

*Beyond Dusting Off the Classics:
From Homer to a “Map of the New World”*

Richard Sacks – January 12, 2023

Derek Walcott, “Map of the New World”

I – Archipelagoes

- 1 At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.
- 2 At the rain's edge, a sail.
- 3 Slowly the sail will lose sight of islands;
- 4 into a mist will go the belief in harbors
- 5 of an entire race.
- 6 The ten-years war is finished.
- 7 Helen's hair, a gray cloud.
- 8 Troy, a white ashpit
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- 11 A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain
- 12 and plucks the first line of the *Odyssey*.



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Catalog description: *One of the most awe-inspiring aspects of poetic language is its ability to transport the human spirit to multiple levels of time, space and meaning, often enveloping old worlds as well as new ones, yet all within a single poetic moment. Please join me tonight for a close reading of one such expansive poetic moment, the 12-line opening poem from “Map of the New World” by the Nobel Prize-winning Afro-Caribbean/American poet Derek Walcott.*

Note on the text: *An earlier version of “Map of the New World” appeared in the Kenyon Review (vol. iii, no. 1) in 1981. The extensively revised text was then published in Walcott’s Collected Poems, 1948-1984 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) in 1986 when Walcott had already begun working on Omeros.*

A pdf file with the powerpoint “slides” used in this session is available via download link at:

<https://sacks-richard.com/bts-poem-at-du>

Charles Stillwagon, Program Manager of the Enrichment Program, is the co-host for this session.

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Stanza #1 (lines 1-2)

- line 1 repeated word with homophones:
rain (1&2, and again later in line 11) ~ **reign** ~ **rein**;
note also the 2 meanings of "sentence"
- line 2 repeated word with homophone:
sail (2&3) ~ **sale**

-
- 1 *At the end of this sentence/**verdict**, rain/**reign** will begin.*
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Stanza #2 (lines 3-5)

- line 3 repetition of sibilants: s-alliteration + line-final s/z in 3-5
repeated l's; **thus line 3 emphasis on initial s-+l>sail/sale**
homophonic i-lands ~ I-lands (~ eyes- in line 11)
stressed-i assonance (> stressed-i in each of 10-12)
- line 4 multiple meanings of "harbors" + homophonic -**lief** ~ **leaf**
- line 5 another potential homophone: -**tire** ~ **Tyre**

Note 1: Tyre was destroyed in 332 BCE by Alexander the Great; Alexander is also the name of Paris of **Troy** who stole **Helen**, thus causing the **ten-years war** and **Troy's** destruction.

-
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 - 2 *At the rain/**reign's** edge, a sail/**sale**.*
 - 3 *Slowly the sail/**sale** will lose sight of islands/**I-lands/eye-lands***
 - 4 *into a mist will go the belief in harbors/**protection/***
the ability to sustain things in one's heart and mind
 - 5 *of an entire race / **Tyre**-connected races.*

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Stanza #2 (lines 3-5), continued

sibilants and the sound of sea:

Walcott, *Omeros*, 2.3.12-13: the white **surf** as it **crashes** / and **spreads** its **sibilant** collar on a **lace shore**

"into a mist will go the...-l[ea]f:"

Walcott, *Omeros*, 26.3.23-25: he saw **the leaf** / of his own canoe far out, **the life** he had left behind / and **the white line of surf...**

Walcott, *Omeros*, 10.3.56-57: Every **leaf** / defines its limits. All roots have their histories.

Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, progression in 2.10-12:

It was like that then, the island.... [T]he sea swept in there, and spread away for miles and miles on either side of the island. It was very small shaped something **like a leaf** stood on end.

She gazed back over the sea, at **the island**. But **the leaf** was losing its sharpness. It was very small; it was very distant. The sea was more important now than the shore.

She gazed at the immense expanse of the sea. **The island had grown so small that it scarcely looked like a leaf any longer.** It looked like the top of a rock which some wave bigger ... would cover.

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Stanza #2 (lines 3-5), continued

"los[ing] ... / ... the belief in harbors / of an entire race:"

Walcott, *Omeros*, progression in chapter 28:

1.4-9: We were the colour of shadows when we came down with tinkling leg-irons to join the chains of the sea, for the silver coins multiplying on **the sold horizon**, and these shadows are reprinted now on the **white** sand of antipodal coasts, your **ashen ancestors** from the Bight of Benin, from the margin of Guinea.

1.28-33: But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendour. Multiply **the rain's lances**, multiply their ruin, the grace born from subtraction as the hold's iron door rolled over their eyes like pots left out in the **rain**, and the bolt rammed home its echo, the way that thunder-claps perpetuate their reverberation.

So there went the **Ashanti** one way, the Mandingo another, the Ibo another, the Guinea. **Now each man was a nation in himself, without mother, father, brother.**

3.7-9: Yet they felt the sea-wind tying them into one nation of eyes and shadows and groans, in **the one pain that is inconsolable, the loss of one's shore...**

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Stanza #3 (lines 6-9)

line 6 three stressed syllables in a row (**tén-yéars wár**)

Note 2: in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the Trojan hero Aeneas “re-enacts” **the 10-year Trojan War** (and especially scenes of the *Odyssey*, followed by scenes of the *Iliad*!) as part of the process of founding Rome; along the way, Aeneas destroys **Tyre-descended** Dido, founder of African Carthage, thus “pre-enacting” Rome’s repeated destruction of Carthage.

line 7 two alliterating words in a row (**Helen's h**air) + homophonic word play **hair ~ heir** + two stressed syllables in a row (**gráy clóud**, with **cloud-** repeated in line 11)

Note 3: “Helen’s h[e]ir” – in *Odyssey*.4.1-14, we hear that Helen had only one child, Hermione, who is at that moment being married off by her father Menelaos (against her will, according to the tradition) to Achilles’ son Neoptolemos whose name means “new war.”

Note 4: “Helen...a...cloud” – a variant in Greek tradition (Apollodorus, *Library* Ep.7.30) features Menelaos, on his way home from Troy, finding Helen in Egypt, “for until that time, Menelaos had possessed only a phantom of her, fashioned from **clouds.**” (Robin Hard trnsl, Oxford 1997)

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Stanza #3 (lines 6-9), continued

"Helen:"

Walcott, *Omeros*, 61.19-21:

...when he thought of **Helen / she was not a cause or a cloud,**
only a name / for a local wonder...

Shakespeare, Sonnet #53, lines 7-8:

On **Helen's** cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian **tires** are painted new...

"white ... ashen ancestors:"

Walcott, *Omeros*, 28.4-9:

We were the colour of shadows when we came down
with tinkling leg-irons to join the chains of the sea,
for the silver coins multiplying on **the sold horizon,**
and these shadows are reprinted now on the **white** sand of
antipodal coasts, your **ashen ancestors**
from the Bight of Benin, from the margin of Guinea.

Walcott, *Omeros*, 1.2.20-22:

... the Aruacs' patois crackled in the smell
of a resinous bonfire that **turned the leaves brown**
with curling tongues, **then ash, and their language was lost.**

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Stanza #4 (lines 10-12)

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lines 10-12 repeated words from earlier stanzas: **drizzle** (10<9),
cloud (11<7), **rain** (11<2&1)

+ multiple homophones: **eyes** ~ **I's**;

-**sey** in *Odyssey* ~ **sea** [9] ~ **see** (**sea** > -**sey** is
the poem's only rhyme of line-endings);

perhaps also homophonic **tightens** ~ **Titans**

Note 5: the **Titans** were the race of Greek gods led by Kronos who overthrew his father Ouranos; the Titans were in turn overthrown by the Olympian gods led by Zeus, thus underscoring the cosmic instability at the heart of the Greek mythological system.

+ stressed i in each line of stanza + word-final s/z 5x,
thus additional emphasis on eyes

+ repetition of pattern **p...cks**: **picks** (11) ~ **plucks** (12)

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Stanza #4 (lines 10-12), continued

"clouded eyes:"

Walcott, *Omeros*, 10.1.12-15:

they sat disconsolately watching the **rain**.../ their **eyes** glazed and
clouded with some forgotten pain

Walcott, *Omeros*, 30.1.24-25:

now its cold **eye** in sunlight was blind as the moon. / A **grey** lens
clouded the gaze of the **albacore**...

Walcott, *Omeros*, 40.2.6-9:

The bewildered trireme / is **turning the wrong way, like the**
cloud-eyed singer / whose hand **plucked the sea's wires**, back
towards the dream / of **Helen**, back to that **island**...

"odyssey[s] ... / ... cancel[ing] the line of master and slave:"

Walcott, *Omeros*, 30.2.7-12:

This was the shout on which each **odyssey** pivots,
that silent cry for a reef, or familiar bird,
not the outcry of battle, not the tangled plots
of a fishnet, but when a wave rhymes with one's grave,
a canoe with a coffin, once that parallel
is crossed **and cancels the line of master and slave.**

Then **an uplifted oar is stronger** than marble
Caesar's arresting palm...

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Stanza #4 (lines 10-12), addendum

"odyssey[s] pivot[ing ... / ... on] an uplifted oar:"

Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.119-130:

But after you have killed these suitors in your own palace, either by treachery, or openly with the sharp bronze, **then you must take up your well-shaped oar and go on a journey until you come where there are men living who know nothing of the sea**, and who eat food that is not mixed with salt, who never have known ships whose cheeks are painted purple, who never have known well-shaped oars, which act for ships as wings do. And I will tell you a very dear proof, and you cannot miss it. When, as you walk, some other wayfarer happens to meet you, and says you carry a winnow-fan on your bright shoulder, **then you must plant your well-shaped oar in the ground, and render ceremonious sacrifice to the lord Poseidon...**

"the first line of the *Odyssey*:"

Walcott, *Omeros*.13.1.119-130:

There were rusted mirrors in which we would look back / on the world's events ... / ... On their varnished rack, / *The World's Great Classics* read backwards in his mirrors...

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- 1 *At the end of this sentence/verdict, rain/reign will begin.*
- 2 *At the rain/reign's edge, a sail/sale.*
- 3 *Slowly the sail/sale will lose sight of islands/I-lands/eye-lands*
- 4 *into a mist will go the belief in harbors/protection/*
the ability to sustain things in one's heart and mind
- 5 *of an entire race / Tyre-connected races.*
- 6 *The ten-years war is finished.*
[but not for Greek, Trojan, Tyre-connected, African or... races]
- 7 *Helen's hair/air has faded, and perhaps she was only a cloud.*
[and her heir was forcibly united with "new-war"]
- 8 *Troy leave us with white ashen ancestors*
[Troy which gives rise to endlessly renewing/repeating wars]
- 9 *in our drizzling, rain/reign-soaked sea/see-ing.*
- 10 *The rain/reign-soaked drizzle tightens like the strings of a harp.*
[a harp strung with repeatedly dethroned, reign-soaked gods?]
- 11 *A man with clouded eyes/I's picks up the rain/reign*
[but clouded by what...?]
- 12 *and plucks the first line of the Odyssey.*
[but what kind of Odyssey, ending how and where...?]