

Transcending the Classics:
Derek Walcott's *Omeros*
Richard Sacks – Spring 2023
Handout #5 (for class of 4/17/23)



The end of Plunkett's "wanderings" and of Maud Plunkett (51.3.7ff/259-260)

- 51.3.7 By the time they crossed the wickered road to the farm
51.3.8 he had devoured two loaves of the fragrant bread
51.3.9 sunlit by the butter which he always carried.
- 51.3.10 Despite that morning's near-accident, **the old Rover**
51.3.11 sailed under the surf of threshing palms **and his heart**
51.3.12 **hummed like its old engine, his wanderings over,**
51.3.13 like the freighter rusting on its capstans. The heat
51.3.14 was wide now and the shadows blacker in the rows
51.3.15 of Maud's garden beds. Their fragrance did not draw her.
- 51.3.16 **She smelt mortality in the oleanders**
51.3.17 **as well as the orchids;** in the funeral-parlour
51.3.18 reek of stale water in vases. She went upstairs.
- 51.3.19 She didn't garden that morning. **Sick of flowers.**
51.3.20 **Their common example of bodily decay,**
51.3.21 **from the brown old age of bridal magnolias**
51.3.22 **to the sunflower's empire that lasted a day.**
51.3.23 By Bendemeer's stream. Nature had not betrayed her,
51.3.24 she smiled, lying in her bed. On the sun-streaked floor
51.3.25 the sunflower's dish, tracking the sun like radar,
51.3.26 altered the jealousies' shadows till they meant more
51.3.27 than the rays they let in. The gold wheel frightened her.

Chapter LII

I

- 52.1.1 **The morning Maud died he sat in the bay window,**
52.1.2 watching the angel-hair blow gently from her face.
52.1.3 That wax rose pillowed there was his crown and wonder,
52.1.4 **a breeze lifting the curtains like her bridal lace.**
52.1.5 Seashells. Seychelles. **The empire of cancer spread**
52.1.6 across the wrinkled sheets...

>> (10.156-8, *continued*) Father Conmee recalls. The story is about Mr. Hussey, the son of Lord Galtrim, and his betrothed, Maud, the daughter of Lord Plunkett. The bridegroom was called from the altar to lead his troops against a marauding party and was killed; **thus his bride was "maid, wife and widow in one day."** She [later] married twice; her 3rd husband was Sir Richard Talbot of Malahide (d. 1329).

A1. *Planktai* "Rovers, Wanderers" in *Odyssey* 12 (Lattimore translation)

- Od.*12.55 Then, for the time when your companions have driven you past [the sirens],
*Od.*12.56 for that time I will no longer tell you in detail which way
*Od.*12.57 of the two your course must lie, but you yourself must consider
*Od.*12.58 this in your own mind. I will tell you the two ways of it.
*Od.*12.59 On one side there are overhanging rocks, and against them
*Od.*12.60 crashes the heavy swell of dark-eyed Amphitrite.
*Od.*12.61 The blessed gods call these rocks the **Rovers** [= *planktai*]. By this way
*Od.*12.62 not even any flying thing, not even the tremulous
*Od.*12.63 doves, which carry ambrosia to Zeus the father, can pass through...

A2. "Maud Plunkett" implied in *Ulysses* 10/Wandering Rocks, 155-160:

Note: Chapter 10 (*Wandering Rocks*) is the only "episode" in *Ulysses* not in the *Odyssey*

The **Malahide** road was quiet. It pleased Father Conmee, road and name. The joybells were ringing in gay **Malahide**. Lord Talbot de **Malahide**, immediate hereditary lord admiral of **Malahide** and the seas adjoining. Then came the call to arms and **she was maid, wife and widow in one day**. Those were old worldish days, loyal times in joyous townlands, old times in the barony.

Malahide: a coastal village about 9 miles north of Dublin featuring a castle going back to the 12th century. The word is a compound in Irish – its 1st element is *mullach*- "hill" while the 2nd element is less clear, probably a place name, thus, "hill of **Íde**." Note in *Omeros* the progression **hides...hills...hills...hides**, all in 4 successive lines at 44.1.11-14/p221. Note also French *mal* "illness," potentially creating a poetic "compound" for "illness of the hide/body" (see 51.3.20/p260).

from *Ulysses Annotated* (Gifford and Seidman), notes to 10.155 and 156-8:

10.155 (223:16): The joybells were ringing in gay Malahide – The opening line of the poem "The **Bridal of Malahide**," by the Irish poet Gerald Griffin (1803-40). The poem recounts the tangled **story of Maud Plunkett's marriage** (see following note) as the "joybells" turn to "dead-bells . . . In sad Malahide." Final stanza: "The stranger who wanders / Along the lone vale / Still sighs while he ponders / On that heavy tale: / Thus passes each pleasure / That earth can supply– / Thus joy has its measure– / We live but to die!"

10.156-8 (223:17-19): Lord Talbot de Malahide . . . widow in one day – Henry II (1133-89), king of England (1154-89), granted Malahide (on the coast nine miles north of Dublin) to Richard Talbot, the first Lord Talbot of Malahide. The Talbots were later created hereditary lord admirals of Malahide and the seas adjoining by decree of Edward IV in 1476. A Talbot was not, however, the principal of the story >>

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What follows "the light beyond metaphor in 54.1 (pp. 271-2)

- 54.3.1 All that Greek manure under the green bananas,
54.3.2 under the indigo hills, the rain-rutted road,
54.3.3 the galvanized village, the myth of rustic manners,
54.3.4 glazed by the transparent page of what I had read.
54.3.5 What I had read and rewritten till literature
54.3.6 was guilty as History. When would the sails drop
54.3.7 from my eyes, when would I not hear the Trojan War
54.3.8 in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop?
54.3.9 When would my head shake off its echoes like a horse
54.3.10 shaking off a wreath of flies? When would it stop,
54.3.11 the echo in the throat, insisting, "Omeros";
54.3.12 **when would I enter that light beyond metaphor?**
54.3.13 But it was mine to make what I wanted of it, or
54.3.14 what I thought was wanted. **A cool wood off the road,**
54.3.15 **a hut closed like a wound, and the sound of a river**
54.3.16 **coming through the trees on a country Saturday,**
54.3.17 **with no one in the dry front yard, the still leaves,**
54.3.18 **the yard, the shade of a breadfruit tree on the door,**
54.3.19 then **the track from which a man's figure emerges,**
54.3.20 then **a girl carrying laundry, the road-smell like loaves,**
54.3.21 **the yellow-dressed butterflies in the grass marges.**

54.3.20: the road-smell like loaves

- 51.3.1-9: "Maud held the warm bag against her stomach.../...the fragrant bread / sunlit by the butter which he always carried."
61.2.17-19: "'Maud closed the door / and sat next to him with the bread, beaming with love."

54.3.21: the yellow-dressed butterflies in the grass marges

- 7.1.41: Achille "ripped the yellow dress in his rage."
55.1.46 > 55.2.32: "Achille walked out into the blinding emptiness / of the shut village. He strode like a prizefighter / on Boxing Day, carrying Helen's yellow dress... / Those elbows like anchors, those huge cannonball fists / wriggled through the armholes of the tight lemon dress. / Helen helped him ... / ... with firm tenderness / ... and her butterfly-quiet kisses... /... He smelt like trees on a ridge at sunrise."



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B1. Breaking down what follows "the light beyond metaphor" in 54.1.14-21

54.3.14: A cool wood off the road

- 17.1.45-51: "Somehow the flaring dewlap / had enraged him. He slammed the door of the Rover, / but, driving down the cool aisle of casuarinas / like poplars, was soothed by the breakwater. In a while / he was himself again. He was himself or as / much as was left. Innumerable iguanas / ran down the vines of his skin, like Helen's cold smile."

54.3.15-16: a hut closed like a wound, and the sound of a river / ...through...trees

- 26.1.22-30 > 26.3.28-30: "Achille did not go down to the fishing stakes one dawn, / but left the hut door open.../... and he climbed a track of huge yams, to find that heaven / of soaring trees.../... The trees within hearing ignored his incantation. He heard only the cool sound / of the river."
> He woke to the sound of sunlight scratching at the door / of the hut... / ...Fingers of light rethatched the roof's straw. / On the day of his feast they wore the same plantain trash / like Philoctete at Christmas.../ ... that made him both woman and fighter."

54.3.16-18: a country Saturday / with no one in the...yard, the still leaves / the yard

- 31.1: Achille back from Africa as a Buffalo Soldier while "A remorseful Saturday strolled through the village" (31.1.1).
29.1-2: Helen, Seven Seas and Philoctete (i.e., "no one"=more than one) waiting in their yards for Achille to return from Africa.
31.2: Achille raking the leaves in Seven Seas' yard on his return from Africa, until "Gradually, Achille / found History that morning. Near the hedge, the tines / of the rake in the dead leaves" (33.2.33-35)

54.3.18: the shade of a breadfruit tree on the door

- 21.1.71-4 and 62.2.6-16, both of which connect Helen to "breadfruit"

54.3.19: the track from which a man's figure emerges

- 10.3.2-4: "Sometimes, a resinous / woodsman would startle [the Plunketts], his bag full of snake-heads / ... He walked without noise..."
61.2.17-22: In Plunkett's mind's eye, "Maud closed the door / and sat next to him with the bread, beaming with love. / There was the same contentment in her demeanour / as when they had seen the old man with his grey bag / carrying the serpents' heads. He had not seen the old labourer emerge..."

54.3.20: a girl carrying laundry

- 18.2.22: Plunkett "could see [Helen's] shadow through...sheets of laundry"
29.1.5-7: "to Helen, stripping dried sheets along / the wire in Hector's yard, the monodic moan / came from the hole in her heart" for Achille.

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