Derek Walcott was born in 1930 in the town of Castries, the capital city of St Lucia, one of the Windward Islands in the West Indies. Omeros, like several of Walcott’s works, interacts with and relies on the European epic tradition. Unlike the works of Homer, Virgil and Milton, however, Omeros is not a recasting of ancient myth, legend or scripture, but an original narrative; although there are threads in which mythical or historical figures or real-life individuals participate, by and large the characters are products of Walcott’s imagination, their actions and interactions purely fictional.

Walcott’s title, Omeros, displays the poet’s clear intention to engage with European epic tradition. Walcott evokes the world of classical epic and repositions it in his own time, exploring similar concerns of individual and national identity as Homer and Virgil, naming his characters from the Iliad, and reinterpreting passages of the Odyssey. One Homeric parallel is introduced at the very start of the text: the character Philoctete (note that the names take their French form, echoing the French-based Creole language of St Lucia), a fisherman describing for tourists how a canoe was made from a tree that once would have been worshipped as a god. Philoctete has an incurable, reeking wound on his shin, ‘a scar made by a rusted anchor’ (I, i; p. 4), an echo of the wound of Homer’s Philoctetes, an archer and the leader of the Thessalians, who in Iliad 2 is prevented from fighting by infection:

Yet he himself lay apart in the island, suffering strong pains,
in Lemnos the sacrosanct, where the sons of the Achaians had left him
in agony from the sore bite of a wicked water snake.
There he lay apart in his pain; yet soon the Argives
beside their ships were to remember lord Philoctetes. (Iliad, II: 721-5)

Just as Troy cannot fall until Philoctetes, despite his stinking wound, is reunited with his people (Hamner, p. 137), Philoctete’s wound has deeper resonances, for it is later explained as a symbol of his ancestors’ slavery, ‘a symbol of slavery’s pain’ (Van Sickle, p. 10):

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… (III, iii; p. 19)

Slavery and colonization are key themes in the poem, together with their implications for an individual’s sense of identity and belonging. St Lucia is filled with figures whose lives have been affected by the European impulse towards imperialism. Modern St Lucians are the descendants of African slaves brought by the English. The Plunketts, too, are outsiders, representatives of the dying British Empire. To emphasize the colonial theme, many St Lucian characters are named for the noble warriors of epic tradition. St Lucia itself was renamed by the
Spanish, losing its tribal name ‘Iounalao: where the iguana is found’ (I, i; p.4). One drama of the island involves two men, Achille and Hector, who contend over a beautiful woman, Helen. The island, as the text makes clear, is also known as Helen—Helen of the West Indies—from the time when it was fought over by the English and French colonists, echoing the struggle for Troy and Spartan Helen. Walcott underlines the connection by several times characterizing the island’s twin peaks, les Pitons, as Helen’s breasts.

Achille and Hector are fishermen, whose names reflect the slavery of their forebears: as John B. Van Sickle observes, it was colonial practice to give slaves from western mythology or religion (p. 8). Describing an engagement in the Battle of the Saints in 1872, when England defeated France, Walcott imagines Admiral Rodney renaming his slave, Achille’s ancestor, because of his heroism:

It was then that the small admiral with a cloud on his head renamed Afolabe ‘Achilles’, which, to keep things simple, he let himself be called. (XIV, iii; p. 83)

For Admiral Rodney, the slave’s new name is a fine compliment reflecting his bravery; but the name and its Homeric import are meaningless to the newly-named Achilles, a slave whose own name is denied him. Walcott is always aware that names are words and thus have meanings, and he explores the issues of naming further when he has Achille travel to his ancestral home in a hallucination, a variant on epic’s journey to the underworld. Achille’s ancestor asks him:

‘Achille. What does the name mean? I have forgotten the one that I gave you. But it was, it seems, many years ago. What does it mean? …

A name means something. The qualities desired in a son, and even a girl-child; so even the shadows who called you expect one virtue, since every name is a blessing, since I am remembering the hope I had for you as a child. Unless the sound means nothing. Then you would be nothing. Did they think you were nothing in that other kingdom?’ (XXV, iii; p. 137)

The question ‘Did they think you were nothing in that other kingdom?’ encapsulates the paradox Walcott shows us in the doubling of Achilles-the-warrior and Achilles-the-slave; and Achille’s ancestor concludes that ‘you, nameless son, are only the ghost // of a name’ (XXV, iii; pp. 138-9).

From the outset, the audience is intended to understand that the poem as named for Ancient Greek Homer; Walcott’s intention is clearly both to evoke the tradition of epic poetry and to express how the great poets and their names have become mundane, their origins forgotten, their importance lost. This is plain in when the Narrator’s discusses the classical poet with Antigone:

‘O-meros,’ she laughed. ‘That’s what we call him in Greek,’ stroking the small bust with its boxer’s broken nose, and I thought of Seven Seas sitting near the reek of drying fishnets, listening to the shallows’ noise. I said: ‘Homer and Virg are New England farmers, and the winged horse guards their gas-station, you’re right.’
... I said, ‘Omeros,’

and $O$ was the conch-shell’s invocation, $mer$ was both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, 
$os$, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore. 

Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes 
that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed.   (II, iii; p. 14)

Homer is also echoed in the blind man, Seven Seas, who will later guide the Narrator in a second version
of the journey to the underworld—in fact, a journey through the hellish past of slavery—and thus to a new
understanding of the world. The guide in the underworld is, of course, familiar from classical epic; but, in
equating Seven Seas specifically with Omeros, the epic poet, Walcott is also drawing on another, later epic from
European tradition, the Commedia of the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri, written in the first quarter of the four-
teenth century. Dante, too, deliberately places his poem in the context of the epic tradition and simultaneously
undermines or alters a number of features associated with earlier epic; he also influences Walcott poetically.

The hero of the Commedia is called Dante, and the fictionalized Narrator echoes the poet’s own life and
experiences; here, of course, is a model for Walcott’s Narrator. The protagonists Dante and Walcott are poets
and observers, not heroes or warriors; both are spiritually or emotionally lost and each must undertake a
metaphorical journey of self-discovery. Dante-the-Narrator is an ordinary man who undertakes an extraordinary
journey through Hell and Purgatory in order to arrive at last in Paradise. Dante tells us his age—35, the centre
of man’s lifespan of 3 score years and 10—at the beginning of the poem, expressing the doubts that this point
of life can bring: ‘Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita’, he begins (‘In the middle of the journey of our life’, 
Inf. I: 1); and that mezzo (middle) itself evokes the opening in medias res (in the middle of things) familiar from
classical epic.

At the beginning of the first part of the Commedia, Inferno or Hell, the narrator famously comes to himself
in a dark wood, where his attempts at progress are impeded by wild animals and his paramount emotion is fear.
This is a far cry from the heroes of classical epic; but this Dante is alone, and even Odysseus weeps when he is
lost and without companions. Having set a scene and a mood which seem a world away from epic tradition,
Dante suddenly moves decisively into the context of classical epic. The despairing narrator-Dante sees a figure
and calls out to it to help him: ‘Miserere di me.../qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo’ (‘Have pity on me, 
whoever you are, whether a man, in truth, or a shadow!’  Inf. I: 65-6). The figure introduces itself rather
obliquely, yet not so obliquely that the student of classical epic cannot quite quickly realize his identity:

‘Not a man: but a man I once was, and my parents were Lombards, and both of them, by their
native place, Mantuans. I was born sub Julio though late, and lived in Rome, under the good
Augustus, in the age of false, deceitful gods. I was a poet, and sang of Aeneas, that virtuous son
of Anchises, who came from Troy when proud Ilium was burned.’
(Inferno, I: 67-75)

The Narrator-Dante is delighted, exclaiming that Virgil—the Virgil of epic—is his model as poet. Virgil will
accompany him on his journey, or at least as far as a pagan can. Dante’s selection of a non-Christian as his first
guide is not without contention, and the character Virgil takes care to underline that no condemnation is attached to his placement in Limbo:

‘You do not demand to know who these spirits are that you see. I want you to learn, before you go further, that they had no sin, yet, though they have worth, it is not sufficient, because they were not baptised, and baptism is the gateway to the faith that you believe in. Since they lived before Christianity, they did not worship God correctly, and I myself am one of them. For this defect, and for no other fault, we are lost, and we are only tormented, in that without hope we live in desire.’ (Inferno IV: 31-42)

The parallel sequence in Omeros is less potentially contentious, for the relationship between Omeros and religion is continuously ambivalent; when Walcott addresses the idea of God or gods in his version of Dante’s meeting with Virgil, it is not the first such confrontation, for faith in the poem is shown to have a fundamental connection to identity. This is Walcott’s Narrator speaking with the Homer figure represented by Seven Seas:

‘… The Aegean’s chimera

is a camera, you get my drift, a drifter
is the hero of my book.’
‘I never read it,’
I said, ‘Not all the way through.’

The lift of the arching eyebrows paralyzed me like Medusa’s shield, and I turned cold the moment I had said it. (LVI, iii; pp. 282-3)

Narrator-Dante’s great reverence for Virgil and his works is subverted here by Narrator-Walcott’s less than flattering confession and his immediate embarrassment, and he quickly finds an excuse:

‘Those gods with hyphens, like Hollywood producers,’
I heard my mouth babbling as ice glazed over my chest.
‘The gods and the demi-gods aren’t much use to us.’
‘Forget the gods,’ Omeros growled, ‘and read the rest.’ (LVI, iii; p. 283)

Yet it is hard to forget the gods, for religion continually surfaces in Omeros. Walcott evokes the rituals of many peoples, from Africa and Europe, North America and the West Indies. The framework of Christianity, imposed by the European Christian colonizers, is seen in the priest’s blessing of the fishermen’s canoes (II, iii; p. 8), and given an extra edge in the priest’s mocking smile as he sees Achille’s faulty English spelling on the side of his canoe. Maud Plunkett, Irish and Catholic, attends the local church. Ma Kilman, purveyor of anaesthetizing rum at the No Pain Café, also goes to the Catholic church; hers is a role that bridges Christian and non-Christian religion, even while it undermines the newfangled Catholic faith and evokes the classical tradition:

… They called her Ma Kilman

because the village was darkened by their belief
in her as a gardeuse, sybil, obeah-woman
webbed with a spider’s knowledge of an after-life

in her cracked lenses. She took Holy Communion
with Maud sometimes, but there was an old African
doubt that paused before taking the wafer’s white leaf. (X, ii; p. 58)
Not ‘Mrs’ Kilman, but ‘Ma’, a diminutive of mother, pointing, as Loretta Collins suggests, to her role as ‘mother-healer’. Walcott describes her as gardeuse, a keeper or guardian; and as a sybil, the ancient goddess Kubaba or Kybele, whose name is often prefixed by the word ‘mother’ and, as ‘the protective spirit of a specific place, a mountain, cave, or human settlement’ (Motz, p. 106), the forerunner of the prophetic sibyls, familiar from the Aeneid in the guide who escorts Aeneas to the Underworld. Ma Kilman practises obeah [cf. obi], ‘an Afro-Caribbean practice that utilizes herbal remedies, possession by ancestral spirits or African-based deities, and diagnosis or divination through trancework’ (Collins, p. 147); an obeah-practitioner is both doctor and priest (Payne-Jackson and Alleyne 2004, p. 23, quoting Abraham Emerick, SJ). This mingling of the Christian and the non-Christian is highlighted again, as Walcott’s describes how Ma Kilman sits at early-morning Mass, searching her memory for the tribal remedy which will cure Philoctete (XLVII, i; pp. 235-7).

If Walcott uses the Commedia as his model for the Narrator and his guide, he also engages with Dante’s chosen poetic form. The vast majority of Omeros is structured around a scheme of threes: there are three subdivisions in each chapter, and, bar one passage of couplets, the stanzas are tercets. This is not an innovation by Walcott, but modelled on Dante’s epic. Dante abandoned the book divisions familiar from Virgil, instead using chapter-divisions called cantos (which Spenser later adopted in The Faerie Queene). Dante also discarded the classical epic hexameter in favour of a new style, known as terza rima or terzina, of interlocking three-line units of verse:

1 Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
2 mi ritrovi per una selva oscura
3 ché la diritta via era smarrita.
4 Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
5 questa selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
6 che nel pensier rinova la paura!
7 Tant’è amara che poco è più morte;
8 ma per trattar del ben ch’i’ vi trovai,
9 dirò de l’altra cose ch’i’ v’ho scortè. (Inferno, I, 1-9)

(‘In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear. It is scarcely less bitter than death: but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there.’)

The interlocking rhyme pattern can be simply demonstrated with a few editorial tools. Each three-line unit consists of two lines which rhyme with each other, surrounding a line which provides the rhyme-sound for the next three-line unit. So, in the example, lines 1 and 3 rhyme in the sound ita (vita, smarrita) and line 2 introduces a new sound, the ura of oscura, which will become the rhyme-sound of the next terzina (dura, paura); and so on.

While his metre is based on the hexameter rhythm of classical epic, Walcott echoes the terzina rhyme scheme (and note his insistence on the form in the separation of the terzine into separate stanzas):

‘This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.’
Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
his soul with their cameras. ‘Once wind bring the news
to the laurier-cannelles, their leaves start shaking
the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,
because they could see the axes in their own eyes…’ (I, i; p. 3)

Walcott clearly understands the form of the interlocking aba bcb rhyme scheme of the true terzina, but, as in this example from the opening of the poem, he tends to follow the rhyme scheme strictly only in the first few lines at the beginning of a chapter or subchapter. (Italian has many more rhyme-sounds, and can thus sustain the terzina pattern much more easily than a poet writing in English.) Usually Walcott’s pure terzina rhyme soon gives way to different patterns, involving assonance, consonance, internal rhyme and eye-rhyme; as Robert D. Hamner points out in Epic of the Dispossessed, Walcott plays with the rhythm too, and the variations of the poetic foot mean that ‘the metre approximates free verse’ (p. 5). Walcott sometimes abandons rhyme entirely for many stanzas, in favour of a focus on rhythm and narrative, before suddenly again picking up either the pure terzina form or his own variations on it. In overtly engaging with Dante’s rhyme scheme and the rhythm of Homer and Virgil, Walcott is clearly inviting his audience to read the poem in the context of epic; in an interview, he explains:

Walcott also engages with key themes from European epic: fathers and sons; displacement and the search for a home (nostos); the relationship between a man and his ancestors; the paradox of women, in their social impotence and their role as catalyst for male action. The classical legend of Achilles’ vulnerable heel is evoked again and again in references to Walcott’s Achille: so, as Achille fashions a felled tree into a canoe, ‘A thorn vine gripped his heel. He tugged it free’ (I, ii; p. 6), and when he dives to the wrecked ship, he weights himself with ‘concrete, tied/ to his heel’ (VII, ii; p. 44). Later, in his hallucinatory return to the Africa of his forebears, another vine echoes slave-manacles: ‘Then a cord / of thorned vine looped his tendon, encircling the heel/ with its own piercing chain. He fell hard’ (XXVII, iii; p. 148). A particularly effective reference rhymes the French form of his name with the body part most connected with his classical model:

The black dog did dog-dances

around him, yapping, crouching, entangling his heel.
Meanwhile, the bonfire rose with crackling branches.

Seven Seas, on his box, called the dog from Achille. (XXXI, ii; p. 162)

Major Plunkett’s wife, Maud, subordinates her own desires to return to Ireland to her husband’s wishes to remain in St Lucia, as a good British Empire wife should; Walcott frequently casts her as a Penelope figure, not only in relation to the embroidered cloth which the Major presciently identifies as ‘her shroud, not her silver jubilee gift’ (XVI, ii; p. 89), but also in the memory of his first love for her, in the war:

… Two days’ leave
before they set out, and he thought he would never
see her again, but if he did, a different life
had to be made whenever the war was over,
even if it lasted ten years, if she would wait… (V, ii; p. 28)
In interviews, Walcott has insisted that his own poem is not, and cannot be, an epic, since it features neither superhuman figures nor battle scenes; furthermore (and this is a point against which Dante might well have argued), Walcott says, ‘I think any work in which the narrator is almost central is not really an epic. It’s not like a heroic epic’ (Rebekah Presson, published interview with Walcott, quoted by Hamner, p. 3). It is notable that Walcott here modifies his initial mention of epic, replacing it with the term ‘heroic epic’. Hamner, attempting to locate Walcott’s poem within the epic tradition, himself qualifies the term epic in exploring the possibilities of genre for Walcott’s poem. He first refers to *Omeros* as ‘an “epic of the dispossessed” because each of its protagonists is a castaway in one sense or another’ (p. 3); although Walcott takes issue with this idea:

Later Hamner considers the poem as ‘a “foundation” epic, one that inscribes a people’s rightful name and place within their own narrative’ (p. 3), and this echoes Paul Merchant’s description of primary epic as “a book of the tribe” (*The Epic*, p. 1). John Figueroa similarly sees the poem’s historical theme not as ‘exile’ but as ‘where is home?’, and a primary concern ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ (*Omeros*, p. 196), and Timothy Hofmeister (p. 3) recognizes the self-consciousness of Walcott’s engagement with the epic tradition:

*Omeros* seeks a relation with Homer... At the same time, *Omeros* also engages crucial issues of poetic modernism (the poet as exile, problems of language, the poet’s response to ideas of ‘nation’). Perhaps even more than the work of other poets that is both current and creates an exchange with the classics ... Walcott marries the voices of ancient and modern poetry.

This self-conscious engagement is clear in Walcott’s own words:
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Sources of illustrations from the lecture (last accessed 8 March 2009)

- Portrait photograph of Derek Walcott by Christopher Felver (2008), [http://www.chrisfelver.com/images/large/writers2/walcott_derek.jpg]
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Other illustrations taken by Catherine Bates on holiday in St Lucia.
Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!

Tant’ è amara che poco è più morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch’i’ vi trovai,
dirò de’ altre cose ch’i’ v’ho scorto.

Io non so ben ridir com’ i’ v’intrai,
tant’ era pien di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai.

Ma poi ch’i’ fui al piè d’un colle giunto,
là dove terminava quella valle
che m’avea di paura il cor compunto,
guardai in alto e vidi le sue spalle
vestite già de’ raggi del pianeta
che mena dritto altrui per ogne calle.

Allor fu la paura un poco queta,
ch’eran con lui quando l’amor divino
e il sol montava sù con quelle stelle
anzi ’mpediva tanto il mio cammino,
che di pel macolato era coverta;
una lonza leggera e presta molto,
che di pel macolato era coverta;
e non mi si partì dinanzi al volto,
anzì ’mpediva tanto il mio camminino,
ch’i’ fui per ritornar più volte volto.

Temp’ era dal principio del mattino,
e ’l sol montava ’n sù con quelle stelle
ch’eran con lui quando l’amor divino
mosse di prima quelle cose belle;
si ch’a bene sperar m’era cagione
di quella fiera a la gaetta pelle
l’ora del tempo e la dolce stagione;
ma non si che paura non mi desse
la vista che m’avea di paura il cor
che m’apparve di paura il cor
l’aere ne tremesse.

Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame
sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza,
e molte genti fè già viver grame,
questa mi porse tanto di gravezza
con la paura ch’uscìa di sua vista,
ch’io perdei la speranza di s’altezza.

E qual è quei che volontieri acquista,
e giunge ’l tempo che perder lo face,
che ’n tutti suoi pensier piange e s’attrista;
tal mi fece la bestia sanza pace,
ché venendomi ’ncontro, a poco a poco
mi ripigeva là dove ’l sol face.

Mentre ch’i’ ripinava in basso lasso,
dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto
chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco.

Quando vidi costui nel gran diserto,
«Miserere di me», gridai a lui,

In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear. It is scarcely less bitter than death: but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there.

After I had rested my tired body a while, I made my way again over empty ground, always bearing upwards to the right. And, behold, almost at the start of the slope, a light swift leopard with spotted coat. It would not turn from before my face, and so obstructed my path, that I often turned, in order to return.

The time was at the beginning of the morning, and the sun was mounting up with all those stars, that were with him when Divine Love first moved all delightful things, so that the hour of day, and the sweet season, gave me fair hopes of that creature with the bright pelt. But not so fair that I could avoid fear at the sight of a lion, that appeared, and seemed to come at me, with raised head and rabid hunger, so that it seemed the air itself was afraid; and a she-wolf that looked full of craving in its leanness, and, before now, has made many men live in sadness. She brought me such heaviness of fear, from the aspect of her face, that I lost all hope of ascending. And as one who is eager for gain, weeps, and is afflicted in his thoughts, if the moment arrives when he loses, so that creature, without rest, made me like him: and coming at me, with panting breath, has escaped from the deep sea to the shore, turns back towards the perilous waters and shores, so my mind, still fugitive, turned back to see that pass again, that no living person ever left.

While I was returning to the depths, one appeared, in front of my eyes, who seemed hoarse from long silence. When I saw him, in the great emptiness, I cried out to him ‘Have pity on me, whoever you are, whether a man, in truth, or a shadow!’ He answered me: ‘Not a man: but a man I once was, and my parents were Lombards,
Allor si mosse, e io li tenni dietro.
che tu mi meni là dov' or dicesti,
E io a lui: «Poeta, io ti richeggio
In tutte parti impera e quivi regge;
A le quai poi se tu vorrai salire,
e vederai color che son contenti
ove udirai le disperate strida,
Ond' io per lo tuo me' penso e discerno
Questi la caccerà per ogne villa,
Di quella umile Italia fia salute
Questi non ciberà terra né peltro,
e ha natura sì malvagia e ria,
ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,
Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi;
Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
Nacqui sub Iulio, ancor che fosse tardi,
Rispuose mi: «Non omo, omo già fui,
e color cui tu fai cotanto mesti». 135
sì ch'io veggia la porta di san Pietro
acciò ch'io fugga questo male e peggio, 132
perché non sali il diletto monte
ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?
«Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?»,
rispuo' io lui con vergognosa fronte.
Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi;
Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
«O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
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Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi;
Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
«O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
Nacqui sub Iulio, ancor che fosse tardi,
Rispuose mi: «Non omo, omo già fui,
e color cui tu fai cotanto mesti». 135
sì ch'io veggia la porta di san Pietro
acciò ch'io fugga questo male e peggio, 132
perché non sali il diletto monte
ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?
«Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?»,
rispuo' io lui con vergognosa fronte.
Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi;
Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
«O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
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I answered him, with a humble expression: ‘Are you then that Virgil, and that fountain, that pours out so great a river of speech? O, glory and light to other poets, may that long study, and the great love, that made me scan your work, be worth something now. You are my master, and my author: you alone are the one from whom I learnt the high style that has brought me honour. See the creature that I turned back from: O, sage, famous in wisdom, save me from her, she that makes my veins and my pulse tremble.’

When he saw me weeping, he answered: ‘You must go another road, if you wish to escape this savage place. This creature, that distresses you, allows no man to cross her path, but obstructs him, to destroy him, and she has so vicious and perverse a nature, that she never sates her greedy appetite, and after food is hungrier than before.’

‘Many are the creatures she mates with, and there will be many more, until the Greyhound comes who will make her die in pain. He will not feed himself on land or wealth, but on wisdom, love and virtue, and his birthplace will lie between Feltro and Feltro. He will be the salvation of that lower Italy for which virgin Camilla died of wounds, and Euryalus, Turnus, and Nisus. He will chase the she-wolf through every city, until he has returned her to Hell, from which envy first losted her.’

‘It is best, as I think and understand, for you to follow me, and I will be your guide, and lead you from here through an eternal space where you will hear the desperate shouts, will see the ancient spirits in pain, so that each one cries out for a second death: and then you will see others at peace in the flames, because they hope to come, whenever it may be, among the blessed. Then if you desire to climb to them, there will be a spirit, fitter than I am, to guide you, and I will leave you with her, when we part, since the Lord, who rules above, does not wish me to enter his city, because I was rebellious to his law.

He is lord everywhere, but there he rules, and there is his city, and his high throne: O, happy is he, whom he chooses to go there!’

And I to him: ‘Poet, I beg you, by the God, you did not acknowledge, lead me where you said, so that I might escape this evil or worse, and see the Gate of St. Peter, and those whom you make out to be so saddened.’

Then he moved: and I moved on behind him.