

## Transcending the Classics:

### Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

Richard Sacks – Spring 2023

Handout #4 (for class of 4/10/23)



Enrichment Program  
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

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#### A1. Prefiguring Book 4: the paths to Catherine Weldon's "sharper grief"

- 35.3.3 ... Catherine Weldon,  
35.3.4... **like Achille on the river**, watched the worried lines / ... /  
35.3.8... ... **The nausea stirring her loins** / ... /  
35.3.25 The clouds turned blank pages, the book I was reading  
35.3.26... was **like Plunkett charting the Battle of the Saints**. / ... /  
35.3.30 ... She walked past the lanterns  
35.3.31... where **some bark canoes** were moored to the landing stage,  
35.3.34 **When one grief afflicts us we choose a sharper grief**  
35.3.35 in hope that enormity will ease affliction,  
35.3.36 **so Catherine Weldon rose in high relief**  
35.3.37 through the thin page of a cloud, making a fiction  
35.3.38 of my own loss. I was searching for characters,  
35.3.39 and **in her shawled voice** I heard the snow that would be blown  
35.3.40 when the wind covered the tracks of the Dakotas,  
35.3.41 the Sioux, and the Crows; **my sorrow had been replaced.**  
35.3.42 **Like a swift over water, her pen's shadow raced.**  
35.3.43 **"I have found, in bleached grass, the miniature horror**  
35.3.44 **of a crow's skull.** When dry corn rattles its bonnet,  
35.3.45... does it mean the Blackfoot is preparing for war?  
35.3.48 ... **So, the bird's skull in the grass**  
35.3.49 **transfixed me...**

**Achille > CW:** "Catherine Weldon / like Achille on the river"

Achille's "nausea" (26.2.21/p141) in Africa

Achille's name from Gk. akhos 'grief, sorrow' as "underscored" in 25.3

Achille in 31.2 raking up something in the leaves "that froze his fingers to the bone."

/ The features incised there glared back at his horror / from its disturbed grave."

**Plunkett > CW:** "the book I was reading / was like Plunkett charting the Battle..."

**Maud > CW:** "her shawled voice" – Maud is most frequently connected with shawls, beginning at 10.1.48/p56. Note at 43.3.26/p218, CW's shawl slips as she dies.

**the swift > CW:** "like a swift over water, her pen's shadow raced."

**the narrator > CW:** "my sorrow had been replaced." Note also at end of section:

"Catherine Weldon, / in **our** final letter to the Indian agent (35.3.65-66/p182).

#### A2. Prefiguring Book 5: Lisbon > London > Ireland (Maud in 23.3/p122)

- 23.3.1 A liner grew from the Vigie promontory,  
23.3.2 white as a lily, its pistil an orange stack.  
23.3.3 She crept past the orchids. At the morning-glory  
23.3.4 she stopped in mid-channel, then slowly turned her back  
23.3.5 on the island. By dusk, she'd be a ghost like all  
23.3.6 her sisters, a smudge on a cloud. Maud marked their routes:  
23.3.7 the cost of a second-class berth **from Portugal**  
23.3.8 **to Southampton, then Dublin**, but the cheapest rates  
23.3.9 staggered Dennis. **She soon grew used to the liner**  
23.3.10 **moored to the hedge. A girl was coming up the trace,**  
23.3.11 pausing for breath, and though the light was behind her  
23.3.12 and the garden glaring, by the slow, pelvic pace  
23.3.13 that made men rest on their shovels cleaning the pens  
23.3.14 and the gardener pause from burning leaves on the lawn,  
23.3.15 a heap in his hands, **Maud knew that gait was Helen's,**  
23.3.16 but the almond eyes were hooded in the smooth face  
23.3.17 of arrogant ebony. Maud tugged off a glove  
23.3.18 finger by finger, prepared for the coming farce.  
23.3.19 **Slow as the liner she came up the stone-flagged walk**



#### **Chapter 37: Lisbon**

cries modulated to "Lisbon" ... / ...

this port where Europe / rose with its terrors and terraces  
(37.1.5/p189 ... 37.2.23-24/p191)

#### **Chapter 38: London**

London gliding with the Thames around its neck / ... /  
as the tinkling Thames drags by in its ankle-irons  
(38.2.2/p195 ... 38.2.12/p195)

#### **Chapter 39: Ireland**

the old language of Ireland / ... / split by a glottal scream  
(39.1.18/p198 ... 39.1.36/p199)

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**B1. What Catherine Weldon sees after the Sioux massacre (43.2/p215-6)**

43.2.1 "I pray to God that I never share in man's will,  
43.2.2 which widened before me. I saw a **chain of men**  
43.2.3 **linked by wrists** to our cavalry. **I watched until**  
43.2.4 they were a **line of red ants**. **I let out a moan**  
43.2.5 **as the last ant disappeared**. **Then I rode downhill**  
43.2.6 away from the Parkin farm to **the Indian camp**.  
43.2.7 **I entered** the camp in the snow. A starved **mongrel**  
43.2.8 and a **papoose sat in the white street, with a clay**  
43.2.9 **vessel in the child's hands**, and the dog's **fanged growl**  
43.2.10 **backed off** from my horse, then lunged. Then **I turned away**  
43.2.11 **down another street** through the tents **to more and more**  
43.2.12 **silence**. There were hoof-marks frozen **in the flour dust**  
43.2.13 near a hungry tent-mouth. I got off. Through its **door**  
43.2.14 **I saw white-eyed Omeros**, motionless. **He must**  
43.2.15 **be deaf too, I thought, as well as blind**, since his **head**  
43.2.16 **never turned**, and then he lifted the dry rattle  
43.2.17 in one hand, and it was **the same sound I had heard**  
43.2.18 in Cody's circus, the snake hiss before battle.  
43.2.19 There was a broken arrow, and others in the quiver  
43.2.20 around his knees. Those were our promises. I stared  
43.2.21 a long while at his silence. It was a white river  
43.2.22 under black pines in winter. I was only scared  
43.2.23 when my horse snorted outside, perhaps from the sound  
43.2.24 of the rattler. I went back outside. Where were the  
43.2.25 women and children? I walked on the piebald ground  
43.2.26 with its filthy snow, and stopped. I saw a warrior  
43.2.27 frozen in a drift and took him to be a Sioux  
43.2.28 and heard the torn war flags rattling on their poles,  
43.2.29 then the child's cry somewhere in the flour of snow,  
43.2.30 but never found her or the dog. I saw the soles  
43.2.31 of their moccasins around the tents, and a horse  
43.2.32 ribbed like a barrel with flies circling its teeth.  
43.2.33 I walked like a Helen among their dead warriors.

**B2. What Achille sees after the slavers' raid (27.2/pp145-6)**

27.2.1 Achille climbed a ridge. He counted the **chain of men**  
27.2.2 **linked by their wrists** with vines; **he watched until**  
27.2.3 the line was a **line of ants**. **He let out a soft moan**  
27.2.4 **as the last ant disappeared**. **Then he went downhill**.  
27.2.5 He paused at the thorn barrier surrounding **the village**.  
27.2.6 Then **he entered** it. Dust hazed the path. A **mongrel**  
27.2.7 and a **child sat in the street**, the child **with a clay**  
27.2.8 **bowl in its hands**, squatting in the dust. The **fanged growl**  
27.2.9 **backed away** from his shadow. **Achille turned away**  
27.2.10 **down another street**. Then another, **to more and more**  
27.2.11 **silence**. There were arrow shafts lying **in the dust**  
27.2.12 around the thatched houses. He creaked open a **door**.  
27.2.13 **Achille saw Seven Seas** foaming with grief. **He must**  
27.2.14 **be deaf as well as blind, Achille thought**. The **head**  
27.2.15 **never turned** but it widened its mouth to the river,  
27.2.16 **the same list of battles the river had already heard**.  
27.2.17 Achille shut the thatch door. Where were all the dead?  
27.2.18 Where were the women? Then he returned to look for the  
27.2.19 child and the ribbed dog. Both had disappeared.  
27.2.20 Once, he thought he heard voices behind a thorn barrier,  
27.2.21 when a swivel of dust rose. He went down to the pier  
27.2.22 and saw the other dugouts nuzzling the crooked poles  
27.2.23 and his own canoe, and nothing was strange; it  
27.2.24 was sharply familiar. They'd vanished into their souls.  
27.2.25 He foresaw their future. He knew nothing could change it.  
27.2.26 The tinkle from coins of the river, the tinkle of irons.  
27.2.27 The son's grief was the father's, the father's his son's.  
27.2.28 He climbed down to the steps of the pier and undid  
27.2.29 the green mossed liana and towed it towards him  
27.2.30 gently. The canoe came like a dog. And then Achille died  
27.2.31 again. Thinking of the ants arriving at the sea's rim,  
27.2.32 or climbing the pyramids of coal and entering inside  
27.2.33 the dark hold, far from this river and the griot's hymn.