

Myths of Identity in Derek Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*"

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1.

The protagonist of "The Schooner *Flight*" describes himself, in a passage which has become well-known, as

a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes
that they nickname Shabine, the patois for
any red nigger . . .
I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.¹

Perhaps more than any other of Walcott's poems, "The Schooner *Flight*" has provided critics and reviewers with phrases to characterize larger pieces of the poet's work, or even his project overall. Rita Dove titles her review of Walcott's *Collected Poems 1948-1984*, "'Either I'm Nobody or I'm a Nation'"; Paul Breslin's review takes its title from a later part of the poem: "'I Met History Once, But He Ain't Recognize Me': The Poetry of Derek Walcott." Rei Terada finds a chapter title for her book on Walcott: "The Pain of History Words Contain."² This poem has come to serve as a representative or even defining moment in the *corpus* of Walcott's work, articulating central preoccupations and methods. As Shabine's self-description suggests, the poem's protagonist claims a kind of representative status as well. Either "nobody" or "a nation," in a single phrase he suggests identification with Odysseus, the primal sailor of the Mediterranean who also named himself as "nobody", and stakes out a claim for his particular Caribbean identity (Dutch, English, African) as a nation, one without borders or a name other than the vernacular

nickname he shares with its citizens. Terada comments, Shabine "in his famous formulation . . . is at once 'any red nigger,' a 'nobody,' and an Aeneas who contains his country's future" (113).

"The Schooner *Flight*" folds together local history (the collision of European and African in the Caribbean, the aftermath of a racially mixed colonial society) and mythic history—Homer's and Vergil's myths of national origin, of the voyage as shaping, redemptive ordeal. To put it differently, the poem is negotiating between local history as such and a local history—of the Caribbean or the Mediterranean—claiming universal shape, meaning, and importance. History, narratives and understandings of the past, is the method, the topic, and the crux of this poem. *SF* begins in *medias res*, and doubles back repeatedly (the first section ends, "let me tell you how this business begin"). The voyage forward is punctuated with memories or visions of the past. Walcott constructs his long lyric on the model of an epic (as he was to do at greater length in *Omeros*, more recently), marshaling the resources of a tradition, and this is true both of the poem's recursive structure and its passages of densely allusive language. Topically, the poem is profoundly concerned with the ways the present encodes the past: in social arrangements, in language, in genetic inheritance, however occulted. It is because Shabine is of mixed descent that he has no place in a society in which black pride follows white power, and must go wander on the sea; the descent which denies him a conventional identity (ancestors who acknowledge him, a place in one society or another) by that denial leaves him virtually anonymous, with all the advantages as symbol and disadvantages for life so entailed. The landscape and seascape through which Shabine and the *Flight* travel are layered with a history of violence across racial and national lines, and the obtrusion of that history into Shabine's consciousness forms a good deal of the narrative.

If Shabine is the product of history, the weight given to him suggests that he is something for the future as well, in that he first names an identity shared by many. In giving *a* name, "Shabine," to that nation as yet nameless and outside of history, the poem offers itself as a founding myth of Caribbean identity, a myth for the hybrid self now made to know, possess and give voice to his own history. The project

is not a small one. What kind of myth, then, does this poem make? What kind of Shabine does it give us?

2.

"The Schooner *Flight*" begins with expulsion and weeping. A hint of leaving Paradise behind ("I . . . watch the sky burn / above Laventille pink as the gown / in which the woman I left was sleeping")—more clearly, though, a sense of Shabine shaking the dust from off his feet, the just man separating himself from the unrighteous: "They had started to poison my soul." If the landscape of line 1 ("idle August, while the sea soft") sounds idyllic, its *otium* translates into a lethal stasis: Shabine "stood like a stone," and his "dry neighbour . . . look through me like I was dead." In the landscape so surveyed, even nature looks man-made and tacky, the sea "rippling like galvanize," the stars "nail holes . . . in the sky roof." Nature is not only reified but divided: the wind "interfere with the trees."

If the poem's early landscapes are stagnant, we are evidently meant to connect this stasis to the overwhelming pressure of the past. Shabine dives for salvage through a sea

. . . so choke with the dead
that when I would melt in emerald water,
whose ceiling rippled like a silk tent,
I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea-fans,
dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men.
I saw that the powdery sand was their bones
ground white from Senegal to San Salvador (349).

The dead choke the water in which the living try to swim. This is a sea which holds the past thickly in suspension; yet despite or because of this density or pressure of the suspended dead, the sea is also a place of visionary insight. Here, in the first of the poem's hallucinations of history, Shabine "sees" that what appear to be bits of sand or coral are really bones, spread along the sea-lanes between the Caribbean and Africa: he sees the traces of the Middle Passage.

The sea contains a human past, which becomes visible here to Shabine; yet the dead suspended in Walcott's ocean are not only Shabine's

predecessors as Caribbean man but also his predecessors as poet. The passage echoes Ariel's song in *The Tempest*: "Of his bones are coral made, / Those are pearls which were his eyes, / Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea-change, / Into something rich and strange." Shabine reverses the Shakespearean transformation, recognizing sand and coral (no pearls here) as the bones of the dead. In *The Tempest*, Ariel's song mocks Alonso's grief for his son, believed drowned, with the proffer of a mere body made "rich and strange" in its dying. Here, drowning is deaestheticized and de-particularized: these bones are the traces of a long history. The passage both echoes and turns Shakespeare, playing on ideas of mourning and fetishistic attachment to the body which the poem engages elsewhere—and in its context, it registers the pressure, if not unequivocally the oppression, of literary ancestors on Shabine's effort to salvage something of value from the past.

In this visionary sea, with its intense clarity and density, manifests along with the traces of a larger past a personal history divided and incapable of moving forward.

The pain in my heart for Maria Concepcion,
the hurt I had done to my wife and children,
was worse than the bends. In the rapturous deep
there was no cleft rock where my soul could hide
like the boobies each sunset, no sandbar of light
where I could rest, like the pelicans know . . . (349).

The dilemma set up for Shabine in the opening sections of the poem is a curious one. Diving, he has a vision of God, and a "far voice" tells him, "If you leave her, I shall give you the morning star." The imperative, however, is simply to "leave her," not to return to married life; it is voiced against what appears less an inability to *choose* (between Maria Concepcion, the wife and children) than an inability to *release*, to let go. Indeed, Shabine's attempt to comply simply replaces Maria Concepcion with other lovers: "when I left the madhouse I tried other women but, once they stripped naked, their spiky cunts bristled like sea-eggs and I couldn't dive" (350). He is pressed to abandon this love which has divided him "from my children, flesh of my flesh," not for integration but for a further division from that body which he mourns just as body:

I ain't want her
 dressed in the sexless light of a seraph,
 I want those round brown eyes like a marmoset, and
 till the day when I can lean back and laugh,
 those claws that tickled my back on sweating
 Sunday afternoons, like a crab on wet sand (347).

Shabine's sin, or his failure, is not infidelity, or not only infidelity; rather, it is unbreakable attachment to what must be left behind. That attachment is articulated as a form of failed mourning. As the *Flight* sails at the poem's opening, Shabine laments that

. . . Maria Concepcion was all my thought
 watching the sea heaving up and down
 as the port side of dories, schooners, and yachts
 was painted afresh by the strokes of the sun
 signing her name with every reflection;
 I knew when dark-haired evening put on
 her bright silk at sunset, and, folding the sea,
 sidled under the sheet with her starry laugh,
 that there'd be no rest, there'd be no forgetting.
 Is like telling mourners round the graveside
 about resurrection, they want the dead back . . . (346).

As lover, Shabine imagines himself bound to a dead past, immune to the promise of a regenerate future; he looks back to Maria Concepcion like a mourner fixed at graveside, grieving for a body which will not be glorified.

For my reading of the poem, preoccupied with its historical and mythic dimensions, Shabine's engagement with Maria Concepcion is most crucial as symptom. She reappears briefly in section 9 as the proponent of a cyclopean fortune-telling system whose dream predicts the poem's climactic storm and its imagery ("whales and a storm") but can't interpret his deeply archetypal dream of "three old women featureless as silkworms stitching my fate" (357)—in the poem's concluding section, we see her at the vanishing point, "drifting away" to marry the ocean, "till she was gone." Something gets worked out between these points of attachment and release, and evidently it is worked out not *with* Maria Concepcion but elsewhere, on a voyage where in order to be freed from

destructive loves, from the body, from memory Shabine is brought to encounter the whole of a national past, to meet over and over again with history.

Shabine's departure, however fortuitous for the project of leaving Maria Concepcion, is motivated in lines which take us back to the poem's ambitions as a kind of national epic.

I had no nation now but the imagination.
After the white man, the niggers didn't want me
when the power swing to their side.
The first chain my hands and apologize "History";
the next said I wasn't black enough for their pride (350).

"History" is proposed as another name for stasis and repetition, what immobilizes Shabine and what makes alternatives to chaining his hands impossible or invisible. Only a few lines further, that laconic apology, "History," is personified as an occulted ancestor; if history is the problem for Shabine, it is also evidently the source.

I met History once, but he ain't recognize me.
....
I confront him and shout, 'Sir, is Shabine!
They say I'se your grandson. You remember Grandma,
your black cook, at all?' The bitch hawk and spat.
A spit like that worth any number of words.
But's all them bastards have left us: words (350).

Shabine insistently claims an *affiliation* with History. But this history turns out to be not so much the narrative he seeks (why you are chained, or the story of my black cook) as a silence. History refuses to perform its function: will not remember, will not speak, will not deliver a narrative of origins or trace the linkage of the present to the past. It is at this moment—disavowed by History—that Shabine voices the double loss of faith which seems to be at the center of the poem. "I no longer believed in the revolution./ I was losing faith in the love of my woman." Under the malevolent gaze of History, the hopes for communal or individual renewal wither. Yet even here, Shabine's rebuff by History leads not to a repudiation of the past, or a turn towards creating more

viable futures, but to a renewed desire for history, and for narratives more true and/or less enervating than those of the spaghetti Westerns which play at the close of this section, "Shabine Leaves the Republic."

Shabine wants and even needs a narrative about the past, yet History itself won't give him one. What happens next speaks tellingly to the poem's strategies overall: Shabine's desire for ancestral history finds spectacular fulfillment in the vision of a whole flotilla of ghost ships reenacting the collective past. Yet the passage which ushers in the vision of history is one of the poem's most purely lyrical, and *least* historical, moments, brief enough to quote in full.

Dusk. The *Flight* passing Blanchisseuse.
Gulls wheel like from a gun again,
and foam gone amber that was white,
lighthouse and star start making friends,
down every beach the long day ends,
and there, on that last stretch of sand,
on a beach bare of all but light,
dark hands start pulling in the seine
of the dark sea, deep, deep inland (351-2).

The voice of "The *Flight* passing Blanchisseuse" gives us a context of harmony and repetition. The gulls wheel "again," day ends, as night falls you see the stars. The star and the lighthouse agree, nature and man in harmony. For all the passage's generality, we feel we know where we are, in this landscape virtually stripped of referents but oriented around the order of land and water, light and dark, punctuated by the seamarks of lighthouse and star. The passage's one geographical referent, Blanchisseuse, places the *Flight* off the northern coast of Trinidad, about to leave it for the open sea, and clearly this is where Shabine's renewing "sea-bath" (346) begins; the poem's conclusion invokes some cosmic laundress (*une blanchisseuse*) as the agent of cleansing and renewal.

Fall gently, rain, on the sea's upturned face
like a girl showering; make these islands fresh
As Shabine once knew them! Let every trace,
every hot road, smell like clothes she just press
and sprinkle with drizzle (360).

At this liminal moment, leaving coast for ocean, night falling, "on that last stretch of sand," something more is visible, something uncanny and undefinable. What are these hands, and what are they doing with the sea?

Perhaps the easiest explanation of those last lines is to say that the "dark hands" represent visually the act of recollection whose results we see in the section which follows, seining the sea for sunken ships. That is, we see what amounts to the poet (Shabine, Walcott) exerting the power to make the sea surrender the past, not as ground up bones but as coherent images, virtually to turn time back to before dissolution, as if "this round world was some cranked water wheel." That power emerges—or, at least, is represented—through a brief recourse to lyric, the general, the timeless, the natural; the detour out of narrative replenishes its energies from another source.

Thus, in "Shabine Encounters the Middle Passage" the bones spread as coral and sand "from Senegal to San Salvador" are reassembled into their living form and context, appearing as an armada of ghost ships assembled out of the dawn fog:

frigates, barkentines,
the backward-moving current swept them on,
and high on their decks I saw great admirals,
Rodney, Nelson, de Grasse . . .
slowly they heaved past from east to west
like this round world was some cranked water wheel,
every ship pouring like a wooden bucket
dredged from the deep (352).

Shabine sees these men-o'-war in some detail—names, the men's "rusty eyeholes like cannons"—and hears "the hoarse orders / they gave those Shabines," "the hissing weeds they trailed." As the ghost ships sail through and past the *Flight*, he casts his mind back to the past he shares with them: "my memory revolve on all sailors before me." When the sun comes over the horizon, the war ships vanish, and a second vision follows.

Next we pass slave ships. Flags of all nations,
our fathers below deck too deep, I suppose,

to hear us shouting. So we stop shouting. Who knows
 who his grandfather is, much less his name?
 Tomorrow our landfall will be the Barbados (353).

As the voice shifts from "I" to "we," the vision becomes at once more substantial and less distinct. The slave ships appear in full light, the light which turned the war-ships into mist. At the same time, less can be known from their appearance. Here, there are no names, either for slaves or for captains, merely an anonymous commerce by "flags of all nations." While the sailors on the frigates were not only visible but even transparent, the denizens of the slave ships remain buried, unseen, unnamed. The anonymity of these forebears contrasts with the sensory detail of the war-ship passage or even with the particularized description of grandfather History ("a parchment Creole with warts like an old sea-bottle, crawling like a crab . . . cream linen, cream hat"). What makes the slave fathers invisible and uncommunicative, though—"below deck too deep, I suppose, to hear us"—also allies them by the repetition of key words with that earlier moment of lyric power when the reeling back of time begins: "dark hands start pulling in the seine of the dark sea, deep, deep inland" (352). That verbal rhyming works against the curt, almost anti-climactic brevity of the slave-ship passage to suggest that the decks which bar vision and communication should also be read in terms of depth, darkness, inwardness, less as barriers than as signs for what cannot be directly manifested. Thus Shabine's inability to see those below decks becomes evidence that, unlike the transparent English admirals, they are profound and substantial.

When Shabine asks for history, nothing is there, but his lyric voice is able to generate narrative out of that nothing: the fathers are unseen and silent, but everything around them indicates their presence, "too deep" to see or hear. (This deep, oceanic place looks much like the one Shabine will claim and occupy, *not* silently, at the end of the poem.) "Shabine Encounters the Middle Passage" testifies to Shabine's ability to have access to the past despite History's denial, by way of a vision which in turn is catalyzed by the abstract power of lyric. He succeeds not in learning the name of his grandfather, but in envisioning a history which does not require names to figure paternity.

This history decouples Shabine from grandfather History, "the bitch," in favor of an unseen father (closer in affiliation but further in the past), who is guiltless, profound, hidden not by choice but by compulsion. Yet the satisfying vision tells its own tale: the silence here, of sons falling silent because the silent fathers cannot hear them, is not utterly unlike History's earlier silence, and Shabine's desire for recognition, for *information*, comes no closer to being satisfied by his spectacular vision. Rather than being answered, his question is rewritten as a rhetorical one: "Who knows who his grandfather is, much less his name?" The shift from "I" to "we" suggests that that very absence of knowledge becomes the grounds of a shared communal identity. Thus, even history's bastard children acquire a story, albeit a story about silence and namelessness.

Walcott stakes a claim for the power of lyric to repeal the passage of time, and permit construction of a past in shapes we can live with and understand—in other words, poetry's power to reproduce history as myth. These middle sections of the poem make the claim good, though not innocently. In the section which follows ("The Sailor Sings Back to the Casuarinas"), a melancholy and cultivated voice laments that history, particularly colonial history, can never be evacuated from poetry, which will always be haunted by "the pain of history words contain" (354). Even the casuarinas bend with grief in the wind, mourning another of the drowned sailors who in this poem seem to mark history's killing power; the power of images to console is never total.

Shabine, too, is not quite done with the past. At the climax of the storm which takes up the poem's penultimate section, "Out of the Depths," the ghost ships of "The Middle Passage" return: not as signs of a buried ancestry but as harbingers of death.

. . . sky water drench us, and I hear myself cry,
 "I'm the drowned sailor in her *Book of Dreams*."
 I remembered them ghost ships, I saw me corkscrewing
 to the sea-bed of sea-worms, fathom pass fathom,
 my jaw clench like a fist, and only one thing
 hold me, trembling, how my family safe home.
 Then a strength like it seize me and the strength said:
 "I from backward people who still fear God."

Let Him, in his might, heave Leviathan upward
 by the winch of His will, the beast pouring lace
 from his sea-bottom bed; and that was the faith
 that had fade from a child in the Methodist chapel
 in Chisel Street, Castries, when the whale-bell
 sang service and, in hard pews ribbed like the whale,
 proud with despair, we sang how our race
 survive the sea's maw, our history, our peril,
 and now I was ready for whatever death will (359).

When peace comes after this storm, it comes not only to air and water but to virtually all the storms the poem has evoked; rage and desire ebb. One looks to this passage, then, for resolution of a great deal, and it seems particularly pressing to understand the work it does, and how that work gets done.

"Out of the Depths" begins with a quotation from the Bible in its title, taken from *Psalms*: "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord! Lord, hear my voice! Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications" (*Ps.* 130: 1-2). What follows as implicit answer seems to point repeatedly to the story of Jonah (suggested earlier by Maria Concepcion's prophetic dream of "whales and a storm"): a story about how one may be swallowed up by the sea's maw and yet survive. Or, one might say after reading the Gospels, a version of the resurrection adapted for sailors and reluctant prophets. Jesus tells the Pharisees, "'For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth'" (*Matt.* 12: 40). Ghost ships and drowned sailors may sink, then, but Shabine is not bound to share their fate.

The strength which "seizes" Shabine suggests a second allusion to *Matthew*, one where drowning figures a lack of faith:

So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me.' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'O man of little faith, why did you doubt?' (*Matthew* 14:29-31)

The faith Shabine lost was in "the revolution" and "the love of my woman"; what seizes him now is not *that* faith but an earlier one, the rediscovered faith in a God who can lift sinking bodies, "heave Leviathan

upward by the winch of his will." (Milton also hovers here, in his invocation of a God who acts in defiance of water: "So Lycidas, sunk low but mounted high, through the dear might of him that walked the waves.")³

Finding this faith, Shabine also finds the place in which it originated. In his recuperation of the faith "that had fade from a child" Shabine reidentifies himself with a community which sings its own history, a sustaining version of the past not as misfortune but as endurance: "we sang how our race/ survive the sea's maw, our history, our peril." What is recuperated as faith is remarkably local ("in the Methodist chapel / in Chisel Street, Castries"), and grounded not so much in an inward experience (conviction of sin, experience of grace) as in a communal worship which seeks to understand its own past in the terms of a Biblical narrative about election, exile, survival. This, I think, is the logic of Walcott's storm-scene, and the method of Shabine's redemption. Shabine imagines himself as a drowned sailor, bound to the fate of "them ghost-ships," but in an instant recognizes that he need not die or resemble the dead. Rather, he finds a belief that he may live, and that belief that living may be possible makes it possible. In his recognition of that faith as coming from a community, he finds a history which locates and makes sense of this moment, both in terms of his personal past and in terms of a shared, communal narrative.

At the same time, "Out of the Depths" has its incoherences when taken with the rest of the poem. These are perhaps best identified by asking whether the "re-" of "rediscovered," "reidentifies," "recuperation" indicates recursion or renewal. The poem anticipates and subsequently claims the second; yet the passage, in some measure, suggests the first. Symptomatically, this pivotal moment in the poem carries a particularly dense inhabitation of antecedent voices, from the section title's direct quotation of Psalm 130 to the more or less explicit echoes of *Jonah*, *Matthew*, "Lycidas," and "The Wasteland" ("Here, said she, / Is your card, the drowned Phoenician sailor";⁴ "'I'm the drowned sailor in her *Book of Dreams!*'"). The echoes these allusions set in motion open the storm to a mythic dimension where Shabine's near-drowning participates in an archetypal narrative of death and rebirth. Echoes of a poem like "The Wasteland" italicize Shabine's similarities to figures like the Fisher

King; to the extent that he is a figure symbolic of a nation, for Shabine to survive his ordeal by storm means good fortune not for him only but for the people of whom he is a symbol. It is not clear, though, that Shabine is a mythic figure in quite that way, removed from time and contingency; to the extent that this is still a poem about the imaginative coming to terms with history, the profusion of antecedent texts also signals a resurgence of the past's pressure.

In this narrative otherwise concerned with breaking free of the past, coming to terms with the past, releasing the past, salvation comes at a moment described in the language of regression: "Then a strength like it seize me and the strength said: / 'I from backward people who still fear God.' / . . . that was the faith that had fade from a child in the Methodist chapel . . ." Shabine embraces as literally salvific "backwardness," belatedness, a return to childhood. This backward turn, moreover, embraces an unreformed past, a childhood faith of fear, pride, and despair as well as survival. It reckons with the crises of corruption and division in the poem's earlier sections ("Raptures of the Deep," "Shabine Leaves the Republic") by forgetting them, returning to a moment before these things took place: "like this round world was some cranked water-wheel," time again moving backward.

If the crisis of the poem in "Out of the Depths" undoes the earlier work of leaving the past behind, its conclusion, "After the Storm," is less than firmly committed to the communal context the previous section has reconstituted; arguably, its undeniable lyric power comes with the move away from that context. The final stretch of the poem is strangely depopulated. It begins with the end of desire, as Shabine sees "the veiled face of Maria Concepcion marrying the ocean, then drifting away. . . I wanted nothing after that day." After the storm, both the local "we" of "Shabine Encounters the Middle Passage" and the communal "we" of "Out of the Depths" vanish—only the first person singular remains. Though Shabine is still aboard the *Flight*, no one else appears with him. Lovers, shipmates, churchgoers have been subsumed by the sea itself—"the sea my first friend; now, my last"—and this line signals a turn towards nature which becomes a merging, first figurative ("the moon open/ a cloud like a door") and then almost literal: "Shabine sang to you from the depths of the sea."

The evocative last line echoes endings by Milton and Eliot, both the final, framing turn to the third person in "Lycidas" ("So sang the uncouth swain to th'oaks and rills") and the uncanny, drowned voice which concludes "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea/ By sea girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/ Till human voices wake us and we drown" (*Collected Poems*, 7). Each of these two great antecedent poems ends with an ironizing disclaimer. "This was an uncouth song, not *my* song." Or, in "Prufrock," I am excluded from the song, it is not my song, not addressed to me, and I cannot linger in the place of its singing and live. Walcott's turn towards the third person, by contrast, does not seem to disavow the poem which precedes it; the song is claimed by or for the speaker, as well as the power to inhabit the deep place it comes from (Prufrock's "chambers of the sea") and to own it as a *native* place. In that sense, this poem attempts to trump Milton and Eliot both; it also deironizes them, asserting that drowned sailors may survive, that one may sing from beneath the sea, that a poem may be written without being framed and disavowed by the authorial voice.

If as a *living* voice Shabine sings "from the depths of the sea," it can no longer be said that he has everything in common with other islanders. In "After the Storm" Terada sees Shabine pulling "his perspective as far back as it can go," to a "nearly posthumous distance" (114). It is from that distance that Shabine speaks his blessing on the islands left behind, a distance from which those islands, if "all different size," begin to share generic features, even to look alike.

Open the map. More islands there, man,
 than peas on a tin plate, all different size,
 one thousand in the Bahamas alone,
 from mountains to low scrub with coral keys,
 and from this bowsprit, I bless every town,
 the blue smell of smoke in hills behind them,
 and the one small road winding down them like twine
 to the roofs below . . . (360)

With the turn from local detail and a contextualized personal history to a more general, Romantic nature, the poem's ending abandons the

"we" it has worked towards earlier in favor of an isolate vatic self whose power to bless comes with distance.

Shabine is no Aeneas. More a descendant than a father, he has left his own children behind, and renounces desire more for peace than duty. It's instructive to compare the end of this poem with *Omeros*, in which the fisherman Achille considers a Virgilian project before finding it impossible.

He might have to leave the village for good, its hotels and marinas,
the ice-packed shrimps of pink tourists, and find someplace,
some cove he could settle like another Aeneas,
founding not Rome but home, to survive in its peace
far from the discos, the transports, the greed, the noise.⁵

Like Shabine, Achille is disgusted with his fallen world, imagines a fresh start; yet he ends by returning home, not finding or founding a new one, because there was "no cove he liked as much as his own village . . . no bay parted its mouth under him like Helen." Aeneas' project of a new foundation is untenable for Achille because he can accept no substitute for what he has. Home and woman are to be repossessed in the knowledge of loss and imperfection. For Shabine, the notion of home itself exists only in a metaphysical sense which makes it practically unlocatable, a "vain search" for an Eden before guilt: "one island that heals with its harbour/ and a guiltless horizon, where the almond's shadow/ doesn't injure the sand." Unlike Achille's canoe, the schooner *Flight* has no landfall in prospect.

The imaginative work performed on history in the middle sections of the poem is aimed in part at the rediscovery of community and lineage, yet "The Schooner *Flight*"'s protagonist keeps moving past the points of potential reintegration he locates—signaled by shifts from "I" to "we"—and the imagined communities they offer. In retrospect, Shabine's statement "I had no nation now but the imagination" looks like a final shift of commitment from nation to imagination, an imagination whose typical mode is movement, sublimation, flight:

I have only one theme:
The bowsprit, the arrow, the longing, the lunging heart—

the flight to a target whose aim we'll never know,
vain search for one island that heals with its harbour
and guiltless horizon (361).

If Shabine begins as "any red nigger," in an anonymity which makes him legion, his final apotheosis as the "genius of the shore," or as a voice singing from the caves of the sea, operates on different terms, replacing representative man with representing man, epic with an artistic *bildungsroman* in which to gain a voice, one loses the body, and with it the body's world.

In this concluding piece of the poem, Shabine is virtually only a voice ("voice to one people's grief"). Rather than a myth for the hybrid self, this is a myth for the poet; yet Shabine's *primary* identification as poet, hand, voice, comes late enough that it serves as conclusion rather than as topic. The case is different in Walcott's later, longer poem *Omeros*. There, Shabine's identities as poet, historian, fisher/voyager precipitate as the three distinct characters of "I," Major Plunkett, and Achille, only to subject that "I" to a thorough-going critique. *Omeros*' "I," a Caribbean poet, indicts himself for a "literature as guilty as History," guilty of a remorse which insists on hearing in the present only the echoes of the past, guilty of nostalgia for "the myth of rustic manners," of a privileged detachment which falsifies.

Why hallow that pretence
of preserving what they left, the hypocrisy
of loving them from hotels, a biscuit-tin fence

smothered in love-vines, scenes to which I was attached
as blindly as Plunkett with his remorseful research?
Art is History's nostalgia . . . (228)

The narrator and Plunkett, the poet and the historian, are faulted for the same tendencies: an attachment like Shabine's to what is history, over and done with, but also a detachment from those who endure that history's consequences in the present. The *Omeros*-poet regards the fisherman Achille, who sometimes becomes Homer's Achilles, with a complicated and wounded love recorded in "this book, which will remain unknown and unread by him" (320). Virgil and Homer give the poem

a clear and celebratory statement of theme—"I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son" (320)—but the poem meditates over and over on the torsions of that project, how to write for or about Achille, or Helen.

The long poem represents its own project as virtually impossible, or impossible to perform with integrity; *Omeros* leads its poet through the circle of hell where selfish poets suffer, and he scarcely escapes "falling towards the shit they stewed in" (293). By contrast, "The Schooner *Flight*" gives us a Shabine for whom poetry is still the solution, rather than an intricate dilemma. As a man, he is disappointed, scapegoated, sickened by his life; as a poet, he suffers no more challenge than a moment of ridicule and a knife fight, which he wins. In the last lines of the poem, Shabine sails down a "road in white moonlight" secure in the double identity of singer and protagonist, Shabine the poet singing Shabine the fisherman individual and collective. But the end is not untroubled. The absence of happiness from this solitary peace, the fruitless search for an island which will heal and remove guilt, look forward to the more self-critical or self-conscious programme of *Omeros*, and suggest that the poet's story is only now beginning.

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NOTES

¹"The Schooner *Flight*," Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986) 346.

²Rita Dove, "'Either I'm Nobody or I'm a Nation'" (review of *Collected Poems 1948-1984*), *Parnassus* 14 (1987): 49-76; Paul Breslin, "I Met History Once, But He Ain't Recognize Me': The Poetry of Derek Walcott" (review of *Collected Poems 1948-1984*), *TriQuarterly* 68 (1987): 168-83; Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992), chapter title: "The Pain of History Words Contain."

³"Lycidas," in *John Milton*, ed. S. Orgel and J. Goldberg (Oxford: OUP, 1991).

⁴T. S. Eliot, "The Wasteland," ll. 46-7, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 64.

⁵Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990) 301.