

**Transcending the Classics:
Derek Walcott's *Omeros***
Richard Sacks – Spring 2023
Handout #6 (for class of 4/24/23)



A: "this day with the conch's moan" – connecting the poem's "present time" > book 7's "day" of a conch's moan, bickering blackbirds, a lizard's question

(the opening invocation of *Omeros*, 2.2.35ff./pp12-13)

- 2.2.35 ... [Seven Seas] drummed the kitchen table
2.2.36 with his fingers. **Two blackbirds quarrelled at breakfast.** [>A2]
2.2.37 Except for one hand he sat as still as marble,
2.2.38 with his egg-white eyes, fingers recounting the past
2.2.39 of another sea, measured by the stroking oars.
2.2.40 **O open this day with the conch's moan,** *Omeros*, [>A1]
2.2.41 as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun
2.2.42 gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise.
2.2.43 **A lizard on the sea-wall darted its question** [>A3]
2.2.44 at the waking sea, and a net of golden moss
2.2.45 brightened the reef, which the sails of **their far canoes**
2.2.46 avoided. Only in you, across centuries
2.2.47 of the sea's parchment atlas, can I catch the noise
2.2.48 of the surf lines wandering...

A1: The opening of book 7: "One sunrise ... [with] a moan ... of a blowing conch"

- 56.1.1 **One sunrise** I walked out **onto the balcony**
56.1.2 of my white hotel. The beach was already swept,
56.1.3 and in the clear grooves of **the January sea**
56.1.4...7 there was only one coconut shell... / ... It changed shapes in light
56.1.15 ... Then, as if from a vase,
56.1.16 or a girl's throat, **I heard a moan** from the village
56.1.17 **of a blowing conch,** and I saw **the first canoe**
56.1.18 on the horizon's glittering scales.

(*note the opening of book 6 (44.1.1-2.2/pp221-3) with
"the same sunrise" [44.1.2], a "balcony" [44.1.23], "in green January" [44.2.1-2])

A2: The end of book 7's ghostly tour (58.3.35-39/p294)

- 58.3.35 Both heads were turned **like the god of the yawning year**
58.3.36 on whose ridge I stood looking back where I came from.
58.3.37 **The nightmare was gone.** The bust became its own past,
58.3.38 I could still hear its white lines in the far-off foam.
58.3.39 **I woke to hear blackbirds bickering at breakfast.**

A3: The lizard's final (and extended) appearance (62.2-3/pp312-5)

- 62.2.1 In the lion-coloured grass of **the dry season**
62.2.2 cannon gape at the sea from the windy summit,
62.2.3 their holes out of breath in the heat. If you rest one
62.2.4 palm on the hot iron barrel it will burn it,
62.2.5 but **a lizard crawls there and raises its question:**
62.2.6 "If this place is hers, did that empty horizon
62.2.7 once flash its broadsides with their inaudible rays
62.2.8 in her honour?
↓ ↓ ↓
62.3.1 Galleons of clouds are becalmed, waiting for a wind.
62.3.2 **The lizard spins on its tripod,** panning, to find
62.3.3 the boulders below where slaves built the breakwater.
62.3.20 **The lizard leaps into the grass.** You bend your head
62.3.21 to hear **"Iounalo"** from the cannon's mouth.

***NOTE: the "present time" of the opening section of the poem:**

- 1.1.1 "This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes."
1.1.2 Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
1.1.3ff. his soul with their cameras. "Once wind bring the news..."
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.

with the present tense perhaps even extending to...
1.1.34 Although smoke forgets the earth from which it ascends,
1.1.35 and nettles guard the holes where the laurels were killed,
1.1.36 **an iguana hears the axes,** clouding each lens
1.1.37 over its lost name, when the hunched island was called
1.1.38... **"Iounalao,"** "Where the iguana is found." / ...
1.1.41-2 ... its deliberate tail / moving with the island

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B: "Helen at the Halcyon" (64.2.1/p322)

- 64.2.1 You can see **Helen at the Halcyon**. She is dressed
64.2.2 in the national costume: white, low-cut bodice,
64.2.3 with frilled **lace at the collar**...

B1: halcyon (from the OED Online):

From Latin *alkyōn* "**kingfisher**"

In classical mythology: **a bird, usually identified as a kingfisher**, which brooded around the time of the winter solstice in a nest floating on the sea, charming the wind and waves into calm

B2: from the *Alcyone* & *Ceyx* entries in Oxford's *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*

Alcyone (daughter of Aeolus) and her husband **Ceyx** (the son of the morning star): The best known myth about [them] is concerned with **his death and transformation [as well as her transformation] into a bird**.... The story Ovid tells in the *Metamorphoses* relates how Ceyx, alarmed at certain portents – [including one as a punishment for his hospitality to Peleus, Achilles' father] – decided to consult the Oracle of Clarus... against the advice of Alcyone, who had a premonition of disaster. Indeed she begged him either to forgo his voyage or else to take her with him. However he sailed off without her,... a great storm arose, and Ceyx was drowned. **As he died, he thought of Alcyone** and murmured her name.... Hera,... unable to bear the sight of the loving wife praying for the return of her dead husband, sent Iris to visit Sleep who in turn dispatched his son Morpheus (whose name means changer of form) to impersonate Ceyx in a dream which would appear to Alcyone. He leaned over her bed ... tears streaming down his cheeks, and told her of the death of Ceyx in the storm. Unconsoled, Alcyone rushed down to the shore and called upon her husband's name. **As she cried, the waves rolled his corpse to her feet. She was at once transformed into a kingfisher** and ... **the gods, taking pity on her, brought him back to life – as a kingfisher like his wife**. And so they lived together once again and mated every year in winter during **the Halcyon Days** when Alcyone's father Aeolus calmed the sea for them for seven days. **These birds nest every winter, and for this purpose Aeolus, lord of the winds, sends calm weather; such days sailors call 'halcyon.'**

B3: "kingfish" as Achille returns < Africa just before seeing the "black king"/frigate

- 30.1.19 **The kingfish**, steel-blue and silver, (30.1.19-22/p157)
30.1.20 lay fresh at his feet, its eye like a globed window
30.1.21 ringing with cold, its rim **the circular river**
30.1.22 **of the current that had carried him back**... [B4 in right-hand column >>]



C: Achille amidst "coral/sea-fans.../stiffened to bony lace" (64.3.3-5/p324)

- 64.3.3 ... The wet, mossed coral
64.3.4 **sea-fans** that **winnowed weeds** in the **wiry water**
64.3.5 stiffened to bony **lace**

C1: sea-fan (from the OED Online)

An **alcyonarian** [soft **coral**] polyp of the sub-order *Gorgoniacea*

C2: "bone" > a "collar" of "lace" in the parsing of "omeros" (2.2.24-28/p297)

- 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**.
↓ ↓ ↓
2.3.22 I saw how **the surf printed its lace in patterns**
2.2.23 **on the shore of her neck**...

C3: Achille amidst the "weeds" and "coral" of the drowned (8.1.48-2.42/pp45-6)

- 8.1.48 the slow-curling fingers of **weeds kept calling**;
8.1.49 he felt the cold of the drowned entering his loins.
↓ ↓ ↓
8.2.22 The shreds of the ocean's floor passed him from corpses
8.2.23 that had perished in the crossing, **their hair like weeds**,
8.2.24 **their bones were long coral fingers**...
↓ ↓ ↓
8.2.41 ... Now, every day
8.2.42 he was clear-headed as the **sea, wrenching lace fans**

C4: "coral" > "bones" > "more coral" (59.2.24-28/p297)

- 59.2.24 ... History has simplified
59.2.25 him [= Achille]. Its elegies had blinded me with the temporal
59.2.26 lament for a smoky Troy, **but where coral died**
59.2.27 it feeds on its death, the **bones branch into more coral**,
59.2.28 **and contradiction begins**...

B4: Achille beyond "the usual kingfish-fighter" at the end of bk. 6 (55.1.28-36/p273)

- 55.1.28 **Today he was not the usual kingfish-fighter**
55.1.29 but a muscular woman, a scarf round his head...
55.1.31-2 brass bells / round his ankles, not chains from the Bight of Benin
55.1.33 but those fastened by himself. He was someone else
55.1.34 **today, a warrior-woman**, fierce and benign.
55.1.35-6 **Today he was African**, his own epitaph, / his own resurrection...