The *Pallinode*: H.D.'s vision for repair in *Helen in Egypt*

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> *"Stesichorus was said to have been struck blind because of his invective against Helen, but later was restored to sight, when he reinstated her in his* Pallinode*...The later, little understood Helen in Egypt, is again a* Pallinode*, a defence, explanation or apology."*[1]

For the living Stesichorus, the palinode was an incantation of sight. The mythology tells us that it was a successful retraction, that the poet was only briefly blind. However, while Helen restored his vision after hearing the palinode, Stesichorus had failed to erase his part in the fracturing of the historical Helen when he '*reinstated her'.* By the time H.D. found Helen, she had long been a splintered myth. In her article "Creating a Women's Mythology," Susan Friedman introduces us to Helen's many canonical faces: "Helen, Daughter of Zeus and child of worldly Sparta; Helen, the kidnapped child-bride of Theseus; Helen, the wife and mother in Sparta; Helen Dendritis in springtime love with Paris in Troy; Helen alone, in the timeless dimension of sacred Egypt…"[2] Her list goes on. Simply put, the Western literary tradition has torn Helen to shreds: Euripides, Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, and Ovid all have their own Helen. Dante, Goethe, Offenbach, Wilde, Yeats, and C.S. Lewis all do to. She is "our culture's archetypal woman-as-erotic-object"[3] who frequently appears on the page only to be revised and reissued, a renewed symbol of beauty, nationality, and a vanishing point of desire.

To accept the story of Stesichorus' palinode is to agree that a palinode is an act of language that performs an act of un-doing. H.D. adopts the palinode for her *Pallinode*, the first of three sections of her epic poem *Helen in Egypt.* In the opening prose epigraph, H.D. defines the Pallinode: "a defence, explanation or apology."[4] If the Pallinode is language that performs an

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[1] H.D., *Helen in Egypt* (New Directions, 1961). 1.
[2] Friedman, "Creating a Women's Mythology." 181.
[3] Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language." 80.
[4] *HE.* 1.

action of un-doing, perhaps it is also the ideal and universalist vision of repair as imagined by apologies, defenses, and explanations.

Three years prior to *Helen in Egypt,* Hannah Arendt published her account of human activity in *The Human Condition*. She wrote, "Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: "Who are you?"[5] And so Helen and Achilles meet on the timeless beach in Egypt:

> few were the words we said,
> nor knew each other,
> nor asked, are you Spirit?
>
> are you sister? are you brother?
> are you alive?
> are you dead?[6]

Arendt argues that the nature of human natality and creativity necessarily means that every act of speech answers to the mystery of the speakers identity.[7] In *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. prefers to cling to the unanswerable. Throughout the epic, though primarily in *Pallinode*, Helen's spiritual quest is to decipher hieroglyphs she sees at the temple of the Egyptian god Thoth-Amen.[8] But while Helen's task is to translate and read the symbols, H.D.'s task as an epic poet seems to position the act of translation as corollary to an individual's inner search for themselves.

The second and third sections of the epic are titled *Leuké* and *Eidolon* and are primarily structured by Helen's inner confrontation with the past.[9] *Leuké* is set on the island Leuké, or the white island, also known as a place of the dead,[10] and follows Helen as she revisits past selves

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[5] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2. ed, with Margaret Canovan (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998). 178.
[6] *HE*, 6
[7] Arendt, *The Human Condition*. 178
[8] Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language." 80.
[9] Friedman, "Creating a Woman's Mythology." 169.
[10] Smith, "Wounded Woman: H.D.'s Post-Imagist Writing." 121.

with their past lovers.[11] In *Eidolon*[12], Helen is presumably back in Egypt with Achilles, but the fuzzy boundaries of space and time in H.D.'s verse make it difficult to categorically determine setting.[13]

As inherited from Stesichorus, the palinode casts historical and literary erasure as a transformation which is directly inverse to the antecedent transgression. An Ode caused blinding. Sight was restored by the palinode. In the pages that follow, I apply the framework of palinodic doing and un-doing onto H.D.'s *Pallinode.* If Stesichorus composed his Palinode to be un-blinded, then Helen experiences the *Pallinode* to be un-splintered. This is not to say that the *Pallinode* achieves unification for Helen without the rest of the epic, or even at all, but that as "the writing" Helen manifests the *Pallinode* as an ideal vision of repair.

> *We were right. Helen herself denies any actual intellectual knowledge of the temple symbols[…]she herself is the writing.* [14]

In the opening pages of *Pallinode*, the first and second prose epigraphs ask and answer the question of how Helen found herself in Egypt. *"How did she get there?...Helen, mysteriously transposed to Egypt, does not want to forget."*[15] Later on, an epigraph confirms in Helen's words, "*Amen (or Zeus as we call him) brought me here."* [16] Helen behaves like language in that Zeus bringing her to Egypt equates to a transposition of her myth from Greek epic into Egyptian lyric[17]

As the central character and trope of the epic, Helen's internal and external experiences weigh equally on the text. In *Postcolonial Literature from Three Continents,* Judith L. Tabron reads Helen as a "marker for history and myth and memory and psychology…When she thinks of Achilles or Clytemnestra or Theseus is as crucial to the narrative as whether or not she was on the walls of Troy."[18] This is Helen, her objectivity and subjectivity, in full view.

the rise and fall of the sea,

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[11] Twitchell-Waas, "Seaward." 477.
[12] Eidolon, n. a specter or phantom
[13] ibid. 478
[14] *HE*, 22.
[15] *HE,* 1, 3.
[16] *HE*, 68.
[17] Willis, "A Public History of the Dividing Line." 95.
[18] Tabron, *Postcolonial Literature from Three Continents.* 104.

the veil of Cytheraea?
are we home-sick for what has been?

I place my hand on a pillar
and run my hand as the blind,
along the invisible curve

or the line of chick or bee;
what are we?
and what is the answer?[19]

Taken from Book Three of *Pallinode*, this passage refuses location. The poetic eye shifts from the sea to a vision of home and then to the interior of the temple. The second excerpted line echoes a question posed by Achilles in Book Three's opening poem,[20] bringing the reader not just to Helen's interior landscape but to a precise moment of rumination. H.D's tercet lyric wafts in and out of Helen's interiority, avoiding fixity at every junction. She populates every letter of of the text.

Helen achieves her task of deciphering symbols in the temple not through instructed knowledge but intuition: "*She knows the script, she says, but we judge that this is intuitive or emotional knowledge rather than intellectual[…]she says she is "instructed," she is enchanted, rather."*[21] The process of deciphering intuitively is primarily based on memory. In Book Two of *Pallinode*, Helen reflects on the "*host of Spirits, the Greek heroes*" who accompany her in the temple:

of his anger, "no art is beneath your power";
what power drew them to me?
a hieroglyph, repeated endlessly,

upon the walls, the pillars,

[19] *HE*, 47
[20] *HE,* 36
[21] *HE,* 13

the thousand-petalled lily;
there are not many, but one

enfolded in sleep
as the furled lotus-bud
or with great wings unfurled,

sailing in ecstasy,
the western sea,
climbing sea-mountains[22]

Helen begins with memory and quotation from an earlier interaction with Achilles, which brings her to a moment of reading and description, resulting in a conclusion about the lily hieroglyph being associated with the "*the Greek heroes,"* which are identified through a series of conjured images of war. Memory frames the act of deciphering, which aims toward performing the transformative un-doing of the *Pallinode*.

The deciphered hieroglyph of the lily becomes a tool for Helen's subsequent deciphering of herself. In *Out of Line: History, Psychoanalysis, and Montage in H.D's Long Poems*, Susan Edmunds writes, "I read Helen herself as a reader, and a reviser, of inherited texts. Recovering forgotten traces of Egyptian writing within later Greek drama, she "transpose[s] or translate[s]" the myth of Oedipus back into the earlier myth of Isis. This peculiarly literary revision of the Western family romance, as Freud conceived it, depends on Helen's visionary act of "reading" a lily."[23] The reading of the lily marks a breakthrough in which Helen's reading of herself.

Whereas the lily is a received image which creates meaning through memory and association, "Helen ponders received history in order to revise it"[24] when it comes to her own deciphering. The received history of the Western family is the destructive oedipal form. However, throughout the epic, Helen's memory beings to stand in for history itself,[25] and as she

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[22] *HE,* 21
[23] Edmunds, *Out of Line*. 98.
[24] ibid. 129.
[25] Tabron, *Postcolonial Literature from Three Continents.* 121.

translates the oedipal figures into those from her memory of the Isis myth, she claims a new history. Helen's associations with Egypt revolve around a redemptive image of the primal family. She recreates the form of the Isis myth family through "an act of subtle genealogy," which "is no easy thing to explain" according to the Greek host of spirits.[26]

Triggered by the memory of her violent encounter with Achilles, Helen begins associate herself with Isis:

> in the dark, I must have looked
> an inked-in shadow; but with his anger,
> that ember, I became
>
> what his accusation made me,
> Isis, forever with that Child,
> the Hawk Horus[27]

Helen recalls this interaction for a third time in Book Two, this time describing Achilles' accusation as having a transformative function. The epic contains a multitude of these "act[s] of subtle genealogy," in which description itself transforms the family structure which Helen most closely associates with her experienced familial patterns; the destructive oedipal characters she assigns to each of her lovers fade away as the Isis myth takes hold of associative capacity.

Helen reconstructs the family by performing "complex reorderings of her mythic memories" which also entails "the transformation of the detested oedipal other into a grieving Isis."[28] The figure of *mother* emerged as a revolving point of H.D's analysis with Freud, who "diagnosed H.D. as having a "mother-fixation.""[29] The associational structure of Helen's self-deciphering mimics "a free associational structure reminiscent of H.D's psychoanalysis,"[30] especially as Isis comes to the foreground of familial transposition. What is most reminiscent of

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[26] *HE*, 184.
[27] *HE,* 22.
[28] Edmunds*, Out of line*. 6.
[29] King, *H.D., Woman and Poet.* 194.
[30] Friedman, "Creating a Women's Mythology." 170.

free association is the activation of memory along the poles of forgetting and remembering. The task of deciphering is negotiated by what is forgotten and what is remembered. The process of undoing is thus achieved.

In her postcolonial reading of *Helen in Egypt,* Tabron reminds H.D.'s reader that the process of history is a highly stylized creation of an artificial separation between an objective and subjective experiences. While psychology happens inside the subject, history happens outside and is recorded objectively. "The very difference between subject and object is that which memory calls into question,"[31] according to Tabron. Helen's task of deciphering through associative memory reimagines the line between history and psychology, object and subject. Locating the unified Helen among her splintered self also allows for the bridging of this gap between psychology and history.

Post-modern theorist Linda Hutcheon has argued that "knowing the past becomes a question of representing, that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording…both history and fiction are discourses…both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past."[32] The Helen myth charts a complex course of histories and fictions and records the gap between subject and object. Helen herself occupies this gap, which, like her, also "has never had a real existence except in the minds of men."[33]

The *Pallinode* is a vision of exact erasure, the 'un-doing' perfectly tailored to the 'doing'. Helen attempts to un-do her splintering by translating and transposing herself as a redemptive figure of mother within the primal family structure. This translation occurs through association and rearrangement, both of a received history and personal psychology. Negotiated through the poles of remembering and forgetting, Helen reimagines the line between history and psychology. Helen has her own Helen.

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[31] Tabron, *Postcolonial Literature from Three Continents.* 86.
[32] from: Grace, *Relocating Consciousness*. 40.
[33] Tabron, *Postcolonial Literature from Three Continents.* 114.

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