

Literary Migrations: Homer's Journey through Joyce's Ireland and Walcott's Saint Lucia

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Abstract

*This paper examines the literary kinship found in the works of Derek Walcott, James Joyce and Homer. Principally, it explores the way in which Walcott transplanted the classical epic tradition onto his Caribbean island of Saint Lucia in the wake of Joyce's similar shifting of the *Odyssey* to twentieth-century Dublin. It argues that Walcott forged a colonial affiliation with Irish literature, which he used as a model for his reflections on the linguistic, cultural and historical situation of Saint Lucia. The paper concludes with Walcott's homage to Joyce in his epic poem *Omeros*, which underlines the significant fact that the epic genre is not a fixed form of yesteryear, but rather a fluid, living category that travels across cultures and languages and acquires richer, more complex meanings through each of these migrations.*

The work of James Joyce looms large in the prolific production of the St Lucian poet, playwright, essayist, and 1992 Nobel Laureate, Derek Walcott. This is revealed in his autobiographical essay 'Leaving School' (1965), in which he reported his youthful identification with '[his] current hero, the blasphemous, arrogant Stephen Dedalus' (Walcott 1993a: 31); in his epic poem *Epitaph for the Young* (1949), where he continued and developed his relationship with Joyce's work; in his seminal essay, 'The Muse of History' (1974), the epigraph to which boasted Stephen Dedalus's forceful declaration in *Ulysses*: 'History is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake' (Walcott 1998: 36); [1] and in his celebrated epic poem *Omeros* (1990), in which he emulated Joyce's Hibernian rewriting of the *Odyssey* as he shifted Homer to the historical, cultural and linguistic circumstances of his twentieth-century Caribbean island of Saint Lucia.

Beneath the enduring fascination that Walcott has repeatedly professed of Joyce and Irish literature, however, it is possible to identify a larger historical reciprocity that proved fundamental in this timely literary meeting. At the core of Walcott's affiliation with the Irish literary tradition, thus, is embedded a deeply-rooted colonial history that forged a series of parallels between the Irish and Saint Lucian islands.

According to Charles W. Pollard, these analogies are based on historical, religious, and political

factors, particularly since '[both writers were] born on an island controlled by the Roman Catholic Church and the British Empire', and were 'educated by Irish priests [...] but rebelled against [their] suffocating orthodoxy' (Pollard 2001: 197). Similarly, he claims that both writers were 'educated in the colonial system, [and] grew to resent English rule yet cherished the English language and literary tradition' (Pollard 2001: 197). Finally, Pollard asserts that their literary vocations 'compelled [them] to flee the provincialism of [their] island home although [they] continued to focus on writing about that island' (Pollard 2001: 197). In effect, Walcott himself identified these striking parallels in a crucial interview with Edward Hirsh:

The whole Irish influence was for me a very intimate one. When the Irish brothers came to teach at the college in Saint Lucia, I had been reading a lot of Irish literature: I read Joyce, naturally I knew Yeats, and so on. I've always felt some kind of intimacy with the Irish poets because one realized that they were also colonials with the same kind of problems that existed in the Caribbean. They were the niggers of Britain (Baer 1996: 59).

In Walcott's creative development as a writer, Stephen Dedalus's perceptive differentiation of his Hibernian-English dialect from the Standard English spoken by the Dean of Studies: '— The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so

foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech (Joyce 2000: 159)', would have increased his awareness that as an English-speaking Caribbean writer he had to face a similar linguistic dilemma.

Therefore, just as Joyce masterfully twisted the colonial language to make it suit the particular requirements of his twentieth-century Irish circumstances, so Walcott similarly employed the English language to express the racial, cultural, and linguistic concerns of the island of Saint Lucia. Walcott turned the English language into a hybridised, Antillean patois that successfully captured the regional accents and idiosyncrasies of the Saint Lucian people. Moreover, in 'The Muse of History' Walcott advocated an Adamic redemption, a linguistic rebirth that would allow New World writers to become a second Adam and to rename, and hence transform, the oppressive colonial legacy which they had inherited.

In particular, he placed emphasis on the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, whom he considers one of the greatest New World poets, arguing that Neruda had similarly undertaken the historical task to rename and poetise his own culture (Walcott 1998: 39-40). This call for action is powerfully allied with the belief that the ex-colonial subject has the right to use 'the white man's words [...] his dress, his machinery, his food. And, of course, his literature' (Walcott 1993b: 20). In this light, Walcott is asserting that language and literature provide marginal writers a dual means of self-representation which enable them to use the Western tradition to their own advantage, as well as stretching the linguistic possibilities of the colonial speech through the use of devices such as code-switching (moving between two languages or dialects within the same discourse) and vernacular transcription (writing in colloquial language).

Yet at the same time, in the mirror of Joyce's art wherein Walcott recognised the image of his own face, are also reflected a series of complex, distorted figures with which the Caribbean poet identified. The looking glass of Irish art simultaneously revealed to him the literary figures of Homer, Dante and Shakespeare, albeit compounded and enriched by the signification they had assimilated in Joyce's work. If Joyce

charted the complex migration of Homer's *Odyssey* into the scenery of his native city of Dublin, then Walcott similarly extended the journey of Homer to the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia.

But Joyce's mapping of the *Odyssey* also involved a complex voyage through history and literature that created a version of the Greek hero Ulysses refracted through the prisms of Dante's *Commedia*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as well as through several centuries of critical interpretations that he had inherited as a twentieth-century Irish writer. Thus in his epic poem *Omeros*, Walcott also incorporated a Homeric heritage refracted by Dante's medieval understanding of Homer (he employed a lyric form that resembles Dante's *tersa rima*) and by Joyce's contemporary readings of Homer and Dante, which Walcott, in turn, blended with the rich, exuberant, and yet oppressive history of Saint Lucia.

Not for nothing has the island been named the 'Helen of the Caribbean', in a metaphorical designation that proposes an analogy between the mythical quarrel between Greeks and Trojans over Argive Helen, and the historical disputes between British and French powers over the sovereignty of the island. Saint Lucia, as Walcott pointed out in 'Leaving School', had been named 'by Columbus [...] after the blind saint' (Walcott 1993a: 24). According to Christian hagiography, Saint Lucy plucked out her beautiful eyes because they proved attractive to a male admirer. This vow of chastity also enabled the martyr to renounce all earthly possessions in her total devotion to God. The motif of metaphorical and physical blindness, as we shall see, is also central to Walcott's relationship with Homer and Joyce.

For Walcott, above all, this process of cross-cultural transference became a means by which Western discourses could be transplanted into the geographical landscape of his native Caribbean Island. These migrating seeds, thus, would bear the fruits of the cultural and linguistic richness of Saint Lucia, but also the thorns of a long and oppressive history of colonisation and slavery. In this manner, 'Homer' becomes *Omeros*, a cultural legacy stripped of a capital 'H' and turned from the

singular monologic ‘Homer’ to the plural dialogic ‘*Omer(os)*’, suitably representing the cultural diversity of colonised peoples whose hybridity is characteristic of an in-between identity that results from the merging of multiple worlds, multiple languages and multiple races. Therefore the canonical figure of Homer acquires a new literary and cultural meaning within a Caribbean heteroglossic locale:

*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 (Walcott 1990: 14).*

The metaphor of the sea provides Walcott with the dual image of literary continuation and re-generation, as the ever-flowing waters of epic inscribe his Caribbean poem within the classical epic tradition but also within the Hibernian sea of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In his essay ‘The Language of Exile’ the Irish poet and 1995 Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, perceptively identified the powerful currents that merge in Walcott and Joyce’s seas: ‘When Walcott lets the sea-breeze freshen in his imagination, the result is a poetry as spacious and heart-lifting as the sea-weather at the opening of Joyce’s *Ulysses*’ (Heaney 1993: 305).

Like Joyce, Walcott set himself the task of creating a new type of trans-cultural epic, which he represented on the large and multifarious canvas of *Omeros*, whereby he depicted the everyday reality of the islanders of Saint Lucia. This vast and complex panel, however, created ambivalent relationships in terms of culture (New World/Old World) race (black/white) and language (Creole-English/Standard English). By this token, the characters that inhabit *Omeros* adopt the grandiloquent names of their epic ancestors, but emulate a new type of heroism that arises, not from the battles of high rank individuals, but from the struggle of fishermen and local people who have to survive the socio-economic challenges of the island.

For instance, in an interview with J. P. White, Walcott applauded Joyce’s successful creation of

a new type of urban epic that transcends traditional notions of heroism: ‘*Ulysses* is an epic because it breathes. It’s an urban epic, which is remarkable in a small city. It’s a wonderful epic in the sense that the subject is lyrical and not heroic. The subject is a matter of a reflective man, not a man of action, but a sort of wandering Jew’ (Baer 1996: 161). The conciliatory qualities of Leopold Bloom, to whom Walcott is alluding here, are particularly manifested at the end of the ‘Ithaca’ episode. Contrary to his Homeric counterpart Odysseus, who mercilessly executed both Penelope’s importunate suitors and the female servants of the palace, Bloom opted for an anti-heroic, pacifist acceptance of Molly Bloom’s infidelity with Blazes Boylan, and decided not to perpetuate a bloodthirsty, Homeric-type revenge on her suitor:

*Why more abnegation than jealousy, less envy than
equanimity?*

From outrage (matrimony) to outrage (adultery) there arose nought but outrage (copulation) yet the matrimonial violator of the matrimonially violated had not been outraged by the adulterous violator of the adulterously violated (Joyce 2002: 603).

It is important to highlight here, nonetheless, that the main story of *Omeros* is the antagonism of two local fishermen, Achille and Hector, who become arch-rivals in their fight for the love of Saint Lucian Helen, a beautiful yet highly enigmatic character, who works as a waitress in a local bar of the island. Yet it merits mention that for as much as Walcott’s characters are able to wear the mythical façade of their Homeric counterparts, these masks are eventually removed in order to reveal the Other, deeper reality that lies beneath the classical attributes. In this manner, Walcott’s Homeric correspondences, like Joyce’s, are not fixed, one-dimensional constructs, but rather fluid, transformative identities that are capable of breaking free from the shackles of their Homeric namesakes insofar as their larger *meaning* becomes transformed by their new geographical setting.

In this way, Caribbean Helen adopts several Homeric and mythological identities; she

inherits the beauty of her counterpart, Helen of Troy, and thus becomes the source of rivalry between Hector and Achille. The eventual death of Hector, however, turns Helen into Penelope, a bereaved figure grieving for his absence, weaving an intricate tapestry out of the foamy currents of her Caribbean *mer*. Helen is also Circe, the enchantress whose powers allure Plunkett (the British expatriate) and who silently steals Maud's (Plunkett's Irish wife's) bracelet. Towards the end of the poem, however, Saint Lucian Helen triumphs over all her epic counterparts as she reasserts herself in all her Caribbean identity, transforming the long history of a marble face into the renewed beauty of an ebony face:

*Names are not oars
that have to be laid side by side, nor are legends;
slowly the foaming clouds have forgotten ours.
You were never in Troy, and, between two Helens,
yours is here and alive; their classic features
were turned into silhouettes from the lightning bolt
of a glance. These Helens are different creatures,
One marble, one ebony (Walcott 1990: 313).*

Another principal personage in the poem is a local fisherman named Philoctetes, who bears a wound from a rusty anchor which, as the book develops, acquires a larger allegorical significance and becomes a metaphor for the abuse and suffering of the Saint Lucian people. As Lorna Hardwick has pointed out: 'Names, relationships and situations familiar from Homer also bring with them reminders of enforced diaspora and a plantation culture which replaced the African names of its slaves with classical ones' (Hardwick 2006: 356).

It is highly significant, in this respect, that Seamus Heaney produced his own Irish version of the Greek hero in *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' "Philoctetes"* (1991). Like Walcott's Caribbean afterlife of the mythological character, Heaney's fluid and lyrically infused translation of *Philoctetes* similarly resonates with echoes of his Irish circumstances. For instance, in his 'Production Notes' he suggested that his new title *The Cure at Troy* conveyed the faith belief system of Irish Roman Catholicism: 'Cure is backlit ever so faintly in Irish usage (or should I say Irish Catholic?) by a sense of miracle. Lourdes and all that' (Heaney 2002: 172).

Further, the Northern Ireland resonances of Heaney's version of Sophocles are deeply interrelated with the fact that most of the cast was originally from Ulster, that the play's official opening took place in the Northern Irish county Derry, and, as Heaney also admitted, the play operated under the cultural slogan of Field Day Theatre Company (Heaney 2002: 174).

In a larger way, both Walcott and Heaney's afterlives of Philoctetes foreground the importance of healing and hope as the best antidotes to alleviate the wounds of the past. "We shall all heal" (Walcott 1990: 219) says the blind figure of Seven Seas to the rest of the characters at the end of *Omeros*. And the Chorus in Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* positively proclaims towards the end of the play: 'So hope for a great sea-change/On the far side of revenge./Believe that a further shore/Is reachable from here./Believe in miracles/And cures and healing wells' (Heaney 1990: 77).

In addition, Seamus Heaney's translation of Sophocles' tragedy reinforces the valid claim that it is possible to identify a longstanding association between Irish literature and ancient Greek mythology, principally in the wake of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Marianne McDonald has particularly recognised the interrelationship between Attic tragedy and the Irish theatrical tradition: 'In the twentieth century, there seem to be more translations and versions of Greek tragedy that have come from Ireland than from any other country in the English-speaking world. In many ways Ireland was and is constructing its identity through the representations offered by Greek tragedy' (McDonald 2002: 37).

Amongst the most important playwrights who have continued and developed this literary affiliation it is worth mentioning here the Irish playwright Tom Paulin, chiefly with his idiosyncratic, Northern Irish version of *Antigone* entitled *The Riot Act: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone* (1985) and Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), in which she successfully transposed Euripides' *Medea* into the cultural and linguistic setting of the Irish Midlands. It is obvious, then, that Walcott employed the rich symbolic medium of Greek literature to convey his Caribbean reality, just as the Irish had, and

still are, exploiting the wide range of creative possibilities offered by ancient Greek tragedians.

Central throughout all stages of *Omeros* is, of course, Homer himself, both as the mythical blind bard who has been credited with the authorship of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and also under the protean guise of his Saint Lucian avatar, a blind fisherman named Seven Seas, who follows the call of the sea and embarks on his own odyssey around the globe. Yet one of Walcott's greatest ironies is that his modern-day Homer, variously known as 'Old St. Omere' and 'Monsieur Seven Seas' had been christened 'from a cod-liver-oil label with its wriggling swordfish' (Walcott 1990: 17-18).

The poem abounds in complex interlaced stories of this blind figure which are stitched together into the larger fabric of *Omeros*. The protean persona of Seven Seas, moreover, not only brings to mind the ancient Greek bard, as well as the blinded minstrel Demodocus who poignantly sang the labours of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, but also another blind Irish poet, James Joyce, who continues and enlarges this genealogy. Even in the 'Lestrygonians' episode of *Ulysses*, Joyce depicted the lonely figure of a blind man, an avatar of Homer, making his way through the streets of Dublin: 'The blind stripling stood tapping the curbstone with his slender cane' (Joyce 2002: 148). This frail figure, we may also add, prefigures Joyce's future destiny as the blind bard of Dublin.

Therefore the theme of blindness becomes a twofold expression in the literary tradition. What the unseeing, inert eyes of the poet cannot perceive is compensated for by the vast, unlimited vision afforded by the eye of the imagination, as the poet exchanges eyesight for the craft of versifying. In *Omeros*, Derek Walcott celebrated the rich allegory of the blind poet, and amalgamated in the character of Seven Seas a fascinating genealogy composed of Homer, Demodocus, Joyce, as well as distant echoes of the mythical figure of the blind Argentine poet, Jorge Luis Borges.

In Book V of *Omeros* the narrator travels to Dublin and stages an imaginary encounter with Joyce, whom he elevates as 'our age's Omeros, undimmed Master/and true tenor of the place'

(Walcott 1990: 200). According to Walcott, the legendary Joyce becomes a phantom that appears at nightfall to walk the streets of his beloved Dublin:

*I leant on the mossed embankment just as if he
bloomed there every dusk with eye-patch and tilted
hat,
rakish cane on one shoulder (Walcott 1990: 200).*

Just as Walcott paid tribute to his Irish predecessor, so in his book-length poem *Station Island*, Seamus Heaney similarly conjured up an encounter with the spectre of Joyce. *Station Island* tells of Heaney's journey to an island in County Donegal which has been the sacred site of pilgrimage since medieval times. Amongst the numerous ghosts which Heaney stumbles upon during this physical and spiritual voyage of self-discovery - highly reminiscent of Dante's *Purgatorio* - is the unmistakable phantom of James Joyce:

*Like a convalescent, I took the hand
stretched down from the jetty, sensed again
an alien comfort as I stepped on ground
to find the helping hand still gripping mine,
fish-cold and bony, but whether to guide
or to be guided I could not be certain
for the tall man in step at my side
seemed blind; though he walked straight as a rush
upon his ashplant, his eyes fixed straight ahead
(Heaney 1998: 266-7).*

Similarly to Walcott, Heaney is able to capture Joyce's distinctive silhouette by means of a brief descriptive passage that condenses his archetypal image. The dream vision that follows stages Heaney's dialogue with the spectre, who advises him on his career and role as a poet: 'Your obligation/is not discharged by any common rite./What you do you must do on your own./The main thing is to write for the joy of it' (Heaney 1998: 267).

What Walcott and Heaney are highlighting here, above all, is that the haunting phantom of Joyce has become their guide and inspiration in their journeys through literature. Both poets are paying homage to the vast literary tradition encompassed in Joyce's work, a corpus which comprises not only a distinctive Irish cadence but also the voices of other literary models, such as Homer and Dante. Ultimately, by calling up

the ghost of Joyce in his epic poem *Omeros*, Walcott is implying that the trajectory of the epic tradition is ongoing, and that the migration of Homer to twentieth-century Ireland may well continue its course into the warmer seas of the Caribbean. This transformative, trans-cultural voyage is succinctly conveyed in the final line of

the poem: 'When he left the beach the sea was still going on' (Walcott 1990: 325).

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Notes

[1] It should be noted that Walcott altered, however slightly, Stephen Dedalus's assertion. In *Ulysses* we read: '— History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake' (Joyce 2002: 28).

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