Some R eflections on Translating a Fragment of Derek Walcott's **Omeros**

There may be a myriad of reasons why we approach a poem with a view to translating it. Some of these are related to one's profession; sometimes, they are determined by a creative impulse, or a necessity imposed on us by dynamics we cannot wholly apprehend. A poet may approach this task playfully, as a way of paying homage to a master, or honing his own poetic skills. As Derek Walcott once asserted, there may be "a kind of instinct that says 'here is the mirror of what I would like to have written.'"[1] Indeed, poets have translated both in order to diffuse the work of writers whose project and sensibility they find to be kindred to their own, and in order to introduce new elements into the literary polysystem to which they belong and which they may wish to defy. Sometimes, poets are said to be the least trustworthy of translators while on other occasions it is

For those of us who master language with more difficulty than poets do, translation may be an overwhelming and frustrating process which makes manifest the notorious incompatibility between languages. One of many reasons why the translation of poetry is so complex and demanding is the fact that both experiences—that of writing poetry and that of translating—represent an extreme engagement with language, which reveals an inadequacy at the heart of our desire for expressing what might only be an intimation. In this sense, a translator might be compared to a poet, as indeed William Wordsworth indirectly suggested in his famous preface to *Lyrical Ballads* from 1800,[3] not without a reference to the inferior position of the former. Translation is considered a subversive force in a literary polysystem; it burdens the target language with foreign elements and unusual rhythms; it stretches its conceptual horizons and occupies almost a space of its own, outside both systems, while being necessarily a part of them. Poetry, too, displays some of these characteristics. In fac

chea(s)-1(s)- ptrr874(a)6(o-1gf2(i)-24)4d4rr874(a)6(o)-10(d)4(t)--1gf2o2(e)5.7 aIga1tiTj874ual2(e)5.7.Iof

webbed / on her Asian cheeks, defined her eyes with a black / almond's outline" has been adapted to the syntax of the TT. The Italian translator of *Omeros* remarked once (only half-jokingly) that a great literary achievement would tolerate a certain number of errors, and it is reasonable to hope that although some dimensions will necessarily be lost in translation, the reader may still enjoy the complex wor(l)d of the original, and that perhaps the translation in itself may be more than an instrument in the process.

Some consideration needs to be given to the problem of metre and rhyme. *Omeros* presents the reader with an intricate metrical scheme which is explained by the author as a homage to Homer's hexameter and Dante's *terza rima*, though this assertion should always be quoted with a grain of salt. Lance Callahan has meticulously analysed Walcott's prosody, reaching the conclusion that a "cleverly engineered uncertainty is […] a defining feature of the metrical contract of *Omeros*, as is the process of raising expectations only to dash them."[11] One of the few constants is the number of syllables per line, which in the chosen excerpt is almost always twelve. The rhyme scheme is variegated and the extract actually opens with a *terza rima*. Walcott has repeatedly asserted that he does not believe in free verse, and has commented on the importance of the concept of design, including the visual aspect of the stanza on the printed page. He has, moreover, been annoyed by people showing surprise that he should write in rhyme: rhyme for Walcott being inseparable from poetry, poetry from song. In translating the passage from *Omeros*, rhyme and metre were inevitably sacrificed to other aspects of the text, but even the attempt at reproducing the highly irregular metrical scheme and variegated English rhyme would have proved a failure, for there are few correspondences between poetic forms in different languages. The number of syllables of the translated lines in most instances amounts to sixteen or seventeen, but of course, the variation is much more evident than in the ST, with the lines in the TT containing from thirteen to twenty syllables. The metrical solution adopted in the TT could be defined as Holmes's organic, content-derivative form with a predominantly dactylic rhythm, the descending intonation being typical of lines in Serbo-Croatian. Admittedly, the TT might display a slightly prosaic colour, but the attempt

translated. Like Walcott's characters in his own view,[13] it is a fragment washed up on another shore, suffering a considerable sea-change. If the process of translation is a voyage, it is one that must be concluded (but only temporarily) in one's mother tongue, and it is both a premise and a conclusion of the described translation process that nothing has such a force to impel us to rediscover our own language as has poetic translation.

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[1] Derek Walcott, "Honey and Alchemy" in Juliet Steyne ed., *Beautiful Translations*