

Monica Manolachi*

WAR TROPES IN OMEROS BY DEREK WALCOTT

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Abstract: For his poetic endeavour, Derek Walcott was awarded the Nobel prize in 1992 and the T. S. Eliot prize in 2010. Postcolonial literary critic Jahan Ramazani appreciates his longest work, the narrative poem *Omeros* (1990), as being “perhaps the most ambitious English-language poem of the decolonized Third World.” Although the critic believes it is based on the “radiant metaphor of the wound” as a “resonant site of interethnic connection”, the poet avoids advocating other Caribbean writers’ anchoring into a discourse of suffering. He proposes instead one of the most dramatic histories of the Caribbean by craftily employing war tropes from elsewhere – Europe, Africa, North America – to rewrite the inner war of the contemporary man who faces a multitude of cultural forces. His work was published when multiculturalism had already become a dominant paradigm in American universities and at the beginning of what James Hunter called the “culture wars” of the 1990s. Taking into consideration that the postcolonial concept of creolization proposed by the Barbadian poet and historian Edward K. Brathwaite was considered by Robert J. C. Young (1995) an unconscious, organic form of cultural hybridity, my argument is that Walcott’s epic poem has transformed the perspective upon creolization by revealing its intentionality. One of the reasons resides in the use of war tropes as sources of symbolic violence, which helps flesh out a history predominantly characterized by plunder, absence and loss, a view which critics such as Paul Breslin hint at. This essay examines how some of these tropes appear in the poem and with what specific purposes.

Constructed in twelve-syllable lines grouped in loose terza rima stanzas and in a highly syncretic postmodern style that alludes to Homer, Dante Alighieri, James Joyce and Aimé Césaire, *Omeros* (1990) tells several complexly intertwined stories. One is the story of Philoctete, a Saint Lucian¹ fisherman, a wounded Caliban, eventually healed by a physiognomically similar woman, a local obeah healer, named Ma Kilman. Another one is the story of two other Caribbean fishermen, Achille and Hector, who struggle over a Caribbean Helen, a black waitress. While Achille represents the changing present, Hector personifies tradition. Their views on Helen constitute the poet’s perspectives on the future of the island Saint Lucia. A third thread tells the story of a white couple, sergeant major Plunkett and his Irish wife, Maud, who represent the colonial aspect of the Caribbean. Intermingled with these plots, the poet’s autobiographical insights and experiences of alterity are meant to make all characters emotionally communicate with each other, in

* University of Bucharest, Romania; monicamanolachi@yahoo.com

¹ Saint Lucia is the Caribbean island where Derek Walcott was born.

spite of their relatively separate lives. They all share the wound of history in different ways and their unity forms a “heteroglossic and polyglossic epic” (Scanlon 105), which raises the question of cultural hybridity.

The discourse of cultural hybridity emerged in the 1990s on the background of what James Hunter called “culture wars”. In Rodica Mihăilă’s interpretation (1999), “instead of having destructive effects, the culture warfare is an engine of change and a force that continuously revitalizes the practice of democracy and the democratic ideal” (136). Referring to the significance of the culture war hypothesis to the American culture, she states that Hunter’s binary opposition “fails to identify the enduring center of American common culture” (137). The search for such a center could not avoid the issue of cultural hybridity as a third way out of a vision based on binary oppositions. In this context, Derek Walcott’s experience in American universities of the 1980s has not remained without effects. The debates over ethno-racial representation and issues of national identity are conflicting themes in *Omeros* and instrumental among the critics of the poem. For instance, Paul Breslin (2001) discusses Walcott’s “war on history”, senses that “here all that is most vexed, inspired, and problematic in his writings converges” (4) and identifies “lacerating contradictions” (6) and “an agonized state of unresolved conflict” (7) in Walcott’s work. In 2005, he reinterprets the inherent conflictual character of the poem by pointing out the reversibility of Walcott’s world, an expression of the Ancient Greek notion of the *apeiron*. “I re-entered my reversible world” (207), the poet writes. Drawing on Levinasian thought, Victor Figueroa (2007) notices “the ethical twist” in Walcott’s work: “while some of the characters in the poem are still engaged with questions of identity, Walcott seems more interested in examining the possibility of alliances between different ethnicities and cultures, and in questioning unequal and unjust relations within power structures, than in articulating identity” (25). However, the poet is not interested in the war or conflict as a form of pre-eminence, but in its conflictual value as a source of art among other sources of art, because, when he refers to Achille’s battle with the hurricane in *Reflections on “Omeros”* (1997), he comments that “a natural element is more challenging than an army. You can perhaps face an army. You can’t face a hurricane. And that’s more epic” (243). Therefore, by setting the meaning of natural forces in contrast with that of human nature, the poet places cultural hybridity and literary creolization at the center of his creative strategy.

There have been two main approaches to cultural hybridity, which can cast light on the conditions of the emergence of Caribbean poetry: one that is more Marxist, social and of anthropological value, focused on emancipation, rooted in the materialist specificity of the Caribbean history and conceptually initiated by Edward K. Brathwaite, in the 1970s; and another one that is poststructuralist, routed in the elusiveness and the postmodern indeterminacy of meaning, expanded by Western theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and often accompanied by psychoanalytical commentary. Their meeting critical point reminds of the distinction between organic and intentional hybridity discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin in the context of linguistic hybridity and accentuated by Young (1995) in the context of the nineteenth century Western interracial history. Young suggests that the pair marks a difference in awareness regarding hybridization, by claiming in line with Bakhtin that, while organic hybridity is more unconscious and tends towards fusion,

towards “a new form” (25), intentional hybridity involves a more contestatory and dialogic relationship, “no stable new form” (25). However, assigning different levels of consciousness to the two types of hybridity has often been a bone of contention.

On the one hand, Brathwaite’s effort to show the importance of Creole English for the former colonized, as a way of subverting the authority of Standard English, found its theoretical expression in demonstrating that creolization is a cultural process, apart from its biologic and linguistic character. In 1971, he writes that it is “material, psychological and spiritual – based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their [new] environment and to each other” (11). In 1975, he considers it “a process, resulting in subtle and multiform orientations from or towards ancestral originals [...] a model which allows for blood flow, fluctuations, the half look” (7). These views involve both reciprocity and absorption, terms that capture equal and unequal power relations among different entities. Although Robert J.C. Young (1995) includes creolization in the category of organic hybridity, equating it, in line with Bakhtin, with “unconscious hybridity, whose pregnancy gives birth to new forms of amalgamation rather than contestation” (21), Brathwaite’s lifelong struggle as a poet and a cultural historian has been to move the concept from the cultural unconscious to everyday cultural politics, by demonstrating its intentional character through the existence of different types of Creole in the islands. He continued his 1970s theoretical commitment by defining what he coined in 1984 as “nation language”,

an English which is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people. (311)

That his approach to creolization has not remained without echo, but became a source of further contestation and reevaluation, is obvious nowadays. For instance, when referring to his work, Ileana Rodriguez (2007) points out that:

Creolization was a proposal for the reorganization of society, a different way of understanding a temporal-social formation and of advocating the already available sets of norms relative to the living textures of the national-popular life. These sets of norms coming from below not only opposed – or, rather, deconstructed – the norms from above but suggested a more organic normativity for Caribbean societies. (237-238)

By transferring the meaning of creolization from personal interracial relations to the “more organic normativity” of the social aspects, and by drawing attention to the fact that, in comparison to transculturation, creolization is “a more ethnically charged concept” (239), the author proposes a perspective different than Young’s reading. There cannot be normativity without intention. Hence she proposes a bond between intention and organicity. Rodriguez goes even further when she asserts that “the genealogy of legitimacy is historical” (243), suggesting that new interpretations can bring further insights into the matter². One conclusion is that using one point or another on what Bill

² Similar views can be found in the articles by Cecil Gutzmore, Glen Richards or Leah Rosenberg, in the same book.

Ashcroft (2009) calls the “Creole continuum” (115) has strategic cultural reasons among writers, which has had a significant influence on literature in terms of postcolonial agency and linguistic behaviour.

On the other hand, Homi K. Bhabha’s approach to cultural hybridity is considered by Young “an astute move” (22) and “an active moment of challenge and resistance against a dominant cultural power” (23). When he located culture in the third space of enunciation, which “carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (38), Bhabha has opened a fruitful dialogue regarding the ambivalence of colonial and neocolonial discourses and of their authority.

In the 1990s, as a wider postcolonial topic that includes creolization, cultural hybridity became the site of redefining the concept of British cultural identity. The Jamaican cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1990) cogently synthesizes Caribbean identity as essentially hybrid. Significantly transplanted to England, itself a culturally hybrid society, in the post-war period, this hybrid cultural identity proved to be as charged with colonial history as the welcoming British identity was charged with the more recent history of the World Wars. Hence, the urgent necessity to compare and contrast histories of very different geographies.

Drawing upon African cultural history in the West, cultural theorist of Guyanese origin Paul Gilroy (1993) reinforces W. E. B. DuBois’s theory of double consciousness in his analysis of the cross-cultural dynamics of the Black Atlantic³. He underlines the creative potential of belonging to different realms of consciousness. He begins his theoretical construction of the concept of the Black Atlantic by comparing African American culture and black British culture and delineating their fertile connections, and by stating his interest in “the special stress that grows with the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once” (3). Although debatable⁴, the concept of the Black Atlantic can be associated with the symbolism of the *kala pani*, the taboo of the sea in Indian culture, which literally means “black water” and involves taking the risk of sailing high waves. The circulation of these cultural metaphors from one part of the world to another implies the necessity of what could be named oceanic thinking: entities that are usually considered distinct may have many aspects in common.

In his poetry, Walcott displays a balanced concern with all these aspects of creolization: cultural, linguistic, biological, conscious and unconscious. When he uses Creole English, he does not adopt it extensively, as poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson or Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze do, to express a sense of belonging to a very different postcolonial reality. Walcott uses Creole English in contrast with Standard English, to show the subtle hubris of cultural hybridity, the tension between the speakers, between the worlds to which they belong. This type of linguistic choice can also be found in the poetry of other

³ Gilroy canvasses black identity in Europe and the New World in connection with European modernity and transatlantic travel, trade and cultural exchange and gives the Black Atlantic an exploratory definition. Trying to find out how Gilroy chose the metaphor, it is worth mentioning Walcott’s words from his article published in 1974: “In the subconscious there is a black Atlantis buried in a sea of sand” (58).

⁴ See L. Chrisman and R. Murray.

poets of Caribbean origin such as David Dabydeen, Fred D'Aguiar, Grace Nichols or Dorothea Smartt.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* mentions that the ultimate root of the word *hybrid* is the Ancient Greek *hubris*, meaning “unbridled, lawless, unnatural” and “insolence towards the god, manifested either in spiritual pride or by behaviour that flouted divine or social law”. Their contiguity suggests that, while the Latin reading of *hybridity* reinforces the tendency of fusion between different things, an Ancient Greek reading implies separation, diffusion as well, which reflects the two main complementary contemporary postcolonial views regarding the concept. Their connection has been inflected by the use of the term *hubris* in the humanities – in history, including history of science⁵, or philosophy⁶ – where it refers to transgressing social, natural or divine boundaries, usually followed by *nemesis* or retribution.

In this context, how can a poet tackle the hubris in cultural hybridity and produce a work of art? How to write about being aware of hubris and still postponing retribution? One of Derek Walcott's answers seems to lie in the use of war tropes in parallel with metaphors of wound. He does not legitimate the power of violence, but skilfully absorbs it into figurative language that reconnects the memory of the conquerors with the memory of the dead. When he refers to the conception of power, Michel Foucault (1998) writes that “one of the essential traits of Western societies [is] that the force relationships which for a long time had found expression in war, in every form of warfare, gradually became invested in the order of political power” (102). For Walcott, these force relationships are represented through metaphorical bonds between the characters, surprising and atemporal, with the purpose of configuring a translocal type of cultural politics rooted in the Caribbean.

In what follows, it will be shown how war tropes are employed to fashion more vivid stories. Whether they are about a woman's or an island's destiny, about jealousy or rivalry, whether they depict naval battles or moments in the American and European history or they are used as an expression of self-knowledge or as commentary regarding art itself, war tropes contribute to a greater awareness of the events they represent.

In *Omeros*, Walcott often compares the destiny of Saint Lucia to that of the ancient, war-devastated Troy and to that of a local waitress, named Helen, after Homer's

⁵ M. Hård and A. Jamison (2005) convincingly restore the relationship between *hubris* and *hybrid* in their cultural history of technology and science. They say that only by taming the former and by becoming the latter can man advance, because hybridity has changed humanity's relation to nature. Experimentation has led to destruction and dislocation, and crisis has been internalized, which has important consequences for cultural matters as well.

⁶ In a study on American and British foreign affairs by David Owen (2007), *hubris* is described as “an illness of *position* as much as of the *person*” (3), with my emphases because these terms are very much related to contemporary debates regarding the structure of cultural identity. Owen writes about “the hubris syndrome”, which he describes as “a phenomenon of something happening to people's mental stability when in power [that] can be captured in popular phrases such as ‘power has gone to his head’, ‘he's taken leave of his senses’, ‘he's lost his marbles’ or ‘she's lost all touch with reality’” (i).

feminine character. From the perspective of the colonizer and of the European immigrant, represented by sergeant major Plunkett, the poet writes that:

Helen needed a history,
that was the pity that Plunkett felt towards her.
Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen's war. (30)

On the one hand, "Helen's war" stands for a black woman's destiny revealed to the world. She is caught between two local peasants in love with her, because she initially is unsure of her expected child's paternity. "Helen's war" is also a metaphor of the French and the English war over the island of Saint Lucia beginning with 1663, when England took control over it, after the French had signed a treaty with the native Carib people. The rule of the island changed for fourteen times. Only in 1814, the British took definitive control of it. Because of these control switches, the island was also known as the "Helen of the West Indies". The difference between history and "her story" hints not only at postcolonial feminism, but also at political independence. In 1979, eleven years before the narrative poem was published, Saint Lucia gained its independence from Great Britain. *Omeros* is thus a well-deserved celebration of the moment.

A similar rapport between a woman and an island is created with reference to the feelings of jealousy between Maud Plunkett and Helen and of rivalry between England and Saint Lucia. Black Helen is described as wearing a "pale lemon frock", a metaphor of the Caribbean sunny weather and of jealousy. Quite obsessed with Helen, sergeant major Plunkett becomes aware of his wife's feelings and of the necessity of his own detachment: "He stayed out of it, but that dress // had an empire's tag on it, mistress to slave" (64). Walcott stages the struggle between the two women by using what Brathwaite calls "nation language" and the monologue, as a representation of Maud's unspoken thoughts:

"So, how are you, Helen?"
"I dere, Madam."
At last. You dere. Of course you dare,

come back looking for work after ruining two men,
after trying on my wardrobe, after driving Hector
crazy with a cutlass, you dare come, that what you mean? (124)

The difficult rapport between the two women epitomizes Plunkett's view on the two islands: England and Saint Lucia. To empower the spirit of the latter, Walcott describes the French – English wars over Saint Lucia. A soldier in the Second World War, when Plunkett lost his first wife and son, he moved with Maud to Saint Lucia and became fond of history. Walcott describes Plunkett's reveries regarding one of his possible ancestors, an English spy sent to the Caribbean to observe the activity of the Dutch merchantmen. Caught in one of the battles between the French and the British, he witnesses the confrontation of two ships: *Ville de Paris* and *The Marlborough*. Walcott depicts the moment with the skill of a painter:

Tales of War

A malevolent flower of smoke continued past dawn
on the brightening horizon. He heard the deep roar
of the boatswain, the gunner's 'Aye!' From her squadron

a French frigate coming close had been hit. She bore
down on *The Marlborough*, the young midshipman peered
at her smoke-shawled beauty, and thought there was no war

as courtly as a sea-battle; her white sails steered
towards him, her embrochures spitting fire
while black veils of fury billowed from her beaked head (85)

The contrast between "her white sails" and the "black veils of fury" subtly alludes to the antagonistic racial relationships located in the background and in the domain of the poetic instrumentality. As well as sails help ships moving, the issue of race became more and more important for the emergence of the British empire in the colonial era. At the time of the conflict between the French and the British, the inhabitants of the island and their culture were of little importance. As Plunkett says, "history was cannon, not a lizard" (92), meaning that history meant power through battles and victories, political strategy and technology, and less a concern with intercultural, ethnic and biological aspects.

In the subsequent chapters, Walcott departs from this perspective on history that objectified the colonies to the extreme. In an essay entitled "The Muse of History", he states that: "in the New World, servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters" (37). This may be the reason why the author reveals Plunkett's interest in the relation between the French – British wars and the Trojan War. "Is this chance / or an echo? Paris gives a golden apple, a war is / fought for an island called Helen?" (100). His questions suggest that history is not restricted to mere events, but it has more to do with the people involved, with their emotions, motivations, mentalities. Hence his indirect conclusion: "He had come that far / to learn that History earns its own tenderness / in time; not for a navel victory, but for / the V of a velvet back in a yellow dress" (103). The postmodern double codification of the "navel victory" (which can be read as "naval victory") and of the letter V (symbol of victory as well as of femininity) accentuates the tight connection between individual and collective tensions in generating the official history and the gender roles in power relationships.

From Achilles' point of view, this type of wandering between different places and times, between one war or another, becomes a site for a restless fight with his emotions:

But what he looked for
was not certain. A weapon. A lance with its stone leaf,

or a shield stretched from pigskin, the mane of a warrior,
or the earth-dyes whose streakings would mask his grief
in their fury. There was one spear only. An oar. (147)

Walcott deconstructs Achilles' manhood by stripping off its appearance reminding of Ancient Greek wars or African battles, suggested by the enumeration of material elements signalling the presence of a fighter. Instead, the metamorphosis of the "spear" into "an oar" alludes to another type of experience, in which the war is internalized. A focus on pronunciation reveals that the "oar" can be read as "war". In Young's terms, this metamorphosis suggests both "a new form", resulted from cultural hybridization as creolization, and also "no new stable form", but "a radical heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of forms" (25). Walcott uses here the common practice of double codification not with the purpose of irony, as it often happens in postcolonial writing, but to draw attention to the relationship between the psychoanalytical and the social domains of identity. The contiguity of the oar with the water opens a dialogue between Achilles' unconscious and his social position as a fisherman in the Caribbean.

Last but not least, the author's narrative voice is constructed in relation with his characters and with several literary references, especially from the European world. In Chapter LIV, Walcott compares the author's view with Plunkett's view regarding Helen. As a historian, Plunkett perceives Helen strictly in terms of battle plans, while, as a writer, the poet advocates inspiration and the openness of the artistic act. However, Walcott eventually dismisses both interpretations, because this new Helen is not the real Helen of Troy: "in her head of ebony, / there was no real need for the historian's remorse, nor for literature's" (271). He even questions why neither can see her "with no Homeric shadow". Later in the poem, he clearly declares that: "These Helens are different creatures, / one marble, one ebony" (313).

Walcott compares himself as an author with other characters too, in an attempt of defining his detached position on the issue of history: "I grew tired, like wounded Philoctete, // the hermit who did not know the war was over, / or refused to believe it" (171) or "I walked like a Helen among their dead warriors" (216). However, his detachment is not passive, but strategic. He poetically reviews various historical events, he thanks for their monumentality and healing bitterness, but he also moves on to express his own *Weltanschauung*. Perhaps the name of his real father, Warwick, whose ghostly character appears in the poem to advise his son, expresses one of the poet's deepest world views as the name is simultaneously a pun signifying a "war wick" like a burning candle wick. Ultimately, the author is searching to "enter the light beyond metaphor" (271), a potential space where identity can find its most beautiful home.

The poet imagines a meeting with his syncretic character Omeros, "the blind man", on the steepest cliff of the island. Omeros stands both for the Greek name of Homer and for Walcott's alter ego and epic poem. He addresses the Greek author with condescendence, "Master, I was the freshest of all your readers" (283), but he is careful to mention that he read his books "not all the way through". He admires Homer, but detaches enough from his mythical figure, so that he can become a great author as well. Their implicit fight is expressed in one of the longest dialogues of the poem, which comprises the motivation of Walcott's art. In his view, not the war was the reason of Homer's writing: "ten years' war was nothing, an epic's excuse" (284), says Omeros. The dialogue continues with an Omeros being curious to learn more about our contemporary world:

‘Are they still fighting wars?’

I saw a coming rain hazing his pupils.

‘Not over beauty,’ I answered. ‘Or a girl’s love.’

‘Love is good, but the love of your own people is greater.’ (284)

Walcott blends the power of war with the delicacy of beauty and love to suggest that intentional cultural hybridity and organic cultural hybridity are taken as two aspects of the same transformative process. Creolization may seem an unconscious process, but, in Walcott’s view, unconsciousness is not opposed to reason. It is one of its sources. After Achilles’ spiritual journey to Africa, his boat returns with a big fish, a symbol of the unconscious, and the poet ends the story with “a triumphant Achilles”, different than Homer’s hero. Walcott’s Achilles is not killed. He is a “quiet Achilles”, not a heroic warrior, but a man whose end “will be a death by water / (which is not for this book, which will remain unknown / and unread by him)” (320). Achilles’ struggle is with poverty and loss, with the power of (human) nature, rather than with a specific character or army.

As literary critic Scanlon notes, “writing a national poem poses particular difficulty for the postcolonial poet in English, whose liminal political and literary position troubles the central status necessary for an epic bard” (106). However, Walcott’s *Omeros* hybridizes conflicting discourses, which results in a transnational, deterritorialized spirit of belonging, in parallel with a strong sense of location. Soon after the narrative poem was published, he expressed his conviction regarding the place of his real belonging – language:

Obviously, when you enter language you enter a kind of choice which contains in it the political history of the language, the imperial width of the language, the fact that you’re either subjugated by the language or you have had to dominate it. So language is not a place of retreat, it’s not a place of escape, it’s not even a place of resolution. It’s a place of struggle. (Montenegro 74)

On the one hand, when referring to the power of creativity, Walcott (1970) writes that “what is needed is not new names for old things, or old names for old things, but the faith of using the old names anew” (10). On the other hand, in 1974, he writes that “faith needs more than style” (43). It is this perpetual opposition between his language and his faith that captures Walcott’s inner war, which often accompanies his artistic endeavour.

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