

## Variations in Characterization for Philoctete in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

Derek Walcott, the Nobel laureate, in his essay "What the Twilight Says" declares that by openly fighting a tradition we perpetuate it and revolutionary literature is a "filial impulse, and that maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor" (36). The traces of this belief are distinguished in most of his works from the very beginning of his career in poems like *Epitaph for the Young: XII Cantos* onwards.

In addition to that, the matrix of the Odyssean allusions exists in a variety of his works such as *Another Life*, *The Schooner Flight*, and *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. The idea of Odyssey invokes a whole tradition of narrative in the works of Walcott and the ceaseless wandering and yearning are made to belong as naturally to Walcott's Caribbean as to Homer's Aegean. All the Odyssean motifs adrift on the sea of Walcott's work anticipate the culmination of Walcott's involvement with Homer in *Omeros*, the epic poetry published in 1990, and *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*, the play written in 1993.

Another well-known critic who has edited a book on Walcott is Harold Bloom. In the introduction of his book on Derek Walcott, he raises the issue of the originality of the Caribbean poet's ideas by asking, "Has Derek Walcott developed a voice altogether his own, the mark of a major poet, or does one hear in him the composite voice of post-Yeatsian poetry in English?" (1). Apparently Walcott is not at all anxious about the influence of other literary figures' works and motifs on his writing. As he explicitly puts forward the concept of assimilation in his essay "The Muse of History" the "fear of imitation obsesses minor poets" not the ones whose works will stand the test of time and "in any age a common genius almost indistinguishably will show itself, and the perpetuity of this genius is the only valid tradition," the originality of the great poets "emerges only when they have absorbed all the poetry which they have read," he continues his essay by elaborating that the first writings of the genius poet/writer might seem to be "the accumulation of other people's trash, but that they become bonfires, that it is only academics and frightened poets who talk of Beckett's debt to Joyce" (62).

In my opinion, the answer to Harold Bloom's question lies in how a poet treats his characters, plots, ideas of his poetry as well as the way he uses the language to express the depth of his thoughts and feelings. The present paper approaches Walcott's concept of assimilation through

a single character in *Omeros*. In other words, by elaborating on how Walcott treats Philoctete, the mythical character of Homer's *Illiad*, the reader can get a better understanding of Walcott's art of dealing with epic poetry.

## **PHILOCTETE**

"This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes."/ Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking/ his, soul with their cameras." (Walcott, *Omeros*). This is how *Omeros* the culmination of Walcott's lifelong involvement with Homer and classics begins. It does not follow the delimitations of the established European epic canons. Like its ancestors it does not begin with the invocation of a muse, the pronouncement of a grand theme or even the introduction of his protagonist, Walcott launches his lengthy narrative poem in medias res with the major character Philoctete. However, wandering and questing like any other epic poem constitute one of the major motifs of this poem in addition to affliction which will be discussed here.

The opening scene of the poem, in which Philoctete narrates for tourists the story of how his comrades and himself cut down trees in the morning to be shaped into fishing boats in order to make their livings, is an account of communal, unalienable labor. But the narration itself is alienated work of a kind which is in contrast with the Homeric bard's narration, for Achaeans, of a tale that confirms their collective identity. The events of the plot of *Omeros* unfold between the "ritual of a communal wholeness" which is about to be shattered, and the "restoration of wholeness through the cure of Philoctete's festering wound" (Breslin 251) by the help of Ma Kilman the obeah woman.

From the very beginning of the poem Derek Walcott's concept of hero and heraldic action is manifested. And as the epic goes on, he explicitly expresses his opinion by referring to Achille's battle with the hurricane that "a natural element is more challenging than an army. You can't face a hurricane. And that's more epic". (Walcott, *Omeros*) These lines foreshadow the modifications Walcott is going to undertake to go beyond the established definition of epic poetry as well as epic hero. He is against the idea of history as the deeds and impacts of heroes. For him, heraldic men are simple, ordinary persons such as fishermen who are close to earth. As Edward Baugh writes, "the heraldic figure calls attention not to itself but to what it stands for" (60).

Philoctete in Walcott's account, like his classical namesake, is a castaway figure who harbours a painful, festering wound that is annoying to everyone who gets close to him.

The story of Philoctete, told in a play by Sophocles but only briefly in the second book of *Iliad* takes on an importance at least as great as the more familiar stories of Achilles, Hector, and Helen in Walcott's long narrative poetry. Walcott attributes a central place to this marginal character who symbolizes the racial and historical wound of his people.

In Sophocles' account, on the way to Troy, Philoctete has been put ashore on the uninhabited island of Lemnos, "This coast-/ This shore-/This is Lemons, the sea surrounds it. No man lives here –even steps", (Sophocles 11) because his festering wound and far-from-good-omened cries had disturbed a religious rite. But toward the end of the war, an oracle reveals that Philoctetes's presence and his infallible bow must return to Troy if the Greeks are to win. So Odysseus, who had deceived and abandoned him, is dispatched with Achilles' son to take him to war.

Philoctete is a social outcast who spends his days isolated from normal human activities because of his affliction that runs much deeper than its physical manifestation, it is both psychic and somatic and entails amnesia "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, for a village black and poor" (Walcott, Omeros). "The festering wound prevents his integration into the life of his community. This wound which symbolizes a racial one demonstrates that in order to convert a house, a colony, a nation into a home, the individual must confront inner as well as external sources of alienation" (Hamner 91).

When other tradesmen go about their work, he seeks the cool shade of Ma Kilman's No Pain Café "Ma Kilman saw Philoctete hobbling up the street,/ so she rose from her corner window, a flask of white acajou, and a jar of yellow Vaseline,/ a small enamel basin of ice. He would wait/ in the No Pain Café all day There he would lean/ down and anoint the mouth of the sore on the shin." (Walcott, Omeros). As the narrative detours around Ma Kilman's mind, we learn that St. Omere's monologue is so unintelligible to her as to be "Greek to her. Or old African babble" (Walcott, Omeros). "The irony of juxtaposing Greek and African tongues may be hidden from her, but the reader must weigh its implicit commentary on her uprooted existence" (Hamner 42). That necessity is underscored as Ma Kilman sympathizes with Philoctete in his suffering who interprets his wound as a racial affliction.

Ma Kilman who has already promised Philoctete to find a remedy for his festering wound searches her memory for the herb her African grandmother could use to draw out the poison, “In the Egyptian silence she muttered softly/ I have a flower somewhere, a medicine, and ways/ my grandmother would boil it. I used to watch ants/ climbing her white flower-pot. But, God, in what place?” (Walcott, *Omeros*).

In *Omeros* Ma Kilman, the obeah woman who cures Philoctete, plays more than one mythical role at the same time. She is something of a Sibyl or Cassandra figure. But, since she must find the moly-like flower that Hermes gave to Odysseus to save him from Circe’s metamorphoses, which is supposed to heal Philoctete, she doubles as Athena freeing Odysseus from Circe.

Ma Kilman casually alludes to ants in passing, and these insects soon join the sea-swift, that has carried the seeds of the flower in its stomach from Africa to Antilles through Atlantic, both as symbols and as potent links with the healing forces of the natural world.

As the story goes on, we see Hector and Philoctete support the protest candidacy of “Maljo,” “whose name means “evil eye” in east Caribbean créole” (Breslin 256). “As a reader familiar with Walcott's poetry would expect, political organizations offer no balm to the wounds of his characters” (Breslin 256).

It is fitting that Philoctete, embodiment of his people's racial and cultural wound supports Maljo who is the candidate of the wounded “...and Maljo waved. He, who was once/ fisherman-mechanic, felt newly empowered/ to speak for those at the back of streets, all the ones/ idling in breadfruit yards, or draping the bridges/ at dusks by the clogged drains, or hanging tired nets on tired bamboo, for shacks on twilight ridges. (Walcott, *Omeros*), and hobbles along the street passing out the pamphlets, his limping feet is as an emblem of St. Lucian disabilities.

The fighting and struggles between the two candidates, Maljo and barber’s son, and their supporters disturb Philoctete profoundly “as Philoctete sat, with the pamphlets in his lap,/ watching the island filing backward through the pane/ of his wound and the window” (Walcott, *Omeros*). “Walcott puns on the transport's windowpane [pane] through which Philoctete observes the divisive campaign and ponders why his countrymen cannot love the island as he does, without rancor “why couldn’t they love the place, same way, together,/ the way he always loved her, even with his sore? Love Helen like a wife in good and bad weather,/ in sickness and health. Its beauty in being poor?/ The way the leaves loved her, not like a pink leaflet/ printed with slogans of black people fighting war?” (Walcott, *Omeros*) Philoctete

“regrets being successful neither in pulling the people of the island together nor in reconciling Hector and Achille over Helen” (Hamner 66). Finally, Maljo loses the election and Philoctete's anticlimactic duty is to clear away the soaked rubbish.

Then Walcott draws our attention once again to Philoctete's ongoing agony. Thus the groundwork is prepared for the story within the story-wherein Ma Kilman retrieves the herbal ingredients that will finally cure Philoctete's sickness, “A swift had carried the strong seed in its stomach/ centuries ago from its antipodal shore,/ skimming the sea-troughs, outdarting ospreys, her luck/ held to its shadow. She aimed to carry the cure/ that precedes every wound; the reversible Bight/ of Benin was her bow, her target the ringed haze/ of a circling horizon.../”) (Walcott, *Omeros*).

In fact, the account of Ma Kilman's journey into the hills and back in the search of the remedial herb becomes one of the miniature quests of *Omeros*. The symbolic consequences of Philoctete's wound are paramount, and Ma Kilman's quest must reestablish a connection with her ancestors to make her able to help Philoctete and cure his wound.

She senses that, if she can recall it, there is a pronged flower (shaped like the rusting anchor on which Philoctete cut his shin) that holds the restorative ingredient she needs “...Between its gnarled toes/ grew the reek of unknown weed; its pronged flower/ sprang like a buried anchor; its windborne odours/diverted the bee from its pollen, but its power,/rooted in bitterness,.../” (Walcott, *Omeros*).

One Sunday morning on her way to church Ma Kilman Rolls down the elastic bands to ease the discomfort of the stockings as she prays, and she is reminded of Philoctete's daily suffering “She rolled down the elastic bands below the knees,/ of her swollen stockings. It was then that their vise/ round her calves reminded her of Philoctete. Then” (Walcott, *Omeros*). “Her empathy is a sign that her redemptive quest is undertaken not for herself but for her people. She must immerse herself in their pain in order to administer the cure. In this heightened state of awareness, the telltale odor of the unknown plant begins to register on her senses. The plant that she seeks gives off a stench like that from Philoctete's wound, but Ma Kilman must not flinch from it. Nature itself empathizes with the human wound that it must heal” (Baugh 193).

A transformation begins as Ma Kilman, numbering her rosary beads, finds herself reciting “her own litany of berries” (D. Walcott, *Omeros*), the name and curative properties of the forest plants, re-collecting potent folk memory. “She goes back behind and beyond Christianity to

reaffirm the suppressed or half-forgotten African gods” (Baugh 193), “the unburied gods”, “waiting to be known by name; but she/ had never learnt them, though their sounds are within her,/ subdued in the rivers of her blood” (D. Walcott, *Omeros*). Ma Kilman recovers the lost herbal cure by learning to understand “the ants talking the language of her great-grandmother” (Breslin 224).

“In summarizing the flight of the swift, Walcott encapsulates the Middle Passage, the menial labor of his enslaved forefathers” (Hamner 135). “In his own way, Walcott has now made Philoctete's recovery essential to the self validation of creole St. Lucia's culture (Hamner 137).

Having earned power and authority, Ma Kilman administers the ritual bush bath to Philoctete. Its wider significance is imagined in the fact that the bathtub is a long abandoned sugar-mill cauldron which was used on the slave plantation. To use it now for healing the wound of centuries is a creative act of reversal. Walcott uses onomatopoeia “O: the scream of centuries,” for both pain and language of utterance. Philoctete breaks into a cold sweat as affliction drains from his festering shin, “and as he surrendered to her, the foul flower/ on his shin whitened and puckered, the corolla/ closed its thorns like sea-egg. What else did it cure?” (D. Walcott, *Omeros*).

Walcott asks the question rhetorically what else it cures and immediately answers in the next section that the result of the cure is recovery of warriorhood, self-knowledge and physical as well as psychological freedom, including freedom from self-contempt “The bow leapt back to the palm of the warrior/ the yoke of the wrong name slipped from his shoulders/ His muscles loosened like those of a brown river” (D. Walcott, *Omeros*).

The sacred herb that heals Philoctete's physical sore is also symbolic of the restorative baptism that awaits all his countrymen “She bathed him in the brew of the root. The basin/was one of those cauldrons from the old sugar-mill, with its charred pillars, rock pastures, and one gazing” (Walcott, *Omeros*). As Philoctete sits in the healing bath, it figuratively expands to become the sea washing the archipelago: “The lime leaves leeches to his wet/ knuckled spine like islands that cling to the basin/ of the rusted Caribbean” (D. Walcott, *Omeros*). The curative herb is homeopathic: it has a foul odor, like that of the festering sore it cures, and “its pronged flower” (D. Walcott, *Omeros*) is shaped like the “anchor” that inflicted the wound (Breslin 269).

Chapter fifty-five opens with the description of Philoctete's hunger for happiness which spreads through him “like a smooth white tablecloth.” (D. Walcott, *Omeros*) Philoctete and blind old St.

Omeres are enjoying themselves at Ma Kilman's Christmas feast and although they have outgrown their pain, they have not forgotten the past.

### **THE WOUND AND CURE OF WEST INDIAN CONSCIOUSNESS**

In the cure of Philoctete the successful recovery of the past opens the future. He has been served from his collective and racial past, and his cure requires Ma Kilman to regain the African herb whose seed has crossed the Atlantic in the stomach of the sea-swifts, just as the enslaved Africans carried their ancestors as "seeds in [their] stomachs" (D. Walcott, Omeros). "I lift up the axe and pray for strength in my hands/ to wound the first cedar. Dew was filing my eyes," (D. Walcott, Omeros)

A literal or figurative wound appears in almost all of the characters and subplots. The term first appears as verb in the very beginning of the poem "I lift up the axe and pray for strength in my hands/ to wound the first cedar. Dew was filing my eyes," (D. Walcott, Omeros) and the phantom-narrator summarizes, "affliction is one theme/ of his work, this fiction," (D. Walcott, Omeros). All the characters are wounded and afflicted. In some cases such as Ma Kilman, Achille, and Philoctete, memory heals, but in some cases like Helen's a clean break with the past cures.

The authorial persona insists that "[t]here was no difference/ between me and Philoctete" (D. Walcott, Omeros), "that we shared one wound, the same cure" (D. Walcott, Omeros). The wounded poet produces a wounded poetry: "Like Philoctete's wound, this language carries its cure, / its radiant affliction" (D. Walcott, Omeros). If the source of Philoctete's wound as well as its consequent amnesia and trauma are also its cure which has been sought in a paradoxical remembering of history in order to forget it again, this time by choice rather than necessity, then the "cure" of the poem's wound is necessarily achieved by a similar path.

The cure of Philoctete's wound figuratively reverses the Middle passage. Philoctete's wound "was given by the sea, but . . . the sea could heal/ the wound also." (D. Walcott, Omeros) His wound is crucial to the poem's meaning, it is the central symbol that represents all the wounds which the poem comprehends. "The hope of healing for all these afflictions, the recuperation of all outcasts, turns on the finding of a cure for Philoctete's wound." (Baugh)

And finally Walcott concluded the story in his stream of consciousness. He ascends Philoctete's pathway past "every wound," reaches the spot where Ma Kilman discovered the healing plant, and stops to address the issue of his foreign travels (Hamner) "and I felt every wound pass. I

saw the healing / thorns of dry cactus drop to the dirt, and the grove/ where the sibyl swayed. I thought of all my travelling.” (Walcott, *Omeros*)

Based on Walcott’s essays and interviews, we can infer that he neither intended to rewrite the second *Odyssey* nor considered Caribbean Sea as the second Aegean. As he says in *Omeros*, he is not the freshest of Homer’s readers. Paradoxically, he both accepts and rejects the idea of rewriting *Odyssey*. In fact, he has used the well-known motifs, characters and literary genres which suits the best to narrate the heraldic action of his people and making a new history-in his own definition-without rancor for postcolonial people. He has profited from *Odyssey* to declare that it is neither fascinating nor convenient to be an epic hero in its classical sense. The heraldic heroes of the postcolonial world are plain, down-to-earth men and women who manage to go beyond the wounds of past and history and open the horizon of future for themselves and their race. If we can here in Walcott the composite voice of other poets that is because he has absorbed all the poetry he has read and has achieved maturity.

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