

4/4/3/27

## *Omeros*

### *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.<sup>1</sup>

Like all history this poem tells a story, a complicated story, which in modern times we tend to associate with a novel rather than a poem. But in another sense it is, of course, fiction. It is fashioned, it is made up – the better to make sense of human actions, which of necessity happen in time, and along a continuum of time.

Its chief characters are taken from the island of St Lucia which was once struggled for, in the old empire days, by the then powerful forces of France and England. In fact it changed hands fourteen times between these two powers aiming to split the green calabash of the world between them. When at the Battle of the Saints De Grasse was defeated, if not outwitted, by the new tactics of Rodney, Britain was certain of its predominant position, not only in the Caribbean but also in Canada and India.

It is his preoccupation with this battle that prompts the character Plunkett's research, and brings him to the distinguished historical work of Breen:

Now he could roar out Breen's encomium by rote

. . . He taught Maud to say it by heart:

"When we consider the weighty interest involved in the iss-

ue . . ." (there was always a spray of spittle with this part, as the sibilants reared with an adder's warning hiss),  
 "Whereby the mighty projects of the coalesced powers

were annihilated and Britain's dominion on the seas  
 secured . . ." Maud recited it to the yellow allamandas  
 as if they were fleurs-de-lys, as her clicking secateurs

beheaded them into a basket and up the stone stairs.<sup>2</sup>

St Lucia – much fought for – which played its part in this battle, is one of the main characters in the history that is this poem; it is also the home or operating focus for other main characters: Hector, Helen, Achille, Philoctete, Seven Seas, Ma Kilman, Dennis and Maud Plunkett, the Narrator and his father and mother, the barber, the tall standing black women who like ants carry their hundred weight loads of coal.

But the poem is historical in the wider sense of bringing in not only the French and the English and the Dutch in their so self-confident

attitude of pillage and ownership: the Indians of the Plains are seen also as they are expected, by the citizens of the newly formed, revolutionary, democratic United States of America, to disappear like their smoke signals, meaningless and no longer visible as night falls over the Dakotas. The devastation of chattel slavery upon parts of Africa is also spelt out; and the dilemma faced by the modern 'development' of a place like St Lucia is brought clearly before our eyes.

But it must be stressed that the lyric intensity of the poem remains throughout what is of necessity outlining in a rather abstract and summary way:

Art is History's nostalgia, it prefers a thatched

roof to a concrete factory, and the huge church  
 above a bleached village. The gap between the driver  
 and me increased when he said:

"The place changing, eh?"

where an old rumshop had gone, but not that river  
 with its clogged shadows. *That* would make me a stranger.  
 "All to the good," he said. I said, "All to the good,"

then, "whoever they are," to myself. I caught his eyes  
 in the mirror. We were climbing out of Micoud.  
 Hadn't I made their poverty my paradise?<sup>3</sup>

Another main character who moves in and out of the poem, and plays a significant part, is Omeros, Homer himself, in the guise of the old blind poet, the seer without eyes, the beggar full of riches, the master of that long resounding line beating upon the conscious and unconscious ear like the ever breaking waves in the Peloponnesus or the Caribbean – *poluphlois boio thalasses. Toujours recommencée la mer!*

The structure of this history or fiction is, as in so much of Walcott, with his Horatian background, mosaic. We do not start with the Wrath of Achilles nor end with the funeral rites of Hector the tamer of horses. We do not have a straight line 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, 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.<sup>4</sup>

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*<sup>5</sup>, but also long before that in 'Tales of the Islands'.<sup>6</sup> 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 . . .<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

And the poem ends with the beach and "the sea was still going on."<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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:

There was no difference  
between me and Philoctete . . .<sup>11</sup>

comes in between Ma Kilman's search for the proper native, traditional herbs which will cure Philoctete of his longstanding wound which stinks, and which isolates him, as it does his namesake in the Iliad, from human comradeship. And the cure that works on him, the prayerful use of the traditional, of the *native*, which is downgraded by the modern, whether secular or religious, that cure works, in a different way, on the narrator for his heart wound, the wound of living, and perhaps loving not wisely but too well. So the fictional and poetic power of the poem, and the poet, seem to suggest to us. But I have to say that on this occasion, when recollected in tranquillity, the sleight of hand does not seem quite to work.

It is now time to say something about the appearance of Homer in this poem, as well as the appearance of the Homeric characters, or more accurately names, already mentioned. For despite its title, and despite the loving appearance of the blind bard himself – in St Lucia and on the steps of St Martins-in-the-Fields – this poem is in no way written, as it were, over the template of the Iliad or the Odyssey. Helen (of St Lucia) appears, and Hector and Achille. And there is a fight over her mysterious beauty. But these St Lucians also bear these names because of the tradition started in slavery of giving slaves such heroic names. Walcott somewhere calls the result of this custom “the shadow of names”. Perhaps as a poet he has always exaggerated the power and importance of names, the giving of which he has more than once reminded us was Adam's role and privilege.

The Homeric aspect, and context of meaning, in this poem is more in the sea and the struggles with it, in what men fight for in Homer and elsewhere, in the displacement and dislocation of people; the Wrath of Achilles, in the Iliad, sent the souls of many noblemen to Hades, leaving their bodies as carrion for the dogs and passing birds.

But the real heroes in this poem are not nobles, or “Kings of Men” as they are in Homer; they are noble people, but most without rank. There are a few with rank, such as Comte de Grasse and Rodney, rivals at the Battle of the Saints. But they are few and unimportant. The real heroes are Hector and Achille and Helen and Philoctete and Seven Seas, some of them fishermen finding it difficult to make a living in the days of trawling fishnets almost as big as St Lucia:

banks robbed by thirty-mile seines,  
their refrigerated scales packed tightly as coins,

and no more lobsters on the seabed. All the signs  
of a hidden devastation under the cones  
of volcanic gorges. Every dawn made his trade

difficult and empty . . .<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle's dictum about the hero needing to be a prince or a leader of men is turned around. This is in fact one of the achievements of *Omeros*. And not only in the respect of the fishermen: Ma Kilman, who cures Philoctete, is a shop-keeper and a sybil/obeah woman; Helen is a maid and waitress; 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. They are indeed noble people, but not people of the nobility. They belong to another stage and type of History.

### Metaphorical

“This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes”.<sup>13</sup>

This is how Philoctete is made to start this long poem. Here we have the language of metaphor at work: that move beyond, but at the same time with, the purely ostensible signification of the words at hand. It is the way language is often used in every day converse, although there the cliché, and the hidden metaphor, often hide from us what is really going on. It is often forgotten that language as metaphor belongs not only to poetry, but also to other forms of fiction such as novels and short stories.

But, of course, poetry uses more intensely, and in a more structured way, this quite common kind of language. Philoctete continues:

“Once wind bring the news

to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking  
the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,  
because they could see the axes in our own eyes.”<sup>14</sup>

Notice the use of “shaking” in which, as so often happens in poetry, the ostensible and the metaphorical use are equally evident; whereas in “the axes in our own eyes” the metaphorical has taken over, in a

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".<sup>15</sup>

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 something beyond themselves, and so involve us in seeing, and learning to see, further significance:

She was selling herself like the island, without  
any pain . . . .<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>

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",<sup>19</sup> 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 structural juxtaposition: "Our contracts// were torn like the clouds, like treaties with the

Indians, / but with mutual treachery."<sup>20</sup> And a new woman, Catherine Weldon, comes onstage. Walcott's woman has left; but Weldon is present to the Indians, even though her hopes for them are to be betrayed:

The nausea stirring her loins  
was not from war, but from the treachery that came after

war, the white piece of paper so ornately signed  
that perhaps that sound was really the loon's laughter  
at treaties changing like clouds, their ink faded like wind.

...  
She had believed in the redemptions of History,  
that the papers the Sioux had folded to their hearts

would be kept like God's word, that each signatory,  
after all that suffering, had blotted out their hates,  
and that peace would break out as widely as the moon.<sup>21</sup>

The original image of "nausea stirring in her loins" is, in this context, made even more powerful, and throws more light on the plight of the Indians, because it does not here anticipate birth, but rather contemplates treachery and murder. Similarly the soon to be used metaphor of 'flour' for 'snow' gains an intensity by obliterating, while still bringing to mind, all the gentle associations we have with flour. And to baste a corpse with dry, cold flour is as "contrary to nature" an activity as one can imagine.

Note how these passages reinforce each other by the image of changing clouds and torn tatters of paper. The white piece of paper also echoes the white snow which the author tends to make something frightening, choking like dry flour:

The snow blew in their wincing faces like papers  
from another treaty which a blind shaman tears  
to bits in the wind . . .

...  
The flour basting their corpses on the white fields.<sup>22</sup>

In fact throughout the Indian pieces one is reminded of the frightening nature of whiteness and the white snow as portrayed in Walcott's early poem 'God rest ye merry gentlemen':

What had I heard,  
wheezing behind me with whitening breath? . . .  
The night was white. There was nowhere to hide.

One feels in fact that Walcott's reference in *Omeros* to Melville about the supremacy of the white is somehow mistaken. I find it hard to think of any embodiment through metaphor of what can be so uncomfortable about 'whiteness' than the book *Moby Dick*. This we find not only in the main character, the cruel whale, but also in the slightly sick-making enormous squid, in the monomania of Ahab, and in all the other matters brought up in the chapter on whiteness! It quite puts into the shade the references in Shakespeare to "lily livered" and "death's pale flag".

But whatever Melville thought of whiteness, Walcott manages here by using that image, to cast a sickening veil, created by others out of perversity, callousness and disdain, over the being and experience and absence of the native Americans:

As the salmon grows tired of the ladder of stone,  
so have we of fighting the claws of the White Bear,  
dripping red beads on the snow. Whiteness is everywhere.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Metaphor of Homer*

I have stated already that Walcott's poem is not an imitation of either the Iliad or the Odyssey. Even though some of the characters in a sense match some of the Homeric personae: Helen, Hector, Achille, Philoctete. The author even speaks of himself as Telemachus to Plunkett's, and his father's, Odysseus. But the point of the use of Homer lies elsewhere. Certainly Homer is honoured as the great creator, especially of the long hexameter line which he uses so skillfully to delineate, among other things, the combers of the sea: "the breakers slow-dolphining over more breakers".

Walcott has always admired this clean Homeric line, especially when it spoke of the sea, the roaring sea, and likened to it the rushing back of the army from their boats and tents to their meeting place:

exc ws ote kuma poluphloisboio thalases  
aigialw megalw bremetai, smargei de te pontos.<sup>24</sup>

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,<sup>25</sup>

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 Tiresias. (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".<sup>26</sup> He is referring to the way in which, in his epics, the struggles among the gods and goddesses 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"<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

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?"<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup>

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".<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

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.

Finally, Homer, Omeros, as metaphor, allows the narrator of this poem once again to raise a question which concerns West Indian critics, and some West Indian politicians and nationalists, not a little: the role of the foreign in West Indian culture, especially of the non-African foreign:

All that Greek manure under the green bananas.

when would I not hear the Trojan War  
in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop?<sup>33</sup>

Notice the pointed ambiguity of "manure". The answer of our author to this question about "foreign" influence, as to all those about "the angst of influence", is quite simple: "But it was mine to make what I wanted of it".<sup>34</sup> It is the "making of something" out of it that matters; and the making of this magnificent poem from the Greek and other influences clearly shows that the question is not so much what influences are at play, and whether some are more relevant and more acceptable to the culture customs officers than others. The test will always have to be the quality of what is made – and that is the most likely point at which relevance and heritage will more or less automatically play their part.

Our consideration of the metaphor of Homer in *Omeros* must stop at this point. Space does not allow further consideration of this matter or of much more that should be considered under the heading of Metaphor, whether the role of images, of structure or of other personae. Under 'structure' we would have to investigate the further meanings added to the historical or story elements by the way in which episodes are juxtaposed in what is a complex mosaic treatment. Of the metaphorical use of other personae one need only mention the role played in this remarkable poem by such 'historical' inhabitants of St Lucia as the Father and Mother of the narrator, and of such characters as the Plunketts and Ma Kilman, and Achille in his journey back to Africa, to mention only a few.

### *Aspects of Moral and Anagogical Interpretation*

This poem is too important, too well constructed, and too concerned, not to note its implication for human living and its echoes,

at least, of what Dante called 'eternal matters'. It quite often depicts, not without at least implied comment, the suffering inflicted on whole groups of people: Plains Indians, enslaved Africans, Poles who left their country for North America. It speaks in moving terms of the over-fishing of the Caribbean, the changes caused by tourism and the doubtful decisions made by local politicians, whose existence has hardly "made any difference" to Philoctetes's life.

But in the end it seems to project some sort of satisfied acceptance on the part of the Narrator, even to a sort of celebration. To what extent does this seem, to the reader, on quiet re-examination, justified:

"but the right journey  
is motionless; as the sea moves round an island

that appears to be moving, love moves round the heart  
with encircling salt, and the slowly travelling hand  
knows it returns to the port from which it must start.

Therefore, this is what this island has meant to you,  
why my hust spoke, why the sea-swift was sent to you:  
to circle yourself and your island with this art."<sup>35</sup>

True these words are spoken in a dream by Seven Seas/Omeros. But some such resolution connected with love and care and art does seem in the end to be suggested as in the final gesture when with Hector dead, Maud Plunkett dead, and Philoctete cured, and the special canoe, 'In God We Trust', back in place, "Achille put the wedge of dolphin/ that he'd saved for Helen in Hector's rusty tin".<sup>36</sup>

Does this resolution ring true? It is a question which must be asked because this superbly crafted poem is not the work of some clever dandy showing us how well he can handle and vary *terza rime*, although he can certainly do that as any careful reading will show. Moreover in the poem itself moral questions are raised such as the ineptitude and dishonesty of local politicians, in connection with tourism, for instance, making other people's children waiters while their own read law.

The Narrator also shows clearly how human beings displace others at will, noting of the Revolutionary Citizens of America "all colonies inherit their empire's sin,/ and these, who broke free of the net, enmeshed a race."<sup>37</sup> This question of the moral and anagogical

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".<sup>38</sup>

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 . . .<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

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.

When Achille goes back to Africa in his vision he, who was originally called Afolabe and was renamed Achille by his master as a kind of honour, enjoys an interesting encounter with his father. One of the things his father has to say to him is cruelly moving, and relates to human experience at a deep level indeed:

Why did I never miss you until you returned?  
Why haven't I missed you, my son, until you were lost?  
Are you the smoke from a fire that never burned?<sup>41</sup>

What lives, what loves, what faith we do not miss until they are lost?  
And what sons and daughters did Africa not miss until they returned?  
Another echo occurs in the lines

This was the shout on which each odyssey pivots,  
the silent cry for a reef, or familiar bird,  
not the outcry of battle or the tangled plots

of a fishnet but when a wave rhymes with one's grave,  
a canoe with a coffin, once that parallel  
is crossed, and cancels the line of master and slave.<sup>42</sup>

This certainly pertains "to eternal matters". "Death lays his icy hands on kings". But is death only the leveller? Is death in any sense the reliever? What of paradise?

Finally, I believe this epigram from the Interlude contains pithily one of the antinomies in this poem so concerned with displacement and the location of home:

House where I look down the scorched street  
but feel its ice ascend my feet

*I do not live in you, I bear  
my house inside me, everywhere<sup>43</sup>*

[my emphasis]

How does this view of hearing my house inside everywhere – with which I certainly sympathise – fit in with the special place St Lucia is to have, and with the notion of being displaced when not being in one's original home?

One stresses again the realization that in a poem like this one is dealing with a tension and structure of images and ideas, but there can

be a point at which parts seem to be hauling away from the overall design. Do we have examples of this in the three cases cited above as being concerned with "everlasting verities"?

"Where is our home? Is there ever any everlasting rest?" might well be questions which cannot be answered in entirely terrestrial terms, any more than the fate of the Native Americans should have been decided entirely by where it suited the railroad companies to drive in the iron spike that linked the East to the West of the United States by rail.

### *L'Envoi*

And so we come to a closure, if not a conclusion.

Why waste lines on Achille, a shade on the sea floor?  
Because strong as self-healing coral, a quiet culture  
is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor,

deeper than it seems on the surface; slowly but sure,  
it will change us with the fluent sculpture of Time.<sup>44</sup>

There is much in the poem I have not been able to cover, especially its touches of humour, and its connection with Homer and his great epics, and the role of the sea and the sound of the sea in *Omeros* and in the hexameters of Homer.

*Omeros* is not an epic, and it hardly touches on the gods. It has characters such as Helen and Hector and Achille. Of the St Lucian Helen one has to note that she is brought much closer to the reader than thy Homeric lady whose face "launched a thousand ships". Homer was very sparing in his description of her, leaving it to the old men chirping on the wall as she passed by pointing out her country's fighting men doing battle to regain her, leaving it to these worn-out fellows merely to say "No wonder there is a war, for her face is like that of an immortal."

But what is much more important than forced likenesses with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is the not widely known fact that at the time of slavery in the Caribbean the masters had the custom (an obscure custom worthy of examination) of giving slaves grand names: Pompey, Phoebe, Cloe and Caesar. In Jamaica in 1760 during Tacky's rebellion Thomas Thistlewood, in reporting on run-aways, tells us

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 faoning its coalpot.

A full moon shone like a slice of raw onion.  
When he left the beach the sea was still going on.<sup>45</sup>

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.