

# “VIRGILIAN REEDS” – A PROGRAM CUE IN DEREK WALCOTT’S *OMEROS*

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Weaving *Omeros* into his work as both title and emblematic character, while adapting Dante’s three-verse stanzas and thematic frame of quest for paradise, Derek Walcott remakes epic tradition in a way that places Virgil in the middle – between his great predecessor and great successor. Varying Virgilian theme and structure, Walcott measures off his work in books and chooses a book’s close to consolidate his program for new epic. He closes Book One with a sudden appearance of his *Father’s Ghost* that links him to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and limns a measured ethical and poetic mission – retrospective and prospective – for the St. Lucian and African themes of the work’s first half, encompassing its first three books:<sup>1</sup>

At the corner of Bridge  
Street, we saw the liner as white as a mirage,  
its hull bright as paper, preening with privilege.

“Measure the days you have left, do just that labour  
that marries your heart to your right hand: simplify  
your life to one emblem, a sail leaving harbour

and sail coming in. All corruption will cry  
to be taken aboard. Fame is that white liner  
at the end of your street, a city to itself.

72.16-24 (1.XIII.ii)

The scene brings to mind the picture – towards the close of the *Aeneid’s* sixth book and first half – of *Aeneas* getting his Roman mission from his *Father’s Shade*, where the theme of Rome’s dominance over Greece makes the implicit – metapoetic – point that Virgil’s new program for epic outdoes Homer’s.

<sup>1</sup>VAN SICKLE, 1999, 19–22, on *Om.* 67.10-76.9 (1.XII.i-1.XIII.iii) [numbers refer to Page/s.line/s (Book.CHAPTER.scene/s)]: cumbersome methods of reference are needed because the poet and publisher have refused repeated requests to furnish the text with a numbering system that would locate lines readily within scene, chapter, and book (see author’s note, p. 7).

Walcott throughout his first three books represented himself as exiled – only a tourist to his St. Lucian home – in a modern Caribbean variation on the displacement of Virgil's and Dante's heroes. Intrigued, perhaps seduced, certainly empowered by an old metaphor, still popular on the island, that calls St. Lucia "Helen of the Antilles,"<sup>2</sup> he invented a local character named *Helen*, endowed with all the fatal charm of the mythic model but imagined with "madras head-tie ...[and an] unimaginable ebony mask" that turned all eyes, including his (23.22-24.4-5 {1.IV.iii}). Capitalizing on the mytheme of a beauty that causes obsessive love, Walcott made this new *Helen* captivate a pig farmer, the retired British Sergeant Major *Dennis Plunkett*.<sup>3</sup> He portrayed the farmer's mind as slightly deranged – wounded fighting Rommel in North Africa – and thus susceptible to metaphoric confusion. In Walcott's metaphoric blend, infatuation for the ebony *Helen* leads *Major Plunkett* to compose a colonial history for the "Helen of the Antilles" (sc., St. Lucia) and to identify the great colonial "Battle of 'The Saints'" (1782, between British and French) with the legendary war caused by "Greek Helen" at Troy (Books 1 and 2).<sup>4</sup>

Besides, Walcott invented other lovers to compete for his *Helen* – two fishermen, *Hector* and *Achille*, the latter imagined also as transported in hallucinatory vision back to his African roots, though powerless to reverse history and save his ancestor from enslavement (Book 3).

Walcott closes the initial books and the poem's first half with a blessing from his wraith-like mother that echoes and complements the programmatic encounter with his *Father's Ghost* (that implicit shadow of *Anchises*):

"Warwick's son," she said.  
"Nature's gentleman." His vine-leaves haloed her now.  
166-23-24 (3.XXXII.i)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 8–9, nn. 3, 4.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 12–13.

<sup>4</sup>Walcott's derring-do with metaphoric blending of disparate plots, times, and spots cries out for interpretation from the theoretical perspective offered by FAUCONNIER, and TURNER 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. "I saw him patterned in shade, the leaves in his hair, | the vines of the lucent body, the swift's blown seed." 69.8-9 (1.XIII.i).

The poet turns northwards in books four and five to his exiled state, which he sketches gradually and self-consciously in a series of programmatic scenes. In this expressly metapoetic context, then, he will make his sole explicit reference to Virgil.

Introducing the exilic books and distinguishing them from their Caribbean & African predecessors, Walcott locates his *Narrator* alone on a New England beach “With the stunned summer going,” while autumn and winter loom: a cycle of seasonal contrast alien to the Caribbean, where January is green (169.1 {4.XXXIII.i}).

From the beach, he puts the *Narrator* “Back in Brookline,” in a house left empty by departed love (4.XXXIII.ii). Addressing the loneliness, he shifts from his usual, Dantesque form, with its three-line stanzas more or less rhymed, to snappy rhyming couplets characterized as exorcism:

Unlucky house that I uncurse  
by rites of genuflecting verse.  
173.17-18 (4.XXXIII.iii)

The couplets invoke the theme of healing through poetic craft:

I do not live in you, I bear  
my house inside me everywhere  
until your winters grow more kind  
by the dancing firelight of mind.  
173.3-6 (4.XXXIII.iii)

The motifs of winter, “dancing,” and “firelight” foreshadow developments to come, starting in the next scene with an exploratory flight of mind that reaches for Native American history to counter personal loss.

Walcott begins his search for historical counterparts to his loss by imagining an airplane journey across the continent, where he takes a hint from sighting a Native American:

Clouds whitened the Crow horseman and I let him pass  
into the page, and I saw the white waggons move  
across it, with printed ruts, then the railroad track  
and the arrowing interstate, as a lost love  
narrowed from epic to epigram....  
175.2-6 (4.XXXIV.i)

Ironies shadow the new departure. "Clouds" alter the "Crow horseman" to get him into the poem. The hint of cloudy vision enabling new departures in plot and theme recalls the wounded and hallucinatory mind of the pig farmer that served as a means for getting colonial history into books two and one.

"Whitened" along with "Crow" and "I let him pass" increases irony. "Crow" also names a bird that is black; "whitened" and "pass" suggest a person of color seeking to conceal the fact and pretending to change racial complexion. The unexpected and self-conscious tone marks the new thematic initiative as if in doubt of its authenticity. With greater confidence Walcott assimilated the rhythmic work of coal-carriers from St. Lucia, when he affirmed the duty declared by his *Father's Ghost*, "to give those feet a voice" (76.3).

Paradox grows in the ensuing vision: "and I saw the white wagons..." The century of history that displaced the Native Americans flashes before the poet's eyes and the encroaching wagons fit the page more naturally than the dark Crow.<sup>6</sup> Their canvas covers have the right color and their ruts are "printed," like the page's lines, which meld metaphorically with successive means of displacement – rail lines and roads. In climactic irony, metaphor makes the interstate highway speed like an arrow shot from a Native American bow.

At this point the *Narrator* reflects on what he has been doing by means of metapoetic metaphors: while his vision stretched to North American history and the "arrowing interstate," his "lost love narrowed," shrinking "from epic to epigram." He expects us to remember that epic and epigram are literary types that stand at opposite extremes of the classical genre scale. They define a literary gamut that stretches from broad narrative to brief, pithy form; here they reflect back on the whole reach of themes just introduced that range from historical and public to personal. As a metaphor for change in love, shifting from vastness to something contained may imply healing or at least reducing pain. The imagined shift appears to reflect upon – thematize, if you will – the

<sup>6</sup>Cf. the ambivalence towards the "white liner" and "bright paper," which represent "fame" [72.16-24 (1.XIII.ii), cited above] – ostensibly banned by his *Father's Ghost*, yet sought by any poet presuming to challenge Homer, Virgil, Dante: hence the scene with the ghost emerges as a classic demurrer – *recusatio* – worthy of Virgil's ecl. 6.1-12.

shift from twelve-syllable lines in triplets loosely rhymed to eight-syllable lines in rhyming couplets that took place in the scene just previous.

Walcott brings this self-reflexive and exploratory flight to a head with a retrospective glance and epigrammatic summary that rises to a prospective and climactic motif:

and Manifest Destiny was behind me now.  
My face frozen in the ice-cream paradiso  
of the American dream, like the Sioux in snow.  
175.10-12 (4.XXXIV.i)

Looking back, Walcott synthesizes his vision with sharp metonymy. He identifies the whole of the West with an ideological slogan, “Manifest Destiny,” that had justified conquest by whites:

After 200 years of westward expansion had brought them as far as Missouri and Iowa, Americans suddenly perceived their destined goal. *The whole continent was to be theirs!* Theirs to exploit, and theirs to make into one mighty nation, a land of opportunity, a showcase to display the virtues of democratic institutions, living proof that Americans were indeed God’s chosen people. A journalist named John L. O’Sullivan captured the new mood in a sentence. Nothing must interfere, he wrote in 1845, with “the fulfillment of our *manifest destiny* to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”<sup>7</sup>

Walcott’s disdain for triumphal ideology was evident already in the first scene of book four, where he referred to “unceasing | self-deceit in an eternal republic” (169.13-14). Now he dramatizes the situation in densely interwoven tropes. “Frozen” conveys a feeling of paralysis, alienation, and entrapment. “Ice-cream paradiso” juxtaposes a common product with a lofty ideal. The Italian word for paradise specifically evokes the *Paradiso* at the climax of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and brings it down to the level of a frivolous, even deleterious, confection. The oxymoron punctures and makes light of “the American dream.”

The final comparison to the “Sioux in snow” then propounds the further paradox that the ice-cream most like snow would be vanilla,

<sup>7</sup>GARRATY, 1979, 263–64..

although *nocciola* if not *gianduia* would better match this visage. Calling his face "frozen" in a *paradiso* of ice-cream also evokes the Italian *gelato*, which means literally "frozen" but commonly stands by metonymy for "ice-cream." At the same time, "frozen" also brings to mind not Dante's paradise but the lowest circle of his *Inferno*, which he imagined as not hot but cold, with the perfidious Brutus, Cassius, and Judas Iscariot as locked in eternal ice.

The reference to "Sioux in snow" provokes more irony. After the generic, even ambivalent, enrollment of Native American themes through the "whitened" figure of the "Crow," Walcott evokes a terrible milestone in the history of "Indian affairs." On their way to take part in a celebration of the messianic religion of the Ghost Dance, a band of Sioux numbering 107 men and 250 women and children was massacred by nearly 500 United States troops at Wounded Knee Creek, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, December 30, 1890, their bodies left to freeze under a blizzard.<sup>8</sup> Making a metaphoric bond that is both bold and difficult, Walcott links their fate to his own situation in the North. The linkage challenges readers supplied with nothing but traditional literary knowledge to broaden their range and revise the version of American history learned in school.<sup>9</sup>

Getting ready to develop his new themes, Walcott opens the second scene by recalling the associative and metaphoric method he has used before: "The wandering smoke below me was like | Achille's hallucination." (175.13-14 {4.XXXIV.ii}). Expanding his appropriation of western history, he depicts the "spike for the Union Pacific" figuratively "hammered into the heart of their country as the Sioux looked on." (175.16-18);<sup>10</sup> he closes by reinforcing his new linkage with the Sioux as he compares their "stunned, anachronistic faces" with his own, theirs "for a land that was lost" and his for "a woman who was gone" (175.24).

By any stretch of imagination great distances remain between the poet's alienation in Boston, the history of colonial expansion in North America, and the grim story of the Sioux. Needing to bridge such formidable thematic gaps, Walcott abruptly shifts focus in the chapter's

<sup>8</sup>BROWN, 1970, 439-45; POWERS, 1975, 120-22.

<sup>9</sup> Some schools now include pre-Columbian and colonial history, e.g. MILANICH, 2001, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup>BROWN, 426-27.

third scene, where he inaugurates and begins to project an intermediate thematic range in an ambitious demarche, densely programmed – exemplified and signalled by metapoetic signage that brings Virgil at last from subtext to surface:

The elegies of summer sighed in the marram,  
to bending Virgilian reeds. Languid meadows  
raised their natural fly-screens around the Parkin farm.

Larks arrowed from the goldenrod into soft doors  
of enclosing thunderheads, and the rattled maize  
threshed like breaking surf to Catherine Weldon's ears.

176.1-6 (4.XXXIV.iii)

At first glance – as often in *Omeros* for its cinematic shifts in voice or viewpoint – a moment of confusion ensues, until a rural landscape begins to coalesce, down to details of setting, time, and place, with elusive – strange somehow familiar – names. Walcott makes the sounds of summer stand for the season by metonymy, and he represents them via metaphor as poetry of a particular kind – elegy, a genre that evokes nostalgia if not grief. He takes me back to summers spent in southern Wisconsin at the Reynolds farm – white house with columned porch, trellis and climbing rose, a hand pump by the rusty windmill, and two gnarled cedars flanking the creaky gate to the unpaved county road.

The metaphor of elegies follows the two others of poetic genre in the immediately preceding scenes, where the bold lines of epic stood for the range of colonial history and the particular point of epigram for the poignancy of personal plight: “printed ruts, then the railroad track | and the arrowing interstate, as a lost love | narrowed from epic to epigram” (175.4-6). Following the hint of literary hierarchy, with epic most far-ranging, epigram most slight, elegy enters as a third between low and high. The resulting scale of literary ranges – epigram, elegy, epic – brings to mind Virgil's works in their thematic ranges: bucolic herding, georgic farming, and civic-heroic warfare.<sup>11</sup> In such a tripartite framework, Walcott's “elegies” associated with rural landscape – farm and harvest – suggest a new version of the Virgilian middle – georgic – range.

<sup>11</sup>Re: tripartite ordering in Virgil and his tradition, VAN SICKLE, 2004a, 257, and 1999, 14–17.

The picture of elegiac melancholy continues with the verb, "sighed," but the nostalgic illusion breaks at the end of the line, where "marram" baffles me and others whom I ask. Occurring only here in *Omeros*, it is a nonce word, *hapax legomenon* – one of those stylistic peculiarities that provoke and test attentive readers. The context hints that it must be a place or plant able to make a soughing sound, but it has got to get looked up, demands our best as readers, explicators, teachers. Walcott seems, not unlike Virgil closing eclogue three with riddles or opening eclogue one with his preternatural use of "oat" to imply poetic pipe,<sup>12</sup> seems, I repeat, to have set for eager interpreters an opportunity, occasion, stimulus – maybe snare or rack,<sup>13</sup> although the fable of spite for the commentators that all such poetry wants, like many such literary anecdotes, tends to let biographical fiction trump interpretative toil, blinding readers to the metapoetic point of difficulties, despite the Aristotelian warning that the sticking points (*adynata*) should carry the reader upwards (*anapherein*) to truer understanding of the form of the work (*to beltion*).

Taking the bait, you quickly turn up roots in botanical, etymological, and literary lore. Marram grass (described in botany as *Ammophila*, "sand loving" or *Arundo arenaria*, "reed of the sand") secures and stabilizes dunes along Europe's northern coasts by means of matted rhizomes – criss-crossing and interlacing rootlike growth beneath the ground. The name derives, says the *Oxford English Dictionary*, from a combination of two verbal roots that specify its location and form: the Old Norse *mar-r* ("sea") and *alm-r* ("reed, stalk"), so marram yields the rough etymological meaning of "sea reed."

Now this *mar-* of course has an etymological pedigree traceable back to the same Indo-European source from which flowed Latin *maris* and then French *mer*. The latter served Walcott for a two-fold pun that associated the name *Omeros* with "sea" (*mer*) and "mother" (*mère*) in the "Antillean patois" of St. Lucia (14.9-15 [1.II.iii]). Yet *mar-* also suggests a paronomastic relay back to Virgil, whose full tripartite Roman name after all was *Publius Vergilius Maro*, so that its third part alone (*cognomen*) often served to identify the poet as just *Maro*.

<sup>12</sup>Re: peculiarity in Virgil's use of *avena*, VAN SICKLE, 2004b, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup>Re: the report that Virgil meant to tease and torment exegetes, VAN SICKLE, 2004a, 11.

The second root in marram, “*almr*,” also boasts an etymological history, like the Germanic *Halm* (“straw, stalk”), reaching back to Indo-European stock. The root gave rise to an offshoot in Greek, *kalamos*, meaning “reed” or “stalk,” but also – by metonymies from material to fashioned objects – various practical instruments and tools, among them syrinx – pipe that *Pan* invented from the reeds he clutched when trying to rape *Syrinx*, the nymph who escaped her stalker by metamorphosis into reed. Many of these metonymies carried over when *kalamos* emigrated to become Latin *calamus*, from which – by still further metonymies of practical employment – comes Italian *calamaio*, “container for the ink used with a (reed) pen.” *Calamus* as reed and pipe became – by means of more metonymy – an emblem for pastoral poetry, thanks to Virgil in the *Book of Bucolics*, who cited the myth that Pan invented the bucolic pipe (*Bucolics* 2.32, 8.24), making reeds stand by metonymy not only for the pipe, but for the poetry in which it appears, hence for the whole bucolic or pastoral tradition.<sup>14</sup> Walcott’s closing phrase, then, “Virgilian reeds,” resonates obliquely with both the roots in “marram”: “Virgilian” with the hint in *mar-* of *Maro*, and “reeds” with *almr/calamus* – Virgilian symbol for the bucolic range.

Discovering such a fabric of literary roots makes Walcott’s language seem more than ever artificial and alien – an imposture on the American prairie setting. “Marram” remains the European name for a plant of coastal dunes not native to northwestern Nebraska’s Sand Hills or the Badlands of South Dakota. Reeds, as plants of marshland, remain unnatural to those arid climes. Even supposing vernal ponds where teal, cranes, avocets and stilts could nest, “reeds” would still not describe native cattail or rush, to say nothing of Lakota plant names. In short the use of “marram” here amounts to constructive catachresis, by which I mean misuse of language, straining for effect, that provokes interpretative adventure and promises to generate meaning.<sup>15</sup> The strangeness may inspire inquiry into Plains ecology, but its main object seems literary. It helps to mark Walcott’s program as tripartite and neo-Virgilian even while contributing a bucolic trace to his incipient middle – georgic – range.

<sup>14</sup>VAN SICKLE, 2004b, 340–41.

<sup>15</sup>Re: catachresis in Virgil, *ibid.*, 353.

Meanwhile, the idiom – “to sigh to” – is a metaphor-metonymy with two different meanings: (1) audibly exhale to convey deep feeling to another; (2) express deep feelings in a manner suggested by another, sc. according to that other's lead. Walcott may imagine “Virgilian reeds” as “bending” because moved to sympathy by the sigh (1), or as a powerful model of expressive movement for the elegies to follow (2).

The notion of modern elegies inspiring ancient reeds (1) implies a dynamic concept of tradition. It conceives of the later poet exercising reinterpretative power that reconstitutes, regroups, and supplements the prior, generating new significance and energizing the tradition from some new point of vantage or view.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the notion (2) that a modern poet takes inspiration from Virgil and responds to his lead corresponds to the common view that literary tradition dictates new practice by setting genre norms.<sup>17</sup>

Both notions seem required to describe Walcott's use of his nonce word here: (2) with its homage to Virgil (*Maro*) and his bucolic range (reeds), yet (1) revising them to initiate a new georgic range. To be sure, when Virgil shifted upwards on the epic scale from the *Bucolics* to the *Georgics* and to farming as his thematic frame, he gave reeds a different metonymic value – *levis calamos* (*Geo.* 2.358: “smooth reeds = stakes” to prop plants) or *fragiles calamos* (*Geo.* 1.76: “brittle reeds = stalks” of lupine – a weed). Yet his prior link of reeds with bucolic tradition via references to *Pan*'s invention remains an ineradicable trace.

Although surprised and pleased at Walcott's bending Virgilian metapoetics to his own programmatic designs, I must not have been quite ready to chalk “marram” up to just poetic genius or luck. Its preternatural aptness kept it in active memory, ready to excite when discovered in a context Walcott would have known without botanical handbooks or scouring European shores – a context itself metapoetic that synthesized and redefined tradition, thus reinforcing the links already glimpsed between “marram” and bucolic roots.

<sup>16</sup> As Virgil refounds bucolic tradition with new authority from Rome (ecl. 1.45): VAN SICKLE, 2004a, xxviii, 257, s.v. Tityran mode, *aition*, Roman; but on Walcott as refounding epic, VAN SICKLE, 1999, 7–8, 13–17.

<sup>17</sup> As Virgil acknowledges the authority of Theocritus (ecl. 2.35-29: “this pipe now holds you as second”): VAN SICKLE, 2004a, 127, n.63.

Homer's ephrasis of the shield for *Achilles* (*Il.* 18.478-608) had long been crucial to my conception of epic (Greek *epos*) with its contrapuntal thematic ranges – heroic, georgic, bucolic.<sup>18</sup> So when I discovered that W. H. Auden, who was influential on Walcott,<sup>19</sup> had published *The Shield of Achilles*, I rushed to get the book. Opening the slender tome, I was elated to find that it began with a seven-poem sequence called BUCOLICS – *Winds, Woods, Mountains, Lakes, Islands, Plains, and Streams*.

At first glance, much seemed alien to ancient pastoral, yet the first poem closed with a wry riff on a poetic program: a self-deprecatory and overtly metapoetic prayer to a “Goddess of winds and wisdom” on behalf of a “poet with bodily tics | Scratching, tapping his teeth, | tugging the lobe of one ear,”<sup>20</sup> who beseeches this unlikely muse to ward off “moon-faced Nonsense”:<sup>21</sup>

And in all winds, no matter  
 Which of Your twelve he may hear,  
 Equinox gales at midnight  
 Howling through marram grass,  
 Or a faint sussuration  
 Of pines on a cloudless  
 Afternoon in midsummer,  
 Let him feel You present,  
 That every verbal rite  
 May be fittingly done,  
 And done in anamnesis  
 Of what is excellent  
 Yet a visible creature,  
 Earth, Sky, a few dear names.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. n. 11 above, also charts at <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classics/jvsickle/shldisc.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Hirsch in conversation (05-09-22), citing his interviews with Walcott: reprinted now by BAER, 1996, 50-63, 95-121; also Baer on Walcott's "Eulogy to W. H. Auden" (194-206).

<sup>20</sup>Cf. the image of *Apollo* tugging the ear of *Tityrus* in a notoriously metapoetic and often misconstrued drama of restraint (ecl. 6.2-5), discussed by VAN SICKLE, 2004a, xxxi, 250, s.v. ccl. 6.

<sup>21</sup>AUDEN, 1955, 12.

Here was Walcott's "sea reed," more at home in Auden's spring or autumn storms and generically European landscape than on Walcott's North American plains. To be sure, "marram" still would have to get looked up by anyone not attuned to the ecology of the European littoral. Its greater naturalness with Auden's gales, however, absent a metapoetic signal like "Virgilian reeds," might not provoke the search that circles back to *Maro* and his thing for *Pan* pursuing reeds. Nor, without that metapoetic goad, might one remark that Auden next distills from Virgil and Theocritus a kind of bucolic essence that makes the whole vignette a prelude particularly apt for Walcott's specific distillate from Virgil.

In counterpoint to his "gales at midnight | Howling through mar-ram grass," which evokes wild sound in turbulent, dark – georgic or odyssean – nature, Auden places a symmetrically opposed scene: "faint sussuration | Of pines on a cloudless | Afternoon in midsummer." His choice motifs do more than our most recent commentaries to illustrate one programmatic link between the founders of bucolic-pastoral tradition;<sup>22</sup> for he echoes and combines two of their defining moments. To open the first idyll, "sweet rustling of pine" – while *Pan* nearby was napping – stamped Theocritus' initial and programmatic version of a bucolic setting (id. 1.1-2: *hady ti to psithyrisma kai ha pitys*).<sup>23</sup> Then Auden's "sussuration" points to the first eclogue, where Virgil made the exiled *Melibæus* praise a sonorous and somnolent situation through sounds that imitate both nature and the sonorous texture of Theocritus, also fondly linking past with future (*quae semper*, "as ever"),<sup>24</sup> in a nostalgic mood like Walcott's "elegies of summer," though the trace of Roman elegy in Virgil was erotic-tragic.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Negligent in this regard COLEMAN, 1977, 84, and CLAUSEN, 1994, 52–53 – compared and evaluated in this journal by VAN SICKLE, 1995, 114–33.

<sup>23</sup> Documented with magisterial finesse by HUNTER, 1999, 68–72.

<sup>24</sup>The mytheme of "time uninterrupted" works in two ways (at two levels, as they say): (1) politically, to obscure and mystify the disruption of the journey to Rome by *Tityrus* and submission to a *New God*, sc. Octavian; (2) metapoetically, to mystify poetic change, assert continuity, with respect to prior literary tradition – a suppositious bucolic ideal.

<sup>25</sup> Virgil does integrate the elegiac poet Gallus into the bucolic range replacing in eclogue ten the hero of Theocritean bucolic, *Daphnis*, and prefiguring the fatally passionate hero *Orpheus* of the fourth georgic: VAN SICKLE, 2004a, xix, 250–51, s.v. 'Gallus'. Misprision of *Gallus* in ecl. 10 by G. B. Conte gets

Hinc tibi quae semper uicino ab limite saepes  
 Hyblaeis apibus florem depasta salicti  
 saepe levi somnum suadebit inire sussurro.<sup>26</sup>

(Hence for you, as ever, from its nearby bourn the croft<sup>27</sup>  
 with willow flower grazed down by Hyblan bees  
 will oft with subtle rustle soothe in sleep.)

ecl. 1.53-55

Auden makes the relatedness of the two scenes explicit by blending them into one, grafting Virgil's *sussuro* onto Theocritus' musical pine. Consolidating this generic synthesis, Auden's weather, season, and hour also fit the time frame shared by the idyll and the eclogue, not to mention the faun of Mallarmé and Debussy.

Modulating, then, to a supplementary emphasis, Auden transliterates Greek *anamnesis* for recollective memory, challenging Plato (*Meno* and *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus* and *Republic*) through the framing metaphor that describes poetry as a "verbal rite," i.e., through the metaphor Auden redeems and qualifies poetry as a quasi-religious practice able to make excellence (cf. Plato's beautiful and good) visible in creatures (as it might be for Plato, *Symposium*, in a handsome lad, but not in a product of visual or verbal craft) – substantial, earthy not ideal – virtue peculiarly pastoral in nature.

By thus combining into one dense texture defining moments from the old bucolic poets, supplemented by a philosophical vindication,

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anatomized and rebuked at <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classics/jvsickle/codici-B10.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup>Politian, that awesomely learned and exquisitely attuned Virgilian, invoking *Pan*, redoubles the echo:

Hic resonat blando tibi pinus amata susurro,  
 hic vaga coniferis insibilat aura cupressis.

*Silva Rusticus* 11-12

[Here your loved pine with coaxing rustle echoes,  
 here with coned cypresses whistles roaming breeze.]

My translation of text from POLITIAN, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Croft, "little field," made to stand by metonymy (whole for part) for V's "hedge," which he imagines enclosing the field, in order to hint at his paronomastic incorporation of the intense quality of time in the living wall: *saepes* » *saepe* :: "hedge" ≈ "often."

Auden recovered and replicated a process central, characteristic, and indeed constitutive of pastoral as literary tradition. He remembered the past from the standpoint of a new frame that both confirmed and reached beyond remembered ranges, not incidentally engaging Plato, like Theocritus and Virgil, too, in their respective ways.<sup>28</sup>

Walcott, then, capitalizes on "marram" and "Virgilian reeds" to lay claim to the Virgilian heritage with its framework of three thematic ranges and to inaugurate his own version of the middle range, predominantly georgic but with traces of the bucolic. Filling out this framework, he adds the motif of "languid meadows," endowing his georgic range with subjective values of human psychology, as pastoral sometimes imputed feeling to nature. The "natural fly-screens" add ironical realism: what is a hot farm summer without the metallic zing of flies?

"Parkin" puzzles, however. The proper name could be a generic sign of settlement by immigrants from Britain, since it still appears in Cornwall and England and in genealogies, local histories, agricultural businesses, and farms around the American Middle West.<sup>29</sup> It also resonates with a similar name associated with relevant themes. "Parkman, Francis," the intrepid Bostonian, began his career as a historian by studying Chief Pontiac's revolt. Parkman went on to write *The Oregon Trail* (1846), a subject that Walcott has just commemorated as "white waggons...with printed ruts" (175.3-4 {4.XXXIV.i}). Parkman's *magnum opus* recounted the epic struggle between France and Britain for control of North America – a subject that Walcott brought into his own epic's first and second books through *Major Plunkett's* deranged history of "The Battle of 'The Saints'."

To his growing literary scenography, Walcott adds the image of larks arrowing to the sky – only slightly less catachrestic than "marram," since also a literary motif removed from American reality. The native American Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) rises in flight but has too weak a voice to match the legendary skylark of Europe (*Alauda arvensis*). But "larks arrowing" does replicate sounds from "Parkin" in a

<sup>28</sup>VAN SICKLE, 2000, 28–30, also 2004a, 254, s.v. Plato; likewise HUNTER, 1999, 14–17, and GUTZWILLER, 1991, 73–79.

<sup>29</sup>Evidence from the numerous genealogical notices available to search on the World-wide Web.

typical feature of Walcott's style (its paronomastic, metaphonic penchant, which so often forges metaphoric links).

A volley of metaphors hints at the myriad domains flickering, jostling, networking – like Lucretian atoms bumping into each other and hooking up to generate worlds – in Walcott's polyphyloprogenerative and anamnetic mind.<sup>30</sup> “Arrowed” for the bird's flight evokes the culture of the Native Americans. The image of “rattled maize” adds a further wrinkle, because this native name for the native grain of North America emigrated to Europe (but had the plant been widely adopted by settlers at the period imagined and renamed by immigrant metaphor “corn”?). Then “rattled” suggests the physical shaking of the stalks, but also can mean “upset, disturbed,” imputing a psychic state to grain, as “languid” did to meadows. “Threshed like breaking surf” combines in metaphor the harvest of the Great Plains with the restless motion of St. Lucia's Atlantic surge – often a home referent for Walcott's mind.

Completing this already complex fabric, Walcott summons a neglected figure from American history, *Catherine Weldon*,<sup>31</sup> “a Victorian artist and Indian rights activist from Brooklyn who lived with Sitting Bull and his family during the last years of his life,”<sup>32</sup> but by Walcott freely refashioned for his own designs as he proceeds to link her with other threads in the poem:

...a rolling excess  
from knoll and pasture concealed the wound of her son's  
death from a rusty nail. It returned the image<><sup>33</sup>  
when the goldenrod quivered, from a golden past.  
176.17-19 (4.XXXIV.iii)

Imagining Weldon without a son, Walcott relates her to the earlier plot that now in retrospect, from the vantage point of “marram” and “Virgilian reeds,” we recognize as georgic: “Only a son was missing”

<sup>30</sup>Bold blending again: see above, n. 4.

<sup>31</sup>WAGNER; HAMMER, 1997, 95-96.

<sup>32</sup>Eileen Pollack (e-mail, 01-08-10), also commenting on *Omeros*: “Amazing poem, and I love that Weldon is in there, but most of what he says about her is his own invention, not historically accurate.” See also POLLACK 2002 – her own now published “work of creative non-fiction” in search of Catherine Weldon.

<sup>33</sup>Comma added to clarify.

from the "fine marriage" of *Dennis* and *Maud Plunkett* (29.3 {1.V.ii}), in their georgic role of farming, albeit pigs – not featured in ancient epic, although swineherds make a cameo appearance in the tenth eclogue and the swineherd proves a trusty ally to his returning master *Odysseus*.

Describing *Weldon* as wounded by her son's death, Walcott forges two further links. He portrayed *Plunkett*, too, as wounded, suffering from a war wound that remained to be healed (28.1-4 {1.V.ii}). But the detail that the death of *Weldon's* son's came "from a rusty nail" recalls a "rusty anchor" that Walcott imagined as wounding the St. Lucian fisherman *Philoctete* (10.1-2 {1.II.i}). This Caribbean *Philoctete*, like his namesake in classical myth, suffers from a smelly, suppurating wound, which symbolizes, in the narrative and thematic frame of *Omeros*, the historical suffering of enslavement and "The Crossing" from Africa to the New World; the search for its cure becomes an ethical and psychological goal of the work:

He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles  
of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?  
That the cross he carried was not only the anchor's  
but that of his race, for a village black and poor  
as the pigs that rooted in its burning garbage,  
then were hooked on the anchors of the abattoir.

19.7-12 (1.III.iii)

When Walcott writes that in *Weldon's* case the "rolling excess" of nature "concealed the wound," the verb leaves doubt, whether concealment is tantamount to the healing that he will imagine for *Plunkett* and *Philoctete* on his return to St. Lucia in book six.

When Walcott describes the concealment as occurring when the "rolling excess" of nature – "goldenrod" above all – "returned the image...from a golden past," another Virgilian moment returns: his account in the fourth eclogue of the Golden Age, which he described as returning and which he, too, employed to conceal suffering, in his case the wounds of civil war:

Ultima Cumaei uenit iam carminis aetas.  
magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo.  
iam redit et uirgo, redeunt Saturnia regna.

iam noua progenies caelo demittitur alto.

(At last the final age of Cumae's song has come.  
The centuries' great cycle approaches birth afresh.  
At last the maid comes back; come Saturn's kingdoms back.  
At last a new line down from lofty sky gets sent.)

ecl. 4.4-7

Virgil's motifs include prophetic verse by the Sibyl of Cumae, rebirth of time, return of maiden Justice, and return of an original, idyllic rule, but also portentous new birth. They form an image of restoration and innovation that overshadows the suffering of civil war, which he reduces to an opaque phrase, *sceleris vestigia nostri* (*B.* 4.13: "traces of our crime").<sup>34</sup> Virgil's Sibyl elsewhere becomes associated in Walcott's mind with the village obeah woman *Ma Kilman* (58.5: 1.X.ii). However, he assigns the hope of a new birth not to his georgic figures, *Maud Phunkett* and *Catherine Weldon*, but only to his invented *femme fatale*, and *cause célèbre* – the ebony *Helen*. Walcott leaves the paternity of *Helen's* coming child veiled in mystery worthy that which has long surrounded the genesis of Virgil's child. The traces of a heroic past persist, but Walcott does not repose his hopes for the future in the return of traditional powers.

Anticipating where he will take the themes thus established, Walcott concludes the whole farm scene:

...That summer did not last  
.... What did not remain  
was not only the season but the tribes themselves  
as Indian summer raced the cloud-galloping plain,  
when their dust would blow like maize from  
the furrowed shelves,  
which the hawks prophesied to mice cowering in grain.  
176.22-177.2 (4.XXXIV.iii)

The image of a golden summer yields to fall, but the season recalled by its figurative title "Indian summer," which rings ironically in the context, reflecting as it does the viewpoint of the colonizing whites. They mistook the new world for old India. They misapplied the name to the

<sup>34</sup>VAN SICKLE, 2004a, xix-xx; also VAN SICKLE, 1992, passim.

American natives. They erased memory of the natives' displacement by using "Indian summer" to evoke halcyon days of autumn, when plump ears dry in rustling shocks of corn and pumpkins scatter gold across the fields, all without hint of conflict or usurpation. Other motifs from the encroaching farms fill out the fall image: "galloping," "maize," "furrowed," and "grain." The image of hawks terrifying mice prefigures hostilities. Closing the scene, the very displacement of the natives becomes a subject of prophecy, which implies that it will return and grow in the poem.

Building on the Parkin vignette, Walcott in the next chapter sends his *Narrator* to Tennessee as a tourist who gets reminded of the natives' forced exile:

"Somewhere over there," said my guide, "the Trail of Tears started." I leant towards the crystalline creek. Pines shaded it. Then I made myself hear the water's

language around the rocks in its clear-running lines  
and its small shelving falls with their eddies, "Choctaws  
Creeks," "Choctaws," and I thought of the Greek revival  
carried past the names of towns with columned porches,  
and how Greek it was, the <'>necessary evil<'><sup>35</sup>  
of slavery...

177.4-12 (4.XXXV.i)

"Trail of Tears" recalls the policy, pursued in the 1830s, of forcing eastern tribes to leave their ancestral lands and move to a dubious lot beyond the Mississippi River, a move supported by Tennessee's native son, Andrew Jackson, as president.

The *Narrator's* response falls into two moments. The first focuses on clear water and shade, which were commonplaces in the idyllic scenes of the pastoral tradition represented by "Virgilian reeds" and evoked by *Dennis Plunkett's* memory of English "pastoral sites – | reasonable leaves shading reasonable earth" (61.14-15). The second moment subverts the idyllic tradition, turning a fresh eye on nature and

<sup>35</sup>Single quotes added to identify the rationale given for slavery in the American south: the invidious oxymoron still flourishes wherever bad conscience seeks cover, e.g., in defense of the death penalty, child labor, military training to kill; but also, paradoxically applied sometimes to government itself.

endowing it metaphorically with language, lines, and sounds that echo the names of displaced tribes: recapturing the onomatopoetic poetics of Theocritus and Virgil, but with new political and cultural edge superimposed from the viewpoint of post-colonial (re)vision.

Subverting yet further commonplaces, Walcott makes a metaphoric move from the sound of “Creeks” to “Greek revival” with its “columned porches” (177.9, 10). Instead of lingering in nostalgia for white columns, though, he warns that the classical heritage also provided a model and rationale for slavery in the new American republic: “how Greek it was, the necessary evil | of slavery” in “Georgia’s || marble past, the Jeffersonian ideal in | plantations with its Hectors and Achillesees.” He undercuts the ideal and imagines slave names that link the American South with the slave ancestors of his fictive St. Lucian fishermen *Hector* and *Achille* (177.11-14). Driving home the links with his earlier Homeric themes, he recalls southern town names that include “Troy” and “Helen.” (177.15-16).

Forging a further link in retrospect, Walcott compares the exiled native women to the coal-carriers of Castries that his *Father’s Ghost* held up to be his model and inspiration: “the bundles of women moving in ragged bands | like those on the wharf, headed for Oklahoma” (177.19-20, cf. 72-76 {1.XIII.ii-iii}); and he associates the old village bard, *Seven Seas*, otherwise *Omeros*, with the figure of a Native American shaman (177.21). Pressing cross-linkage, he looks “deep into Georgia, where history happens | to be the baying echoes of brutality” (178.4-5). He conjures up “gibbet branches...from which Afolabes hung like bats” (178.7-8 {4.XXXV.i}) – blending lynched blacks with *Afolabe*, the imaginary African ancestor met by *Achille* (Book 3).

Adding that “Hooded clouds guarded the town squares with their calendar churches, || whose white, peaked belfries asserted that pastoral | of brooks with leisurely accents” (178.8-11 {4.XXXV.i}), he again recalls the motif of talkative water that flows from the tradition of “Virgilian reeds.” His “leisurely accents” even brings to mind the Greek used by Theocritus, with its broader dialect (Doric). Yet the idyllic surface dissolves into an ominous undercurrent since “hooded” suggests klansmen in “white, peaked” disguise, while “leisurely” smacks of a menacing drawl. Then “Negro shacks” evoke a “running wound, like the rusty anchor | that scabbed Philoctete’s shin” (178.12-14) – the wound made emblematic of historic suffering in enslavement (19.9 {1.III.iii}).

Returning to the fate of the Native Americans, the next scene opens with quotation marks to signal another shift in point of view: "Life is so fragile. It trembles like the aspens" (178.19 {4.XXXV.ii}). This voice, unidentified at first, reflects "that day isn't far when they will say, 'Indians | bowed under those branches, which tribe is not certain'" (178.25-26). Clues accumulate: the speaker hails from "the alleys of Boston" and "Once, from the barn's rafter | a swift or a swallow shot out, taking with it || my son's brown, whirring soul" (179.7-10). At this we recognize *Catherine Weldon* from "the wound of her son's death" (176.18). The motif of the bird's flight reminds us, too, how "a swift" has often served Walcott as an engine of metaphor, which enables the connections, crossings, and links that unite the work through the "dancing firelight of mind." Again the theme of the missing son blends this plot with the *Plunketts* (29.3 {1.V.iii}), shadowing also *Odysseus* and *Leopold Bloom* from James Joyce's *Ulysses*; while *Achille's* African ancestor, *Afolabe* also yearned for a son (136-37 {3.XXV.iii}).

Walcott goes on to reinforce *Catherine Weldon's* association with the natives and, by implication, his own:

...smoke bound me to the Indians

from morning to sunset when I have watched its veiled  
rising, because I am a widow, barbarous  
and sun-cured in the face<;><sup>36</sup> I loved them ever since

I worked as a hand in Colonel Cody's circus,  
under a great canvas larger than all their tents,  
when they were paid to ride round in howling circles,

179.15-21

Smoke with its shifting forms serves Walcott, as often, to describe his mind's workings as associative and metaphoric. Nothing in her fragmentary history shows that *Catherine Weldon* actually joined Buffalo Bill's circus, but Walcott seizes the occasion to recall how the Native Americans were turned into a degrading spectacle in the eastern cities, masking their suffering in the West.

The chapter's concluding scene further cross-links *Catherine Weldon*. The *Narrator* compares her to "Achille on the river" (180.4),

<sup>36</sup>Punctuation altered: ">" replaces "<," here.

again evoking the hallucinatory journey back to Africa in search of the ancestor-father who was first enslaved. To *Weldon*, he also attributes nausea at the treachery of the whites, who broke their treaties with the Native Americans. He interrupts to compare his version of that tragic history to “Plunkett charting the Battle of the Saints” (181.2), which implies engagement with history but in the manner of the poet, which is passionate and idiosyncratic, hallucinatory.

Returning to his equation between personal loss and the tribes’ displacement, Walcott makes an explicit program for what he is up to in these books:

When one grief afflicts us we choose a sharper grief  
in hope that enormity will ease affliction,  
so Catherine Weldon rose in high relief

through the thin page of a cloud, making a fiction  
of my own loss. I was searching for characters,  
and in her shawled voice I heard the snow that would be blown

when the wind covered the tracks of the Dakotas,  
the Sioux, and the Crows; my sorrow had been replaced.  
Like a swift over water her pen’s shadow raced.

181.10-18 (4.XXXV.iii)

The rhyming “affliction” and “fiction” recall the programmatic moment when Walcott explicated his creation of *Major Plunkett*:

This wound I have stitched into Plunkett’s character.  
He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme  
of this work, this fiction, since every “I” is a  
fiction finally.

28.1-4 (1.V.ii)

As he fabricated “Plunkett’s character” to embody “affliction,” so here “searching for characters” he discovers and fashions *Weldon* into his medium of access to the affliction of the Native Americans. Their “sharper grief” imagined through her is to heal his own sense of loss, replacing his sorrow with theirs. Since she plays the role of medium in the transfer, he compares *Weldon*’s pen to the “swift over water,” recalling

again his recurrent engine of metaphor. The scene turns to quotation marks around a meditation on mortality and immortality for the Native Americans and the soldiers: "Is the cross for them also? The resurrection of their bodies?" (182.5-6). Signing off, in retrospect, the *Narrator* identifies the meditation as "Catherine Weldon, | in our final letter to the Indian agent" (182.14-15), her pen identified with his.

The West recedes and personal narrative swells at book four's close, which recalls heroic sons distressed on shores and succored by divine parents (185.13-188.6 {4.XXXVI.iii}): e.g., Homer's *Achilles* visited by *Thetis* (*Il.* 1.351-427; 18.65-137), also Virgil's *Aristaeus* calling *Cyrene* from the shore but then conducted down miraculously to her dwelling undersea (*Geo.* 4.316-414) and his *Aeneas* – shipwrecked on the Carthaginian shore and met by a non-too mothering *Venus*. Walcott, to be sure, again evokes his male parent, as in the metapoetic scene that closed book one and echoed the counsel of *Anchises* to *Aeneas*. These sudden apparitions of Walcott's father also recall Virgil's hero watching the death of *Priam* and being reminded of his father – *subiit cari genitoris imago* (*Æn.* 6.560: there came the image of my dear parent).<sup>37</sup> Walcott uses this second visit from the paternal *Ghost* to limn the remainder of the work by means of metapoetic counsel to visit European capitals (foreshadowing book five) and then go back to St. Lucia (books seven and six). The *Ghost* proffers a remedy for the alienation from his northern surroundings that Walcott had sketched in the previous scene:

Passing the lamplit leaves I knew I was different  
from them as our skins were different in an empire  
that boasted about its hues, in a New England

that had raked the leaves of the tribes into one fire  
on the lawn back of the carport...

185.1-5 (4.XXXVI.ii)

In metaphor, the native peoples become colored autumn leaves burned in the bonfires of the suburbs that have long since replaced the native

<sup>37</sup>Homer made *Priam* prompt *Achilles* to remember his own father (*Il.* 24.486, 504), which *Achilles* did (511) – scene that Virgil has just recalled with bitter irony, as *Achilles'* son insults and slaughters the old king his father had treated with respect (*Æn.* 6.540-50).

forest.<sup>38</sup> Walcott will return to amplify and exhaust the metaphoric nucleus that equates North American natives with leaves in three chapters that close the fifth book and his exile in the north.

Launching this sequence (206 {5.XLI}), Walcott expands his earlier satire of the “Greek revival” in American slavery (cf. 177-78 {4.XXXV.i}). In the opening scene, he hints at his own kinship with the Greek slaves, “tutors, curly-haired” and “many from obscure islands,” who taught spoilt Roman children aesthetics. But he satirizes Athenian democracy, “its *demos* demonic and its *ocracy* crass...for all those ideals went cold in the heat of its hate” (206.8-12); and he ascribes to the American South “Athenian principles and pillars, | maintained by convicts and emigrants who had fled | persecution and gave themselves *fasces* with laws | to persecute slaves.” (206.15-18). He mingles Greek tradition with Roman, the laws and *fasces* (the bundle of axes and rods, that embodied the Roman magistrate’s power of capital and corporal punishment), in a satire of governments created on classical model by outlaws and victims in order to victimize slaves. He closes by characterizing southern attitudes toward blacks with a parallel drawn from the North:

...black  
shadows...an enraging nuisance

which, if it were left to its Solons, with enough luck  
would vanish from its cities, just as the Indians  
had vanished from its hills. Leaves on an autumn rake.  
206.20-207.3 (5.XLI.i)

Pressing on with his satire of Athens, Walcott remembers that Solon, as the legendary law-giver of Athenian democracy, often serves by metonymy to describe the whole class of legislators in later days. The closing metaphor links “urban renewal, Negro removal” and the displacement of Native Americans.

The second scene shifts to New England and reinforces the

<sup>38</sup>The metaphoric link between falling leaves and the doomed generations of humankind figured in ancient epic (*Il.* 6.146-149; *Aen.* 6.309-10) only to acquire a layered irony through Walcott’s association of the so-called “Redskins” with autumn hues and their extirpation with suburban bonfires.

metaphoric connections between Native Americans and autumn leaves. Walcott writes:

There Iroquois flashed in the Indian red, in the sepias  
and ochres of leaf-mulch, the mind dyed from the stain  
on their sacred ground, the smoke-prayer of the tepees  
pushed back by the Pilgrim's pitchfork. All over again,  
diaspora, exodus.

207.16-19 (5.XLI.ii)

From the motif of exile, he infers a broader principle:

...Men take their colours

as the trees do from the native soil of their birth  
and once they are moved elsewhere, entire cultures  
lose the art of mimicry, and then, where the trees were  
the fir, the palm, the olive, the cedar, a desert place  
widens in the heart. This is the first wisdom of Caesar,  
to change the ground under the bare soles of a race.

207.24-208.6 (5.XLI.ii)

Calling this the "groan of the autumn wind," he adds that its message is what he "shared through Catherine's body" (208.8), reinforcing his use of *Weldon* to link the affliction of the American natives with his own.

Having identified the Native Americans with autumn leaves, Walcott in the third scene ironically commands their fall: "Flare fast and fall, Indian flags of October!" (209 {5.XLI.iii}). The commands gain force from alliteration. "Flare" links the change to the bonfire, which itself was already linked to the Native Americans' expulsion from their lands. Calling the leaves "flags" complicates the metaphoric linkage, suggesting the hostile flags of the troops that do the displacing.

This linkage grows in the picture that follows with metaphors of "riding" and "cavalry." It takes the form of a vibrant pastiche that mingles images of the season and colonial history: tide like cavalry, "cirrus pennons," "forts of firewood," "white steeple over cowed pews." Walcott attributes the impressions to *Weldon*:

That was Catherine's terror, the collar, the hay-rake,

the evening hymn in the whalehouse, its starched ribs  
white as a skeleton. The nightmare cannot wake

from a Sunday where the mouse-claw of ivy grips  
the grooved brick of colleges...

209.16-20 (5.XLI.iii)

Through the eyes of *Weldon*, Walcott sees the vestiges of Puritanism as a “nightmare,” hard to throw off. Yet he shifts to his own point of view, where “a yellow tractor | breaks the Sabbath” and breaks the spell of New England tradition with puns, “sifting wit from the chaff, the thorn out of Thoreau, | the mess from Emerson” (209.20-24).

Varying the theme of exile and terror, and shifting from autumn towards winter, the next chapter opens in Toronto, where the *Narrator* eyes “a young Polish waitress...with that nervous | smile of the recent immigrant that borders on tears” (210.19-211.6 {5.XLII.i}). Moving from concupiscence to empathy, he turns to metaphors from winter:

Her name melted in mine like flakes on a river  
or black pond in which the wind shakes packets of milk.

211.23-24

Signs of winter mount in the two brief scenes that close the chapter, each but three stanzas. “The leaves’ fling was over. Willows harped on the Charles,” relocates the setting to Boston (212.16-17 {5.XLII.ii}). Metaphors evoke the looming winter and a return west:

twigs clawed the clouds, the hedges turned into bracken,  
the sky raced like a shaggy wolf with a rabbit pinned  
in its jaws, its fur flying with the first snow

212.19-21

The run of metaphors prompts a familiar vision, closing the scene: “I saw Catherine Weldon running in the shawled wind.” (212.24). “Shawled” has been one of her signatures since she first appeared and a metaphoric building block through these books.

The chapter’s final scene opens with an extraordinary metaphor: “The ghost dance of winter was about to start.” (213.1 {5.XLII.iii}). Winter, which has been appearing in metaphors by way of analogy and

illustration, suddenly becomes the subject illustrated, being compared to the "ghost dance," which for most readers will be the less familiar term:

The Oglalas sent emissaries to Walker Lake, Nevada, to meet with the new prophet, a Paiute Indian named Wovoka. He himself had "died" and had communicated with the deceased. There he was told of a new Indian gospel, one which stated: "Jesus is now upon the earth. He appears like a cloud. The dead are all alive again. I do not know when they will be here; maybe this fall or in the spring. When the time comes there will be no more sickness and everyone will be young again.

The Oglalas adapted the *Wanagi wacipi* 'ghost dance' to their own modes of cultural expression. They planted a sacred tree and the adepts danced around it, falling into trances. During the trances the dancers visited with the deceased and came back to life to sing songs about their visions. Although warned by the prophet not to fight with the white man, the Oglalas donned sacred ghost shirts (*ogle wakan* 'sacred shirt') which were believed to be impenetrable by the white man's bullets.<sup>39</sup>

Among the Sioux, one who espoused the new beliefs was Sitting Bull, the religious leader of the Hunkpapa clan whom Catherine Weldon actually befriended. His request for permission to go to Pine Ridge to meet the Ghost Dance prophet aroused fears in his local Indian Agent, who ordered Indian Police to arrest him. On a pretext they killed him on December 15, 1890.<sup>40</sup> Followers of his then joined pilgrims, led by Big Foot, who were proceeding to the dance at Pine Ridge when the cavalry massacred them on December 30 at Wounded Knee Creek just 16 miles short of their goal.

Winter's arrival marks the closing chapter: "Flour was falling on the Plains" (213.10 {5.XLIII.i}). Walcott brings back *Catherine Weldon* to complete the part for which he enrolled her. Imagining her mind, he again links Boston and the West: as a girl she had one of those little glass globes she could shake so that snow would cover a tiny house inside. Now that snow becomes the snow drifts "blurring the Parkin

<sup>39</sup>POWERS, 1975, 121, citing James Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1896) 23.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

farm” and that house resembles the Indian fort in the blizzard (213.10-18 {5.XLII.i}). Walcott employs the fiction of her mind to memorialize the fate of the Sioux, their pride and their poverty. He imagines hallucination taking over in the form of metaphors that evoke the massacre in terms of the natural setting: “The pines have lifted their spears. || Except the thick, serrated line on the slope | was rapidly growing more pine-trees.... the pines lowered their lances in a gallop.... they screamed in the ecstasy | of their own massacre, since this was the Ghost Dance.” (214.21-215.9). These seem more like trees of tragedy (*Pentheus* comes to mind, trapped up a pine tree and killed) than the musical setting for *Pan* hinted by “Virgilian reeds.”

Walcott closes the scene as he opened, with the image of the little glass globe:

The absence that settled over the Dakotas  
was contained in the globe. Its pines, its tiny house.  
215.14-15 (5.XLII.i)

He begins the second scene with a projected monologue in the mind of *Catherine Weldon* recalling the massacre’s aftermath: “I saw a chain of men | linked by wrists to our cavalry” (215.12 {5.XLII.ii}). When Walcott dissolves the sight into “a line of red ants,” he links these prisoners through his metaphoric imagination to slaves seized in Africa in book three (145.9) or the women carrying coal in evoked by his *Father’s Ghost* in the program scene closing the first book (73.23). When Walcott then makes *Weldon* ride down into the desolate camp, he maps the scene to *Achille* visiting the African village where his ancestor was enslaved (145.13). There he imagines *Achille* encountering a shaman – an African version of the blind St. Lucian sage and Homer-figure *Seven Seas* as a shaman; he makes *Weldon* see “a white-eyed *Omeros*, motionless” (216.5), where the eyes recall the marble bust of Homer described by Walcott in a Boston studio (14 {1.II.iii}). Walcott also imagines her seeing a “warrior | frozen in a drift,” which suggests the surviving photograph of Big Foot dead in the snow.<sup>41</sup> Finally, he maps the whole scene onto Troy, making *Weldon* say, “I walked like a Helen among their dead warriors.” (216.24).

<sup>41</sup>BROWN, 443.

The final scene opens with a quotation mark and a voice that seems to continue *Weldon*:

"This was history. I had no power to change it.  
And yet I still felt that this had happened before.  
I knew it would happen again, but how strange it  
was to have seen it in Boston, in the hearth-fire.  
I was a leaf in the whirlwind of the Ordained.  
Then Omeros's voice came from the mouth of the tent.  
217.1-6 (5.XLII.iii)

Readers of the whole poem will recognize that this blends with what they saw when *Achille* scouted the ancestral village after the slave raid (144-48 {3.XXVII.i-iii}).<sup>42</sup> In that case, Walcott imagined the mind of *Achille*: "He foresaw their future. He knew nothing could change it." (146.10). But the words puzzle after "how strange it | was." The point-of-view slips between *Weldon* in the snowbound camp and a hearth in Boston, whether hers at some past visionary moment or the poet's. He enrolled her figure after all to extend his own reach and wrote of "our final letter to the Indian agent" (182.14-15). The point-of-view shifts immediately back to the camp and an oracle from *Omeros* that mingles triumph with resignation:

"The Ghost Dance has tied the tribes into one nation."  
As the salmon grows tired of its ladder of stone,  
so have we of fighting the claws of the White Bear,  
dripping red beads on the snow. Whiteness is everywhere."  
217.9-12 (5.XLIII.iii)

The oracle rings with authority and tragic irony against that first quizzical engagement with these themes: "Clouds whitened the Crow horseman and I let him pass | into the page" (175.2-3).

Her report of the oracle closes *Catherine Weldon's* account. The *Narrator* addresses her with reassurances; but she remains fixed in her

<sup>42</sup>Walcott's visions of desolation after battle invite comparison with Virgil's picture of his hero alone in Troy's ruin, when *Venus* reveals that the gods are destroying the city (*En.* 6.601-23). I am grateful to the Editor for calling this to my attention.

chair, “and like a carved | totem her body hardened to wood” (217.22-23); “I loved snow | once,” she concludes, “but now I dread its white siege outside my door.” (218.5-6).

His bucolic-georgic outreach over, Walcott returns to his city dilemma, where metaphors convey continuing alienation: “Dead cars foam at the mouth with icicles. The boat | of the streetcar’s light divides the frozen breakers...” (218.22-23). In vain he looks for “that attic where” he made love to the Greek girl and listened as “‘Omeros’ echoed from a white-throated vase.” (219.15, 18; cf. 14 {1.II.iii}), but he “had lost the address.” He continues to perceive the situation as a displaced person, whose nautical metaphors betray that he is native to another place: “I walked through coral stones,” a trolley’s “hull slid past the combers,” and “Houses passed like a wharf” (219.22, 26-27). Isolated in the wintry scene, his nautical and marine tropes imply the turn his plot must take – prophesied at the close of book four on the lonely beach by his father’s *Ghost* – back to the tropical island Eden completing his improvement on the nostalgia of Virgil’s exiles – *Melibæus*, *Aristæus*, *Eurydice*, *Orpheus*, *Æneas*, and the soul of *Turnus* – all in flight,<sup>43</sup> nor destined for felicitous returns.

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<sup>43</sup>Re: Virgil’s recurrent figures of exile as motif unifying his works, VAN SICKLE, 2004a, 227–32.

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