The Exile's Epic Path to Healing: Authorial Intrusion in Purgatorio *and* Omeros

by Kelly Elizabeth Hill

Authorial intrusion, where the author interrupts the flow of a story to offer his or her thoughts to the reader, has been both heavily studied and critiqued. Whether to call commentary from the author a digression or an intrusion would depend on the time period being discussed. It would be impossible to pinpoint the first example of authorial intrusion, although William Congreve, author of *Incognita; Or, Love and Duty Reconcil'd* written in 1692, is often recognized for being one of the first authors to utilize authorial asides deliberately and consciously (Dawson 2016: 155). By the 18th and 19th centuries, authorial digressions in novels were perfectly acceptable conventions as long as they were prefaced with excessive apologies from the author (Dawson 2016: 157).

However, as reading became a more private experience in the mid to late 19th century, and the tradition of oral storytelling faded, the author's voice became more important and the belief that authorial commentary "works against the dramatic potential of the novel" (Dawson 2016: 158) by interrupting the flow of a narrative became more widely accepted. By the 20th century, these once acceptable digressions were being called intrusions, partly because of the way readers and critics approached

fiction. Postmodern authors, meanwhile, occasionally incorporated authorial commentary into their work to debunk the very idea that anything in fiction is "real."

One kind of authorial intrusion that has received less scholarly study, though, occurs when the author intrudes into the fictionality of a story by becoming a character. In a memoir or biography, it's understood the author will be both narrator and character; in a work of fiction, however, the author is generally expected to be separate from his or her characters. Therefore, this kind of intrusion is notably distinct from the authorial moralizing, lecturing, and explaining so common in Victorian novels, as well as the taunting of post-modernism. A reader is forced to grapple differently with a text when he or she can't extricate the author from the work because the author has suddenly *become* the work. As Dawson asks, "When does narration stop and commentary commence?" (Dawson 2016: 151) It is this intersection of narration and commentary and how it impacts both reader and author that I will explore in the work of two seemingly dissimilar poets: Dante Alighieri and Derek Walcott.

I first discovered the works of Dante and Walcott in a graduate seminar titled "Time, Exile, Language: A Poetic Odyssey from Dante to Walcott," which juxtaposed medieval and post-colonial literature as a way of engaging with interdisciplinary theory. At first glance, there isn't much to connect these two poets outside the depth and breadth of their poetry: Dante was an exile from Florence who wrote in the 1300s, Walcott a St. Lucian poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. It's worth noting that the scholarship on both Dante and Walcott is vast and in the words of Walcott himself from a 1996 interview, "I have to be careful not to give […] the false impression that I'm a very thorough scholar [of Dante]." (Fumagalli 2001: 282) Only in the last decade or so have scholars dedicated themselves to exploring the "Dantean" influence in Walcott's work, and there is clear and direct evidence that Walcott did in fact learn and borrow from Dante, from his recycling of the *terza rima* in *Omeros* to the contents of the 1996 interview of Walcott by Maria Cristina Fumagalli called "A Conversation About Dante with Derek Walcott," in which he expresses admiration and a literary debt to the Italian poet.[1]

Ultimately what I as a modern day reader found most striking about these two poets was their common status as exiles and how this shared status influenced their storytelling. Dante was physically exiled from the city of his birth and forbidden to return under penalty of death, an exile he felt deeply and which influenced his work. In contrast, Walcott's exile was more spiritual and intellectual. Even though Walcott eventually rejected the label of exile(most notably in his 1985 *Paris Review* interview) he did often speak of duality in his life, what he once called the "wrestling contradiction of being white in mind and black in body."[2] Paola Loreto's description of Walcott as a "voluntary exile" or "traveler" is especially poignant, a traveler being

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[1]For more on the intersection of Dante and Walcott, see Maria Cristina Fumagalli's article in *The Cambridge Quarterly* "Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and Dante's *Commedia:* Epics of the Self and Journeys into Language" (2000).

[2]*NBC News*, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/derek-walcott-nobel-laureate-playwright-dies-87-n734916> (30 July 2017).

someone who "is defined by his choice to belong to more than one culture and to be free to move between more than one culture." (Loreto 2009:15)

A closer examination of Dante and Walcott reveals an unusual overlap: both poets employed the kind of authorial intrusion mentioned above and became minor characters in their stories. That both poets were exiles, or travelers, not only granted them a unique freedom in what they could write, but it also granted them the liberty to merge the political with the personal by becoming characters in their own work, a way to achieve healing via storytelling and art.

It's worth noting from the outset that Walcott and Dante wrote themselves into their work as *secondary* characters. Certainly it's one thing for an author to be the protagonist of his or her story – it's quite a different statement when the author is a minor character in his story. As secondary characters, Dante and Walcott were able to speak to their own personal sense of exile, as well as highlighting that their unique voices should also be understood as one of many voices in the story. Blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction in their character personae allowed these authors to "reclaim" their lost homeland and history while also giving them a platform to challenge the sins and injustices of larger institutions and establishments: the crisis of Church and State in Christendom for Dante, and colonialism and its lingering aftereffects for Walcott. In other words, by becoming minor characters in their own works, both Dante and Walcott were able to return home and discover the healing powers of an identity forged by their own hand, as opposed to one bestowed on them by the larger powers of society, while also giving a voice to those people who had been largely forgotten.

I hope the reader will forgive this momentary authorial digression, but in order to fully understand the "author as character" literary device, it's important to understand the extent to which the characters of Walcott and Dante in their poems are autobiographical. A character in a story, even a character modeled on a living or deceased person, is not "real" in the true, literal sense of the word; characters are created by an author and exist on a page, so a debate on the "realness" of a character in a story would quickly devolve into an exercise in absurdity. I will therefore focus on how Walcott and Dante blurred fiction and non-fiction in their character personae and how this fluidity between real and imagined allowed them to express their ideas about the role of art in society as well as control and shape their own narratives, instead of allowing their stories to be told by others.

Although the scholarship on Dante is vast, his biography is not. Based on the few facts that are generally agreed to be true – born in Florence in 1265, exiled in 1302, died in 1321 – it can be difficult to determine how much Dante the pilgrim is meant to be Dante the poet in the *Commedia*. Giuseppe Mazzotta is quick to point out that most biographies of Dante start with the assumption that there is a direct connection between Dante's life and his work, and research on Dante's life often focuses on the objective events in his life while dismissing the ambiguities that don't align with the proposed narrative (Mazzotta 1993: 2-3). This might be one reason that Boccaccio's

1348 biography of Dante,[3] also the earliest, and which blends fact and fiction, (much like Dante himself did in his own work), still endures as a resource for studying Dante because of its imaginative nature. Exile is what sparked Dante's imagination, granting him the "unwanted liberty to think on a grander scale."(Hollander 2001: 3) Or as Mazzotta writes: "Dante's history is essentially the history of his works, and they cannot be understood without understanding the bleak clarity exile brought to his vision […] But because everything was now lost, nothing was lost." (Mazzotta 1993: 9) Or finally, as Prue Shaw points out, there's a reason it's been suggested Florence should have built a statue of the nameless Florentine who exiled Dante; without exile, Dante would surely not have written the *Commedia*. (Shaw 2014: xv)

The action of the *Commedia* is set during Holy Week of the year 1300, a year and a half before Dante's real life expulsion from Florence. Dante's exile is not specifically addressed in the *Commedia* until canto 17 of *Paradiso* when Dante the pilgrim learns that exile awaits him. John Najemy in his article "Dante and Florence" explains that Dante is made to understand that he will learn certain truths "precisely *because* of his separation from the city" (Najemy 1993: 238; emphasis mine). Therefore, Dante the poet gives himself the autonomy and authority to fictionalize his own exile and reject his city of birth before it rejects him. It's while in the realm of Purgatory that Dante the poet and Dante the pilgrim are seeking healing, in order to be prepared for, among other things, this moment in Paradise. In other words, exile granted Dante a kind of literary freedom, a way to rewrite and revise his own history, which is seen throughout the *Commedia*, but especially in the *Purgatorio*.

It's in this realm that Dante's imaginative skills are on full display. The concept of Purgatory was a fairly new concept, less than 100 years old, when Dante was writing the *Commedia*. Art throughout the Middle Ages had representations of both Heaven and Hell, but Purgatorial art was not as prevalent (Simone 2014: 3). Therefore, Dante's representation of Purgatory's physical topography as well as the penitential acts performed on each terrace was original to him. Unlike the souls in Hell, who must suffer for all of eternity, souls in Purgatory have repented and been forgiven. But even though these souls have been granted a permanent state of grace, they are not in Heaven yet because they are all still suffering from the consequences of their earthly sins. Until these vices have been purged and corrected in Purgatory, their souls cannot be reunited with God in Paradise (Durlin 2003: 9-10).[4] In Purgatory the past is important and the souls "suffer over the complexities of their minds and memories," (Simone 2014: 1) yet as they advance up the mountain, it's the present moment that matters. This is a stark contrast to the souls in *Inferno*, who lack a future because of their past.

Dante starts his climb of Purgatory with seven "p"s traced onto his forehead. One by one they are erased from his body as he climbs. By the time he reaches Paradise, all

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[3] For a more detailed analysis of the structural complexity of Bocaccio's *Vita di Dante*, see Mazzotta (1993: 2-3).

[4] The Durling translation is widely used with English speakers, thanks to inclusion of the original Italian on the left hand page and the English translation on the right. He also provides a historical, political, and theological context to situate English-speaking readers.

have been removed and his spiritual burden, which had been both figuratively and literally heavy, has been lifted.

In Dante's Purgatory, poetry and art are given prominent roles. The reader sees this in the way Purgatory itself is structured, with art adorning each terrace and serving as a reminder of what the soul should strive for and also what it should avoid. In order to advance up the terraces, the souls must continue to purge the wrong kind of love, what Virgil calls "distorted" love – gluttony, lust, pride, etc. – in order to embrace the right kind of love. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than on the terrace of the proud, with the sculptures of humility and pride carved so ornately onto the walls of the terrace that Dante the pilgrim is unsure at first if they are in fact artwork. Here the souls are forced to carry heavy stones and gaze at their feet and the ground, where there are images of "iconic and destructive pride" (Simone 2014: 7) meant to show the souls what to avoid.

It's on this terrace that Dante the artist must wrestle with and confront his own artistic pride, specifically in canto 11. Here Dante the pilgrim is interacting with, as opposed to merely observing, the prideful souls. More than half of canto 11 is dedicated to an exchange between Dante and Oderisi, a famous manuscript illuminator who tells Dante he now sees the sin in placing too much stock in your own artistic worth. Later in the canto Dante, much like the prideful souls around him, has adopted a stooped stance and is feeling the effects of his own pride weighing him down:

> Ascoltando chinai in giù la faccia;
> e un di lor, non questi che parlava,
> si torse sotto il peso che li 'mpaccia
> e videmi e conobbemi e chiamava,
> tenendo li occhi con fatica fisi
> a me che tutto chin con loro andava.
> (*Purgatorio* 11.73-78)[5]

On this terrace, Dante recognizes that what elevates art is its ability to heal and transform; less important is the artist. Dante the author is given the challenge of how to convey his belief that art can serve a divine purpose, while simultaneously avoiding the criticism that he is placing too much pride in his own artistic merit. It's through Dante the pilgrim that Dante the poet is able to address this concern. Here, Dante the pilgrim is one of several souls stooped over by pride, one of several artists who must grapple with the harsh inevitability that someone new will always come along to supplant them. After navigating the terrace of the proud and confronting his own prideful nature, the first "p" is erased from Dante's forehead; immediately he feels a new lightness.

In Dante's time, secular literature, or the writings of poets, was generally considered imaginative.[6] In contrast, theological allegory tended to be "limited to a

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[5] Listening, I bent down my face; and one of / them, not the one who was speaking, twisted / under the weight that hampers them, / and saw me and knew me and was calling, /struggling to keep his eyes on me as all bent over I /walked along with them.

single use, interpreting the several meanings found in certain […] historical passages in Scripture." (Hollander 2001: 101) However, Dante did something radical in the *Commedia* by treating his secular poem as something historical, drawing on the allegory of theologians and presenting the poem as if it had happened (Hollander 2001: 101). One way Dante does this is to directly address the reader (seven times in the *Purgatorio*) with the kind of authorial intrusions discussed at the beginning of this paper. The first aside to the reader occurs in canto 9: "Sharpen here, reader, your eyes to the truth" (line 19) and the last in canto 33:

> S'io avessi, lettor, più lungo spazio
> da scrivere, i' pur cantere' in parte
> la dolce ber che mai non m'avria sazio,
> ma perché piene son tutte le carte
> ordite a questa cantica seconda,
> non mi lascia più ir lo fren de l'arte.
> (*Purgatorio* 33.136-141)[7]

Poets in Dante's time generally insisted their work was fictional, yet here was Dante insisting his fictional work about being led through the afterlife by the esteemed Roman poet Virgil was true. The reader then becomes "[Dante's] willing collaborator, not merely choosing to understand that a given narrated event is 'impossible,' but learning to comprehend why the author is asking us to grant its 'truthfulness.'" (Hollander 2001: 94)

In the *Purgatorio*, Dante is reunited with friends like Casella (canto 2), Belacqua (canto 4), and Forese Donati (canto 23) as well as all the poets and artists he meets on the terrace of pride. Dante interacts with famous historical figures from antiquity (Cato, Virgil), kings and emperors (Rudolph of Hapsburg, Wenceslaus II ruler of Bohemia, and Philip III of France in canto 7) as well as unnamed citizens. In other words, he speaks with those who would have been considered literate and those who would have only been able to read Italian.

As Ascoli points out, reunion is especially important in Purgatory, "not only the reuniting of individuals with their Creator, but also the reconvening of broken families and dispersed communities." (Ascoli 1993: 96) Friends, lovers, families – all are united in Purgatory. Dante the pilgrim is but one of many souls on the journey up Mount Purgatory, and his role in the story is simultaneously that of an individual and that of an "everyman."

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[6]Some medievalists, such as Barbara Newman and Maureen Boulton, are backing away from this type of claim and are studying what is proving to be a more complicated relationship between theology and imaginative literature than previously theorized. For more on their explorations of the sacred and the secular, see Newman's book *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred* (2013) and Boulton's *Sacred Fictions of Medieval France: Narrative Theology in the Lives of Christ and the Virgin, 1150-1550* (2015).

[7] If, reader, I had more space to write, I would /continue to sing in part the sweet drink that could /never satiate me, /but because all the pages are filled that have / been laid out for this second canticle, the bridle of /art permits me to go no further.

The most important reunion in the poem is between Dante the pilgrim and Beatrice. Dante the pilgrim is named only once in the entire poem, when Beatrice calls him by name after he has climbed Purgatory and is in the Earthly Paradise:

> "Dante perché Virgilio se ne vada,
> non pianger anco, non piangere ancora,
> ché pianger to conven per alta spade."
> (*Purgatorio* 30.55-57)[8]

Here the reader sees the importance of Dante inserting himself into the story beyond the more globalized healing achieved by climbing the terraces with all the other souls in Purgatory; once in Paradise, Beatrice calls him by name, singling him out. By not hiding behind a created character, the story becomes bigger than Dante, "not a mere personal history" (Dinsmore 1903: 64) but a universal story, accessible for all. Dante the pilgrim is one of many souls in Purgatory waiting to be cleansed, no more and no less important than the kings and other famous people traversing the mountain. Everyone who asks for forgiveness, and means it, will be granted peace and salvation, even an exile like Dante.

All the souls in Purgatory are "strangers in a strange land" (Schnapp 1993: 94) and all are, in essence, exiles from Paradise. The souls are on a specific journey in a land with a specific topography and here, time matters. In many ways, exiles have nothing but time on their hands, cut off from friends, family, and their country. Time is different in the other poems of the *Commedia*: it's wasted in Hell, and inconsequential in Paradise (Schnapp 1993: 94). But in Purgatory, time is what has the power to heal. Every soul has been granted a sentence, and once they have completed their prescribed time on a terrace, they ascend to the next in order to continue cleansing their soul.

Dante gives himself the challenge of returning from Purgatory and sharing what he has learned – he has been refreshed by not only reaching Paradise but by sharing the truth of the souls he's encountered, by giving a history to everyone. Many of the souls in Purgatory have asked Dante that when he returns to earth to remind their families to pray for them to help them as they traverse Purgatory.

By becoming a character in his poem, Dante the poet was able to control events that were out of his control. He couldn't control where he was living, but he could control how he moved in his own story, how he navigated the world beyond this one, where God's love could save a soul who was ready to receive it. The Purgatory Dante created is about choice and healing, from the arrangement of the terraces to the gentle lightening of the soul as it is cleansed of sin and reaches the summit. Exiles have to live in the present; Dante's Purgatory is a world where healing can be achieved not by wallowing in the past but by continually moving forward, an idea that Derek

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[8] "Dante, though Virgil depart, do not weep yet, /do not weep yet, for you must weep to another /sword."

Walcott will also explore several hundred years later. Even before he is reunited with Beatrice in Paradise, Virgil tells Dante the pilgrim:

> Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno:
> libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,
> e fallo for a non fare a suo senno.
> Per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio."
> (*Purgatorio* 27.139-142)[9]

What better healing can there be for an exile than to have attained personal freedom, to be king of one's own soul?

More than six hundred years later, poet Derek Walcott undertook a similar journey of healing for the exile in his epic poem *Omeros*.

Walcott was born in 1930 on the island of St. Lucia, once a former British colony. He published his first poetry collection at age 14, and his breakthrough collection, *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*, explored themes that would continue to occupy him throughout his writing career: Caribbean life, the scars of post-colonialism, language, and power, to name a few.[10] While writing *Omeros*, Walcott was still struggling with the dual identity he'd carried all his life. Though not an exile in the literal sense like Dante, Walcott was burdened with an emotional and intellectual sense of exile, of not fully inhabiting one world. Logically, this meant there were times he felt excluded from both worlds.

In *Omeros*, the character of Walcott shares some key characteristics with his author creator: he too is from the island of St. Lucia, is in the middle of a divorce, and is struggling to reconcile his sense of loyalty to both the European writers he studied in school and his Caribbean homeland. Even the childhood home of Walcott and Walcott the character, now a printing press, is the same.

When asked how he saw himself in terms of the great tradition of English language poetry, Walcott once said, "I am primarily, absolutely, a Caribbean writer. The English language is nobody's special property […] I have never felt inhibited in trying to write as well as the greatest English poets."[11] And yet, as Hamner points out, Walcott's early work was more "Eurocentric" (1997: 17) in feel than his later work. Walcott himself even described his first published poem as "Miltonic," and his largely autobiographical poem written at age 19, "Epitaph for the Young: A Poem in XII Cantos" is preoccupied with how a West Indian poet like himself fits into the Euro-American literary tradition. In this early autobiographical poem, "the young poet [Walcott] solicits at one time or another the names of Telemachus, Hamlet, Stephen Dedalus, and Icarus." (Hamner 1997: 32) At the start of his writing career, Walcott was mulling over where and how he as a Caribbean poet fit into the literary world.

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[9] No longer await any word or sign from me; free, / upright, and whole is your will, and it would be a / fault not to act according to its intent. / Therefore you over yourself I crown and mitre."

[10] *Poetry Foundation: Derek Walcott*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/derek-walcott> (30 July 2017).

[11] Derek Walcott, interview by Edward Hirsch (1985).

Four decades later, it seems Walcott has found an avenue for ridding himself of "all that Greek manure" (Walcott 1990: 271) and reconciled, to some degree, the competing influences of European traditionalism and the Caribbean in both his writing and his life. Walcott said in a 1985 *Paris Review* interview that one privilege of being a West Indian poet is getting to do everything for the first time, while also having a literary tradition you can study to see how it's done, with people like Defoe, Dickens, and Richardson. What has happened, then, for Walcott to go from mimicry of the masters (even if his mimicry was both deliberate appropriation and re-telling) to the belief that there can be an incorporation of both the colonizer and the colonized?

This is where the literary move of author as character enters. By becoming a minor character in *Omeros*, Walcott was allowed to be both the one *telling* (and therefore controlling) the history of the West Indies, as well as the one *showing* the effects of colonialism. It is significant that he too chose to become not a main character in his poem, but a minor one, just as Dante did centuries before. *Omeros* is not the story of one man. Rather, the cast of characters, the chorus of the forgotten, is what makes a whole. In this respect, all the characters of *Omeros* – Walcott, Achille, Helen, Major Plunkett, Maud, Hector, even Catherine Wheldon – are simultaneously protagonists and secondary characters. By inserting himself into the story, Walcott is confronting the internal and external sources of his alienation and exposing them for the reader. Throughout the poem, we see all the characters, but especially the character of Walcott, searching for a home. The reader is drawn into the world of Walcott's Caribbean home as well as the world he encounters as a voluntary exile.

Walcott the character makes an early appearance in the poem, in Book I, Chapter 2 as he remembers a former Greek lover. After this, the author's persona fades and is largely forgotten until he reappears in Book I, Chapter 12, when Walcott visits his childhood home and encounters his father's ghost.

There are several possible reasons for why Walcott's father Warwick shows up at this point in the poem. Warwick died at age thirty-one of an ear infection when Walcott himself was quite young. At this point in the poem, Walcott the character is 31 (a difference between character and poet is that Walcott would have been in his 50s when writing *Omeros*), the same age his father was when he died. The reader learns Warwick was named after "the Bard's county" (Walcott 1990: 68) and died on April 1, the date accepted by most scholars as Shakespeare's birthday. With the appearance of his father's ghost (a ghost only Walcott the character can see, a very Shakespearean literary move to be sure) the reader sees Walcott being forced to confront his dual identity, specifically the part steeped in the English literary tradition (Hamner 1997: 54). Warwick walks with his son down to the wharf and cautions his son to remember who he is, to not set his sights so far out to sea he loses sight of his island.

> "Measure the days you have left. Do just that labour
> which marries your heart to your right hand; simplify
> your life to one emblem, a sail leaving harbor
> and a sail coming in. All corruption will cry
> to be taken aboard. (Walcott 1990: 72)

This is a prelude to what sets in motion Walcott the character's true search for his identity and home. Warwick gives his son a task, to use his writing skills to record the history of those women who used to carry coal down to the ships in the harbor. These women have been forgotten by history, (after all, they are but minor characters in the great drama of life), and Walcott's fathers instructs him to be their voice:

> "…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."
> (Walcott 1990: 75)

Walcott the character is made to engage with his dual identity of European literary traditionalism and post-colonial Caribbean life. He will use his writing skills, which came from his European literary education, to "write a wrong," a wrong committed by the oppressors whose language Walcott will be using. Yet the reader also sees Walcott appropriating this writing, recognizing it as a tool that can be used to tell the story of people whose history was robbed. (Interestingly enough, Walcott confessed that he attempted to write all of *Omeros* in patois but found that he missed writing in English while also worrying he was only "doing that effort out of some kind of national duty." – Fumagalli 2001: 281)

Exploitation and erasure of history for the colonized are two of the sins we see Walcott the author and Walcott the character grappling with. Throughout the poem, the characters in *Omeros* are seeking a sense of self as they struggle to understand their place on the island: Major Plukett's search for an ancestor in the West Indies to justify his presence there, Achille's search for his true identity when he discovers his name was Afolabe, Philoctete's literal and symbolic wound of colonialism, to name a few. When Warwick instructs his son to construct a narrative for a group whose story has been erased by the ripple effects of colonialism, he is also telling his son to write his own story.

Book 4 deals with Walcott the character's journey to America and Europe. This is the most autobiographical section of the poem and largely centers around his feelings of loneliness and isolation due to both his divorce and the racism he encounters while in America. (It's worth noting Book 4 has been criticized for various reasons, specifically the conflation of Walcott's own divorce with the plight of Native Americans, which he explores through the character of Catherine Weldon. However, if we are viewing Walcott the character as serving a multitude of purposes, one of them is certainly personal healing for Walcott the poet himself, who was in the middle of a divorce while writing the poem.)

It's in Book 4 that we see the personal connection to home that has been plaguing Walcott the character with seventeen rhymed iambic tetrameter couplets:

House where marriages go bust,
house of telephone and lust

House of caves, behind whose door
A wave is crouching with its roar

House of toothbrush, house of sin,
Of branches scratching, "Let me in?"
(Walcott 1990: 173-174)

In this section, "house" is repeated throughout, eighteen times to be exact, whereas "home" only appears in the last line. The bulk of *Omeros* is approximately rhymed *terza rima* stanzas, a nod to Dante, of course. When the reader encounters this section of exact rhyming couplets, so visually and aurally different from the rest of the poem, it makes the reader sit up and take notice, thereby calling attention to Walcott the character's loneliness. The reader sees this loneliness and alienation on both the small and large stage, first in a deeply personal sense with his divorce, made concrete by all the ways a home converts into an impersonal house full of things when suddenly occupied by only one person. But we also see Walcott's loneliness in Boston, a city which Walcott the character finds alienating and foreign. The color of his skin in America and the racism he is subjected to as a result only heightens his keen sense of not belonging. Closely following on the heels of the rhymed couplets are mentions of his time in Boston. In the first instance, Walcott the character has left a museum and is looking for a cab: "cabs, like the fall, were a matter of colour, and several passed, empty." (Walcott 1990: 184)

And then on the next page, Walcott the character thinks:
Passing the lamplit windows I knew I was different
 from them as our skins were different in an empire
that boasted about its hues, in a New England

that had raked the leaves of the tribes into one fire
…and I saw the alarmed pale look,

when I stepped out of a streetlight, that a woman
gave me at a bus-stop…
(Walcott 1990: 185)

Here, the use of his personal alienation and sadness services the more global aim of opening up history to others. Walcott the character literally does not fit in because of his race. He lacks a home not only because of his divorce but also because of his skin color. Walcott the poet expressed dislike for the city of Boston, once calling it "the city of my exile."[12] This layering of fiction and non-fiction into the story is a way for Walcott,

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[12]*Paris Review* interview.

much like Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, to be constantly revising and molding his own story, to be the one acting upon the story from multiple angles instead of being someone acted upon by society.

This blending of autobiography and fiction is nowhere more present than in Book 6 when Walcott the character attends the funeral of the fictional character of Maud: "I was both there and not there. I was attending / the funeral of a character I'd created; / the fiction of her life needed a good ending / as much as mine" (Walcott 1990: 266).

Certainly it's hard to imagine a more postmodern move than a writer telling his readers he invented all the characters and that, even with himself in the story, this is not a "real" story. The reader also can view this in much the same way Dante struggled with his thoughts about the role and power of art on the terrace of the proud. In *Omeros*, the reader sees that art can only heal so much, that becoming a part of the story, while cathartic, can only take Walcott the author, and Walcott the character, so far.

We see the culmination of his more globalized healing in Book 6 as Walcott the character stands on the café balcony looking out at his island, his Helen:

> 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 butterfly
> (Walcott 1990: 249)

Walcott, much like Odysseus, has spent years wandering far from home, never feeling fully at home in America, searching for meaning in his life by examining the life of someone like Catherine Weldon, who also felt alienated and exiled from her people. It isn't until Walcott the character returns to his island after his travels that he embraces "a creole reality: a new whole reassembled from broken fragments." (Hamner 1997: 128)

It's fitting that both healing on the personal and political level is achieved in the Book 6, since they are intertwined and cannot be studied in isolation:

> 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 'til literature
> was guilty as History.
> (Walcott 1990: 271)

Walcott once expressed a mistrust of anthropologists and folklorists, claiming they "embarrass or elevate too much."[13] Book 6 is a fervent reminder of Walcott's fear, of becoming the kind of poet who "plunder[s] life in the name of art." (Hollander 2001: 153) Walcott used himself as a character to remember to not exploit his island, his Helen, in the lofty name of art or history, because ultimately, he'd only hurt himself.

So what would have been lost if Dante and Walcott did not become minor characters in their stories? Both Dante and Walcott were first and foremost poets. Writers tell stories, they create characters, and move them around in an imagined space. Authors who are in exile – whether an emotional or physical one – are constantly telling and retelling their own stories to make sense of the world around them. By casting themselves in the center of events, Dante and Walcott had a chance to rewrite their own personal history along with History, that malleable and frustrating narrative. The "obsessive telling and retelling of his own narrative" (Hollander 2001: 2) that Hollander ascribes to Dante can also be seen with Walcott. The poets' intrusions into their stories are much bigger than simple asides or digressions. The collaboration between author and autobiographical character in the text is a reminder to the reader of the potent sense of loss that lingers within both an individual and a community when voices are silenced. As minor characters in their work, both Dante and Walcott show how a person can control his or her own story, no matter the circumstances. The authors took a risk by becoming characters – there was no hiding behind a character when they expressed their ideas but rather they were speaking for themselves and for the community at large. They might have been exiles and travelers, but they refused to be written out of their own history.

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Kelly Elizabeth Hill is a current Humanities Ph.D. student at the University of Louisville. She holds an MFA in Writing from Spalding University and a B.A. in Spanish from The University of Texas at Austin. Her short stories have appeared in various literary journals, including *The Los Angeles Review* and *Yemassee Journal*. Her short story "Dream Club" was the winner of the 2015 William Richey Short Fiction Contest, judged by Aimee Bender.

kelly.morris.3@louisville.edu