Truth and Representation: The Confrontation of History and Mythology in *Omeros*

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TRUTH AND REPRESENTATION
The Confrontation of History and Mythology in *Omeros*

by Ted Williams

> *It is not that History is obliterated by this sunrise. It is there in Antillean geography, in the vegetation itself.*
>
> —Derek Walcott, *The Nobel Lecture*

> *The deconstruction is not something we have added to the text but it constituted the text in the first place. A literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own mode, and by reading the text as we did we were only trying to come closer to being as rigorous a reader as the author had to be in order to write the sentence in the first place. Poetic writing is the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction; it may differ from critical or discursive writing in the economy of its articulation, but not in kind.*
>
> —Paul De Man, *Semiology and Rhetoric*

Barbara Webb suggests in *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction* that modern writers frequently reject the disciplinary constraints of historical representation "in favor of what they consider the more creative forms of mythic discourse" (*Myth* 3). "Among Caribbean writers," proposes Webb, the issue of privileging mythical forms of representation is directly related to the putatively "negative perception of New World history as a legacy of dispossession, exploitation and betrayal" (*Myth* 3). "In an effort to circumvent the alienating effects" of historical discourse, argues Webb, "some Caribbean writers have turned to the archetypal patterns of myth" (*Myth* 3). Accordingly, concludes Webb, Derek Walcott frames his 1974 essay "The Muse of History" with the following epigraph from James Joyce: "History is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (*Myth* 3). Walcott presumably proposes here a complete "rejection of the concept of historical time" and embraces instead "the timeless universality of myth" (*Myth* 3). "In the New World," writes Walcott,

> servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of revenge written by the descendents of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendents of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates into pathos. The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force. The great poets of the New World, from Whitman to Neruda, reject this sense of history. Their vision of man in the New World is Adamic. (*Muse* 2, 3)

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Yet Webb's conclusion largely obscures the fact that in his poetry Walcott never deploys mythical representation as a discrete unit of literary signification, nor does he simply discard, on the basis of an epistemological objection, that which belongs most properly to the historical register. Walcott, rather, utilizes both historical and mythical modes of representation precisely in order to foreground the way in which one discourse relies upon and cancels out the other. In this respect the complex relation of historical and mythical tropes in Walcott's work represents a kind of resistance to and problematization of the reductionist logic implicit in Webb's argument. Instead of privileging one mode of discursive production over the other—a move which is enabled only by means of violating the epistemological preconditions of each—I am concerned to show that in Walcott's epic poem, *Omeros* (1990), the relationship between history and mythology is at once mutually constitutive and radically nullifying. One may not, in other words, simply choose between the opposed meanings of history and mythology in the poem, as the logic underwriting one mode of representation always implies the logic underwriting the other. Nor may one properly suppose, in an Hegelian effort to reconcile dialectically opposed categories of literary representation, that both forms of signification are in equal operation at the same time. The poem cannot embody two contradictory meanings simultaneously because the truth of one discourse is dependent upon and rendered intelligible by its repudiation of the other.[1]

Situated on the parallel lines of history and mythology in Omeros are two figures who ostensibly signify discrete modes of literary representation. We might tentatively say that Major Plunkett, an English colonial living at St. Lucia with his wife, Maude, is representative of historical representation, while the persona of the poet, a native St. Lucian who functions as Walcott's fictional "self," is representative of the mythical. Plunkett, a Guinness-drinking, khaki-wearing Englishman who served under "Monty" in Africa during World War II, is a pensioned army regular who arrives at St. Lucia to reap the benefits of his country's Empire. He is, or so Walcott would have us believe, the very embodiment of the process of historiography itself: "An evening with the Plunkett's: he marking cannons / by their Type, Trunions, Bore, Condition, Size, Weight / in a marbled ledger, by order of Ordnance, / Cypher—GR.III, GR. IV, Site, Silhouette, Date, / nib scratching the page, beaking the well for a word" (Omeros 88).

The poet, on the other hand, is presumably a figure, not unlike Homer, who is constitutive of the mythical and the poetical, the timeless and the transcendent: "When would I not hear the Trojan War in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop. / When would I enter that light beyond metaphor?" (*Omeros* 270). The persona of the poet, the "I" of the poem's narrative, is deeply invested in ways of seeing and organizing experience that fly in the face of traditional notions of historiography: ". . . I despised any design / that kept to a chart, that calculated the winds. / My inspiration was impulse . . ." (*Omeros* 270).

Obviously the opposition of Plunkett and the figure of the poet closely corresponds to the supposedly simple opposition of history and mythology in "The Muse of History." For the next several pages, then, the discussion will focus on the different ways that Plunkett appears to be constituted by and driven towards the process of historical representation in the poem. On a superficial level Plunkett functions as the central trope for the related colonial and historical endeavor in the New World. He assumes in the poem the role of the impartial observer—the historical subject—whose business is to participate in the textual production and preservation of the British conquest of the Americas. At the same time, Plunkett also assumes an identity whose very condition of possibility is enabled by an epistemic reading of Breen's historical account of the Battle of the Saints, the decisive naval victory in which the British wrested possession of St. Lucia from the French. In this respect Plunkett's identity is provisionally

linked to a signifying system, largely historical in character, within which he is both signifier and signified. While Plunkett's textual identity is governed by and constitutive of a discourse of British imperialism, however, he is nonetheless compelled to construct a familial genealogy in a mode of discourse more mythical than historical.

Plunkett's complicity in the act of gathering, ordering, and disseminating colonial-historical knowledge is demonstrated from the outset of the poem. When Plunkett is first introduced to the reader, for instance, he is busy researching and committing to memory Breen's master-text of British colonialism. But like any empiricist worth his salt, Plunkett also decides to test the redemonstrable conclusions of his illustrious predecessor by conducting some fieldwork of his own: "[H]e stood there, measuring out the site with his cane / and a small map he had found that was falling apart / from its weathered spine in the back of the library"(*Omeros* 98). To better understand the battle and its significance, to better comprehend its pivotal importance in the embattled history of the island, Plunkett places under scrutiny every "billet" and every "regiment" documented by Breen. And to better comprehend "in detachment" the subtle naval tactics of De Grasse and Rodney, the admirals of the French and British fleets, respectively, he "learn[s] eighty ships of the line" and charts "the drift of the channel that day" (*Omeros* 91).

Seemingly enthralled by the accuracy with which Breen charts the battle, and dazzled by the order and coherence in which it is presented, Plunkett experiences a kind of euphoria when he in fact confirms the historian's findings: "His vision was swimming with fathom-depths, degrees / bubbling with zeroes on the old nautical charts; / he pinched his eyesockets. Cannons flashed from his eyes" (*Omeros* 89). Plunkett immerses himself completely in Breen's text and invests himself experientially in its mimetic but still palpable approximation of reality: ". . . He heard the thunder / in the cannonading caves, and checked the pamphlet / from the museum, ticking off every blunder / with a winged V, for the errors in either fleet. / In his flapping shorts he measured every distance / with a squared, revolving stride in the khaki grass" (*Omeros* 91). Perhaps more importantly, Plunkett resolves to continue the research in a manner befitting both Breen and the British empire: "He kept up research in Ordnance. The Crusted wrecks / cast in the armourer's foundry, the embossed crown / of the cannon's iron asterisk: Georgius Wrecks" (*Omeros* 93).

Plunkett's early and excessive positivist faith in the truth-value of historical knowledge leads him to fight at every turn the local legends and folktales that seek to explain the origins of St. Lucia by means of "Iounalo the lizard": "Iounalo, eh? It's all folk-malarkey!" (*Omeros* 92). For Plunkett, "History [is] fact" and most certainly "not a lizard" (*Omeros* 92). The idea that "the greatest battle / in naval history, which put the French to rout" (*Omeros* 92), could have been "fought for a creature with a disposable tail" is anathema—the excremental by-product of a signifying system built on lies, innuendo and superstition: "Iounalo, my royal arse! / Hewanorra, my hole!" (*Omeros* 92). Further, it is an idea worthy only of "black pamphleteers" who, lamentably, wish to revise the history of the island in such a way that the British will be perceived primarily as "villains": ". . . It will be rewritten / by black pamphleteers, History will be revised, / and we'll be its villians, fading on the map / (he said "villians" for "villains"). And when it's over / we'll be the bastards!"(*Omeros* 92).

Breen's well-organized history of St. Lucia, on the other hand, is authorized and authenticated by its presence within a system of signs that is directly analogous to, if not synonymous with, the "real." While "black pamphleteers" may insist that the origins of St. Lucia derive from a lizard "belling its throat on the hot noon cannon" (*Omeros* 91), the "facts" which textually correspond to the British usurpation of the island indicate, to the contrary, that St. Lucia burst into history only at that moment when De Grasse surrendered the island to Rodney: ". . . near sunset, on April 12, hear this, the *Ville de Paris*/ struck her colours to Rodney. Surrendered" (*Omeros* 100). If the island's Afro-Caribbean population must resort to constructing an alterna-

tive narrative around a highly suspect lizard, then it is because the slaves merely sat passively as history, indeed reality, passed before their very eyes: "The Slaves watched the redcoats running between the trees, / dispersing like blossoms when the poinciana / rattles its hanging bandoliers in the breeze / as the thunderheads ignite with no cannoneer"(*Omeros* 81). For Plunkett, history as meaningful action is coterminous with its "factual" representation. It is both process and product of a uniquely triumphant British sensibility which the desirous slaves can only applaud: "[The Slaves] clapped as the soldiers scrambled to the redoubts / and their hot palms longed for lances in that rapture /of men before war, till a fusillade of shouts / burst from the apoplectic, sunburnt engineers" (*Omeros* 82).

While tirelessly contributing to the figurative elaboration of the colonialist enterprise on the island, Plunkett also attempts to locate his own identity inside the fixed meaning of historical signs. The power of the sign, that is, becomes inextricably wedded to the concept of selfhood, and individual identity is achieved only when it recognizes itself in the mirror of the historical text. For Plunkett, this act of self-discovery occurs precisely at that moment when he recognizes himself in the mirror of Breen's master text.

Plunkett decides to formulate an identity based on his own family history, and during a visit to the "War Office" he pays "some waxworks fellow" to trace his "ances-tree" (*Omeros* 87). After "plucking" through "cliffs of guilt ledgers" with their promise of titles "from Agincourt to Zouave," the genealogist discovers, much to Plunkett's dismay, that his family roots lead only to a Scottish "claymore" (*Omeros* 87). Though satisfied when his man, "bald as a snooker-ball," finds "blue blood" in the Plunkett family genealogy, the Major becomes increasingly nervous that he is no longer an Englishman in the strict sense of the term: ". . . But why Scots? Why a claymore / with a draped tartan?"(*Omeros* 87). Plunkett's ambivalence about his family's lineage and its sudden termination in Scotland is compounded when his marriage to Maude bears no fruit: "No heir, he told the mummy from Madame Tussaud, / who believed he had dropped an aitch" (*Omeros* 88).

Finding only a "blank place" in his search for an appropriate family crest, the Major finds in Breen's history of the island a more satisfying relation to the past—if not a more compelling prospect for the future (*Omeros* 88). When researching the mortality rate of the Battle of the Saints, Plunkett stumbles across a reference to a certain midshipman who coincidently shares his surname: ". . . Then he found the entry / in pale lilac ink. *Plunkett* . . . One for the lacy trough / *Plunkett*? His veins went cold. From what shire was he?" (*Omeros* 93). Suddenly any doubts the Major harbors with respect to his family origins disappear, and any anxiety concerning both his name and inability to produce a son dissolve: "This was his search's end / He had come far enough / to find a namesake and a son"(*Omeros* 94).

Historical discourse functions here as a kind of Lacanian mirror. Gazing into the text as a child might gaze into his or her mirror image, Plunkett proudly recognizes in the representation of the midshipman, who sadly drowned in the battle, that which can only be of himself: "because of his son's sacrifice in battle. / The apple of his pride bobbed in his wattled throat" (*Omeros* 99). The meaning of self returns to the Major as a result of systemically reading in the signs something that was already there—in this instance a "son" whose textual reality is anterior to his discovery, and who derives specifically from the "lilac ink" of historical representation: ". . . Pray for his repose / under the wreath of the lilac ink . . ." (*Omeros* 94). While Plunkett is evidently bound to a mode of representation of which he is an enthusiastic signifier, so too is his identity closely linked to a signifying system of which he is most certainly the signified: ". . . He was a very thorough /and observant young officer with an / honourable career ahead of him, but a bit raw. / His name was Plunkett, his vessel, *The Marlborough*" (*Omeros* 79).

The blank space on the family crest operates as a genealogical palimpsest, and Plunkett inscribes for himself an originary relation to St. Lucia whose basis derives from the military

exploits of the midshipman : ". . . A carved, scrolled shield waited / at the willow's base, his name and hyphen / for a closing date, then a space for a son and heir" (*Omeros* 87). Contrary to what the reader might have expected, however, the anxiety Plunkett experiences over his dubious family lineage is displaced by the elaboration of a myth. Plunkett, in other words, literally fashions a myth of origin around a British midshipman to whom he bears no familial relation whatsoever. The absence of any "factual" genealogical connection between Plunkett and his "son" prevents him from disclosing to anyone, including Maude, the "namesake" from which his identity, such as it is, most surely derives: ". . . Bless my unbelief, /Plunkett prayed. He would keep the namesake from Maude" (*Omeros* 94).

It is here that Plunkett's dependence on and complicity in the discretely historical begins to break down. History is reimagined by Plunkett in terms of an ever increasing confrontation with myth. The emergence of this confrontation in the poem calls into question the idea that history operates in a space of representation independent of myth. For Plunket, as for the figure of the poet, one mode of representation will come to serve as the very condition of possibility of the other. Before turning to the different ways this complex relationship is inscribed in the poem, it is first of all necessary to examine the different events that produce in Plunkett a desire to mark the limits of traditional notions of historiography.

Plunkett's method of organizing, recording, and documenting St. Lucian experience undergoes a process that depends upon at least three contemporary critiques of historical representation. The first of these critiques is that the veracity of historical discourse is predicated upon the assumption that meaning is not an effect of a particular order of knowledge but a self-evident fact whose specificity is merely reported upon. As Stephen Slemon suggests in "Wilson Harris and the 'Subject' of Realism," historical-realist texts attempt to naturalize the signifying system within which they are constructed—a move that depoliticizes the conditions of their production (74). The methodological crisis that Plunkett undergoes is presumably motivated by a notably masculinist desire to give Helen, the "arrogant servant [who] ruled [his] house" (*Omeros* 29), a legitimate history of her own: ". . . Helen needed a history, / that was the pity that Plunkett felt towards her" (*Omeros* 30). But Plunkett also experiences a kind of textual vertigo when he places the "mirror" of the historical register in relation to the racial and sexual other: ". . . He was fixed by her glance / in the armoir's full-length mirror . . ." (*Omeros* 96).

Put another way, the aporia between Breen's narrative of the island and the "oblique" presence of Helen serves to unsettle the foundational meaning of the "stone house" that previously functioned as the unquestioned master historical text: "Black maid or blackmail, her presence in the stone house / was oblique but magnetic. Every hour of the day, / even poking around the pigs, he knew where she was" (*Omeros* 97). The contractual agreement between author (Breen) and reader (Plunkett) appeals to a stable referent (colonialist history) in relation to which the non-European is signified only as absence—if he or she is signified at all (Slemon 74): "The shreds of the ocean's floor passed him from corpses / that had perished in the crossing, their hair like weeds, / their bones were long coral fingers, bubbles of eyes" (*Omeros* 45). When this contract is broken, a linguistic disjuncture occurs: "[Plunkett] could see [Helen's] shadow through the sheets of the laundry (*Omeros* 97). The sudden recognition of an extra-historical other on the island renders Breen's account starkly one-dimensional: ". . . [S]kirting emotion / as a ship avoids a reef, [Historians] [follow] one chart / dryly with pen and compass, flattening an ocean / to paper diagrams" (*Omeros* 95).

While Plunkett had earlier participated enthusiastically in the production and preservation of colonialist knowledge on the island, the "passionless books" (which do not reflect the "smell, eyes, and the long black arm" of Helen) marginalize the more essential "knowledge that the island's beauty" exists in a mode of discourse "unafflicted" by the conventional constraints of historical representation (*Omeros* 96): ". . . [T]he factual fiction / of textbooks, pamphlets,

brochures, which [Plunkett] had loaded / in a ziggurat from the library, had the affliction / of impartiality" (*Omeros* 95). They did not, however, contain in them any accounting of "the wild heights of . . . splendor and arrogance" that is both Helen and the island of St. Lucia. For if truth is beauty, implies Plunkett, then the secret "knowledge" of "the island's beauty [is] in her looks" (*Omeros* 96). For Plunkett, Breen's narrative history of the island is no longer an unmediated reflection of object and event but the product of a particular—and thus contestable—way of organizing the world. The truth of Breen's narrative, in sum, is no longer regarded by Plunkett as that which is given but that which is made.

The second critique is that historical discourse is seen as committed to the problematical goal of systematically describing the totality of worldly experience (Slemon 74). Breen, of course, posits the totality of St. Lucian experience in units that correspond directly to the naval history of the island: "history [is] a cannon . . . De Grasse / leaving Martinique, and Rodney crouching to act in the right wind" (*Omeros* 92). However, the totalizing patterns that emerge out of the "iron resurrection" of St. Lucian history begin to corrode when Plunkett and his "book burdened heart" perceive "the vows of the Empire" as being somehow incomplete. The sheer weight and the physical objectivity of the Battle of the Saints dissolve like a "ghost of canvas turned to cloud." In their place arrives Helen—a woman whose very alterity requires an appropriate narrative of its own. The mysterious pleasure that Plunkett experiences in her physical being compels him to acknowledge that the barely perceived image gliding over the mirror of the colonial text is the unspeakable shadow "that made a drama out of every passing" (*Omeros* 97). Plunkett, recognizing the textual omission his predecessor commits, resolves that "henceforth her shadow will glide on every mirror," and that ". . . all History's appeal / lies in this Judith from a different people" (*Omeros* 97).

Breen's representation of colonial experience also directs the attention of the reader "onto the object under observation and away from the figure who is observing, measuring, and recording" (Slemon 74). Consequently his analysis focuses exclusively on the visible elements of the battle which can be "accurately" measured: ". . . The *Marlborough* / declined engagement and veered from the cannonade"; "the wind grew too light, both fleets were tacking off course / and closing in at three or four knots from the wind's / changing sides"; "In the channel with three islets christened 'Les Saints,' / in a mild sunrise the ninth ship of the French line / flashed fire at the *Marlborough*" (*Omeros* 84). Meaning for Breen is always self-evident. Its "order of figuration" is incapable of effecting the question of the historical "I," because the "burden of representation" is shifted unequivocally to the discovery of the objects themselves (Slemon 74): ". . . he was to observe / from certain ports the tonnage, direction, and mass / of Dutch merchant men; the arms they shipped in reserve / to American colonies through St. Eustatius" (*Omeros* 79). The successful representation of historical experience rests not on the ability to interpret an event as it unfolds, but on the ability to let the event record itself: ". . . Observation is character, / so he watched [The Ville de Paris] wallowing in her wounded pride / with her loosened stores" (*Omeros* 85). As Aijaz Ahmad points out, however, the logic underwriting the idea of "neutral description" constitutes the epistemological ground from which ideology conceals itself as such:

> [T]o 'describe' is to specify a locus of meaning, to construct an object of knowledge, and to produce a knowledge that will be bound by that act of descriptive construction. 'Description' has been central, for example, in the colonizing discourses. It was by assembling a monstrous machinery of description—of our bodies, our speech acts, our habitats, our conflicts and desires, our politics, our socialities and sexualities, in fields as various as ethnology, fiction, photography, linguistics, political science—that those discourses were able to classify and ideological-

> ly master colonial subjects, enabling the transformation of descriptively verifiable multiplicity and difference into the ideologically felt hierarchy of value. To say, in short, that what one is presenting is 'essentially descriptive' is to assert a level of facticity which conceals its own ideology, and to prepare a ground from which judgements of classification, generalization and value can be made. (99)

Plunkett, finally sensing the "weighty" presence of the ideological in the sweeping conclusions drawn by Breen, learns that History, as a process of disinterested observation, is incapable of transcending the conventional, cultural, and historical biases of its recorder. Indeed, Plunkett recognizes that Breen is utterly constrained in his ability to see past the battle or to document the elusive presence of otherness on the island: ". . . [Plunkett] had come that far / to learn that History earns its own tenderness / in time; not for a naval victory, but for / the V of a velvet back in [Helen's] dress" (*Omeros* 103). While Breen attempts to efface his identity in the historical text "as a ship" might change course to "avoid a reef" (*Omeros* 95), Plunkett perceives that the "final fiction" of the objective "I" contains in it a trace, a kind of unmistakable excess, that cannot help but to reveal the political context within which it is produced: "In History, he'd had a crypto-fascist master / who loved German culture above everything else, / from the Royal House of Hanover to Kaiser Wilhelm" (*Omeros* 103). What was earlier a mimetic rendering of object and event in strictly empirical terms is now "historic print" colored by the "stiff factions" of "naval aquatint"(*Omeros* 103).

The third critique gestures to the way that historical discourse is fundamentally imperialist in nature, inasmuch as it seeks to appropriate, classify, and order the particular object or event it places under investigation (Slemon 74-75). When Plunkett begins to map the geo-political boundaries of the Battle of the Saints, for example, it is always in terms commensurate with and dependent upon the hemispheric scope of the British conquest of the Americas: ". . . What he was after / was such destruction it would be heard in Europe—/ masts splintering like twigs and fed to the fire / in George the Third's hearth—in which the sun's gold sovereign / would henceforth be struck in the name of one Empire / only in the Caribbean, gilding the coast / of the Eastern Seaboard from Georgia to Maine" (*Omeros* 95). As both signifier and signified of historical discourse, Plunkett comes to the postcolonial world believing in some kind of British "order," "coherence," and "Culture" (Slemon 74). He is both product and process of the "settled, monolithic over-writing" which British imperialism has always already inscribed upon (post)colonial space (Slemon 75): ". . . he'd found himself saying things like 'Luverly,' / 'Right-o,' and, Jesus christ, 'Ta!' from a wicker chair, / with the other old farts exchanging their brusque volley / in the class war"(*Omeros* 25, 26). The British subject who enters into the geo-political space of the (post)colonial Empire, then, enters simultaneously into a figurative space of enunciation that is always already coded in the language of imperialist appropriation (Slemon 75): ["Plunkett] drained the foaming Guinness. / Seychelles. Seashells. One more. In the olive saucer, / the dry stones were piling up, their greenpith sucked dry. / Got what we took from them, yes sir! Quick, because the/ Empire [is] webbing" (*Omeros* 30).

Recognizing his own imperialist tendencies, Plunkett considers another means in which to register "her past, her tribe" (*Omeros* 97): "It was at that moment he felt a duty / towards her hopelessness, something to redress / (he punned relentlessly) that desolate beauty / so like her island's" (*Omeros* 29, 30). Understanding, that is, the degree to which Breen's history of St. Lucia belongs only to British posterity, and driven by a sense of duty to weave a more inclusive narrative around Helen's "hopelessness," the Major begins to mark a series of connections between the Battle of the Saints and the Trojan War: "The Major made his own flock of V's, winged comments / in the margin when he found parallels" (*Omeros* 95). Discovering that "the

island was once / named Helen" (*Omeros* 31), Plunkett, "clapping conclusive hands" (*Omeros* 100), resolves to frame a one-to-one correspondence between the "Helen" of St. Lucia and the "Helen" of Troy: ". . . Is this chance / or an echo? Paris gives the golden apple, a war is / fought for an island called Helen?" (*Omeros* 100). The shadowy presence of Helen, who exerts a kind of corporeal pressure on extant narratives of British colonialism, places the formerly unmitigated record of St. Lucian history in direct confrontation with the mythical language of Homer: ". . . Her village was Troy, / its smoke obscuring soldiers fallen in battle" (*Omeros* 31).

The act of representing Helen and the island in discretely historical terms is no longer conceivable for Plunkett: "Now, whenever his mind drifted in detachment / like a catatonic noon on the Caribbean Sea/ Plunkett recited every billet, regiment, / of the battle's numerological poetry" (*Omeros* 91). To be sure, the recognition of racial and sexual otherness is made possible precisely because of the "knotted entanglement" of history and mythology on the island: ". . . If she / hid in their net of myths, knotted entanglements / of figures and dates, she was not a fantasy / but a webbed connection" (*Omeros* 95). For both Plunkett and the figure of the poet, the epistemological assumptions governing the logic of history and mythology now constitute the two "interlocking" sides of the text around which the battle for meaning is organized in the poem: "I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text; / her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking basins of the globe in which one half fits the next / into an equator, both shores neatly clicking / into a globe" (*Omeros* 319). The disciplinary logic navigating one discursive practice becomes entirely dependent upon the equal but opposite "balance, weight and design" of the other (*Omeros* 319): "Like the . . . halves of one brain, or the beat of both hands rowing that bear the two / vessels of the heart with balance, weight and design" (*Omeros* 319). In the "boat" that anchors both forms of representation, Plunkett and the poet are simultaneously self-asserting and self-canceling "shipmates" (*Omeros* 41).

Rei Terada proposes that the relation of historian and poet "wavers" during the course of the poem "as Walcott withdraws from the comparison, falls part of the way back into it, and withdraws from it yet another time" (194). This conclusion obviously presupposes that Walcott, as the author of both Plunkett and the figure of the poet, is compelled to give to the reader a reliable "grammatical signpost" as to which form of representation he in fact privileges in the poem: "Statements battle, break into exceptions and finally deepen into questions" (194). The idea that Walcott would avoid the question of authorial intention altogether becomes for Terada an unsatisfying rhetorical slight-of-hand: "The more Walcott's unanswered questions multiply, the more they come to seem rhetorical"(194). In the end, Terada concludes that Walcott cannot answer his "string of questions" because, like death, they exist in a kind of extra-linguistic after-world into which the mortal subject may not tread: "Walcott's string of questions reinforces its association to the end of life" (194).

I would argue that the poem poses a series of unanswerable questions on the politics of representation precisely in order to foreground the unlikely nature of the questions in the first place. In *Omeros*, historical and mythical discourses exist in such close proximity that it would be impossible for either Plunkett or the poet to fully extricate themselves from either one. Even the figure of the poet apprehends the impossibility of choosing one discourse over the other, as the poem's readers could "recall" either "th[e] [Trojan] battle/ for which they named an island / *or* the heaving wreck of the *Ville de Paris*" (*Omeros* 322, my emphasis). The persona of the poet cannot choose because one discourse does not function in the absence of the other: ". . . [B]ut there in the Khaki Ulysses / there was a changing shadow of Telemachus / in me, in his absent war, *and* an Empire's guilt / stitched in the one pattern of Maude's fabulous quilt" (*Omeros* 263, my emphasis).

The particularities of the geo-political history of St. Lucia are legitimated in the poem by virtue of the fact that historiography, an epistemology whose central aim is linked to the rational demythification of worldly experience, differentiates itself from the metaphysical

claims of mythology, an order of figuration whose authority is established not in accordance with the laws of positive science but in the name of transcendental truth: "So Plunkett decided that what the place needed /was its true place in history, that he'd spend hours / for Helen's sake on research, so he proceeded / to the whirr of enormous moths in the still house" (*Omeros* 64). The trans-historical register of myth, on the other hand, gains its value in *Omeros* by means of a foundational system of knowledge in relation to which the one-dimensional contingencies of the temporal world are relegated to the status of mere ephemera: ". . . skirting emotion / as a ship avoids a reef, [Historians] followed one chart / dryly with pen and compass . . . // . . . none noticed the Homeric repetition / of details, their prophecy. That was the difference" (*Omeros* 95, 96).

History and mythology assert themselves as intelligible regimes of knowledge only to the extent that the logic and coherence of one is dependent upon and incompatible with the illogic and incoherence of the other: "[Plunkett and I] had used two opposing strategems / in praise of [Helen] and the island" (*Omeros* 271). The space of representation between history and mythology in the poem constitutes the confrontational ground on which the production of Truth is at once affirmed and refuted, as the conventional set of rules ordering the production, distribution, and reception of one kind of knowledge is, as Paul de Man might put it, "precisely the error denounced by the other" (1179): "History was a cannon, not a [mythical] lizard; De Grasse / leaving Martinique, and Rodney crouching to act / in the right wind. // Was the greatest battle / in naval history . . . / fought for a creature with . . . elbows like a goalie? For this a redoubt / was built? And his countrymen died? For a lizard / with an Aruac name?" (*Omeros* 92).

The relation of history and mythology in *Omeros* is mutually constitutive and radically nullifying. The poem embodies two meanings, both of which are mutually exclusive. Since the meaning of one discourse is enabled only in relation to the established meaning of its discursive counterpart, the reader may not decide with the certainty of foundational truth which meaning has priority over the other. It is not, in other words, a question of simply choosing between "antipodal" meanings at work in the text, the historical or the mythical, the contingent or the universal, the temporal or the timeless, depending on your point of view, because both meanings always already imply one another: "Boys watched the white man's inexhaustible patience / chasing the curious piglets away from his work, / which was to prove that the farthest exclamations / of History are written by a flag of smoke, / from Carthage, from Pompeii, from the burial mound of antipodal Troy" (*Omeros* 98, 99). Indeed, the act of choosing the truth of one epistemology over the non-truth of the other is an ideologically charged operation whose very condition of possibility is inextricably tied to the functioning of power. To privilege a discursive practice whose epistemological presuppositions are coincidental with and the result of the interests of a particular ideology is also to engage in the productive application of force, as the willed affirmation of one way of knowing is by definition the willed refusal of the other.

By the same token, however, one may not suppose that by means of a dynamic system of exchange the relation of history and mythology is a dialectical one. History and mythology constitute the two poles around which meaning is organized and disseminated in *Omeros:* ". . . the island was once named Helen; its Homeric association / rose like smoke from a seige; the Battle of the Saints / was launched with that sound, from what was the 'Gibralter of the Caribbean," after thirteen treaties / while she changed prayers often as knees at an alter, / till between French and British her final peace / was signed at Versailles" (*Omeros* 31). The radically opposed valences of these two poles situate the differentiated meanings of the poem on parallel (and thus nonintersecting) lines: "I remembered that morning when Plunkett and I, / compelled by her diffident saunter up the beach, / sought grounds for her arrogance. He in the khaki / grass round the redoubt, I in the native speech / of its shallows; like enemy ships

of the line, / we crossed on a parallel" (*Omeros* 270). Like two opposed religions the rules governing the logic of both ways of knowing certainly refer to one another but they do not converge: "I felt the chasm that widened at Glen-da-Lough, / deep as a daisied trench, over the quilted bier, / the disenfranchisement no hyphenating rook / could connect between two religions, the one here / and that of our chapel" (*Omeros* 264, 265). The poem cannot embody two contradictory meanings at the same for the simple reason that the truth of one is entirely contingent upon its strong renunciation of the other: "[Plunkett] had been convinced that his course was right; I despised any design that . . . calculated the winds" (*Omeros* 270). The yoking together of opposed meanings in the text, therefore, may be achieved only as the result of an interested disavowal of the binary logic which gave each discourse its particular meaning in the first place.

The simultaneous affirmation and refutation of historical and mythical discourses in *Omeros* means that "two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings" are both possible and impossible (de Man 1179). When confronted with these equally tenable possibilities, however, the reader is unable to posit with the authority of absolute Truth which meaning is definitively privileged in the poem. The final meaning of the poem is thus endlessly deferred: ". . . So much left unspoken / by my chirping nib!" (*Omeros* 321). While the narrative initially seeks to demonstrate the way in which the incommensurability of history and mythology is constitutive of experience on the island of St. Lucia, it also suggests, more than elegiacally, that their "coiled" relation constitutes the irreconcilable basis of experience in all of Christiandom: "Both [are] condemned / to pass a thermometer like that ampersand / which connected their names on a blackboard, its sign, / coiled like a constrictor round the tree of Eden" (*Omeros* 292).

The final deadlock in the battle over absolute meaning in *Omeros* means that very particular questions must be asked of each discourse. These questions, I would argue, are insufficiently and perhaps even speciously posed at the end of the poem, insofar as the figure of the poet, who ultimately eschews the obfuscating "shadows" of history and mythology altogether, asks the reader to consider whether the true meaning of Helen might be essentially extra-discursive: ". . . There, in her head of ebony, there was no real need for the historian's / remorse, nor for literature's. Why not see Helen / as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow, / swinging her plastic sandals on th[e] beach alone, / as fresh as the sea-wind? Why make the smoke a door?" (*Omeros* 271). To be sure, the poet's final suggestion that the truth of Helen is somehow beyond the shaping limits of discursivity implies that new questions must issue from the contested field of critical theory itself. Rather than faithfully awaiting either the arrival or the return of a transcendental point of view, in other words, critical theory must ask how—and in what particular circumstances and towards what particular ends—is something approaching "the truth" constituted in the poem? What are the political and textual entailments of these various claims to the truth? How do the signs "history" and "mythology" operate in critical discussions of *Omeros*? To what uses are they put? Only then will *Omeros* scholarship disrupt, modify, and reconfigure the inaugural opposition in relation to which it labors today.

NOTE

1. I should state at the outset that the governing argument of this essay has been shaped by my reading of Paul de Man's "Semiology and Rhetoric."

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