

Walcott's *Omeros*

The Classical Epic in a Postmodern World

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With his plays drawn from Greek mythology and his evocative epic hymn to the Caribbean, *Omeros*, Nobel laureate Derek Walcott has forced many to rethink the relationships between archaic Greek society and the contemporary world. Joseph Farrell, known especially for his work on classical epic, takes up a debate as to whether *Omeros* can be considered an epic at all, and suggests that in forcing us even to ask this question, Walcott demands that we reassess the position and assumed supremacy of Western literary epic. In demonstrating the complex relationship of *Omeros* to the tradition of classical epic, Farrell reveals the contingencies of that tradition and the richness of Walcott's poem as a work that straddles both epic and novel, classical and modern, scribal and oral.

Let me begin with an anecdote.

I have a daughter who is a student in the Philadelphia public school system. Like any other big-city school system, ours has its problems, but so far they have seemed manageable. If nothing else, trying to negotiate the school-district bureaucracy provides parents with a rich store of strange experiences that we enjoy sharing with one another. This particular story concerns race. Again like most cities, Philadelphia has had to cope with the problem of segregation by race and has chosen to address the problem in schools not by busing, but by establishing a voluntary desegregation program. Schools in the "deseg" program receive extra funding from the central district and consequently have more instructional and support staff, enrichment programs, and so forth. Parents choose whether to participate in the program and designate in order of preference the schools they would like their child to attend. The children are selected by lottery and are assigned to a school on the basis of their number and their race: almost everything depends on whether the school you want needs more white, black, Asian, or Hispanic children in that particular year. The year we applied marked the first time that the aspirations of anyone in our family had so explicitly been tied to his or her race.

My daughter's name is Flannery—not the most common name, and when a child who bears it encounters another, their common name creates a spe-

cial bond. One of the Flannerys we know is further distinguished by the fact that she is also a twin and that she and her brother Schuyler have one white and one black parent. It is their experience with the deseg system, a parental war story, that I want to recount. Because race is the only criterion for admitting a child to a deseg school, the district requires interested parents to specify their child's race, and to do so in terms that are, literally, black and white: they recognize nothing in between. Flannery and Schuyler's parents balked at this. To identify their children as either black or white would go against everything that they stand for, both in their marriage and in the absolutely interracial identity that they cherish in their children. But a choice had to be made. When they simply refused, the bureaucrat in charge of the interview, who had no doubt been through this before, sighed wearily and said: "Well, I guess we're just going to have to subject them to the eyeball test." The parents were too astonished to protest before the children were sized up by the bureaucrat, whose job at that moment was simply to determine the race of the children by his own judgment about the color of their skin. And in a decision that could have been scripted by Solomon, but more likely by Kafka, he found that one of the twins was black and the other was white.

Derek Walcott has been subjected repeatedly to the literary-critical equivalent of this test and indeed invites such scrutiny by the way in which he thematizes his own racially mixed ancestry.¹ As he wrote over thirty years ago in the often-quoted poem "A Far Cry from Africa,"

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?²

Years later in "The Hotel Normandie Pool," the theme returns:

And I, whose ancestors were slave and Roman,
have seen both sides of the imperial foam,
heard palm and pine tree alternate applause
as the white breakers rose in galleries
to settle, whispering at the tilted palm
of the boy-god Augustus. My own face
held negro Neros, chalk Caligulas;
my own reflection slid along the glass
of faces foaming past triumphal cars.³

The motif of racial indeterminacy presents itself throughout Walcott's poetry in other registers as well: the linguistic register, in which English threat-

ens to occlude the Creole dialects of St. Lucia; the literary-historical register, in which Walcott speculates on his storyteller's craft in its relation to that of the Caribbean "man of words" and to that of Shakespeare, to name but two of his many models; the religious register, in which St. Lucia's Catholic culture contrasts with Walcott's own Methodist upbringing, while both Christian traditions exist in dialogue with the folk religion of the common people and with the animism of the islands' ancient inhabitants; and in many other registers. One of these others is the one on which I will focus, the generic register; for the debate (if I may call it that) over the genre of *Omeros* shares with these other questions the twin motifs of dichotomy and indeterminacy in ways that cast a strong and useful light on the poem and on the concept of genre itself.

To begin, even characterizing discussion of the poem's genre as a debate is an overstatement. Diverging opinions there have been, but little dialogue. Classicists like Mary Lefkowitz, Oliver Taplin, and Bernard Knox and Eurocentric comparatists like George Steiner have expressed little doubt about the poem's epic character.⁴ But Sidney Burris, while hailing *Omeros* as a "sprawling new poem" of "herculean ambition," pointedly avoids using the word "epic," calling *Omeros* a Caribbean "national narrative."⁵ Similarly, long-time students of Walcott and of West Indian literature generally have been chary of the epic label. It is true that Robert Hamner, one of the world's foremost experts on Walcott, has not shied away from it.⁶ But John Figueroa, perhaps the dean of West Indian literary studies and a former teacher of Walcott's, in what was probably the first scholarly commentary on the poem, stated flatly and preemptively: "*Omeros* is not an epic."⁷ Similarly Patricia Ismond, another distinguished West Indianist and Walcott specialist, finds *Omeros* informed by a lyric rather than an epic sensibility.⁸ Finally, I should mention that this is the tack taken by Walcott himself, who has said: "I do not think of it as an epic. Certainly not in the sense of epic design. Where are the battles? There are a few, I suppose. But 'epic' makes people think of great wars and great warriors. That isn't the Homer I was thinking of; I was thinking of Homer the poet of the seven seas."⁹

This last remark points to the different ways in which critics have viewed the poem's relationship to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Eurocentric critics have been quick to identify the poem's "debt" to Homer as its essential distinguishing characteristic; Taplin perhaps goes farthest in this regard.¹⁰ Burris, in contrast, predicts that "commentators on *Omeros* . . . will understandably busy themselves in tracking down the Homeric parallels in Walcott's poem," but argues that this will be "a particularly ill-fated approach because part of the poem's task, its attempt to recreate the original authenticity of Walcott's Caribbean culture, lies in its deliberate deflation of analogy."¹¹ The most important antecedents of *Omeros*, Burris suggests, are to be found in Walcott's own dramatic works and in another quasi-Homeric work of great generic in-

determinacy, Joyce's *Ulysses*.¹² Figueroa goes even farther, stating that "Walcott's poem is not an imitation of either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. . . . The point of the use of Homer lies elsewhere," that is, in his metaphorical or allegorical significance "as the great creator," especially of poetic language, and "as the Blind Seer," himself a wanderer held in no great honor whose suffering has gained him an acute understanding of the nature of things, even as a kind of poetic savior who rescues Walcott's Narrator from the sins that have beset other poets.¹³ But this Homer is, finally, a symbol of "the foreign in West Indian culture, especially . . . the non-African foreign," an element that is itself in need of redemption: for Figueroa, the value of a poem like *Omeros* "is a question not so much of what influences are at play"—of whether the poem merits a place in the apostolic succession of Homeric imitators—but of "the quality of what is made" out of these influences, whether they bear the authentic stamp of Homeric originality.¹⁴

There has thus been considerable anxiety among critics and on the part of the poet himself about the generic affinities of *Omeros*. One may conjecture that many of those who hail the poem as an epic do so without much interest in genre theory, but rather out of a desire to honor Walcott for what is indeed a remarkable achievement. In general most critics appear to regard the entire issue of genre as unfortunate, any choice among the available categories being difficult if not impossible for most readers to make. Despite the difficulty, however, critics raise the issue as one that is somehow necessary to confront, even if some can manage only an equivocal solution, like that of the reviewer who described the poem as, "if anything," a novel in verse.¹⁵ Any uncertainty raised by the epic pretensions of *Omeros* stems from the obvious fact that the poem does not conform rigidly to the generic expectations that most readers bring to classical European epic poetry. In a way, this attitude is preferable to its opposite, which regards *Omeros* as unproblematically an epic in the Homeric tradition. The poem is, without question, about problems of belonging, concerning itself with the dubious prospect that any of us might find real comfort in a sense of belonging to some putatively homogeneous group. The problem of literary categorization is thus merely a special case of one of the poem's central themes; but it gains point from the fact that epic has been perceived—particularly European epic in the classical tradition—as, to use Bakhtin's term, the "monologic" genre par excellence and as the antithesis of the most thoroughly open and dialogic genre, which Bakhtin terms the novel.¹⁶

With respect to the assessment of postcolonial literature, the critical discourse of epic poetry acquires a racist tinge. Ultimately, I believe, it is the notion that the European epic speaks with the voice of the accumulated authority of generations of white imperialist culture that leads many readers to deny *Omeros* any meaningful association with the epic genre, while in the open polyphony of novelistic genres they find a quality better suited to the Cre-

olization of language, the racial and literary miscegenation, that characterize the poem. The debate clearly goes far beyond mere taxonomy and becomes a political battle for Walcott's racial identity and ethnic soul: is the author of *Omeros* "really" the white Walcott descended in blood from men of Warwickshire and in ink from the bard of Avon, or is he the black descendant of slaves whose history and language have all but disappeared from the official record, a man whose story can be told only in novelistic opposition to the epic culture that seeks to co-opt him as its own spokesman? In this light, it becomes clear that the epic element in *Omeros* threatens to reopen an old debate over Walcott's relationship to the European and African elements in his personal heritage and in the culture of the West Indies as a whole.¹⁷

In this essay I would like to make two responses to those critics who feel compelled to deny that *Omeros* is an epic poem. First, to base such a denial on a desire to claim *Omeros* as an *Afro*-Caribbean poem ignores those contemporary studies in world epic that go well beyond the literary tradition defined by European poets such as Homer and Milton. Second, to distinguish the poem from its predecessors in the canonical epic tradition on the basis of its capacity to celebrate alterity is to ignore the European epic's capacity for self-questioning and for radical reinterpretation of its own generic roots.

Let me expand upon both points.

AFRICA AND THE EPIC

Those critics who are embarrassed by the possibility that *Omeros* might be taken for an epic, and hence as a white man's poem, are, no doubt unknowingly, endorsing an untenable and extremely reactionary view of what epic poetry is in its racial and world-cultural dimensions. Such a view, to be sure, has been maintained by a number of "authoritative" discussions of epic as a world genre; but these discussions can easily be shown to be deeply, if unwittingly, implicated in a racist discourse of shocking naiveté.

The idea that the African nations were actually incapable of producing an epic literature was articulated, not perhaps for the first time, but with embarrassing clarity, by Maurice Bowra in his 1952 study *Heroic Poetry*.¹⁸ In surveying the heroic poetry of a wide variety of world literatures, Bowra noted the close relationships between poetry of praise or of lamentation and the heroic poetry with which he was concerned, but observed that the two former categories "exist in some societies where heroic poetry is lacking." He ascribes this lack to an "inability to rise beyond a single occasion to the conception of a detached art." The examples he cites are from Africa—specifically, from Uganda and Ethiopia—and he concludes his discussion with these words: "Though these poems, and many others like them, show a real admiration for active and generous manhood, they come from peoples who have no heroic poetry and have never advanced beyond panegyric and

lament. The intellectual effort required for such an advance seems to have been beyond their powers."¹⁹ It is extremely depressing to observe how often these and similarly demeaning cultural stereotypes leap to Bowra's mind as he discusses the literary achievements of African peoples. Characteristic is the presumption that heroic verse represents a later and more developed stage of the panegyric and lament that Bowra finds in Africa, the idea that a literary culture must progress from these early stages toward a true heroic literature, and that heroic poetry calls for a degree of intellectual abstraction of which Africans are not, in his view, capable; rather, the poetry that they do produce is notable for its "simple and primitive" qualities, its "expression of an immediate and violent excitement." Bowra's views, which strike us today as ignorant and insulting, are fully representative of literary scholarship in his day, and he was far from alone in believing that epic was simply not an African genre. A similar opinion was voiced in 1970, this time on purely formal grounds rather than as a judgment on the intellectual capacities of the African artist, by the influential folklorist Ruth Finnegan.²⁰ But by that time the tide had begun to turn, and since then considerable work has been done both to make known the existence of an epic literature among a number of African peoples and to study its particular qualities.

The procedure followed by many studies of the African epic is double. Scholars like Isidore Okpewho and John William Johnson aim to show, on the one hand, that the African epic is recognizable as epic on the same terms as canonical European specimens, and, on the other hand, that it displays certain distinctive characteristics as a primarily oral and performative rather than literary genre.²¹ For this reason Africanists have an important role to play, first and self-evidently, in the comparative study of oral epic as a phenomenon of world literature, but also, to the extent that research into oral poetry has revolutionized the study of the Homeric poems, in the effort to reinterpret the canonical tradition of European epic that boasts of its Homeric ancestry. One consequence of this activity is that the African epic has been subjected to some of the same questions that had begun to be asked both of the archaic Greek epic and of its putative modern European analogues, principally, poetry of the South Slavic epic tradition recorded and studied by Milman Parry and Albert Lord.²² It can now be seen that the African material stands in more or less the same relationship to texts like the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as does the Slavic material, even if one reaches the conclusion that the Homeric poems are by comparison only vestigially oral performances that have traveled some considerable way down the road from performance to literary fixedness. For instance, when Okpewho, in order to illustrate oral poetry's tendency to strive for immediate effect by means of humor, compares the grim humor shown by the narrator of the *Kambili* epic ("The old sandle man's head was cut off at his neck. / Big trouble has begun in Jimini! / The little man fell flopping about like a tramp in the cold")²³ to Patro-

clus's ill-timed and entirely out-of-character jeering at the Trojan Cebriones, whom he has just killed, it is clear that what Okpewho regards as a typical and even normative procedure for the Mandingo poet is present, but nevertheless comparatively rare in Homer.²⁴ If we are unconvinced by this particular analogy, however, other examples come to mind: the Homeric narrator's ironic aside concerning the bargain struck by Glaucus, who exchanges his golden armor for Diomedes' bronze (*Iliad* 6.234–236),²⁵ or perhaps Odysseus's observation to his host and principal listener, Alcinous, that his story is getting rather long, and it might be time simply to stop and go to bed (*Odyssey* 11.328–384). This exchange occurs about halfway through the hero's narrative of his adventures since the Trojan War and, not incidentally, about halfway through the poem as a whole. When Alcinous refuses to hear of any delay in the completion of the tale, we may take his reaction as the oral poet's script for his ideal audience, who should be as eager for the rest of his story as Alcinous is for that of Odysseus.²⁶

Passages like these are admittedly not very common in our *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—or perhaps they tend to be overlooked by readers unaccustomed to finding such elements in epics of the European canon. But despite Homer's distance from actual oral performance, comparative study establishes without question the ultimately oral and performative character of Homeric epic and in this way aligns the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with modern world epic as against the remainder of the ancient, medieval, and early modern tradition of "classicizing" European epic in the Homeric tradition—such as the *Aeneid*, *La Divina Commedia*, *Os Lusíadas*, *Paradise Lost*, and so forth. This is a crucial point, I suggest, because the scholarly discovery of an African epic linked to Homer by virtue of its being the product of an oral-epic performance culture actually parallels one of the dominant conceits of literary apologia in *Omeros*—namely Walcott's construction of Homer not as a participant in an exclusively European scribal culture, but as a singer of folktales whom one might find just as readily in an African or Afro-Caribbean context as in that of archaic Greece.

For Walcott, the Creole culture of the Caribbean is preeminently an oral culture. In the poem "Cul de Sac Valley" he contrasts this culture with the scribal culture in which he works, calling Creole "a tongue they speak in, but cannot write."²⁷ He imagines himself as a poet-carpenter, creating a work that images perfectly his Caribbean homeland:

as consonants scroll
off my shaving plane
in the fragrant Creole
of their native grain;

from a trestle bench
they'd curl at my foot,

C's, R's, with a French
or West African root

from a dialect throng-
ing, its leaves unread
yet light on the tongue
of their native road.

("Cul de Sac Valley"
1.13-24)

But as he catches the fresh scent from a stand of trees in the landscape he wishes to represent—trees designated in French Creole as *bois canot*, *bois campêche*—his dream of honestly representing that landscape is shattered as he imagines the trees "hissing" at him with reproach:

*What you wish
from us will never be,
your words is English,
is a different tree.*

(1.33-36)

Here the poet's language and his status as a member of the scribal culture distance him from the oral culture of his Creole home.

The motif of Caribbean culture as grounded in orality is basic to Walcott's thinking on language. His play *O Babylon!* concerns the cultural and political ideals of a Rastafarian community in Kingston, Jamaica. In a note on the play, Walcott writes of the Jamaican spoken dialect in its pure form as unintelligible except to Jamaicans, and thus in need of translation to any outsider; and "within that language itself," he writes, "the Rastafari have created still another for their own nation. . . . [They] have invented a grammar and a syntax which immures them from the seduction of Babylon, an oral poetry which requires translation into the language of the oppressor," and goes on to observe: "To translate is to betray."²⁸

This confession pertains in the first instance to the author's project of representing an oral culture in a scripted play; but it sheds a painful light on his effort to write a West Indian poetry at all, and particularly to write it in English. Such an effort must be fatally flawed from the start because any English poem, any written work, stands at an extra degree of separation from its subject as compared with Creole utterance. It possesses the quality not so much of an original composition as of a translation—and, thus, as a betrayal.

What is crucial, however, is one's response to the recognition of this betrayal. If there is a division between English and Creole, between scribal and oral cultures, between Europe and Africa, there is also a relationship to be negotiated. It is this insight that makes place for the craft of translation, a space that is inevitably, necessarily *there*.

Translation is, however, an transitive process: if Creole must be translated into English, the converse is also true. If European colonialists bring foreign categories of intellection to the interpretation of Caribbean realities, it is equally possible to translate European culture into West Indian terms; and this latter type of translation, while it is, given the asymmetrical power relationship between the European colonialists and the islanders, less common than the first, shares with all forms of translation the impossibility of leaving the "original" unchanged. The decision to translate Homeric epic into West Indian terms cannot but change one's perception of Homer. Thus Walcott's characterization of Caribbean dialects as "oral poetry" finds its parallel in Walcott's refusal to cede Homer to the scribal culture of European colonialists.

This is no casual theme in *Omeros* (or, indeed, in Walcott's work as a whole), but a central problem to which the poem constantly and broodingly recurs. The theme is sounded first in the image of Seven Seas, a blind old man identified by the poem's Narrator with Omeros (1.2.2-3). Seven Seas spends some of his days sitting in the No Pain Cafe, observed by its proprietor, Ma Kilman: "Sometimes he would sing . . . But his words were not clear/They were Greek to her. Or old African babble" (1.3.2).²⁹ It is Seven Seas who, like a prophet, discloses to Philoctete the meaning of Achille's unusual, overnight absence from port: he has journeyed to Africa in search of "his name and his soul" (2.29.2).

This equivalency between Greek and "old African babble" involves an approximation of Homer's oral poetry to elements in West Indian speech that must remain, even to many West Indian listeners, inarticulate and at best partially understood. This motif finds its parallel in other contexts. When, for example, in the Narrator's interview with Homer himself the ancient poet declares that "a drifter/is the hero of my book," the Narrator surprises him by rejoicing: "I never read it," which he then qualifies: "not all the way through."³⁰ For the reader alive to the poem's engagement with literary antecedents, it is a puzzling moment.³¹ I take this reply as rejecting what is implied when Homer refers to his *Odyssey* as a "book." The passage thus indicates that Homer is not to be understood exclusively as the representative, nor *Omeros* as the product, of European scribal culture; for, after denying that he has ever "read" Homer "all the way through," the Narrator declares his debt to the oral tradition, going on to insist:

"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, and I walked along
the curled brow of the surf; the word 'Homer' meant joy,
joy in battle, in work, in death, then the numbered peace

of the surf's benedictions, it rose in the cedars,
 in the *laurier-cannelles*, pages of rustling trees.
 Master, I was the freshest of your readers."³²

This emphasis on Homer as an oral poet of the sea and of nature, one whose poetry finds its analogue not in literature but in the unwritten landscape and seascape of St. Lucia, in the quotidian experience of a growing boy, constructs a Homer very different from his Virgilian and Miltonic progeny, one who resembles much more the Slavic and African epicists recovered by folklorists. If this Homer can be encountered at all through reading, it can only be a partial encounter—"not all the way through"—involving not just the leaves of a book but also "the pages of the trees."³³

In this respect research into the existence and oral performative character of the African epic and the establishment of a link between these traditions and those that produced the songs of Homer in a sense substantiates Walcott's imaginative characterization of Homer, in one of many avatars within *Omeros*, as Seven Seas, the wizened old storyteller of St. Lucia who embodies the lore and wisdom of the island people and whose ultimate roots are in Africa.

EPIC AS A DIALOGICAL GENRE

My second main point concerns the way in which most students of literature have been taught to conceive of the European epic. It is clear that the study of world epic in the twentieth century represents a major challenge to traditional definitions of the genre based on the European canon. In addition, it can easily be shown that these traditional definitions are wholly inadequate to describe even poems like the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*. A good deal of the modern theoretical discourse that concerns itself with epic—and I am thinking here primarily of the classic formulations, descended from Schiller, of Hegel, Lukács, Auerbach, and Bakhtin—shows a pronounced tendency to employ a discursive caricature of the genre as a foil for making clearer the less strictly defined, formally and culturally heterogeneous, and in short "open" characteristics of other genres, especially the novel.³⁴

This discursive strategy has resulted in a number of pernicious literary-historical misconceptions, not least of which is the absurdly one-dimensional idea of the epic genre that many students of literature regard as axiomatic. Thus while the epic, when viewed from a multicultural perspective, may prove to be many things, in the classical tradition of European literature it has been accorded a privileged place among the most elevated genres. Among its attributes, along with a tone conforming to its elevated matter, are *authority*, or the idea that the stories told by the epic narrator are objectively true; *transcendence*, or the idea that the authority and truth of the epic narrative are

wholly independent of any historical or cultural contingency; and *originality*, the idea that epic is in some sense a source of subsequent culture, particularly as the literary embodiment of a nation's character.

If we define the European epic as necessarily possessing characteristics such as these, it is easy to see why some readers would hesitate to regard *Omeros* as representing the genre. Its tone is seldom elevated, nor is much of its matter especially dignified. The narrative voice, though sure in a technical sense, is personal (in many passages explicitly autobiographical), uncertain (readier to ask questions than to provide answers), idiosyncratic (prone to seemingly uncontrolled punning), uncomfortable with the mantle of authority. The narrative itself is often untrue in any conventional sense: the Narrator does not really speak with his dead father or with Homer himself; Achille does not really sail to his ancestral Africa; Denis Plunkett is in fact neither the father nor the descendant of the obscure midshipman who bore the same surname and who died in the Battle of Les Saintes. It is also clear that the nationalism of this epic is far from embracing the imperialist ideology of previous epics. Walcott's St. Lucia is consistently represented as a remnant and a victim of empire, while as one among many Caribbean islands, the formerly contested possession of rival empires now, left to fend for itself, seems both an unlikely subject for a triumphalist national epic and an unlikely heir to the epic tradition handed down from Greece, Rome, and Christendom in general.

If there were any doubt that *Omeros* is a deliberate nonepic, it would seem to be dispelled by a pair of passages that occur near the end of the poem. In the first, Walcott imagines what a conventional epic description of St. Lucia might have looked like:

"In the mist of the sea there is a horned island
with deep green harbours where the Greek ships anchor

.....

It was a place of light with luminous valleys

under thunderous clouds. A Genoan wanderer
saying the beads of the Antilles named the place
for a blinded saint. Later, others would name her

for a wild wife. Her mountains tinkle with springs
among moss-bearded forests, and the screeching of birds
stitches its tapestry. The white egret makes rings

stalking its pools. African fishermen make boards
from trees as tall as their gods with their echoing
axes and a volcano stinking with sulphur

has made it a healing place."

(*Omeros* 7. 57.1)

The style of this passage, its beauty notwithstanding, might strike the reader as absurd and hence sheerly parodic in the usually unpretentious linguistic context of *Omeros*, with its stretches of plain dialogue, its Creole, its occasional obscenities. But there is no mockery here. The passage is uttered first by Omeros himself, who observes the Narrator weeping like a boy:

and he saw how deeply I had loved this island.
Perhaps the oarsman knew this, but I didn't know.
Then I saw the ebony of his lifted hand

And Omeros nodded: "We will both praise it now."
But I could not before him. My tongue was a stone
at the bottom of the sea, my mouth a parted conch

from which nothing sounded, and then I heard his own
Greek calypso coming from the marble trunk,
widening the sea with a blind man's anger.

Omeros then sings the first two lines of the song quoted above. The Narrator continues:

and the waves were swaying to the stroke of his hand,
as I heard my own voice riding on his praise
the way a swift follows a crest, leaving its shore.

They sing the remaining stanzas together, until the Narrator informs us:

My voice was going
under the strength of his voice, which carried so far
that a black frigate heard it, steadying its wing.

The concentration of literary motifs in this passage—its elevated tone; the appearance, in the fact that both Omeros and the Narrator are on a boat, of the classical conceit by which composing poetry is figured as sailing (to say nothing of allusions to specific literary voyages, like that of Dante and Virgil across the Styx); Omeros's vatic knowledge of the Narrator's love, unsuspected by himself, for his native land; the response of the waves and of the frigate bird to the Orphic power of Omeros's song; the blending of the poets' voices; and the younger poet's inability to sing before hearing the voice of the elder—all represent a departure from the "normal" (if one can speak of a norm) narrative style of the poem up to this point. Through this departure and in the distance it takes us from the poem's usual stylistic procedures we can measure the gap between *Omeros* and other epics of the Homeric stripe.

A second passage not long after this one accomplishes something similar, but in a less striking way. The poem's final chapter begins as follows:

I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son,
who never ascended an elevator,
who had no passport, since the horizon needs none,

never begged nor borrowed, was nobody's waiter,
 whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water
 (which is not for this book, which will remain unknown

and unread by him). I sang the only slaughter
 that brought him delight, and that from necessity—
 the slaughter of fish, sang the channels of his back in the sun.

I sang our wide country, the Caribbean Sea.
 Who hated shoes, whose soles were as cracked as a stone,
 who was gentle with ropes, who had one suit alone,

whom no man dared insult and who insulted no one,
 whose grin was a white breaker cresting, but whose frown
 was a growing thunderhead, whose fist of iron

would do me a greater honor if it held on
 to my casket's oarlocks than mine lifting his own
 when both anchors are lowered in the one island.

(*Omeros* 7.64.1)

Such a passage is literally perverse, turned backwards, alluding in the poem's final chapter to the conventional opening of a canonical epic. Indeed, one can easily read the first line of the chapter as an allusion to the opening lines of the *Iliad*, but an allusion that systematically inverts virtually everything in its source:

μῆνιν, ᾄειδε, θεά, Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
 οὐλομένην

(*Iliad* 1.1–2)

"Sing, goddess, the baleful anger of Peleus' son, Achilles." Every departure from the Homeric model speaks eloquently of the vast difference in perspective between the two poems. In naming his hero, Walcott rejects the universal form Achilles in favor of the dialectal variant Achille, local Creole by way of colonial French. By including the patronymic he underlines the theme of cultural rift; for while Achilles and Peleus share membership in a single Hellenic culture, the very names of Achille and Afolabe represent the victimization of Africans in the Americas at the hands of the European slave trade. The epithet "quiet" is of course unimaginable for any Homeric hero. Finally, in "I sang" two crucial reversals occur. First, in the change of tense and mood from Homer's forward-looking "sing" ᾄειδε is figured the dislocation, as mentioned above, of the epic invocation from the poem's beginning to its end. Second, and more tellingly, Homer's "goddess" θεά, the Muse, disappears: the poet has no need to petition divinity for his song but, mortal and fallible though he may be, sings on his own authority. For some readers it is this, more than anything else, that places *Omeros* outside the bounds

of the epic genre. "*Omeros* is not an epic," writes Figueroa, "and it hardly touches on the gods."³⁵ And indeed, it is in passages like this that we squarely confront Burris's "deliberate deflation of analogy."

If the European epic is what the theorists tell us it should be, then clearly *Omeros* is no epic. But those theorists are wrong. Certainly the idea that epic is a closed, authoritative genre, objective in its regard of the heroic past, and so on is a significant discursive construct that evidently answers some deep-seated cultural longing on the part of readers brought up on European literature. But a discursive construct it is, and its usefulness in describing or understanding an actual epic poem is limited at best. The discourse on the epic is, to be sure, one of the longest-lived and most powerful elements of literary investigation in the West. The fact is, however, that there has always been a counter tradition of reading epic as more open to pluralities of interpretation than the conventional view of the genre would seem to allow, and such interpretations have recently become a dominant feature of the critical discussion. From ancient allegoresis of the Homeric epics, which refuses to take the poems at face value, to romantic readings of Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost*, to New Critical readings of the *Aeneid* as a deeply divided, grimly brooding meditation on the costs of empire, practical critics have always shown great acuity and resourcefulness at reading behind the objectivity and transcendence that we have all been taught to find in epic to the cultural anxieties and historical contingencies reflected and refracted within what poses as the inevitability of epic narrative.³⁶ It is in general I think fair to say that the rigid conception of epic that I have been outlining is by and large the province of theorists, who find such a construct useful for their own discursive purposes, and of nonspecialists, who are by definition not very interested in the epic; while the excellent work that any number of connoisseurs have done illustrates that an acceptance of alterity is a basic constitutive feature of the European epic from its inception. To deny that *Omeros* is an epic on the grounds that it is something "other" than the *Iliad* or *Paradise Lost* is to misunderstand the development of European epic as badly as Bowra misunderstood the existence of African epic.

But if *Omeros* does not conform to the expectations of theorists and non-specialists, it does not fail to satisfy them. Walcott's ironic handling of the generic conventions of classical epic poetry is in my view more convincingly read as a logical extension of the epic genre's capacity to reinvent itself through inversion, opposition to epic predecessors, and ironic self-reflexion. To return briefly to the end of the poem: by announcing his subject here rather than at the beginning of the poem, the Narrator inverts normal epic procedure. While this particular stratagem is, I believe, an innovation, it is of a piece with the kind of striving for novelty that one finds throughout post-Homeric epic. That is to say, it is precisely the kind of innovation, commonly identified with Greek poetry of the Hellenistic period, but found

everywhere in Virgil, Camões, and Milton as well, whereby either adherence to epic convention or imitation of a particular epic model is pointedly varied in such a way as to force rethinking about fundamental aspects of the genre.³⁷ This capacity has come to be seen as a central characteristic both of individual poems (e.g., Virgil's internal dialogue between the voices of celebration and lament, and his reduction of the hero and his enemy to a single pattern) and of the tradition as a whole (e.g., Milton's recasting of the classical pagan hero as a demon to be surpassed and defeated by a new, Christian hero possessed of qualities diametrically opposed to those of his prototype and foe).³⁸ Indeed, two recent studies of the European epic argue convincingly that the genre can be understood only in dialectical terms. For David Quint, the dialectic takes shape over time, with each instantiation of epic narrative finding its place on a continuum that lies between a wholehearted commitment to the celebration of triumph and a dissenting point of view that consistently takes the side of a defeated resistance. For Susanne Wofford, the epic poem is dialectical in its very structure: in the simile, the epic figure par excellence, the genre attempts to correlate its heroic ideology with the (largely antithetical) values of the external world.³⁹ Over time, Wofford argues, the genre develops various strategies for negotiating this disjunctive relationship, which nevertheless remains apparent to the reader and plays an essential role in constituting the epic. Both Quint and Wofford thus present views of the epic that are profoundly at odds with received opinion concerning the closed, monologic nature of the genre; and, what is more, their ideas, while developed and expressed with great energy and uncommon insight, are by no means eccentric when considered in relation to the bulk of contemporary critical work on the European epic. Indeed, one might say that their work marks an important stage in theoretical work on the epic and a signal that in this field theory has finally begun to catch up with practice.

Thus the polyglossia of *Omeros* does not just flout epic convention or render allusion to the classical epics merely parodic or unimportant, but actually continues the epic tradition of questioning and self-questioning engagement on the part of the poet with his predecessors. Placing at the end of the poem a passage that the "rules" of the genre tell us should come at the beginning is a formal instance of the capacity for inversion and reinvention that is itself a property of the epic genre. We may also take it as a signal that more substantive forms of inversion and reinvention are under way as well.

Once we realize this, it becomes clear that my earlier summary of a hypothetical argument in which I adduced this passage to prove that *Omeros* is no epic is itself open to drastic revision. To begin with, I called "Achille" a "dialectal variant" of "Achilles," the "universal" name for the greatest of heroes. This position is correct within the confines of a discourse that regards epic as the literary embodiment of a unitary, undifferentiated "European" culture; but a modest amount of philological inquiry reveals what is wrong

with this perspective. "Achilles" happens to be the form that the name takes in English as well as in Latin, and it is through Latin that the form acquires its apparent universality. In fact, though, this form is, like "Ulysses" for "Odysseus" and "Hercules" for "Herakles," a Roman corruption of the Greek "Akhilleus." In other words, it is itself a dialectal variant. It is clear that the poem invites precisely this kind of scrutiny; consider its title, which designates the master poet of the tradition it engages not as the spuriously universal Latinate "Homer" (< Latin "Homerus"), but by the Greek "*Omeros*." Indeed, even here we cannot claim that the Greek form represents a fixity or an authenticity that can pass for universality; for it is not the form that an ancient Greek would have used, "*Ομηρος* [i.e., HO-me-ros], but modern Greek as spoken to the Narrator by a Greek woman and transcribed without regard for the conventions of the written Greek language.⁴⁰ It is the sound of the word that captivates the Narrator, who supplies it with his own idiosyncratic, aural etymology:

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

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

The name stayed in my mouth.

(*Omeros* 1,2,3)

The Greek word is "derived" from elements of the French Creole dialect spoken, not written, on the islands and from the natural sounds of the Caribbean environment.⁴¹ We may find in the apparent chronological inversion that derives Greek from French a parallel to the formal device of ending an epic with a formula normally used for beginnings, though in the sounds of the natural environment the Narrator finds a linguistic source that is indeed older than language itself. What is more important is to recognize in the "demotion" of Greek to a derivative status relative to the primacy of "our Antillean patois"—itself a tellingly ironic formulation in a poem written chiefly in English—a motif repeated in at least two other central conceits of the poem with much broader thematic significance.

The first of these conceits, which descends from the idea of *translatio imperii*, involves the unending succession whereby formerly enslaved and colonized peoples become oppressors in their own right. The motif first appears in the early poem "Ruins of a Great House," of which Rei Terada writes: "Walcott places the British conquest of St. Lucia at the end of an originless chain of conquests including the Roman colonization of Britain."⁴² *Omeros* neatly

extends this motif, beginning with the ancient Athenian democracy—"its *demos* demonic and its *ocracy* crass"⁴³—that enslaved its fellow Greeks who inhabited the islands of the Aegean in what began as a defensive league against Persian invasion but ended as the Athenian Empire. Then Roman enslaved Greek and appropriated Greek culture as a symbol of empire, passing this iconography of power on to other enslaved peoples destined to gain empires of their own. The British Empire in turn established colonies throughout the New World and, with its fellow European powers, enslaved and exterminated the inhabitants of that world—virtually, in the case of the North American Iroquois and Sioux, completely in the case of the Antillean Aruacs and Caribs—and thereby created a fresh need for slaves, supplied by Africa, whose descendants remain oppressed by a pervasive racism particularly in the contemporary United States.⁴⁴ But even the enslaved and the oppressed are not free from complicity. A shocked Achille witnesses a slaving raid on his ancestral village carried out by another African tribe.⁴⁵ The warlike Caribs had been responsible for wiping out the peaceful Aruacs, while a regiment of freed North American slaves—the Buffalo Soldiers of the United States Ninth Cavalry—advanced the cause of white imperialism by carrying out the final defeat of the Sioux.⁴⁶ "All colonies inherit their empire's sin."⁴⁷

For our purposes a second motif is perhaps even more important. I refer to the figure of lineage or paternity in *Omeros* and in epic narrative generally.

In *Omeros* paternity is a far from simple matter. Denis Plunkett grieves because he will die without an heir, and in an act that is half pedantry and half unrestrained imagination he makes himself the "father" of a young midshipman also named Plunkett, who, he discovers, died serving under Admiral Rodney in the Battle of Les Saintes 200 years before the story of *Omeros* takes place. Imagining this young man as his son does not prevent Plunkett from claiming him as an ancestor as well, by a crazy logic based on the fact that, as Plunkett will do, the young midshipman also died without leaving an heir. The Narrator of the poem stands in a similarly ambiguous relationship to his father, who died at an age younger than that of the Narrator, who thus figures himself as "older" than his father as he tells the story of *Omeros*.⁴⁸ Achille experiences a hallucination that takes him to Africa, where he converses with people whom he imagines as his ancestors; and as the poem ends he prepares to raise Helen's child, who may be his own son or else that of his departed friend and rival, Hector. In all these instances the relationship of fathers to sons is deeply problematized, the basis of the relationship questioned: is it primarily a biological matter, or one dependent on empathy, imaginative sympathy, mutual interest, and acceptance, or even an act of will asserting itself over reason? Is the vector of the relationship always one that follows the arrow of time from father to son, or does the son engender the father from whom he wishes to inherit?

This is, I submit, one of the central problems of the European epic from

its inception. The heroes of the *Iliad* are obsessed with their own ancestry and are bent on proving that they measure up to the standards set by their forebears. Telemachus's coming of age involves meeting his long-lost father for the first time in his life. Aeneas must transform himself from the dutiful son of a doomed race to the progenitor of the greatest empire in world history. Satan rebels against the appointed succession of the Father by the Son, so that Adam, fatherless himself, becomes the begetter of humankind in general. It is difficult not to see in the career of the European epic an ideal instantiation of the Oedipal warfare that for Harold Bloom constitutes the driving force behind all literature.⁴⁹ But the epigonal work can never overcome its own belatedness and derivative status. For epics such as these, genealogy—not just that of the hero, but that of the poem itself—becomes all important: by virtue of claiming legitimate descent from Homer, these epics attempt to take the place of Homer as originary texts in their own right. But on grounds of originality it is clear that the principal European epics are compromised by their membership in a clearly defined literary tradition stretching back to Homer: by virtue of this fact, they can never be original as Homer is.

By renewing this aspect of the epic tradition *Omeros* makes of itself a paradigm for the contemporary individual's relationship to the various cultural legacies that he or she inherits or wishes to claim. In a limited way, the poem can thus be read as an allegory of our own relationship to classical culture, or to the immigrant culture of our personal ancestors, or even of groups to which we feel or imagine a sympathetic connection rather than an ethnic or biological one. The central reflection of this arrangement is the relative lack of authority and control that Walcott's Narrator exerts over his story, in sharp contrast to the objectivity and truth that are conventionally ascribed to the epic poet. Walcott's Narrator is thus not so far removed from his reader, in that both are in the position of needing to piece together fragments of a broken past in order to make sense of their existence and experiences.

Thus *Omeros* presents the reader with a litmus test, or rather, with the illusion of such a test; for, like the bureaucrat of the story with which I began, any reader who seeks to apply such a test to this poem can only fail. There is in *Omeros* no black or white, but only black and white. Its roots are not in Europe or Africa, but necessarily in both Europe and Africa. Consequently, it is not epic or novel, but only epic and novel. This, however, it can only be if its relationship to classical epic, however we may choose to problematize this relationship, as well as to the epics of groups traditionally ignored by the canonical European epic tradition, is fully acknowledged and integrated into our reading. This is only one of the reasons that we should celebrate this remarkable poem, which is after all still new to us, still in many ways uncanny and unfamiliar—for its ability to make us see our own past anew, to force us to reflect upon our own ancestry, and to understand our own heritage—racial, intellectual, and cultural—both as it is and as we would have it be.

NOTES

1. For a brief bibliography and survey of the critical tradition, see Marowski and Matuz 1987, 414-423.
 2. In this paper I cite from Walcott 1986 (*Collected Poems, 1948-1984*) unless otherwise noted. The passage in question may be found on p. 15. The poem originally appeared in 1956, according to Irma E. Goldstraw's indispensable bibliography (1984, 5), and was subsequently included in Walcott 1962, 18.
 3. Walcott 1986, 443. The poem originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1981 (Goldstraw 1984, 39) and, later that year, in the collection *The Fortunate Traveller* (New York, 1981), 63-70.
 4. Lefkowitz 1990, 1, 34-35; Knox 1991, 3-4; Taplin 1991, 213-226; Steiner 1993, 13-16.
 5. Burris 1991, 559 (my emphasis).
 6. Hamner 1993b, 19; cf. the introductory remarks in Hamner 1993a, 10-12.
 7. Figueroa 1991, 211.
 8. Ismond 1991, 10-11.
 9. Quoted by Bruckner 1990, reprinted in Hamner 1993a, 396-399. Walcott's remarks stress the importance to him of the novelists Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, and Ernest Hemingway as models for *Omeros*. See also Brown and Johnson 1990, 209-233; White 1990, 14-37.
 10. "*Omeros* is profoundly Homeric and undoubtedly epic"; see Taplin 1991, 213-226.
 11. Burris 1991, 560.
 12. On dramatic elements in *Omeros*, see Burris 1991, 561-564. Burris calls *Ulysses* "the work that will in all likelihood emerge as the most generous sponsor of *Omeros*" (p. 561).
 13. Figueroa 1991, 203-205. On p. 205 he observes that St. Lucy, the patron saint of the island, was herself a blind seer. Blindness and compensatory insight is a recurring theme in Walcott's work, one with special relevance to the figure of the poet. In "Cul de Sac Valley" the poet images himself as an Oedipus questioned by a row of Sphinxes (Walcott 1986, 13).
- In this essay I will use the capitalized form "Narrator" to indicate the character in *Omeros* who narrates the poem and represents the figure of the poet himself; the lowercase form indicates the implied singer of whatever poem happens to be under discussion.
14. Figueroa 1991, 206.
 15. Leithauser 1991. Cf. Figueroa 1991, 197: "The poem [is] much more a novel than an epic, while never losing its lyrical fire."
 16. The argument is spelled out most clearly in Bakhtin's essay "Epic and Novel" (Bakhtin 1981, 3-40).
 17. The question of Walcott's influences, which has been prominent in criticism of his work since the beginning, came to be viewed in terms of cultural allegiance as Walcott's European influences were found by some less relevant to the Africanist West Indian political consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s than the work of other writers, particularly Edward Brathwaite. The literature comparing the two writers is quite large: representative works include Lucie-Smith 1968; Drayton 1970; James 1970;

[Anonymous] "How Far are Derek Walcott and Edward Brathwaite Similar?" 1974; Collier 1979; King 1980. As Walcott's interest in African themes, particularly in plays such as *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and *O Babylon!*, came to be appreciated, the question of his cultural allegiances became less urgent. Further, with Walcott's rise to international stature he has come to be compared with poets such as Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney, and one result of appearing in such company before an international audience is that his Caribbean identity seems hardly in doubt. Significantly, the West Indian writer with whom he is most often contrasted nowadays is not Brathwaite, but V. S. Naipaul, with whose dismal judgment upon postcolonial culture, particularly in the West Indies, Walcott (1974) took exception.

18. Bowra 1952, 1-11.

19. Ibid.

20. Finnegan 1970, 108ff. Finnegan, however, is not concerned, as Bowra is, with the capacity of Africans to produce heroic literature so much as with the technical question of whether their heroic literature is in verse.

21. Of crucial importance was the publication of the Sundiata epic (Niane 1960; Pickett 1965 (English translation). On the poem, see Miller 1990, 87-101. Other important scholarly investigations of African epic include Okpewho 1979; Knappert 1983; William Johnson 1980.

22. On the work of Parry and Lord on this tradition, see Lord 1960.

23. *Kambili*, vol. 1 of *The Songs of Seydou Camara*, trans. Charles S. Bird, Mamadou Koita, and Bourama Soumaoro (lines 505-507); cited by Okpewho 1979, 205-206.

24. A more apt comparison might have been between other instances of interaction between poet and audience in contemporary performative epic and passages in our *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that are best explained as "local variants," that is, as versions of the story suited to performance in some specific setting that somehow found their way into what eventually became the "canonical" text. Such an explanation has been advanced in the case of the episode involving Aeneas in *Iliad* 20, which may ultimately owe its existence to a ruling dynasty that claimed descent from the hero: see Kirk 1991, 298-301, with further references. An even stronger case can be made for the prominence of the Athenian contingent in the Catalogue of Ships in that Athens was not a great power either at the time when the events of the *Iliad* putatively occurred or at the time when a recognizable version of the poem was first coming into existence; yet the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus played some role, one that may have been both extensive and decisive, in the canonization of the text of Homer that has come down to us. On this particular problem see Kirk 1985, 178-180, with further references. On the phenomenon in general, see Svenbro 1976, 5-73.

25. This passage has a long history of interpretation, much of which finds the humorous element misplaced. See Kirk 1990, 190-191, with further references.

26. With this motif we may compare contemporary performances of North African epic: see the Dwight Reynolds's essay in this volume: "Problematic Performances: Overlapping Genres and Levels of Participation in Arabic Oral Epic-Singing."

27. Walcott 1987, 10.

28. Walcott 1978, 155-156. This passage is quoted at greater length and discussed in Terada 1992, 93-94.

29. Seven Seas performs, for instance, at a party held at the café in honor of a political candidate (2.20.1). Ma Kilman's eventual role as Philoctete's healer un-

derlines the assonance between her name and that of Machaon, surgeon to the Greek forces in the *Iliad*, as Burris points out (1991, 561), citing the equivalence as an example of Walcott's "slapstick disregard" for his Homeric parallels. Burris's rather facile reaction ignores the fact that the character of Ma Kilman, a "gardeuse, sybil, obeah-woman" (1.10.2), antedates *Omeros* and indeed is first presented not as Walcott's creation, but as "found object" of St. Lucian folk culture, appearing first in a Creole song included and translated in "Sainte Lucie," secs. 4-5 (Walcott 1986, 314-319, first published in the collection *Sea Grapes* as long ago as 1976). The connection with Machaon would appear to have been forged or "discovered" some time after the poet's initial acquaintance with the figure. I would add that the hand of the poet is more clearly visible in the character's connection with the No Pain Cafe, which takes its name from that of *νηπενθής* (*nēpenthēs*), "[allowing] no pain," a drug administered by Helen to her husband, Menelaus, and to their guests, Telemachus and Peisistratus, so that they might discuss the war at Troy and the difficult homecomings of the Greeks who fought there without succumbing to grief. Thus Ma Kilman herself is a type of Helen in her odyssean, as opposed to her iliadic, manifestation.

30. *Omeros* 7.56.3.

31. The theme of alleged gaps in the author's reading recurs, again with respect to the sources of *Omeros*, but this time involving the *Aeneid* as well as the *Odyssey*, in White 1990, 16-35. The problem is addressed with great insight by Fuller (1992, 517-538). One thinks of Yeats's striking way of naming the inspiration of his life's work: "the half-read wisdom of daemonic images" ("Meditations in Time of Civil War" 7.40, in Yeats 1983, 206).

32. *Omeros* 7.56.3.

33. The theme of a natural language heard or even read in landscape is prominent throughout Walcott's work. See for instance the excellent observations of Terada 1992, 152, 164-165, 167; 171-174.

34. The locus classicus for this line of discourse is Friedrich Schiller's essay *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795-1796). It continues in G. W. F. Hegel's *Ästhetik* of 1835 (on which see Bowie 1990, 140-142), Georg Lukács's *Theorie des Romans* (1920), Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1953), and Bakhtin's "Epic and Novel" (1941; not widely known in this country before the Emerson and Holquist translation of 1981). It is fair to say that the influence of these thinkers on the study of the novel and its relationship not only to epic but to premodern literature in general has been decisive, but in many ways far from constructive.

35. Figueroa 1991, 211; cf. *Omeros* 7.56.3: [Narrator] "The gods and the demigods aren't much use to us."/"Forget the gods," Omeros growled, "and read the rest."

36. On ancient allegoresis of Homer, see Lamberton 1986, with further references. On *Paradise Lost*, see Newlyn 1993. For a convenient survey of twentieth-century trends in Virgilian criticism, see Harrison 1990, 1-20.

37. This particular type of intertextuality goes by the convenient name *oppositio in imitando*. There is a considerable literature on this phenomenon, most of it known, unfortunately, only to specialists. For a brief survey with references, see the introduction to Farrell 1991, 3-25. As a convenient illustration of the effect produced by this type of writing, consider the Narrator's observation that Achilles's "end, when it comes, will be a death by water/(which is not for this book)" (*Omeros* 7.64.1). The

point being imitated is Tiresias's prophecy in the Homeric *Odyssey* that the hero's death will occur far from the sea (*Odyssey* 11.134–136). The imitation *e contrario* not only redefines the meaning of death at sea according to the values of a new poetic universe but actively enlists the contribution of a whole range of previous independent imitators of the *Odyssey*, from Dante, whose Ulisse does in fact contradict Homer by dying a watery death (*Inferno* 26.85–142), to Kazantzakis, whose importance to Walcott as a mediator of Homeric and meta-Homeric traditions awaits further exploration, and Eliot, particularly of course in *The Waste Land*, to mention only these.

The phenomenon of *oppositio in imitando* parallels what Harold Bloom has famously figured as the belated poet's struggle for originality in the face of an oppressive weight of tradition in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and subsequent studies, but differs by focusing largely on the impersonal forces of generic development rather than on the psychological trope of the Oedipus complex. A further parallel may be found in the work of those scholars who have attempted to define the role of the individual poet-singer working within a tradition of oral composition and performance: e.g., Nagler 1974; Austin 1975.

38. On this aspect of the *Aeneid*, see Putnam 1988, 151–201. On Milton's Christian revision of pagan heroism, see Fish 1967.

39. See Quint 1993; Wofford 1992. See the review of both Quint and Wofford in Farrell 1993.

40. The poem thus privileges orality over literacy: the modern spelling is identical to the ancient, but the rough breathing mark is vestigial since the initial *H* sound has disappeared (Walcott uses the *H* only at 3.30.2). Thus Walcott's transliteration of Homer's Greek name into Roman characters as "Omeros" ironically represents more accurately than standard modern Greek orthography not only the absence of the *H* sound, but also the fact that the first and second *O* sounds (represented in Greek by omicron and omega, respectively) no longer differ in quantity, as they did in the ancient language, but actually sound identical. In fact, to say even this is too simple in view of the multiplicity of ancient conventions of spelling and pronunciation and the modern distinction between Katharevousa and Demotike. But my main point is, I think, clear.

41. Note that it is clearly an inhabited or personified environment: a conch shell sounds only when blown like a horn; leaves may crunch under human footsteps or from other causes; and the mouth of the cave quickly becomes the Narrator's mouth.

42. Terada 1992, 60. "Ruins of a Great House" originally appeared in 1956, then in Walcott 1962 (the collection *In a Green Night: Poems, 1945–1960*), and most recently in Walcott 1986 (*Collected Poems*), 19–21.

43. *Omeros* 5.41.1.

44. *Omeros* 5.41.2–3.

45. *Omeros* 3.27.1.

46. "Buffalo Soldiers" was the name given by the Southwest and Plains Indians to the troops who served between 1866 and 1891 as the Ninth and Tenth Regiments of the United States Cavalry, all of them African-Americans. The troops evidently accepted the name as a badge of honor, and the Tenth incorporated a bison into its regimental emblem (Leckie 1967, 25–26). The Ninth's involvement in the U. S. government's response to the Ghost Dance movement among the Sioux in 1890–1891

was the last significant campaign of the Buffalo Soldiers (Leckie, pp. 25–26). The narrative of this episode in *Omeros* occurs in what may be the most elliptical part of the poem. It begins when Achille, fresh from his hallucinatory voyage to Africa, remembers hearing the Bob Marley song "Buffalo Soldier" at a party the previous night and imagines himself a member of that troop (*Omeros* 3.31.1). The tale is related sporadically in the thirteen chapters that flow through the Narrator's experiences living in Boston and, especially, traveling to the Great Plains (a trip explicitly likened to Achille's dream of Africa at 4.34.2) and in passages related from the perspective of Catherine Weldon, a Boston woman who lived with Sitting Bull at the time of the Ghost Dance. This thread of narrative ends with book 5. Achille himself, in the reverie induced in him by Marley's music, is imagistically associated with the destruction of the Sioux nation and of the Aruacs (3.31.1).

In a similar way, Achille's ancestor, the Afolabe who first acquired the name Achilles from Admiral Rodney himself, helped the British forces position a cannon for the defense of St. Lucia against a French assault (2.14.3). By this act this Achilles unwittingly takes the part of the British Empire, which would ultimately gain political control over the island, against the nation that would leave so great a stamp on the island's culture, particularly its language and religion, in the time of his descendants.

It is possible, although *Omeros* does not do so, to document the converse phenomenon, the complicity of American Indians in the enslavement of blacks: see Abel 1992. And, to complete this brief typological survey of racial oppression, see Koger 1985.

47. *Omeros* 5.41.2.

48. "Now that you are twice my age, which is the boy's/which the father's?" "Sir,"—I swallowed—"they are one voice" (1.12.1).

49. Bloom 1973.

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