

Derek Walcott's Don Juans

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*Di sasso ha il core,
O cor non ha!*

—Lorenzo da Ponte

I. The Nobody of Nowhere¹

In 1974, the Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned Derek Walcott to adapt *El Burlador de Sevilla* (1616?), the original Don Juan play by Tirso de Molina. The resulting play, *The Joker of Seville*, was given its premiere by Walcott's own company, the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, in November 1974. Budget cuts in the metropolis left the RSC unable to produce it (Chamberlin 158).

As John Thieme has shown, Walcott's play is emphatically a Caribbean one, incorporating a number of elements from the folk culture of Trinidad and subjecting Tirso to the process of Creolization that helped to create that culture (63-9). Perhaps the most striking of the changes discussed by Thieme occurs in Walcott's handling of Tirso's second scene. In the original, Don Juan is sailing from Naples to Seville when he is shipwrecked on the coast of Spain, near Tarragona. There he seduces Tisbea, a young fisherwoman. In Walcott's version, Don Juan crosses the Atlantic on a slave ship and is shipwrecked in New Tarragon. His servant Catalinion, who rescues him, is a Moorish slave. Tisbea is "*a fishergirl of mixed blood*" (34). While Don Juan is in the bushes completing his conquest of Tisbea, Catalinion distracts her friends with the story of how Don Juan conquered him.

Another striking change, one which Thieme does not discuss but which turns out to be relevant to those he does, is first obvious in Walcott's

handling of the first scene. When Isabella realizes that the man she has just made love to is not her lover Octavio, she asks him who he is. Tirso's Don Juan replies: "I am a man without a name" (235); Walcott's says: "I'm nobody, that's all you know; / my name is Nobody, or you're dead!" (14). The allusion to Homer is almost as violent as the death threat. Odysseus tells Polyphemus the Cyclops that his name is Nobody; then, when Polyphemus has been blinded, he cries out that Nobody has hurt him, and so the other Cyclopes refuse to help him. Thus Don Juan identifies his seduction of Isabella with the blinding of Polyphemus by Odysseus (who uses a phallic beam of olive wood); in an equally sinister trope, he identifies Isabella's sexual desire with the Cyclops's cannibalism.

Tirso himself alludes to Homer several times, notably in a long speech in praise of Lisbon by Don Gonzalo (whom Don Juan will later kill and whose statue will finally take Don Juan to hell): he mentions that it was originally called Ulyssibona, after Ulysses/Odysseus (255). Walcott drastically cuts the speech and even more drastically undercuts the praise: his Gonzalo remarks that Lisbon, the city named after the man who said he was Nobody, is a Nobody of a city compared to Seville (27).

The motif recurs throughout the play, gradually becoming more and more prominent (seven of some twenty-three occurrences, nearly a third of them, are in the last tenth of the play [142-51]), and accumulating greater and greater meaning. As often happens, Don Juan's joke turns out to be a way of telling the truth. When Tisbea, his second victim, asks him who he is, Don Juan replies: "Nobody. A shipwrecked prince. A poet" (39). At first this seems less significant than his joke on Isabella.² When Tisbea expects him to marry her, however, he tells her:

Marry a man, Tisbea; I am a
force, a principle, the rest
are husbands, fathers, sons; I'm none
of these. (48)

Insofar as a man's identity is based on his relationships—on his being a husband, father, or son—then Don Juan, who repeatedly violates the loyalties that relationships depend on, is not a man. He does lay claim

to another kind of identity, as "a / force, a principle." When his father upbraids him for his behaviour, however, he denies even this kind of identity:

Well, why defend my character
 against those who think they know it?
 What defense has any mirror
 against hate, except to show it
 as self-hate? I am their image,
 a question that has no answer.
 They smile, I smile. They rage, I rage.
 I feel nothing. (66; cf. *Han* 57)

What begins as a refusal to defend his character ends as an admission that he has no character. Even his sexual escapades, which are what make the others rage, may be mere mimicry, or acting out: Octavio confesses that he dreams of doing what Don Juan does (131; cf. *Thieme* 71).

When Don Gonzalo, the father of his third victim, attacks him, he disclaims even the most rudimentary kind of identity, the will to live: "Lives! You want mine! Nothing! A leaf / whirled in generations of leaves!" (84). He does defend himself, and kill his assailant, but his defense is only a mirror-image of the attack. When Gonzalo comes back from the dead to take him to hell, Don Juan welcomes him:

You see here a man born empty,
 with a heart as heavy as yours;
 there's no Hell you could offer me,
 sir, that's equal to its horrors. (144-45)

The joke, finally, is on the Joker.

It is common enough for authors to present Don Juan as "a being without internality," in *Kristeva's* phrase (197). *Byron's* virtually featureless hero is only the clearest example. In *Walcott's* play, however, Don Juan is not the only character whose name is Nobody. Just before telling *Tisbea* that he is nobody, he asks her who she is; she replies modestly: "Me? Oh, I ent nobody, sir. *Tisbea*. A poor fishergirl" (39). As in the case of Don Juan himself, this characterization, or non-

characterization, accumulates meaning as the play proceeds. After he abandons Tisbea, she drowns herself; in the last scene, her ghost appears to him:

I am nobody; Tisbea, sir,
 forgotten as the face that looks
 long at itself in quiet water,
 water forgets. I am condemned
 to mirrors now that multiply
 my useless beauty to no end. (143)

Like Don Juan himself, Tisbea is now a mere image, a being without internality. She can multiply herself in mirrors but will never bear children: Don Juan's sexuality breeds only death.³

Arguing that his third victim, Ana, Gonzalo's daughter, is not worth fighting over, Don Juan refers to the vagina as "the second grave / no more than an indifferent slit / to take another stiff" (81). Elaine Savory Fido has drawn attention to the misogyny of the passage, which is obvious enough, but I think she is wrong to suppose that Walcott endorses it (112). Instead, he suggests that Don Juan's disgust at the vagina, his sense of it as a grave, is essentially a reflection of his self-disgust, his sense of the phallus as a corpse.

Not only Don Juan and his victims, but also their avengers—practically all the other characters—are nobodies. After all, he does describe himself as their mirror image. When he manages to throw the blame for the seduction of Isabella onto her lover Octavio, his uncle Don Pedro advises Octavio to conceal his identity: "Octavio's nobody now" (22). When Tisbea's lover Anfriso follows Don Juan across the Atlantic to avenge her, Don Juan asks him who he is. "Nobody," he replies. Don Juan, after killing him, agrees (70). When Gonzalo tries to avenge his daughter, the chorus warns him: "*Better watch yourself, old man, / nobody can beat Don Juan*" (83). It is precisely nobody—the statue of the dead Gonzalo—who does finally beat him. After his death, the chorus cynically concludes that "nobody killed him," since "Statues can't move," and since "there's no Hell" there was nowhere to send him (148). Just as the seducer and his victims are identified in annihilation, so are the

seducer and the avenger. So, finally, are the victims and the avenger: "How silent all his women were! / All statues, like his murderer" (150).

The figure of Odysseus appears frequently in Walcott's poetry, often in the guise of Nobody. When the hero of *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967) announces his intention of returning like an Odysseus to his African kingdom, his friend reminds him: "You black, ugly, poor, so you worse than nothing. You like me. . . . Man together two of us is minus one" (237). Shabine, the Odysseus of "The Schooner *Flight*," introduces himself:

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. (*Kingdom 4*; cf. Dove 63-64)

The traveller in "The Arkansas Testament" (1987) discovers that he is "still nothing. A cipher / in its bubbling black zeros" (116).⁴ The motif appears in *Omeros* (1990) in the ingenious form of a series of references to the Cyclops that lack any corresponding reference to his attacker, so that Odysseus is silently elided into Nobody (e.g., 13, 46, 51-52, 102, 201, 299); it appears more powerfully in the suggestion that Hector, the descendant of African slaves, returns to Africa after his death: that he becomes an Odysseus by becoming nothing (232-33). In Walcott's dramatization of *The Odyssey*, which the RSC did manage to stage in 1992, the motif is appropriately prominent (Hamner 104-05, 106). Odysseus's trick is expanded into an elaborate vaudeville routine (64-65, 68, 71-72). The hero resumes the name of Nobody when he returns to Ithaca disguised as a beggar (121, 126). As in *Omeros*, the motif is associated with death. A sailor warns Odysseus: "Until he enters his own grave, sir, no man is safe."⁵ Odysseus replies: "Then call me 'No-man'" (41). On his visit to the underworld, Tiresias shows him an "alphabet of souls, Ajax to Zeus." The weary Odysseus predicts that he will join them: "This 'O' will be nothing that is Odysseus" (92).⁶

An outer nothingness mirrors the inner one, just as the emptiness of Don Juan's victims mirrors his own (Walcott does retain an old-fashioned tendency, which I will discuss below, to identify women with

landscapes). "Air," a poem written a few years before *The Joker of Seville*, begins with a quotation from *The Bow of Ulysses* by J. A. Froude and ends with a complaint about the West Indian landscape: "there is too much nothing here" (*Gulf* 69-70). The explorer-speaker of "Koenig of the River," a poem written a few years later, announces: "I, Koenig, am a ghost, / ghost-king of rivers." Then he asks the river what it wants to be called: "The river said nothing" (*Kingdom* 43-44). The river's reply would please Shabine, who declares at the end of "The Schooner Flight": "I wanted nothing after that day" (*Kingdom* 19). The wandering poet of *Midsummer* (1984) feels like a bored automaton (20); when he tries to shave, he sees himself, as Don Juan does, as both a mirror image and a corpse:

My double, tired of morning, closes the door
of the motel bathroom; then, wiping the steamed mirror,
refuses to acknowledge me staring back at him.
With the softest grunt, he stretches my throat for the function
of scraping it clean, his dispassionate care
like a barber's lathering a corpse. . . . (21)

Outside, "The hills have no echoes" (17); "the air is empty. . . the lit stage is empty" (23); "the cloud waits in emptiness for the apostles" (32); "noon jerks toward its rigid, inert center" (39). A Caribbean island may be a paradise, but "Paradise is life repeated spectrally, / an empty chair echoing the emptiness" (31; cf. Dove 74). The Africa that Hector returns to in *Omeros* is one that precedes the slave trade, one that no longer exists, a nowhere (cf. Terada 26). When Odysseus arrives at Polyphemus's island, he finds "an infinite, empty wharf," marked everywhere with the sign of the Cyclops, a "giant eye." A Philosopher warns him: "A man becomes nothing at that Zero's bidding" (60-61).

Walcott's preoccupation with the void should not be confused with existentialism, which he has dismissed, in "The Muse of History," as "simply the myth of the noble savage gone baroque" (6). The Sartre he is interested in is the Sartre who wrote the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* (cf. *Dream* 211, 277). The West Indian landscape is empty because it has been emptied, by genocide and imported disease. The people who have subsequently repopulated it have been emptied too.

As Rita Dove puts it, "The Middle Passage obliterated family ties, tribal connections, and the religious and communal rites that give sense to natural law. West Indian history is a how-to manual for the brutal destruction of whole races' systems for sustaining memory" (56). The slave trade destroyed all the social foundations of identity that Walcott's Don Juan rejects. As Walcott himself puts it, "what was . . . brought in the seeded entrails of the slave was a new nothing" ("Muse" 4). The reference to the "seeded entrails" of the slaves identifies the crimes of the slave traders with the sexual depredations of a Don Juan: the slaves have been anally raped, and the "new nothing" is the fruit of this monstrous conception.

Edward Chamberlin has shown (31-32, 44, 163, 165; cf. Hamner 104-05) that Walcott's use of the motif of nothingness is a response to V. S. Naipaul, who, in *The Middle Passage* (1962), an account of a return visit to the West Indies, concluded: "The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (29). Walcott's conclusion is very different.

His Don Juan, back from New Tarragon, complains:

The New World that I saw
wasn't Eden. Eden was dead,
or worse, it had been converted
to modesty. No Indian goes
naked there; they're all dressed to kill
while the incense-wreathed volcanoes
hallow genocide. Eden was hell.
Men, earth, disembowelled for gold
to crust the Holy Spanish Cross. (61)

What he has seen, however, is essentially what he has done—indeed, it is what he has been sent there to do. Earlier, the King of Castile has described him as

a young and supple-tempered blade, . . .
now on that rigorous crusade
in our dominions overseas
which God our Heavenly Father's given,

to bring the New World to our knees
 for a new earth, and a new heaven,
 to kiss this cross, the sword of Christ. (29)

Don Juan accomplishes his mission on a woman's body, much as Columbus, in *Midsummer*, accomplishes his on a feminized landscape: "the white-breasted Niña and Pinta and Santa Maria / bring the phalli of lances penetrating a jungle / whose vines spread apart to a parrot's primal scream" (58). Don Juan is the right man for the job: he spreads around him the nothingness within him—the nothingness which, he has argued, is only a reflection of that of the chivalry of Spain. Like Polyphemus, he is a zero who turns people into nothings.

It is hard to see this desolate conquistador as a folk hero, as John Thieme does (69-71). It is true that Tirso's title is usually translated as *The Trickster of Seville* and that the trickster is a popular type of West Indian folk hero (Thieme 64); but Walcott's Don Juan is precisely a joker, not a trickster: a wild card that can imitate any of the other cards but has no identity of its own. His frequent claims to represent "a / force, a principle," seem as hollow as his promises to women. As he tells the statue, they are both projections of the desires of others: "I'm as much a vision as / you are. We both don't exist" (142).

Thieme is right to emphasize that the play ends not with Don Juan's damnation but with a new dawn and the promise of a resurrection (71-72). The promise, however, is ambiguous. The resurrection could be that of Don Juan himself, in the form of his victims, who, in the self-hatred he has inflicted on them, will mimic him just as he mimics the self-hatred of the chivalrous society that destroys him. He warns against this prospect, whose mechanism he has every reason to understand:

These slaves assert their heritage,
 but they despise their origins,
 so they dress up in the image
 of courtiers, and bow to a prince,
 playing at dukes and duchesses.
 A sad joke, but a sadder lust
 to curse their masters while they dress
 like those who grind them in the dust. (91-92)

But the resurrection could also be that of the victims themselves, as themselves, somebodies at last. For Walcott is insistent that the double annihilation embodied in his *Don Juan* and perpetrated in his *West Indies* "must be seen as the beginning, not the end of our history" ("*Muse*" 6).⁷ In a memoir of his work with the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, he describes what this beginning might be like:

What would deliver [the descendant of slaves] from servitude was the forging of a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its own mode of inflection, and which began to create an oral culture of chants, jokes, folk-songs and fables. . . . (*Dream* 17)

The Joker of Seville suggests this new beginning (on the cultural level) through its exuberant celebration of Trinidadian music, dance, and sports like stick-fighting, and articulates it (on the personal level) through Isabella, who has been doubly victimized, once by *Don Juan* and once by a society that locks her up in a convent for losing her virginity to him:

My agony had made life new
and endless as the unhindered
sky when it is a seamless blue. (113; cf. Thieme 70)

One might wonder whether Isabella's skies will remain so cloudless, just as one might wonder whether a whole society can find a new beginning in the experience of genocide and slavery. Walcott himself describes as naive the belief with which he began his work in theatre, that "If there was nothing, there was everything to be made" (*Dream* 4). But the alternative is Naipaul's despair.

II. The Stone Don in the Opera

Just as Walcott weaves Homeric allusions into his Tirsonian tragedy, he weaves Tirsonian allusions into his Homeric verse novel. The intertextuality of *Omeros* is essentially an extension of the Creolization

of *The Joker of Seville*, but it is so complex that it recalls a remark he made in 1897: “. . . I may have not wanted to be a poet but an anthology, which I don't mind, because I enjoy so many voices that my own is irritating. So what you ask, what leads me from line to line, I *hope*, is any poet who is inhabiting the next letter” (Montenegro 211; see also Walcott, *Dream* 4).

Walcott's remark, if not the very title of his poem, might seem an adequate response to the scolding of Sidney Burris: “Commentators on *Omeros*, then, will understandably busy themselves in tracking down the Homeric parallels in Walcott's poem—after Joyce, there are many practiced hands waiting in the wings—but this seems a particularly ill-fated approach because part of the poem's task, its attempt to recreate the original authenticity of Walcott's Caribbean culture, lies in its deliberate deflation of analogy” (560). But Burris's remark also requires a political answer. One of the legacies of colonial imperialism, Edward Said has argued, is a tendency, on the part both of former colonizers and of former colonial subjects, to think in terms of “reified polarities,” us versus them (41). In trying to restrict Walcott to “the original authenticity of [his] Caribbean culture,” Burris perpetuates those polarities; Walcott, however, is a post-colonial writer who tries to go beyond them by appropriating from European culture what suits his needs rather than simply rejecting it wholesale (Said 30-31). As Walcott puts it, the post-colonial project “did not mean the jettisoning of ‘culture’ but, by the writer's making creative use of his schizophrenia, an electric fusion of the old and the new” (*Dream* 17).

Walcott's “Homeric parallels” are not, of course, simple or servile imitations, any more than Joyce's are. One of the ways in which Walcott asserts his independence from his Homeric material (as Joyce does) is precisely by the “deliberate deflation of analogy”; another way is by combining it (as Joyce does) with other material, such as allusions to Tirso. Rei Terada describes the effect of such an intertextual strategy: “Difference from one predecessor simultaneously suggests mimicry of another. . . . Connections tend to be confusingly overdetermined” (187). Even more confusingly, the overdetermination works both ways. Just as a single detail in the poem might have more than one source, so a single source might be represented in the poem in more than one way.

As a result, it has become something of a critical commonplace to declare oneself incapable of doing justice to *Omeros* as a whole (e.g., Figueroa 193, 206, 207-08; Livingstone 132; Terada 185); even examining the ways it uses the Don Juan myth (a much smaller and simpler matter than the Homeric one) is a daunting task.

The globe-trotting narrator of *Omeros* is an Odysseus (see 14, 187, 269, 282, 291), as are a number of the other characters; but he is also a Don Juan. When he first enters the poem, he is making love with a Greek woman, who teaches him the modern Greek pronunciation of Homer's name that he will take for his title. What marks this love scene as specifically Don Juanesque rather than as more generally erotic is its spectator, a statue, in fact a marble bust of Omeros himself: "I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as / cold as its marble"; as she undresses for him, he tells Omeros, he feels "that another cold bust, not hers, but yours / saw this with stone almonds for eyes . . ." (14-15). That the woman herself should be associated so insistently with the statue begins to suggest the complexity of Walcott's intertextuality.

That she should be so insistently described as cold suggests (as does her announcement, in the middle of their lovemaking, that she wants to go back to Greece) that the poet is not a very successful lover. One of Walcott's "deliberate deflation[s] of analogy" has been a common feature of the Don Juan myth since Byron, if not since Mozart: ironizing the figure of the irresistible seducer. Later in the poem, a Circean lover turns the poet into a swine (154-55), apparently because she considers him a chauvinist pig. Later still, the poet laments his "abandonment in the war of love" (171). It is not clear how many abandonments the poet has experienced; his very vagueness suggests that they have been numerous. Eventually he finds himself as emptied out as the Joker of Seville (who describes himself to Tisbea as a poet [*Joker* 39]):

All I had gotten I deserved, I now saw this,

and though I had self-contempt for my own deep pain,
I lay drained in bed, like the same dry carapace
I had made of others, till my turn came again.

He concludes: "the love I was good at seemed to have been only / the love of my craft and nature" (*Omeros* 241). He has exploited the others, his lovers, drained them to dry carapaces for the sake of his art.

This sexual self-accusation recalls a political one. Returning (like Odysseus) to his island home, the poet wonders whether he has exploited it, like his lovers, for the sake of his art:

Didn't I want the poor
to stay in the same light so that I could transfix
them in amber, the afterglow of an empire,

preferring a shed of palm-thatch with tilted sticks
to that blue bus-stop? Didn't I prefer a road
from which tracks climbed into the thickening syntax

of colonial travellers, the measured prose I read
as a schoolboy? (227; cf. *Dream* 3-4, 14-15, 19)

This particular parallel (between the poet's exploitations of his women and of his home) is an example of a general tendency in Walcott's poetry, a tendency at which I have glanced in his earlier work but which becomes particularly prominent, and particularly problematic, in *Omeros*: the tendency to associate women with landscapes. The identification of the vagina with the grave, to which Fido objects, is actually another example of the same tendency, since a grave is part of the landscape.⁸ The poetic-mythological topos of woman-as-landscape is problematic because it belongs both to a sexism as old as Judeo-Christianity and also to a more recent, imperialist tradition: as Mary Louise Pratt has shown, the (typically male) European traveller on the imperial frontier typically thinks of himself as an Adam in a garden which is itself his Eve (57, 168, 176, 193, 213, 217-18).

This topos affects the portrayal of virtually every woman in the poem, and it is crucial in integrating the allusions to Odysseus, who travels from land to land, with those to Don Juan, who travels from woman to woman. All we know, for example, about Antigone,⁹ the woman who teaches the poet how to say "Omeros," is that she can speak Greek, that she looks "Asian" (presumably Levantine), that she is homesick for Greece, and that her frothy underwear makes the poet think of her

as an island: "the surf printed its lace in patterns / on the shore of her neck, then the lowering shallows / of silk swirled at her ankles, like surf without noise" (14). When, in a nightmare that forms the visionary climax of the poem, the poet meets Omeros and tells him about Antigone, the first thing Omeros wants to know is what city she came from (284).

The topos is most pronounced in the treatment of Helen, the poem's central female character, the cause of the estrangement of the friends Achille and Hector, as her classical counterpart was the cause of the war between Greece and Troy. At one point or another, most of the other characters recall pointedly that the island of St. Lucia was itself once called Helen. As she washes and dresses for a "blockorama," Achille, her lover, reflects bitterly:

She was selling herself like the island, without
any pain, and the village did not seem to care

that it was dying in its change, the way it whored
away a simple life. . . . (111)

Achille is jealous, of course—so brutally jealous that he will, ironically, drive her into the arms of Hector. Hector, however, makes the same association. He used to be a fisherman, like Achille; now he has a more lucrative job as a taxi-driver in Castries, the capital, but he is not sure that the change has been for the better:

Castries was corrupting him with its roaring life,
its littered market, with too many transport vans
competing. Castries had been his common-law wife

who, like Helen, he had longed for from a distance,
and now he had both. . . . (231)

When, after Hector's death (in a taxi crash), Helen returns to Achille, he not only thinks of her womb as Hector's grave (she is carrying Hector's child)¹⁰ but adds: "There, in miniature, / the world was globed like a fruit" (275). Usually Achille's topographical associations are much more specific: he considers moving to another part of the island, "But

he found no cove he liked as much as his own / village, . . . no bay parted its mouth // like Helen under him . . ." (301).

Philoctete, the crippled friend of Achille and Hector, regrets the falling-out between them much as he regrets the social divisions caused by an election campaign; he is thinking of both when he asks himself:

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? (108)

Dennis Plunkett, the lower-class English pig farmer whose attempt to write a military history of the island (complete with Homeric parallels) is a kind of internal parody of *Omeros* itself, somehow feels that he owes his project to Helen's "desolate beauty," which is "so like her island's" (30; see also 64, 93, 96). His Irish wife, Maud (who is herself identified with Ireland [303]), thinks as she watches Helen walk:

Those lissome calves,
that waist swayed like a palm was her island's weather,

its clouded impulses of doing things by halves,
lowering her voice to match its muttering waves,
the deep sigh of night that came from its starlit leaves. (123)

Walcott deploys these associations with some subtlety. When characters close to Helen, like Achille, Hector, and Philoctete, compare her to the island, they at least tend to do so in social and political terms, making her into an example of historical trends affecting all the islanders; the Plunketts, more distant observers, tend to naturalize or aestheticize her. Walcott also draws attention to Maud's racist assumptions about the islanders' laziness (their "clouded impulses of doing things by halves"), and to Plunkett's urge to mystify British and French responsibility for the fighting over the island by assigning it to the island itself (much as Homer might be said to mystify the causes of the Trojan war by blaming it on his Helen):¹¹ "Helen needed a history. . . . / Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen's war" (30). The Battle of the Saints

(1762), the particular conflict Plunkett has most in mind, was of course precisely "theirs," Britain's and France's, not St. Lucia's.

Walcott also, however, allows his narrator to indulge in the same kind of thinking. In the poet's first encounter with Helen, he naturalizes her heavily, comparing her at length to a panther (36-37). When he is sure that he will never see her again, he thinks of her as "my island lost in the haze" (222). (He also allows her to remain an almost completely opaque character [Terada 190], and the two glimpses he does allow into her consciousness are not encouraging: in the first, his penetration of her consciousness is associated with a stab wound [115]; in the second, with sexual penetration [152-53]. Even on the level of focalization, the poet is identified with Don Juan—and sexuality is identified with violence, as in the first scene of *The Joker of Seville*.) When he laments his "abandonment in the war of love" in the United States, he compares his loss to the Sioux's loss of their land, grieving over "a land that was lost, a woman who was gone" (175); but presumably his woman was not forcibly removed by the Seventh Cavalry.

The poem does sometimes question the identification of woman and landscape. The Arawak name for St. Lucia was Iounalao, "Where the iguana is found" (4); and late in the poem, an iguana which seems, as Terada points out (195), to resent the choice of Helen rather than itself as a symbol of the island, sarcastically recalls Achilles's identification of her with the world: "Were both hemispheres the split breadfruit of / her African ass . . . ?" (312). Overall, however, the poem seems to endorse the association. In a passage that announces itself as a kind of moral ("this is what this island has meant to you, / why my bust spoke"), Omeros offers the poet an entirely non-problematic identification of the person and the geographical: "as the sea moves round an island // that appears to be moving, love moves round the heart" (291).

The Omeros who makes this pronouncement is not, however, himself an unproblematic figure. He is a statue, constantly and mysteriously changing from marble (or plaster) to ebony and back again (279-81; cf. 313). He is, as his first appearance suggests, the statue from the myth of Don Juan (among other things); the poet has already spoken of "immortal statues inviting [him] to die" (183), and, in his nightmare,

"the blind guide" leads him to hell "with a locked marble hand" like the Commendatore leading Don Giovanni offstage at the end of the opera (289).

Throughout the poem, statues are insistently associated with money and power, especially imperial power; the poem's most succinct statement of the meaning of sculpture is that "power / and art [are] the same" (205).¹² Just as insistently, however, the poem undercuts this power, in a repeated gesture which may suggest that the moral pronouncement of the marble/ebony Omeros is an appropriate target for some of Burris's "deliberate deflation." The very statue that proclaims the identity of power and art is decaying, displaying "some Caesar's eaten nose." As Achille rows home from a fishing trip prolonged by a visionary encounter with the slave trade, the poet declares: "an uplifted oar is stronger than marble / Caesar's arresting palm" (159). Prominent among the statues inviting the poet to die is again "glaring insomniac Caesar, for whom death / by marble resolved the conspirator's crisis" (183). When the poet encounters a statue, apparently of some conquistador, on the wharf at Lisbon, he is pleased to observe that nature has treated it with disrespect: its "green-bronze / cloak [is] flecked with white droppings" (192; cf. 204). When he encounters the statues of parliamentarians at Westminster, he topples them in imagination by choosing to look at their reflections inverted in the Thames (196). In the American South, he observes that the legacy of slavery is destroying the public art, "corrupting the blue-veined marble with its disease" (206). On his own visit to the metropolis, Plunkett notices "the ailing / statues of lions" (251); back home in St. Lucia, after the death of his wife, he has a vision of the decline of empire, in which "The statues close their eyes" (262).

In this version of the story, Don Juan, despite his lack of success with women, repeatedly triumphs over the statue. Even in his nightmare, when he thinks that Omeros is taking him to hell, the poet affirms "my own language, the one for which I had died, // . . . not the marble tongue of the bust I sat beside" (287). The two figures, however, tend to be identified. The relics of imperial power in Lisbon are compared to "the stone Don in the opera," not to the stone Commendatore;¹³ and as he looks up at the conquistador's statue, the poet draws the same

parallel between sexual and imperial aggression that Walcott suggests in *The Joker of Seville*: "We had no such erections / above our colonial wharves, our erogenous zones / were not drawn to power" (192).¹⁴ Even at the poem's tenderest and apparently least political moments, the lover can turn into the statue.¹⁵ On Long Island Sound, the poet appeals to the (male) reader to recall his first, hesitant adolescent lovemaking, "your palm like a statue's on / your girlfriend's knee" (169). When the heartbroken Plunkett lies down beside the dead Maud, they are like "statues on a stone tomb" (261). He immediately sees his vision of the empire declining and the statues closing their eyes. Omeros's wistful questions about Antigone reveal to the poet that even this impressive marble/ebony vision is another disappointed lover (284).

The identification of Don Juan with the statue implicates the poet (who is, like Walcott himself, part English)¹⁶ in the crimes of empire. So do the poet's identification with Don Juan (a figure of imperial exploitation in *Omeros* as well as in *The Joker of Seville*); his own confessions of exploitation; and, all too convincingly, his use of the topos of woman as landscape. One of the effects of this self-implication is to save the poem from the "rhetoric of blame" that Said sees as characteristic of the reified polarities of imperialism and its aftermath (18). *Omeros* is, in many ways, a very angry poem; but it insists on tempering accusation with self-accusation.

Don Juan's triumph over the statue, then, is a triumph over himself; the poet's nightmarish confrontation with Omeros is a confrontation with himself (Terada 209). Appropriately, the climax of the nightmare is a self-confrontation, one which echoes the poet's earlier self-accusation. Omeros takes the poet to hell—the volcanic springs of Soufrière. There they see "the Pool of Speculation," full of the

... souls who had sold out their race, the ancient forge

of bubbling lead erupted with speculators
whose heads gurgled in the lava of the Malebolge
mumbling deals as they rose. These were the traitors

who, in elected office, saw the land as views
for hotels and elevated into waiters
the sons of others, while their own learnt something else. (289)¹⁷

Since these souls have been damned for the political and economic equivalent of the poetic exploitation of which the poet has already accused himself, they try to drag him down to join them. Then Omeros and the poet come to the pit of the poets. The poet feels himself falling into it; "then Omeros gripped / my hand in enclosing marble. . . ." At the same moment, "a fist of ice" grips his other hand: it is the fist of his own damned soul, which also tries to drag him down with it, repeating the accusation of exploitation:

"You tried to render
their lives as you could, but that is never enough;
now in the sulphur's stench ask yourself this question,

whether a love of poverty helped you
to use other eyes, like those of that sightless stone?" (293-94)

The soul's accusation identifies the poet with the statue, as a symbol of imperial exploitation: his "love of poverty" has given him the stony eyes, blind to human misery, which prefer "the poor / to stay in the same light so that [he] could transfix / them in amber, the afterglow of an empire" (227). The soul's gesture identifies itself with the statue as an avenger, dragging Don Juan down to hell. Omeros's saving grip is stronger, and the poet is saved (Figuerola 205). He wakes up.

The point (to put it reductively) seems to be that self-accusation is itself a healing act (in this it differs from the self-hate of *The Joker of Seville*, presumably because it is a self-conscious insight rather than a compulsive repetition); Omeros is a figure both of condemnation and of redemption, both a white statue and a black one; the poet escapes from hell because his soul sinks into it (cf. Terada 207-08). Earlier in the vision, Omeros and the poet have taken turns singing the praises of St. Lucia; the poet's song ends: "'a volcano, stinking with sulphur, / has made it a healing place'" (287). The hell of Soufrière is really purgatorial, not infernal. Its stench of sulphur recalls the sulphurous bath in which Philoctete's wound is finally healed, and similar imagery of healing dominates the end of the poem (see 246-48, 282, 296, 309, 318-19, 323). This healing is meant, I think, to be limited. After all, self-accusation, or even a more general process of self-confrontation or self-realization,

can only go so far in healing the wounds inflicted by history. Despite its much greater length and scope, *Omeros* is finally a more modest work than *The Joker of Seville*. By the end of the poem, Achille, Helen, Philoctete, Plunkett, and the poet have found some measure of personal peace, but the larger issues Walcott has raised remain unresolved. In the very last lines, Achille finishes the day's fishing and goes home to Helen: "When he left the beach the sea was still going on" (325).

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NOTES

¹An earlier version of Part I was presented at the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast Conference, University of Washington, Seattle, 6 November 1993. My thanks are due to the participants (fit audience though few) for their questions and comments.

²Although an aristocrat, Don Juan is not a prince. Walcott may be alluding (like Eliot in *The Waste Land* [192, 257]), to the shipwreck of Ferdinand, in *The Tempest*. Ferdinand, however, is a more benign figure than Don Juan, if only because the island on which he finds himself has already been colonized by Prospero.

³"[U]seless beauty" may be an allusion to the sonnets in which Shakespeare urges the young man to his "beauty's use," procreation (2.9), and warns him that his "unused beauty" will be buried with him (4.13).

⁴Walcott may be alluding to *As You Like It* (3.2.274-77). Such allusions come easily to a poet with "a mind drenched in Elizabethan literature" (Walcott, *Dream* 11).

⁵Walcott is weaving the end of *Oedipus Rex* into his complex texture of allusions: "let none / Presume on his good fortune until he find / Life, at his death, a memory without pain" (Sophocles 78).

⁶Perhaps an allusion to a more hopeful cipher, "this wooden O," in the Prologue to *Henry V* (13).

⁷Shakespeare's "wooden O" is also the site of a new imaginative beginning, the yet-unattempted flights of his "Muse of fire" (*Henry V*, Pro. 1).

⁸The identification recurs in *Omeros*, though in an elegaic rather than a contemptuous tone: "The sail of her bellying stomach seemed to him / to bear not only the curved child sailing in her / but Hector's mound" (275); and, neutrally, in *The Odyssey*: "The grave we all come from was hidden by a bush" (74). The passage from *Omeros* alludes to Titania's description of how she and her votaress would laugh "to see the sails conceive / And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind," and how the pregnant votaress would imitate them. The Shakespearean passage even anticipates Walcott's deathliness, since the votaress dies giving birth (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.1.123-37; see Han 17, 54-55).

⁹The allusion to a classical example of female heroism may function as a balance against the morally ambiguous behaviour of Walcott's (and Homer's) Helen.

¹⁰Helen is not certain of the paternity of her child (34), but the poem seems to modulate towards assuming that it is Hector's, perhaps to grant Hector a measure of immortality.

¹¹When, in the poet's nightmare, Omeros sees the masts of the ships assembled for the Battle of the Saints, he staunchly sticks to his version of the story: "This is like Troy / all over. This forest gathering for a face!" (288). In *The Odyssey*, however, Helen insists: "The whole thing was not over me but some sea-tax" (31).

¹²This dictum may be a parody of the famous aphorism from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

¹³Walcott's reference is precise. In Mozart's opera, unlike Tirso's play, the Commendatore is always referred to as the Commendatore (or as Anna's father), never as Don Gonzalo.

¹⁴In "What the Twilight Says" (1970), however, Walcott confesses to a desire for such potent erections: "There was only one noble ruin in the [West Indian] archipelago: Christophe's massive citadel at La Ferrière [in Haïti]. It was a monument to egomania, more than a strategic castle; an effort to reach God's height. It was the summit of the slave's emergence from bondage. . . . To put it plainer, it was something we could look up to" (*Dream* 14).

¹⁵So, as we have seen, can his beloved/victim (see also 219, 313). So (to do justice to the full multivalency of the symbol) can male victims of power, as when Odysseus's overworked and rebellious crew "stare like statues" at him (202).

¹⁶Omeros's vacillation between marble and ebony may suggest (among other things) the poet's mixed racial and cultural heritage.

¹⁷Another of Walcott's mythical analogues, of course, is Vergil leading Dante through the Inferno (Figueroa 204, Terada 206). "Malebolge" ("Evil Pouches") is the second-lowest circle of hell, the region of the fraudulent (Dante 18.1n.).

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