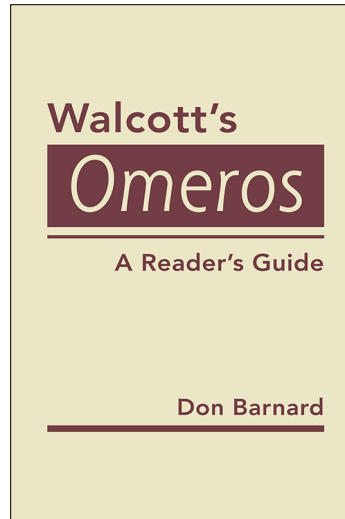


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Walcott's *Omeros*:
A Reader's Guide

Don Barnard

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Walcott's *Omeros* and This Guide

This is how Homer's myths became universal and durable, treating the big themes: birth and death, loyalty and betrayal, loss and questing, victory and defeat, love and hatred. For centuries, writers have retold them for their own times and places. Derek Walcott's *Omeros* treats all of these, but superimposes others: exile and identity, exploitation and resistance, figuration and reality.

Omeros is a complex and subtle work that resists easy explanation. It is a novel in verse whose setting is many centuries long and three continents wide, but also intensely local to the Caribbean and therefore not well-known to many of its readers. In weaving his many themes together, Walcott uses all of the freight that a word carries: its currency in patois or standard English, its ancestry, and its aural and visual qualities. At the same time, Walcott explores the process of writing and his own motivations in a verse that amounts to a master class in the use of form, rhythm, and rhyme.

This introduction and the notes that follow seek to guide the reader through some of the detail, so that the power of the work can be appreciated more fully. Geographical and historical references are explained; examples of poetic style or technique are pointed to; intertexts from other authors and Walcott's own writings are suggested. The prosody is analyzed and new theories are proposed to resolve structural issues raised by earlier critical writings. Some of Walcott's symbolism is explored, as are the autobiographical aspects of the work. Walcott's own words on a subject are quoted extensively and reference is made to the rich critical literature on his

work. Endnotes and a bibliography will allow readers to investigate further more easily.

Ultimately, however, Walcott's subtlety remains and no attempt to remove this should be allowed to succeed. The reader is referred first and last to the poem itself. Users of this guide are therefore recommended to begin with Walcott's text, referring to the Annotations section of the guide (Chapters 10 to 16), where straightforward questions may be answered. Once *Omeros* has been read and appreciated in full, some of the broader critical questions can then be explored, with the help of Chapters 2 to 9 of the guide. It is hoped, then, that a further reading of the poem will be enriched by some of the suggestions made in this guide.

Omeros transcends its title. It does not attempt to transplant the classic Homeric myths from one archipelago and era to another. That would contradict Walcott's understanding of myth. In his words: "Where have cultures originated? By the force of natural surroundings. You build according to the topography of where you live . . . [Y]ou mystify what you see, you create what you need spiritually, a god for each need."¹ Homer's gods and heroes are not Walcott's. They do not meet his need for a myth for his own time and place.

Also, Walcott has said, "I did not plan this book so it would be a template of the Homeric original because that would be an absurdity [. . .] you would be doing a third version of the *Odyssey* via Joyce."² He rejects such mimicry and sets himself a more heroic aim, a new way of seeing St. Lucia and the Caribbean in a language beyond history, a "light beyond metaphor" (see *Omeros* LIV/iii/4).³

It is not a straightforward text, or even one in which layers of meaning may be peeled away one by one. Everything resonates with everything else. Walcott said of it, "So the book is really not about a model of another poem; it is really about associations, or references, because that is what we are in the Americas: we are a culture of references, not of certainties."⁴

Walcott's themes, symbols, and imagery have developed by association, accretion, and transmutation over many years. Bruce King writes (of *Another Life*, Walcott's earlier autobiographical long poem), "[It] is a symphony of styles, influences, imitations, echoes, colours, recurring themes, reharmonizations."⁵ By the time Walcott came to write *Omeros*, another fifteen or so years had added to the richness of the mix. This guide does what it can to help readers appreciate that richness more fully.

Notes

1. Walcott, "The Caribbean, Culture or Mimicry?" p. 56.
2. Walcott, "Reflections on *Omeros*," pp. 230–231.
3. References to *Omeros* are shown as chapter/section/stanza.
4. Walcott, "Reflections on *Omeros*," p. 239.
5. King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 310.