (African on is mother's side, European on his father's). Farrell's question about whether the author of *Omeros* is "the White Walcott descended in blood from men of Warwickshire and in ink from the Bard of Avon," or "the Black descendant of slaves whose history and language have all but disappeared" (251), suggests we ought to read Plunkett and "Walcott" as representative figures of this divided genealogy.[15] Moreover, Walcott's complex genealogy ("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?" he asks in "Far Cry from Africa," 1962) has to be figured into the critical debate that Brathwaite launched. Walcott's seeming refusal to choose between Brathwaite's African and European literary traditions is partly a function of his own desire to embody the various strains of his own identity, strains which mirror the syncretic makeup of Caribbean culture. Walcott, as we have already seen, insists that "illegitimacy" and "historical bastardy" are the norm in the Caribbean (Hamner 79), which is why he resists the temptation to "exploit an idea of Africa," a temptation he argues leads both to "heroic idealism" and "historical sentimentality" (Hamner 79).

In *Omeros*, Walcott divides himself between Plunkett and "Walcott" in a way that foregrounds his bastard, illegitimate identity as a writer. Avoiding the kind of historical sentimentality he associates with an essentializing Afrocentrism, Walcott foregrounds the shared condition of displacement and dispossession that joins these two characters and colors their approach to writing.[16] The problems each encounters as a writer are grounded in this displacement and dispossession. Both Plunkett and "Walcott" struggle to come to terms with their identity by trying on, and then rejecting, different narrative and historical strategies in ways that underscore their shared, postcolonial status. "Walcott" is haunted by his connections to the poem's overtly African characters, Philoctete and Achille, on the one hand, and to Western epic writers like Homer and Dante, on the other, while Plunkett struggles with his links to the history of colonialism and empire and his connection through that history to Philoctete and Achille.[17] "Walcott's" attempt in the poem to achieve some kind of balance between his reliance on the Western epic and his evocation of the island and its inhabitants in a way that escapes that structure's Eurocentric reductiveness reflects his attempt to come to terms with an identity "divided to the vein" by slavery and colonialism. Likewise, Plunkett's failed struggle in his writing to keep fact and metaphor separate underscores the division in his own identity between a Western episteme linked

to the logic and rationale of empire *and* his identification with the islanders in their shared fate under colonialism. Of course, we cannot simply map the division between Plunkett's and "Walcott's" historicism over the debate about Brathwaite's great and little traditions, or his distinction between humanist and folk poetry, for neither man's approach to writing fits these neat categories. However, we *can* read Plunkett's failed positivist historicism and "Walcott's" abandonment of the Eurocentric device of the Homeric parallel as an attempt on Walcott's part to come to terms with his own overdependence on the great tradition of humanist writing that has fed criticism of his work for over forty years, while he struggles to reconcile the various threads of his identity.

III.

The need for such a reconciliation in the poem is figured by its central trope, the wound, which first surfaces as an emblem of slavery for Philoctete. "I am blest / wif this wound," Philoctete says to Ma Kilman, and the poem's narrator explains that "he believed the swelling [on his shin] came from the chained ankles / of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure? / That the cross he carried was not only the anchor's / but that of his race" (19). Philoctete's wound is complemented by Plunkett's, a "wound," according to the narrator, that is "in his head" (27), a reference both to the literal wound he received during World War II and the more figurative wound of his experience with and complicity in empire.[18] Later, this link between Philoctete's and Plunkett's wounds expands to include "Walcott." When Philoctete finally comes to Ma Kilman to have his wound treated, Walcott explicitly relates both the wound and its cure to the poet's suffering over the wayward course of his own poem. Ma Kilman bathes Philoctete's wound in "one of those cauldrons from the old sugar mill" and "an icy sweat glazed his scalp, but he could feel the putrescent shin drain in the seethe like sucked marrow" (247). As Philoctete's wound is healed the narrator asks, "What else did it cure?" (247). The answer, of course, is "Walcott" himself, and what follows is a passage crucial to understanding the symbolic link between Philoctete, Walcott, and Plunkett. The narrative voice is "Walcott's":

> And I felt the wrong love leaving me where I stood
> on the café balcony facing the small square
> and the tower with its banyan [. . .]
>
> The process, the proof of a self-healing island
> whose every cove was a wound, from the sibyl's art
> renewed my rain-washed eyes. I felt an elation
>
> opening and closing the valves of my paneled heart
> like a book or a butterfly [. . .] (249)

As Philoctete's cure represents a symbolic coming to terms with the legacy of slavery so "Walcott's" cure purges the "wrong love" his poem tried to express for the island and

its inhabitants through his mythic focus on Helen and his reliance on Homer.[19] It is only after this cure, of course, that "Walcott" can recognize his complicity with Plunkett, their shared fate as colonized writers trying to right the island's wrongs: "Plunkett, in his innocence, / had tried to change History to a metaphor, / in the name of a housemaid; I, in self-defense, / altered her opposite" (270).

Linked as it is to Philoctete, Plunkett, and "Walcott," this wound in *Omeros* carries a tremendous burden, for it ultimately must stand for slavery, colonization, and a certain kind of misdirection in writing about the Caribbean shared by both Plunkett and "Walcott."[20] In the exchange I cited above with Edward Hirsch, in which Walcott insists on the bastard illegitimacy of Caribbean identity, he warns that remaining fixed solely on what slavery did in the Caribbean is like the "chafing and rubbing of an old sore. It is not because one wishes to forget; on the contrary, you accept it as much as anybody accepts a wound as being a part of his body. But this doesn't mean that you nurse it all your life" (Hamner 79). There is a clear link between the wound in *Omeros* and the wound Walcott discusses in this exchange with Hirsch. The wounds of slavery and colonialism in turn wound the Caribbean writer. Walcott attempts in *Omeros* to incorporate the wound of slavery into a complex Caribbean body wounded also by colonialism and characterized by a complicated set of cultural genealogies, African, European, and indigenous, Protestant, Catholic and Obeah, Homeric and West Indian. The Caribbean Walcott struggles with in *Omeros* is not essentially African or European, and so it is finally not possible for "Walcott" to choose between Brathwaite's strategy and a Homeric, Western one. To the degree *Omeros* endorses a poetry of the actual over a poetry of metaphor, it seems to me it produces an ending not quite earned, for Breslin is right that in the end the poem embraces a resolution it does not quite enact: The Homeric parallels are simultaneously employed and rejected in a somewhat disingenuous way. However, this does not mean the poem has failed in evoking something essential about the Caribbean.

To understand what that is, we need to turn to Antonio Benítez-Rojo, who in *The Repeating Island* paradoxically insists that "the main obstacles" to a study of the Caribbean are the very elements most central to its identity: "its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity; its contingency and impermanence; its syncretism, etc." (1). All of these qualities are evoked in the complex and somewhat contradictory poetics Walcott foregrounds in *Omeros*. What seems most confused about the poem, then, is in fact a sign it is getting the Caribbean "right," for *Omeros* is characterized by just the kind of "supersyncretism"(12) Benítez-Rojo associates with the Caribbean, a region whose "cultural expressions" are "European, African, and Asian" (12). Benítez-Rojo's recipe for studying the Caribbean becomes a virtual gloss of the locations and journeys that comprise *Omeros*:

> Certainly, in order to reread the Caribbean we have to visit the sources from which the widely various elements that contributed to the formation of its culture flowed. This unforeseen journey tempts us because as soon as we succeed in establishing and identifying as separate any of the signifiers that make up the supersyncretic manifestation that we're studying, there comes a moment of erratic displacement of its signifiers toward other spatio-temporal points, be they in Europe, Africa, Asia, or America, or in all these continents at once. (12)

The experience of reading *Omeros* is "erratic" and disorienting in just this way, for Walcott takes the reader on a series of "unforeseen journeys" : Plunkett muses about the British empire from Africa to Asia; Achille travels in an extended dream sequence back to Africa; "Walcott" visits European cities associated with imperialism and colonialism such as London, Dublin, Lisbon, and Venice; and the poem traces the Cherokee Trail of Tears across the American plains while evoking the spirit of the Ghost Dance.[21] Philoctete's and Achille's connection with the slave trade fuses with Walcott's evocation of the ravages of Native American displacement, and both of these narratives are merged with Plunkett's increasingly bleak musings about colonialism and empire and "Walcott's" second thoughts about the "monumentality" of European history.[22] *Omeros* gives us a Caribbean very much like the one Benítez-Rojo evokes, a world marked by "erratic displacement" and multiple "spatio-temporal points," one whose historical and culture sources have just the kind of "bastardy" and "illegitimacy" Walcott discusses with Hirsch.

Paradoxically, these multiple displacements and spatio-temporal points are what, following Benítez-Rojo, makes *Omeros* so thoroughly Caribbean a poem. The Caribbean, in his view, is a sum of its sources, and it is a mistake to "persevere in the attempt to refer the culture of the Caribbean to geography" (24). The Caribbean has "no circle or circumference" but is in fact a chaotic assimilation of "African, European, Indoamerican, and Asian contexts" (24), extending from "the Amazon to the Mississippi delta," from the "north coasts of South and Central America, the old Arawak-Carib island bridge, and parts of the United States. [. . .] Antilleans [. . .] tend to roam the entire world in search of the centers of their Caribbeanness" (24–5). The poem's disparate locations mirror the terrain Benítez-Rojo covers here (St. Lucia, Africa, London, Lisbon, Boston, the Plains States, etc.), and the peripatetic "Walcott" emerges in the poem as an Antillean writer roaming the world in search of his Caribbeanness. The poem's rather forced or over-orchestrated conclusions—Plunkett and "Walcott" reconcile, "Walcott" gives up his Homeric parallels for a Helen "beyond metaphor," Philoctete and Achille come to terms with their displacement, etc.—mark an aim but not a realization. What we are finally left with is what Benítez-Rojo calls a "*mestizaje*" work (26), but one without synthesis, a "concentration of differences, a tangle of dynamics obtained by means of a greater density of the Caribbean object," a complex of "binary oppositions Europe/Indoamerican, Europe/Africa" that "do not resolve themselves into the synthesis of *mestizaje*" but into "insoluble differential equations, which repeat their unknowns through the ages of the meta-archipelago" (26). What repeats in these repeating islands and in Walcott's poem is the inscription of difference, heterogeneity, multiple roots, conflated identities, paradoxical linkages, and impossible geographies.

In the final analysis, these qualities ground Walcott's poem in the Americas. This is the expansive geography *Omeros* covers, "America" construed as a hemispheric location and implicated in the historical roots/routes of Paul Gilroy's black Atlantic.[23] In a discussion about *Omeros* with Rebekah Presson in 1992, Walcott explains the importance of this hemispheric location:

> The whole idea of America, and the whole idea of every thing in this side of the world, barring the Native American Indian, is imported; we're all imported, black, Spanish. When one says one is American,

> that's the experience of being American, that transference of whatever color, or name, or place. The difficult part is the realization that one is part of the whole idea of colonization. Because the easiest thing about colonialism is to refer to history in terms of guilt or punishment or revenge, or whatever. Whereas the rare thing is the resolution of being where one is and doing something positive about that reality. (*Conversations with Derek Walcott*, 193)

Seen in light of Walcott's earlier insistence that Caribbean identity ultimately has to be characterized as bastardized and illegitimate—and that the terms have positive connotations that need to be embraced—his insistence here that everyone in the Caribbean is imported, "part of the whole idea of colonization," is crucial. This key idea constitutes the links among Helen, Plunkett, "Walcott," Achille, and Philoctete in *Omeros*, and it helps explain why the poem's geography includes not only the Caribbean, but Africa, Europe, and the United States as well. The poem explores the disparate roots/routes of Antillean identity as they construct the subjectivity of these particular characters (African, British, European, etc.), but it is the experience of colonization and the fact of displacement that predominates. Walcott rejects the impulse toward guilt, revenge, or nostalgia for a lost home (be it Achille's or Plunkett's) for a resolution that focuses on the necessity of being where one is and the struggle to do something positive with that reality.

Mimicry in the poem finally has less to do with Walcott's trying to copy Homer than with his desire to explore the centrality of mimicry in the construction of Caribbean identity. The syncretic or hybridizing effects of colonization define the context in which subjectivity and identity develop, so that mimicry, defined in positive terms by Walcott as the imaginative work of appropriation and invention, is central both to being Caribbean and writing about it. *Omeros*, as I have been arguing, is as much a poem about writing about the Caribbean as it is a poem about the Caribbean, one that explores the politics and poetics of mimicry, linking "unoriginality" to the condition of colonization and the processes of cultural syncretism. We cannot understand what Walcott is struggling with in *Omeros* without a sustained awareness of the connection the poem makes between bastardy and mimicry, and how it attempts to link the nature of Caribbean identity *and* writing to the historical processes associated with both.

NOTES

1. Farrell singles out in particular Mary Lefkowitz, Oliver Taplin, Bernard Knox, and the comparatist George Steiner (249).
2. Farrell argues that critics who deny *Omeros* status as an epic take an unnecessarily narrow, conservative approach to the genre, one that is Eurocentric and misses "the genre's capacity to reinvent itself through inversion, opposition to epic predecessors, and ironic self-reflexion" (262). Dougherty argues, "in their original native context, the Homeric poems, just like *Omeros*, comprised an ever-fluid synthesis of stories and traditions that aimed to forge or consolidate a sense of national identity in a time of crisis and change" (339).
3. For Walcott's disavowal of the poem's status as an epic, see "Reflections on *Omeros*." Davis complicates the matter by insisting that what he calls the "performance of disavowal" is actually central to the classical epic tradition (see especially 326–8).

4. For an excellent summary of this debate see Hamner, 1–12. See also Farrell, 269, fn. 17, and Ismond.
5. Breslin argues that while *Omeros* develops a critique of its own "analogical model," the poem itself does not seem written with that critique in mind. "Too many parts of [*Omeros*]," he observes, "seem sincerely invested in the Homeric analogy critiqued elsewhere" in the poem (272). I would add that the long section in Book VII patterned on Dante's *Inferno* has Walcott playing Dante to the *Inferno's* Virgil, just the kind of Eurocentric hubris he has always been criticized for.
6. Walcott, as we shall see a little later in this essay, often associates the Caribbean with "America," defined broadly in hemispheric terms. He writes in "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry":

> We live in the shadow of an America that is economically benign yet politically malevolent. [. . .] We were American even while we were British, if only in the geographical sense, and now that the shadow of the British Empire has passed through and over us in the Caribbean, we ask ourselves if, in the spiritual or cultural sense, we must become American [. . .] it is an absurdity that I can live with; being both American and West Indian is an ambiguity without a crisis, for I find that the more West Indian I become, the more I can accept my dependence on America . . . because we share this part of the world, and have shared it for centuries now, even as conqueror and victim, as exploiter and exploited (51).

7. Appadurai rightly argues that these processes are a specific hallmark of globalization and the accelerating link between electronic media and mass migration (5–11), but Walcott would certainly argue that these processes have been at work for generations in the Caribbean.
8. Walcott is emphatic about embracing the hybrid, mongrel nature of Caribbean identity. In an interview with Edward Hirsch, he warns of the dangers of an Afrocentric "historical sentimentality" and insists that "the whole situation in the Caribbean is an illegitimate situation. If we admit that from the beginning that there is no shame in that historical bastardry, then we can be men" (79). One hopes that by this he meant that we can be women, too. Ramazani notes that in "intermingling Caribbean and European literary paradigms" in *Omeros* Walcott "thickens the cultural hybridity of each, accelerating, complicating, and widening rather than purifying what might be called the dialectic of the tribe" (410).
9. See in particular Williams, Davis, and Breslin.
10. Williams's argument develops as a critique of Barbara Webb's suggestion that Caribbean writers tend to privilege mythical forms over the alienating effects of purely historical representation, a formulation that is, in Williams's view, oversimplified.
11. See Book II, Chapter XVIII, where Plunkett's empirical research begins to give way to his interest in developing a set of parallels between Homer's Helen and his own. Here he comes face-to-face with the desire to see a set of parallels between Helen of Troy and St. Lucia-as-Helen. "He had no idea," Walcott writes, "how time could be reworded,/which is the historian's task. The factual fiction/of textbooks, pamphlets, brochures, which he had loaded/in a ziggurat from the library, had the affliction/of impartiality; skirting emotion" (95).
12. See Breslin, 261, for a concise summary of this kind of analysis.
13. See Book One, Chapter Four, Section Three, 23–4.
14. Ismond argues Walcott's engagement with European sources has to be understood in terms of his larger commitment to engaging the multiplicity of populations and cultures that have constructed the Caribbean. Walcott, she writes, realizes "that there is no turning back." He "believes that the destiny of the West Indian peoples must depend on the resources they find within themselves for acting with confidence towards what has been left, negative as well as positive" (235). She insists that "this is not to be derivative or beholden. [. . .] The very confidence and tenacity of his approach challenges and defies any such notions of inferiority" (235).
15. This schema is of course complicated by the presence of Achille, who is at times played off against Plunkett in the poem in ways that have him representing Walcott's African heritage to Plunkett's British. I have emphasized the "Walcott"/Plunkett pairing in this essay because I am interested in how the poem uses it to explore approaches to writing and historicizing the Caribbean.
16. Walcott's position here is similar to Paul Gilroy's. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy is critical of black nationalism among U.S. and Caribbean critics. Indeed, his opposition to "nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches" is central to his geographic focus on the black Atlantic. "I want to develop," he writes, "the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational

and intercultural perspective" (15). I will be arguing that it is just this perspective that drives the cultural syncretism in *Omeros*. See Okpewho for an analysis of *Omeros* as a "black Atlantic" poem. For an extended discussion of *Omeros* as an epic about dispossession, see Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*.

17. Researching the history of the island, Plunkett discovers a Midshipman Plunkett who ostensibly spied on the Dutch for the British and eventually fought with Admiral Rodney in the Antilles. Major Plunkett comes to think of him as "a namesake and a son" (94). See 77–83 for his story. The Midshipman provides Plunkett with his own historical link to the island, and by using this section of the poem to connect the Midshipman to Achille's ancestors in St. Lucia Walcott also forges a link between Plunkett and Achille.
18. The reference to Plunkett's wounding during the war is on 27–28. Walcott pauses here to underscore the metaphorical significance of Plunkett's wound, writing that "This wound I have stitched into Plunkett's character/He has to be wounded. Affliction is one theme of this work, this fiction" (28). The poem is replete with Plunkett's nostalgia for, and musings about, empire. See, for example, 37–8 on how foreign markets drove the Roman and Spanish empires, and later (90), Plunkett's nostalgia for the British empire. The poem's treatment of colonialism, empire, and the contemporary spread of globalization deserve a more extended analysis than I can develop here.
19. Plunkett also visits Ma Kilman later in the poem as he mourns the death of this wife, Maude. She effects a kind of cure for this wound as well, one that Plunkett says "bound him for good to another race" (307).
20. See Ramazani for a detailed reading of *Omeros* and the trope of the wound.
21. While Walcott's aims in creating such a sweeping canvas for his poem are clear, I agree with Breslin that these disparate elements do not always cohere very effectively. Breslin complains, for example, that "the metamorphosis of Sioux into Cherokee into African Americans who are also Afro-Caribbeans who in turn are like Homeric Greeks proceeds so rapidly, and with so little interest in the particular qualities of any of these peoples, that the universal becomes a blank category" (264).
22. During "Walcott's" visits to European cities connected to empire and colonialism he reflects on the extent to which "history" is a construction of Western experience. These reflections are developed in his musings about historical monuments to conquest. In Lisbon, for example, confronted with the statue of a bronzed horseman, Walcott observes that "We had no such erections / above our colonial wharves, our erogenous zones / were not drawn to power, our squares shrank the directions / of the Empire's plazas .[. . .] For those to whom history is the presence / of ruins, there is a green nothing" (192). It is important to read passages like these in connection with how Walcott treats Plunkett's attempts at historiography.
23. Gilroy insists that "marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes" (19). In my view *Omeros* works to put the emphasis on "routes" in just the way Gilroy outlines here.

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Introduction

Sunt lacrymae rerum . . .

These are days not only of fast food but also of immediate literary comment and judgement. Even before *Omeros* was out one was given an advance copy – and six weeks to write a chapter on the book for the then forthcoming *The Art of Derek Walcott*. I have been acquainted with parts of the work for some time. But the complicated concerned music of the poem I met just six weeks ago. So I realise that although I must say what I have to say clearly and without hedging my bets, there will be much that I have missed, and more that I will see in a different light after prolonged re-reading.

Of one thing I am quite sure: this 325 page poem is an outstanding achievement, by a gifted and hardworking poet whose multifaceted Caribbean upbringing and experience was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the production of this masterpiece. While not lacking in any way lyrical fire, it makes meaning, and displays deep human concern, through a sort of novelistic structure of a mosaic kind.

I intend to examine this remarkable poem through well tried, or if you prefer old fashioned, categories: Historical, Metaphorical, Moral and Anagogical.

Historical

We helped ourselves
to these green islands likes olives from a saucer,

munched on the pith, then spat their sucked stones on a plate.[1]

0-X

juxtapositions, made less, rather than more, clear by the author's direct interventions in the style of old time novelists. Sometimes it is but the intervention of the *narrator*, but sometimes it appears to be the author, and in one place, at least, the *I* becomes a kind of general consciousness, or the locution of one of the characters, as if in the author's voice. A prime and rather confusing example of this takes place in the incident between the young Plunketts on the hillside during the war, as the camouflaged ships steam under the cliffs, and Dennis decides not to take the physical possession of Maud which she in her generosity is offering.

> . . . with gulls buzzing the cliff
>
> and screeching above us when she parted both lips
> and searched for his soul with her tongue, her wild grey eyes
> as flecked with light as the sea, then she was urging
>
> me to go in, port of entry, with my fingers
> and I could not.[4]

This particular intrusion of *I*, whether it be the voice of Plunkett or of the authorial voice is not, of course, new in Walcott. It appears in *Another Life*[5], but also long before that in 'Tales of the Islands'.[6] At times it is not clear enough just what is happening, or rather who is intended to be speaking.

To return to the Historical aspect, the historical theme is not so much, as had been asserted, *exile*. It is rather *where is home?* And, of course, man's inhumanity to man. The historical movement of people is often forgotten now, even in places like the Caribbean, which has been one of the greatest recipients and results of this movement, whether voluntary or forced. It cannot be by accident that the poem opens with what is to the local fishermen their main means of movement:

> "This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes".
> Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
> his soul with their cameras . . .[7]

And notice too that the tourists are also involved in this process of the movement of people.

Much later in the poem we hear of Plunkett that his wanderings are over:

> Despite that morning's near accident, the old Rover
> sailed under the surf of threshing palms and his heart
> hummed like its old engine, his wanderings over,
>
> like the freighter rusting on its capstans.[8]

And the poem ends with the beach and "the sea was still going on."[9]

In the beginning and the end, Achille has travelled back to Africa, the Indian (sub continental) diaspora has taken place, the Indians of the Plains have been moved very nearly into extinction; we have been to Holland, where the young midshipman, also called Plunkett, has been spying for Rodney. We have been in the desert with Plunkett's fighting colleagues, we have been in Istanbul, and seen Athens and Atlanta, Georgia. We have, as they say in Nigeria, 'travelled'. And although the pivot and focal point is St Lucia, and Maud and Hector, and the father of the narrator, end their lives there, and Omeros appears there to show the narrator the way, there appears to be a secular version of the Augustinian conclusion somewhere in the background – "our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee". Or as we hear in connection with Seven Seas, who is the islander who has travelled most, and has lived among the "Red Indians":

> Seven Seas sighed. What was the original fault?
> "Plunkett promise me a pig next Christmas. He'll heal
> in time, too."
> "We shall all heal."
> The incurable
>
> wound of time pierced them down the long, sharp-shadowed street.[10]

But that is perhaps to anticipate the last aspect of our probing and analysis.

The historical aspects of this remarkable poem, then, are wide ranging. It is not only Helen of St Lucia who is portrayed and explored, but St Lucia herself – one of her names was Helen – and the displacement of people as an aspect of their human condition. The poem, much more a novel than an epic, while never losing its lyrical fire, is complicated in structure, gaining some of its meanings by the juxtaposition of episodes. For instance, an outburst on the part of the author:

rather sinister way. For the trees and the waterfalls and the mountains and the ground-doves' mating call – as they are used here as the poem becomes air-borne – continue to play on our feelings in a certain way because they have been made to become not only sentient but personal communicating beings, realising what the work of the axe means to the *laurier-cannelles*. Whereas to the fishermen, as to the warriors of the Iliad, the felling and hollowing by fire of the proud trees are but necessary steps in their vocations.

Note also that because of the dramatic and novelistic nature of this poem, these words are put into the mouth of Philoctete, who uses a slightly bantering tone: he is showing off just a little to the tourists. After all, he is going to get to the very important matter of 'raising' some money from them by showing them the scar on his leg: "It have some things" – he smiles – "worth more than a dollar".[15]

No doubt there is no need to labour the importance of being constantly aware of how the poet is using metaphor to have us react in a certain way, not only to make the meanings he desires, but also to have us feel and respond in a certain way. The poem is, in the sense discussed, History, it is a story. But it is pre-eminently metaphor. Not only in its words and images, but in a larger sense, in its structure, story, the characters it delineates and the way it relates its various parts to the whole which it slowly becomes as we develop our relationship with it. We need a careful knowledge of the poem in order to enjoy and appreciate it, but it is as much a knowledge of acquaintanceship as of learning.

I shall draw attention to a few more ways in which metaphor works in this poem, as much to keep us sensitive to one of the main poetic uses of poetry in general as to acquaint us with Walcott's way with language. Just as single words or images – the *shaking* of the leaves above, for instance – take on meanings beyond their first or 'literal' significance, so episodes or persons can metaphorically signify some thing beyond themselves, and so involve us in seeing, and learning to see, further significance:

> She was selling herself like the island, without
> any pain . . . .[16]

This is said of the St Lucian Helen, whose preparation for the Friday night festivities has made Achille *nauseous with jealousy*. So much so that Achille, like his namesake Achilles, sulked "in his tent" and refused to join in the fête. He has watched her taking her careful bath in the outside shower. "Is the music,/ the people I like" she says. But

> he sat in the frame of the back door to the yard
> watching her head, in the shower he'd built for her
> from brand-new galvanize, streaming from the white foam
>
> with expensive shampoo, and, when it disappeared,
> came back, the mouth parted, the eyes squeezed with delight.[17]

She makes her full preparation; she tries to persuade him to join in, but he goes off to the canoes on the beach from which point he can watch

> her high head moving through the tourists,
> through flying stars from the coalpots, the painted mouth
> still eagerly parted. Murder throbbed in his wrists
>
> to the loudspeaker's pelvic thud, her floating move.
> She was selling herself like the island, without
> any pain, and the village did not seem to care
>
> that it was dying in its change, the way it whored
> away a simple life that would soon disappear
> while the children withered on the sidewalks to the sounds[18]

By metaphorically linking the island with Helen in the aspects of the new, the vibrating, the flying stars, as well as the pelvic 'self selling', the author intensifies our involvement in the history and the fiction which have their value in being images of the real world. Whether it is easier to understand, and to sympathise with, Helen or with the neonatal St Lucia is difficult to say. But both are images of each other; both cast light on the other's predicament. Whether when we realise this we are any nearer an insight into what might be the solution to this 'developmental' problem, we shall discuss when we look at the moral aspects of this poem.

In another part of the world, in another aspect of the human condition, the author deepens our insight by a different use of metaphor. We are with the sad experience of the Native Americans, more commonly called the Amerindians. Immediately after the moving interlude which starts "House of umbrage, house of fear",[19] and which refers to the breakdown of his third marriage, our author turns to the fate of the Crow horsemen among the Dakotas. There is no doubt a metaphorical significance in this structual juxtaposition: "Our contracts// were torn like the clouds, like treaties with the

In fact the author tells Omeros

> I have always heard
> your voice in that sea, master, it was the same song
> of the desert shaman, and when I was a boy
>
> your name was as wide as a bay, as I walked along
> the curled brow of the surf; the word 'Homer' meant joy,
> joy in battle, in work, in death,[25]

But Homer is honoured also as the Blind Seer. Two of the many traditions which attach to him are quite contrary: one is that of a sort of court poet singing what are essentially praise songs, epics that give a failing aristocracy a kind of legitimacy by associating them with the heroic deeds of the past; the other is more that of the wanderer, the beggar poet who was not treated too well. It is the latter figure which Walcott really uses; that plus the always fascinating all-seeing blind person, like Tirisias. (Blind people play an important role in this poem: Seven Seas, Homer and St Lucia herself.) Omeros also acts as a guide to the Narrator in the manner that Virgil guided Dante through Hell.

In discussion of what his works have meant to our author, Homer tells him to "Forget the gods".[26] He is referring to the way in which, in his epics, the struggles among the gods and godesses influence the story and the fates of its characters. Walcott has followed this advice; he ranges all over the world, enabling us to look at suffering and the human condition in many places, but this suffering and displacement are not brought about by the almost childish games of Grecian gods.

Omeros comes to guide our author through his own St Lucia. Before that Homer has been the blind beggar and wanderer met in London as well as in the ruins of the Amerindian tents. In these places he is the witness to suffering and stupidity, and the means of our gaining insight. On the banks of the Thames, in the guise of an old sailor, or a sort of Wandering Jew, with his manuscript tucked underneath his arm, he watches the river go by like a barge drawn along by Time.

One may wonder whether he would have been treated as badly as is portrayed in this poem, on the steps of St Martins in the Fields! But as he sits "curled up on a bench underneath the Embankment wall"[27] he watches empires pass:

> And the sunflower sets after all, retracting its irises
> with the bargeman's own, then buds on black, iron trees
> as a gliding fog hides the empires: London, Rome, Greece.[28]

The appearance of Homer in London, and the treatment he receives (on which he comments later) leads to a remarkable passage. It is as though the long-lasting blind bard, who has seen so much, stirs up the universal conscience to ask a series of questions about our destiny, questions which seem to be answered (by our author?) with no little bitterness. The questions include: "Who decrees a great epoch?", "Where, in the stones of the Abbey, are incised our names?", "Who screams out our price?", "Who will teach us a history of which we too are capable?", "Where is the light of the world?", "Where is our sublunar peace?"[29]

The answers to these questions are deep and depressing: one wonders whether we should go on living, or rather go on dying.

> Where is the light of the world? . . .
> . . . In the City that can buy and sell us
> the packets of tea stirred with our crystals of sweat.[30]

This section, juxtaposed to, and in some ways stirred up by, the presence of Homer and the treatment he receives ends, as it must, in the shadows: "dark future down darker street."

But when next the metaphor of Homer emerges – of Omeros – the colours are lighter, "One sunrise I walked out onto the balcony/ of my white hotel".[31] The marble head of Omeros arises on the shores of St Lucia, metamorphoses into human form, and the author sets off with his guide, Omeros, to a deeper knowledge of his own St Lucia, whose patron saint was herself blind but seeing all, blind to preserve her honour:

> but I saw no shadow underline my being:
> I could see through my own palm with every crease
> and every line transparent since I was seeing
>
> the light of St Lucia at last through her own eyes,
> her blindness, her inward vision as revealing
> as his, because a closing darkness brightens love,
>
> and I felt every wound pass. I saw the healing
> thorns of dry cactus drop to the dirt, and the grove
> where the sybil swayed. I thought of all my travelling.[32]

It is Omeros and Seven Seas who bring him to a point of peace and reconciliation, and it is Omeros who saves him from the pit of hell in which certain poets are stewing in their pride and envy.

implications is a topic that one would have desired much more space to ruminate upon, let alone discuss, and I would not be surprised to be found wrong by those who come after. But the topic is too important to dodge.

To what extent is a certain sort of fatalism and quietism implied in this poem? Is that really the way of human history: what will be, will be? How deeply has the *Salve Regina* sent its roots? *Exules filii Hevae?* To ask these questions simply underlines the respect and pleasure with which one reads and re-reads this poem.

The question about fatalism and quietism can be phrased differently: does the *denouement* seem contrived? Not perhaps in the heat of reading, such is the intensity of the lyrical quality of the poem and its rhythmic sweep. But in quiet contemplation of the poem as a whole one wonders if one has not too easily acquiesced in the image of the "motionless journey"

> "...as the sea moves round an island
> that appears to be moving, love moves round the heart".[38]

Of course the full meaning even at the moral level, and at the level of "eternal verities", must rest in the tension built up between the parts. It is a question of whether the displacement parts – what one might call the 'whiteness is everywhere' parts – do not totally outweigh the integrative parts, represented by Achille, for instance, and by the guidance of Omeros himself. It is not a matter easy to settle at this early stage of the public existence of this remarkable poem. But it would be cowardly and trivialising not to raise it.

It is connected with what one might call the '*Salve Regina*' aspect. This needs some explanation. Towards the end of the poem we read:

> Behind lace Christmas bush, the season's red sorrel,
> what seemed a sunstruck stasis concealed a ferment
> of lives behind tin fences, an endless quarrel . . . [39]

then Seven Seas, in his penetrating blindness, contemplating the whole situation,

> . . . at his window heard their faint anthem:
>
> '*Salve Regina*' in the pews of a stone ship,
> which the black priest steered from his pulpit like a helm,
> making the swift's sign from brow to muttering lip.[40]

In whatever way the "swift's sign" might alter the basic message of the '*Salve Regina*' (and it might in fact underline it) it is worth looking at the '*Salve's*' words which are usually sung to one of the most haunting of Gregorian plain chants; it is, of course, addressed to that Star of the Ocean, Star of the Sea, Mary the mother of Jesus:

> *Salve Regina, Mater misericordiae, vita, dulcedo et spes nostra, salve. Ad te clamamus, exules filii Hevae. Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle.*

It is the *clamamus, exules filii Hevae* which particularly interests us: "We cry to thee; we are exiles, children of Eve, groaning and weeping in this valley of tears." And it ends "after this exile show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus".

Notice the notion of exile, and of *Another Life* in which the blessed fruit will be experienced, and notice also the popular hymn connection between Mary and the sea and the wanderer, Star of the Ocean, Star of the Sea "Pray for the wanderer, pray thou for me". And of course Homer's Odysseus is one of the great wanderers, a fit icon for modern humans, driven from the islands, dragged from Africa, beaten across the snow-floured plains of North America, hastening from Poland and Nazi Germany, consoled only from time to time by birds that are free to leave, to return either every night, or annually like the cattle bird of Couva.

This displacement of human persons Walcott brilliantly delineates. But he goes out of his way to say that he has lost his faith in myths and religion; and Omeros seems to persuade him to the view "to love your own above all else". How does the loss of faith square with his real heroes, who are consoled by the *Salve*, cross themselves before most activities, seek cures in the old tradition, sympathetic medicine? They groan for the coming of justice but, for good or ill, they are consoled by something that is to happen *after this exile.*

And is not one of the main reasons for the disappearance of the Amerindians – like their smoke signals in the evening – precisely that the pale-faced loved their own? And Plunkett not only learnt to accept Maud's death but his real relationship to St Lucia; he had no longer found "his own" all that lovable.

There are other echoes of the eternal in human experience which are worth mentioning as they go well beyond the usual uses of metaphor. Unfortunately we have not time to explore them now, but the reader will easily see their implications for matters that are of more than passing interest. We will mention a few.

that Achilles was at liberty until 6 December when "about 3 p.m. our Achilles (alias Hercules) and Paradise Achilles came home together, of their own accord." And a Plato and Abraham also came back from liberty, to the bilboes, alas, despite the grand names. But it is possible that some of these names were given in recognition of feats performed not least of all in the European wars which then took place in the Caribbean.

In *Omeros* the grand names are given to simple folk some of whom had the kind of problems the noble heroes had in Homer's poems. With these problems they struggled, as with the "loud sounding sea", with no less dignity and humanity than all the heroes in the bloody wars that sprung from wrath, and saw so many become the spoils for carrion crows and wandering dogs. But what is common to Homer and *Omeros* is not only struggle and coming to terms with death and violence and separation from home, but the sea, the loud sounding *poluphloisboio thalassesie*. and its moods and sounds.

The armies gathered in Homer with the sound of rushing waves; in *Omeros*, in the end Achille

> scraped dry scales off his hands. He liked the odours
>
> of the sea in him. Night was fanning its coalpot.
>
> . . .
>
> A full moon shone like a slice of raw onion.
> When he left the beach the sea was still going on.[45]

The sea is still going on.

NOTES

1. Walcott, *Omeros*, London, 1990, Book 1 Chapter V, p.25.
2. *ibid.*, Book 2 Chapter XIX, pp.99–100.
3. *ibid.*, Book 6 Chapter XLV, p.228.
4. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LXI, pp. 304–05.
5. Walcott, *Another Life*, London, 1972.
6. 'Tales of the Islands', *In a Green Night*.
7. Walcott, *Omeros*, Book 1 Chapter I, p.3.
8. *ibid.*, Book 6 Chapter LI, p.259.
9. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LXIV, p.325.
10. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LXIII, p.319.
11. *ibid.*, Book 6 Chapter XLVII, p.245.

12. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LX, p.300.
13. *ibid.*, Book 1 Chapter I, p.3.
14. *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*, p.4.
16. *ibid.*, Book 2 Chapter XXI, p.111.
17. *ibid.*, p.110.
18. *ibid.*, p.111.
19. *ibid.*, Book 4 Chapter XXXIII, p.173.
20. *ibid.*, Book 4 Chapter XXXIV, p.175.
21. *ibid.*, Book 4 Chapter XXXV, p.180.
22. *ibid.*, Book 5 Chapter XLII, p.214.
23. *ibid.*, Book 5 Chapter XLIII, p.217.
24. Homer, *Iliad B*, lines 209–10.
25. Walcott, *Omeros*, Book 7 Chapter LVI, p.283.
26. *ibid.*
27. *ibid.*, Book 5 Chapter XXXVIII, p.195
28. *ibid.*, p.196.
29. *ibid.*, pp.196–97.
30. *ibid.*, p.197.
31. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LVI, p.279
32. *ibid.*, p.282.
33. *ibid.*, Book 6 Chapter LIV, p.271.
34. *ibid.*, p.272.
35. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LVIV, p.291.
36. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LXIV, p.325.
37. *ibid.*, Book 5 Chapter XLI, p.208.
38. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LVIII, p.291.
39. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LXII, p.310.
40. *ibid.*
41. *ibid.*, Book 3 Chapter XXV, p.139.
42. *ibid.*, Book 3 Chapter XXX, p.159.
43. *ibid.*, Book 4 Chapter XXXIII, p.174.
44. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LIX, p.296
45. *ibid.*, Book 7 Chapter LXIV, p.325.