

**Transcending the Classics:  
Derek Walcott's *Omeros***  
Richard Sacks – Spring 2023  
Handout #1 (for class of 3/20/23)



**The opening 33 lines of *Omeros* (pp. 3-4):**

- 1.1.1 "This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes."  
 1.1.2 Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking  
 1.1.3 his soul with their cameras. "Once wind bring the news  
 1.1.4 to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking  
 1.1.5 the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,  
 1.1.6 because they could see the axes in our own eyes.  
 1.1.7 Wind lift the ferns. They sound like the sea that feed us  
 1.1.8 fishermen all our life, and the ferns nodded `Yes,  
 1.1.9 the trees have to die.' So, fists jam in our jacket,  
 1.1.10 cause the heights was cold and our breath making feathers  
 1.1.11 like the mist, we pass the rum. When it came back, it  
 1.1.12 give us the spirit to turn into murderers.  
 1.1.13 I lift up the axe and pray for strength in my hands  
 1.1.14 to wound the first cedar. Dew was filling my eyes,  
 1.1.15 but I fire one more white rum. Then we advance."  
 1.1.16 For some extra silver, under a **sea-almond**,  
 1.1.17 he shows them a scar made by a rusted **anchor**,  
 1.1.18 rolling one trouser-leg up with the rising moan  
 1.1.19 of a conch. It has puckered like the corolla  
 1.1.20 of a sea-urchin. He does not explain its **cure**.  
 1.1.21 "It have some things"-he smiles-"worth more than a dollar."  
 1.1.22 He has left it to a garrulous waterfall  
 1.1.23 to pour out his secret down La Sorcière, since  
 1.1.24 the tall laurels fell, for the ground-dove's mating call  
 1.1.25 to pass on its note to the blue, tacit mountains  
 1.1.26 whose talkative brooks, carrying it to the **sea**,  
 1.1.27 turn into idle pools where the clear minnows shoot  
 1.1.28 and an egret stalks the reeds with one **rusted cry**  
 1.1.29 as it stabs and stabs the mud with one lifting foot.  
 1.1.30 Then silence is sawn in half by a **dragonfly**  
 1.1.31 as eels sign their names along the clear bottom-sand,  
 1.1.32 when the sunrise brightens the river's **memory**  
 1.1.33 and waves of huge ferns are nodding to the sea's sound.

**A: *Omeros* rhyme scheme vs Dante's *terza rima* (cf. *Inferno*, canto 1, 1-12)**

...canoes	A	A	Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
...taking	B		mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
...news	A		ché la diritta via era smarrita.
...shaking	B	B	Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
...cedars	C		esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
...eyes	D		che nel pensier rinova la paura!
...feed us	C	C	Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;
...Yes	D		ma per trattar del ben ch'i' vi trovai,
...jacket	E		dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.
...feathers	F	D	Io non so ben ridir com'i' v'intrai,
...back, it	E		tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto
...murderers	F		che la verace via abbandonai.

**B: examples of rhyme scheme "violations" in 1.1.16-33 (plus 1.1.42)**

- 1.1.16 "sea-almond" not even close to rhyming with 1.1.14 "eyes"  
 note homophonic "alternatives" – see + all + (le) monde (French 'world')  
 cf. Once you have seen everything and gone everywhere,  
 cherish our island for its green simplicities (36.3.58-59, p. 187)
- 1.1.17 "anchor" and 1.1.20 "cure" separated by 2 lines instead of 1  
 cf. He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles  
 of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?  
 That the cross he carried was not only the anchor's  
 but that of his race, for a village black and poor (3.3.10-13, p. 19)
- cf. Like Philoctete's wound, this language carries its cure,  
 its radiant affliction; reluctantly now,  
 like Achille's, my craft slips the chain of its anchor (64.2.34-36, p.323)
- 1.1.26-32 "sea" > "cry" > "dragonfly" > "memory" sequence  
 "sea" and "memory" separated by 5 lines  
 "cry" rhymes w/ "-fly" but shares consonant before final vowel w/ "memory"  
 note also that "cry" is modified by "rusted" (found earlier at 1.1.17)
- 1.1.42 with line-final "eyes" emerges as an "intrusion" in the rhyme scheme's  
 progression (34-41 with ABABCDCD, and then 43-46 with EFEF)  
 note: line 14 "eyes" is part of the first major rhyme scheme violation

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**The parsing of "omeros" in 2.3.1-33 (pp. 14-15):**

- 2.3.1 "O-meros," she laughed. "That's what we call him in Greek,"  
2.3.2 stroking the small bust with its boxer's broken nose,  
2.3.3 and I thought of Seven Seas sitting near the reek  
  
2.3.4 of drying fishnets, listening to the shallows' noise.  
2.3.5 I said: "Homer and Virg New England farmers,  
2.3.6 and the winged horse guards their gas-station, you're right."  
  
2.3.7 I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as  
2.3.8 cold as its marble, then the shoulders in winter light  
2.3.9 in the studio attic. I said, "Omeros,"  
  
2.3.10 and **O was the conch-shell's invocation, mer was**  
2.3.11 **both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,**  
2.3.12 **os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes**  
  
2.3.13 **and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.**  
2.3.14 **Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes**  
2.3.15 **that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed.**  
  
2.3.16 The name stayed in my mouth. I saw how light was webbed  
2.3.17 on her Asian cheeks, defined her eyes with a black  
2.3.18 almond's outline, as Antigone turned and said:  
  
2.3.19 "I'm tired of America, it's time for me to go back  
2.3.20 to Greece. I miss my islands." I write, it returns-  
2.3.21 the way she turned and shook out the black gust of hair.  
  
2.3.22 I saw how the surf printed its lace in patterns  
2.3.23 on the shore of her neck, then the lowering shallows  
2.3.24 of silk swirled at her ankles, like surf without noise,  
  
2.3.25 and felt that another cold bust, not hers, but yours  
2.3.26 saw this with stone almonds for eyes, its broken nose  
2.3.27 turning away, as the rustling silk agrees.  
  
2.3.28 But if it could read between the lines of her floor  
2.3.29 like a white-hot deck uncaulked by Antillean heat,  
2.3.30 to the shadows in its hold, its nostrils might flare  
  
2.3.31 at the stench from manacled ankles, the coffled feet  
2.3.32 **scraping like leaves,** and perhaps the inculpable marble  
2.3.33 would have turned its white seeds away...

**C: linguistic logic and the parsing of "omeros" in section 2.3**

- C1a) **O** – cf. 2.2.40/p12: "O open this day with the conch's moan, Omeros"  
C1b) **mer** – Fr. **mère** 'mother' and **mer** 'sea'  
C1c) **os** – Fr. and Lat. **os** 'bone' plus Lat. **ōs** 'mouth, opening, speech, face, prow'  
C1d) **os's** "sibilant collar" – **os** as onomatopoeic through its sibilant s-sound  
  
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C2) **Expanding linguistic logic:** Fr. **eau** [ø] 'water' + Eng. **mare** 'horse' (fem.)  
8.2.4-5/p45: "sea-horses, / curling like questions" questioning Achille  
25.1.7/p133: "the horned river-horses" Achille encounters in Africa  
26.1.9/p139: "who entered a river-horse" among stories Achille hears in Africa  
30.1.35-36/p158: "like a sea-horse, his memory / dimmed in the sun" of Achille  
returning from Africa  
31.1.16-17/p161: "pennons in reggae-motion, a white bonnet / in waves of heat like a  
**sea-horse**" as Achille back from Africa turns Buffalo Soldier  
Note also that "**mare**" is attested 5x in the poem, all in phrase "**mare's tails**"  
9.1.42/p49, 18.1.16/p95, 60.1.5/p299, 60.1.19/p300, and 64.2.50/p323 which reads:  
From a plaster Omeros / the smoke and the scarves of **mare's tails**,  
continually / chalked associate phantoms across our own sky.  
  
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C3) **Beyond linguistic logic: Omeros** = "dry leaves" + "washes" < "cave-mouth"  
cf. Ma Kilman's search for and brewing of the cure for Philoctete's wound  
48.2.39-45/p245 (with **sibyl** [2x], **mouth**, and **cave** repeated within next 10 lines):  
she scraped the earth with her nails, and the sun  
put the clouds to it ears as her screech reeled backwards  
to its beginning, from the black original **cave**  
of the **sibyl's mouth**, her howl made the emerald lizard  
lift one clawed leg, remembering the sound.  
Philoctete shook himself up from the bed of his grave,  
and felt the pain draining, as surf-flowers sink through sand.  
49.1.7-15/pp246-7 (a section which ends with the question: "What else did it cure?")  
She had one in her back yard, close to the crotons,  
agape in its crusted, agonized **O: the scream**  
**of centuries**. She scraped its rusted scabs, she scoured  
the **mouth** of the cauldron... / In the scream she poured ... /  
... **seawater** and sulphur. Into this she then fed  
the bubbling root and **leaves**. She led Philoctete  
to the gurgling lava.

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**The “wound I have stitched into Plunkett’s character” (5.2.14-48/pp27-8):**

- 5.2.14 I was hit then, but I could remember nothing  
5.2.15 for months, in casualty. Oh yes! that business
- 5.2.16 of Tumbly's eyes. The sky in them. Scottie laughing.  
5.2.17 Tell them that at the Victoria, in the noise  
5.2.18 of ice-cubes tinkling and the draft-beer frothing.
- 5.2.19 **This wound I have stitched into Plunkett's character.**  
5.2.20 **He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme**  
5.2.21 **of this work, this fiction, since every "I" is a**  
5.2.22 **fiction finally. Phantom narrator, resume:**  
5.2.23 Tumbly. Blue holes for his eyes. And Scottie wiser  
5.2.24 when the shock passed. Plain men. Not striking. Not handsome.
- 5.2.25 Through the Moorish arches of the hospital ward,  
5.2.26 with a cloud wrapped around his head like an Arab,  
5.2.27 he saw the blue Mediterranean, then Maud
- 5.2.28 lying on her back on the cliff and the scarab  
5.2.29 of the troop ship far on the roadstead. Two days' leave  
5.2.30 before they set out, and he thought he would never
- 5.2.31 see her again, but if he did, a different life  
5.2.32 had to be made whenever the war was over,  
5.2.33 even if it lasted ten years, if she would wait,
- 5.2.34 not on this grass cliff but somewhere on the other  
5.2.35 side of the world, somewhere, with its sunlit islands,  
5.2.36 where what they called history could not happen. Where?
- 5.2.37 Where could this world renew the Mediterranean's  
5.2.38 innocence? She deserved Eden after this war.  
5.2.39 Past that islet out there was the Battle of the Saints.
- 5.2.40 Old Maud was ruddy as a tea-rose; once her hair  
5.2.41 was gold as a beer-stein in firelight, but now  
5.2.42 she'd stretch a mapped arm from her nightdress....
- . . .
- 5.2.46 Sometimes the same old longing descended on her  
5.2.47 to see Ireland. He set down his glass in the ring  
5.2.48 of a fine marriage. Only a son was missing.

**D: “phantom narrator[s]” and beyond**

**Seven Seas speaking to the narrator in book 7 (58.2.15-17ff/p291)**

Your wanderer is a **phantom** from the boy's shore.  
Mark you, he does not go; he sends his **narrator**;  
he plays tricks with time...

**the narrator at Maud Plunkett’s funeral (53.2.13-24/p266)**

**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  
as much as mine; that night by the tasselled shade  
with its oblong halo over her bowed hair sewing,  
I had looked up from the green baize with the Major's  
face from the ornate desk to see light going  
from her image, and that image was my mother's,  
whose death would be real, real as our knowing.  
Join, **interchangeable phantoms**, expected pain  
moves me towards ghosts, through this page's scrim,  
and the ghosts I will make of you with my scratching pen...

**the last section in which the narrator uses the 1<sup>st</sup> person of himself (64.2.30-35/p323)**

But the name Helen had gripped my wrist in its vise  
to plunge it into the foaming page. For three years,  
**phantom hearer**, I kept wandering to a voice  
hoarse as winter's echo in the throat of a vase!  
Like Philoctete's wound, this language carries its cure,  
its radiant affliction...

**the final lines of the narrator using the 1<sup>st</sup> person of himself (64.2.49-51/p323)**

... From a plaster *Omeros*  
the smoke and the scarves of mare's tails, continually  
chalked **associate phantoms** across our own sky.