

Derek Walcott on Omeros: An Interview

Luigi Sampietro: How does a masterpiece come into being? Why did you choose the terza rima?

Derek Walcott: I think I began the sections without knowing what I was doing. I think it began in blank verse ? or unrhymed, rough pentameter. And, then, I remember that there were other sections that were like couplets: some sections dealing with some figures like Philoctete or Timon of Athens. And, then, when it began to take shape ? then it began to fall into a kind of rough-textured terza rima. Although it?s syllabically ? in twelve syllables ? nearly every section, apart from one or a few chapters.

I thought that the ? and this is very technical, but it may be of interest ? the usual meter for heroic or narrative verse in English is pentametrical. But the echo of the pentameter, it seems to me, it?s felt to be a little conventional and a little pre-determined. And, of course ? I think ? even if you add rhyme to that, you have a risk of either quatrains or couplets.

So, I preferred to use a longer line ? a hexametrical line. Because I felt that the prose ? the narrative experience in the poem ? would?ve had less of a sort of an epic echo if it were in hexameter as opposed to if it were in pentameter ?in which it would already begin to certainly have echoes of Milton, or Tennyson ? something Victorian ? in terms of the measure of it. And I don?t think that the pentameter would?ve allowed me the kind of prosaic space that I wanted for the action of the narration ? the prose element in it. I think that in the pentametrical measure ordinary things tend to get over-emphasized by the beat ? I think. Whereas here there is more flexibility, more caesuras. You can relax, you can pick up ? accelerate as you wish.

And then the rhyme design, the terza-rima design. It?s almost a combination or a Homeric meter with... Although I don?t know Greek. But I?m not sure that it?s fair to Homer to do him in pentameter. I don?t know Greek, but I feel that his is a much more relaxed line; relaxed, but at the same time giving you more space for action than the pentameter ? which announces itself as being important, in a sense. And it?s very difficult to navigate banality in the pentameter. Because ? I don?t know ? it becomes, really, Victorian, ?and heroic, in the wrong sense. So, it was like a sort or combination of a Homeric kind or measure ? although I didn?t think of Homeric, necessarily. I thought hexametrical. And of course, a Dantesque thing of the terza-rima design.

LS: Why not in quatrains?

DW: Quatrains wouldn?t have been good because the quatrain is too sort of self-completing. It doesn?t give you a propulsion into the next stanza like the terza rima does. Because, then, you have to continue. You have to go on. Right? And that propels it very, very energetically? to have it rhyme. And the rhyme... Rhyme is a propulsion. People think of rhyme as stasis. But rhyme is propulsion. It pushes. It doesn?t stop.

So, I think, that?s how the design came into place. There are parts of the book that,

sometimes, now, when I look at it, I kind of regret. I didn't know always. Because if you write some sections later, to connect it like a long domino backwards, sometimes if a rhyme is missing I regret it. But very often there is either something approximating rhyme, or... Like an internal rhyme, maybe. Quite close. Like ? there's one section that has ?settle?. And then I said: Oh, but where's my rhyme for ?settle?? And then I realized that there's a thing about a ?kettle?. And I thought: Well, anyway, there's an echo in the next line ? of that. So ? that happens pretty frequently. But wherever the lines go to rhyme exactly, I feel ? now that the book is out ? I still feel a little distressed. So, in some future day, I might just clean it up, and get it all? - I don't know. Maybe I will.

LS: Why are the chapters so uneven in length?

DW: I didn't want to break it up into suites, into sections ? a symphonic design. I wasn't interested in that. Because that ? that sort of violates... That brings in imagination. Brings in a consciousness of the symphonic ? a design. A lyric section here ? and then this gets more ? and expands more than another. . .

I don't believe in this business of people being restless, or a reader being a restless person. I think it is conforming to a fallacy that the 20th-century reader is by nature more restless than a 15th-century reader. I mean ? people read thoroughly, when they do read well. And, so, this modern thing of saying that you can't keep going for so long, or people will get tired ? is a fallacy.

A book is something you put down and pick back up. And to try to rush it, and to try to do it in the sense of: I'm going to have it like a symphonic design ? in suites and sections. . . Then, the narrator, the writer, becomes self-important. You become aware of the shape. You admire the contrapuntal effects of the shape. And I wasn't interested in that.

LS: But there are lyrical sections, in Omeros, where the narrator is not simply describing.

DW: Yes. There is one section that is lyrical, which I hesitated about using. But I thought: Well, the moment when it comes... It's kind of pivotal in the book. And it's kind of a lonely, separate thing. A reflection on the part of the narrator. A summation of an experience. And I only did once. It is OK It's tolerable. It's a tolerable idea. And it is somewhere in the middle of the book ? not early. It gives it a kind of pivot to rest on.

LS: You mentioned the difference between the 20th- and the 15th-century reader. The first main difference is, of course, that in those days they would read poetry aloud, whereas nowadays. . .

DW: That's true too. Yes. Right. But also, I mean ? books were rare. I think a good reader has an attitude that says books are rare. Certainly good books are rare. Actually, I think we just read the same writers, anyway. I don't think the average human being, whoever he is, has an omnivorous idea of readership. Certainly in poetry we go back to the best poets rather than always taking in what's the latest, or the newest, or what's the fad ? or whatever.

So, readership ? I think ? has always been a monastic kind of endeavor. It doesn't matter whether they were manuscripts, or the thousands of? books coming out every month. So, I didn't have the vanity to say I was writing for that kind of reader. But the whole point of the idea of tiring the reader... Since I wasn't tired, I don't see any reason why... [didn't feel tired

doing it. I didn't feel I would tire anybody. And then the book ? I think ? has a lot of rest in it. It is divided easily into sections and chapters. It is not just one lump of a thing.

LS: Was it thought to be read, rather than to be...

DW: Recited? Well ? I don't think you can recite a long poem any more. In the reality of it, if you don't have a tribal situation, or a very enclosed, incantatory society.. . I mean ? even in Dante there is a... The fact that Dante can be learned by heart, and stuff like that... Or is, or was learned by heart ? or one had that view. . . I think ? unless you are in a position where you feel yourself to be the tribal bard, and everybody's going to learn to recite what you are writing ? I think that that is no longer around. It has been a long time gone.

So. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe the incantatory quality of the thing... But I think that the reality of fragmentation in history ? in terms of whether we have the sacred books that we have, and we learn passages from ? they come out of a very unified order, a very unified sect. -

I'm not saying that there isn't some kind of order in the Caribbean. It may not be visible, but I think that the order lies in the rhythm of their life, right?, which is simple. But in terms of the meter of the poem, I did not want to write anything that was going to sort of dignify the Caribbean by ambition ? by my own ambition. By saying: I will now write what happened... No.

I think that the presumption of that, on the part of a Virgil, or a Homer, or anyone speaking on behalf of a culture, on behalf of a race, or on behalf of a civilization ? even Dante, except in a religious sense ? is someone who has an idea of a future, of a direction. And that is, in a way, linked with power ? the idea of the bard of the race, the bard of a culture ? Virgil and Augustus ? or something prophetic. A gleeman, or someone who knows the chants of the tribe. Or the Bible ? or whatever. That is associated with power. In the sense that there's destiny. A sense of destiny.

But I think that the sense of destiny, in the 20th century, is very dangerous. Because the sense or destiny exists in Nazism, in Fascism. And, therefore, if you have a poetry ? I think ? that has a sense of destiny, the democratic reality is only to relegate that poetry to... Unless I'm saying: I'm going to write the great American poem ? and you cannot separate the great American epic from the idea of an American destiny.

Maybe ? that's why, in a way, Whitman did not undertake to write a narrative epic. And celebrated the American epic in a lyrical manner, in a personal I-manner. So ? therefore, he's not really an epic poet, in the sense that he doesn't have a shape ? have a story. He's epic in the sense of width ? and the subject. But he doesn't do what we know to be epic, in terms of a narrator propelling ? in sequence ? the events that are related to the destiny of the tribe. Whitman is a democratic poet ? I think. He didn't feel he could do it.

LS: What about Hart Crane?

DW: Hart Crane? He didn't have a hero in his Bridge. And ? I think ? that's why it collapsed. It didn't have a central figure.

LS: Omeros is not, then, the great Caribbean epic.

DW: I think it would be a terrible irony for the Caribbean, if just for the sake of dignifying a race ? of saying: This poem is going to redeem history... It would be a terrible kind of presumption ? I think. So, I certainly didn't want to do that. All I wanted to do was to celebrate

the diurnal, day-to-day heroism of people who go out and face the arrogance. Is that destiny? Well, yes, that's admirable. Because such people — fishermen — the ordinary lives that are depicted — they have no idea of expanding power. They think they relate to power — they relate to the power of the weather and the power that has been in their past — in history and slavery, and so on.

And that's why I resist so much the idea of this poem as being epic in its undertaking. It has elements of epic. It has widths. It has a variety of subjects, and — I suppose — you can say it has heroes, in a way. But there is not a sort of label outside that says: I will now undertake to — you know — to justify, or condemn, or redeem history.

LS: You said once that the goal of poetry is ultimately, after all, to glorify God. Would you like to comment on that?

DW: If you substitute, say, "light" for "God" — and it happens there is a lot in Dante of the same thing? I think a poem is a commemorative act, and an act of gratitude. It may be an act of bewilderment, too. But it's also that. I think the greatest poetry is beyond the idea of mortality. I think it's beyond the idea of the ephemeral. Certainly, it's beyond the idea of the writer's own life. So that, by its very nature, because it is rhythmic, it is incantatory. And because it is incantatory, it is celebratory. And what does it celebrate? It may celebrate mystery. It may celebrate bewilderment, even. But, ultimately, what it does celebrate is astonishment, I think — however quietly. I think it celebrates astonishment.

One may say: "How can you say that about certain sort of pessimistic poets?" But — I don't think that there is a great pessimistic poet. I can't think of a great poet who is a pessimist. You can think of very good poets, and very honest and true poets, and so on. Poets who may end in despair, and so on. But I think that even when these poets are writing, what they're saying is: "It is something. Some feeling within me?". Right? Whereas, if one condemns man through man's iniquity — only — then you have something that doesn't redeem anything.

I'm not saying that the alternative is to be religious. I'm just saying — even if it is a very corny phrase — that life remains a mystery. That death remains a mystery. And if it's not a mystery, and is simply a brutal extension of a purposeless existence — and that's putdown — there's always that thing beyond that that says: Well, you may think so; but that's not a satisfactory answer, either. A desperate alternative is not to praise so you can save your soul.

What is then that thing that a poet is engaged in? I think that the answer is in the fact that any poet, really, would prefer to be anonymous — and not to have a name. Not even have a style, really. And I think it is just as sacred an occupation as... Whose purpose is... Even a sense beyond religion, in a way. [I think that poetry can round a religion — right? Whereas religions don't discover poetry. I mean — I think poetry can be the beginning of a religion.

LS: You said that you don't read Greek. But Greek culture is always there, in your poetry.

DW: I never said Greek culture — I think.

LS: . . . Greek mythology, or names?

DW: Well, I know. That's a thing that... It is quite easy, I think, to make that association. But any relationship I see, it's not certainly based on scholarship. It's certainly not based on a wide reading of Greek literature, or even a deep knowledge — a knowledge of any kind, really

? of Greek culture, or history. And I have cherished that ignorance because I think I could've wound up as someone who would've depended on allusions to become very important, or ? you know? ? to associate.

But there?s a cleavage. There is a separation between the old world and the new?it is there. I don?t undertake it because I wanna heal it. It is a fact that there are echoes. And what are the echoes? The echoes are simply replicas of experience. Arid I?m not comparing Caribbean culture yet ? yet ? to Greek culture. But...

I mean, Caribbean culture is ? since it was permitted to be articulate ? is just about two-hundred years old. And that is ?babyhood?, compared to any other culture. Right? But, as I?ve said before, there has never been a place that has had such concentration in a tight space of all the cultures of the world ? in places like Trinidad and Jamaica. It is actually a more interesting place than ancient Greece. Because ? I mean: How many tribes are there, now? And how many cultures were fed into ancient Greece ? Egypt, or whatever?

We can?t tell how deep this dispossession, or apparent dispossession, seems to go. And, right now, we see the preponderance of the peoples writing in the Caribbean ? it?s African and Indian. But we have a lot of Chinese. We have a lot of Lebanese. When these people, out of a generation whose fathers are not merchants, or whatever ? who came after slavery and indenture ? when they begin to articulate themselves ? we don?t know who our really great poet is gonna be ? what he?s gonna look like. He?s not necessarily going to be African ? or Indian. He may be Chinese. He may be Lebanese. He may be white. He may be anything.

LS: Well?

DW: And that?s what?s history. They may be all artists. Or all musicians. Or whatever. So that there is a race, in the Caribbean, made of all the various races. Now, what is the shape of that ethic ? or aesthetic ? that is going to come out of the Caribbean we are just beginning to determine. But what we can see determining the lineaments of the Caribbean is this kind of individuality of the ethnic background. But also a multiplicity that makes ? that unifies the whole idea of the Caribbean. So, in human terms, the possibility of the Caribbean is far superior to what really happened in Greece. Just in human terms ? and the multicultural possibility.

In terms of achievement, nobody is going to compare the architecture of ancient Greece to the architecture of the Caribbean ? or the culture of ancient Greece to the culture of the Caribbean, and so on. But it?s simply too early.

And, also, we cannot judge one culture by the definitions of another. We cannot say: Well, why aren?t they making marble statues in the Caribbean? They don?t have marble in the Caribbean. So, whatever they carve, in the Caribbean, we have to adjust to. It could be wood. And the shapes are not necessarily going to look like ancient Greek. Or be neo-Roman, or neo-classic, or neo-Greek. Now, we, having had a Western education ? and having been brought up with these associations ? can?t avoid these associations...

My knowledge, then, of Greek culture has really been one of echoes that have been in my head.

LS: No direct references?

DW: No. I mean ? anybody looking through my references ? my associations ?they?re simple

associations that everybody knows: Odysseus, the Eternal Wanderer; or Helen, the Eternal Beauty; or, in this case, Achilles, the Eternal Warrior; or Hector... These are just magnified, very ordinary symbols that everybody... Household names, really. Not really figures. I mean ? I don't know the history of Achilles? activity in the Iliad Maybe I was scared of the Iliad because ? I don't want to be swallowed up, in a sense, by Homeric comparison.

But as I grew older I realized that ? you know ? that the simplicity of certain things in the Caribbean must be the same as the simplicity of certain things in the Greek islands. That what comes out of the Greek islands ? in the freshest poet, still ? was Homer. The freshest poet ? comes out of the elemental thing of the Greek archipelago. Doesn't come out of palaces.

And the scale of those palaces ? and the scale of those cities ? the scale we're talking about ? is not the scale, as everybody knows, of an andrian epic. You know what I mean? How many soldiers? Three thousand? Four thousand? Whatever! What's that, now? It's a battalion! And how big a city? How big is Odysseus? palace? A couple of rooms, maybe?

So ? in terms of scale, we tend to magnify. And, certainly, in terms of color ? we bleach out the idea of Greek culture. It's bleached out. There's no professor ? there's no... Very few writers can think of Greece in terms of color. They always think of Greece in terms of a dried-out, desiccated museum.

LS: We tend to forget that the statues were painted.

DW: Exactly. I think ? the Caribbean ? the vitality of the Caribbean ? the vulgarity of the Caribbean ? is exactly the vulgarity that existed in Greece. And that the ? the arenas ? the color? the arenas full of color, and noise... But we don't like that. We prefer to think of an audience at a Greek theater, all looking like statues ? looking like marble. As if the audience itself were statues, and soon. In that sense I consider the Caribbean to be more Greek than Europe. In a sense. In that kind ? in that kind of energy. Plus, of course, the elements.

So that, whatever my literary associations are, in the book ? the book turns on the narrator and says: ?Why don't you stop with these Greeks? It's stuff. Just look at things!? But then the honesty of that is: things are so embedded, and emblematic, that you cannot think of anyone sailing an ocean ? alone ? or trying to get home ? without being Odysseus. You cannot. How can you? It's impossible. Why pretend that you can? Why pretend you can... That figure has been made for us permanently.

But ? every culture has a story of a man flying to get back. All quests ? every story has that. And, to be sure, other cultures have stories ? especially if they're marine cultures ? of people lost and trying to get back home ? and return. So, it's not even something that Homer created. It's out of a legend. It's out of folklore. It's folkloric ? as well.

So ? that's the association. It's there.

LS: So, this is not something you had in school. You said you didn't have Greek. Did you have Latin?

DW: No. I had Latin when I went to college. But every child, and I say this in the book, every... I mean ? for instance, St. Lucia was called ?the Helen of the West Indies?. But ? somebody called it Helen of the West Indies because it had been fought over. It was a place that was the equivalent of ? I'm trying to think ? of a fortress. Gibraltar, It was once called that, too. Because of its location in the middle of the Caribbean?in a triangular location.

French thing; French people, next door; etc., etc. It was a good location for? for strategy, as well as ?whatever... A strategic value.

LS: It was crucial.

DW: It was crucial. And ? so it was fought over. And at last it changed hands twelve times between the French and the British. Now, some time in history, when you go back, people ? in terms of scale, again? will say: ?Well, what is that? A couple of ships?? ? and soon. Not really. They were very, very large expeditions. I mean ? Rodney ? and de Grasse ? these were huge. Because they were also fighting to get America, later ? the whole ? and Canada, and all of that. The Caribbean was crucial. It was a place of struggle ? military and naval struggle, certainly.

So that, when some child grows up in St. Lucia, today, and people sing about the Helen of the West ? then that child has to know: Who?s this Helen? And ? if somebody called the island ?Helen?, then you have to find out who Helen was. And even if you say: Well, Helen of Troy was a beautiful woman that people fought over ? to simplify it ? the Caribbean, the black Caribbean ? or Indian, or whatever ? the Chinese Caribbean child growing up there ? has to know, right away, that this Helen is not... It?s out of literature. Right? So ? that you know. Given that, even a fisherman going to school ? or me, it doesn?t matter ? we all learned that, and the names that are still there.

I was just talking to somebody in St. Lucia the other day, and he said: ?I see you have somebody called Hector.? And a lady said to me: ?There?s a Hector who has a shop in St. Lucia? ? in Gros Ilet, the same village. And, of course, Achille [pronounced in the French way: E?1i?] is another name that is common. Now, these names have been given to these people ? are given, because... Well, first of all, the slavemaster gives a name to a slave because he thinks that that slave has the attributes of Achilles, or of Caesar, or Pompey...

LS: It was the same in the South of the United States.

DW: Exactly. These names ? these heroic names may have been given ? satirically? But I don?t think so. I think they may have been given ? even if they may appear to be patronizing ? they were given because of qualities. Right?

I mean ? if Pompey ? if somebody?s amused to call a slave ?Pompey? because that?s the last thing he is ? Pompey ? there are qualities of Pompey that are smart. Pompey ?s a smart general ? you know? And maybe that attribute ?maybe it?s something in a servant that somebody saw: ?There it is a smart guy!? Or ? this guy is Caesar because he looks around ? he walks around ? like he?s Caesar. This guy is Achilles because he thinks... Even if you say: He thinks ? first of all, the attribute is there! And whether you parody that attribute ? or patronize that attribute ? the suggestion of the attribute is true in terms of its association.

Now, does that person become Achilles? Does that person become Caesar? Yes! That person becomes... . Even if he doesn?t know what his name is. Right? And does Helen ? does this island become Helen of the Caribbean? Yes, it becomes so because... First of all because it didn?t give itself the name. And, secondly, because, in terms of the reference to it, really bloody wars were fought over it. It did change hands. It seemed to have been worth the price of ? of a war. And so on.

LS: The blacks were given Greek or Roman names. Do you think that the names from the Bible were given only to the whites?

DW: Well ? I don't know. The blacks ? everybody, in a way, gets a heroic name. A lot of blacks growing up in a slave condition, or in post-slavery conditions, were given names that were totally heroic models. Like Washington ? or whatever name was given. And people made jokes about him, and would say: ?What! His name?s George Washington Jones?? ? or something like that. OK But the mothers ? or the godfathers ? may figure: ?Well, here?s an example of someone who is a noble figure.? Right?

So ? that is a benediction. It?s not a parody, I don't think. There?s nothing wrong with somebody ? a black man ? being whatever Washington was. There?s nothing wrong with that. If they are qualities of Washington, they are there in everybody. So, why should it become ridiculous to some people to see some black man being called George Washington? That?s mother?s wish for the child. Or the name?s wish for the child. It?s not something to be laughed at. You know?

Of course, the African names are gone. But I even argue that the restoration of a name, via... It?s the same nostalgia ? I think. It?s a waste of time, in the new world. I think it has a poignancy that looks like dignity. But it is not the same thing. It is still ? being displaced, in a way ? to do it. To almost wish one were somewhere else. Or to wish that such and such a thing did not happen. That history did not happen. Well ? I think that the maturity of it is to say: Yes, slavery did happen. Yes, I was called Walcott. You know? These are realities. What am I going to do? Wish it didn't happen, and get myself another identity? But I'm not interested in that.

In the same way that the whole political situation in the Caribbean should not repeat simply what formula it was given. But neither should it wish to completely surrender things that are not part of its maturing. I mean ? not to have print, not to have cars, or not to have machines ? fits immature. If you think you are losing your soul, or some nonsense like that, simply because you didn't make it. You know what I mean?

LS: The African and the Indian aspect are then...

DW: Every aspect of culture contributes to another culture. It?s not only white people who give ?x? travail. Astronomy is from the Arabs. It?s not a thing from London. So, every aspect of human culture is a contribution made. By now the African aspect may be much more important than ? than the machine. In the sense that any spiritual contribution, to any civilization, is far more important than any technical contribution.

And, therefore, the contribution of the American Indian, which has never been absorbed by the American pioneer, to his cost ? to his cost? is... Because we see what is happening in terms of ? of pollution. And the desperation that people have about pollution. And those are values that existed in the native American Indian. The American Indian had these values. But the desperation that people have in terms of preserving the earth, and the air, and the water, and whatever it is ? that?s there. The anti-pollution thing. It is the same sacramental idea that the native American Indian had about not touching anything that doesn't belong to you ? that?s not yours. That belongs to God ? that?s not yours but of the gods.

LS: And it?s exactly where Omeros starts, isn?t it?

These were their pillars that fell, leaving a blue space
for a single God where the old gods stood before.

The first god was a gommier. . .

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:

Luigi Sampietro [2]

Criticism Target:

Derek Walcott

Tags:

Omeros [3]

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/derek-walcott-omeros-interview>

Links

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/luigi-sampietro>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/omeros>