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What the Sea-Almond Has Seen

Derek Walcott was, in addition to being a prolific poet, a prodigious and well-practiced painter. He told the *New Yorker*’s Hilton Als that his artistic philosophy was about “representing the thing you see with fidelity.” This comes through in his landscape paintings, which, though almost surreally vivid in color, are evidently concerned with realistic portrayals of their subjects. Human figures are legible as such, reposing at café tables or looking out over the horizon, surrounded by yellowy dirt roads and spindly trees. The acute attention to detail creates a sense that the paintings are windows into a Caribbean world that we could step into, if only we could fit into their frames.

Walcott’s artistic mind comes across clearly in his celebrated epic, “Omeros”; if there is one thing that “Omeros”succeeds in being, it is as an aesthetic homage to the natural beauty of St. Lucia, the Caribbean island Walcott called home. As in his landscapes, the poem is filled with painterly motifs of the island: the fishermen’s rough canoes, Achille’s augural swift, Maud Plunkett’s doomed allamandas. Like the water lilies of Monet’s Giverny, these elements come to characterize St. Lucia.

Of the poem’s recurring motifs, perhaps none is so prominent as the sea-almond tree. The sea-almond is a large tropical tree with long fan-shaped leaves, found on several continents around the world. The first such tree we encounter in “Omeros” is one under which the fisherman Philoctete sits, showing off the unhealing scar on his knee “made by a rusted anchor.” The willing audience to this unpleasant display is a group of gathered tourists who try to “take his soul with their cameras” and from whom Philoctete hopes to earn some “extra silver” by showing off the raw wound.

As with so much of “Omeros,” this scene seems to spring from a landscape painting—the purpose of the human figures seem really just to act as staffage, and instead the attention is placed on the nonhuman, in the form of the natural beauty that surrounds this scene. That is, the real activity is to be found in the “an egret [that] stalks the reeds” for food, the “silence…sawn in half by a dragonfly / as eels sign their names along the clear bottom-sand,” all beneath the shade of the sea-almond.

We could leave our interpretation of the sea-almond there and imagine, with good reason, that Walcott would be satisfied: if we can extend his philosophy of painting into poetry, the sea-almond is there because it *is* there, in real life, growing all over St. Lucia. But as the narrative progresses and the sea-almonds continue to pop up, the tree becomes more than just an artistic gesture. At one point, the blind man Seven Seas hears the “breeze / washing through the sea-almond’s wares”; it is like the sea-almond is a voice box through which the island can speak to him.

Moreover, in a poem populated with humans inspired by Greek epic—Hector, Achille, and Helen are most obviously named after figures from Greek epic, while the blind man Seven Seas is an analog for Homer and the fisherman Philoctete might be legible as Patroclus—the sea-almond is also a Caribbean translation of a Homeric figure, albeit a nonhuman one. It is the olive tree of Greece to which the sea-almond of owes its literary ancestry. As with the sea-almond in “Omeros,” olive trees populate Homer’s world—the stake that Odysseus drove into the eye of Polyphemus was made of olive wood, men and women “anoint” themselves with olive oil, Odysseus and Minerva sit at the “root of a great olive” as they plot the former’s triumphant return to Ithaca. But like the human St. Lucian characters and their Homeric counterparts, the resemblance between the sea-almond and the olive tree is only skin-deep (or, rather, bark-deep). In “Omeros,” the sea-almond takes on a much greater narrative significance than the olive-tree ever does in Homer.

The aforementioned scene with Philoctete and his wound is the first in the poem, and it is a sign from the start that this is an island in transition. Even as Philoctete, Achille, and Hector continue to toil as fishermen in the traditional way, making their canoes by hand out of cedar, tourists are arriving on the island with their cameras and their money. Other change happens in the poem, too: Hector quits his job as a fisherman and starts driving a van shuttle; he and Achille fight over the beautiful Helen, who is fired from her job and becomes pregnant; Major Plunkett and his wife grapple with their awkward presence on the island until she finally dies of cancer. Amidst all this change, the sea-almond is a constant presence, not just in the space of this story but, seemingly, through several lifetimes. The “tribal burden” of “centuries,” Walcott writes, “arches the sea-almonds spine.” Like the wizened old Seven Seas, the sea-almond has borne witness to the modernization of St. Lucia.

Sea-almond trees are deciduous; their leaves turn red or yellow during dry seasons before falling from the trees. As such, even as the presence of the almond tree is a constant, the “changing leaves of the almond tree” and the “crackle of leaves underfoot” become markers of the passage of time. This is important to a poem in which an island-time atmosphere pervades. The nonlinearity of the narrative certainly contributes to this sense, making time feel nebulous as the poem modulates between past and present. So too does the free verse and formal flexibility of Walcott’s poetry: We have no rhythmic markers that could allow us to predict when to expect the change to a new line, much less the change of a scene. When the scene does change we are uncertain whether we have moved forward or backward in time; Hector is dead in Chapter XLV, but reappears in Chapter LI, his van nearly colliding with Major Plunkett’s car. The net effect is that time often seems not to have past at all. Yet we know it has, as the changing colors of the sea-almond can tell us.

For temperate zone-dwelling readers unfamiliar with St. Lucian flora, there is some cognitive disorientation that occurs when we picture the image of fallen leaves on a tropical island. Walcott seems to anticipate his readers’ potential perplexity, taking advantage of it by transplanting the sea-almond into a New England context. “I knew I was different / from them as our skins were different in an empire / that boasted about its hues,” Walcott writes in a scene from his perspective, “In a New England / that had raked the leaves of the tribes into one fire / on the lawn back of the carport, like dead almond leaves on a beach.” Although the narrative of “Omeros” centers of St. Lucia, Walcott makes frequent diversions to other locales, like West Africa, from which Achille’s father was taken and enslaved, and Boston, where Walcott, in real life, taught. Though the sea-almond is almost exclusively a feature of the St. Lucian landscape, this scene suggests how it might transcend that space.

What with the close identification of sea-almonds with St. Lucia that Walcott develops over the course of the poem, it is surprising to note that sea-almonds are not native to the island. They were transplanted more recently to the Americas, coming from a broad range of other tropical regions including, perhaps most significantly, Africa. In a poem in which the tandem legacies of slavery and empire underlie the entirety of the narrative, this can hardly be a coincidence. Walcott depicts the violence of this history in a series of visions that Achille has of a slave raid in West Africa, which had “caught the village in the flung arc of a net / with its mesh of whirling archers.” Unlike the Greek epics that inspired it, “Omeros” has no bloody scenes of war and heroism. The slave raids are, horrifically, the closest we come to that, and Achille’s vision is a supernatural indication that the history of slavery is still present in the daily lives of St. Lucia’s inhabitants. The ancestors of the characters we think of as native to the island—as opposed to the tourists or to Major and Maud Plunkett—were brought forcibly there within the last few centuries. Likewise, the arched spine and ubiquity of the sea-almond conceals the history of its own relatively recent transplantation to the island.

This mirroring of sea-almond and human exists also in the form of Helen. At one point, Maud recognizes Helen by her “gait…but the almond eyes were hooded in the smooth face of arrogant ebony.” In more ways than one, Helen is the focal point of “Omeros”; when she passes, islanders and foreigners alike pause to stare—“Who the hell is that?” yells one incredulous tourist—and her wavering romantic allegiance between Hector and Achille causes agony for the two of them and gossip around town. Helen’s distinguishing features are deeply rooted in her non-whiteness: the wide sway of her hips, her ebony skin, and, most significantly to this discussion, her almond eyes. The almond shape is, in common parlance, associated with Asian eyes, and so there is some ambiguity to the racialization of Helen’s features. This fact reflects the complexity of the mixed racial identities of St. Lucians, which has its roots in the legacy of the island’s colonial subjugation under French and British rule. Walcott is clearly thinking about the connection between eyes and identity, sea-almond and olive, because he compares the almond-eyed St. Lucian Helen with the vision of “olive-eyed” mosaics surrounding the Homeric Helen.

And so Walcott returns again to visual art: mosaics in ancient Greece, paintings in modern St. Lucia. Unlike Homeric epic, the power of “Omeros” is derived from the complexity of its characters. The sea-almond is one of those characters, drawing us into the landscape. Like the inhabitants of St. Lucia, the sea-almond was brought to the island and is now here to stay. The danger is that the tree’s beauty, and the beauty of Walcott’s poetry, will lull us into forgetting the darker history of colonialism and slavery that it represents.