

*From Winslow Homer to Marcel
Duchamp and the Fortunate Flaw in
Derek Walcott's "Omeros"*

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"Les grands artistes ont du hasard dans leur talent et du talent dans leur hasard."

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BEGINNING WITH HIS earliest poetry, Derek Walcott stresses the importance of capturing visually the world around him. In the autobiographical *Another Life* (1973), Walcott recalls his oath to give artistic expression to St. Lucia; he also records his dilemma in feeling that to fulfill the oath, he must choose the pen over the brush (58-59). He has long been in the practice of making drawings of scenes for both his plays and poetry (Montenegro 202). As a result, among the Walcott materials at the St. Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies are a number of his watercolor designs for sets and costumes. Book covers and dust jackets of *Sea Grapes* (1976), *Midsummer* (1982), and *Omeros* (1990) exhibit his artistry; five reproductions of his original works appear in Robert Hamner's *Epic of the Dispossessed* (1997); and he is preparing an illustrated book of verse for Farrar, Straus and Giroux (pre-publication title, *Tiepolo's Hound*). In the bibliography "Walcott's Hack's Hired Prose," Victor Questel lists more than eighty articles on architecture, sculpture and painting written by Walcott from 1960-1967 while he was arts editor for the *Trinidad Guardian* (64-67). Although Walcott has made his reputation primarily in words, he has always projected a world appealing to both ear and eye.

Obviously such an important element of Walcott's oeuvre has been examined by numerous scholars and reviewers, becoming

the focus of separate chapters in two books and at least four substantial articles. Useful as each of these critical analyses has been, none fully prepares for the innovative painterly technique that emerges for the first time within Walcott's 1990 epic, *Omeros*.

Early on, Edward Baugh observed that painters and painting are important as subject matter and crucial to the style and focus of Walcott's *Another Life* ("Painters"). Marion Stewart, writing in 1981, discusses Walcott's allusions to painters, styles and movements, as well as Walcott's own use of light and color imagery, in work published up to the date of *Sea Grapes* (1976). Robert Bensen goes so far as to assert that many poems comprising *Midsummer* (1984) are "composed as verbal paintings — portraits, landscapes, seascapes, studies and sketches. Painting informs many of the poems directly as subject . . . as a source of imagery, in the handling of qualities of light and color, and in the range of themes" (338). Clara de Lima asserts that, of the many artists cited by Walcott, Vincent Van Gogh is the model for Walcott's independent attitude, his penchant for conflicting subject matter, and the fervor of his commitment to art (174-75). Rather than pursue the influence of individual painters, I draw on the artistic device of chiaroscuro to account for the multidimensional features, the etched contrasts, the psychological shadings of juxtaposed subjects and surfaces endemic to Walcott's plays and poetry ("Art"). More recently, Rei Terada underscores the fact that Walcott's acquaintance with European art begins with paintings that have already been "textualized," as in Thomas Craven's textbook (Walcott, *Another* 23; see also Baugh, *Derek* 29 n. 10). Terada makes the salient point that all but a privileged few "usually *experience* a painting through a book's mediation: its size, its condition, its ordering, its commentary." Then Terada returns to Walcott's early brush/pen dilemma, stressing his ongoing aspiration for the direct immediacy of painting, free of the sociopolitical trappings of verbalization (127, 143-44).

These articles have in common their concentration on the overt naming of famous painters, on references to artistic movements, and on graphic depiction as subject matter and tech-

nique in Walcott's writings. Baugh correctly observes that *Another Life* grows out of Walcott's youthful admiration for the golden age of European art: "In the Renaissance he found a supreme example of a great age defined by its art . . . the idea that it is the art that brings the age to fullest self awareness, that 'signs' the epoch" ("Painters" 84). The lists of memorable painters and paintings recorded in the above mentioned articles reflect Walcott's initial interest in the Renaissance and his widening taste as he continues, up to the time of writing *Omeros*, to sample Western tradition. Considering the length of *Omeros*, the number of artists mentioned is relatively small, especially in comparison with *Another Life* or *Midsummer*. As usual, however, each of the references may be explained using overtly linear analysis. In other words, through images and allusions, artistry informs the text literally, with a one-to-one correspondence. Each title, artist, movement or sensual depiction advances some aspect of the narrative, enriches a scene, reveals character, supports theme, complements a literary technique or reifies mood.

Despite numerous references to art as a subject and incidental passages that may be likened to verbal brush strokes, in *Omeros* there are barely a dozen citations of art objects and graphic artists: one sculpture, three paintings, eight artists and one movement. These few concrete examples certainly do not exhaust the subject of art in *Omeros*; nevertheless, they are exemplary for two reasons. First, a brief linear explication demonstrates the manner and extent to which each provides the textual enrichment usually perceived by critics and reviewers. Second, since at least a couple of these citations entail principles beyond the explicit applications that are always available in Walcott's poetry, I wish to trace an argument for the unique relevance of Marcel Duchamp's work to the deeper structure of *Omeros* (Hamner, "Aleatory" 352). At the outset, I should indicate that *ekphrasis* (the verbal rendition of a work of visual art) is relatively peripheral in *Omeros*. My interest is in creative parallels and the technical or theoretic reverberations suggested by individual works of art.

Perhaps because he is too deeply absorbed in epic paraphernalia, perhaps because he deems it unnecessary, Walcott does

not get around to mentioning a graphic artist until well over half way through *Omeros*. Then, in the first section of chapter 36, he names Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal 1697-1768), Vincent Van Gogh (1853-90), Winslow Homer (1836-1910), and Augustus St. Gaudens (1848-1907). This clustering is appropriate because the scene centers on a museum near Boston Common. Given the autobiographical basis of Walcott's narrative persona, it is worth mentioning that he taught at Boston University while writing *Omeros*. In keeping with his confession to J. P. White that he experienced a remarkable degree of racial fear in Boston ("Interview" 28), in this scene, the prevailing mood of Walcott's alienated narrator is belligerent. The immediate source of ire within the poem, however, derives from his reaction to the stultifying ramifications of "Art," with emphatic capitalization. As a dark-skinned poet from an obscure tropical island smoking a cigarette in the shadow of a metropolitan monument to the fine arts, he complains, "Art has surrendered / to History with its whiff of formaldehyde" (182). The problem is that aspiring artists from a marginal culture must pry through the raw material of their personal experience with an imagination burdened by authoritarian influences.

Coming from one who appropriates Western tradition as though it were his storehouse, Walcott's attitude here seems disingenuous or, at best, paradoxical. Nevertheless, the protest reinforces the ambivalent project of *Omeros*: to give artistic expression to humble peasants whom history and art have consistently relegated to the background. His contemplation of the museum at the close of book four bitterly echoes the Malreau epigraph that opens *Another Life*: "What makes the artist is the circumstance that in his youth he was more deeply moved by the sight of works of art than by that of the things which they portray" (1). From early in his career, Walcott has been concerned with the dual capacity to perceive reality through his eyes and through the lens of art.

That bifocal vision gives rise to the poetic challenge suggested by the Boston museum. Two painters give focus to his "conditioned" sight. Mentally preparing himself to enter the "dead air" of the museum, he grudgingly accepts the idea that

"every view is a postcard signed by great names: / that sky Canaletto's, that empty bench Van Gogh's" (183). For Walcott's purposes, Canaletto is the perfect example; other landscape painters — the Baroque Jacob van Ruisdale (1628-82), Romantics such as John Constable (1776-1837) or Thomas Cole (1801-48) — are more attuned to the open naturalness of nature. Renaissance vistas by Canaletto teach proportion, line, and perspective as they guide the eye through gilded Venice or along the Thames of storied London (Watson 54). Canaletto's paintings exemplify the "landscape locked in amber" from *Another Life* (3), the kind of exaltation that first kindles the aspirations of the two central narrators in *Omeros*. Walcott, as poet/participant, shares with expatriate Englishman Major Dennis Plunkett the self-imposed burden of doing for St. Lucia what traditional Western artists and historians have always done for imperial Europe. In *Omeros*, a new black Helen and the St. Lucia she embodies (the "Helen of the West") are to be inscribed into an expanded canon. Herein lies a problem for Walcott's adaptation of the Epic, a problem not to be resolved until late in *Omeros*: by striving for parallels between Helens and their separate countries, Walcott imposes aesthetic, cultural, historical, political and racial overtones that threaten the humanity of the woman herself. When Walcott eventually addresses this injustice, he interrogates the very perspective of conventional art itself. As we have learned — from Ferdinand de Saussure on the arbitrary relation of words to things and through Jacques Derrida's explication of the deferral embedded in difference — meaning evolves in that open territory between sign and signified (Saussure 65-70; Derrida 129). Significant as the metaphorical likenesses may be between Walcott's black and white Helens, latent within his comparisons of the women, and within the identification of each with her nation, is a vast gulf of otherness. The potent irony of Walcott's equivocal trope is that he conjures elaborate Hellenistic associations as a delaying strategy, only to create room later for exploitation of profound differences.

In this regard, the allusion to Van Gogh functions in Walcott's scheme as a subtle, initial move beyond the more tra-

ditional style of a Canaletto. Van Gogh's expressionistic impasto powerfully captures, more than natural objects, a subjective way of seeing flowers, orchards, people, and interiors, as well as the bench Walcott mentions (Hulsker 349-50, 398). Furthermore, the genealogically sensitive Walcott would have at his disposal the fact that the Dutch blood running through Van Gogh also courses through his mulatto veins. Bracing himself against influential artistic predecessors, however, he must somehow withstand the gravitational pull of entrenched models.

Paradoxically, as Walcott resists preordained views of nature, his narrative persona stumbles upon an artistic antidote displayed in the museum: Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* (1899) [Plate One].¹ For a variety of reasons, Walcott discovers in *The Gulf Stream* an image that vitalizes his dream of wresting art free to serve the cause of his own people:

I caught the light on green water as salt and clear

as the island's. Then I saw him. Achille! Bigger
than I remembered on the white sun-splintered deck
of the hot hull. Achille! My main man, my nigger!

circled by chain-sawing sharks; the ropes in his neck
turned his head towards Africa in *The Gulf Stream*,
which luffed him there, forever, between our island

and the coast of Guinea, fixed in the tribal dream,
in the light that entered another Homer's hand,
its breeze lifting the canvas from the museum.

But those leprous columns thudding against the hull
where Achille rests on one elbow always circle
his craft and mine, it needs no redemptive white sail

from a sea whose rhythm swells like Herman Melville. (183-84)

The Gulf Stream's obvious relevance to Walcott's epic overrides the fact that the closing line of this passage anticipates subsequent condemnation of racism in Melville and in contemporary Boston.

Nowhere else in the poem does Walcott devote as much attention to a painting as he does in this conventionally *ekphrastic*

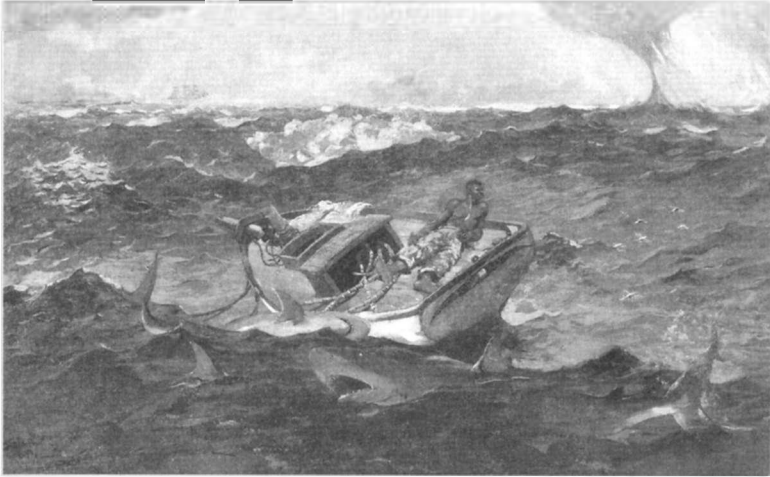


Plate One. Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream*. Oil on Canvas, 28" × 40". The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Catherine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1906 (06.1234). All rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

passage, rendering it the typical visual reference that evokes literal explication. According to James Heffernan, "From Homer's time to our own, *ekphrastic* literature reveals again and again this narrative response to pictorial stasis, this storytelling impulse that language by its very nature seems to release and stimulate" (4-5). If, as Albert Gardner observes, *The Gulf Stream* is a "storytelling picture" that leaves "the construction of the story to the spectator" (211), Walcott's literary response is quite predictable. In many ways, *The Gulf Stream* is a striking analogue for the fundamental setting, characters and themes of *Omeros*. Walcott's details underscore the significance he attaches to the technique and subject matter while stimulating the reader's imagination to detect further inferences. His initial response to *The Gulf Stream* is to a quality of light that carries vivid memories of the Caribbean. Talking with David Montenegro in 1987, Walcott expresses a visceral appreciation for the difficulty of emulating the natural colors in tropical scenery:

Watercolor's an extremely difficult medium in the tropics. . . . In the tropics, the dramatic division that exists between the . . . sky and

the foreground, is extremely dramatic. It's almost complementary, in terms of the hues that are there. The incredible blue that is there in the tropics is almost impossible to get — the *heat* of that blue . . . but look at the palette that exists for watercolor in the tropics, where shadows are black, black-green, or contain black, which you can't really use in watercolor. . . . [and] there the lines are hard-edged, and you have a very hard time manipulating them into any kind of subtlety. (203)

Significantly, in a 1994 art review, Walcott expounds on Winslow Homer's tropical atmosphere, praising his "hard light" and the "savage edge" he gives objects ("Jackie" 417). Embedded in the simile Walcott uses to describe Homer's green water ("as salt and clear as the island's") is a proximate hint of the "salt of the earth," imagery in keeping with the peasantry he celebrates in *Omeros*.

The second focus of attention is the forlorn black sailor adrift in a dismasted boat. Walcott immediately identifies the prototype of his own central character in *Omeros*. His exclamation — "Achille! My main man, my nigger!" — doubles as a fond epithet and reaffirmation, since a new Achille is his protagonist. Transparent resemblances pervade Walcott's description of the sailor's predicament. Embedded in the three stanzas beginning with the fifth line, Walcott establishes his own geographical and political location for these two Achilles. The black sailor and his disabled boat are isolated, literally cut off from escape by circling sharks. It follows that the sailor must be craning his head eastward because Walcott imagines him gazing toward Africa, drifting "there forever, between *our* island / and the coast of Guinea, fixed in the tribal dream" (emphasis added). "Our" island coupled with "tribal dream" suggests Walcott's lifelong argument against people of color living in the New World who want to sacrifice their birthright in favor of some idealized version of a lost past. Elsewhere, in one of his more impassioned statements, he challenges "pastoralists of the African revival" to learn to give their own authentic meaning to old things, "so that mongrel as I am, something prickles in me when I see the word Ashanti as with the word Warwickshire . . . both baptising this neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian" ("What" 10). Thus this fictional engagement with

Winslow Homer's painting complements the cultural dichotomy that must somehow be reconciled personally and communally in *Omeros*.

Taking into account the fact that the word *Omeros* derives from the Greek pronunciation of Homer's name and that Walcott draws from his Greek predecessor in creating a Caribbean epic, the figurative nexus of *The Gulf Stream* generates an ever-widening resonance. The current of the actual Gulf Stream was an integral part of the triangular slave route that joined Africa and the Americas to Europe. Now, the painting provides an opportunity for Walcott to capitalize fortuitously on the work of "another Homer." This (Winslow) Homer has projected an artistic *Gulf Stream* with its Achille perpetually suspended in his creator's medium. When the poet/narrator translates Winslow Homer's painting into his own terms, the "light that entered another Homer's hand," figuratively generates a "breeze lifting the canvas from the museum." In other words, Walcott asserts an extension of this visual moment through his unfolding narrative. Art and History with their capital letters may have succeeded in institutionalizing a pantheon of objects and names, but imaginative individuals can extract viable beauty and meaning on their own.

In the tercet following his association of the Greek and American Homers, Walcott employs a subversive double entendre to claim his own kinship with Winslow Homer's out-cast sailor. The threatening sharks are now "leprous columns" circling "his craft and mine." This play on "craft" does not simply allude to Walcott's own inner and outer struggles as a writer born in a former British colony. It goes much farther, proclaiming his ultimate independence from external sources of validation. The craft that he and Achille share "needs no redemptive white sail / from a sea whose rhythm swells like Herman Melville." Herein Walcott catches the significance of the fact that, in this dire moment, the black seaman gazes sternward where he is cut off from Africa by a threatening water spout rather than forward toward potential rescue from a ship under full sail. The whiteness of the sail may be worthy of note as is the fact that Walcott describes the rhythm of the sea swelling "like

Herman Melville," whose racism is remarked in subsequent lines; but these suggestions are only incidental to the primary subject. The emphasis is on self reliance, two isolated "craftsmen" expecting no miracles.

When Walcott exits the museum in this first section of chapter 36, his mood remains as defiant as when he entered. Whatever encouragement he has drawn from his expropriation of *The Gulf Stream* is moderated by his experience of a world burdened with prejudices of race, Art and History. The declining sun that glances off the gilded dome of the Massachusetts State House also casts shadows across Augustus Saint-Gaudens's Shaw Memorial on Boston Common. Watching the darkness consume this frieze commemorating Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his black 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the depressed narrator feels himself "melting in their dusk." In the dark obscurity of the historical neglect that is the common fate of his and their ancestors, an irrepressible Walcott is not above punning on the sound of "frieze" as he turns his collar up against a "real freeze" (184). Regardless of whether he intended to balance real and imagined by the qualifying adjective in this line, there is symmetry in his interrogative use of the arts in this cluster. It is a delicate give and take that speaks to the precarious balance Walcott attempts to strike throughout *Omeros*: between real life and its poetic analogue.

While Canaletto and Van Gogh can represent accepted preserves of History and Art, Homer and Saint-Gaudens, at least in Walcott's treatment, exemplify the possibility of artistic democratization. If all four of these first artists are Caucasian, the latter two reach out to include black men, not as props or background, but in terms of their human dignity. Works such as the *Shaw Memorial* and *The Gulf Stream* suggest at least two possibilities: admission of the other into the eminent domain of Art; or, more intriguingly, the potential desanctification of art. Ironically, the most pernicious difficulty Walcott addresses in centering an epic on St. Lucian peasants is to prevent their being turned into literary objects. Walcott says he discovered the essence of a noun in writing *Omeros* — "A noun is not a name you give something. It is something you watch becoming itself,

and you have to have the patience to find out what it is" (Bruckner 13). No matter how immediately realistic, no matter what the medium, pen on paper and paint on canvas both create accounts of life, accounts that then achieve a separate existence of their own. Should Walcott's narrative succumb to imported classical paraphernalia, the St. Lucian reality that inspires him simply becomes an additional object of Western confiscation. One strategy to disrupt this process is to use the tools of art to expose its acquisitiveness. To do so, Walcott must engage the reader in such a way as to present *Omeros* as a work in progress, explicitly referring to the threads and seams as he sews his tapestry together.

In book five, the poet/narrator's travels take him from Boston to Europe, from a museum's exhibits to the historic cities and scenes that inspired the art collected in galleries around the world. With references to Diego Velázquez and Marcel Duchamp in the third section of chapter 40, Walcott introduces two artists whose techniques suggest the deeper complexity of *Omeros*.

In passages leading up to the reference to Velázquez, Walcott again contemplates the interrelationship of art and life. This time he struggles with the stultifying legacy of Venice. Having crossed the Atlantic from his colonial origins to stand on the soil of imperial rule, he confronts his nagging fear of "Time," a metaphor for European history's amnesia regarding marginal peoples. He suggests that oblivion may await him because he prefers ephemeral life (the source of art) above the permanency of art itself. As he expresses it, "what I preferred / was not statues but the bird in the statue's hair." He notes that images of city squares, dungeons and "idiot dukes" are "redeemed by the creamy strokes of a Velázquez" (204-205). Walcott's indefinite article "a" invites only a passing glance since he is building toward a cumulative idea; however, there are aspects of Velázquez's rendering of Baroque techniques that stand comparison with Walcott's transgressions of convention in *Omeros*.

Rather than adhere to conventional techniques, in his *Feast of Bacchus* (c. 1628), for example, Velázquez inserts a touch of insouciant realism. He focuses on young Bacchus crowning a



Plate Two. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* (*The Maids of Honor*). Oil on canvas, 10'5" × 9'. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. Photograph courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

drunkard lurching forward on unsteady knees. Behind the devotee, in burlesque contrast with the classical figures of gods on the left, Velázquez depicts a disheveled band of revelers whose vacuous grins and irreverent postures bespeak the decadence of the contemporary age (Brown, D. 71). In the more

famous *Las Meninas* (1656) [Plate Two], Velázquez produces a tour de force of optical illusion (Brown, J. 259; see also Foucault's detailed analysis in *The Order of Things*, 3-16). The spatial planes are sufficiently realistic, yet what might ostensibly have been a state portrait of the royal couple is deftly converted into a study of the artist at work. Just as the Walcott persona actively engages the reader of *Omeros's* autobiographical and textual references, the Spanish painter invites attention to the immediacy of his act of creation. Objects recede into the distant interior of *Las Meninas*, starting on the left margin with the back of a large mounted canvas. The eye then passes either to the infanta Margarita's group in the center foreground or to the left midground where Velázquez himself stands before his canvas, staring directly at the position which should be held by the king and queen, were they visible. In the virtual space created by their suggested existence outside the frame, Velázquez's fixed gaze encompasses any viewer who stops to look at this painting. Balancing the artist in the same plane but off to the right margin stand a couple engaged in conversation. In the farthest reaches of the chamber are several replicas of Peter Paul Rubens' paintings (Brown, J. 256), a gentleman backlit in a doorway, and a strategically placed looking-glass reflecting the royal couple who had been omitted from the virtual threshold of the painting.

By manipulating visual effects as he does, Velázquez creates layers of optical planes with interspersed figures, teasing the eye with depicted space, "real" space, virtual space, pictures within pictures, and reflected images. In his verbal medium, Walcott has his palimpsests of fictions within fictions, classical quotations within his modern context, and subplots uniting his persona with interrelated groups of characters. Although there is nothing in Walcott's naming of Velázquez that necessitates analysis of the artist's paintings, when this Baroque artist reaches out to encompass viewers within the province of *Las Meninas*, he anticipates the contemporary poet's engagement in the self-reflexive intertextuality of *Omeros*. The major congruence for Velázquez and Walcott is not located within the immediate subject matter of the passage in which the Spanish artist is

mentioned; it lies beyond the lines, just as Velázquez reaches outside his canvas. In *Las Meninas* we see represented what is there, what is in the process of becoming, and also, the implied spaces that inevitably elude finite expression. Because structuralist theoretician Michel Foucault anticipated that naming the actual people represented in *Las Meninas* might unduly limit interpretation, he cautions against the tenuous "relation of language to painting." Since neither "can be reduced to the other's terms," he argues,

it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax. (9)

Thus when Walcott stresses early in *Omeros* that "every 'I' is a fiction" (28), he ventures well beyond factual autobiography, withdrawing from his created persona as a character to posit the image of himself engaged in the process of creating his role. This mirroring effect already exists in *Las Meninas*. In order for Velázquez to capture the perspective of his complex scene, he might well be utilizing a camera obscura plate or gazing into a large mirror just behind his erect canvas. That being the case, he too is in a position to paint not only his own portrait, but to contemplate or "reflect" on the reflection of himself painting.

Regardless of the fact that Walcott would be unconcerned with technical theory or the deeper relevance of Velázquez's technique here, the insight into the painting remains apposite to *Omeros*. What is more important for the epic's narrative continuity, the passing reference to Velázquez remains cogent. Walcott's assertion that subject matter is "redeemed by the creamy strokes of a Velázquez" resonates with increasing jaundice as he builds toward the end of the section. Beginning with Velázquez as one whose art preserves dungeons and idiots for posterity (though Francisco Goya might have served as well), Walcott mounts a sequence of images wherein different forms of art defy authoritarian institutionalization. Doomed musicians can mingle their strains of Schubert with the smoke rising out of Nazi concentration camps; an accidental crack can be

incorporated into Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23); the Dadaist movement can anticipate reality's impetus for the anti-art surrealism of poets Paul Celan and Max Jacob.

After introducing the specific names, Walcott proceeds more generally. The "mausoleum museums" of Europe and such compendiums of vanity as the multi-volumed *The World's Great Classics* begin to strike Walcott as gestures of self-pardon "in the absolution of fountains and statues" (205). If the message conveyed by celebratory monuments erected across Europe is that "power / and art were the same," Walcott refuses to acquiesce. He delivers an alternative perspective on the efficacy of imperial accomplishment:

Tell that to a slave from the outer regions
of their fraying empires, what power lay in the work
of forgiving fountains with naiads and lions. (205)

Here he intimates that for those on whose backs empires were built, forgiveness has yet to be rendered. As he writes, of course, the slave's response is emerging in the hands of one of their descendants.

With Walcott's next direct reference to the arts, in the second section of chapter 53, painting becomes a simile for the arrangement of words on the page, the text itself. The scene wherein he mentions *Les Nymphéas*, from Claude Monet's many studies of water lilies, is commemorative. Walcott thinks of flowers and gardens because Maud Plunkett, a character with whom he shares a love of gardening, has died. From the beginning, she and Major Dennis Plunkett have represented European settlers in St. Lucia and Walcott sees in them elements of his own mother and father. Vegetation imagery emerges as he brushes feelings of personal loss on the canvas of his page.

I had wanted large green words to lie waxen on
the page's skin, floating but rooted in its lymph as
her lilies in the pond's cool mud, every ivory prong

spreading the Japanese peace of *Les Nymphéas*
in the tongue-still noon, the heat, where a wooden bridge
with narrow planks arched over the calligraphic

bamboo, their reflections rewritten when a midge wrinkled the smoothness, and from them, the clear concentric rings from a pebble, from the right noun on a page. (266)

In keeping with the flow of thought, Walcott's strokes are as impressionistic as Monet's play of light across illusive forms. Just as impressionism grows out of the fact that no observer can seize the essence of objective reality, Walcott projects words, thoughts and his persona "floating and rooted" in the context of a fleeting scene. Yet, he is conscious of his ironic presence in the narrative:

I was both there and not there. I was attending
the funeral of a character I'd created;
the fiction of her life needed a good ending

as much as mine. (266)

When he makes a similar observation in *Another Life*, he apologizes to his artistic mentor Harry Simmons, fearing he exploits Simmons's suicide for dramatic effect (140). By the time of *Omeros*, he is reconciled to the interplay of the texts he lives by writing. If every "I" is a fiction, then every life is sustained by its illusions, its interpretation of reality.

The final citation of two specific painters in *Omeros* occurs in the first section of chapter 61. In this scene, the widowed Major Plunkett is reliving earlier years with his late wife. Englishman William Etty (1787-1849) and Dutch-born Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), who aligned himself with the English School of painters, are both notable for technically proficient styles that lack vitality. Despite his historical meticulousness, Alma-Tadema often descends to the anecdotal or sentimental, while Etty indulges in the portrayal of mythological female nudes with insufficient emotional conviction (Roberts, K. 68; Brookner, 655). Walcott's motive for introducing these two examples is readily evident, considering the Major's maudlin state of mind. As he strokes his tomcat and gazes at a daguerreotype of Maud, he reflects that she has always reminded him of her 19th century Irish homeland. Taking inventory of their accumulated Victorian mementos, it occurs to him that his whole

existence is *fin de siècle*. To epitomize the anachronism of Plunkett's outmoded frame of reference, Walcott has him arrive at his own conclusion:

It was all a lark. Like something out of Etty
or Alma-Tadema, those gold framed memories,
stroking the tom in the dark with an ageing hand. (304)

While the allusion to these particular painters serves an explicit purpose and is notable for the fact that it does not elicit the provocative extensions of thought triggered by Velázquez, Duchamp or even Homer, it effectively sums up the Major's need to settle with the gilded past and come to terms with the present.

Dennis Plunkett's necessary reconciliation with contemporary life on his adopted island comes late in the epic; however, its significance enlarges as it becomes complementary to revisions Walcott gradually introduces into his own persona and into the structure of *Omeros*. Major Plunkett and the poet/narrator grow to recognize that their quest to expropriate the image of Helen is misguided. Beyond the fact that their desire for Helen is confiscatory, the significations of their art and history necessarily disfigure the actuality being signified. The danger that Helen as a person may be lost to political or aesthetic symbolism is such that Rei Terada contends, "Helen is in fact characterized principally by her opacity, although she is also notable by default for her autonomy and apparent disdain for the regard of others" (190). Maud Plunkett's humanity, too, is threatened by her dual role as the embodiment of Ireland and the wife who is neglected (the Major's Penelope embroidering her tapestry of birds) while her husband indulges in research. One of the central problems addressed by *Omeros* is that neither of these women nor their islands can be reduced to anyone's cultural icon. As Walcott reconfigures *Omeros* in order to accommodate its intentional fault line, his self-reflexive technique enters the aesthetic realm already explored by Marcel Duchamp. The appropriateness of Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* is explicit and the narrative functions of Van Gogh through Alma-Tadema are transparently explicable. Only Diego Velázquez, because of his illusive compositional perspec-

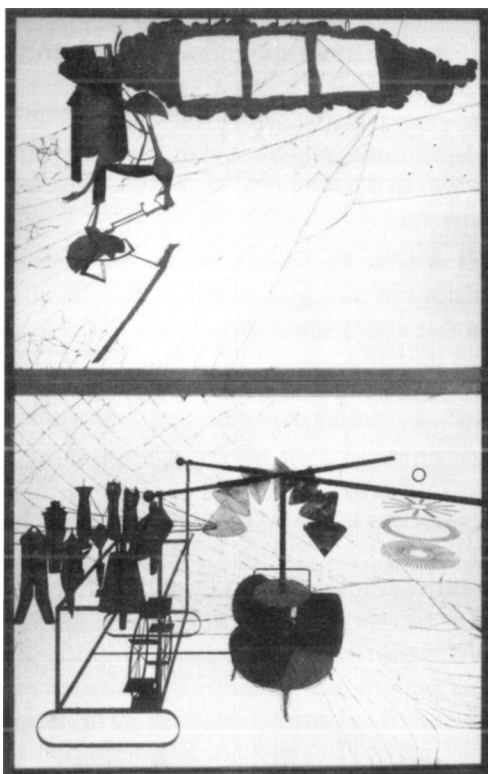


Plate Three. Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even; Large Glass* (detail). Oil Paint, varnish, wire, foil, dust — on two panels of glass, 9'1/4" × 9'1/8". Philadelphia Museum of Art: Bequest of Katherine S. Drier.

tive, and Marcel Duchamp, because of his iconoclasm, afford far deeper textual correlates for *Omeros* than Walcott's passing reference would indicate.

Within two lines on page 205, Walcott names Duchamp, cites *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (also known as the *Large Glass*) [Plate Three] and mentions the famous accidental crack in this mixed-media glass work. The artistic allusion alone is nothing unusual for Walcott; however, the kinetic moment captured in the incomplete *Large Glass* makes a proximate template for the flow of *Omeros*. Moreover, the crack running

through the glass admits a cluster of aesthetic insights into Walcott's epic. Fortunately, Duchamp left extensive notes and gave provocative interviews, and *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* has elicited enough critical study that various interpretations are readily available (Adcock, Golding).

At the outset, it should be remarked that the pictorial aspect of *The Bride Stripped Bare* is too abstract to serve *Omeros* in the same capacity as the realistic *The Gulf Stream*. In the upper-left panel, Duchamp depicts an emblematic *Bride*, already stripped, who inspires lust (just one form of imagination) in nine bachelors — represented in the left quadrant of the lower panel by *Nine Malic Molds*. The inspired *Bachelors* generate a gas that passes through capillary tubes and then through funnels, where it condenses into drops of semen that ascend into the upper right panel of the *Bride*. The *Bachelors'* intrusion into the *Bride's* domain is symbolized by nine marks formed by painted matches fired onto the glass from a toy cannon. Duchamp's love of puns is evident in the phallic derivation of "malic," while the cannon shots suggest a violence inherent in the suspended sexual activity. From the beginning of *Omeros*, Walcott's leading female character, Helen, functions in the same capacity as the *Bride*. Although she is no virgin and must serve double duty both as symbol of St. Lucia (the Helen of the West) and as a fictional character, Helen embodies the motivation for *Omeros*. Herein lies the first of five principal correspondences between Walcott and Duchamp.

Like the *Bride* in the *Large Glass*, Helen inspires multiple suitors: expatriate Dennis Plunkett, the two peasant fishermen Achille and Hector, and Walcott's own persona. To the extent that all four men seek to possess Helen, to make her into the fulfillment of their dreams, their quests entail an element of violence. In a straightforward love triangle, Achille sacrifices his friendship with Hector over this alluring woman. After Hector's accidental death, leaving Helen pregnant, she and Achille reconcile and agree to raise her child. Major Plunkett and Walcott have a more complicated inspiration. Regardless of their benevolent intentions, in attempting to convert this peasant woman into a national symbol, they emulate the imperial prece-

dent of exploiting people for their own ends. The Major sees evidence of St. Lucia's potential grandeur in the historic Battle of the Saints (won by British Admiral Rodney in 1782). Like Helen of Troy, this black woman and her island are treated as pawns in an international dispute. Walcott, equally infatuated, undertakes the poetic story of Helen that becomes *Omeros*. As with the accidental crack in the *Large Glass*, however, there is a flaw in all these schemes to graft their meaning onto Helen.

The "fortunate flaws" that *Omeros* and *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* have in common is that beauty, the human spirit, and art can never truly be reduced to a possession. Fortunately, the breakdown of monopolistic gestures creates opportunities for more pluralistic awareness. In *Omeros*, this is the lesson to be learned by the peasant lovers, the expatriate historian, and the postcolonial poet. Herein Duchamp and Walcott are aligned on a philosophical level that undergirds the details of character, plot, setting and theme in *Omeros*. Whether it is from his curiosity regarding the way three pieces of thread land on a surface (3 *Standard Stoppages* 1913-14), or his preservation of accidental cracks (running through the *Large Glass*), Duchamp acquired a deep respect for the possibilities growing out of pure chance. Looking back Duchamp recalls, "The idea of letting a piece of thread fall on a canvas was accidental, but from this accident came a carefully planned work. Most important was the accepting and recognizing of this accidental stimulation" (Kuh 92). He believes that eventually the public will recognize the potentialities generated by coincidence because "chance is a definition of what happens in the world we live in and know more than any causality" (Roberts, F. 63).

Walcott grasps this very same principle and incorporates it into *Omeros*. His insight, as he describes it, first arose from a simple error, mistyping "love" where he intended "life." From this incident, he discovers "That is one part of the poetic process, accident as illumination, error as truth, typographical mistakes as revelation" ("Caligula's" 138). Consequently, the epic he was undertaking at the time is fabricated on accumulated consequences of chance. By accident of birth, Walcott grew up in a Caribbean colony he and his classmates were taught to asso-

ciate with an Aegean Helen ("Leaving" 4). He and his people are descended from slaves who were often gratuitously named for heroes of classical and biblical literature. His model for Helen derives from the remarkable face of a woman he happened to glimpse on a local transport bus during a brief visit to St. Lucia (White 35). Even his title is the result of an actual Greek woman's correcting his Anglicized pronunciation of Homer's name (Hamner, *Epic* 42 n. 6). In addition to importing coincidence and experience into *Omeros*, Walcott also invests his fictional Major Plunkett with an obsession for historical and mythological correspondences. Combing through dusty records, the Major stumbles upon the entry for a nineteen-year old British Midshipman Plunkett who died in the Battle of the Saints. In a moment, he claims the namesake and son he and Maud could never otherwise have (94). Impressed by the name of the French flagship that surrendered in the famous battle, the *Ville de Paris*, Dennis cannot resist the cumulative parallels. He excitedly proclaims "his Homeric coincidence," to Maud:

"Look, love, for instance,
near sunset, on April 12, hear this, the *Ville de Paris*

struck her colours to Rodney. Surrendered. Is this chance
or an echo? Paris gives the golden apple, a war is
fought for an island called Helen?" — clapping conclusive hands.
(100)

Dennis Plunkett builds on lucky coincidence, fiction within a fiction, as does his creator in exploiting incidental details that take root in his fertile imagination.

Duchamp and Walcott are also alike in insisting on the potential value of subjects not usually acknowledged as "artistic." Two appropriate labels would be "Accidental" or "Found" art, to describe subject matter that unexpectedly excites some fruitful recognition, such as the analogous names and events that catch Plunkett's fancy. When the discovery involves some intervention on the artist's part, Duchamp also applies the label "Ready-made." When asked for a definition, Duchamp described it as "a work of art without an artist to make it" (Roberts, F. 47). He hastens to add, however, that his intentions are

iconoclastic rather than definitive. Insisting on this linkage between the accidentally artistic and a desire to interrogate artistic tradition, Duchamp articulates this philosophical point that is echoed in turn by Walcott. Duchamp insists that rather than being chosen, a Ready-made must initially declare itself, regardless of aesthetic considerations:

Taste is the enemy of art, A-R-T. The idea was to find an object that had no attraction whatsoever from the esthetic angle. This was not the act of an artist, but of a non-artist, an artisan if you will. I wanted to change the status of the artist or at least to change the norms used for defining an artist. Again to de-deify him. The Greeks and the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries thought of him as a worker, an artisan" (Roberts, F. 62)

These beliefs guided Duchamp as he worked on the *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and the *Bottle Dryer* (1914); in the case of the *Large Glass*, he fixed months of accumulated dust on the lower panel, fired matches at the upper panel, and accepted the shattered striations of its accidental breakage.

In choosing his setting and characters from the historically neglected Caribbean region, Walcott has a stronger political motive than Duchamp, but he is responding to material that, although marginalized in the annals of the Western world, constitute his native environment. He tells J. P. White that *Omeros* aims to "hear the names of things and people in their own context, meaning . . . everything around a name" (35). Yet he is as wary of the usual means of recording life as Duchamp. When he tells a *New York Times* interviewer that he wants to capture the freshness of a place, he rejects "History" because it "makes similes of people, .[and] these people are their own nouns" (Bruckner 13). Somehow he must do justice to those nouns without overwhelming them with the encrustations of capitalized "History" and of Duchamp's stultifying "A-R-T." Utilizing the same ironic wit that informs Duchamp's parody of traditional artistic icons, Walcott gives us New England farmers Homer and Virg under Mobil's sign of the winged horse (14). Walcott confesses that he deliberately teases sophisticated readers with the paraphernalia of conventional epics: "I call it a

shield because I want critics to get the references. . . . The parenthesis, the large parenthesis will begin. Everybody will put in a bracket — now he is trying to do *Ulysses*" (Brown and Johnson 216). In *Omeros* itself, Walcott has his protean title character (appearing severally as old "Seven Seas," an African griot, a Sioux Shaman and Omeros/Homer) denigrate his own *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. When the poet/narrator confesses that he has read only excerpts from his predecessor, Omeros responds, "These gods and the demi-gods aren't much use to us . . . forget the gods . . . and read the rest" (283). That "rest" is the dispossessed population of the New World.

Beneath the cover of his pseudo-epic shield, Walcott offers his revised Homer and his creolized form of Greeks. His idea of the Homeric singer is a blind vagabond of the seven seas rather than the marble statue veiled under three thousand years of academic dust (Bruckner 13). In a 1990 interview, Walcott referred to classical Greeks as "niggers of the Mediterranean" with extravagant Puerto Rican panache, remarking,

People who praised classical Greece, if they were there then, would consider the Greeks' tastes vulgar, lurid. The same thing is true of looking at art as exotica. They would not be looked at as stately classical painters, but as exotica, barbarous exotica. . . . that's what I'm saying is very Caribbean. (Brown and Johnson 217).

Walcott's equivocal treatment of the arts and his insistence on the validity of otherwise "tasteless" material could well be taken from Duchamp. Like Duchamp, Walcott is not so much anti-art, as intent on its de-deification.

Putting his iconoclastic ideas into practice in *Omeros*, Walcott allows three of his four protagonists to succeed, paradoxically, through a beneficial flaw. Although Hector, Achille, Dennis Plunkett and Walcott's persona idealize Helen, their treatment of her duplicates the legacy of Western domination, chauvinism, imperialism, slavery and colonialism in the New World. Each man must learn that the woman and the island she symbolizes should not be objects of possession. She deserves to be accepted on her own terms by the peasant fishermen who love her as well as by the Major and the poet who wish to preserve

their black Helen through history and art. Hector's fate records the negative results of acquisitiveness. Thinking that he can hold onto Helen through money, he sacrifices his inborn attachment to the sea for the harried existence of a taxi driver. The result is self-destructive frenzy, leading to his fatal automobile accident (225). Achille fares better because he learns in a sun-stroke induced dream of Africa that his Afro-Caribbean roots are not in an atavistic Africa, but in St. Lucia. Once he knows his identity, he is capable of recognizing a deeper brotherhood with his late rival Hector and is mature enough to receive Helen as an equal when she chooses to return (267).

Walcott's poet/narrator travels through North America and Europe before returning home to correct his perspective on Helen. Guilt accompanies his change of heart because, much as he despises the depredations of tourism in St. Lucia, he has selfishly wanted the native landscape to stay as he has idealized it, the way commercial postcards freeze a picturesque cliché. Admitting that "Art is History's nostalgia" (228), he sees the need to come down from the balcony of detached observation (250) and rid himself of "All that Greek manure under the green bananas" (271). Major Plunkett's conversion comes later, in the wake of Maud's death and after a seance with the old *gardeuse* Ma Kilman finally awakens a sense of belonging:

. . . He learned how to pause
in the shade of the stone arch watching the bright red
flowers of the immortelle, he forgot the war's

history that had cost him a son and wife. He read
calmly, and he began to speak to the workmen
not as boys who worked with him, till every name

somehow sounded different; when he thought of Helen
she was not a cause or a cloud, only a name
for a local wonder. (309)

Eventually the narrator and Plunkett accept the significance of the woman they admire in her own right. Contrary to their original intention, the island need not be locked in amber; Helen needs no deification through history or art.

The fourth principle aligning Walcott and Duchamp is their shared fascination with language, its surprising dexterity and potential for creativity. Duchamp tells Katharine Kuh,

For me, words are not merely a means of communication. You know, puns have always been considered a low form of wit, but I find them a source of stimulation both because of their actual sound and because of unexpected meanings attached to the interrelationships of disparate words. . . . If you introduce a familiar word into an alien atmosphere, you have something comparable to distortion in painting, something surprising and new. (88-89)

Talking with Francis Roberts, he concludes that his *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) marks the shift in his career from a visual to an "ideatic" mode, emphasizing ideas. The term sheds light on Duchamp's thought-provoking titles and his delight in placing objects in alien contexts: entitling a plain snow shovel *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), irreverently painting moustache and beard on the *Mona Lisa*, and then punning on the French pronunciation of L.H.O.O.Q. — "She's got a hot ass" — to provide a caption for the latter picture (1919). For Duchamp and Walcott alike, linguistic play suggests the kinetic energy connecting reality and its observer. As Arturo Schwarz argues,

puns, like poetry, undermine the basic suppositions of a static and immutable reality, since they are concerned with the equating of two different realities. The wider the gap between these two realities in ordinary life, the brighter will be the spark that illuminates their formerly undiscovered relationship. (32)

Walcott's objective in *Omeros* is to dis-cover the latent beauty in the people and landscape of St. Lucia. By first presenting his narrative in the anachronistic trappings of classical literature, he juxtaposes the ironically named descendants of slaves with legendary heroes. A second displacement occurs when Walcott subsequently challenges the reader's conventional expectations by rejecting his own paraphernalia. At times Walcott manipulates chronology by having Achille find his paternal ancestor in tribal Africa, by having Major Plunkett discover a nineteen-year-old "son" who predates him by over a hundred years, and by bringing back the ghost of his own father Warwick

to compound Shakespearian puns on his name. Warwick tells his son,

I was raised in this obscure Caribbean port,
 where my bastard father christened me for his shire:
 Warwick. The Bard's county. But never felt part
 of the foreign machinery known as Literature.
 I preferred verse to fame, but I wrote with the heart
 of an amateur. It's that Will you inherit. (68)

Imbued as he is with the cultural milieu of his native Caribbean, natural and artistic, Walcott has access to an unending supply of disparate Ready-mades. When they "choose" him, as Duchamp suggests is the usual order of things, Walcott incorporates them into his poetic text.

The fifth parallel between Duchamp and Walcott hinges on their expectations regarding the audience for art. In Kynaston McShine's words, "Duchamp is proposing an attitude of mind, an intelligence which has the capacity to grasp complex relations, to see the sense in non-sense and the nonsense in sense" (132). Walcott requires an equal degree of mental flexibility on the part of the reader. Low puns, great leaps in space and time, multiple points of view, intricate allusive parallels that are eventually repudiated, and an illusive autobiographical presence that contemplates its own fiction leave much room for creative engagement. When Walcott notes the ocean has no memory of Gilgamesh or the *Iliad* (296) and acknowledges that Achille will never read his epic (320), the reader still holds the fictions in balance. During the vivid inferno scene in book seven, Walcott has the ghost of Homer explain to him that *Omeros* recounts two odysseys. While Walcott the narrator had traveled cities of the world, his child-self had never left his native shores. As *Omeros* explains,

... the right journey
 is motionless; as the sea moves round an island

 that appears to be moving, love moves round the heart —
 with encircling salt, and the slowly travelling hand
 knows it returns to the port from which it must start. (291)

In this passage, Walcott draws on literary convention, expanding generic epic subject matter through self-reflexive dialogue.

While he reifies the unheralded beauty of his countrymen, at the same time his fictional "I" invites the reader to share with him the mechanics of his creative process.

In *Omeros*, Walcott benefits from each of the artists he brings to our attention. Winslow Homer's realism complements his Caribbean nexus. Diego Velázquez's presence is minimal, but he signals the increasingly subjective point of view in artistic expressiveness that is recognizable at least as early as the Baroque period. *Las Meninas* presents the viewer with an artist depicting himself watching as he is in the act of painting the very portrait placed before him. Marcel Duchamp's experimentation with works leading up to *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* causes the viewer, the audience, to be conscious of an environment filled with Ready-made art; as a result, the art horizon expands to encompass viewer and artist. Positioning the free-standing *Large Glass* in the center of a room creates a reciprocal artistic context: The viewer is able to see through the glass any chance spectator who passes on the opposite side, while by the same token, the passerby may take in the primary viewer as part of his/her experience. Finally, depending on the angle, either observer may happen to glimpse him/herself reflected on the surface as a subject contemplating his/her own participation in art.

There is no evidence to suggest that Walcott is influenced by Duchamp. Nevertheless, appreciation of their exploitation of the fault line between life and "Art" confirms the similarity of their ideologies. Craig Adcock contends that "the notes which comprise Marcel Duchamp's 'manuscript' and the works which they buttress express one of the most radical philosophies of art that the twentieth century has yet known, and, indeed, one which may have changed the character of the art process for all time" (1). Duchamp and the crown jewel of his career are alluded to in *Omeros*, and both artists confront common aesthetic problems as they exploit the inextricability of life and art. This inextricability accounts in part for Duchamp's decision to leave *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* as an incomplete statement. He admits, "I felt that sometimes in the unfinished thing there is more warmth that you don't change or make any

more perfect in the finished product" (Roberts, F. 46). In the same vein, although Walcott's protagonists achieve satisfactory closure in *Omeros*, their story is merely suspended. Significantly in the final line of the epic, "the sea was still going on" (325). Walcott's sea and Duchamp's "warmth" embody the pulse of life, as incomplete as it is imperfect.

NOTES

- ¹ Walcott does not indicate whether the painting is in Boston on loan from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, but surely some degree of artistic license can be permitted.

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