

Afro-Greeks

*Dialogues between Anglophone
Caribbean Literature and Classics in the
Twentieth Century*

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*Translatio studii et imperii**The Manipulation of Latin in Modern Caribbean Literature*

Misericordie probat populos et foedera jungi.

(V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*)¹

'The Classics!' Mr. Bellfeels screamed with admiration, although he did not know the translation. 'The fecking Classics, boy!'

(Austin Clarke, *The Polished Hoe*)²

If the lament for the loss of Latin and classical education at the end of the last chapter seemed like an indulgence, this chapter will seek to persuade otherwise by examining the unlikely ways in which three anglophone Caribbean authors have employed their classical education in the services of original anti-colonial and anti-imperial critiques. I centre my discussion around the medieval Latin concept of *translatio studii et imperii* ('translation of learning and power/empire'), which assumes the transfer of culture along with power as empires succeed each other. In origin, the *translatio* looks back to the idea of universal history in Graeco-Roman and ancient Jewish historiography, with its emphasis on the succession of empires.³ However, the medieval *translatio* places a greater emphasis on the empires

¹ Naipaul [1979] 2002b: 29. All quotations from this novel are taken from the 2002 Picador paperback edition.

² Clarke 2002: 262.

³ On 'universal history' and the succession of empire, see Momigliano 1987: 39–52.

of Europe emanating from Rome's empire, which in turn was a conduit for Greek culture. Modern theorists of postcolonial translation apply this concept more broadly, to refer to the tenet of the westward-moving trajectory of empire, from the Far East in the distant past to the USA in the present. In origin the concept presupposes the continuity of Rome's culture passed down through successive European empires, as Douglas Robinson explains:

[B]elievers in the *translatio studii et imperii* insist that learning and empire were successively embodied in a sequence of cultures while remaining fundamentally the same. Thus the bare historical fact that learning and empire have moved from Greece to Rome to France, say, is idealized (and to some extent rendered irrelevant) through the belief that their migration has not changed learning and empire: that they are still the same in the (sic) fourteenth-century Christian Europe as they were in ancient Greece and Rome.⁴

This contradictory model of translation, which is also a model of stasis, reveals the powerful ideological construction of Classics as a form of western knowledge, transmitted along with empire. The Latin motto of the University of the West Indies (*ex occidente lux*) arguably attempted to lay claim to this idea of a westwards trajectory of knowledge by inserting the *West Indies* into the *translatio studii*.⁵ In practice, since Classics was transmitted along with empire in the British West Indies, those authors for whom Classics was part of their intellectual apparatus wrestled with the problem of how to use this knowledge while simultaneously avoiding its colonial accretions. In response to colonial appropriations of Classics, transmitted over a putative network of empire, the writers who I examine here offer a strenuous critique, pointing to blatant fictions and gaps in colonial Classics. Moreover, I will argue that they often conduct this critique through subterfuge, under the guise of apparent error, playing on the colonial prejudice that Classics did not belong to them.

⁴ Robinson 1997: 54; see also the excellent theoretical discussion of the idea of a trans-temporal, never-ending Roman empire in Willis 2007: *passim*.

⁵ See the discussion on p. 92 above.

TRANSLATING LATIN BADLY

We start with a misquotation of Virgil,⁶ which forms one of two Latin mottoes that recur in V. S. Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River* (1979). When the reader first encounters this Latin phrase on page 29 of the novel, it is not glossed with a translation. In fact, the narrator Salim draws our attention to the lack of translation by expressing his ignorance of the meaning of the phrase: 'These Latin words, whose meaning I didn't know, were all that remained of a monument outside the dock gates' (ibid.). Left untranslated for forty pages (70), these Latin words exert a talismanic force, whose power lies precisely in their incomprehensibility. Once translated, the sentiment that they carry is exposed as a lie as the motto is seen to be a deliberate misquotation, and indeed malappropriation, of a line in Virgil. But as Imraan Coovadia has argued in a recent discussion of misquotation in Naipaul's novel, this misquotation of Virgil, which has its origins in the colonial history of Trinidad, functions as 'an insider's joke, a cache of hidden authority'.⁷

The second epigraph, from Austin Clarke's novel *The Polished Hoe* (2002), ridicules the white Bajan plantation manager, Mr Darnley Alexander Randall Bellfeels, who revels in the attainments of his illegitimate son Wilberforce in winning a prestigious Barbados Island Scholarship on the strength of his results in classical subjects in the Senior Cambridge Certificate.⁸ Bellfeels's toast of the 'fecking Classics' comes in response to a modified quotation from Book 21 of Livy's *History*, quoted in honour of his son's achievement (see p. 125 below). As with many of the other members of elite Bajan society satirized in the novel, Bellfeels is typical in paying lip service to the Classics as a marker of civilization and class, while being ignorant of what they contain. But Clarke's portrayal of the superficial veneer of classical learning assumes a deeper classical knowledge in order to grasp the humour of the satire, as well as an appreciation of the significance of Classics in Barbados' educational history.

⁶ A misquotation of Virgil, *Aeneid* 4. 110–12, 'si Iuppiter . . . miserieue probet populos aut foedera iungi'.

⁷ Coovadia 2008: 5.

⁸ On the institution of the island scholarships in the British West Indies, see pp. 72–3 above.

These particular misquotations and misappropriations of Classics will be analysed in greater detail below, but for the moment they stand as examples of a larger phenomenon—the canny misquotation of Latin in modern Caribbean literature. 'Canny' because the (mis)quotation of Latin often involves the complex manipulation of readers' expectations. For those who recognize and can translate the quotation in question, misquotation may suggest simple error. However, these misquotations simultaneously conceal an additional layer of significance; recognition of the Latin source and its context is not sufficient for interpretation. To fully comprehend the meaning of the (mis)quotation, the reader needs to know the Caribbean context in order to appreciate the intelligence of an error that actually conceals an important truth. It transpires that quoting or translating Latin badly is not a simple matter.

Before turning to specific Latin misquotations in Caribbean literature, it will be useful to relate the themes of (mis)quotation and translation to the theoretical study of postcolonial translation. It is a truism that translations are embedded in complex cultural, political, and historical contexts. A corollary is that changed cultural contexts require new translations or adaptations. In the Introduction I suggested that the adaptation of the Classics for a Caribbean context—a new word for a new world—was fundamental to the process of gaining independent recognition and authority for the cultures of the anglophone Caribbean and their art. So too with quotation: the quotations that served under colonialism will not necessarily be the quotations of choice in the post-colony. Or, if retained, these quotations become the subject of transformative irony. In addition, the introduction of deliberate errors in the quotation of Latin, on the part of authors who know what they are doing, signals the contradictory legacy of Latin as an imperial language that simultaneously reflects majority and minority translations: the postcolonial writer sees both.

Taking their cue from Homi Bhabha's word-play on the translational and the transnational, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi have suggested that to 'speak of post-colonial translation is little short of a tautology',⁹ on the grounds that the metaphorical process of translation (a 'carrying across') is omnipresent under empire. One does not

⁹ Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 12–13, quoting from p. 13. See Bhabha [1994] 2004: 244, where Bhabha relates translation to 'culture's transnational dissemination'.

have to subscribe to the tenet of *translatio studii et imperii* to appreciate that texts travel in several different directions as a result of the movements occasioned by empire. And not only do texts circulate as they are carried from place to place, but they also migrate internally as the set of references according to which they are read shifts. Recent work on translation and globalization is helpful here. Exploring parallels between the interplay of globalization and localization in cosmopolitan networks as a model for contemporary translation theory, Michael Cronin has recourse to two concepts that were coined to explain the dissemination of scientific facts and innovations: the 'immutable mobile' and the 'mutable mobile'.¹⁰ The first refers to the conception of scientific facts as products of a particular knowledge context 'where the configuration of facts and context must be held stable if they are to arrive safely at their destination and make sense on the receiving end' (2006: 27). Conversely, the 'mutable mobile' originally referred to a design of water pump in Zimbabwe, which was adapted and tweaked with the result that it was 'never quite the same from one village to the next . . . the pump changes shape but still remains recognizable' (ibid.). Applying both concepts to translation theory and taking the example of the inequality between 'English literature' and the status of literatures translated into English, Cronin likens the 'immutable mobile' to the idea of a national literature premised on a Romantic notion of original, national literary genius, which is 'transported unchanged through time'. Conversely, the translational equivalent of the 'mutable mobile' would be 'a notion of literature that is networked beyond national borders through the intrinsic duality and mutability of translation'.¹¹

The idea of the 'mutable mobile' elucidates the role of the misquotation of Latin in postcolonial Caribbean literature, and its role in writing back to colonial misquotations that pretend imperial immutability even while transforming the message of the transmitted text. The negating prefix *mis-* suggests error, but like the Zimbabwe water pump these misquotations still work as quotations because the

¹⁰ Cronin 2006: 27–32. For the 'immutable mobile', see Latour 1987; for the 'mutable mobile', see de Laet and Mol 2000.

¹¹ Cronin 2006: 32.

source is recognizable even though the shape has changed. Given my focus on misquotation, it is pertinent to remember the Latin etymology of the English noun 'error': the primary meaning of the Latin noun *error* is wandering. I will argue that in Caribbean literature the apparent errors involving the misquotation of Latin reflect this wandering and the fact that, like translation, quotation is neither static nor stable, but will depend on the cultural context that it serves. Errors of misquotation draw attention to difference and to change. In the case of the misquotation of a text, particularly a Latin text where so much scholarship has gone into establishing the 'original' and authentic text, the change is particularly radical, because the source text itself is altered. With interlingual translation the source text in the 'original' language (i.e. in an untranslated state) remains the same, regardless of the changes that a translation might introduce to the target text.¹²

There is an analogy here with Roger Abrahams's analysis of the way in which the conventions that govern New World speechmaking have frequently been misinterpreted as flawed or inept reproductions of white speech. Reviewing colonial testimonies of African-American and Afro-Caribbean speech behaviour, Abrahams concluded that negative stereotypes of African-American culture led many white listeners to construe divergence and difference of speech as the misperformance of white norms.¹³ In the texts discussed in this chapter, the misquotation of Latin plays on these stereotypes, leaving it open for the incautious reader to perpetuate the stereotype by mistaking misquotation for error. These misquotations demand a version of Du Bois's double consciousness, since competent decoding depends on the reader identifying the error according to one set of conventions, while at the same time understanding the cleverness of an error that is not one.¹⁴

¹² Granted this is a somewhat artificial scenario, since this Latin source text is not accessible to us without translation, which immediately introduces change.

¹³ Abrahams 1983: 23. See also ibid. 31: 'the observer took note of the oration both because of its similarities to British practice and its inappropriateness; he can only fall back on his stereotyping habits to handle his sense of embarrassment by suggesting that these Afro-Americans were trying to copy their master's verbal practices but misunderstood and therefore imperfectly reproduced them.'

¹⁴ See p. 229 below with n. 11.

Another of Abrahams's caveats is helpful here. Abrahams's study of institutions of speechmaking among Afro-American communities (using 'American' in the broad, geographical sense) in North America and the eastern Caribbean led him to argue that European cultures are only one element in a complex system that governs how people speak in different contexts and the content of their speech. To insist on European cultures as the dominant key to interpretation is to occlude the other cultures at work. In the case of representations of ancient Greece and Rome in Caribbean literature, it is particularly important not to immediately classify them as European cultures,¹⁵ but rather to see how they are received into a syncretic space in which codes from Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean are all in play.

LATIN AND SWEET TALK IN AUSTIN CLARKE'S *THE POLISHED HOE* (2002)

In Chapter 2 we saw how, in *Growing up Stupid under the Union Jack* (1980), the Barbadian writer Austin Clarke reconciled his elite classical education with the cultural norms of Barbados society.¹⁶ In his recent novel *The Polished Hoe*, set in 1950s Barbados, Clarke has explored the cultural legacy of the classical education favoured under colonialism and the way in which this seemingly foreign legacy could be adapted and possessed by different groups within Barbadian society. At one end of the spectrum of adaptation, Clarke depicts the use of Latin and Latinate English in the decorous tradition of eloquence or speech genre referred to as 'talking sweet', in which speakers attune their verbal register and the content of their speech to correspond to the ceremonial nature of an occasion.¹⁷ In the novel such appropriations of Latin are often culturally opportunistic and, in Clarke's satirical exposure of the plantation society, are often used by a poorly educated hegemonic class to lend assumed civilizational

¹⁵ See pp. 2–3 above.

¹⁶ See pp. 90–6 above.

¹⁷ For an explanation of 'talking sweet', see Abrahams 1983: 34.

authority to uncivilized behaviour. At the other end of the spectrum, the primary narrator and her interlocutor offer a folk perspective on the classical legacy in the Caribbean.¹⁸ At first glance this folk perspective seems unreliable, but is seen upon reflection to contain canny insights that constitute a fresh model for classical reception, one that is attuned to the historical experience of the modern Caribbean. As author, Clarke positions himself in the middle of this two-way cultural flow between received, Western culture on the one hand, and local folk culture on the other hand. The novel itself demonstrates Clarke's mastery of the rhythms of Barbadian speech, but assumes an international readership alert to the novel's different cultural codes.¹⁹

An insight into the two-way cultural flow at the heart of the novel can be observed in miniature in one of Clarke's short stories, 'Privilege'.²⁰ The story begins with a phone-call from the Prime Minister of Barbados (Errol Walton Barrow, 1920–87),²¹ in which Clarke is asked if he knows the meaning of the word 'privilege'. As Clarke flounders around on the end of the phone trying to work out what the Prime Minister is getting at, he offers a conventional dictionary definition of 'privilege' (right, advantage...). The Prime Minister then teases him that, 'a former professor at Yale University and at other American Ivy League universities, teaching people Black Studies and Black

¹⁸ To be sure, 'talking sweet' is in evidence among the folk just as much as among the more westernized elite, but in the case of the latter, Latin quotations and Latinate phrases are much more common, reflecting their privileged education. In the novel the character of Mary-Mathilda is a deft manipulator of different codes of speech, talking up and down at will, subtly adjusting her register to the social class of her interlocutor.

¹⁹ I see parallels between what I call Clarke's 'canniness' and the 'literary anancyism' advocated by Ifeona Fulani as a strategy for black writers (African, African-American, and Caribbean) to secure international publication without having to silence their voices. Although Fulani writes specifically about Caribbean women writers, what she says about this anancyism could equally apply to Clarke's strategies of narration in *The Polished Hoe*: 'Anancy is the signifyin(g) spider who, in the continuous spinning of his web, tests the limits of language in a perpetual "discourse of trickery"' (Fulani 2005: 69; quoting De Souza 2000: 59).

²⁰ 'Privilege' is published in the collection of short stories entitled *Pig Tails 'n Breadfruit: Rituals of Slave Food* = Clarke 2000: 54–66.

²¹ Errol Barrow was Prime Minister of Barbados in 1966–76 and again in 1985–7.

Walcott's essay,¹⁵⁴ Rei Terada attributes a larger thesis to Naipaul, drawing on the whole of Naipaul's oeuvre:

It is already clear in Naipaul that the *English* in India were not really English. In the Indian context their mannerisms were absurd; Anglo-India even when it existed was a 'fairytale land.' Shouldn't we take the next step of wondering whether the Indian context merely underscored an absurdity that existed in England itself? Weren't real English clubs, for example, largely mimicking prior English clubs, a distant subculture of mythic grace?¹⁵⁵

It is precisely this idea of an originary culture of 'mythic' grace, and mimetic homage to this culture, that Naipaul satirizes so relentlessly, both in his own life and that of others.

To return to Naipaul's use of the misquotation of *Aeneid* 4.110–12: many of Naipaul's critics imply that Naipaul has a violent aversion to creolization and the concept of 'misceri populos'. In fact, Naipaul resurrects this misquotation of Virgil precisely to show that colonial empires, whether in the Caribbean, India, or Africa, had a tendency to simplify complex realities in the construction of their myths of empire, to turn a deliberative proposition (*si . . . probet*) about the legitimacy of one culture's interference with and imposition on another, into an affirmative statement (*probat*). Many readers, myself included, reject Naipaul's pessimistic response to this proposition, but he cannot be accused of oversimplification. Given that modern studies of the phenomena of empire and imperialism continue to attribute the invention of empire to Rome, Naipaul's re-reading of Virgil in *The Mimic Men* serves an important historiographical purpose in the modern Caribbean, exposing the gap between colonial appropriations of the classics and the deeply ambivalent messages contained in these texts.

truth. The only thing is that it is not, to my mind, only the West Indies which is being insulted by Naipaul, but all endeavor in this half of the world, in broader definition: the American endeavor.'

¹⁵⁴ Terada 1992: 18–25.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 19.

DEREK WALCOTT: TRANSLATING EMPIRE

In the two previous sections we have looked at ways in which both Clarke and Naipaul use the misquotation of Latin to reflect on the role of the Classics in modern imperial fictions.¹⁵⁶ To an even greater extent than either author, Derek Walcott has unravelled the conceit that the modern empires in the New World are in some way validated by the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome as transmitted via the Roman Empire. In this section I examine the theme of *translatio studii et imperii* in Walcott's corpus and the way in which he has translated empire, on his own terms.

I start with a passage in the sixth book of *Omeros* where Walcott, revisiting a theme explored in earlier poems,¹⁵⁷ contrasts the Europe of the Holocaust with the Europe of the classical ideal ('that other Europe'), which was impressed upon colonials in the Caribbean:

What my father
spiritedly spoke of was that other Europe
of mausoleum museums, the barber's shelf
of *The World's Great Classics*, with a vanity whose
spires and bells punctually pardoned itself
in the absolution of fountains and statues,
in writhing, astonishing tritons; their cold noise
brimming the basin's rim, repeating that power
and art were the same, from some Caesar's eaten nose
to spires at sunset in the swift's half-hour.

¹⁵⁶ Walcott uses the phrase 'imperial fiction' in the poem 'The Fortunate Traveller': 'Through Kurtz's teeth, white skull in elephant grass, | the imperial fiction sings' (Walcott 1981: 93).

¹⁵⁷ See, in particular, 'The Fortunate Traveller' (dedicated to Susan Sontag), 'The heart of darkness is not Africa. | The heart of darkness is the core of fire | in the white center of the holocaust' (*ibid.*). For doubt about the efficacy of Walcott's use of the 'Heart of Darkness' motif here, see Nixon 1992: 105, 'Walcott's effort to establish the heart of darkness as a figure for a moral condition no longer predicated on an African, or even a Third World locale seems a thin straw in a very strong wind.' *Contra* Nixon, I would argue that this is to withhold the power to signify from Walcott. See also the references to the Holocaust in *Midsummer* (Walcott 1984: 54), and *The Bounty* (Walcott 1997a: 22, 23, 35).

Tell that to a slave from the outer regions
of their fraying empires, what power lay in the work
of forgiving fountains with naiads and lions.¹⁵⁸

The lineage of empire is seen to be an amalgam of different cultures and civilizations, assimilated into a blunt classical ideal symbolized by the 'classics' of world literature, classical sculpture (whether portrait busts of a Caesar, tritons, or naiads), and ecclesiastical architecture. This 'classical' version of the past is rejected in the spondaic innumble of the phrase 'mausoleum museums'—a past that is dead. In turn, this rejection takes us back to an earlier chapter (XXXVI), where the narrator had mused on the immortality of art in the setting of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. That chapter begins with the lines: 'Museums endure; but *sic transit gloria* | agitates the leaf-light on their concrete benches | in the sculpture garden . . .'¹⁵⁹ The marble classics in the museum are cloying until Walcott as narrator comes across the work of a modern Homer: Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* (1899).¹⁶⁰ This classic of modern American art with its pregnant symbolism of a black sailor marooned on a wrecked vessel, encircled by sharks with ominous waves encroaching, brings classical past into dialogue with the racial politics of the present. The narrator identifies the black sailor with the Achille of his own poem ('Achille! My main man, my nigger!'),¹⁶¹ suddenly switching into black slang for the exclamation, identifying the black experience of his Caribbean with the black experience of North America. Although this encounter with (Winslow) Homer enables Walcott to recuperate something from the museum, its classical civilization is shown to be superficial when he emerges into the dusk 'between the Greek columns | of the museum' (184) into a world where he has no success in hailing a cab because of

¹⁵⁸ Walcott 1990: 205 (6. XL. iii). ¹⁵⁹ Walcott 1990: 182 (4. XXXVI. i).

¹⁶⁰ 'in the light that entered another Homer's hand' (184). This entire section is discussed brilliantly by Hamner 1997a: 99–101 and Goff and Simpson 2007: 248–9. Hamner includes an illustration of *The Gulf Stream* on p. 100. *The Gulf Stream* is in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, but has been loaned to the Boston Museum of Fine Art in the past for a Winslow Homer exhibition. Döring 2002: 157–8 suggests that Walcott's analysis of the painting identifies Homer's painting with Turner's painting *The Slave Ship*, retracing 'the iconographic *translatio imperii* of visual powers from the Old World to the New, from the British to the American empire.'

¹⁶¹ Walcott 1990: 183.

the colour of his skin, leading to the bathetic pun '*Sic transit taxi*, sport' (ibid.). Given that the narrator has just surveyed the Shaw Memorial featuring Saint Gaudens's frieze of the black soldiers depicted with Colonel Shaw, Robert Hamner rightly highlights the wry reflection on racial politics 'The ironic humour is that after more than a hundred years and thousands of lost lives a black man in this city continues to endure discrimination' (1997a: 101). However, this section also contains a more universal point about the passing of empires and their civilizations. Walcott translates a trope in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* about white races presiding over 'every dusky tribe'¹⁶² into the dusk settling over Boston Common and the symbolic *memento mori* of empire contained in the detail of the 'declining sun':

So I stood in the dusk between the Greek columns
of the museum touched by the declining sun
on the gilt of the State House dome . . .

museums may endure, and art may be immortal up to a point, but the world about them is in flux and often in tension with the civilizational ideals encased behind the museum's 'classic façade' (182). In this static environment Walcott finds a pivot/hook for translation in the chance resemblance of the black sailor to the fictional character Achille in his own poem, and the coincidence of the painter's name ('another Homer'). The irony here is that Walcott has earlier used the more authentic, Greek name of Omeros for his bard (and title), over the name 'Homer' with its associations of the American classical renaissance,¹⁶³ but in this instance this New England Homer chimes in with Walcott's reinvention of Homeric epic.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² This is a quotation from the beginning of chapter 42 ('The Whiteness of the Whale') of *Moby Dick*. For a discussion of the complexity of the symbolism of the whiteness of the whale, see C. L. R. James's study of *Moby Dick* (James [1953] 2001: 41–2).

¹⁶³ Cf. Walcott 1990: 14 (1. II. iii), 'I said: "Homer and Virg are New England farmers, and the winged horse guards their gas-station, you're right."'

¹⁶⁴ I also note Paula Burnett's compelling reading of the phrase 'another Homer'; Burnett suggests that there are actually four Homers in play here (Homer, Omeros, Winslow Homer, and Dunstan St Omer), seeing Dunstan St Omer, the St Lucian painter and Walcott's friend from childhood, as a counterpart to Winslow Homer (2000: 171–2).

The gap that Walcott opens up between historical regimes and the art that lurks in their museums or the architecture of their public spaces undermines the mantra that 'power and art are the same'. First, the immortality of art is attacked: art belongs to the material world ('some Caesar's eaten nose') of historical change and decay and, like their artworks, empires fray (*sic transit gloria mundi*).¹⁶⁵ A similar critique is present in the poem 'Roman Peace' (*The Arkansas Testament*), where Walcott depicts a senile Augustus hallucinating about the legions lost along with the Roman general P. Quinctilius Varus in a battle in Teutoburg Forest in AD 9—one of the most humiliating episodes in the history of Rome's empire.¹⁶⁶ The decay at the heart of every empire is beautifully encapsulated in the line 'The marble phlegm of Rome lies on his chest', where the decline of an emperor is imagined sculpturally and stands symbolically for the eventual decline of all emperors.¹⁶⁷

Secondly, when Walcott retorts that the perspective of 'a slave from the outer regions | of their fraying empires' might be different, he hints at the historical and cultural specificity of art and its ability to alienate viewers who do not share in the culture that produced it. There is also a suggestion that the real power—the manpower—that funded or physically built these monuments often came from slaves or subjects of empire.¹⁶⁸ On the one hand a failure of cultural translation (*translatio studii*): art that does not carry over from the old world of Europe to the new world of the Caribbean; and on the other hand the brutal process of *translatio imperii* through the exploitation of foreign labour.

The compact between art and power is there at the beginning of *Omeros* when Walcott muses on the marble bust of Homer, its nose broken, like the 'eaten' nose of the Caesar, and what it would make of the history of the transatlantic slave trade ('its nostrils might

¹⁶⁵ See Walcott in White 1996: 159, 'And that's what the ruins of any great cultures do. In a way they commemorate decay. That's the elegiac point.'

¹⁶⁶ Famously described in Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (*Life of Augustus* ch. 23).

¹⁶⁷ Walcott [1987] 1988: 71.

¹⁶⁸ See the connection between the museums and monuments of London and the exploitation of slave labour in the lines '... the City that can buy and sell us ... the packets of tea stirred with our crystals of sweat'. Walcott 1990: 197 (5.XXXVIII.iii).

flare').¹⁶⁹ In this context the statue is apparently exonerated from the horror of the slave trade, since it is described as 'inculpable marble' and is even incorporated into the suffering through the passivity of the past:

perhaps the inculpable marble
would have turned its white seeds away, to widen
the bow of its mouth at the horror under her table,
from the lyre of her armchair draped with its white chiton.
to do what the past always does: suffer, and stare.

The question of the past and its role in the present is at the centre of the historiographic nexus of *Omeros*. Walcott's narrative fluctuates between a sympathetic vision of a classical past that has been coerced into modern fictions, and a wary or sometimes hostile view of the same past for its role in propping up these fictions. The poet's impulse to translate the past and to interpret it in a Caribbean context can be likened to domesticating translation, in which a source text is 'brought home' to a target culture.¹⁷⁰ Hence the significance of the Greek sculptress Antigone authorizing Walcott's Caribbean Homer ("O-meros," she laughed. "That's what we call him in Greek").¹⁷¹ Following Alexander Irvine, we could call this a deterritorializing adaptation, as illustrated by the breakthrough in chapter XXX, when Achille views his native land of St Lucia after a hallucinatory return to his ancestral land in West Africa: 'This was the shout on which each odyssey pivots, | ... [8 lines omitted] And I'm homing with him, Homeros, my nigger.'¹⁷² In place of a canonical, capitalized *Odyssey*, we get the odyssey as a transferable concept ('each odyssey'), as Walcott 'homes' with his character Achille and,

¹⁶⁹ Walcott 1990: 15 (1.II.iii).

¹⁷⁰ On the homing instinct in domesticating translation see Steiner [1975] 1998: 398–400.

¹⁷¹ Walcott 1990: 14 (1.II.iii). See Melas 2007: 149 on this erotic encounter as a 'contingent foundation' for the poem.

¹⁷² Irvine (2005) has written of Walcott's 'deterritorialization of Western myth'. Irvine explains this idea on p. 126: 'The classics aren't being forgotten; rather it is a way of reading the classics that must be abandoned. They must, in Deleuze and Guattari's phrasing, be "deterritorializ[ed]", used in "strange and minor" ways in order for a minority writer to find a voice of any consequence,' quoting from Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 16.

simultaneously, with Homeros, whose name coincides with home.¹⁷³ In fact, this passage (159) is the only place in the entire poem where Walcott uses the form 'Homeros' (a transliteration of the ancient Greek noun "Ὅμηρος"), as distinct from the modern Greek/Patois hybrid form Omeros.¹⁷⁴ In other words, this is the closest that the narrator gets to Homer, and yet Walcott keeps his distance from this canonical Homer by making the pseudo-etymology 'home' more prominent than the transliteration of the ancient Greek name. This cagey identification with Homer reflects a broader pattern in *Omeros*, whereby Walcott is careful to keep his distance even in the moment of engaging with epic. Scholars have posited an analogy with the simultaneous proximity and distance that is characteristic of Homeric similes, which typically resist geographical and cultural specificity. Lorna Hardwick has suggested 'reception as simile' for a model of Walcott's reception of Homer, in which distant worlds are brought into contact.¹⁷⁵ To quote Oliver Taplin, 'the great majority of the similes is neither fixed in time nor located in place: they do not belong to Homer's first audience particularly more than any other audience' (2007: 179).¹⁷⁶ Taplin goes on to posit that the similes are 'paradigmatic of the coexistence of similarity and difference which is at the core of the power of Homeric poetry as a whole' (ibid.). According to Melas, Walcott employs 'Omeric similitude' as a way of transcending the limiting gaze of the tourist: 'Whereas the Homeric simile cannily separates specificity from locality, Omeric similitude delocalizes tourism's reified caricature of local type. Homer or

¹⁷³ For discussion of Walcott's polylingual etymology of 'Omeros' at p. 14, see Dougherty 1997: 335–6. Hamner 1997a: 42 introduces the helpful concept of 'connotative etymology'. Melas 2007: 150 emphasizes the erotic act between poet and lover and adds the etymology 'homme's eros' to the mix.

¹⁷⁴ See Farrell 1997: 264 for an incisive discussion of the cultural politics involved in Walcott's etymology and the question of dialectal variants. See especially his description of the Anglicized name 'Homer' as a 'spuriously universal Latinate' form (ibid.).

¹⁷⁵ See Hardwick 1997 ('reception as simile'), 2000: 124, 2007: 61–2—the latter for the suggestion that Walcott's *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* effectively follows the pattern of a reverse simile in its engagement with Homer.

¹⁷⁶ This property of Homeric similes has been widely commented on. Taplin's article is particularly relevant here because he discusses Walcott's tentative assimilation of the Homeric simile (2007: 184–6).

Omeros thus provides Walcott with epic distance, or rather, epicity as distance.¹⁷⁷ This conjunction of similarity and distance domesticates Homeric epic by deterritorializing it; it is home everywhere and nowhere.

This is a strategy that liberates the epic from the countless misprisions that it has suffered from antiquity to the present, including Walcott's own assimilation which is careful to maintain fictional similarities with Homeric epic while insisting that it is not the same. Walcott allows his bard an identity that is foreign to the world of the poem, and that is potentially offended by the ways in which he has been revised and revisioned in world literature, but the flip side of this foreignness is the displacement of Homer from his own poem, as it were. The first aspect (Homer's alienation from his own poem) is reminiscent of Borges's immortal Homer in the story 'The Immortal',¹⁷⁸ where Homer fails to recognize himself in the changed text that we read today. The second aspect is also Borgesian, as John Thieme has observed in the case of an earlier Walcott poem, 'Map of the New World', where the poem purports to be the *Odyssey*: 'A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain | And plucks the first line of the *Odyssey*.'¹⁷⁹ The answer to this intertextual conundrum is that Walcott largely bypasses the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, instead accessing their mythical traditions,¹⁸⁰ which reach back beyond them and extend long after them through other texts with which Walcott engages more directly, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Joyce's *Ulysses*.

¹⁷⁷ Melas 2007: 158.

¹⁷⁸ 'El Inmortal' is the first story in the collection of short stories entitled *El Aleph* (1957).

¹⁷⁹ Walcott 1981: 25 (CP 413). See Thieme 1999: 167: 'As with *Omeros*, this suggests that the poem about to be written is actually *The Odyssey*, not a derivative Caribbean by-product. Just as in Jorge Luis Borges' "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," where the fictional Pierre Menard produces his own verbatim version of Cervantes' novel without any indebtedness to it, so the implication here is that a completely new work is about to be undertaken.' See Greenwood 2005b: 140.

¹⁸⁰ Walcott 1990: 283 (7. LVI. iii): "I never read it," | I said. "Not all the way through." See White 1996: 173. See also Davis 2007: 208, who comments: 'it is clear... that Walcott sees the Homeric epic narratives fundamentally as a matrix of archetypal figures, images, and motifs... that constitute a kind of archive for later writers and artists in the Western canon.'

The received idea of *translatio studii et imperii* holds that the translation of culture and the translation of power/empire go hand in hand, and that art translates the power of those that rule. Walcott's counter-strategy has always been to insist on the power of art, leading to the concept of an 'empire of art'. Accordingly, the era of the end of empire calls for a systematic renegotiation of the literature of empire in order to establish a new empire of literature. *Omeros* is the centrepiece of this project, involving as it does the translation of canonical Homeric epics into a New World context. Translation in this sense is the metaphorical exercise of carrying over Homeric epic from ancient Greece to the modern Caribbean.

Miscarriage of Empire

We have seen how the misquotation of Virgil functions as a critique of the faux-authority of European civilization in Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979). Walcott also uses Virgilian misquotation to highlight the miscarriage of power and justice at the heart of colonial culture. In Walcott's case the misquotation occurs in chapter 5 of the long autobiographical poem *Another Life* (1974). This chapter bears as its epigraph the Latin motto on the St Lucian shield 'Statio haud malefida carinis', and the motto is subsequently embedded in the poem in a classroom scene.¹⁸¹

'Boy! Name the great harbours of the world!
'Sydney! Sir.'
'San Franscescol'
'Naples, sah!
'And what about Castries?'
'Sah, Castries ees a coaling station and
der twenty-seventh best harba in der worl'
In eet the entire Breetesh Navy can be heedent!
'What is the motto of St. Lucia, boy?'
'Statio haud malefida carinis.'
'Sir!'

¹⁸¹ Walcott 2004: 29–30. See Baugh and Nepaulsingh 2004: 250 for commentary on this motto and the harbour at Castries to which it refers.

'Sir!
'And what does that mean?'
'Sir, a safe anchorage for sheep's!'

This motto is a deliberate misquotation of the description of the island of Tenedos at *Aeneid* 2.23 ('nunc tantum sinus et statio malefida carinis'). I have noted elsewhere that Walcott quite deliberately sends us back to Virgil, alerting us to the Virgilian intertext with the phrase 'Virgil's tag' (line 708).¹⁸² Timothy Hofmeister has illuminated this intertextual play, arguing that an awareness of the imperial maladaptation of Virgil prompts us to reassess the relationship between colonial power, colonial subject, and Virgil's Rome. Insofar as the schoolboy, along with his fellow St Lucians, has been duped by a false motto, they are like the Trojans—the future Romans—of *Aeneid* Book 2.¹⁸³ However, as with Austin Clarke's use of Latin (mis)quotations in *The Polished Hoe*, the Latin allusion entails complex cultural politics. Not only is the Latin misquotation on which the allusion hangs a sign of colonial duplicity, but it is also part of a classroom exchange in which pedagogy is crossed with colonial domination. This warped colonial perspective reduces the significance of Castries, the capital of St Lucia, to the fact that it can receive the entire British navy in its harbour; and still it only comes in at twenty-third place in a ranking of the world's harbours.¹⁸⁴ Given the imperial subject matter, and the fact that St Lucia still had semi-colonial status at the time at which the poem was published, the opening exclamation 'Boy' makes the schoolboy's subsequent 'Sirs' resemble an exchange between master and subject.¹⁸⁵

As Baugh and Nepaulsingh observe, 'the schoolchildren, who speak a version of English with an African base, are aggressively

¹⁸² Greenwood 2005a: 90 (n. 60).

¹⁸³ See Hofmeister 1999: 52–3, especially 53: 'The story of the African diaspora nests inside the ancient myth, in short, when Walcott's allusive play reverses the imperial revision of Virgil.' See Baugh and Nepaulsingh 2004: 185–7, who trace the Virgilian themes in *Another Life*, concluding with a series of parallels between the poet Walcott and Aeneas (187).

¹⁸⁴ See Greenwood 2005a: 81. Melas 2007: 119 comments neatly, 'Walcott mocks this obsessively comparative history of ranking by ordinals.'

¹⁸⁵ St Lucia did not gain full independence until 22 February 1979; for the period 1967–79, it was an 'Associated State' of the United Kingdom.

corrected by their teachers who speak English properly and seem culturally distant from their local students'.¹⁸⁶ Although Walcott 'reverses the imperial revision of Vergil', as Hofmeister puts it (n. 183 above), his own recondite allusive play reinforces the very cultural distance that he criticizes in the teacher. These Latin tags are a world away from the life of ordinary St Lucians, and Walcott's privileged education divides him from the countrymen and women to whom his poetry seeks to give voice. As the narrator of *Omeros* comments on the village Olympiad in Gros-Îlet:

When one wore a crown—
victor ludorum—no one knew what it meant, or
 cared to be told. The Latin syllables would drown
 in the clapping dialect of the crowd.¹⁸⁷

In turn, this passage is strongly reminiscent of the poem 'A Latin Primer' (*The Arkansas Testament*), where Walcott reflects on his experience as a Junior Latin master, and muses that his complicity in disciplining the students 'made me a hypocrite; | their lithe black bodies, beached, | would die in dialect'.¹⁸⁸ Since the narrator likens the pupils to porpoises in the preceding stanza, the sense seems to be that the Latin drilled into them in the classroom will not enable them to survive in the world outside the school, where they will be like proverbial fish out of water. In both poems, Latin is overwhelmed by dialect.

Pompous Latin phrases are one of the signatures used to characterize Major Plunkett when he is first introduced in chapter 5 of *Omeros*.¹⁸⁹ In this chapter the phrases 'Pro Rommel, pro mori' (25), 'Pro honoris causa' (ibid.), 'memento mori' (30), and finally 'victor ludorum' (32) all feature as part of Plunkett's stream of consciousness. The first phrase, invented by Walcott, refers to the German AfrikaKorps serving under Rommel in North Africa and possibly alludes to Wilfred Owen's famous appropriation of Horace's 'dulce et

¹⁸⁶ Baugh and Nepaulsingh 2004: 186; they cite Walcott's own comments on this passage in support of their interpretation.

¹⁸⁷ Walcott 1990: 32 (1.V.iii).

¹⁸⁸ Walcott [1987] 1988: 23. See King 2000: 54–5.

¹⁸⁹ For the 'real-life' Major Plunkett on whom the character was modelled, see King 2000: 41.

decorum est pro patria mori' (*Odes* 3.2.13).¹⁹⁰ The second phrase, 'pro honoris causa' (lit. 'for the sake of honour'), used in the conferring of honorary degrees, has a bathetic comic effect when used in reference to the war: 'Pro honoris causa, | but in whose honour did his head-wound graduate?'; while the phrase 'memento mori' ('remember that you are going to die') is used in conjunction with Remembrance Day. But although the Major's use of these phrases is recherché and therefore pompous, the first three phrases contain poignant irony because they pertain to the Second World War—a war of which the Major himself was a victim.¹⁹¹ We might call Plunkett a disillusioned exponent of empire; although he often expresses nostalgia for Britain's lost empire, he too is a victim of an imperial fiction and, like Philoctete, bears a wound (28). In Plunkett's case he labours under a double lie: the 'ancient lie' that Owen mocks in his poem, the lie that twisted Greek and Latin texts to serve modern interests, and the lie or illusion that St Lucia bears Homeric associations.¹⁹² The two lies are related, since the appropriation of Latin tags on the one hand, and the naming of islands and slaves after classical names on the other hand, belong to the same fictional history that relays European civilization back to the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome and makes spurious classical translation serve the transmission of power/empire.

In Plunkett's case this spurious translation takes the form of identifying 'coincidences' between the details of St Lucian history and Homeric epic.¹⁹³ As critics have observed, Plunkett's enterprise of writing an epical history fulfils A. J. Froude's statement about the

¹⁹⁰ 'Dulce et Decorum est' (written in 1917). See Hardwick 2000: 53 on Walcott's quotation of Owen's poem in Walcott's play *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (Walcott 1993: 60; Act I, scene vii).

¹⁹¹ Commenting on *Omeros* 6.LIV.i, Henriksen 2006: 244–5 offers interesting observations about the combination of 'upper-class sociolect' and 'Caribbean English' in Plunkett's speech, although some of the phrases she identifies as Caribbean English are actually typical of army cant in a man of Plunkett's age and background.

¹⁹² See Hardwick 2000: 52 'The use by propagandists of this line from Horace in order to justify and console those who were likely to die and to glorify death in battle was another example of appropriation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of ideas and phrases from classical authors without much attention to the context in which they were originally written.'

¹⁹³ See Hamner 1997a: ch. 3 for discussion of Plunkett's approach to history.

West Indies as the proper arena for a modern English epic.¹⁹⁴ His enterprise is also reminiscent of the Belgian historian Raymond in *A Bend in the River*, who takes the history of the Roman Empire as the model for his history of the Congo. Although Plunkett's model is Greek mythology, rather than Roman history, in his reading he uses a bookmark that he had won as a prize 'for an essay | on the Roman Empire. In those days, history was easy.'¹⁹⁵ The second sentence can be construed severally: 'in those days' can refer to Plunkett's recollection of the simplicity of ancient history as taught at school, with its factual certainties and coherent narrative. However 'in those days' may also refer to ancient Rome, suggesting a progressivist view of historical time, with history becoming increasingly simpler the further back in time one goes. After all, the notion that the history of the ancient world is easy is a presumption of imperial mythmaking, which relies on a knowable and easily transmissible version of the past. When Raymond ponders 'Do we really know the history of the Roman Empire? Do we really know what went on during the conquest of Gaul?' he throws into question an entire regime of knowledge.¹⁹⁶ Nor is this imperial mythmaking exclusive to the modern world; it is already there in many of the ancient texts that are pressed into modern myths.

In Walcott's poetry the trajectory of the imperial lie goes back to the archetypal, Roman Empire. Caesars figure repeatedly in Walcott as figureheads for the propagation of imperial power and the stratagems used to enforce it—we have encountered a few of them already. The collection *In a Green Night*, which was published in the year that Trinidad and Tobago gained Independence (1962), includes a sequence entitled 'Two Poems on the Passing of an Empire'. In the first poem, a heron alighting on a tree stump segues into a vision of the eagle on Roman military standards, 'such an emblem led Rome's trampling feet, | pursued by late proconsuls bearing law', but the poet concludes with relief that 'time and motion is at a period' so the heron in this case cannot signify empire.¹⁹⁷ The second poem juxtaposes the

¹⁹⁴ See Hamner 1997a: 59; Henriksen 2006: v–xvi.

¹⁹⁵ Walcott 1990: 113 (2.XXI.ii).

¹⁹⁶ Naipaul [1979] 2002b: 151 (see p. 139 above).

¹⁹⁷ Walcott 1962: 38. Trinidad and Tobago gained Independence on 12 August 1962. Walcott was resident in Trinidad at the time.

British Empire (Britannia) with the Roman Empire of the previous poem, seen through the loss sustained by a veteran of the African campaign. The same analogy is employed in the poem 'A Letter from the Old Guard' (*The Arkansas Testament*), which is written in the persona of another veteran who also served in Africa under the empire.¹⁹⁸ The veteran compares his colonial military service to the tax tribute exacted under the Roman Empire:

I soldiered for my King
and island. My hands catch arthritis,
but they rendered unto Caesar what is Caesar's,
just like the Gurkhas. What ferocious blighters!

The moral balance of the poem is further weighted towards the veteran with this echo of Christ's words to the Pharisees,¹⁹⁹ and the confusion of culture that empire brings is evident in the mixed linguistic register with which the veteran voices his letter: the expression to 'catch arthritis' is West Indian English, while the exclamation 'What ferocious blighters!' is in the idiolect of the British army.

In the poem 'Tropic Zone' (poem 43 of *Midsummer*), Walcott aligns his poetry with the unregulated, tenseless space of the ocean: 'and my own prayer is to write | lines as mindless as the oceans of linear time, | since time is the first province of Caesar's jurisdiction.'²⁰⁰ Similarly in *Omeros* in a passage where the narrator compares the expulsion of the American Indians (specifically the Lakota tribe) from the Dakotas with the forced migration of African slaves and the decimation of native Amerindian peoples in the Caribbean; these acts of deracination are relayed back to Caesar: 'This is the first wisdom of Caesar | to change the ground under the bare soles of a race.'²⁰¹ The burden of history in Walcott's poetry is freighted with the classical gravitas of Rome's empire, which provided a pretext for subsequent empires. Hence the assault on the classicism of the Republic of America—Walcott's 'new

¹⁹⁸ Walcott [1987] 1988: 40–3.

¹⁹⁹ Gospel of Matthew 22: 21. See Walcott's discussion of this phrase in his 1990 interview with J. P. White (White 1996: 159).

²⁰⁰ Walcott 1984: 57.

²⁰¹ Walcott 1990: 208 (5.XLI.ii). Compare Hamner 1997a: 122.

empire'—as a shallow façade in *Omeros*.²⁰² In the modern world the argument about empire is always also an argument about the classical past and how to interpret it.

New World, New Word

One of the ways in which the so-called 'Old' World powers inscribed themselves in the 'New' World was through old words, as a way of disarming the foreign and unknown.²⁰³ These old words included the Bible and classical mythology, and Latin nomenclature for the flora and fauna of this new world. This was a case of translation following the trajectory of empire/power and its legacy was the metaphor of 'the colony as a translation, a copy of an original located elsewhere on the map'.²⁰⁴ Writing about local folklore in the poem 'White Magic', Walcott complains that the wood nymphs of classical antiquity—the dryads and hamadryads—have been preserved in literature, while Papa Bois, the old man of the forest in Trinidadian folklore, is dismissed as a copy of Pan, the satyr in Graeco-Roman mythology: 'but when our dry leaves crackle to the deer-| footed, hobbling hunter, Papa Bois, | he's just Pan's clone, one more translated satyr'.²⁰⁵ This poem famously concludes with a terse statement of the inequality at the heart of the colonial condition: 'Our myths are ignorance, theirs are literature'.²⁰⁶ On both sides of the caesura are myths—those of the colonized and the colonizer—but there is an inscrutable inequality that means that on one side the myths are relegated to the status of ignorant superstition, while on the other side they are elevated to literature. In seeking to level this equation, Walcott has often turned to translation, as a means of both dismantling power and conveying a new cultural order.

In the poem 'The Almond Trees' (*The Castaway*), Walcott tackles translation through the phenomenon of metamorphosis.²⁰⁷ He

²⁰² Walcott 1990: 206 (5.XLI.i).

²⁰³ See p. 8 above.

²⁰⁴ Bassnett and Trivedi 1999a: 5. Consider, for example, the spectacle of Barbados as 'Little England' in George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* and Austin Clarke's *Growing up Stupid under the Union Jack*, discussed on p. 93 above with n. 86.

²⁰⁵ Walcott [1987] 1988: 38.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 39.

²⁰⁷ Walcott 1965: 36–7. For discussion see Thieme 1999: 80–2. Thieme is more optimistic than I am in his interpretation of the imagery of this poem.

describes a typical beachscape as a scene of carnage in which trees washed from Africa, like enslaved Africans, have been stripped down and rebranded with classical tags in the New World:

Welded in one flame,
huddling naked, stripped of their name,
for Greek or Roman tags, they were lashed
raw by wind, washed
out with salt and fire-dried,
bitterly nourished where their branches died,
their leaves' broad dialect a coarse,
enduring sound
they shared together.

Taking his cue from the Froudian insult that there is nothing here and that the region is without history, Walcott depicts a landscape that unwittingly echoes classical mythology as a result of the classical names that have been put upon the trees. Alluding to Ovid's famous description of the metamorphosis of Daphne into a laurel tree in Book 1 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Walcott casts the women who come to the beach as 'brown daphnes, laurels' in 'Pompeian' bikinis whose metamorphosis through tanning reflects the metamorphosis undergone by the trees. However, this trivial skit on classical mythology stands in stark contrast to the wound of history at the centre of the poem; Walcott contrasts the artistic, erotic transformation of Daphne into a tree with these eradicated trees, whose 'grief | howls seaward through charred, ravaged holes' (1965: 37). The theme of wounding through translation is revisited in 'The Schooner, *Flight*' (*The Star-Apple Kingdom*), where the narrator Shabine muses on 'the pain of history words contain' (1980: 12). In this poem the naming of trees again symbolizes cultural imperialism.²⁰⁸ As the ship approaches Barbados, Shabine spots casuarinas on the shore and considers the different names by which these trees are called: 'cedars, cypresses, or casuarinas' (*ibid.*). He explains what is at stake for the colonial in the choice of a name:

²⁰⁸ There is an excellent discussion of this section of 'The Schooner, *Flight*' in Breslin 2001: 204–6.

but we live like our names and you would have
to be colonial to know the difference,
to know the pain of history words contain,
to love those trees with an inferior love,
and to believe: 'Those casuarinas bend
like cypresses, their hair hangs down in rain
like sailors' wives. They're classic trees, and we,
if we live like the names our masters please,
by careful mimicry might become men.'²⁰⁹

Everywhere, botanical translation implies metamorphosis, transforming the landscape through language.²¹⁰

In both 'The Almond Trees' and 'The Schooner, *Flight*' this transformation is a site of pain, a scene of humiliation since the value of the landscape lies only in its resemblance to foreign landscapes.²¹¹ Hence the healing of Philoctete's affliction in *Omeros* entails, among other things, 'The yoke of the wrong name lifted from his shoulders.'²¹² Note the interpellation of the classical in all of this: in *Omeros* the fisherman's wrong name is a Greek name (in the French transliteration), and here the advantage that the cypresses have over the casuarinas is that they are 'classic' trees.

Although Walcott successfully domesticates this classical past in *Omeros*, with the result that readers of the Homeric epics are now just as likely to hear Walcott in Homer as Walcott heard Homeric echoes in the quarrels of local fishermen, the anxiety over naming persists in subsequent collections of poetry (*The Bounty*, *Tiepolo's Hound*, and *The Prodigal*), as Walcott mediates between the languages of empire: primarily his 'two languages': English and St Lucian Creole, but other

²⁰⁹ Walcott [1979] 1980: 12, echoed in *Omeros* (Walcott 1990: 208 (5.XLI.ii)).

²¹⁰ Describing the botanical classification undertaken by the Flemish botanist Carolus Clusius (1526–1609), Richard Drayton has remarked 'After Clusius, the botanist was no longer a mere commentator on the ancients, he now had the daunting Adamic responsibility of naming every new herb' (Drayton 2000: 14).

²¹¹ Breslin (2001: 206) emphasizes Shabine's progress in realizing and ultimately rejecting the 'colonial subservience' (205) involved in privileging foreign names over local names, but I would stress that although Shabine has reached this realization, the colonial mindset that Shabine describes is narrated in the present tense, as an enduring condition.

²¹² Walcott 1990: 247 (6.XLIX.ii).

languages feature as well. Throughout his career, Walcott has written and spoken about the Adamic thrill of naming in poetry in English what had never before been named: elements of St Lucian landscape and culture, flora, fauna, and topography.²¹³ These new words from the New World pose an implicit challenge to the dominant English language in which Walcott writes. Nouns such as *pomme-arac*, *bois-canot*, *laurier canelles*, and *bois-flot* require translation and remind us that St Lucia is not wholly within the language of empire. Maria Tymoczko has written perceptively about the analogies between translation from minor culture into dominant culture, and the cultural inequalities exposed in the circulation of postcolonial literature. With reference to translations, Tymoczko writes of unparalleled, untranslatable words from the source culture that persist into translations, causing 'perturbations in the lexis' of the translation.²¹⁴ Similarly, Lawrence Venuti has written of 'language use as a site of power relationships', and the ability of literary texts in so-called 'minority' languages to 'submit the major language to constant variation, forcing it to become minor, delegitimizing, deterritorializing, alienating it.'²¹⁵

Walcott invites this power play, commenting on words as the inalienable resource of the Caribbean writer ('But that's all those bastards have left us: words').²¹⁶

I think that the writer writing in English or in Spanish is lucky in the sense that he can master the original language, or the language of the master himself, and yet have it fertilized by the language of dialect. Someone who knows what he is doing, a good poet, recognizes the language's essential duality. The excitement is in joining the two parts.²¹⁷

Walcott's comments describe, at the level of language, what he has described elsewhere at the level of culture, condoning the idea that, in art, 'maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor.'²¹⁸ Lorna Hardwick has explored this position in the work of Walcott

²¹³ See, e.g., Walcott 1998: 79–80. ²¹⁴ Tymoczko 1999: 24.

²¹⁵ Venuti 1998: 9–10; here Venuti draws on Lecercle 1990, and Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

²¹⁶ 'The Schooner, *Flight*', Walcott [1979] 1980: 9 (CP 350).

²¹⁷ Walcott in Ciccarelli 1996: 45 (the interview was conducted in 1977).

²¹⁸ In the essay 'The Muse of History', Walcott 1998: 36; originally published in 1974.

and Seamus Heaney, explaining that 'here we are dealing with consciousness which recognizes both the assimilationist impact of classical texts on colonised peoples and the capacity of writers to use the texts to build new works'.²¹⁹

I have suggested elsewhere that Walcott repeatedly uses Latin etymologies in his poetry to highlight the interpenetration of languages, such that Latin, Creole, and Standard English are found to share many roots.²²⁰ In Walcott's poetry Latin has the capacity to level out the inequities in cultural translation by pointing up an imperial debt at the heart of English.²²¹ The process is analogous to that which Maria Cristina Fumagalli has identified in the poetry of Seamus Heaney: with Heaney activating Latin etymologies at the heart of 'English' words in the midst of dialect, leading to a middle form, which she likens to Dante's use of the vernacular.²²² If we read the line 'civilization is impatience',²²³ in *The Bounty* with this mechanism in mind, then the characteristic of civilization is not just restlessness, but also impassivity—drawing on the Latin etymology *impatiens*. This word-play takes us right back to 'Prelude', the opening poem of the collection *In a Green Night* (1962), which contains the line 'Time creeps over the patient who are too long patient', where both senses are active: both suffering (from the Latin verb *patior*, I suffer) and impatience at this suffering.²²⁴ Walcott then manipulates the Latin etymology of this adjective in the declaration that his life 'must not be made public | Until I have learnt to suffer | In accurate iambs'. As though, even though the poet writes in the midst of real suffering, the suffering of art is the only suffering that counts. This critique of civilization as restless agency that inflicts suffering in its wake recalls Césaire's emotive balance sheet of civilization and its victims, and is a good example of how Walcott, like Césaire, draws on the linguistic copia of western civilization to question its values.²²⁵

²¹⁹ Hardwick 2002: 241.

²²⁰ Greenwood 2009.

²²¹ See Prince 2007: 184, who suggests the term 'post-colonial philology' to describe Walcott's linguistic creativity, 'creating new language and new connections between language'.

²²² Fumagalli 2001: xxv.

²²³ Walcott 1997a: 35.

²²⁴ Walcott 1962: 11.

²²⁵ Elsewhere Walcott echoes Césaire's famous negation more directly (see, e.g., *Omeros*; Walcott 1990: 22 (1.IV.ii)).

CONCLUSION

Starting with Austin Clarke's canny misquotations of Latin and classical mythology in *The Polished Hoe*, this chapter has explored the fiction of imperial succession (*translatio imperii*), which sees modern European empires continuing Rome's civilization through the very act of empire.²²⁶ I have suggested that all three writers, Clarke, Naipaul, and Walcott, tackle this fiction by getting at the texts that are supposed to transmit this civilization (*translatio studii*). In both Clarke and Naipaul, misquotation shows up a miscarriage in the process of translation and, correspondingly, a miscarriage in the succession of empire. If the texts quoted mean something else, or are misquoted, then the imperial narrative loses cogency. In the case of Walcott, I have suggested that the translation of empire and the simultaneous translation of Classics, which often accompanied empire, is one of the major themes of his poetry. The complexity of Walcott's engagement with the Classics stems from the fact that *translatio imperii* is at the same time a reality and a fiction for him. It is a reality insofar as the colonial education that Walcott received inculcated the idea that the British Empire and the empire of art were one and the same, and that access to the Classics was only to be had through the school of empire. This confusion of art and empire is articulated in *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), where the artworks in the Phaidon series are said to have:

... opened the gates of an empire
to applicants from its provinces and islands,
in the old argument that the great works we admire
civilise and colonise us, they chain our hands
invisibly.²²⁷

However, the phrase 'old argument' suggests that it is time to move on. The innovation in Walcott's view of the classical past, realized in *Omeros*, is to distinguish the transition of western empires²²⁸ from

²²⁶ See Willis 2007: 331–2. ²²⁷ Walcott 2000: 57.

²²⁸ See *Omeros* 5.XXXVIII.ii: 'And the sunflower sets after all, retracting its irises | with the bargeman's own, then buds on black, iron trees | as a gliding fog hides the empires: London, Rome, Greece' (Walcott 1990: 196).

the works of art produced under these empires.²²⁹ Through his reinvention as Omeros, a rough, vagrant bard from Greece, Homer is decolonized and estranged from the classical ideal suggesting that it is not arts that civilize and colonize, but that they are themselves colonized. Crucially, in Walcott's engagement with Homer, Homer is not 'western'.²³⁰ Even some of the subtlest studies of *Omeros* miss a beat here. For instance, Jahan Ramazani's description of the warrior Philoctetes as 'the *classical white* male war hero responsible for victory in the Trojan War' (my italics) elides ancient Greek literature, modern constructions of ethnicity, and a periodization ('classical') that is alien to Greek mythology.²³¹ The very point about Walcott's Homeric theme is to spring characters like Philoctetes from this trap.

The different approaches taken by Clarke, Naipaul, and Walcott can be summarized under two headings: 'the ellipsis of empire' and 'the elision of empire'. The former (ellipsis) refers to the glossing over or suppression of aspects of ancient Greece and Rome in the flow of empire. V. S. Naipaul has coined the phrase the 'classical half view' to express the gulf between writers in the ancient world 'who possess the whole apparatus of ancient Civilization', and subsequent generations of readers who attempt to fill in the gaps in the history of a Polybius, or a Caesar.²³² Naipaul cites the bafflement of modern schoolchildren who translate Caesar's compressed vocabulary and who lack the cultural references to make sense of what they are translating. Furthermore, Naipaul suggests that this half-view is an integral feature of classical literature itself, which sometimes uses words 'to hide from reality' (166). If we accept that our view of the past is only a half-view, then it seems absurd that a line from Virgil, say, can stand as a self-explanatory shorthand for Belgian colonization in the Congo, or the British maritime empire in the Caribbean.²³³ Similarly,

²²⁹ Döring 2002: 208 uses a reading of *Omeros* to counter George Steiner's conception of 'translational continuity' within the Western canon (Steiner [1975: 467] 1998: 479).

²³⁰ On shifting perceptions of the 'Westernness' of Homer in the twentieth century, see the introduction in Graziosi and Greenwood 2007: 1–24.

²³¹ Ramazani 2001: 54.

²³² Naipaul 2007: 151.

²³³ Recall Raymond's plaintive question in *A Bend in the River*: 'Do we really know the history of the Roman Empire?' (Naipaul [1979] 2002b: 151), see p. 176 above.

Clarke's retelling of the Trojan horse episode, which raises the question of whether the Trojans were Greeks or Romans, reminds us that the past is plural and cannot be conscripted into a single story. The ellipsis view of empire holds that there are gaps in our knowledge of the past and that the very existence of these gaps permits new ways of looking at the past. The existence of these gaps then negates the fiction of a continuous western civilization, or the elision of empire whereby disparate empires are elided into a seamless succession.