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Abstract

Richard Rowan, the hero of James Joyce's *Exiles*, explains at the beginning of the third act that while he was walking the length of the beach of Dublin Bay, demons could be heard giving him advice. 'The isle is full of voices', Rowan says, adapting a phrase from *The Tempest*, and this sentence aptly describes Joyce's aesthetics. In his poem *Omeros* Derek Walcott may well have succeeded in doing for St. Lucia what Joyce did for Ireland and Dublin.¹ And he has done so, not in the naturalistic or psychological mode of *Exiles*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or *Dubliners*, but in the grand manner of the later Joyce's *Ulysses*. The ambition of Walcott's poem is clear: the poet measures himself against Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Joyce. It is an ambition worthy of a Nobel prize.

GEERT LERNOUT

Derek Walcott's *Omeros*: The Isle is Full of Voices

Richard Rowan, the hero of James Joyce's *Exiles*, explains at the beginning of the third act that while he was walking the length of the beach of Dublin Bay, demons could be heard giving him advice. 'The isle is full of voices', Rowan says, adapting a phrase from *The Tempest*, and this sentence aptly describes Joyce's aesthetics. In his poem *Omeros* Derek Walcott may well have succeeded in doing for St. Lucia what Joyce did for Ireland and Dublin.¹ And he has done so, not in the naturalistic or psychological mode of *Exiles*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or *Dubliners*, but in the grand manner of the later Joyce's *Ulysses*. The ambition of Walcott's poem is clear: the poet measures himself against Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Joyce. It is an ambition worthy of a Nobel prize.

Like Joyce in *Ulysses*, Walcott has given his epic a temporal framework: that of a single day from morning to evening. Yet this frame is constantly interrupted by a number of stories, each with its own chronology, its own flashbacks. One of these stories, that of the I-narrator's writing of the poem, lasts three years, and another, that of Helen's pregnancy which begins at the opening of the poem, is not finished when the book closes. The island of St. Lucia is the centre of the book's action, although a few of the characters, most prominently the I-narrator, visit places in Europe and North America. But this is not limiting: the island is linked, explicitly and implicitly, with the Greek islands, with Ireland, with Africa.

Five different stories are told: a first tells of the wound of Philoctete which was cured by Ma Kilman, owner of the No Pain Café. A second is the story of the blind Monsieur Seven Seas, also known as *Omeros*, or 'Old St. Omere', who is a rhapsode, the singer and poet of St. Lucia. The third is the jealousy of Achille and Hector and their love for Helen, the most beautiful woman of the island. These three stories deal with the lives of the black fishermen in a village on St. Lucia and the links with Homer and the myths of Troy are clear and obvious. Philoctetes, Achilles, Hector, Helen and Homer are alive and well and living on St. Lucia. The story of Regimental Sergeant Major Plunkett and his wife Maud is less obviously linked, although the Major is an Odysseus sort, who has fought in the war and come back home to his wife Maud, who is a kind of Helen: just as Helen of Troy 'was weaving a great web,/ a red folding robe, and work-

ing into it the numerous struggles/ of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians',² Maud makes a quilt that depicts all the birds of the island. The last story is that of the I-narrator, whose Greek girlfriend leaves him to go home. The poem records both his loneliness, and the healing of the wound that she has left. After a first reading, this seems to be the master-narrative: the I-narrator links the other stories and the respective characters: he knows Hector, Helen, Seven Seas, Achille and Philoctete. The Major was his instructor and he attends the funeral of Maud Plunkett, and at some point the narrator admits that he has given the two of them characteristics of his father and mother. On this interpretation the poem registers the attempt to heal the wound of the beloved's absence. It is only after a closer reading that we notice how the poem records the narrator's inability to exclude the real heroines of the poem, Helen and St. Lucia. Just like *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, the poem is unable to restrict itself to its theme: the linear narrative breaks down, and this failure is thematized in its own right.

It may seem strange to speak of failure in a discussion of a book that is so obviously an ambitious technical masterpiece. Few contemporary poets would ever attempt a 325-page epic in *terza rima*. Admittedly, Walcott does not employ Dante's very strict rhyme-scheme, but his verse is full of more *recherché* forms: although the length of the line and the number of lines in a stanza seem to be fixed, rhymes vary from *rime riche* to assonance and eye-rhyme, and *Omeros* sometimes gives the impression that Walcott is offering us a catalogue of all the poetic possibilities available in English. At moments of great poetic or dramatic intensity, Walcott does come close to the *terza rima*:

'O-meros,' she laughed. That's what we call him in Greek,
stroking the small bust with its boxer's broken nose,
and I thought of Seven Seas sitting near the reek

of drying fishnets, listening to the shallows' noise.
I said: 'Homer and Virg are New England farmers,
and the winged horse guards their gas-station, you're right.'

I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as
cold as its marble, then the shoulders in winter light
in the studio attic. I said, 'Omeros,'

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

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.
Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes
that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed. (14)

Walcott gives the impression of simply reporting a conversation and the sentence structure is nowhere strained or difficult, but he manages a series of rhymes that is quite astonishing: 'Greek' and 'reek' in the first stanza are simple, 'farmers' in the second and 'arm, as' a bit more adventurous. But the crux is the link-up between stanzas: between the first two stanzas: 'nose' and 'noise'. 'Omeros' rhymes with 'mer was' and links the third and the fourth stanza, the visual rhyme 'crashes' and 'washes' links the fourth and the fifth. The 'shore' in line 13 has to wait five more stanzas for its rhyme-word 'floor'. And in the last two stanzas of the preceding chapter, Walcott has 'waves' and 'wharves' and 'captains' and 'capstans'.

As is clear from the section above, rhyme is not Walcott's only strength, his lines abound with alliterations: the b's in line 2 or the sibilants in 'the white surf as it crashes/ and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore'. The theme of writing or of language sometimes even takes centre-stage, when Walcott puns relentlessly (frieze-freeze, Seychelles-seashells, able semen, navel victory) or offers us descriptions in terms of orthographic conventions. Starfish becomes asterisks and two Englishmen in hell are described like this:

There were Bennett & Ward! The two young Englishmen
in dirty pith-helmets crouched by the yellow sand
dribbling from the volcano's crust. Both were condemned

to pass a thermometer like that ampersand
which connected their names on a blackboard, its sign
coiled like a constrictor round the tree of Eden. (292)

And this is a cityscape under snow: 'Turn the page. Blank winter. The obliteration/ of nouns fading into echoes, the alphabet/ of scribbling branches' (218).

The structure of the poem gives the impression of being loosely chronological, but there is more to it than that. Walcott tells several different stories in a complex system of successive embeddings that he has borrowed from modern novelists. The continuity is maintained formally by the division into chapters and books: every chapter has three parts or movements, the poem has seven books varying in length from the first, which is the longest with thirteen chapters, to the fourth, with four chapters. There is a natural division between the first three and the rest, each group containing 32 chapters. Each book concentrates on one theme, which is introduced in the third section of the last chapter in the preceding book. The first book establishes all of the themes and characters, the second concentrates on Major Plunkett and his wife Maud. In the last chapter of Book Two, XXIV, we find Achille on a fishing trip, following a swift; Book Three chronicles his dream-voyage to Africa and the land of the dead. The last chapter of Book Three, XXXII, introduces the narrator, whose trips in the U.S. we follow in Book Four. Book Five chronicles the

narrator's travels abroad, which were prophesied in chapter XXXVI, the last of the preceding Book. Chapter XLIII, the last chapter of Book Five, announces the return of the narrator to St. Lucia and his stay on the island covers the narration in Book Six. In the final book everything comes full circle, a movement announced in Achille's ritual African dance in the final chapter of Book Six. The last section of chapter XXXII, which functions as a link between Book Three and Book Four, deserves to be quoted in full. In the chapter, the narrator has visited his mother and, returning at night, he has the impression that he is in Africa. When he enters his house he observes, 'enlarged by the lamp, a stuttering moth.' Then begins the third section:

The moth's swift shadow rippled on an emerald
lagoon that clearly showed the submerged geography
of the reef's lilac self, where a lateen sail held

for Gros Îlet village like a hooked butterfly
on its flowering branch: a canoe, nearing the island.
Soundless, enormous breakers foamed across the pane,

then broke into blinding glare. Achille raised his hand
from the drumming rudder, then watched our minnow plane
melt into cloud-coral over the horned island. (168)

The moth 'above the taut sheet still fragrant from the iron' in the narrator's room at the end of the second section moves out of doors and becomes a plane whose shadow ripples on the lagoon. A view from the window of the plane is described, with the water, the reef, and a sail that is, with its own shadow, 'like a hooked butterfly' because it is day now. The surf is soundless from above, but it breaks 'into blinding glare' and it is only at this point that we realize that the perspective has shifted from the narrator up in the plane to Achille in the boat below. The boat's rudder drums like the plane's engine and Achille watches it fly away. The image has been reversed: in a plane like a moth, the narrator saw the boat as a butterfly, in his boat Achille sees the 'minnow plane/ melt into cloud coral'. And that is not all: the plane's shadow is 'swift', and this is the name of the bird that Achille followed across the Atlantic to Africa in the whole preceding Book. The first sentence of the first section of chapter XXXIII, the beginning of the next Book, is: 'With the stunned summer going' (169). This phrase represents the opposite of the idyllic scene in the Antilles and it carries a phonetic reminder of the 'stuttering moth'. It must be clear that the overall structure of *Omeros*, with its interlocking sections, imitates the interconnected rhymes of the *terza rima*.

Language is never unproblematic in a post-colonial environment in which every idiolect is ideologically marked, as when the narrator talks to Major Plunkett, who gave him drill exercises when he was a boy. His

educated accent betrays him, because it is not marked by the local way of speaking, whereas the Major's is exposed as not quite up to standard.

'Been travellin' a bit, what?'

I forgot the melody of my own accent,
but I knew I'd caught him, and he knew he'd been caught,

caught out in the class-war. It stirred my contempt.
He knew the 'what?' was a farce, I knew it was not
officer-quality, a strutting R.S.M.

Regimental Sarn't Major Plunkett, Retired.
Not real colonial gentry, but spoke like
them from the height of his pig-farm, but I felt as tired

as he looked. Still, he'd led us in Kipling's requiem.
'Been doin' a spot of writing meself. Research'.
The 'meself' his accommodation. (269)

But Walcott goes beyond mere verbal play and punning: he creates a web of metaphors and images that keeps his material together, both on the scale of the complete poem and in individual chapters. A good example of the process on the latter level is Chapter XLI, in which Walcott describes the practice of the Roman conquerors to acquire 'Greek slaves as aesthetics instructors/ of their spoilt children, many from obscure islands/ of their freshly acquired archipelago' (Walcott teaches in Boston). He mocks the American habit of calling its towns after Greek examples and the 'small squares with Athenian principles and pillars// maintained by convicts and emigrants who had fled/ from persecution and gave themselves *fascies* with laws/ to persecute slaves' (206). The *fascies* are then mirrored in the image of the pillared façade

that looked down on the black
shadows that they cast as an enraging nuisance

which, if it were left to Solons, with enough luck
would vanish from its cities, just as the Indians
had vanished from its hills. Leaves on an autumn rake. (206-207)

We move from the *fascies* to the pillars-and-frieze, which leaves a shadow, and this shadow becomes an autumn rake. The rake is important because it is autumn by now, Indian summer more precisely, and the play of white and black is interrupted by an Indian red, pushed back 'by the Pilgrim's pitchfork' (207), another visual rhyme of '*fascies*'. The device itself is not unusual, but the abundance of these cohesive images is; as if Walcott is offering us a masterwork in the original meaning of the work, as if he is trying to convince the reader of his mastery over the material.

Walcott's most important structuring device, without which there probably would be no *Omeros*, is the intertextual reference to Homer. The dimensions of the reference to the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are at first sight prominent and obvious: Helen is the object of the love of two fishermen, Achille and Hector, who fight over her. Achille seems to have a lot of trouble with his heels, Hector dies when he crashes his taxi, their village is called an 'antipodal Troy', and of the island's two political parties one is Greek, the other Trojan. Philoctete has a wound that will not heal, 'Old St. Omero' has sailed around the world and he possesses a manuscript that might well be that of the entire poem. Major Plunkett has a pig-farm and he realizes at some point that the inhabitants of St. Lucia are seen as pigs: 'If History saw them as pigs, History was Circe/ with her schoolmaster's wand, with high poles at the fêtes/ saint-day processions past al fresco latrines' (64). Maud Plunkett, like Helen and Penelope, is a weaver, she embroiders quilts. On a larger scale, events in the poem mirror occurrences in Homer: Achille's dream-voyage to the land of his forefathers is explicitly described in terms of a visit to the land of the dead, Odysseus's descent into hell. Even the weather is not immune to homeric parallels: 'The Cyclone, howling because one of the lances/ of a flinging palm has narrowly grazed his one eye,/ wades knee-deep in troughs' (51).

But Walcott goes beyond simple correspondences between ancient epic and modern poetic material; unlike Joyce's homeric heroes, more than one of the characters in the poem is aware of the parallels: Major Plunkett is actively looking for a mythological relevance in the island and its history. He tells his wife about the Battle of the Saints:

'Look, love, for instance,
near sunset, on April 12, hear this, the *Ville de Paris*

struck her colours to Rodney. Surrendered. Is this chance
or an echo? Paris gives the golden apple, a war is
fought for an island called Helen?' (100)

As in Joyce's *Ulysses*, the contemporary corollaries of Homer's heroes function as not very complimentary comments on the state of our own time. Dublin's Odysseus is an advertisement canvasser, Telemachus a failed poet, Penelope an adulterous singer and Walcott's Helen of Troy, an ex-waitress and ex-maid, cannot choose between Achille and Hector, two fishermen. The narrator makes such a disparaging comparison between the classic epics and the modern reality in the passage quoted above: 'Homer and Virg are New England farmers,/ and the winged horse guards their gas-station' (14), where the two most important Greek and Roman epic poets are farmers and the winged horse Pegasus, the symbol of poetry, has become a sign over a Mobil gas-station. But such an interpretation would be mistaken: Walcott is not making fun of his characters,

he is not setting the ancient against the modern world in order to deplore the decadence of the latter, and neither was Joyce. In this respect, both writers differ fundamentally from the Eliot of 'The Waste Land', who imagined that he ridiculed the secretaries of the London city by comparing them to nymphs. In *Ulysses* and in *Omeros*, Leopold Bloom and Achille are the real heroes, and they have their creators at their side. The reader of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* who begins to read *Ulysses* is forced to transfer his sympathy from the pompous poet Stephen Dedalus, who has so obviously failed in what he set out to do at the end of *A Portrait*: 'to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race', to the all-round hero Leopold Bloom. Walcott too sympathizes with his modern hero: when Achille sails home again after his descent into hell, the narrator writes: 'And I'm homing with him, Homeros, my nigger,/ my captain, his breastplate bursting with happiness!' (159)

The most important character in this respect is Helen, an independent woman who does not need men to define her destiny. Although unlike Molly Bloom she does not get the privilege of her own voice, she is at the centre of the story and the author identifies her with the past and future of the island. St. Lucia is the real hero of *Omeros*, and for everybody in the poem, Helen is the island. Major Plunkett realizes with 'a flash of illumination' (103) that the island is Helen, and Achille observes the same thing when he sees her at the reggae-festival: 'She was selling herself like the island' (111). But Helen transcends any homeric type-casting; in Chapter XXIII she is compared to the tourist liner, 'white as a lily, its pistil an orange stack', after all, hers is the face that launched a thousand ships. But she has her black church dress on and she is pregnant, and is so in many ways the exact opposite of the virginal lily. When Maud wants to give her the money she had asked for, Helen 'was down the track/ with the arrogant sway of that hip, stern high in the line/ of the turned liner' (125). The trouble is that Helen transcends everything, even the homeric framework imposed on her: at the end of the poem, in Chapter LIV, the narrator realizes the futility of both Major Plunkett's strategy of providing Helen and the island with a history, and his own of creating an intertextual web around her:

There, in her head of ebony,
there was no real need for the historian's
remorse, nor for literature's. Why not see Helen

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

Omeros is more than a modern version of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*; the poem is the centre of an intertextual web that contains strands from all major

works of Western literature, from Virgil and the Bible to James Joyce. Virgil is present on a smaller scale than Homer, and he is emphatically absent as a guide in the Dantean descent into hell, but Walcott quotes the *arma virumque* that opens the *Aeneid* in Chapter XVIII. The major competitor to Homer in Western thinking and writing is the Bible, and in *Omeros* too the biblical and the homeric compete. In Chapter XVIII, Major Plunkett catches Helen when she is wearing one of his wife's bracelets on her black arm. This makes her at once Helen of Troy, whose epithet in Homer is 'of the white arms', and the biblical Eve. The bracelet becomes the snake in Eden and he hears it hiss:

Her housebound slavery could be your salvation.
You can pervert God's grace and adapt His blessing

to your advantage and dare His indignation
at a second Eden with its golden apple (96-97)

Walcott juxtaposes the story of Paris and his apple and that of Eve and hers: the Major is afraid of the lust he denies for 'this Judith from a different people', he lives in terror 'of age before beauty, the way that an elder/ longed for Helen on the parapets, or that bed./ Like an elder trembling for Susanna, naked' (97).

Another major intertext is Dante's *Divina Comedia*, which in its turn constitutes a meeting-place of biblical and classical references. Walcott takes from Dante the three-line stanza, the *terza rima*, the descent into hell of Achilles, and the overall structure into chapters: 100 cantos (10 X 10) in Dante, 64 chapters (8 X 8) in *Omeros*. Minor references include the comparison of some of the island's geography to Dante's description of the Malebolge, the deepest section of his *Inferno*. In chapter X, Major Plunkett climbs the volcano Soufrière, and the description of the crater relies heavily on Dante's description of the Malebolge in canto XVIII of the *Inferno*: 'Holes of boiling lava/ bubbled in the Malebolge, where the mud-caked skulls// climbed, multiplying in heads over and over' (59). Later, the narrator's father explains the island's history to his son:

Hell was built on those hills. In that country of coal
without fire, that inferno the same colour
as their skins and shadows, every labouring soul

climbed with her hundredweight basket, every load for
one copper penny, balanced erect on their necks
that were tight as the liner's hawsers from the weight.

The carriers were women, not the fair, gentler sex (74)

Joyce's role in this epic is crucial; it is simply impossible to write a modern-day homeric epic without reference to *Ulysses*. The central

meeting with the shade of Joyce in Dublin is framed by a network of references to Joyce's work. The Irish framework is introduced in the world of the poem in the person of Maud Plunkett, who is originally from Ireland. Her husband's name has powerful Irish echoes: Joseph Plunkett was Director of Military Operations of the Irish Republican Brotherhood; he signed the proclamation of the republic in 1916 and was executed by the British for his part in the Easter rising. Walcott sets up a series of similarities between the two islands: they are both colonized nations, they are divided along religious, linguistic and cultural lines, and a form of English is spoken that is non-standard. Most of the references to Joyce's works are only minor echoes: Maud is, like Bloom in *Ulysses*, described as a 'bit of an artist', and the beginning of Chapter XLIII, 'Flour was falling on the Plains' (213), echoes the lyric passage at the end of 'The Dead' which begins with: 'Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, further westwards, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves'. But the majority of the references to Joyce fall into a pattern: they deal with the Stephen passages in *Ulysses*, more specifically those that involve Stephen's relationship to his father. A first passage occurs in Chapter XII, which records the narrator's conversation with the spirit of his father, who describes his interest in poetry, his early death and the survival of the narrator's mother in terms of Shakespeare's life and especially in terms of *Hamlet*, and he adds, 'I believe the parallel has brought you some peace./ Death imitating Art, eh?' (69), which echoes Stephen Dedalus's Shakespeare theory in the 'Scylla and Charybdis' chapter of *Ulysses*. The end of this section, with the narrator's father 'patterned in the shade, the leaves in his hair, the vines of his translucent body' (69), mirrors the last sentence of the second chapter of *Ulysses* when Stephen, as Telemachus, takes his leave from Mr Deasy, a very inconsequential Nestor: 'On his wise shoulders through the checkerwork of leaves the sun flung spangels, dancing coins'. A similar moment occurs when the narrator leaves the museum in Boston in the first section of Chapter XXXVI: 'Out in fresh air, close to a Bayeux of ivy,/ I smoked on the steps and read the calligraphy// of swallows' (183). This scene echoes an important moment at the end of 'Scylla and Charybdis' when Stephen leaves the Dublin National Library: 'The portico. Here I watched the birds for augury. Aengus of the birds'. And a final scene occurs at the beginning of Chapter LVI, when the narrator watches the beach from the window of his hotel. He sees a coconut and a dog. When a cloud covers the sun, the coconut changes into the marble head of Homer, which changes in its turn into Seven Seas, who is in his turn transformed into a log. Then the cloud uncovers the sun and the log becomes a bust again: 'They kept shifting shapes, or the shapes metamorphosed/ in the worried water' (280). What is enacted here is 'Proteus', the third chapter of *Ulysses*, in which Stephen walks along Sandymount strand. Proteus is, according

to the story that Homer's Menelaus tells Telemachus, the old man of the sea: 'At the time when the sun has gone up to bestride the middle of the heaven,/ then the ever-truthful Old Man of the Sea will come out of the water under the blast of the West Wind'.³ When Menelaus manages to catch him, Proteus keeps changing: 'First he turned into a great bearded lion,/ and then to a serpent, then to a leopard, then to a great boar,/ and he turned into fluid water, to a tree with flowering branches' (IV, 456-58). But the inquisitive dog is Joyce's: 'Their dog ambled about a bank of dwindling sand, trotting, sniffing on all sides. Looking for something lost in a past life. Suddenly he made off like a bounding hare, ears flung back, chasing the shadow of a lowskimming gull'.

The meeting with Joyce in Chapter XXXIX is central to the story of Book Five, which chronicles Walcott's visit to Europe and to the origins of slavery and colonialism. First he visits Lisbon, then London, where he meets Omeros with his manuscript, but in both capitals of capitalism he finds only the stone effigies that are left of decadent and dying empires. The image of Glendalough which opens Chapter XXXIX is totally different: in a rich and punning language, the description of the abbey's ruins in County Wicklow is enlivened with images that remind one of St. Lucia.

The great headstones lifted like the keels of curraghs
from Ireland's groundswell and spray foamed on the walls
of the broken abbey. That silver was the lake's,

a salver held by a tonsured hill. (198)

The difference with Lisbon and London is that Ireland and Glendalough do not belong to the conquerors but to the vanquished, the inheritors of a disappearing language. Even the name of the place 'echoed the old shame/ of disenfranchisement', and the political division of Ireland becomes clear when a rook flies north across the Ulster border:

it would see a street that ended in wreaths of wire
while a hearse with drizzling lights waits for an order
in a sharp accent, making the black boots move on

in scraping syllables, the gun on its shoulder,
still splitting heirs, dividing a Shem from a Shaun,
an Ireland no wiser as it got older. (199)

The fight between Unionists and Republicans in the North is expressed in terms of the warring brothers of *Finnegans Wake*, and in the second section of the chapter the narrator notices the violence that is part of the natural scene: 'those fields which they inherit// hide stones white-knuckled with hatred' (200).

The third section describes the mossy embankment of the river Liffey in Dublin, where the narrator imagines Joyce himself 'with eyepatch and

tilted hat,/ rakish cane on one shoulder' (200), as in the famous pictures of Joyce on the banks of the Limmat in Zürich. Joyce does not appear, but 'in black cloche hat and coat' (200) is Anna Livia, 'Muse of our age's Omeros, undimmed Master/ and true tenor of the place!' Anna Livia, the female heroine of *Finnegans Wake*, does not accidentally appear when 'a stroke of light brushed the honey-haired river', she is the river. The narrator goes to a restaurant where an air by Thomas Moore is played, a favourite of Maud Plunkett's.

And then I saw him.

The Dead were singing in fringed shawls, the wick-low shade
leapt high and rouged their cold cheeks with vermilion
round the pub piano, the air Maud Plunkett played,

rowing her with felt hammer-strokes from my island
to one with bright doors and cobbles, and Mr. Joyce
led us all, as gently as Howth when it drizzles,

his voice like sun-drizzled Howth, its violet lees
of moss at low tide, where a dog barks 'Howth! Howth!' at
the shawled waves, and the stone I rubbed in my pocket

from the Martello tower brought one-eyed Ulysses
to the copper-bright strand, watching the mail-packet
butting past the Head, its wake glittering with keys. (201)

This dense passage not only makes the link between this poem and Joyce's work, between St. Lucia and Ireland, it creates a network of allusions to Joyce's works that manages to include his whole oeuvre. The title of the last story of *Dubliners*, 'The Dead', is alluded to, and the sisters in 'fringed shawls' of that story take the place of Maud Plunkett. At the same time and in line with the implications of Joyce's story and of the 'Hades' chapter of *Ulysses*, the dead stand for all the dear departed that haunt the living city. Howth is the peninsula guarding the North entrance to Dublin Bay, and Howth Castle and Environs is also HCE, the male protagonist of *Finnegans Wake*, counterpart of Anna Livia Plurabelle, ALP. But it is on the beach among the 'violet lees/ of moss at low tide' between Howth and Liffey, that Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* discovers his calling as a writer, and at the other side of the Liffey Stephen watches the dog in the 'Proteus' chapter. The narrator has brought a stone from the Martello tower, the scene of the opening of *Ulysses*, and rubbing it brings 'one-eyed Ulysses/ to the copper-bright strand', which mirrors the appearance of Anna Livia earlier: she too was summoned by a stroke of light. This reminds us of the correspondence between Chapters 1 and 4 of *Ulysses*: when Stephen and Bloom see the same cloud cover the sun, the thoughts of both characters become gloomy until the sun appears

again and the light wipes away the desolate mood. The last image combines the end of *A Portrait*, the beginning and ending of *Ulysses* and the end of *Finnegans Wake* in the image of the mail-boat passing Howth. This is the boat that takes Stephen to the continent at the end of *A Portrait*, it is the boat that Stephen sees from the Martello-tower at the beginning of *Ulysses*, and the end of that book evokes Leopold Bloom's proposal to Molly among the rhododendrons of Howth. *Finnegans Wake* begins and ends with the riverrun of the Liffey, its last lines describe the waters of the Liffey mixing with the salt water of Dublin bay: 'We pass through grass behush the bush to. Whish! A gull. Gulls. Far calls. Coming, far! End here? Us then. Finn, again! Take. Bussoftlhee, mememormee! Till thousandsthee. Lps. The keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the'. The keys that glitter in the wake of the mail-boat seem to be keys that originate in Joyce's work and that can open quite a few doors in *Omeros*.

The image of the self-conscious postmodern poet who carefully chooses the writers he will borrow from is one that Walcott may have encountered in contemporary Irish poetry: quite a few poets have referred to the ghost of Joyce and Dante in their work, most prominently Thomas Kinsella and Seamus Heaney.⁴ From the context it is clear that Heaney is a crucial influence here. In his most Dantean cycle *Station Island*, Heaney describes a meeting with Joyce's shade that is quite similar to Walcott's Chapter XXXIX.

My emphasis on Walcott's creative reading of the masters of the Western literary canon may give the impression that *Omeros* represents an attempt to become part of the European tradition, but this is not quite true. Carefully built into the texture of the poem is a counter-narrative that is openly and strongly critical of all Western traditions.

At the heart of the poem is the stated ambition in two of the protagonists, Major Plunkett and the narrator, to represent Helen and the island. The Major wants to give the island a sense of its own history. As a pig-farmer he realizes that History has been unkind to the islanders and as a man he is attracted to Helen: 'So Plunkett decided that what the place needed/ was its true place in history, that he'd spend hours/ for Helen's sake on research' (64). Book Two represents his effort, and it is characteristic of the soldier's perspective that he concentrates on the one major military event in the history of St. Lucia: he tells the story of a spy in Holland, a midshipman, gives the background of the Battle of the Saints, and describes the midshipman's death by drowning. His research brings him to the museum and the ruins of the fort, but his central find is the son and heir in the past that he does not have in the present: the midshipman's name was Plunkett, and he was nineteen when he died. When he is tempted by the bracelet that is also a snake, the Major denies that his research is not innocent: 'He murmured to the mirror: No. My thoughts are pure./ They're meant to help her people, ignorant and poor./ But these, smiled the bracelet, are the vows of empire' (97). Plunkett and his

wife represent what is most decent of the British Empire, the ordinary people at the frontiers who fought the Empire's wars: one of Plunkett's ambitions was 'to embark on/ a masochistic odyssey through the Empire, to watch it go in the dusk' (90).

But there is another story, one that has no records and no place in the Empire's official history and one that does not deal with military campaigns. It is the story of slavery, and its protagonists and victims are the people of the island. Their representative is Achille and Book Three tells his story. When, early in the poem, Achille had dived to the sunken ship, he found the skeletons of slaves that were killed in the crossing. Later, in a dream-like voyage, he follows a swift across the Atlantic to Africa, where he briefly becomes part of the life of the village where his forefathers were taken as slaves. The real epic is the crossing to America of Achille's forefathers: 'But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendour' (149). The slaves on board the ship lose their identity, their creative abilities, their names, they become shadows. As shadows they enter the new land:

Their whole world was moving,
or a large part of the world, and what began dissolving

was the fading sound of their tribal name for the rain,
the bright sound for the sun, a hissing noun for the river,
and always the word 'never', and never the word 'again'. (152)

This is the story that has no history, the true epic that has been forgotten, and the story of slavery and mass extinction does not stop there: the Aruacs, the Indians who originally lived on the island, have completely disappeared. After the reggae-party, it is Achille who, with the beat of the Marley song 'Buffalo soldier' in his head, imagines that he is a soldier, and he uses his oar as a gun:

slowly he fired the oar
and a palm-tree crumpled; then to repeated cracks

from the rifle, more savages, until the shore
was littered with palm spears, bodies: like the Aruacs
falling to the muskets of the Conquistador. (162)

Equally ironical is the fact that it is Achille again who digs up an Aruac artifact and simply throws it away. The killings, glorified both in Homer and in Hollywood movies, and the forgettings are part and parcel of the Western tradition that Walcott's narrator is nevertheless part of. The narrator, like the island, is torn between Europe and Africa, between Plunkett and Achille: when the latter is helped out of his canoe in the African

village, the narrator briefly intervenes: 'Half of me was with him. One half with the midshipman/ by a Dutch canal' (135).

It is this double perspective that makes the poem such a powerful achievement: Walcott presents the two sides, the benevolent colonialism of the minor officials of the empire on the one hand and the descendants of slaves on the other, but as a poet he takes a stand. Of Maud and the Major the narrator says:

There was Plunkett in my father, much as there was
my mother in Maud. Not just the morning-glories
or our own verandah's lilac bougainvilleas,

or the splayed hands of grape-leaves, of classic stories
on the barber's wooden shelf, the closest, of course,
was Helen's, but there in that khaki Ulysses

there was a changing shadow of Telemachus
in me, in his absent war, and in an empire's guilt
stitched in the one pattern of Maud's fabulous quilt. (263)

Woven into the tapestry of this poem are both the wars and wounds of the British and of any empire, and the loss of history suffered by the empire's dispossessed. The initial impulse of the poem might have been personal; but the loss of the beloved, the width of the poem, its themes of loss and hurt break through the lyric into the epic. At the opening of the poem, the narrator can still write about Major Plunkett's war wound: 'This wound I have stitched into Plunkett's character./ He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme/ of this work' (28), but very quickly the real and historical wounds efface the literary or homeric ones. Walcott is aware that these wounds cannot be healed with art; he writes in Chapter XL:

The honeyed twilight cupped in long, shadowed squares,
the dripping dungeons, the idiot dukes, were all
redeemed by the creamy strokes of Velazquez,

like the scraping cellos in concentration camps,
with art next door to the ovens, the fluting veil
of smoke soaring with Schubert? The cracked glass of Duchamp's

The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors; did Dada
foresee the future of Celan and Max Jacob
as part of the cosmic midden? (205)

The narrator's father is right: the poet's writing is like the women who carry coal to the ship:

There, like ants or angels, they see their native town,
unknown, raw, insignificant. They walk, you write;

keep to that narrow causeway without looking down,
climbing in their footsteps, that slow, ancestral beat
of those used to climbing roads, your own work owes them

because the couplet of those multiplying feet
made your first rhymes. Look, they climb, and no one knows them;
they take their copper pittances, and your duty

from the time you watched them from your grandmother's house
as a child wounded by their power and beauty
is the chance you now have, to give those feet a voice. (75-76)

It is those feet and the proud women whom they carry that are the real heroines of *Omeros*. When we finish this poem we should at least remember the scene when Helen comes to Maud to borrow five dollars: Maud only comes out of the house to meet Helen when she starts to wrench some flowers off the vine. After Helen has walked away without taking the money, Maud picks up the flowers:

The allamandas lasted three days. Their trumpets would bend
and their gloop pass. But she'll last forever, Helen.

NOTES

1. All quotations are from Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).
2. Homer, *The Iliad*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), Bk. III, ll. 125-27.
3. *The Odyssey of Homer: A Modern Translation*. Richmond Lattimore, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), Book IV, ll. 400-2. Further references in the text.
4. See Geert Lernout's 'The Dantean Paradigm: Thomas Kinsella and Seamus Heaney', in C.C. Barfoot and Theo D'Haen (eds.), *The Clash of Ireland: Literary Contrasts and Connections* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989), pp. 248-64.