



The Dimension of the Common Man in Derek Walcott's Omeros: An Intertextual Approach

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an intertextual study of Derek Walcott's collection of poetry entitled *Omeros*. *Omeros* is a high point in Walcott's poetic effort to create a positive image of the Caribbean society. Through this work, the poet seeks to heal the historical, psychological, economic and political trauma created by centuries of excruciating slavery, cruelty of indentured labour, cultural rootlessness, and the dilemma of miscegenation. Walcott's effort to positivise the negative perceptions of the Caribbean society takes the form of an incisive interrogation and restructuring of the Classical form of the epic genre. Classical epic deals with destiny-oriented titanic struggles of great men and women against gods, demi-gods, monsters, forces of evil, and against men and women of earth-shaking valour, just as is witnessed in the tale of the Trojan war. Structurally the epic form excludes the poor and low-born such as the wretched, culturally flotsam fishermen of the Caribbean. In *Omeros*, Walcott achieves a stunning feat of transforming the humdrum, poverty-stricken lives of the Caribbeans into a heroic pitch. His rationale is radical and revolutionary: the epic is informed by what is of crucial importance to, and irrevocably affects the destiny of a people. Following this premise, healing the half a millennium of intractable psychic wounds of the Caribbean society is not of less crucial importance, and destiny impacting, to the Caribbeans than triumphing over the rival Trojans was to Classical Greece. This is the focus of this essay's interface between Classical epic and the Caribbean epic created in Walcott's *Omeros*.

INTRODUCTION

The publication of *Omeros* in 1990 signaled another milestone in the remarkable career of Derek Walcott. This is not only because the author who was born in the tiny Caribbean island of St. Lucia won the Nobel Prize for literature but also because his work of poetry, *Omeros*, subtly undermines the

The Dimension of the Common Man in Derek Walcott's Omeros

very concept of the epic genre from which it emerges, and so created a new possibility in the form of the epic genre.

Omeros initiates a novel movement towards the recognition of the common man as having epic proportions. By so doing, *Omeros* offers an alternative to the terms of Classical heroism. The story of *Omeros* revolves around the lives of Caribbean fishermen in the island of St. Lucia. The main protagonists are Achille, Philoctete, Hector, and seven Seas (*Omeros*); Helen, a beauty of the island and the love interest of Achille and Hector- in many ways a centre of the story, a British farmer and landowner named Dennis Plunkett, and his wife Maud; the local bar owner and healer, Ma Kilman; and the narrator himself who is a poet and native of St. Lucia. The epicisation of these otherwise ordinary men and women lies in the radical creativity of Derek Walcott.

This study is carried out in the light of the intertextual approach to literary criticism. The theoretical discourse of intertextuality fuses both intrinsic and extrinsic approaches to criticism. Intertextuality is tied up with the changing views of the "text". The French-born Roland Barthes' view is based on the linguistic understanding of a literary text as "a body of signs constituting of message which has an existence independent of its author or sender and its reader or receiver" (94).

According to Barthes, a literary text is composed of multiple writings which come from a wide range of sources, and exists in relations of "contestation" rather than coalescing into a smooth and integrated whole. As noted by Webster, Barthes' understanding of a literary text suggests that "text consists of an uneasy assemblage of various strands which interact in different and perhaps unpredictable ways"(94).

Critics such as Julia Kristeva, Katica Kularkova, and Mikhail Bakhtin, Harold Bloom, Michael Faucault, Richard Altick etc hold aspects of a central notion that every literary text is a pastiche of numerous other texts by other writers –reworked by the writer to produce a new work. The crux of this study is to highlight the ways through which Derek Walcott hewed the common man in "epic" proportions using his own criteria for heroism and to underscore the echoes, flavours and influences of other writers' works in the creation of *Omeros*, hence demonstrating the appropriateness of intertextuality in the study the work.

For most of the story, Philoctete suffers from a festering wound to his leg, eventually healed by Ma Kilman; Achille and Hector compete for the love of Helen. A central figure in the poem, the poet/narrator, haunted by the despair of lost love, travels the world, and is eventually led to renewed faith by the blind guide *Omeros* and his visions in St. Lucia. In fact, there are five stories carefully woven to create this modern epic of the dispossessed as the title of Hamner's book on *Omeros* suggests. *Omeros* is greatly influenced by Homer and Dante as we see Walcott's incorporating the concerns of Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy* in his work. In *Illiad*, Homer focuses on the theme of anger and battle. In *Odyssey* he stresses the theme of homecoming while in *Divine Comedy*, Dante's emphasis is on redemption.

Walcott in his *Omeros* focuses on anger, battle, homecoming and healing or redemption in the lives of the ordinary St Lucians and St. Lucia herself. Walcott presents the thematics of anger, division, competition, lust and conflicts, as well as the healing effect of homecoming and redemption in the characters.

An epic reflects the concern of the culture that produces it. According to William Shullenberger; “the epic is a monumental literary form which is an index to the depth and richness of a culture.” Epic reflects a culture’s origins and projects its destiny”. Traditionally an epic poem is a long poem narrating the heroic exploits of an individual in a way central to the beliefs and culture of his society. Typical elements are fabulous adventures, superhuman deeds, polyphonic composition, majestic language and a craftsmanship deploying the full range of literary devices. And this, Walcott embarks on in *Omeros*, using the Dante-originated terza rima.

Epic poems typically narrate stories closely connected with the founding and development of ethnic and national traditions. They tell the stories of heroes capable of superhuman feats of warfare and are often either godlike or partially divine. In addition, one major characteristic of epic poetry is the celebration of warfare and military glory. From the foregoing, *Omeros*’ point of departure from the traditional epic highlights Walcott’s concern in the work.

To Shullenberger, Walcott in *Omeros* “performs a stunning transformation of Homer’s foundation texts”, (*Illiad* and *Odyssey*). Walcott has frequently developed analogies between the seascapes and cultures of Homer’s Mediterranean and his own Caribbean; *Omeros* naturalises Homer’s epic scene from ancient Troy to the backwater Antillean island of St. Lucia, and discovers the tragic grandeur and mythic power of Homer’s heroes in the fishermen and the villagers.

In an interview with Luigi Sampietio, Walcott bares his mind about the epic and his work *Omeros*. He emphasizes that in writing *Omeros*, he is not writing the Caribbean epic. He considers it presumptuous for him to lay claim to such a task because to him, in epic as is generally believed, the narrator is propelling in sequence the events that are related to the destiny of the tribe. To him, the sense of destiny in the 20th century is very dangerous

because the sense of destiny exists in Nazism, in fascism. All I wanted to do was to celebrate the diurnal, day-to-day heroism of people, who go out and face the arrogance (of living). This to Walcott is “admirable” because such people (fishermen) whose ordinary lives are depicted, have no idea of expanding power. They think they relate to power-they relate to the power of the weather and the power that has been in their past- in history and slavery... But there is not a sort of label outside that says: I will now undertake to ... justify, or condemn, or redeem history (Sampietio 1).

The Dimension of the Common Man in Derek Walcott's Omeros

Although he sees pentameter as suitable for heroic or narrative verse in English, structurally he chose the terza rima because it is a much more relaxed line. In addition, it gives a propulsion into the next stanza, it enhances a sense of fluid narration that Walcott desires to realize in the work. The terza rima is a form of verse adapted from the Italian poets of the thirteenth century. It consists of tercets written in iambic. In other words, a stanza of terza rima consists of three lines of five feet of iambic syllables, linked with the next stanza, and with the next, and so on, by a recurrence of a rhyme scheme aba, bcd, cde, fef, etc.

Achille peered in the dark, and then bolted the half- door shut. (a)
It was rusted from sea- blast. He hoisted the fishpot. (b)
with the crab of one hand; in the hole under the hut. (a)
he hid the cinder-block step. As he neared the depot (b)
the dawn breeze salted him coming up the grey street (c)
past sleep-tight houses, under the sodium bars (d)
of street-lamps, to the dry asphalt scraped by his feet; (c)
he counted the small blue sparks of separate stars. (d)
Banana fronds nodded to the undulating (e)
anger of roosters, their cries screeching like red chalk. (f)
drawing hills on a board. Like his teacher, waiting, (e)
the surf kept chafing at his deliberate walk. (f)
("Omeros"8)

This gives a sense of continuous tale and a chain that is interwoven as it tells a story of epic proportions. It is in this regard especially that Walcott purposely deviates from the epic genre in order to broaden the scope of this traditionally heroic form. The protagonist's range from the poet himself to simple peasants who are the opposite of demigods engaged in great battles. *Omeros* presents the strategies by which human beings survive and assert their integrity in spite of the restraints of overwhelming hegemonic forces.

Omeros is an innovative extension of the epic tradition. According to Hamner, *Omeros* complements the time-honoured traditions of the epic by giving voice to the marginalized peoples of the New World. He describes *Omeros* as an epic of the dispossessed because each of its protagonists is a castaway in one sense or another. Regardless of whether their ancestry is traced to the classical Mediterranean Europe, Africa or confined to the Americas, they are transplanted individuals whose separate quests all center on the fundamental human need to strike roots in a place where one belongs ("Epic of the Dispossessed" 1 of 3).

The poem begins with Philoctete demonstrating the making of a canoe to a group of tourists: "This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes. Philoctete smiles for the tourists ..." ("*Omero*" 3). This paves the way for the poet to link with the decimation of the original inhabitants of the Island – the Arawaks. This is the beginning of the history of violence:

The bearded elders endured the decimation of their

Peter Onwudinjo and Chris Egharebva

tribe without uttering a syllable of that language
they had uttered as one nation, the red-skinned
logwood endured the thorns in its flesh, while the
Aruacs' patois crackled in the smell of a resinous
bonfire that turned the leaves brown. ("*Omero*" 6).

We are also introduced to two important characters in the epic Hector and Achille who at the beginning were fishermen until Hector abandoned the canoe for a lorry, and friends until Helen brought conflict between them. This conflict is highlighted early in the poem:

Hector ran, splashing in shadows mixed with the
drizzle, towards Achille, his cutlass lifted. Men can kill
their own brothers in rage, but the madman who
tore at his heart, the rage that he felt against
Hector... was shame. To go crazy for an old bailing
tin crusted with rust! The duel of these fishermen
was over a shadow and its name was Helen. ("*Omero*" 16-17).

Thus the poet introduces one of the major themes of the poem that links the work to Homeric epic. This fight between Achille and Hector over Helen brings to mind the encounter of their namesakes thousands of years back over Helen of Troy and we are prepared to encounter the various elements of that epic event. However, the poet introduces Philoctete, a man inflicted with a wound that needs healing, and Ma Kilman who desires to heal the wound, but forgets the healing process: "But what is wrong wif you; Philoctete? I am blest wif this wound, Ma Kilman... Which will never heal. Well, you must take it easy. Go home and lie down, give the foot a lickle rest" ("*Omero*" 18-19).

Although the wound came from an old anchor, the poet links the wound to the historical event of slavery. "He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure? That the cross he carried was not only the anchor's but that of his race..." ("*Omero*" 19). Thus the poet introduces the theme of history which is very significant in the work and the amnesia that negates the benefits of history which he examined earlier in "Laventville." In the course of the work Walcott shows that amnesia is one major factor that delays the healing process of the people and that healing comes only from a compassionate acceptance of ancestral roots. This is a significant development in Walcott's poetry especially in *Omeros*.

The perception of heroism is very crucial to epic "... As in your day, so with ours, *Omeros*, as it is with island and man, so with our games... Men sought fame as centaurs..." ("*Omeros*" 33).

The poet here implies that over the centuries men in search of fame engage in the destruction of other human beings. Man has always glorified death and destruction in the pursuit of fame. This includes the destruction of the original inhabitants and St. Lucian history – an island that changed hands

The Dimension of the Common Man in Derek Walcott's Omeros

fourteen times between two rival forces (Britain and France). This concept of heroism is presented by Plunkett and by implication, the Western view of heroism which is also the theme of traditional epic represented by Homer. In this work, Walcott makes a significant departure from this Western essence of heroism. He presents in *Omeros* another concept of fame, which is altogether new in epic. Suffice it now that Walcott sees heroism as portrayed in healing. Fame resides not in war or destruction but in compassionate healing- the healing of individuals and the healing of society. In fact, *Omeros* sets out to do this and Walcott in the first book of the poem sets the stage for the realization of this vision of healing. He introduces the major actors involved in this process. First is Philoctete, with a wound, a sore that needs healing. Second Ma Kilman who possesses the cure to the wound but amnesia impedes on its realization. Third he presents Achille and Hector whose conflict brings to mind the pattern of an epic. Next we meet Plunkett who presents the Western view of heroism, and finally, Walcott presents a confrontation with his father which opens an important thematic concern of Walcott in the poem- the healing of his dilemma of identity. In this confrontation the poet's father confirms the transplant nature of the people.

I was raised in this obscure Caribbean port,
where my bastard Father Christened me for his
shire:
Warwick...
"what was Warwick doing, transplanting
Warwickshire?" (*Omeros*, 68-69)

Despite this transplant and insignificant nature of the island, the father admonishes the poet to preserve the activities of the people by writing poetry. Poetry gives meaning to the people and the land:

they see their native town
Unknown, raw, insignificant. They walk, you write;
... your own work owes them
because the couplet of those multiplying feet
made your first rhymes look, they climb, and no one
knows them;
they take their copper pittances, and your duty
from the time you watched them from your
grandmother's house
as a child wounded by their power and beauty
is the chance you now have, to give those feet a voice (*Omeros* 75-76).

Thus from childhood, the poet's passion was for the preservation of the life of the people and the island in art. Book one ends with the poet's encounter with his father who bequeaths to him the responsibility and desire to produce an epic of his island. He has to give the feet to those that labour for pittance, those unknown, insignificant peasants, a voice through his work that could appropriately be termed the epic of the dispossessed.

Peter Onwudinjo and Chris Egharebva

The poet presents the various battles for the island of St. Lucia through the eyes of Major Dennis Plunkett. As earlier observed, St. Lucia changed hands fourteen times between Britain and France. This historical conflict by the European powers for the “Helen of the West Indies” brings to the forefront deaths, destruction, courage and heroism which form the ingredients for an epic. In this work Walcott extends this western concept of the hero and heroism to include the strength of survival of “the inheritors of the Middle Passage” as he observed in “Laventville”. Plunkett who fought in the war lost his only child, and whose intelligence report caused the destruction of the enemy’s fleet, gradually comes to a realization that the tenderness of history lies not in war but in human relationship:

... He had come that far
to learn that history earns his own tenderness
in time; not for a naval victory, but for
the V of a velvet black in a yellow dress. (“*Omeros*” 103)

The realization that “great events of the world would happen elsewhere” (“*Omeros*” 103) causes a redefinition of history on the part of Plunkett:

In history, he’d had a crypto-fascist master
Who loved German culture above everything else,
... he had given as one of his essays

’
“A few make history. The rest are witnesses.
... his essay had won first prize”. (“*Omeros*” 103-104)

This earlier perception of history as reflected in his essay has to change. “History was a cannon... /History will be revised” (“*Omeros*” 92).

This new perception of history enables Plunkett to see history as the activities of the colonial powers. For this would only give rise to a sense of guilt and fear as documented history would show. Plunkett, as a result of his new perception of history, comes to the realization that the island’s beauty was in Helen’s looks. Thus Plunkett is taken in by emotions, as he perceives the natural beauty of Helen:

That victory was hers,
and so was his passion...
Island’s beauty was in her looks
splendors and arrogance (“*Omeros*” 96).

This redefinition of history, beyond the documented history is the focus of Book Three. It comes in the form of Achille’s confrontation with his past- a definition of his identity. Earlier on Achilles queries his identity after seeing the ghost of his father,

Achillee saw the ghost
Of his father’s face shoot up at the end of the line.
Achille stared in pious horror at the bound canvas
And could not look away, or loosen its burial knots.

The Dimension of the Common Man in Derek Walcott's Omeros

Then, for the first time, he asked himself who he was ("*Omeros*" 130).

The answer to this question becomes the subject of Book Three. Led by a sea swift Achille takes a trip "into his own beginning, ("*Omeros*" 134) into Africa, and "a light inside him wakes, /skipping centuries, ocean and river, and time itself" ("*Omeros*" 134). Book three celebrates Achille's homecoming to Africa. He finds welcome by his father as two worlds merge although "time stood between them" ("*Omeros*" 136). Amnesia had set in, giving credence to the poet's conception of historical amnesia:

In the place you have come from what do they call
you?

Time translates.

Tapping his chest,

The son answers:

"Achille." The tribe rustles, "Achille".

AFOLABE:

Achille, what does the name mean? I have forgotten
the one that I gave you. But it was, it seems. Many
years ago.

what does it mean?

ACHILLE:

Well, I took have forgooten

Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know.

("Omeros" 137)

Gradually Achille comes to an awareness that names are not mere
identification but portray predestination and hope.

AFOLABE:

A name means something. The qualities desired in a
son, every name is a blessing,

Since I am remembering the hope I had for you as a
child.

Unless the sound means nothing. Then you would be
nothing.

Did they think you were nothing in that other kingdom?

ACHILLE:

I do not know what the name means. It means
something, maybe. What's the difference? In the
world I come from we accept the sounds we were
given. Men, trees, water ("*Omeros*" 137-138).

To Achille names are just sounds- without meaning. He must learn that the
inability to know the meaning of one's name amounts to an inability to

Peter Onwudinjo and Chris Egharebva

understand, or realize one's identity and destiny. Achille is so estranged from his gods and his people because of three hundred years of slavery. "He stood in the clearing/and recited the gods' names. The trees within hearing/ignored his incantation" ("*Omeros*" 140) because "after three centuries" ("*Omeros*" 142) he could not remember the rituals of invocation.

The poet then presents the genesis of the loss: slavery; then a celebration of their survival. "But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendor" ("*Omeros*" 149). And because man is a born maker, creativity continued in the New World carried through the Middle Passage by the slaves:

They could not
stay idle too long. The chained wrist couldn't forget
the carver for whom antelopes leapt.
... They left their remembered
shadows to the firelight. Scratching a board,
they made the signs for their fading names on the
wood,
and their former shapes returned absently, each
carried
the nameless freight of himself to the other world.
("*Omeros*" 150).

In a similar vein the slaves practically came with nothing but they create something in the New World:

bare as their asses
yet they felt the sea wind tying them into
one nation ("*Omeros*" 151).

Thus as they create and adapt to their environment, amnesia sets in:
What began dissolving
Was the fading sound of their tribal name
and rain ("*Omeros*" 152).

This portrayal of the Middle Passage experience is unique in Walcott's poetry. Here we see a clear identification with his African heritage never before portrayed graphically in his poetic career. This identification underscores his desire for healing in his epic. The final section of the poem stresses the longing for healing, cure or reconciliation that we realize that this indeed is Walcott's concern in *Omeros*.

We observe the reconciliation between Achille and Hector howbeit at Hector's burial which is summarized in three words "Vexation is past" ("*Omeros*" 233), and Achille's action of accepting Helen and the pregnancy which belonged to Hector.

Healing in "*Omeros*" is both physical and psychological. The physical includes the healing of the head wound of Plunkett, the healing of Philoctete's festering sore. Philoctete shook himself up from the bed of grave, and felt the pain draining. ("*Omeros*" 245).

The Dimension of the Common Man in Derek Walcott's Omeros

It is a healing that begins with the acceptance and innovation of the gods ignored over the centuries:

She (Ma Kilman) glimpsed gods in the leaves, but,
their features obscured...
Erzulie, shango, and ogun; their outlines fading,
thinner as belief in them thinned... (“*Omeros*” 242).

Because they have been buried “Far three deep centuries”
 (“*Omeros*” 242). Now:

She foraged for some sign
... and thrashed herself for the sin
of doubting their names before the cure
could begin (“*Omeros*” 243).

Apart from the physical healing, “what else did it cure?” (“*Omeros*” 247), the poet asked rhetorically. Psychologically, for the poet, the issue of identity is cured. “The yoke of the wrong name lifted from his shoulders” (“*Omeros*” 247). It silenced “the scream of centuries” (“*Omeros*” 246). The historical dilemma of slavery and slave master that creates in the poet identity dilemma which has trailed his personality in his poetic career: The division in his vein, and the poison from both ancestors which he focused on *In A Green Night*, “the mongrel” and “monster of the wrong age and season” of *Another Life*, a “nobody” of *The Star Apple Kingdom*, are images that have expressed the dilemma of his identity from the start of his career which now comes to a healing in *Omeros*.

The poet declares that the shame of self hate is cured. He
Feel(s) the shame, the self-hate
draining from all our bodies...
There was no difference
between me and Philoctete. (“*Omeros*” 245).

Philoctete was physically healed but it is a healing that extends to the entire society be it the slave descendants whose ancestors were in chains or the descendants of the indenture labourers.

CONCLUSION

Omeros celebrates the lives of ordinary Caribbean people, their relationships, their struggles for existence, their loss, pains and more importantly, their healing. The central theme of affliction and healing runs through the poem: afflictions not caused by wars or battles by demigods, but afflictions that emanate from the daily struggles by the people. In the hands of the master craftsman, the lives of these Caribbean folks have been transformed into the

heroic through the poets adaptations of the Classical epic form. The struggle of the Caribbean folk to triumph over enturies of dislocation, translocation, crushing slavery, manumission and misgenation is no less heroic for the survivors of the Middle Passage than the struggle for Troy was for the Creeks. The forms are different, the essence is the same. Both are heroic. One may therefore conclude that, despite Walcott's reluctance, he has created a hitherto unknown possibility in the epic genre.

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