

A Raging Swift: *Omeros* and Walcott 'on the wing'

*The ten year war is finished,
Helen's hair, a grey cloud,
Troy, a white asphalt
by the drizzling sea.*

*The drizzle tightens like the strings of a harp,
A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain
and plucks the first line of the *Odyssey*.*

Derek Walcott, 'Map of
the New World, I Archipelagoes'

These evocative lines, rich with an ancient resonance, might serve as epigraph to *Omeros* by Derek Walcott. The tightening of strings predicated the tone of the poem from 'A man with clouded eyes'. *Omeros*, a poem of some 322 pages¹ dedicated to Walcott's 'shipmates in this craft', in a communion of living and dead poets, presumably, is as intensely private as it is public. There is no doubt who the angry, compassionate figure at the helm is or who his guardian spirits are, those with whom he communes page by page in the righteousness of his quest for St. Lucian liberation. The ship's company is impressive. Eliot is there. The reader is addressed as adjunct to, or member of a tourist party, almost voyeur, by the suffering Philoctete, a type of 'You! hypocrite lecteur -- mon semblable, -- mon frère!'² Sometimes, the references to Eliot's *Waste Land* are overt as in the 'Madonna of the Rocks' (225), the 'good night' lines of Hector's burial (233), the 'sybil-like' Ma Kilman (244-245), the similar London references (196-197), 'What the Thunder said' might find its echoes in the marvellous hurricane sequence (47ff). But Walcott might say with James Simmons that 'no land is waste'³. *Omeros* is also a poem of disparate voices, including Walcott's own, conducted by the narrator. One may observe an embrace of Yeats in 'some sorrows are like stones' (241) in the autobiographical chapter XLVIII (240-241), and in the poem's 'mackerel-crowded seas' when Achilles reaps 'the thrashing mackerel', 'the silvery mackerel'

(324).⁴ The St. Lucian young live in a kind of Yeatsian 'Sailing to Byzantium' in 'one another's arms' on Bob Marley reggae: 'The young took no interest in canoes / That was longtime shit' (112). In fact, the Walcottian rage produces its own 'terrible beauty' when the full configuration of the poem becomes apparent. Negotiating in his psyche the contradictions of European tradition and African soul and bringing these together when his verse flows, Walcott embodies in his poetry, as well, the wider Yeatsian contraries. We find on board, too, the ubiquitous, wandering Joyce of 'The Dead', *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. The ship's company could hardly be complete without Dante and the original Homer.⁵ Yet the mature tone of *Omeros* is Walcott's own, it easily breaks the boom of its many influences. It is a tone he strove hard to perfect by all accounts. Contemporary and former Caribbean and West Indian poets like Louise Bennett (in a line from the oral, vernacular traditions of Africa) made the tone possible: the love of Caribbean poets for their locale is well evidenced, while the writer of *Omeros* had the vernacular Dante, too, at his side. And Walcott wanted to be true to his own Beatrice, his Helen, his St. Lucia, whom he loves with a great intensity and to genuine tears in the poem: 'And my cheeks were salt with tears, but those of a boy / And he saw how deeply I had loved the island' (286). For his retelling of Homer, Walcott had his basic characters ready made in St. Lucia. Giving their slaves names like Hector and Achilles, the original slavers and plantation owners may have enjoyed the brief 'Homeric laughter from the Gods'⁶ but the formerly enslaved have now become the corner stones of a great poem. Their legacy is, however, a context of post-colonial poverty, where the Philoctetes, Hectors and Achilles of today are struggling fishermen or taxi-drivers, wrestling a living from sea and land, while beautiful Helen is a haughty housemaid, and up-earning waitress, in a new tourist-dependent economy. Behind the façade of hotels and marinas stand the 'negro shacks [that] / moved like a running wound' (178).

What makes *Omeros*, of course, is not these raw and angry literal 'incidentals' of some social or economic history or contemporary reality — ordinary people — but the power and energy with which their spirits are mobilised for life and poetry and the innate integrity, nobility and control of the writing about them in *terza rima* which spans over three hundred pages.⁷ The

scale and sheer beauty of the work in its various sections has tended to leave critics, readers and poets largely mesmerised in its wake, like grasping at the facets of a polished diamond. For instance, there is Walcott's narrative skill, his innate sense of structure, his theatrical sense of 'the real' with his small but eloquent cast, his cinematic technique, not to mention his use of epiphanic mode and revelatory parenthesis. In a sense, maybe, one could say that Walcott had it 'easy' — that the 'Edenic experience' of St. Lucia, itself, with its 'vast sky', 'really large sea', 'the incredible blue bays of the Caribbean and the untouched, 'unprinted' landscape was just waiting to be written about.⁸ But, then, these are largely available anywhere (when the sun shines) and Kavanagh touched on the essentials in 'Epic' (a poem Walcott admits to being influenced by).⁹ It is to Walcott's credit and glory that he had the human and lyric capacity and confidence in his craft, the rage and the commitment, to forge 'the conscience' of St. Lucia, even amidst the gutted laughter of the defeated there. What is helpful about *Omeros* is its clarity, its classical strengths of lyric music with simplicity, and its directness and energy in dealing with the world of action. Walcott is blessed with 'epic' objectivity and, within his poem, we encounter not the obtrusion of personality but the inevitability of events and human joys, sufferings and redemptions told within historical contexts. We are carried along on the poem's rhythmic tides and swells and embrace the flesh and blood of real people across its pages. As if to complement the poet's radiant anger at injustice, parts of the poem are also just very funny. The irony is sharp and bright, too, a thousand miles from pedantry. Reading a very long poem can be daunting to poetry lovers today so accustomed and indoctrinated have we become to, and with, shorter forms. But, if we admit, say, to the importance of Chaucer, Milton and Blake in the repertoire, then there must be a place also for contemporaries specialising in long or very long poems. This sounds very basic. And it is. In *Omeros*, of course, the narrative is crucial because in such (narrative) poetry, the music of what happens grows organically from the narrative elements and is indissolubly linked to them. Nevertheless, a summary of its 'linear' narrative cannot encompass the many subversive subtleties of plot, sub-plot and language, the many *terza rima* byroads there for the wandering and exploring. These are well signposted textually. For instance, while

Plunkett is St. Lucia post-war settler, quintessentially English, and Maud late Anglo-Irish, Plunkett is also a famous familiar Irish name and Tennysonian Maud in her garden might feel more at home in late Victorian England.¹⁰

Recognition of Walcott's *magnum opus* has been slow enough to gather momentum outside of the United States. But Robert D. Hamner's full length study, *Epic of the Dispossessed* offers in its two-hundred pages a comprehensively researched analysis of *Omeros*.¹¹ Hamner's thesis is that Walcott in this poem offers a voice to the marginalised peoples of the New World. All of the poem's protagonists, as they merge into and detach themselves from the narrator, are castaways in one form or another. Whether their ancestry be classical, Mediterranean, European, African, 'native' or 'settled' American, they are individuals transported across 'seas' desperately seeking to establish roots, or community, some place they can call 'home'. In her study of the sea swift as recurring symbol in *Omeros*, Heather Bradley orients Walcott's odyssey through his past and helps him to join the disparate elements of his heredity into one coherent identity: as a matter of fact the cure for Philoctete's wound (and, by extension the cure for his people's wound) comes from the root of an African plant whose seeds had been carried to St. Lucia by the sea-swift:

[...] the flower that withered on the floor
of moss smelt sweet and spread its antipodal odour
from the seed of the swift. (245)

The swift, therefore, links the different horizons the protagonists aim towards: it is a unifying symbol, a symbol of singular identity for peoples displaced by imperialism. It is, of course, the underlying rage at imperialistic influences, old and new, that fuels this voyage of shipmates that is *Omeros* and engenders the righteous aesthetic of the poem.¹²

Besides the attributes identified earlier by Heather Bradley, the swift suggests also, for this writer, other lyric imperatives for the author and narrator of *Omeros*. The swift is a bird incessantly in flight. In this context, it is an apt symbol, an alter ego, for the poet himself remembering what he had forgotten and keeping him and his poetry 'on the wing'. What is remarkable about *Omeros* is its nippy, narrative speed, running in counterpoint to both hexameters and length. One may linger a little to luxuriate on the

climactic points of the verse passages, but the thrust is resolutely onwards. As in the best long poems, there is constant sweet tension for the reader who wants to stop, stay put, dwell on the felicities and turn to the next page. One can see, then, how the image of the swift is so attractive and vital. Swifts are birds of exceptionally long wings and powerfully built bodies; they drink, bathe and, reputedly, mate on the wing. Even their wingbeats might be described as 'classical' — ironically 'stiff', 'slow' wingbeats — four to eight per second. Yet the crescent-like design of their wings makes them the most efficient among birds for high speed flight. Being the fastest of small birds, they are believed to reach 110 kilometres (70 miles) per hour regularly and there have been reports of speeds considerably in excess of that.¹³ Swifts 'live' their flights then; landing on flat ground they may be unable to regain the air. Their sharp claws allow them to cling only to vertical surfaces, a dark-sonnet Hopkins image in itself and one which the author of *Omeros* might not disassociate himself from at certain points in the poem. In one deeply poignant and brilliantly observed section, as he meets his frail invalided mother in a home, he describes her in swift-like terms: 'She floated so lightly! One hand, frail as a swift, / gripping the veranda' (165). Achilles in his boat is only trailing after the swift. But the bird swoops low to propel and energise the verse when there is a danger it might lag or self-exhaust. The function of the swift's flight is central, then, to *Omeros*. The swift functions as muse and Mnemosyne and as aid to narrative thrust. In this context, too, the bird's presence relates to the very tone, language, music and verbal texture of *Omeros*: the airy, vernacular, ariel-tone of the language singing in counterpoint to its hexameters (it is no accident that the poet's mother — celebrated later in *The Bounty*¹⁴ — was a gifted piano teacher; Joyce is addressed as 'tenor of this place').

The image of the swift relates further to another constant that keeps Walcott 'on the wing' and his tongue supple: the deep anger, or rage, at injustice that impels his prosody. Sometimes there is simultaneous conjunction between narrator anger and the swift as in this exchange between the original Homer and *Omeros*:

[...] I heard his own
Greek calypso coming from the marble trunk,

widening the sea with a blind man's anger:
"In the midst of the sea there is a horned island
with deep green harbours where the Greek ships anchor"
and the waves were swaying to the stroke of his hand,

As I heard my own thin voice riding on his praise
the way a swift follows a crest, leaving its shore (286)

Heather Bradley has also written of 'The Rage of Derek Walcott' focusing on the poet's racial and cultural consternation in 'A Far Cry From Africa'.¹⁵ The poet had already raged against the detriment of St. Lucia in *Another Life* and made a detailed study of the Dantean 'technique of creative swearing'.¹⁶ Walcott's consternation resurfaces again, with a vengeance, in *Omeros*. The narrator's anger glints as early as the second line as Philoctete 'smiles for the tourists' (3). Mass tourism is obviously a phenomenon that drives the narrator apoplectic. If pigs are Plunkert's business now (supplying meat to the tourist trade?), 'Empires were swinish' — he had already railed against 'The class war that denigrated the dead / face down in the sand, beyond Alexandria' (26). The narrator, himself, knows what white class and dominion have meant as exemplified by 'Fame [...] that white liner/at the end of your street, a city to itself (72) attracting'. All corruption [...] 'To be taken aboard' (72). Walcott is particularly acidic on the intercourse of art and power. He depicts the ship of power: 'Its hull bright as paper, preening with privilege' (72). This intercourse is seen as particularly demeaning and insulting to those outside 'the circle': art and beauty themselves are thereby demeaned, and this constant cry in *Omeros* is echoed in Achilles's lament for Helen: 'She was selling herself like the island' (111). Walcott's island, the beautiful St. Lucia, is being engulfed again, in a modern-day white cultural imperialist wave typified by 'the D.J.'s fresh-water-yankee-cool-Creole' (111).

Walcott's methodology of response appears to employ hit and run guerrilla tactics in his verse nipping in again and again with little explosive lines: 'remember us to the black waiter bringing the bill' (149). This line comes at the end of Achilles's lament for the slaves transported from Africa. More often, though, the narrator's anger engages us hand to hand as in his depiction of

negro shack [that]
moved like a running wound, like the rusty anchor
that scabbled Philoctete's shin. (178)

The narrator's US experience describes racism and fear still endemic in society, 'I looked for a cab, / but cabs, like the fall, were a matter of colour / and several passed, empty'. (184). In London, he finds 'the barges chained like our islands to the Thames' (196) where 'The swans are royally protected, but in whose hands / are the black crusts of our children?' (197). He rages against centralism and a Europe with power and influence but little to offer, bar some imperialist 'Caesar's eaten nose', lit-up irrelevant spires, the tiring weight of its cities, and on all sides the repetition 'that power and art were the same' (205): nothing to offer but a jaded mythos and sterile fountains, a message of irrelevance, 'Tell/that to a slave from the outer regions' (205). He sees himself linked to his people by a 'mental chain' as they stand at lecterns or auction blocks, 'Their condition/the same, without manacles' (210). It is not surprising that, momentarily, his spirit will tire as he views a Miltonic variant:¹⁷

The white wolf drags its shawled tail into the high snow
through the pine lances, the blood dried round its jaw;
it is satisfied! (217)

A Joycean paralysis sets in, 'whiteness is everywhere'¹⁸ (217). Even his poetry will have its demise:

its time was gone
with the spirit in the wood, as wood grew obsolete
and plasterers smoothed the blank page of white concrete. (227)

Is he a modern day Quixote, then, tilting at windmills or a Cuchulainn fighting the indomitable tide? He is driven to accept a measure of economic change on his return to St. Lucia, talking to the taxi driver: "All to the good", he said. I said, "all to the good"? then, "whoever they are" to myself' (225). The narrator's muttering erupts in fine style as he sees his unique St. Lucia, 'Helen of the West Indies', become just one touristified extended beach like Greece or Hawaii¹⁹, taken out of its natural element like Hector who soon plunges to his death over cliffs. Rage

reaches its boiling point as old Homer and Omeros view the new St. Lucia from volcanic Soufrière: imprecations are rained down on speculators and their minions in the circle of speculation 'as they went on making their deals / for the archipelago with hot, melting hands' (290). The human cost is counted, 'where others / kept making room for slaves to betray their brothers / till the eyes in the stone head were cursing their tears' (290). The rage that began with the photographer's click on the first page of *Omeros* reaches its apotheosis in the howl of Achilles as the poem nears its close:

It was the scream of a warrior losing his only soul
to the click of a Cyclops, the eye of its globing lens,
till they scattered from his anger as a khaki mongrel
does from a kick. It was the last form of self-defence,
it was the scream of gangrene, and the vine round his heel
with its thorns. Waiter in bow-ties on the terrace

laughed at his anger. They too had been simplified.
They were like Lawrence crossing the sand with his trays.
They laughed at simplicities, the laugh of a wounded race (299)

The narrator contemplates leaving his home village for good with its 'hotels and marinas, / the ice packed shrimps of pink tourists' (301), a village that 'imitated the hotel brochure/ with photogenic poverty, with atmosphere', overrun by insensitive crowds that crushed 'the immortelle's vermillion' (311). Anger subsides like charcoal in a fire.

'In the South,'
Seven Seas said, 'the Deep South, you musn't talk back,
you do what the white man give you and shut your mouth.' (317)

In spite of this gloom, *Omeros* finishes on a quasi-positive note with Helen approaching us, 'You! 'hypocrite lecteur — mon semblable, — mon frère!' (via Eliot)....' 'with the leisure of a panther' (322). The narrator's faith is restored in the fortitude, fightback and potential of his people, where the Act of Poetry, Hartnet's rebel act²⁰, is now described in terms of the sex act: 'Helen had gripped my wrist in its vise/to plunge it into the foaming page' (323). Faith is restored in the poet's craft, in the essential rhythms and

responses of ordinary people as they survive the evils of poverty, exploitation and power:

[...] A triumphant Achilles,
his hands gloved in blood, moved to the other canoes
whose hulls were thumping with fishes' (324).

'A full moon shone like a slice of raw onion,
When he left the beach the sea was still going on. (325)

That it is, and will continue, and that we must accept and embrace and prepare for it, in its various faces, is the message of this unsettling and memorable work, where authorial rage and our discomfiture unite in determinant aesthetic.

¹ I refer to the Faber and Faber 1990 edition of the poem throughout.

² T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, '1. The Burial of the Dead' (l.76).

³ James Simmons, *No Land is Waste, Dr. Eliot* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1973).

⁴ I find the narrator's rage not unYeasian. See Yeats's 'Easter 1916' 'Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart'. See also Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium'.

⁵ Walcott has 'creolised' the *Odyssey* for the stage: Derek Walcott, *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).

⁶ See Boris Pasternak, 'Spasskoc', *The Penguin Book of Russian Verse*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p.335.

⁷ A brief bleak two-page mid-way couplet sequence (pp. 173-174) breaks the *terza rima* pattern of the poem.

⁸ See Carrol Fleming interviewing Derek Walcott in 1978, Caribbean Writer on Line <http://www.thecaribbeanwriter.com/volume7/n7p.52.html>.

⁹ See Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Temascal: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Imprint of Dante* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2001), p.281.

¹⁰ From *The Surnames of Ireland*, ed. by Edward MacLysaght, (Dublin/Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2001), p.246: 'Plunkett / Pluinicéid — of French origin, this family came to Ireland at the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion and became one of the most distinguished in Irish history'. For Maud see Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Come into the Garden, Maud ...' from 'Maud: a Monodrama' in *A Choice of Tennyson's Verse*, selected with an introduction by Lord David Cecil (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 61.

¹¹ Robert D. Hammer, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1997). See also Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 2001), reviewed in this edition of *Agenda*.

¹² Heather M. Bradley, 'The Sea Swift as Symbol in Walcott's *Omeros*', <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/caribbean/walcott/bradley5.html>.

Sea swift references I noted in text of *Omeros*: pp. 6, 21, 22, 42, 69, 72, 89, 100, 125 (3 times), 126, 127, 130, 134, 138 (twice), 145, 159, 165, 179, 181, 187, 188, 189, 191, 203, 205, 223, 233, 235, 238, 241, 242, 266, 267, 282, 286, 291 (twice), 295, 310, 312, 317, 319 (twice), 323.

¹³ From *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Swift Reference. Micropoedia. IX, p. 720, 1974 Edition.

¹⁴ Derek Walcott, *The Bounty*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).

¹⁵ Heather M. Bradley, 'Conflicting Loyalties in "A Far Cry from Africa"', <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/caribbean/walcott/bradley2.html>.

¹⁶ Fumagalli, *ibid.* p.74, where Dante is seen by Walcott as a master of the style of exhortation.

¹⁷ See John Milton's 'grim wolf with privy paw' in 'Lycidas', line 128. See also Vallombrosa reference in *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, l. 303 and *Omeros*, Book Four, p.172.

¹⁸ See James Joyce: "'Browne is everywhere'", said Aunt Kate, lowering her voice' in 'The Dead', *Dubliners*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics, 1967), p. 203.

¹⁹ See, for example the advertisement for Noble Caledonia Limited, Belgravia, London in *The Sunday Times Magazine*, September 8, 2002, 'West Indies Under Sail', Cruising the Caribbean Sea Aboard the Sea Cloud 11 with Colin White MA AMA, 2nd to 17th February, 2003 – Day 7 St. Lucia ... a splendidly rugged island of towering mountains, lush green valleys and acres of banana plantations', p.52.

²⁰ Michael Hartnett, 'the act of poetry/is a rebel act', from 'A Farewell to English', in *A Farewell to English*, (Loughcrew, Ireland: Gallery Press, 1978), p. 65.