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A Poem Begins with a Lump in the Throat": Metawriting as a Possible Method to Overcome Writer's Block in Derek Walcott's Omeros

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Abstract

This article offers a new reading of Derek Walcott's book-length poem *Omeros*, arguing that its marked metatextual statements function as a method to counter writer's block by transforming moments of creative apprehension into writing substance. While scholarship on writer's block has largely adopted empirical or clinical frameworks to diagnose and categorize its causes, critics of Walcott have not examined how his metatextual strategies might address the phenomenon of writer's block. This article therefore reorients the study of writer's block toward the field of creative writing by examining how a writer may confront this issue within the creative work itself and in the act of writing. It argues that Walcott's self-conscious metatextual practice demonstrates how reflection on the writing process can also confront moments of blockage. If writer's block denotes the condition in which a writer is unable to begin or continue writing, then writing about writer's block performs a twofold function: it acknowledges the impasse while simultaneously transforming it into creative material. In *Omeros*, metawriting—writing about writing—becomes writing substance itself. This approach shows how metawriting can help writers confront creative blockage, offering new perspectives for Walcott studies and for the pedagogy of creative writing.

Keywords

Derek Walcott; Omeros; Writer's block; Metawriting; Caribbean literature; Affliction; Trauma

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A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a homesickness or a love sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words. (Frost 1963).

"Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words … I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (Alter 2004; *The Holy Bible*, Exodus 4:10).

1. Introduction

Moses' supplication to God, "I am not a man of words" and "I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (Alter 2004; *The Holy Bible*, Exodus 4:10), reflects not merely speech defects but a defeatist mindset, a fear of failing to articulate thought. This mirrors the struggle "toward expression" to "find fulfilment" and to soothe the "lump in the throat," echoing Frost's epigram. In response, God appoints Aaron as Moses' "prophet" (*The Holy Bible*, Exodus 4:10–17; 7:1), ensuring smooth transmission of the Word. Moses' anxiety exemplifies what Mike Rose terms "writer's block, that frustrating, self-defeating inability to generate the next line, the right phrase, the sentence that releases the flow of words" (Rose 1984, 389). Moses' Qur'anic entreaty— "Untie my tongue, so that they may understand my words, and give me a helper from my family, my brother Aaron"—rehashes the Torah's story while foregrounding the centrality of speech fluidity to spreading God's Word. Since primeval times, poetic voice has been linked to divinatory inspiration: Greek poets sought guidance from the Muses, those "nine maidens of poetry" endowed with "divine voice" (Spentzou and Fowler 2002, 8–9).

In classical Arabic literature, poets are thought to invoke the "jinn of inspiration" (Yosefi 2019, 295) to claim poetic authority. Walcott, however, opens *Omeros* not with a plea for the Muse but by invoking Omeros, the oral name for Homer, "the great original, the intertextual authority" (Culler 1976, 1387): "O open this day with the conch's moan, Omeros, /as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun/gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise" (Walcott 1990, 12). He both invokes and revokes Omeros, and the narrator's line— "Master, I was the freshest of all your readers" (Walcott 1990, 283)—marks selving rather than mere following. That he has "never read" (Walcott 1990, 283) *The Odyssey* emphasizes Walcott's authorship beyond the "Homeric shadow" (Walcott 1990, 271). Introducing Seven Seas, the blind St. Lucian bard, before Omeros, Walcott adapts Homeric models into Caribbean characters, demonstrating self-conscious writing that reflects on composition itself, foreshadowing his metawriting strategies.

In this article, my understanding of writer's block emanates from Walcott's authorial insertion of metatextual references. While Walcott intervenes to reflect on the text he is writing, he does not depict creative failure; instead, he expands the interplay between poem and reality. The passage from "thoughts" to "words," as Frost notes, depends on such reflective intrusion, redirecting attention to the writing process. In this way, he multiplies creative possibilities while "exploring a theory of fiction," in Patricia Waugh's terms (Waugh 1984, 13). Across *Omeros*, these metatextual reflections and pauses function as organizing principles, turning potential hesitation into a generative framework for the poem.

The title *Omeros* exemplifies Walcott's metawriting. By recalling Homer, he situates himself in a classical tradition while creating space to reflect on writing itself. The poem links written and oral spaces, engaging cultural, historical, and theoretical entanglements. Walcott unsettles generic conventions, producing a text that is "oppositional" (Thieme 1999, 41), multi-layered, polyglot, and "speakerly" (Gates 1988, 198), in Henry Louis Gates's terms. O*meros* incorporates oral cultural elements within written codes and traces transoceanic "moblities" (Sheller 2003, 4; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, 2) of the Middle Passage. Opening on an animist scene where trees are conceived as gods, Walcott adopts instances of "poetic anthropology" (Hartog 2001, 25), tracing cultural residuals from animism to Christianity and highlighting syncretism. One telling instance is Achille's boat: when a priest remarks on the name, Achille responds, "Leave it! Is God's spelling and mine" (Walcott 1990, 8).

Similarly, in "The Sea is History," a colonial white teacher confronts local students, showcasing epistemic contrasts and Walcott's attention to cultural complexity. His metawriting converts potential compositional obstacles into textual substance. By juxtaposing concrete monuments with the sea as history— "Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? … The sea has locked them up. The sea is History" (Walcott 1984, 364)—Walcott establishes counter-referential coordinates. Employing a catechistic (Terada 1992, 168), question-and-answer structure, he integrates "folk wisdom" (Terada 1992, 168) and never "gets stuck" (Lange 2007, 4): the sea functions as both reflective and generative source.

Colonial schooling and folk culture provide material for Walcott's poetry. In his "often-anthologized early poem" (Terada 1992, 8), "A Far Cry from Africa" (Walcott 1984, 18), he remains attentive to historical context, drawing on the Mau-Mau rebellion (1952–1960) between the Kenya Land and Freedom Army and the British authorities (Blakeley

2009, 80–82). Through oppositional writing, Walcott inserts identitarian polarities— "either/or" constructs—to challenge essentialist views of Caribbean identity. By weaving biographical details into the poem, Walcott expands the notion of cultural belonging, positioning Africa and Britain as competing yet constitutive frames of identification. The interrogative structure and oscillation between opposites reflect a metawriting strategy: by staging "either/or" tensions, the poem interrogates and extends identitarian positions into a cross-cultural stance.

Omeros similarly interweaves epic tradition, poetic originality, orality, and writing as competing cultural modes within a colonial framework. Invoking the names Homer, Homeros, Omeros, Walcott links writing with reflection on poetic practice, making Homer himself a subject of the poem: straddling epic and anti-epic, he redefines (Davis 1997, 328) the epic genre and voices the "heroism of defeat" (Bloom 2005, 37–38), characteristic of a slave diaspora after the Middle Passage. Despite forced displacement, these slaves created new cultural worlds and identities. Walcott thus "reopens," to borrow Bloom's term, the epic genre and "clears" (Bloom 1994, 11) a space of his own as a maker or "re-maker" (Schoenberg 1996, 69). The interplay between "making" and "remaking," writing and rewriting, becomes a method to overcome writer's block. By revisiting Homer, the Western "great original" (Culler 1976, 1387), Walcott opens *Omeros* to Caribbean etymologies and associations, turning metatextual reflection into productive poetic substance.

2. Surveying writer's block

To write is to explore the terrain of artmaking, confronting obstacles such as apprehension, anxiety, perfectionism, creative deficiencies, and fear of evaluation (Kaufman and Kaufman 2009)—collectively known as writer's block. Capitalizing on "mixed-method, qualitative and quantitative analyses," Sarah Ahmed observes that writer's block stems less from ideation than from challenges in shaping ideas into coherent writing (Ahmed 2019, 1). Ahmed further observes that scholarship on writer's block has long drawn on psychoanalysis, whose early insights—though couched in outdated Freudian terminology—established enduring principles. Ahmed argues that blocking "often lies outside conscious" awareness, can result from excessive concern with "controlling certain aspects of writing," and is influenced by "perfectionism" and inflexible adherence to "rules"—issues later echoed by "cognitive scientists." She notes that "motivation and emotion" also play central roles in blocking. Across disciplines, Ahmed surveys these insights to compile measurable definitions of writer's block and strategies for managing it (Ahmed 2019, 4). These principles frame writer's block as largely unconscious, with motivation and emotion as key determinants. Ahmed surveys the literature of writer's block across disciplines to define and measure blocking, aiming to identify strategies for understanding and managing it.

Kaufman and Kaufman further highlight subtypes of blocked writers identified by J. L. Singer and M. V. Barrios in "Writer's Bock and Blocked Writers" (Singer and Barrios 2009, 225–246): "the dysphoric/avoidant subtype," marked by "emotional distress" and avoidance of the "solitude of writing"; "the guilty/interpersonally hindered subtype," for whom writing raises "interpersonal dilemmas"; "the constricted/dismissive/disengaged subtype," characterized by limited creative engagement with the "writing task"; and "the angry/disappointed subtype," associated with "impatience," "hostility," and "narcissistic concerns" (Kaufman and Kaufman 2009, 16). This typology suggests that psychological, emotional, and personal factors can significantly impact the creative process and lead to periods of writer's block. Together with the cognitive, behavioural, and neurophysiological perspectives discussed earlier, these subtypes illustrate the complex interplay of factors that can impede writing.

Freud emphasizes the mysterious character of the creative writer. Through imaginative fictionalization, creative writers engage readers deeply, eliciting emotions and responses that might otherwise remain dormant. As he observes, "We laymen have always been intensely curious to know […] from what source that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it" (Freud 2004, 36). Creative writing is not an easy task, though. Most writers experience periods of blockage during composition. Those "creative writers," Barron argues, "whose dedication is a quest for ultimate meanings" (Barron 1966, 159), continually seek new modes of figuration to explore existential concerns such as life and death. At times they are struck by sudden "lightning-like inspiration" that enables them to "conjure a text" in dialogue with earlier works (Waitman and Plucker 2009, 287). Even so, times of creative impasse remain common; writer's block, defined as "the perceived inability to write that can cause high levels of distress and discouragement in writers" (Kaufman and Kaufman 2009, 16), continues to mark the process of artistic production.

As this brief overview shows, although scholars have extensively studied writer's block, their analyses have largely been scientific, offering insights into its causes and contributing to its definition as a still partly understood phenomenon. In this article, however, I shift the focus to writer's block in a creative context—that is, within creative works themselves. Focusing on *Omeros*, which I read as a metatextual work reflecting on its own processes of production, I will show how a creative writer may confront and explore writer's block through the very act of writing.

3. Metawriting and character outlining

While deliberating on the themes of his long poem *Omeros*, Walcott lays out the method by which he outlines his characters. In such passages as "This wound I have stitched into Plunkett's character" (Walcott 1990, 28), the focus is not merely on physical portrayal but on a metatextual pattern or structure. Character outlining thus becomes a form of theorizing on characterization. *Omeros* repeatedly reflects on its characters, setting, themes, and genre, turning metatextuality into a means of articulating poetic vision while furnishing the author with writing material. Writing about writing maximizes compositional possibilities and transforms the poem into a self-conscious creative writing workshop.

In "Learning from Fiction – Using Metawriting to Overcome Writing Problems," Ulrike Lange shows how self-reflective fiction can help writers confront anxieties surrounding the act of beginning a novel. Referring to Sasha Sokolov's "experimental novel" *A School for Fools*, Lange notes that the narrative "stages the problem of beginning" by "incorporating versions and parts into the final text which would usually be eliminated during revision" (Lange 2007, 3). The novel opens with the question many writers ask before composing the first sentence: "All right, but how do you begin, what words do you use?" (11). "By posing this question," Lange argues, "the first sentence of the novel is already written and now one sentence can lead to another" (Lange 2007, 2–3).

This fictional writing strategy exemplifies what Lange calls "the thinking-aloud protocol," whereby "the mental and emotional processes while writing are verbalized" (Lange 2007, 3). Drawing on Peter Elbow's book *Writing without Teachers* (Elbow 1998), Lange demonstrates how Elbow engrafts a "mode of reflection in his metawriting" as a potent technique to help writers "ge [t] unstuck" (Lange 2007, 4). Awareness, naming, and analysis of blockage, Elbow argues, transform frustration into progress, allowing the writer to move forward (Lange 2007, 4). Through this "thinking-aloud protocol," he suggests that writer's block can be overcome:

> Talk to yourself in your writing. If you stop involuntarily in the middle of a sentence … force yourself to keep writing and write to yourself whatever you have to say about that sentence: why it is stupid or wrong… (Elbow 1998, 74)

Hence, "talking to oneself in writing," even about one's difficulty, turns silence into articulation and the blockage itself into writing material.

What Walcott does at the beginning of this section from *Omeros* is to set forth his conception of character sketch and the principles of writing, whereby writing becomes self-conscious or narcissistic (Hutcheon 1991; Waugh 1984). He openly exposes the process of creation within the poem itself:

> 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 … (Walcott 1990, 28)

Here, Walcott incorporates his outline and method of writing into the fabric of his poem, merging the poem, its outline, and its compositional process. This instance of "thinking-aloud," "usually hidden" in the author's private drafts, is "verbalized within the literary text" itself (Lange 2007, 4).

Walcott stages not simply a character sketch but a perspectivist method by which the character is observed by both writer and reader. By recording his act of construction, Walcott allows the reader to witness Plunkett's formation through language. In this ongoing act of fictionalization, "every 'I'"—every character— is written and unwritten at once. The framing of narrative and character deepens as Walcott maps a topography of violence or "affliction." Dennis Plunkett and Maud Plunkett, a British expatriate couple of Irish origins and figures of colonial presence, are themselves scarred by suffering. The "old wound in his [Plunkett's] head" (Walcott 1990, 56) and the absence of fact that "a son" (Walcott 1990, 29) embody this anguish. Maud Plunkett's death from "cancer" (Walcott 1990, 260) further amplifies the poem's anatomy of pain.

The novice writer observing Walcott's graphic delineation of suffering can trace how "affliction" is transposed into imagery. The motif of wounding is central to Walcott's characterization; the island's inhabitants are, by default, afflicted — their wounds symbolizing the colonial "affliction" inscribed into both landscape and character. Yet these wounds operate not only as historical or physical markers but also as metapoetic symbols of the creative process itself. In *Omeros*,

affliction becomes both theme and method: writing inscribes marks of wounding on the characters' bodies. Walcott transforms this pain—personal, historical, and artistic—into generative potential, turning the condition of being "wounded" into a metaphor for the writer's own creative apprehensions and recovery. From the outset of the poem, Philoctete, a local St Lucian fisherman, is marked by a visible "sore":

> … The sore on his shin
>
> still unhealed, like a radiant anemone. It had come
>
> from a scraping, rusted anchor. The pronged iron
>
> peeled the skin in a backwash … (Walcott 1990, 9–10)

The introduction of Ma Kilman, the "g*ardeuse*, sybil, obeah-woman" (Walcott 1990, 58) extends this network of affliction and care:

> … He would wait
>
> in the No Pain Cafe all day. There he would lean
>
> down and anoint the mouth of the sore on his shin. (Walcott 1990, 18)

The "sore on the shin" is foregrounded not simply as a wound or scar but as a structural frame shaping the relationships between characters. This frame turns conversation itself into a generative device that sustains the poem's narrative movement. Dialogue eases the flow of narration and furnishes the text with living, plausible substance. At this point, the "phantom narrator" (Walcott 1990, 28) momentarily steps aside, allowing Philoctete and Ma Kilman to speak in their own voices:

> *"Mais qui ça qui rivait-'ous, Philoctete?"*
>
> *"Main blessé."*
>
> "But what is wrong wif you, Philoctete?"
>
> "I am blest.
>
> wif this wound, Ma Kilman, *qui pas ka guérir pièce.*
>
> Which will never heal." (Walcott 1990, 18–19).

The insertion of Creole exemplifies how Walcott draws on the socio-cultural condition in St Lucia, conferring immediacy and authenticity on the narrative. The use of Creole, then, is not simply mimetic but metatextual, reflecting Walcott's awareness of the island's multilingual reality as a creative resource. Linguistic heterogeneity—English and Creole, colonizer and colonized tongues—becomes rich sociocultural substance for writing. In this sense, the linguistic textures of St. Lucia provide the raw material of creation, while the Creole voice testifies to a history of coerced mobilities and colonial subjugation. By integrating this voice into the poem's structure, Walcott transforms cultural fragmentation into aesthetic unity, converting historical wounds into generative vectors of writing.

At this point, the narrator re-enters the scene, reworking the image of the "sore" (Walcott 1990, 19) in a broader symbolic way. The text foregrounds this wound as a framing principle that gradually grows into a historical allegory encompassing communal life not only in St Lucia but across the Caribbean archipelago. Walcott weaves a dense textual fabric through character relations, showing how personal and collective wounds become material for poetic construction. Not only does "the historical wound" distress "the descendants of slaves," Paul Breslin observes, but it also affects the descendants of masters. Jahan Ramazani likewise reads Philoctete and Plunkett as "a transnational allegory" of both "the wound of black St Lucian history" and the larger "incurable wound of time" (Ramazani 2001, 51-71). Through these layered reflections, Walcott converts historical and corporeal affliction into poetic substance, exemplifying how metatextual reflection transforms potential creative blockage into aesthetic substance.

Walcott employs a polarizing method in character sketching, juxtaposing colonized and colonizer, while highlighting common traits that reflect the Caribbean history of loss. Both Philoctete and Major Plunkett bear physical injuries that carry signs of trauma. By focusing on the "sore on [Philoctete's] shin" (Walcott 1990, 18) and the "old wound in [Plunkett's] head" (Walcott 1990, 56), Walcott makes pain physically visible and corporeally felt. These bodily afflictions are not merely descriptive; they transform trauma into textual substance, showing how the poet converts suffering into fertile material for creative writing.

For Philoctete, "the sore on his shin" traces back to "the chained ankles/of his grandfathers" (Walcott 1990, 19) during slavery, linking personal affliction to historical trauma. Plunkett, meanwhile, is restless, seeking recognition and fulfilment as an expatriate with no progeny, a wife plagued by cancer, and a desire for Helen, a local woman. His concern with writing the island's history shows how Walcott makes use of cultural history and collective memory as writing material. Dennis Plunkett seeks the island's history through Helen's name, imagining St Lucia through the mythic lens of Helen of Troy. Walcott thus situates the local within a wider mythic framework: Helen's name becomes caught in a "net of myths," "knotted entanglements," and "webbed connection" (Walcott 1990, 95), linking personal memory, colonial history, and classical myth.

In an interview with J. P. White, Walcott explains:

> The connection is, we were brought up to believe that the Helen of the West Indies is St. Lucia, because it was fought over 13 times. And there's Elena, a Black woman, much like the one on the bus in 'The Light of the World.' … I'm taking these people as if they were fragments or shards washed up on this shore and looking at them for the first time. (White 1990, 35)

Like Helen of Troy, the St Lucian Helen is also fought over by Achille and Hector, local fishermen. Walcott thus reappropriates Greek mythology, Homeric characters, and the epic genre, mapping them onto Caribbean life. Plunkett retraces the genealogy of Helen's name, which unfolds into multiple layers of meaning: the St Lucian woman desired by Dennis Plunkett, St Lucia itself— "historically contested between France and England" (Breslin 2001, 12)—and the narrative Helen caught between Achille and Hector. She lives with Achille but loves Hector; after Hector's death she returns to Achille, who accepts her unborn child despite uncertainty about its father. By interweaving these identities and histories, Walcott reworks colonial and classical material into poetic substance. The poem continually reflects on its own construction, turning the challenge of representing hybridity, rootlessness, and local lives into a creative process that foregrounds Caribbean historical complexity.

Walcott observes how his characters embody both physical and psychic pain. Philoctete, Achille, Hector, Dennis Plunkett, and Maud Plunkett bear corporeal scars, illnesses, and grief. In Book Two, Achille—sorrowful and weary of the town's tourist bustle—retreats to his canoe, where he reflects on Helen and is overcome by a mixture of anger and pity (Walcott 1990, 115). This moment foregrounds Achille's inner affliction, contrasting emotional turmoil with the surrounding calm. Walcott's characterization turns emotion into landscape, rendering psychic disquiet in visible form. In dramatizing Achille's anger and pity, Walcott advances a self-reflexive aesthetic in which pain becomes narrative material. Writing thus emerges as a method for confronting creative impasses, transforming potential writer's block into communicable flow.

Walcott's interweaving of character, setting, and symbolism exemplifies a self-conscious staging of narrative components, showing how the poet sidesteps creative blocking by mapping the creative process within the narrative. The image of the "full moon's grace sailing dark trees" signals Achille's epiphanic journey to ancestral Africa, while also demonstrating a self-conscious writing method. Achille's traversing of time and space becomes a metatextual reflection on patrimony and filiation in a rootless Caribbean diaspora, showing how a writer can avoid writer's block through reflective engagement with creative writing and complex Caribbean legacy.

In correlating creative writing with metawriting, Walcott weaves semantic associations between the "moon," the "canoe," the "sea" and the poem, evoking classical conception of poetry as a sailing vessel. Walcott draws on the classical motif of poetic composition as sailing: "the 'I' is a mast; a desk is a raft" (Walcott 1990, 291; Dougherty 2001, 188; Dougherty 1997, 353). These symbols transform movement and mobility into the aesthetic and philosophical substance of the poem. Sun-stricken, Achille, "[c] radled at the bow like a foetus, like a sea-horse" (Walcott 1990, 158), is guided by the "sea-swift" (Walcott 1990, 22, 319) or "*l'hirondelle des Antilles*" (Walcott 1990, 88) to Africa, where he meets his father Afolabe and saves his people from bondage:

> And God said to Achille, “Look, I giving you permission.
>
> to come home. Is I send the sea-swift as a pilot,
>
> the swift whose wings—is the sign of my crucifixion. (Walcott 1990, 134).

Walcott’s method mediates colonial displacement through narrative form, showing how one can transcend time, geography, and “pain” (Walcott 1990, 115). His structuring of Achille’s voyage reflects cultural and religious syncretism, where animism and Christianity cross-pollinate, rendering homesickness and historical trauma as aesthetic material.

Walcott’s framing of Achille’s voyage demonstrates how pain, homesickness, historical trauma, and deracination become both subject and substance for poetic form. This reverse journey to ancestral origins transforms motion and mobility into creative substance, extending beyond Achille to the poet himself, who merges with his character:

> And I’m homing with him, Homeros, my nigger,
>
> my captain, his breastplates bursting with happiness! (Walcott 1990, 159).

Through possessive intimacy— “my nigger,” “my captain”—and the invocation of “Homeros” (Roberts 2002, 46), Walcott intermixes poet and character, transforming writing itself into an act of shared healing. By punning on “homing” and “Homeros”—signifiers bound by the idea of homecoming and belonging (Barnard 2014, 175; Greenwood 2010, 170)—Walcott locates home (or “homes”) in the act of writing itself. Writing thus becomes both monument and landmark, attesting to the identitarian connections between Africa (the lost home), the Caribbean (the inhabited, new home) and the diaspora (the symbolic, communitarian home).

The pain, or “the tribal/sorrow that Philoctete could not drown in alcohol” (Walcott 1990, 129), is transcended through Achille’s homeward journey. Walcott’s metawriting treats history and memory as substantial (bio) data, enriching character construction and narrative development. Through this self-reflexive process, he forges affinities between characters and articulates multiculturalism, hybridity, and cross-cultural Caribbean identity. Facing questions of identity, race, memory, history, and culture, Walcott draws on Western and African heritages to construct a poetics of Caribbeanness. Near the end of Book Three, he reappears in Achille’s shoes to reflect on African origins:

> And this was the hymn that Achille could not utter:
>
> *“Merci, Bon Dieu, pour la mer-a, merci la Vierge*" __
>
> “Thank God for the sea who is His Virgin Mother";
>
> *"Qui ba moin force moin"*__"Who gave me the privilege
>
> of working for Him. Every bird is my brother";
>
> "*Toutes gibiers c'est freres moin', pis n'homme ni pour travail"*__
>
> "Because man must work like the birds until he die." (Walcott 1990, 160)

Walcott, as a maker and craftsman, draws on Creole or “Antillean patois” (Walcott 1990, 14), inscribing it into his narrative. This choice appears in Book One, where Walcott incorporates Creole as a founding component of the poem. By doing so, he Caribbeanizes Omeros, establishing imaginative affinities with Homer and Greece, “the original continent” (Walcott 1998, 69):

> … I said, "Omeros,"
>
> and O was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was
>
> both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
>
> *os*, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes
>
> and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore. (Walcott 1990, 14)

Partitioning Omeros into three phonemes exemplifies how metawriting offers material for the writer to put his ideas into words. In this way, Walcott's recourse to Creole exemplifies a method that retraces a history of linguistic syncretism, one that enabled enslaved peoples to confront communication blockage and invent a medium blending both English—the language of the master—with African tongues—the languages of origin.

This act of surviving the linguistic crisis offers Walcott a model to confront creative failure or writer's block. The fragmentation of language and the use of the vernacular thus become resourceful material for poetic creation and the means of overcoming creative impasse. The vernacular, both symptom and cure of linguistic fracture and blocking, is creatively used as a "speakerly" mode of language (Gates 1988, 198) and idiom of thought. By reinvesting oral culture and incorporating it within the coded system of writing and the epic genre, Walcott develops a method of transforming linguistic aporias into poetic possibility. This recalls the way Dante Alighieri introduced vernacular instead of Latin so that common people would have access to reading and understanding the Bible (Fortuna, Gragnolati, and Trabant 2010, 1–14). Walcott writes his own project, profiles his characters, and integrates common people and their language into literary texts. Writing thus turns into a historical and semantic process where the text displays a self-questioning movement digging into legacies of slavery and its attendant linguistic syncretism. As local voices circulate worldwide, the text becomes a vehicle of culture: Walcott becomes a hero of culture, and the people acquire heroic or epic proportions. Walcott creates a cosmology of pain as he digs into Middle Passage experience and present-day Caribbean. Reflecting on imperial subjugation and forced mobilities during slavery and tourist mobilities in contemporary Caribbean, Walcott extends the same line of torture of chained slave progenitors to their descendants.

As Walcott recalls reading Sioux diaries and letters while teaching at Boston University, he transforms archival material into writing substance. Archival documents have become a method of creative writing that connects intertexts and transforms historical records into poetic form. Walcott thus fictionalizes history and historicizes poetry, using archival documents as a narrative vector to address historical and identitarian blockages. This approach also functions as a model for novice writers, showcasing how archival sources can become poetic substance to overcome creative impasses or writer's block. In Book Four, Walcott links his characters to nineteenth-century American figures as he consults Weldon's journal documenting her activism for the Sioux:

> 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. (Walcott 1990, 181)

Catherine Weldon's historical archive opens a horizon of fictionalization and provides material for literary production. By sketching Weldon's profile and parallelling Philoctete's wound with her son's death from a wound "caused by a rusty nail" (Shaw-Miller 2021), Walcott destabilizes the boundaries between fiction and history. This foregrounds the figure of the inventive writer who transforms archival and historical material into poetic substance, redrawing topographies of suffering and colonial violence while modelling methods to overcome creative impasses. Walcott allows Weldon to voice the vulnerability of life: "'Life is so fragile. It trembles like the aspens …'" (Walcott 1990, 178) —showing how creative entanglements between archive, history, and poetry can stitch ties between Indian plight, Caribbean suffering, and the human condition. Through this metawriting practice, Walcott turns extratextual material into poetic craft, reworking archival fact into figural potential and transforming creative apprehension or writer's block into poetic renewal.

Walcott reflects on the strife of Indian tribes, contrasting imperial "deceit" with the Sioux trust to show how historical material can nourish literary exploration:

> Empires practised their abstract universals
>
> of deceit: treaties signed with a wink of a pen's
>
> eye dipped in an inkhorn, but this was not Versailles
>
> with painted cherubs, but on the Dakota Plains.

She had believed in the redemptions of History,

that the papers the Sioux had folded to their hearts

would be kept like God's word … (Walcott 1990, 180)

The writer in this sense finds enough material to weave thematic associations— between old empires, neo-imperial expansion, and the making of "History" as institutionalized power—into poetic fabulation. Walcott, fittingly then, crafts an oppositional narrative of "history," demonstrating how archival accounts and stories of damaged people can become pivotal writing substance through which the writer confronts writing anxiety.

4. Metawriting as a creative writing workshop

Metawriting frames the creative writer's space so much so that it turns into a workshop in which Walcott demonstrates ways of fitting expression to the poem's thematic stance, while the narrative displays a self-theorizing method. In articulating self-guiding principles, Walcott showcases creative writing techniques predicated upon constant interleaving between text and metatext. His metawriting references serve as a form of "self-monitoring," revealing "the ability to manage or control our verbal and nonverbal self-presentation to foster desired images in the eyes of our beholders" (Snyder 1979, 88).

It is worth mentioning that Walcott turns the act of writing into a workshop on writer's practice by charting and breaking frames. While setting forth his own frame of writing, he unsettles those pre-established conventions of epic genre. This view corresponds to what Patricia Waugh calls "frame-breaking" in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction.* As she explains, "contemporary metafiction … foregrounds framing as a problem," questioning the "procedures" that construct both reality and fiction: What is the 'frame' that separates reality from 'fiction'? Is it more than the front and back covers of a book, the rising and lowering of a curtain, the title and 'The End'?" (Waugh 1984, 28). Through direct intervention in the narrative, Walcott creates frames within frames. His presence becomes visible within the poem, which takes the form of an anti-epic. Rather than signalling a failure to write an epic along the Western literary canon, the poem demonstrates how the colonized writer develops oppositional methods to write a Caribbean epic voicing the region's cultural history and geography. The "frame" of the European vision is unframed through oppositional writing; the anxiety of writing the epic is addressed by showing how epic genre grows by transgressing its own conventions (Pavel 2003, 201; Cohen 2003, 482). The poem's beginning and ending, the title and cover (Waugh 1984, 28), relate to the same place—the Caribbean—forming a "circular pattern," and with the father's instruction to "enter" European cities before returning home:

But before you return, you must enter cities

that open like The World's Classics …

Once you have seen everything and gone everywhere,

cherish our island for its green simplicities …

… The sea-swift vanishes in rain,

and yet in its travelling all that the sea-swift does

it does in a circular pattern. Remember that, son." (Walcott 1990, 188)

This scene of father-son encounter recalls a prominent epic motif of filial inheritance, yet here it crisscrosses literary, cultural, and creative writing dimensions for a poet struggling to assert both his authorship and his people's cultural affiliation with Greek culture or classical narratives. The father's instruction to "enter cities /that open like *The World's Classics*" situates writing as a rite of passage, an initiation through the colonial metropolis before returning to the Caribbean. His exhortation to "remember that … all the sea-swift does/it does in a circular pattern" enacts not simply the poem's rhythm but its metapoetic structure: creation as both return and ongoing project. Through this circular motion, Walcott redefines travel and writing as vectors of self-discovery and cultural re-identification. For the creative writer, this offers a model of how thematic, socio-critical, and cultural insights converge into a method of writing that invokes Homer yet asserts authorial selving rather than following. Walcott's method suggests that one way to overcome writer's block is to produce a text that yokes writing and metawriting, transforming creative anxiety into reflective practice.

Metawriting shows through the father's ghost breaking in to instruct his son, the poet. He reminds his son that art and writing must remain sustaining projects of Caribbean culture and the means through which it attains lasting significance. The father's statements parallel those of Seven Seas, the blind St Lucian bard, who tells the poet that "the sea-swift was sent to you: /to circle yourself and your island with this art" (Walcott 1990, 188). Both figures function as creative mentors, urging the poet to translate ancestral and collective experience into art. Drawing on the epic topos of bequest, Walcott turns the inherited suffering and labour of slavery into cultural symbols. The father reappears as a metapoetic figure, instructing the poet to chronicle the experience of the black charcoal women: "[…] They walk, you write; […] give those feet a voice" (Walcott 1990, 187–188). Writing thus becomes an act of cultural restitution, giving voice to the voiceless labour of these women. In these intersections between father and son, writing and travelling, art and island representation, the poem stages a creative writing workshop in which colonial trauma is transformed into the regenerative act of art.

Walcott emerges as a character in his own poem, wavering between its textual and thematic strands. He tells the reader how he must momentarily leave Achille to speak about Maud Plunkett:

> I was both there and not there. I was attending
>
> the funeral of a character I'd created;
>
> the fiction of her life needed a good ending." (Walcott 1990, 291)

These lines illustrate how Maud Plunkett's fictional life comes full circle; her funeral is attended by the poet-narrator as a sign of closure and creative control. Walcott similarly inscribes himself in the poem through self-referential moments that fuse biography and creation: "I was both father and son. I was as old as her [his mother's] /exhausted prayer" (Walcott 1990, 75–76). Earlier in the narrative, Walcott shows his method of characterization by orchestrating his figures while shaping a cross-cultural poetic vision. Achille and Dennis Plunkett appear as twin halves of Caribbean hybridity, each embodying aspects of the poet's divided yet reconciliatory vision. As a narrator moving in his narrative, Walcott becomes both creator and created, turning writing into a self-reflective meditation on authorship and showing how creative blockage may be overcome through the very act of writing.

When Achille undertakes his spiritual travel back to Africa, to ancestral lands, Walcott writes:

> Half of me was with him. One half with the midshipman
>
> by a Dutch canal. But now, neither was happier
>
> or unhappier than the other … (Walcott 1990, 75–76)

What is striking is how Walcott sketches himself through both Achille and Plunkett, portraying them as complementary halves of his poetic self. Their coexistence within a single consciousness epitomizes Walcott's cross-cultural vision, one that reconciles African ancestry and British colonial inheritance within the creative act of writing.

In charting the act of writing itself, Walcott shows how he becomes a hybrid construct composed of intertwined identities. By entering his own narrative and shaping his characters as symbols of hybridity, he turns the poem into a space of reconciliation. The line "neither was happier/or unhappier than the other" marks the reintegration of opposed identities. Walcott thus reveals how both identitarian crisis and creative blocking within the Caribbean imagination can be resolved through reintegrating contradictions in artistic creation. In this sense, *Omeros* tells the story of a metawriting workshop in which the poet's negotiation of divided selves models a way to overcome authorial and cultural blocking through the motion of writing itself.

Omeros features a creative writing workshop where Walcott demonstrates techniques that render the poem a "visible syntax" (Walcott 2000, 57), foregrounding its texture as a narrative of cultural hybridity. Maud Plunkett's "one pattern" quilt (Walcott 2000, 263), housing the "island's birds" (Walcott 2000, 267), becomes a metonym for Walcott's poetic weaving. The scene of knitting the quilt, recalling Penelope's weaving of Laertes' shroud (Lowenstam 2000; Hernández 2008; Schweizer 2002), highlights rewriting and renewal in a Caribbean context. Walcott knits a "palimpsest 'tapestry' in which … Aegean and Atlantic texts are intricately interwoven" (Bada 2000, 13).

In the same spirit, the poem foregrounds Achille's "shade" as a figure of cultural emergence:

> Why waste lines on Achille, a shade on the sea-floor?
>
> Because strong as self-healing coral, a quiet culture.
>
> is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor,
>
> deeper than it seems on the surface … (Walcott 1990, 269).

The text becomes a rhizomatous fabric whose threads branch out from both African and European strands. Writing thus emerges as a "self-healing" practice that reconciles Caribbean divided identities, transforming fragmentation into coherence through creative renewal.

This metawriting method turns the poem into a creative writing workshop, showing how writing about writing, character outlining, and thematic patterning can help overcome writing blocks. Walcott lays out a text which continually reterritorializes its reference field, probing identity formation and cultural visibility in a neoliberal frame "linking up of culture, economy, and governance" (Brouillette 2014, 2). The modernist anxiety over creating "one great monument" (Naimon 2012, 117) is reworked: rather than fearing failure to achieve monumentality, Walcott creates a new monumentality in which geography becomes an identity-assigning reference, the sea a site of history, and homecoming an anti-motif where "there are homecomings without home" (Walcott 1984, 128). In doing so, Walcott redraws epic convention to write a Caribbean epic while modelling a creative writing lesson. Walcott's craftsmanship comes to the fore, as *Omeros*, an anti-genre (Zoppi 1999, 512), becomes the monument itself, contesting European notions of monumentality grounded in concrete achievements or architectural permanence.

5. Conclusion

Studying Walcott's markedly self-conscious mode of writing is particularly relevant to understanding ways of confronting or managing times of creative failure leading to writer's block. As Walcott probes the act of writing as a self-reflective practice, he multiplies creative possibilities and models a poetics of renewal. Within *Omeros*, the interplay between the creative and the compositional processes becomes evident: writing and reflection, invention and reconstruction, English and Creole, continuously feed into each other. This dynamic is keyed to an identitarian project in which opposites—conventional and unconventional forms, genre and anti-genre, storytelling and story writing, traveling and homecoming—function as complementary vectors shaping the narrative.

Walcott nests metawriting reflections within his own narrative. He mobilizes postmodern narrative techniques to compose a long poem that not only recounts the story of a local fishing community but also foregrounds the very methods of its representation, making them integral to the creative process. By reworking and reframing the epic genre, he creates a text that articulates identitarian aspects of life while situating them within global readership. These metatextual inferences function as acts of metacognition, offering reflections not only on thematic content but on the writing process itself. By foregrounding writing alongside narrative, Walcott develops a method through which creative challenges—including hesitation or writer's block—can be reinvested into opportunities for reflection, experimentation, and artistic as well as generic renewal.

Walcott emerges as a cultural hero entrusted with crafting a situational symbiosis where wounded elements are cured in process. This poetic vision—healing within affliction—helps soothe writing apprehensions. Metatextual statements as "Like Philoctete's wound, this language carries its cure" (Walcott 1990, 323) and "A swift had carried the strong seed in its stomach/centuries ago from its antipodal shore, / […] She aimed to carry the cure/that precedes every wound …" (Walcott 1990, 238–239) foreground bodies and language as repositories of remedial practice. Philoctete and the swift thus become sites of endemic cure; likewise, language carries creative aspects bodying forth Creole culture outlasting the hardships of slavery. Walcott turns language into a fieldwork where opposites coexist, fostering healing and acceptance of cultural hybridity, while easing writing apprehension. In this way, his cross-cultural method becomes a model for managing writer's block: by harnessing opposites and integrating conflicting inheritances within a single poetic expression, he creates a potent source of invention.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study. All sources analysed are cited in the References.

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