How to Begin a New World: Dante in Walcott's *Omeros*

Thomas Austenfeld
University of Fribourg, Switzerland

She led Philoctete to the gurgling lava.
[*Omeros* Ch XLIX, Section 1, line 14-15.]

A poem as long and ambitious as Derek Walcott's *Omeros* surely has more than one key episode, but among the passages contending for that honor, the healing of Philoctete in chapter 49 stands out.[1] It poetically combines the resolution of postcolonial suffering through African wisdom with an Edenic vision. Once Philoctete is healed, the narrator can imagine a new world; a project he accomplishes with allusions to Dante. This essay argues that Walcott's increasing reliance on Dante's content and form—with a corresponding decreasing reliance on Homer—over the course of *Omeros* accomplishes the recasting of a heteronomous postcolonial project into an autonomous poetic utterance. The healing of Philoctete is the signal event in a group of poetic moments about to follow in quick succession in which Walcott suggests that his epic starts a New World.

The swift transformation of Philoctete, accomplished in just 33 lines of poetry, changes everything. Readers such as Jahan Ramazani have rightly seen Philoctete's wound as synecdochizing the condition of Antillean and other colonized peoples, ultimately claiming a "Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction." But the rapid transition of Philoctete's fate accomplishes more than elegant mourning. Walcott here signals his wish to move beyond analyzing a condition to positing a new beginning. Initially, the violence of Philoctete's metamorphosis is suggested by warlike imagery, then suddenly the formerly hobbled old man has been transformed into a new Adam exuding both physical and sexual prowess:

> The bow leapt back to the palm of the warrior.
> The yoke of the wrong name lifted from his shoulders.
> His muscles loosened like those of a brown river

> that was dammed with silt, and then silkens its boulders
> with refreshing strength. His ribs thudded like a horse
> cantering on a beach that bursts into full gallop
>
> while a boy yanks at its rein with terrified "Whoas!"
> [...]
>
> But now, quite clearly the tears trickled down his face
> like rainwater down a cracked carafe from Choiseul,
>
> as he stood like a boy in his bath with the first clay's
> innocent prick! So she threw Adam a towel.
> And the yard was Eden. And its light the first day's.
> (247-48)

This miraculous transformation and renewal has no precedent in Homer's work but the cleansing and healing both evoke Dante's theocentric universe, along with the transformational voyage that his pilgrim-self undergoes. The formal device of Dante's *terza rima* has accompanied readers from the first page of *Omeros* onward. In chapter 49, readers first encounter a thematic Dantean allusion in the "gurgling lava" that constitutes Philoctete's bath: Dante's *Inferno*, especially the Malebolge, will be mined for metaphors in the remainder of the poem. The fisherman's healing in the 33 lines of section II of this chapter recalls Dante's numerology to which Walcott playfully alludes throughout *Omeros*. Walcott's increasing reliance on Dante from chapter 49 onward recaptures *in nuce* his lifelong poetic growth.

Over the years of his maturation as poet, Walcott has shown remarkable consistency in his attention to Dante.[2] By dismantling myth but retaining the poetic form of Dante in the concluding chapters of *Omeros*, Walcott affirms the privileged status of Dante in his work which allows him to make a threefold claim: Dante signifies autobiography of a special kind by combining culture and self; Dante signifies the assertion of linguistic native originality; and finally, Dante signifies the beginning of a new world. These claims so dominate Books VI and VII of *Omeros* that the poem's title allusion, Homer/Omeros, increasingly recedes before the emerging figure of Dante.

The trope of the new world, familiarly attributed to the Caribbean and indeed to the American hemisphere, runs the danger of being clichéd. To invest it with significance, Walcott must deliver on the Edenic vision he evokes as a consequence of the old man's healing, and he does so by radically changing the direction of *Omeros*, reducing

the formerly highly allusive and thickly troped world of St. Lucia to the pure phenomenon of itself, excepting only his Dantean apparatus from the poetic *reductio*. Ulrich Prill's observation that Walcott's reception of Dante is by no means unambiguous (157-58) is supported by the curious fact that several characters in the poem, from Philoctete to the narrator to Achille, seem to refer back to Dante's pilgrim-self. The only unambiguous Dante reference is formal; it is the persistent *terza rima* which throws into high relief the thematic and narrative changes occurring within and after chapter 49.

First, the poem's narrator is cleansed and focused. Immediately following Philoctete's release from "the yoke of the wrong name"—he is no longer wounded, hence his name no longer identifies him correctly—the narrator, too, feels "the wrong love leaving [him]," (249) as he analogously experiences a rapid series of metamorphoses: the world in which he has existed to date is turned upside down, "since the rain was shining and the sun was raining" (249). Like the Socratic disciple in Book IX of Plato's *The Republic* whose soul is finally turned in the right direction and no longer fettered by the "wrong love," the narrator now turns his thoughts to "Soufrière/and [...] the bubbling pits of/the Malebolge"; his island, St. Lucia, shines "with an interior light like Lucia's" and his sense of joy is expressed in the same rampant image as that used already for Philoctete, "pounding like a stallion's hooves/ on a morning beach" (249). Through the allusion to the pits of the *Inferno* and to the guiding light of St. Lucia, one of Dante's three female intercessors, the poet expresses an animalistic sense of liberation and boundless energy in Dantean terms.

Second, the tone of the poem changes perceptibly from sweeping narrative and historical speculation to a series of episodic, focused events. Having invested major portions of the book with allusions, puns, and learned references which have made *Omeros* a treasure trove for classicists,[3] postcolonialists, and literary theorists, Walcott consciously abandons classical myth and false historical parallels in the remaining pages. Shortly after Philoctete's metaphysical unyoking and rejuvenation, both the narrator figure and Major Plunkett give up their inflated ideas of meaning-making, "all that Greek manure under the green bananas" (271), and decide to let this island and its characters be themselves:

> Why not see Helen
> as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,

swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone,
as fresh as the sea-wind? (271)

From this point forward, Maud Plunkett dies and is buried, Achille performs his cross-gendered African dance, the narrator muses upon ways to save the island from the influx of tourists, Hector has a fatal car accident, and Helen moves in with Achille. Yet at the same time as the grand myth has turned into everyday story, the shape of the poem on the page, the *terza rima* stanza, has not changed at all.

The transformation of the poem's subject matter and tone after chapter 49 is made more dramatic by the continuing *terza rima*. While Walcott has employed the *terza rima* in *Omeros* loosely in terms of its intricate rhyme scheme—frequently the lines arrange themselves better as near-quatrains in terms of rhyme—he has made no compromise in the typographical representation. Three-line stanzas fill the book, excepting only a two-page excursion into haunting dactylic tetrameter in the third section of chapter 33, itself a numerologically prominent place in the poem that practically calls for violating readers' expectations. After Philoctete's healing in chapter 49, Walcott successively abandons the classical allusions, but he does not abandon *terza rima*. He was under no obligation to remain consistent in his meter and could have abandoned *terza rima* along with the matter of Troy. His *oeuvre* is testimony to his command of poetic forms. A brief look through his work shows that he used *terza rima* only in a very few cases before *Omeros*, and that he has rarely used it since.[4] Whereas the thematic development of *Omeros*, then, distills the Caribbean kernel, a St. Lucian *Ding an sich*, out of the detritus of literary and colonial history, the poetic method steadily affirms Dante. By chapter 49, Walcott has explained the Caribbean for well over two hundred pages not on its own terms, but always in terms of something else: Troy, the Odyssean voyages, Colonial history, the British empire, and the subjugation of Native Americans and Blacks by the United States government. If narrative honesty and low mimesis are to be the final gestures of the poem, they materialize in Dantean disguise. Continuing *terza rima*, the poet now portrays the Caribbean in terms of Dante's *Inferno*, especially in chapter LVII, the visit to the Malebolge with Omeros. Having taken leave of "all that Greek manure," we now deal in Italian lava.

Walcott's effort to offer us "the Caribbean-as-Caribbean" in this manner suggests that Dantean form and Dantean content hold a privileged place in his universe that exempts the great Tuscan from

becoming merely another metaphor, another analogy, another anxiously eyed influence. By definition, postcolonial writing is haunted by a dichotomy between the old and new, between imitation and originality. Political faultlines accompany this literary dichotomy: the imitator is said to remain the slave, the innovator presumed to be the self-liberator. Walcott, however, has always resisted such classification, freely choosing and modifying his models as they suited him, including his views on the history of slavery. In his 1974 essay, "The Muse of History," Walcott described the history of slavery as the history of black people selling black people to white people: "I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper 'history'" ("Muse" 64). Over the years, Walcott has had to struggle with being perceived as too Eurocentric, too indebted to the Western tradition to be fully invested in Caribbean identity. In the 1970s, critics Patricia Ismond and William Walsh contrasted Kamau Brathwaite, "spokesman of the African heritage," and "Walcott, as champion of European values, representing his polar opposite" (Torres-Saillant 121). Recent critic Torres-Saillant, who chronicles this history, himself rejects the dichotomy, and it no longer seems of concern in current criticism.[5]

As in politics, so in literature Walcott's views on imitation and classical form do not coincide with orthodox postcolonial views, somewhat to the exasperation of some of his readers. For some, the choice of Homer or Dante is merely the choice between two equally unacceptable European models. In *Commonwealth Literature* (2000), Stefanie Ciocia confronts Walcott's choice of Homer as a precursor and of the epic as his genre. Epic is, after all, the preferred genre of empire and offers the foundational narrative of a people or culture. While, Ciocia explains, "it is not unusual for postcolonial authors to confront canonical Western texts in order to write back to them and expose their imperialistic assumptions [...] Walcott *does* pay homage to the blind bard" (87, her emphasis). This might be read to mean that we've got a problem as soon as the postcolonial author does not meet the ideological expectations of the postcolonial critic. Isn't there something, Ciocia and others appear to be asking, that makes Walcott's world his own, that resists portrayal in-terms-of-something-else? If only *Omeros* weren't named *Omeros*! Ciocia sets out to reinterpret the *katabasis* motif (the journey to the underworld) which, "while reproducing a classical

epic theme paradoxically points out the originality of Walcott's world" (87). But while Ciocia is partially successful in thus dispatching Homer, she does not dispatch Dante. The most Dantean episode in *Omeros*, the climactic Malebolge scene in chapter 58, in which Omeros and the narrator together travel to a Caribbean version of the underworld near the volcano of Soufrière, makes little sense without the reader's recognizing the intentional allusions to Dante's eighth circle of Hell. Ciocia reads this episode carefully and explains it well (96-98), thus leaving open the possibility that the Dantean echoes merely replace the successfully banished Homeric shadows. Moreover, she does not mention the *terza rima* whose insistent presence on every page of the book (save two) practically shouts out Dante, Dante, Dante! I reiterate the name three times because of the importance of numerology in the *Divine Comedy*, a feature revisited in *Omeros* in the consistency of the three parts of each chapter, the three sections of 33 tercets, the fact that Ch. 3, section iii (and select others) have 33 lines, the three plots, three deaths, three battles, three names for St. Lucia, and other features.[6] I posit that the replacement of Homer by Dante does not cast any aspersions on Walcott's continuing reliance on European models; instead, it says a great deal about his intentional shaping of the poem's concluding portion.

The special place of Dante in Walcott has been investigated in depth by at least two scholars. In his 2004 book, *New World Modernisms*, Charles Pollard reads Dante through Eliot and Walcott, consistently affirming Walcott's greater ability to make creative use of Dante.[7] Maria Cristina Fumagalli,[8] who began this line of inquiry and to whom every subsequent reader of Walcott and Dante is indebted, offers a sustained close reading of Dante in *Omeros* in a 2000 article in *Cambridge Quarterly*. She emphasizes the journey character of both poems, the importance of dialogues in revealing characters, the presence of Santa Lucia/St. Lucia in both texts, and the connections between poetry and faith. To Fumagalli's subtitle, "Epics of the Self and Journeys into Language" and to Pollard's positive valuation of Dante in Walcott, I want to add an interpretive gloss. Walcott takes Dante at face value and neither ironizes him nor denies the salubrious influence of Dante on his own work, quite unlike the manner in which he deals with Homer, the ostensible godfather of the poem. Not only does Walcott's narrator, in an act of *lèse-majesté*, conjure Homer's name into folk etymologies when speaking with his former Greek girlfriend

(14); but he later admits to Omeros that he "never read" the master's work, "not all the way through" (283). Moffett sees in this gesture Walcott's "Bloomean 'anxiety of influence'" (21). Remarkably, Walcott nowhere betrays any similar anxieties with respect to Dante.

In *Omeros*, Walcott affirms Dante's threefold importance in autobiography, in linguistic native originality, and in the beginning of a new world.

Autobiography is a form of self-invention, and Dante's model in the *Commedia* is a rare combination of ecclesiastical history with personal meditation. One might say that Dante gave himself a lasting place in literary history in part because he so successfully claimed for himself the central place in the salvation history told in his *Commedia.* In modern times, as well, poets sometimes earn a place in literary history by claiming it themselves. Ralph Waldo Emerson sounded the call for a national poet in October 1844 and Whitman claimed the title eleven years later in *Song of Myself.* Remarkably, in his call, Emerson had invoked Homer, not just as a normative national poet but as one who might celebrate the rich complexity of a culture:

> We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so admires in Homer[.] (465)

This particular Emersonian passage casts a new light on Walcott's *magnum opus*, *Omeros*, because Walcott has indeed proven throughout his poetic career that he "knew the value of [his] incomparable materials." I won't go so far as to credit Emerson with a proleptic vision of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque when he speaks of the "carnival of the gods," but the "barbarism and materialism of the times" which Emerson mentions seem to me to find their objective correlative in the economic underpinning of the three plots of *Omeros*, in which the various livelihoods—fishing, pig-farming, taxi-driving, hotel work—together with the history of French-English colonial warfare provide the canvas upon which the gods and heroes of Walcott's Caribbean epic live out their destinies. Homer is thus nearly omnipresent in *Omeros*, both phonetically (Homer/Omeros) and as a spectral character who appears to converse with the narrator, even though the more explicit references to Greek myth drop out of the text after Philoctete's healing. But in the same paragraph in which he referenced

Homer, Emerson also invoked Dante: "Dante's praise is, that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality" (465). In other words: in the *Commedia*, Dante wrote his spiritual autobiography; he took the belief system that governed his world, medieval Catholicism, and shaped in the exemplary journey of one soul a pattern of the life of his time. He blended the personal and the universal into a coherent poetic representation. That blending, I submit, is also the achievement of *Omeros* and more pointedly the achievement of Walcott. By self-critically leading his narrator to change his mind and the direction of his poem in Books VI and VII, Walcott mingles the personal and the universal into his poetic whole, his autobiography. In an epic so evidently concerned with definition of self through ancestry, Walcott invokes and welcomes Dante as his ancestor in autobiographical poetry.

If, then, Homer's world—via Emerson—accounts for the carnivalesque in *Omeros*, and Dante's world—via Emerson—accounts for Walcott's autobiographical adumbration of *Omeros*, a further interpretive avenue opens: the geography of the Antillean world, with its island archipelagoes and men in boats, recalls the ancient Aegean, but the present postcolonial condition of the Antillean world is more meaningfully explained by invoking Dante. Homer gives Walcott the title for his poem and lends depth to such characters as Hector and Achille. But the *Iliad*—and to a lesser extent even the *Odyssey*—is ultimately the story of a society, not of an individual.[9] For Walcott himself, then, Dante is a more significant *figura* than Odysseus. Like Dante, Walcott's narrator suffers (especially in section 3 of chapter 33), undergoes the cathartic experiences that follow Philoctete's healing (see p. 249), undertakes a purgatorial journey to the gurgling pits of Soufrière in chapter 58, and witnesses the concluding scene in which Achille confronts the sea much as Dante confronts the vision of God at the conclusion of *Paradiso*. Walcott can see himself as analogous to Dante; if, however, he made the identical claim for the entire Caribbean, he would merely perpetuate colonial appropriation. In the end, by choosing Dante as model, Walcott speaks eloquently to his journey as an individual poet.

A second debt to Dante is linguistic in nature. As much as he was steeped in the world of medieval Catholicism that had taken shape over the preceding thirteen centuries, Dante broke with tradition by not writing in Latin but in Italian. That linguistic gesture had

impressed an earlier theoretician of the colonial experience, who interpreted it as liberating to Antillean authors as well. In his 1979 talk, "History of the Voice,"[10] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, St. Lucia poet and historian, links the necessary emancipation of Caribbean languages back to none other than Dante:

> The forerunner of all this [i.e. what Brathwaite calls "nation language"] was of course Dante Alighieri who at the beginning of the fourteenth century argued, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (1304), for the recognition of the (his own) Tuscan vernacular as the nation language to replace Latin as the most natural, complete and accessible means of verbal expression. (392-393)

In 1974, Brathwaite had still assumed that Walcott was "a humanist concerned with converting his heritage into a classical tradition, into a classical statement" (qtd in King 270). Yet Brathwaite saw that Dante could be used either as linguistic liberator or as a cipher of classical fossilization. When Walcott finally gives Dante full rein in his poetic process, in *Omeros*, he perceives him as liberating, not as enforcing classical models. Walcott does not copy precisely the tight interlocking stanzaic pattern of Dante's *terza rima*, a model more suited to a highly inflected language such as Italian. But Walcott manages to convey the *patois* of the Islanders as naturally as if he were Milton freshly waking from sleep, ready to dictate a thousand lines of *Paradise Lost*. The representation of spoken *patois* with its grammatical solecisms in Dante's revered form is a perfect synecdoche of the postcolonial condition; it is mimicry to the second power. It is as if Caliban had successfully appropriated Prospero's prosody. Such prosodic homage is not the imitation of the younger, fearful poet who suffers from the anxiety of paternal influences. Instead, it is native originality at its finest and the high point of a development to which Dante has stood godparent since Walcott's earliest writing.

In 1950, Walcott had written a short radio play "based on the Paolo and Francesca episode in Dante's *Inferno*" (King 75). When *In a Green Night* was published in England in 1962, some reviewers noticed "echoes of Villon, Dante, Catullus, and the metaphysicals" (King 184), suggesting that Walcott laid claim to the entire European and English tradition, at least that part of it which predecessor poets like Eliot had sanctioned for imitation. But in the late 80s, the time when Walcott was heavily invested in completing *Omeros*, Dante had gained a more

permanent foothold in his poetic universe. In his talk "The Sea is History," Walcott claims an ahistorical space for art and poetry, but especially for Dante: "Dante, for a poet, *is*. That is related to the same idea that God *is*. God doesn't have a past or future tense. And art does not have a past or future tense."[11] Such a view allows Walcott the unselfconscious adoption of literary antecedents, especially Dante, because he has freely chosen them instead of finding himself overdetermined by their normative history. Dante's autobiography writ large, as Emerson suggested, could become Walcott's model. Walcott's own epic would then be both an autobiography and additionally a portrayal of some of the contradictions and complexities of the Caribbean. It would offer ample room for colonial history such as the Battle of the Saints and Plunkett's World War II memories. It could reenact Homer's love triangle involving Helen as much as Achille's dream-journey to his African ancestor Afolabe. This confident catholicity bears out Walcott's assertion that history is neither achievement, domination, destiny nor slavery, lamentation or emancipation. Instead, "The Sea is History."[12]

The trope of "a new world," a term conventionally associated with such disparate ideas as Adam naming the animals, the American hemisphere from the European point of view, and even utopian projections, is Dante's third bequest to Walcott.[13] Walcott shows in *Omeros* that the New World isn't just new from the colonizers' point of view, but that its newness emerges from within itself and is far more comprehensible to its native citizens than to those "old-worlders" who either find fault with the imitation or dismiss epigonism altogether. In his essay, "The Muse of History," Walcott had already addressed the apparent incompatibility of both claiming a new world and offering homage to Dantean versification:

> The Caribbean sensibility is not marinated in the past. It is not exhausted. It is new. But it is its complexity, not its historically explained simplicities, which is new. [...] It will survive the malaria of nostalgia and the delirium of revenge. (54)

The new world that Walcott creates in *Omeros* is not just shown in the story of Philoctete's healing, it is inherent in the flexible form of the *terza rima* stanza itself. Just as Dante in 14th century Tuscany introduced the vernacular of his region in a challenge to ubiquitous Latin, so Walcott, in using Dante's characteristic stanza freely, gives voice to

the inhabitants of the island of St. Lucia by adapting *terza rima* to English and Creole idioms. Reed Way Dasenbrock writes: "If Walcott's poem is, to use a pun he uses, a three-master, the third master [besides Homer and Dante] is Ezra Pound" (118). Other critics have forwarded Virgil, Milton, Yeats, Joyce, Conrad, Hemingway, and others as candidates for the "three masters."[14] But this literary search may miss the point entirely. Walcott's famous puns tend to be closer to their referential linguistic root. Fumagalli's chapter on Walcott's early poem, "Epitaph for the Young," written between 1946 and 1949, and not included in *Collected Poems*, analyzes Walcott's early use of the journey metaphor and a youth/ship protagonist (41). Fumagalli explicitly references the popularity of the sailing/embarking metaphor used by classical poets such as Virgil and documented by Curtius. Dante himself uses the image of a boat or bark frequently in significant places in the *Commedia.*[15] In a signal instance in canto III of the *Inferno*, Virgil has to argue with Charon to grant Dante passage over the Acheron; the opening image of the *Purgatorio* is again the boat: "To course over better waters the little bark of my genius now hoists her sails."[16] I would like to suggest therefore that we take another look at Walcott's "three-master" and understand it as a sailing metaphor: the "three-master" on which the poem *Omeros* journeys is its form itself, a flotilla of *terza rima* stanzas sailing firmly into the New World on the three masts of their lines.

In the same vein, the poem's third plot—Philoctete's wound and its eventual healing, with which I began—adds complexity to *Omeros* beyond imitating the old world. Greek and English colonialist wars, referenced in the poem, end with the victors and the vanquished. By contrast, Ma Kilman's healing of Philoctete, through resuscitating African art, creates the formerly wounded fisherman as a new Adam, offering renewal and wholeness in lieu of domination. This plot is the contribution the New World makes to poetry and history in the ahistorical setting of the Caribbean, without "a past or future tense," as Walcott wrote.[17] Such timelessness is expressed artistically in the ideal poetic practice that Dante models for Walcott:

> In the last few cantos of the *Paradiso*, however, you come to a place in which there is light: light without heat, light without shadows, a steady radiance that consumes [...] a light that is, as Dante writes about it, beyond art. To get *beyond art* is the ideal of the artist.

(Walcott, "Reflections" 234)

At the end of chronicling the narrator's transition from heteronomy to autonomy, Walcott concludes his epic in a literary homage to Dante and Milton, but with a Caribbean twist. He empties the stage of all but two actors, Achille and the sea. Dante's *Divine Comedy* made a claim no less radical than Walcott's. At the end of his most personal journey through Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, Dante concludes with an impersonal vision of the godhead, "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (Musa tr. 585). Having concluded his poem, Dante is ready to begin living on earth once again, to start the second half of his earthly life with a sense of direction and guidance, no longer impeded by the allegorical beasts that stopped his progress in the very first canto. Milton ended his epic not dissimilarly, with a prospect towards living in the "real" world: having lost Paradise, Adam and Eve recognize that "the world [is] all before them."[18] By offering—in a vernacular poetic voice—a plot that starts the world anew in the gesture of Philoctete's healing, Walcott with a nod to Dante and Milton moves beyond postcolonial liberation to a healing that reaches from Africa to the New World, two continents connected by what is arguably the main character of *Omeros*, the sea itself; a sea, moreover, on which men travel in boats. Just before the end of the *Commedia* Dante, ever himself the voyager and now ready to gain the vision of God, recalls yet another famous boat of classical antiquity, the *Argo* whose colossal shadow managed to startle even Poseidon.[19] The *Commedia* ends with Dante's impersonal "love." The sea, also impersonal in the last line of *Omeros*, "was still going on." Achille, returned from fishing, his boat safely put up, stands at the edge of the sea looking towards Africa. The café, an earthly paradise, beckons: "The No Pain lit its doors/in the village" (325); even Achille's metaphysical world is in good order as his friends "helped him haul *In God We Troust* back into place" (324). Dante's trust in God may have been reduced to the name on a boat, but Achille views the sea as the guarantor of his life and livelihood. Life will go on as long as the sea is still going on.

Notes

[1] The wound as postcolonial trope has been examined carefully by critics, most notably Ramazani, who also offers a detailed investigation into the classical Philoctetes figure.

[2] See King, especially 75 and 184. Prill (155) calls attention to a staged reading of Robert Pinsky's *Inferno* translation in 1995, in which Walcott read the part of Virgil.

[3] See especially the Spring, 1997 issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, with contributions by Burian, Dougherty, Davis, and Farrell.

[4] *The Bounty* (1997) is in long paragraphs of poetic line (with the notable exception of the first set of lyrics, an elegy upon his mother, in *terza rima*), *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000) is in couplets, and *The Prodigal* (2004) is again in poetry paragraphs. As far as his work in terza rima before Omeros is concerned, there is one short poem called "Fame" in *The Arkansas Testament* and there are a few in *Collected Poems 1948-1984*; "The Gulf," "Love in the Valley," and three brief sections in chapters 8, 15, and 23 of "Another Life."

[5] Indeed, Charles Pollard (2004) compares both Walcott and Brathwaite to T. S. Eliot, emphasizing the Caribbean poets' similarity, not their inherent differences, as inheritors—and interpreters!—of Eliot.

[6] I am indebted to Lance Callahan, In the *Shadows of Divine Perfection: Derek Walcott's Omeros*, p.125, for this set of numerological observations.

[7] See especially 149-173. For example, Pollard asserts that "Walcott takes better advantage of the more mixed nature of Dante's model and productively renews it to suggest the social utility of his poetry in representing a Caribbean cultural identity" (151).

[8] Fumagalli also offers a sophisticated treatment of Dante's influence on Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott in *The Flight of the Vernacular* (2001). Her chapter 9, "A Caribbean Epic of the Self: Walcott's Omeros" is deeply attentive to verbal echoes of Dante in Walcott.

[9] In "Reflections on *Omeros*," Walcott playfully denies that *The Odyssey* is an epic: "[T]he Odyssey is a very domestic poem. [...] It's simply, obviously, the story of a man having a hard time getting home—a lot of it his own fault" (230).

[10] published in book form in London in 1984.

[11] Transcript of remarks made by Walcott in connection with reading his poem, "The Sea is History," York University, Toronto, Jan. 18, 1989, ed. Birbalsingh, 24.

[12] See Walcott's poem "The Sea is History" in *Collected Poems* 364-367.

[13] Fumagalli's Chapter 4 in *The Flight of the Vernacular*, "Dante's *Vita Nuova* and Walcott's *Another Life*," offers further proof of the long-enduring presence of Dante's thought in Walcott's poetry and, moreover, of the notion of speculative autobiography on the model of Dante.

[14] Joe Moffett offers a detailed study of Homer as "'master' in the literary sense, in that his work is the source from which Walcott's derives" but he also asserts that "master" "calls to mind the colonizer /colonized relationship" (2).

[15] I am grateful to my colleague Laura Getty for stimulating conversations about Dante and Virgil.

[16] Singleton translation.

[17] See note # 11.

[18] Book XII, line 646.

[19] "che fé Nettuno ammirar a l'ombra d'Argo," (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 96). Dante, of course, calls Poseidon by his Roman name Neptune. Walcott consciously alludes to this moment: "One of the greatest images in the history of literature is Dante's image of Neptune lying on the bottom of the sea, with the shadow of the *Argo* passing over him—that is just astonishing!" ("Reflections" 237).

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