Postcolonial Odysseys

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Derek Walcott's Voyages of Homecoming

By

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To my parents, Maeve and Greg, for getting me this far.

And to my husband David for the voyages to come.

In maps the Caribbean dreams of the Aegean,
and the Aegean of reversible seas
—Derek Walcott

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

[1] Bernardino di Betto (1454-1513) was an Italian Renaissance painter commonly known as Pintoricchio *or* Pinturicchio.

INTRODUCTION

One of the first things we notice about Romare Bearden's collage *The Return of Odysseus*, which provides the cover illustration, is the flat plane of turquoise water that melts without distinction into the sky, only to reappear on the clothing of Penelope and her Suitors, as well as on a scarf around the neck of the returning Odysseus, standing in the doorway. The effect of this pure, clear luxury of colour leaves a trace on the mind after the eye has wandered from the object in question, namely an immersion in sea blue. The role of the sea in the Caribbean imagination cannot be overstated. Existence in the archipelago seems to be at all times defined by the perpetual ebb and flow of tides, lived to the rhythm of its crashing breakers. Theorists such as Antonio Benítez-Rojo describe a Caribbean culture that is "not terrestrial but aquatic" being a "realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity" (Benítez-Rojo, 1996, 11); for J. Michael Dash the Caribbean Sea provides a metaphor for the region's transformative nature, representing an "unstable medium beyond the fixing power of any discourse" (Dash, 1998, 29). Poet Frank Collymore expresses the oceanic imperative by which he "must always be remembering the sea, / Being always cognizant of her presence […] Always, always the encircling sea" (Collymore, 2005, 10). Dwarfing the achievements of man, the passing of empires and epochs, the boundless waves are a constant reminder of human insignificance in the wake of the unceasing elemental. It is perhaps unsurprising that in writing his acclaimed narrative poem *Omeros* (which adheres to the genre of epic in that it is concerned with the fate of a nation or race), Walcott would eschew political and geographical boundaries for a regional perspective achieved through the unifying medium of the blue Caribbean basin, "I sang our country, the wide Caribbean sea" (Walcott, 1990, 320).

The trope of the sea in Walcott's poetics operates as a polyvalent figure. He reads the sea as a repository of the past, the swash and backwash of recurrent tides bearing witness to the continual inscription and erasure of time and thus possessive of atemporality; it is a palimpsestic record in which successive ages are contained. A blank canvas on which everything or nothing can be read, the sea for Walcott is a shifting narrative that resists the fixing impetus of North Atlantic historiography, a concept reaching fullest realization in the poem "The Sea

is History." For the writer living on a small island this continual sea presence can promote a feeling of provincialism, of being "castaway" on "islands [that] have drifted from anchorage," far from the metropolitan centres of publishing houses and readerships (Walcott, 1964, 12). Walcott enlists his own awareness of marginality to point to the paradoxical provincialism of the centre, invoking the natural world to highlight the limitations and transience of human civilizations; in "Ruins of a Great House," the crumbling plantation house becomes a metaphor for the transience of colonial conquest, which is just another layer in the strata of the archipelago's past. Radical shifts in scale perception balance the poet's conception of his own native St. Lucia, situated on the island bridge between North and South America, as being but one of "[a]s many islands as the stars at night" with the attendant appreciation of "this earth [a]s one/ island in archipelagoes of stars" (Walcott, 1979a, 19/20).

The inhabitants of the Caribbean archipelago are a diaspora population, displaced by colonialism; musings on sea-crossings therefore highlight the multiple vectors of Caribbean identity, which conjoins several horizons. The virtual eradication of the indigenous Amerindian peoples as a corollary of European colonisation, coupled with the enforced migration of African slaves and indentured servants from Asia, led to the creation of a population of displaced individuals where everybody came from somewhere else. Writers of the region express how the sea operates as a point of connection and separation, a medium by which to retrace diasporic routes and a line of severance whose hyphenating function results in the creation of the divided selfhood of Jean Rhys' Creole, Edward Kamau Brathwaite's Afro-Caribbean, and V.S. Naipaul's East-Indian West-Indian, among others. Walcott's writings, like much postcolonial literature, proliferate with voyages, both real and imagined, by which the colonial subject rehearses the trauma of arrival, the loss of a culture of origin and explores the (im)possibility of reconnection. The poet's expresses a view of division or inbetweeness as providing the paradigm of Caribbean identitarian construction; his own mixed racial heritage links him to Africa, England and Holland, routes that significantly, are all retraced by characters in the long narrative poem *Omeros*.

Though instructive, these outward voyages refute the possibility of return to pre-colonial roots and result in a further grounding or "rooting" of characters in the new homeland. Thus, the outbound journey in Walcott's poetics traces a circular route that is simultaneously a form of homecoming. Advocating a strategic amnesia of the past, Walcott conceives of the Caribbean subject as a "castaway" figure, shipwrecked in the after-

shock of the imperial venture, who must learn to rebuild a satisfying cultural home out of the debris of the past, washed up on alien shores. Yet homecoming can never be a straightforward concept due to the transformative nature of the voyage; the figure who returns is never quite the same as the one that set out. The homeland too is prone to alteration in the interim, a fact of which Walcott is only too aware; the strain of absence creating a gulf between the writer and the archipelago he seeks to celebrate in his art.

Walcott's conception of a Caribbean identity is thus unfixed, existing in a state of perpetual motion and transformation. The evolution of his engagement with the figure of the wanderer, both for the poet-persona that inhabits much of Walcott's verse, and the characters that populate the poems addressed in this thesis, marks a growing acceptance of this drifting subjectivity. In his poetry Walcott moves from a stylized exilic condition of being "Ulysses without shipmates" (Walcott, 1949, 41) to a "fortunate traveller" (Walcott, 1980a, 11) who could recognize that "[t]he sea was my privilege" (Walcott, 1990, 295). Acclimatizing to a settlement in unsettlement, the poet seeks out of the natural world creatures of a common migratory nature. The wandering Odysseus in Walcott's s stage adaptation of Homer's epic poem is repeatedly compared to a sea-turtle and a crab for instance, sea creatures that carry their homes on their backs. The sea-voyager finds its complement in the sky traveller, Walcott exploiting the semantic capability of the word "flight" to denote both passage and escape, as evidenced in his combination of both voyage and flight in the name of the vessel the "Schooner *Flight*". Similarly the sea-swift in *Omeros* acts as a transatlantic guide overseeing all other odysseys in the poem. Representing an exemplary hybrid, the swift ties together the disparate strands of the region's cultural identity in her circular migration across east-west meridians.

Walcott's rich allusiveness draws migratory characters from literary texts to supplement his motley crew, ranging from Odysseus and Robinson Crusoe to Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom. Significantly the autobiographical impulse of his own work, which sees the frequent deployment of the poet-persona within his verse, render him just as likely to cast the creators of these fictive characters as characters in his longer poems; thus Homer makes an appearance in *Omeros* as a creolized wanderer, and Joyce in the same poem is spotted in a pub by the Liffey. As the poet-persona could sing along with Omeros in praise of his island, "[b]ut I could not before him," so Joyce sings to the piano accompaniment of Maud Plunkett, one of Walcott's own creations, the point being that if Walcott does at times take his cue from others, he reserves the right to

change the tune (Walcott, 1990, 286). It is perhaps unsurprising then, given Walcott's preoccupation with voyaging and homecoming, supplemented by his highly intertextual poetic mode, that the figure of Odysseus, the archetypal seafarer and master of disguise who divides his time between seeking adventure in distant lands and a yearning for *nostos*, has spanned almost five decades of his career. This study provides an investigation of Walcott's engagements with the Ithacan king in his recognizable and submerged permutations from his early poems right up to his stage adaptation of *The Odyssey*.

Walcott's engagement with Greek myth is multifaceted, evolving over time and reaching its apogee with the publication of *Omeros* in 1990, a poem which re-instated the epic poet with his name in modern Greek: "Omeros," a strategy that simultaneously attested to the cultural specificity of Homer and his continuing relevance in the modern world. A brief glance at the titles of Homer's *The Odyssey*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Walcott's *Omeros* shows a shifting focus from the first as an adventure tale, to the second as an account of a man, to the third as an examination of the writer and writing, an observation supported by Walcott's insertion of the poet-persona as a prominent character within the text. Walcott's verse drama adaptation of *The Odyssey*, while remaining largely true to the original epic narrative, also deviates on a few minor points. One of the more significant is Homer's account of Menelaus wrestling the Old Man of the Sea, Proteus; another is his casting doubt as to the veracity of Odysseus' tales, "[m]onsters […] We make them ourselves" (Walcott, 1993, 159/160). Walcott's version substitutes Menelaus with Odysseus wrestling the shape-shifting God, thus highlighting the centrality of the trope of transformation in the narrative; his undermining of Odysseus' heroic status through the introduction of doubt shifts the focus of Homeric verse from glorious deeds and battles to the theme of storytelling in general. Yet these themes were always themselves present in Homeric verse; in this regard, what Walcott's adaptations and appropriations highlight is the reciprocal nature of literary inheritance. Repudiating the Bloomian paradigm of an Oedipal struggle between the writer and his literary predecessor, Walcott's allusions dismantle dominant theories of influence and originality. His poetics attest to the fluidity and contingency of the original oral narrative through newly imagined reversible odysseys, "[i]n maps the Caribbean dreams/ of the Aegean, and the Aegean of reversible seas" (Walcott, 1997a, 62). Walcott's appropriations, therefore are non-adversarial in contradistinction to many postcolonial rewritings, adopting instead an *à la carte* approach to cultural borrowings.

The rupture of the Middle Passage crossing severed links to Old World traditions for the colonial subject, leading to an enforced engagement with the culture of the coloniser. A culture created from the fragments of others, cultural production in the archipelago is frequently read as a form of mimicry. Walcott's penchant for assimilation would be problematic for the colonial writer, leading as it did to many critical assumptions that he was at heart a Eurocentric writer. Employing the trope of the meridian as a central figure of his poetics, Walcott dismantles assumed binaries of Old World originality and New World imitation to encourage a more dialogic interaction on a non-hierarchical plane. Acknowledging New World mimicry, he does not concede Old World originality and it is this reservation which justifies his poetic appropriations. In the Caribbean the lack of a single cultural tradition to draw upon legitimizes the poet's claim to all the cultures of the region. In his assimilations, the poet's preferences for other well-known European borrowers, such as Shakespeare, Eliot and Joyce itself provides a critique of the notion of European originality. However, although openly acknowledging Caribbean non-originality, he maintains that as a writer, "you build according to the topography of where you live" (Walcott, 1974a, 56). That is, though allusive his work is distinctly Caribbean.

These appropriations from European culture are not free of colonial anxiety: in the poem "Greece," the poet hurls the burdensome body of Greek literature off a cliff and stabs the "old Greek bull" (Walcott, 1980b, 36) with an indigenous plant, while in *Omeros* the poet-persona systematically dismantles all the Greek parallels painstakingly erected in the first two-thirds of the narrative, dismissing them as "[a]ll that Greek manure under the green bananas" (Walcott, 1990, 271). Yet the Mediterranean is also an enabling resource, symbolizing a productive meeting point of various cultures. Reimagining Homer as a "poet of the Seven Seas" rather than a sacred literary primogenitor, he reinvents the Greek bard as Omeros, a creolized wanderer ripe for transformation (Bruckner, 1997, 396). The fluidity of Omeros is attested to in his conflation with the Caribbean character Seven Seas, who memorably metamorphosise back and forth into one other. That Walcott reads Omeros as a mirror to his created character Odysseus, both being cast as storyteller-wanderers, emphasizes Walcott's own investment in both figures. To the extent that Walcott replaces the storyteller wanderer with the migrant writer through the stratagem of making them interchangeable, the implication is that the poet-persona also becomes an Odysseus.

So much ink has already been devoted to the explication of Walcott's poetics that it becomes a daunting task to justify a new addition to the

growing canon. Through single author and single work studies, comparative analyses, essay collections, alongside collections of interviews with the writer and the publication of his own critical essays, the ground traversed is certainly well covered. It is necessary therefore to place this book in context of what has gone before. Early publications tended to rely heavily on identitarian modes of reading Walcott's writing. Two main approaches emerged: one side emphasised the poet's self-conception as a figure "divided to the vein" between Europe and Africa, the other asserted that his mixed heritage led to a composite identity, wide enough to house the various strands of the poet's identity (Walcott, 1962a, 18). The former reading is inevitable, given that the theme of division resounds heavily through Walcott's work, encouraging this emphasis on internal bifurcation; in the critical essay "What the Twilight Says" Walcott conceives of himself as a "neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian" (Walcott, 1970a, 9). Moreover the allusiveness of Walcott's writing has lead to it being read against that of Edward Kamau Brathwaite on the assumption that Walcott's assimilation of European culture lends itself to Eurocentrism, while the centrality of Africa to Brathwaite's construction of Caribbean identity articulates an Afrocentric perspective; on a crude level the choice between Walcott and Brathwaite has been cast as a choice between Europe and Africa. More recent publications have eschewed such simplistic readings; Ismond (1997), Bobb (1998), and Pollard (2004) forwarding instead the complementarity of their writing agendas, despite differing focal points. Bobb, for instance, reads the "task of each poet becomes the rewriting of history, a kind of cultural mythmaking" (Bobb, 1998, 11). In this reading, a ruptured past leads to attempts to construct an integrated Caribbean identity.

Efforts to resist external definitions for the West Indian poet emphasise his commitment to expressing the Caribbean in his art. Ismond's *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: the Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott's Poetry* criticises the underrepresentation of the Caribbean context in Walcott's work. Refuting Eurocentric readings of Walcott, Ismond interprets his allusiveness instead as a subversive counter-discourse to the European tradition. For her the Caribbean of Walcott's early work is "the place where he pursues the revolutionary effort native to his purpose as a writer of colonial origins, to arrive at the maturity of definitions of self and identity" (Ismond, 2001, 2). Other publications prefer to present the poet as a unified Caribbean figure, the fault lines of his identity being a natural off-shoot of colonialism in the region that lead to a layering of perspectives rather than a fragmentation of identity. Thieme's *Derek Walcott* and Breslin's *Nobody or a Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*

advance the view that Walcott promoted a "cross-cultural – as opposed to Afrocentric or Eurocentric – reading of Caribbean" (Thieme, 1999, 1), with the "evasion of defined identity [representing] a deliberate strategy" (Breslin, 2001, 1). Such readings are worthwhile in their recognition that either/or identitarian construction paradigms are overly simplistic in a Caribbean context.

Another trend in Walcott scholarship focuses on the assimilative nature of his writing, independent of questions of identity construction. Commenting on the broad allusiveness of Walcott's work, Terada's reading of Walcott *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry* examines Walcott's poetry through the lens of postmodern theory. Terada suggests that "[i]f Walcott did not exist, theorists of influence would have to invent him" noting that his poetry reveals the "limitations of popular assumptions about influence" (Terada, 1992, 42/3). Terada's insight is useful in that it highlights that Walcott does not merely incorporate various cultural resources in his work, but that his poetry, as well as his critical work, represents a direct challenge to outmoded models of literary influence. Attempts to place Walcott's work in relation to that of his contemporaries have also fruitfully placed his allusiveness within a broader perspective; indeed, some of the more productive studies of Walcott in the last number of years have examined issues of influence in a comparative context. Maria Cristina Fumagalli's *The Flight of the Vernaular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, and the Impress of Dante* and Charles W. Pollard's *New World Modernisms: T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite* explore the dialogue that two contemporary poets enter into with their literary predecessors. Such studies are instructive in that they suggest that the assimilation of colonial culture is inevitable, rather than exceptional, in a postcolonial context. Pollard's study is additionally valuable in placing Caribbean creolization within the context of European modernism, suggesting that the issue is not a case of colonial culture being dependent on metropolitan frames of reference, but that the dependence on external cultural resources is common to both. In this sense Walcott exemplifies the ideal artist of T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in that he has the "historical sense" that compels him to write as if the "whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence" (Eliot, 1972, 72). Walcott's well-documented quarrel with official History can best be understood as a rejection of the concept of linear time in preference for an atemporal universe, a simultaneity of experience that renders tags of "originality" and "mimicry" spurious, thus "Joyce is a contemporary of Homer (which

Joyce knew)" (Walcott, 1997b, 241). Walcott's insistence on the reciprocal nature of literary inheritance further echoes Eliot's views that:

> what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them (Eliot, 1972, 72).

Reading Walcott in terms of European modernism therefore effectively collapses the prejudicial opposition between Old World originality and New World mimicry propagated by colonial discourses.

Many studies of Walcott's poetry have pointed to the importance of Homer's *The Odyssey* in Walcott's writing, yet surprisingly, no full length study of this topic exists; the analysis provided in these pages seeks to fill that critical lacuna. This book examines the trope of voyaging in Derek Walcott's poetics, particularly as it pertains to the poet's engagement with classical verse. Focusing specifically on the poet's engagement with Homeric myth, and *The Odyssey* in particular, it articulates the manner in which Walcott's postcolonial reconfigurations of epic verse both highlight the endurance of the classics as well as demonstrating how cultural practices can remake and transform ancient texts. Concomitant with the poet's presentation of self as divided, this study traces opposing forces in operation within this trope: a centrifugal force that corresponds to the outward journey away from his island home in search of greater publishing opportunities and broader readerships, and a centripetal force corresponding to the return journey, or homecoming. If the outward journey represents an anxiety of betrayal or infidelity to the island home, the return is rendered equally problematic. The journeys represented in Walcott's verse, though frequently incomplete, are circular in nature. For Walcott, the voyage trope belies the possibility of stasis, the person returning never being fully identical with the person who set out; the voyage therefore represents a process of continual transformation, with the final destination being the point of embarkation.

The enabling potential of Greek myth is marked by a similar to-ing and fro-ing in Walcott's verse as he repeatedly engages with, and simultaneously disavows, Homeric configurations. Although betraying the anxiety of adopting the literature and culture of the coloniser, Walcott insists on the reciprocal nature of poetic appropriation, the act of rewriting also signalling new ways of rereading, thus effectively altering the reception of the source text; looking to Walcott's verse prepares us to read Homer anew. Readers of Walcott can thus identify *The Odyssey* as a key text upon

which to consider the Caribbean writer's preoccupation with issues of identity formation, originality and colonial history. Further depth is provided by the mediating influence of James Joyce, whose engagement with Homeric verse also registered the anxieties of the colonial writer, and manifested a commitment to the quotidian. Romare Bearden's collection *The Odysseus Series* further reinforced the poet's belief that in addressing the particular an artist is provided with a means to articulate the universal. Given that these case studies transgress generic and artistic boundaries, this study is interdisciplinary and inter-artistic in nature. As such, it interrogates the perceived exclusivity of poetry and prose, and of literary and artistic disciplines. Highlighting the permeability of such boundaries, it investigates the journey of Odysseus, as prototypical wanderer, through time and space, from oral to print culture, from word to image.

Chapter One examines Walcott's hostility towards North Atlantic historiography, as expressed in his poetry and in his critical essays. Exploring the paralysing effects of historical rupture in a colonial context allows for a greater understanding of Walcott's evolving relationship to his African cultural heritage and to his complex feelings towards his European linguistic and literary inheritance. From the early stages of his career, Walcott's assimilation of European cultural resources and his insistence that the umbilical link to Africa had been severed by the Middle Passage, fed the critical assumption that he favoured one aspect of his mixed heritage over the other. Yet the Manichean logic of these readings fails to appreciate the more nuanced relationship the poet maintains with both strands of his ancestral bequest. If Walcott's African inheritance is characterised in terms of traumatic loss, it is also read in terms of a surviving communal consciousness; his European ancestry is read in similarly ambivalent terms in references to "ancestral murderers and poets" (Walcott, 1962a, 19). Refusing to be defined by historical rupture, Walcott advocates a palimpsestic reading of the Caribbean as a blue basin in which the pebbles of islands are constantly washed clean, a continuous process of erasure and re-inscription. As a writer who staunchly abrogates the importance of historical discourse, yet constructs his poetics as an ongoing and developing response to it, Walcott's quarrel with history represents one of the generative knots of tension around which the disparate threads of his critical and imaginative writing gathers.

The second chapter develops this reading of Walcott's response towards cultural inheritance through an analysis of his views on mimicry. Developing a concept of mimicry that closely aligns it to current theories of creolization allows the poet to vigorously respond to detrimental colonial discourses which maintain that New World cultures are

necessarily derivative. A reading of Walcott's "castaway poems" documents the early stages of the odyssean wanderer figure in his work. If early formulations read the West Indian writer as shipwrecked by history and castaway on foreign shores, the development of this figure will see the castaway gathering the necessary materials to build a raft. Gradually, the figure of Crusoe cedes to Odysseus in terms of a frequency of allusions. The mutability of the Crusoe/Odysseus figurations point to the broader project of the poet's writings on mimicry, which is to free poetic allusiveness from the taint of colonial theft; Walcott's mimicry repudiates notions of cultural trespass in order to claim the diverse cultures of the Caribbean as a natural legacy. No longer bound to terrestrial coordinates, the poet cultivates a dynamic relationship between roots/ routes, voyaging/ homecoming and migration/settlement in his work. Advancing a view that it is only through disciplined endeavour that the apprentice becomes a master, Walcott strategically defies a position of servitude in relation to the English literary canon. Armed with the necessary skills to combat his shipwrecked condition, the craftsman castaway is able to launch his metapoetic craft and steer his vessel through unknown waters.

Chapter Three examines the postcolonial afterlife of European modernism. Although modernism and postcolonialism are commonly read as opposing discourses, this chapter puts forward the argument that many postcolonial artists find in the cross-cultural poetics of modernism an enabling precedent for cultural creolization. Though, as postcolonial critics are quick to assert, modernist primitivism and exoticism are, as objectifying discourses, fundamentally opposed to liberatory agendas, many postcolonial artists are content to adapt modernist strategies to their own specific circumstances. This has led to a gradual recognition of non-adversarial connections between modernist and postcolonial artists in current critical circles. Ramazani, for one, finds the roots of postcolonial poetic devices such as translocalism, mythical syncretism and heteroglossia in Euro-modernist bricolage (Ramazani, 2007, 294). Moreover, the assimilative methodologies of modernist art provide Walcott with another counter-argument to the indictment of New World non-originality. To the charge that colonial culture is necessarily secondary or derivative, Walcott raises up a mirror to Western culture in order to expose successive genealogies of imitation. Furthermore, the recourse to mythology that was central to modernist art complements Walcott's own strategic deployment of myth; T.S. Eliot's writings on modernism's preoccupation with myth as a means for organising history being an obvious example. Like the modernist artists who had preceded him, Walcott would "reject the idea of history as time for its original concept as myth" (Walcott, 1974a, 37). This

area is, however, under-theorized; as such, much work still needs to be done in this area. This book presents two separate case studies of modernists – James Joyce and Romare Bearden – who, in a manner similar to Walcott, incorporated Homeric appropriations in their work. In doing so, this section allows for productive discussion on the resonance of the Odysseus myth for the postcolonial artist.

Chapters Four and Five focus exclusively on Walcott's *Omeros* as the apex of the poet's Homeric appropriations. Both explore the circular journeys that are propagated throughout the poem, leading to the gradual realisation that the outward journey in Walcott's verse is always a form of return. Chapter Four explores the viability of a postcolonial epic, given the genre's implicit correlation with militarism and narrative teleology. If, to use Hamner's formulation, an "epic of the dispossessed" is indeed viable, then it will clearly need to be drafted along alternative lines to classical prescriptions (Hamner, 1997, 3). The marginalisation of the epic hero is notable and complements the poetic project to celebrate the ordinary inhabitants of the archipelago, rather than to elevate them to mythical proportions. Walcott presentation of a reversible world presents a reciprocal rather than a genealogical model in influence, offering new ways of reading Homer. Reading Greece in terms of the Caribbean, and not the other way around, affords Walcott a means to creolize Homer and epic, thus igniting the verse with renewed vitality. The figure of the swift as transatlantic migrant inaugurates all of the journeys undertaken throughout the poem, guiding the outbound crossing and enabling an eventual homecoming. As representative of a natural world that Walcott repeatedly privileges over the ruins of civilizations past, the swift's criss-crossing of east-west meridians offers the potential for communal integration in the present, in the wake of the historical rupture instigated by the colonial mission.

Chapter Five looks to Walcott's extensive treatment of the wound trope in *Omeros*. Though wounding in postcolonial literature is a common figure to articulate colonial trauma, it is a trope that Walcott has expressed extreme discomfort with in earlier works. Therefore, it can reasonably be assumed that Walcott's deployment of the wound will deviate from that of resistance literature. Incorporating the disparate heritages of the polycultural Caribbean, the wound affects all levels of society, coloniser and colonised alike. A polysemic metaphor for the common bond of suffering, it collapses the binarisms of colonial discourses, allowing for an integrative healing to assuage the pain of colonial rupture. It also provides a means for Walcott to align his experience with that of his fellow St. Lucian's; the writer's struggle with an imposed language being akin to

Philoctete's suffering under the yoke of an imposed name. This section highlights how the projects undertaken to immortalise St. Lucia through recourse to history and myth are deemed failures; the poet realises they are unnecessary and endeavours to move beyond metaphorical logic in order to celebrate his island for its own inherent worth, without the aid of mythic inflation. Dismantling the Homeric scaffolding erected by his inherently analogous mind, Walcott revels in the astonishing ordinariness of Caribbean realities, marking a provisional anchoring of his metapoetic vessel. Homecoming for the poet, as with his odyssean wanderers is a benediction and a burden, something that is not given but must be earned. Signalling the beginning of the end of Walcott's poetic appropriations of Homeric verse, the publication of *Omeros* marks a decisive turning point in his career.

The final chapter examines Walcott's verse drama adaptation of *The Odyssey*, commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Transposing epic verse to dramatic form involved a radical rewriting of the poem; the result is a clipped, dynamic and distinctly Caribbean *Odyssey* that yet maintains a remarkable fidelity to the original poem. Walcott's Odysseus is drafted along the same fault lines as the odyssean wanderers that roam the pages of his verse. Divided between a love of adventure and responsibility, voyaging and homecoming, Walcott's Odysseus is clearly torn between conflicting allegiances. A shell-shocked veteran lost at sea, he is a figure that threatens total disintegration. Refusing to award superhuman status to this "sacker of cities" serves a postcolonial agenda but also has the effect of greatly increasing the dramatic tension in a story that might have grown weary through repetition. As a trickster storyteller, who may have invented his great deeds, this Odysseus seems ill-equipped to face the challenges lying in wait, thus increasing the suspense for audiences during decisive scenes in the narrative. This section highlights the way in which Walcott's adaptation of epic incorporates a postcolonial agenda in order to challenge the epic genre's perceived unsuitability for the postcolonial writer.

Above all other allusions in his writing career, the Homeric appropriations have the most lasting a deepest resonance. The epic scaffolding provided the poet with a useful foothold, a new perspective from which to consider the nature of his craft. However, the function of scaffolding is to provide temporary support, and not to be a permanent fixture. Thus classical analogy is invoked with a view to its own supersession, its built in obsolescence. Walcott's dramatic adaptation of *The Odyssey* marks therefore the end of his large scale Homeric appropriations. The engagement with this extrinsic culture can be

understood therefore as strategic rather than subservient. By the mid-nineties, Walcott is ready to turn his gaze from Greece and steer his craft towards other shores.

PART I:

THE CRAFT

CHAPTER ONE

THE SIREN SONG OF HISTORY

Whoever draws too close,
off guard, and catches the Sirens' voices in the air-
no sailing home for him, no wife rising to meet him,
no happy children beaming up at their father's face.
The high thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him
—*Odyssey*, Book 12[1]

The sigh of History meant nothing here.
—Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory"

In Book XII of Homer's *The Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus faces yet another obstacle to his homecoming in the form of the Sirens. With their bewitching music, these seductive bird women entice sailors to their doom, for none can hear their melodious singing without falling prey to their enchantment. As evidence of their destructive capabilities, their flowering meadow is piled high with the mouldering bones of men who have stopped too long and listened, thus losing all thoughts of duty and home. Forewarned by the witch Circe, Odysseus instructs his crew to plug their ears with beeswax and to tie him to the ship's mast, that he alone might hear how the nymphs sing of "all the pains that the Greeks and Trojans once endured/ on the spreading plain of Troy" (*Od*. 12. 205/6). While he screams to be released, that he might wallow in their thrall, his deafened crew sail on by treacherous waters.

Classicists have observed that the song of the Sirens is very similar to that of the Iliadic Muses, who also enchant their listeners with tales of the Trojan War[2]. Thus an intertextual narrative competition is established within the poem between *The Iliad*, an epic of warfare and conquest, and *The Odyssey*, a wandering epic, whereby the narrative of past conflicts

[1] Throughout this book I have used the version of *The Odyssey* translated by Robert Fagles and published in 2006 by Penguin Classics.

[2] Carol Dougherty's *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey* provides an insightful exegesis of this episode (Dougherty, 2001, 71-3).

threaten the poetic success of Odysseus' future voyaging and storytelling. Within this schema, the song of the past is one of stagnancy and immobility, whereas the song of the future is linked to mobility and innovation. Should Odysseus stop to listen to the Iliadic past – a tempting prospect given that his own personal history is inextricably woven into this story – he will forsake his destiny and homecoming to wither and rot on the Siren's shores. It is only by resisting this temptation that he can continue his own journey and craft his own song.

This episode provides a telling analogue for Walcott's views on the West Indian writers' relationship to history, most explicitly outlined in his 1974 essay "The Muse of History." Interestingly, he chooses another mythical figure of devastating power when he writes that history is the "Medusa of the New World" (Walcott, 1974a, 36). As in the case of the Sirens, the Gorgon represents the threat of immobilisation and a premature end to voyaging and storytelling. Walcott's well-documented rejection of history reaches its apogee here as he categorically "refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force" (Walcott, 1974a, 37). His poetics attempt to circumvent the discourse by claiming that "amnesia is the true history of the New World" (Walcott, 1974a, 37-39). Concomitant with this denunciation of history is a refusal to engage with the degradations of a colonial past on a creative level. In another statement essay published in the same year he declares: "[t]he degradations have already been endured; they have been endured to the point of irrelevancy" (Walcott, 1974b, 53). In the Caribbean, traumatic regional stereotypes born of the area's downtrodden past, such as Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul's assertion that "[h]istory is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (Naipaul, 1962, 20), or Victorian traveller James Anthony Froude's damning verdict that, "[t]here are no people there in the true sense of the word" (qtd. in Walcott, 1969a, 36), are combated not by the production of a counter-catalogue of local achievement but the unceremonious dumping of the yardstick.

Walcott's repudiation of imperial historiography, with its emphasis on military achievement and conquest, is a refusal to engage with the degradations of a colonial past in his imaginative writing. Despite his polemic language and repeated disavowal of the general term "history", Walcott's writing subtly distinguishes between different types of history, most obviously between a Western Imperial History and a cultural inheritance that endures the process of colonisation and geographical displacement. As Rei Terada perceptively notes, he disparages history as a "linear record" but respects it as a "communal consciousness suffusing perception" (Terada, 1992, 170). It is the former that consistently evokes