

## Article

# Living up to Her “Avant-Guardism”: H.D. and the Senescence of Classical Modernism

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**Abstract:** In a journal entry from 1957, H.D. writes that Adorno’s description of the aging of modernist music might easily apply to the fate of her own work in the post-war period: “Among other fascinating things, he [Adorno] says that Bartók ‘could not quite live up to his own avant-guardism’ [sic] [ . . . ]. I felt the phrase applied, in a way, to myself and my Helen sequence” (H.D. 2015, p. 40). H.D.’s remark refers to her long poem, *Helen in Egypt* (1960), which, with its engagement with classical sources and epic themes, seemed to some to be a throwback to an earlier modernist period in which Pound, Joyce, Eliot and H.D. herself had looked to ancient models as a means of reinvigorating modern literature. What did it mean for H.D. to feel that her work had outlived its time, to be a first-generation modernist still writing in that mode after many of her peers and their achievements had passed into history? This article explores H.D.’s sense that her practice was at odds with contemporary demands for poetry to answer to immediate historical concerns. It also considers her case against the critics in letters, notes and in *Helen in Egypt* which contains its own defense of the relevance of classical modernism to the post-war present day.

**Keywords:** H.D.; *Helen in Egypt*; Adorno; late modernism; epic; avant-garde

## 1. Introduction

In a journal entry from 1957, H.D. touched on the work of the Frankfurt School theorist, Theodor Adorno. She wrote that Adorno’s description of the aging of modernist music might apply to the fate of her own late work: “Among other fascinating things, he [Adorno] says that Bartók ‘could not quite live up to his own avant-guardism’ [sic] [ . . . ]. I felt the phrase applied, in a way, to myself and my *Helen* sequence” (H.D. 2015, p. 40). H.D.’s remark refers to her long poem, *Helen in Egypt* (1960) which, with its active engagement with classical sources, might easily have seemed to be a throwback to an earlier modernist moment, a belated example of the Joycean mythic method or the classicizing style of Imagism—the product of an avant-garde that had had its day. This was not just, however, a case of being artistically behind the times. H.D. worried that her poem did not live up to the increasing demand for art to be responsive to present-day realities and, indeed, that her choice of an epic subject could be seen as an attempt to eschew the difficult realities of history *altogether* in favor of the consolations of the distant past. These fears were not unfounded. H.D. had, and would again, be accused of being an “anachronism” by critics and art-theorists who preferred the conspicuous social and political commitments of realist or documentary forms to the opacities and indirections of modernism (Burnett 1990, p. 92). But they were, she felt, misplaced because her poem *was*, after all, a reflection on “actuality” albeit in an epic guise. While there is now little doubt about the quality and significance of H.D.’s writing in the 1940s and 50s, questions remain about the context in which it was produced: To what extent was H.D. working against what she took to be the prevailing artistic and political tide? And to what purpose? How might we understand her adherence to a “high” modernist aesthetic in explicit defiance of critics and art-theorists who were talking about its demise?

This article builds on studies of late modernism which have generally focused on the succession of a first generation of writers by a second late generation (Miller 1999, Davis 2016) or on the ways in which modernist lives and careers often extended beyond, and sometimes went on to question, the artistic moment from which they emerged (Whittier-Ferguson 2014, MacKay 2007). Among this second group, changes in practice are often related to wider social and historical developments and in particular to what Thomas S. Davis calls “the disorder in the world-system” that led to transformations in Britain’s global status, sovereignty and sense of “political belonging” (Davis 2016, p. 16). Until recently, H.D. had rarely been considered in this context although, as Lara Vetter and John Whittier-Ferguson have both pointed out, she fits the framework well (Vetter 2017, pp. 20, 21; Whittier-Ferguson 2014, n. 211).<sup>1</sup> Having made her name in the 1910s as part of the Imagist movement, H.D. continued to write across a range of genres into the 1940s and 50s, producing poetry, experimental memoir and a series of “historical” novels, as well as the epic poem *Helen in Egypt*. This late phase of H.D.’s career has often been dismissed as *belatedness* and her output in these years criticized for its focus on mythical and ancient worlds rather than the concerns of the present day. Yet as Vetter points out in the first book to take H.D. seriously as a late modernist, H.D. had never been so closely interested in politics as she was in the period during and after World War II and, while she understood why some thought her work remote from contemporary issues, she nonetheless resisted the idea that to write of the classics was in any way an avoidance of present-day realities: “H.D. was dismissive of allegations of escapism, for she did not believe that the only way to write about a war was to describe its battlefields” (Vetter 2017, p. 14). Vetter finds evidence to support this claim in H.D.’s neglected late prose where rather than abandon her modernist aesthetic H.D. transformed it to better accommodate an analysis of the social and historical dynamics of her own times.

I follow Vetter’s lead in seeing H.D.’s late modernist aesthetic in *Helen in Egypt* as an intervention into the contemporary, but suggest that the intervention is more reflexive in nature than that seen in other genres. *Helen* raises questions about the fate of poetry after WWII and whether art necessarily becomes ideology by continuing to invoke classical sources and methods that not only seemed remote from the present but whose express purpose, in the case of the Homeric epic in particular, was the commemoration of heroic actions performed in war. It speaks broadly in other words, to the question that has since become closely, if not always accurately, associated with Adorno’s name and, as H.D.’s brief comment on his work suggests, was already linked with him in the period in which she wrote her last works: How, and whether, art can ever be adequate to the representation of the destruction of life in WWII. As scholars have long pointed out, for Adorno the question is not about the difficulty of thinking or of representing the magnitude of the suffering because the means of destruction was entirely in keeping with a technologized and rationalized culture and society in general. Rather, as J.M. Bernstein argues, the destruction can no longer be made culturally intelligible because culture itself is subject to the same processes. This essay does not seek to provide detailed analysis of Adorno’s thinking on this subject: His significance here is that for H.D. he briefly captured the attitude of the times towards her own aging generation of artists, a significance that is increased by the fact that Adorno’s theories regarding the senescence of modern art have since become part of the standard account of late modernism from which others take their cue. The first part of my article explores some key contributions to this standard version of late modernism before describing the means by which H.D. came to her own understanding of what it meant to have outlived one’s own aesthetic moment. Adorno is the spur to thinking more broadly about the demand felt by H.D. in the post-war period for art to be responsive to its times. The second part of the article reads H.D.’s “heroic epic”, *Helen in Egypt*, as an answer of sorts to the problem it might otherwise be seen to manifest: The poem certainly does not offer a direct and realistic treatment of war, but nor is its engagement with classical

<sup>1</sup> John Whittier-Ferguson does not consider H.D. in his book on late modernist literature as some of her late works, *Trilogy* most obviously, have long been the centre of critical attention. He nonetheless observes in a footnote that she would ‘fit admirably into the frame I have constructed’ (Whittier-Ferguson 2014, p. 211).

and epic materials a flight from actuality, far less an argument for art to continue in the Homeric tradition of remembering heroism in battle. *Helen in Egypt* asks whether the epic tradition was, or ever could be, a transparent response to the “actuality” of war and, in suggesting that it could not, drives towards an insistence on the ultimate ambiguity and unknowability of what really happened in war. In concluding his discussion of Adorno on the condition of art after WWII, Bernstein argues that, “the only legitimate cultural practices now would be ones that reflectively put themselves and their past in question” (Bernstein 2001, p. 422). By this measure *Helen in Egypt*, which goes back to the primal scene of Western culture to ask what it means to write about war in the contemporary, would seem altogether more responsible to its times than the more present-focused and realistic modes to which it was unfavorably compared.

H.D. was not alone among first-generation modernists in her use of “anachronistic” sources to reflect on post-war politics and society. Pound was involved in his own epic project, the *Cantos*, in the same period and the fascist associations of the late additions to this poem undoubtedly compounded the view that the genre was ideologically and politically suspect. William Carlos Williams published *Paterson* between 1946 and 1958 and, although he had always distanced himself from the classicizing modernists, he viewed his own epic as Joycean in character. H.D. does, however, seem to have been particularly vulnerable to charges that her art had outlived its moment. This was certainly connected to her iconic status as the original Imagist, a label that she found difficult to shake. As Burnett points out, critics often took no account of the fact that H.D. had realigned herself with other avant-gardes in the 1920s and 30s from the *Close Up* group to the set around Eugene Jolas’s *transition* (Burnett 1990, p. 96). Gender also had a role to play in the sometimes hostile reception of her late works and, although H.D. found more academic success later in life than her contemporaries Djuna Barnes and Mina Loy, she did not benefit in the same way as T.S. Eliot from the entry of modernism into the American academy and nor was she given the same license to re-invent herself and her work. Not all of H.D.’s late readers, it should be said, were critical. At the same time that commentators such as Randall Jarrell were announcing H.D.’s obsolescence, a younger generation of poets, including Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan, were taking her mythic methods and use of classical sources as the template for their own “timely” creations.

## 2. The Senescence of the Avant-Garde

The essay which came to H.D.’s attention in 1957—Adorno’s “The Aging of the New Music”—is a key point of reference in the debate over the lateness and/or out-datedness of modernism. Georg Lukács, for example, draws on this essay in “The Ideology of Modernism” as part of his argument that literary modernism is bourgeois art in its final, decayed form of allegory (Lukács 1963, p. 37).<sup>2</sup> “The Aging of the New Music” is also prominent among the essays discussed in Edward Said’s *Late Style* where Said seeks to recuperate the awkwardness and difficulty of late modernist art as a means of disrupting imperial fictions of progress and national destiny. According to Said, “The Aging of the New Music” offers two main insights. Firstly, “new music” cannot simply reproduce the traumatic effect on the audience of the first performances of Berg or Stravinsky by slavish adherence to a “system” of dissonance or shock (Said 2006, p. 16). To transform Schoenberg’s “compositional freedom” into Webern’s “strict domination of 12 tone procedure” is, by definition, to destroy it (Adorno 2002, p. 187). Secondly, Said notes that the genuinely late work refuses assimilation. It functions neither as the crowning achievement of the composer’s career, nor as the final seal on his posthumous reputation, but as a manifestation of an “increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism” (Said 2006, p. 17). There appear, then, to be two senses in which avant-garde art might age: Either regressively, as its shock value dissipates and it is absorbed into the academy, or disgracefully, by refusing such

<sup>2</sup> Lukács picks up on Adorno’s notion that the ‘angst-obsessed vision of life’ has diminished among bourgeois intellectuals. This has led, he argues, to the loss of authenticity in the modernist artwork.

absorption along with what Said terms “the rewards offered up by being comfortable inside society, not the least of which was to be read and understood easily by a large group of people.” According to this second definition, Adorno himself proves the very model of a late writer, refusing his readers the crutch of summaries or specialisms and producing an “overabundance of material none of it compressible into an Adornian system” (Said 2006, pp. 21, 22). For Said, Adorno rejects the option of growing old comfortably in the academy in favour of cultivating a more awkward and implacable form of lateness that refuses assimilation to the end. The difference between Said’s subversive late avant-garde artist and Luckács’s complicit late modernist is indicative of the way lateness has been revised and reclaimed in recent years and Adorno’s essay with it. H.D.’s work, it should be said, fits neither paradigm especially well. Few would now claim, as did Jarrell and others, that her late work is an “anachronism”. But nor is she easily reclaimed as Said’s “disgraceful” late modernist either. She very much hoped to see her difficult late prose works in print and, although not successful in this particular respect, she did, as noted above, enjoy recognition and academic plaudits in the latter part of her career.

The essay by Adorno on which both of these critics draw is less interested in tracing the fate of a particular career than in analysing a dialectic that is internal to avant-garde music itself:

Music wanted to do justice to the Kantian idea that nothing sensuous is sublime and the more the market debased it as a childish game the more it pressed to maturity through spiritualization. [ . . . ] Music had to pay a price for all this, which Valéry suspected was the case with all new art. In New Music this price is its senescence. (Adorno 2002, p. 188)

“The Aging of the New Music” identifies in the avant-garde resistance to the market a pull to “spiritualization” that is both a rationalization and what Peter Dews has described as “desubstantialization” (Dews 1989, p. 42). By rationalization, Adorno designates the process by which the artist impresses a subjective form and unity on to nature to create the autonomous art-object. Desubstantialization describes the obverse side of this process: The artist *subtracts* himself from the equation and fetishistically worships the art-object for its illusory “freedom”. To return to the example given in “The Aging of the New Music”, when Schoenberg’s “compositional freedom” becomes a “twelve-tone system”, man thinks he has found the musical “thing-in-itself”, the essence and life-form of modern music: “Deluded man sets up something artifactual as a primal phenomenon and prays to it; an authentic instance of fetishism” (Adorno 2002, p. 194). At this point, both subject and object disappear. The artist forgets himself as the subjective origin of the unified object and forgets the object in its affinity to nature in order to worship an illusory “system” instead.

The senescence of modern art is shorthand, then, for the process by which art, keen to retain its autonomy from the market, denies its artefactual nature (its man-made origins), and in so doing effectively speeds up its own disappearance. Adorno recognizes as one of the catalysts in this process the attempt to reconcile art with science. Rather than ensuring the survival of art in a rationalistic world, this endeavour serves to hasten its end because the transformation of art into a science only emphasizes its uselessness in a world in which everything must have a purpose:

The vain hope of art, that in the disenchanted world it might save itself through pseudomorphosis into science, becomes art’s nemesis. Its gesture corresponds to what is psychologically termed identification with the aggressor. (Adorno 2002, p. 193)

Adorno draws on the language of psychology to suggest the perversity of art’s attempt to prolong its existence by these means. This language is more pronounced in the first English translation of the essay and perhaps provided a point of entry and comparison for H.D. who employed, as she often did, psychoanalytical frameworks and vocabularies in *Helen in Egypt*.

H.D. knew Adorno’s essay second hand. She had read an article in *The Listener* published in 1957 titled “The Modernity of William Walton” in which Donald Mitchell provides a digest of Adorno’s essay recently, and very loosely, translated by Rollo H. Myers in *The Score* as “Modern Music is Growing

Old”.<sup>3</sup> In Myer’s hands, “senescence” loses its dialectical character and becomes a more straightforward description of art’s failure to be responsible to its times, a failure that he reads as a form of repression. The most recent translation of Adorno’s essay describes the “danger of dangerlessness” proceeding from the tendency for the “once shocking to be absorbed back into the tradition” (Adorno 2002, p. 181). This is the institutionalization of the new, the process that Edward Said describes in *Late Style*. In Myer’s translation, however, the artwork is personified, even pathologized and the result is to transfer the agency of the institution to that of the individual artwork itself: New music, he says, has repressed the element of anxiety—it is afraid of being afraid (Adorno 1956, p. 19). Seeking a reason for this repression, Mitchell points to a deficiency in “conscience” curiously attributed both to the composer and to the “character of certain central works”:

Both “anxiety” and “duty” imply the existence of a conscience; and when we come to inspect the nature of Walton’s output, and the character of certain central works, we find, I suggest, on the one hand, an alert artistic conscience promoting a valid (even anxious) modern idiom; on the other, a comprehensive conservatism, markedly free of an anxiety, private or socially induced, maintaining traditions not normally associated with the role of the modern composer. (Mitchell 1957, p. 245)

Mitchell’s interpretation observes a direct correlation between “an alert artistic conscience” and the production of works in a particular style that he describes as “a valid (even anxious) modern idiom”. It is difficult to know of what exactly he imagined this idiom to consist—the key point is that it must not reproduce “traditions” that are not usually thought of as “modern”, presumably classical and epic traditions among them.

Mitchell thus simplifies what is, in Adorno’s essay, a complicated relationship between art and actuality post-WWII. Here as elsewhere Adorno argues that since Auschwitz all art must have a “bad conscience” because confronted with an event that cannot be made ethically intelligible, and a form of death that cannot be made meaningful, art is forced to admit the lie in its past claims to self-sufficiency as well as the limits of its claims to universality. As Bernstein remarks with reference to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno implies that “the only legitimate cultural practices now would be ones that reflectively put themselves and their past in question” (Bernstein 2001, p. 422). In *Negative Dialectics*, culture is revealed as “garbage”, while in “The Aging of the New Music”, it takes on the appearance of ruins: “Since the European catastrophe, culture hangs on like houses in the cities accidentally spared by bombs” (Adorno 1990, p. 367; 2002, pp. 199, 200). For Mitchell, on the other hand, art might assuage its bad conscience by manifesting a level of anxiety consonant with both private and “socially induced concerns”, in other words, by developing an “alert artistic conscience” (Mitchell 1957, p. 245). The sense of rupture, the “World Catastrophe” in Adorno is curiously muted. In its place is a historical scale of anxiety—greater in some ages, lesser in others—to which the artist must respond appropriately according to his or her conscience.

### 3. “Living [ . . . ] Aesthetically above [One’s] Means”

The Hirslanden journal entry for 12 February 1957 seems at first to concede that *Helen in Egypt*, written between 1951 and 1955, is a belated contribution the modernist (and thereby no longer avant-garde) poetry H.D. produced earlier in her career: “Adorno is quoted as from The Score, in The Listener. Among other fascinating things, he says that Bartók ‘could not quite live up to his own avant-guardism and was living, so to speak, aesthetically above his means.’ [ . . . ] I felt the phrase applied, in a way, to myself and my Helen sequence” (H.D. 2015, p. 40). The influence of Mitchell is evident in the manner that H.D. reads “senescence” in this passage. It would seem to mean the

<sup>3</sup> In the notes to *Essays on Music*, Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will are less than complimentary about Myers’s translation efforts for *The Score*: “A peculiar, abbreviated and completely confabulated paraphrase of Adorno’s essay, translated from the French, was published in *The Score* in December 1956” (Adorno 2002, p. 200).



“repression” of anxiety about the times and is manifest (or not) in the form and idiom of the artwork. H.D. sees the relevance of this condition to *Helen* but ultimately pushes back against the idea that an “epic” idiom is necessarily evidence of “repression”:

I escaped from the epic *Angst* of which again Dr. Adorno says (in regard to music) that “the distinguishing feature of the ‘finest moments’ of this heroic epoch was the ‘element of anxiety (Angst)’ an element that in our own day has been ‘repressed’.” (I quote from *The Listener* article, Adorno’s distinction between “modern” and “contemporary” music). Superficially, I feel kinship with this, though my heroic epic was the actuality of war, re-emerging in the heroic Greek legend, in which Paris takes over in reverse, as it were, after Helen’s parting with Achilles. (H.D. 2015, p. 40)

This passage is clearly indebted to Mitchell’s tentative interpretation of “angst” as akin to “duty”. The first word (incompletely translated by the English word “anxiety” as Mitchell notes [245]) describes a condition of dread that although existential in character is said to be felt especially strongly in the “epoch” of the first avant-garde. The second word, “duty”, suggests that it is incumbent on the artist to somehow acknowledge this condition in an art that is appropriate to the times. To do so, in Mitchell’s terms, is to manifest an “alert artistic conscience.” H.D. acknowledges, albeit “superficially”, that since the passing of this epoch the sense of “angst” has been repressed and that, no longer able to do its duty in responding to this condition, art has been impoverished as a result. To continue to use the modes and idioms of the first avant-garde might be, then, to “liv[e] asthetically above [one’s] means” in the sense that they are an empty currency, disconnected from the moral and existential imperative that gave rise to them in the first place. This is a gloomy prognosis but it is not one with which H.D. entirely agrees. There is, she thinks, still value in the old clacissizing ways and this value inheres in their capacity to do precisely what Mitchell thinks can only happen in a “modern (even anxious) idiom”: To give thought and representation to present-day concerns, specifically the “actuality of war”, and, further, to examine the impossibility of doing so *without* invoking the past or, as H.D. puts it in response to criticism from Harriet Monroe, “drag[ging] in a whole deracinated epoc[h]” (H.D. 1997, p. 9).

This argument brings the journal entry into line with H.D.’s other notes and prose works from the pre- and post-WWII period in which she frequently tries to reconcile her concern for suffering in the present with her use of ancient and mythological models. In *The Sword Went Out to Sea* written in the 1940s and published in recent years, H.D. offers W.H. Auden as an example of the kind of politically-committed poet whose contemporary significance she thought to have outstripped her own: “He’s a gifted young man and I’m trying to catch up to him” (H.D. 2007, p. 28). Elsewhere she responds more directly to her critics who sensed, precisely, a lack of “conscience” in H.D.’s recourse to the classics. In “Notes on Parsanius, Euripides and Greek Lyric Poets”, H.D. compares these critics, ironically, to the Furies bent on punishing her for failure to live up to moral expectations: “I am not fleeing from the present, pursued by present-day art-theorists, serpent crowned Erynnes. I think myself rather beyond the fashion, ultra-modern” (H.D. 1990, p. 96). “Ultra modern” is a term that recurs in H.D.’s writing not to suggest an extreme degree of modernity—the avant-garde of the avant-garde—so much as the condition of seeing the present as connected to and reanimating all that has come before. In her translation of Euripides’ *Ion*, for example, the “ultra-modern” is defined as time that is “accordion-pleated” allowing for concentration and distension so that past and present are potentially proximate (H.D. 1937, p. 83). In a note to Norman Pearson (sometimes referred to as “Note on Poetry”), H.D. recalls a letter she received from Harriet Monroe in the midst of the Zepplin raids in WWI “when I had staggered home, exhausted and half asphyxiated.” Monroe demanded that she should “get into ‘life’, into the rhythm of our time, in touch with events”. H.D. counters by arguing that the “tragic spectacle of our times” is not to be approached by recording events as they unfold in the present. Instead, the poet needs to address the “suppressed” memories that condition our experience of these events (H.D. 1997, pp. 9, 8). This is a Freudian approach to an Adornian problem—art’s “bad conscience”—that, as mediated by Mitchell, appears conveniently as a problem of collective repression. *Helen in Egypt*’s return to classical sources—to some of the earliest poetic accounts of war—is a way

of reflecting obliquely on the “actuality” of the recent war as well as a refusal to accept the critics’ definition of what counts as the actual.

#### 4. “Was Troy Lost for a Kiss?”

*Helen in Egypt* thus resists the solution to the problem of art’s bad conscience offered by the “art-theorists” and critics referenced in H.D.’s notes and letters. This poem is not written in a “modern idiom” and in any case, as H.D. argues, this would not guarantee the presence of an “alert artistic conscience” because it cannot account for the way that disavowed artistic practices and traditions nonetheless condition the cultural record in the present (Mitchell 1957, p. 245). In *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. looks to ancient models—to what the Hirslanden journal calls the subject matter of “heroic epic”—as a means of representing the “actuality” of war. “Actuality” in this context suggests reality in a factual (independently existing) and, as I will suggest below, artefactual (man-made) mode as well as, in a sense close to the French *actualité*, a current or newsworthy state of affairs. *Helen in Egypt*’s claim to represent actuality can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it describes the manner that *Helen* sifts through the fragmentary remains of ancient cultures to recover images that prefigure the events of WWII. As Elizabeth Willis points out in an essay on H.D. and the Bomb, phrases including the “holocaust of the Greeks” and the “flash in the heaven at noon that blinds the sun” are charged with contemporary significance (H.D. 1985, p. 229). Lines such as “The break in the Wall” (H.D. 1985, p. 170) and “a blasted shell, my city, my Wall” (H.D. 1985, p. 133) point via numerous similar images in H.D.’s war poems to the buildings destroyed during the Blitz as well as to the breach made by the RAF in the “Steel Wall” of the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain (Willis 2007, p. 82). (H.D. herself traces the origins of this phrase to Goering in *The Sword Went Out to Sea* (H.D. 2007, p. 6)). Secondly, as I argue below, *Helen in Egypt*’s engagement with actuality is reflective in nature: It considers exactly *how* art might be supposed to manifest an “alert artistic conscience” as regards history and the misunderstanding of both art and actuality that resides in the expectation that it should. H.D.’s poem uses the deficiencies of the epic record to show why “getting in touch with events” might be precisely the wrong demand to make of art and *never more so* than at the present time. A version of post-enlightenment reason (calculating, skeptical and scientific) operates in *Helen in Egypt* to turn what Adorno describes as “events worth reporting” into artefacts falsely created by the method of enquiry and then worshipped as if they had a life of their own (Adorno 1991, p. 24). H.D. does not give up on the idea that art might reflect on actuality—her answer to Adorno suggests that she thought this is precisely what she was doing in *Helen in Egypt*. Rather, perhaps more Adornian than some of her critics, she thought that modern methods, *especially* when they pretended to a direct and realistic treatment of events, were not necessarily more truthful than the old. Moreover, insofar as modern practitioners failed to put their new methods into historical context, they might be unaware of their complicity with tradition in this respect.

From the beginning, *Helen in Egypt* refuses the idea that the classical record as it stands is an objective or disinterested account of events. H.D. does not expect to find in the work of the Homeric poets in particular an alert artistic conscience, especially not when it comes to the representation of Helen and the role she played in the Trojan War. Helen has been misrepresented, firstly, by members of the “powerful war-faction” who identified Helen as “Hecate and a witch” (H.D. 1985, p. 18) and, a second time over, by the poets who depicted her as the immediate cause of the conflict. *Helen in Egypt* pays tribute to a counter-tradition which, beginning with Stesichorus’s *Pallinode* and continued in Euripides’ *Helen*, holds that Helen herself was never actually present in Troy at all. Instead, she was “rapt” (H.D. 1985, p. 242) away to Egypt by Zeus and her place on the walls taken by “a cloud”.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The line is spoken by a servant in Euripides’ *Helen*: “Were all our toils in vain, then, for a cloud?” (Euripides 1997, pp. 140, 210). The sentiments expressed, which as the Oxford editor points out are those of the ‘ordinary soldier’, echo throughout *Helen in Egypt* in lines such as ‘Was Troy lost for a kiss?’ (H.D. 1985, p. 230).

It seems at first as though the purpose of H.D.'s poem is to set the record straight, to fix the inaccuracies and inconsistencies that are present in the dominant Homeric account. *Helen in Egypt* demands to know the truth as to Helen's actual whereabouts: "Is this Helen [in Egypt] actually that Helen [of Troy]?" (H.D. 1985, p. 8) Further, it offers to restore to the story those elements that had not previously been thought worth reporting:

tender kisses, the soft caresses,  
given and received; none of these  
came into the story,

it was epic, heroic and it was far  
from a basket a child upset  
and the spools that rolled to the floor; (H.D. 1985, p. 289)

The voice, that of Helen in this instance, gives equal weighting to the values set up as opposites in this section. Matriarchal are played off against patriarchal values, familial against national interests and the compassion revealed in the intimate embrace against the heroism manifest in public actions. The "bowman" who shot the arrow is arguably Eros, not Apollo: "I, Helena, know it was Love's arrow" (H.D. 1985, p. 83). The musical motif of the poem is sounded by the lute not the trumpet: "was Troy lost for a subtle chord? [ . . . ] because Apollo granted a lute-player, / a rhythm as yet unheard, / to challenge the trumpet-note?" (H.D. 1985, p. 229). And finally, although *Helen in Egypt* tackles an epic subject, it does so, as Susan Stanford Friedman points out, in a lyric voice which allows for the expression of intimate thoughts and feelings that are little in evidence in the heroic versions of the story (Friedman 1986, p. 215).

The suggestion that intimate exchanges are just as worth recording as heroic and epic deeds means that *Helen in Egypt* has often been read as a feminist and pacifist rewriting of its Homeric sources.<sup>5</sup> There is little, however, to be gained in the way of a good artistic conscience by doing so. Instead of acknowledging and making reparation for violence, upending the values of the "powerful war-faction" (H.D. 1985, p. 18) merely brings to light another source of conflict and dislocation, one that has been more completely repressed. As Susan Edmunds points out, the spools referenced in the passage quoted above are suggestive of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the child's attempt to master the absence of the mother. Edmunds adds that the poem as a whole might be read as a study of the dire consequences of a mother's abandonment: "Male rivalry is the cause of war, but its secret cause is woman's neglect" (Edmunds 1994, p. 134). The spectre of Achilles's mother, Thetis, hovers over *Helen in Egypt* and her carelessness in failing to dip her son's heel in the river Styx—"O careless, unspeakable mother" (H.D. 1985, p. 253)—has repercussions beyond her death: "O Thetis . . . / so she failed at last, / and worse than failure, / the mockery, after-death" (H.D. 1985, p. 254). By contrast, while Achilles might be blamed for his failure to save Iphigenia, his actions are given a rational explanation by the person we might expect to be most sympathetic to Iphigenia's fate as a pawn in the game of war: "Achilles himself, Helen argues, would have been stoned to death by the 'elect,' if he had tried to rescue Iphigenia" (H.D. 1985, p. 87).

Responsibility in general, regardless of whether it is directed at an individual or at a group, a worldview or a set of values, is not as easily apportioned in this poem as might at first seem to be the case. This is partly a consequence of the way that H.D. uses voice to undercut narrative authority. As Robert O'Brien Hokanson points out, much of *Helen in Egypt* is told as if it were Helen's own story but she is neither a reliable nor authoritative witness to events and consistently questions the

<sup>5</sup> See for example Susan Stanford Friedman's essay "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D. as Epic Poets" in which she argues that *Helen in Egypt* is a "feminization of the epic" to better represent the female point of view (Friedman 1986, p. 206). See also Rachel Blau Du Plessis who reads the brother-sister dyad in *Helen in Egypt* as H.D.'s most successful attempt to overcome the model of romantic thralldom (Du Plessis 1985, p. 67).



veracity and value of her recollections. Other voices intrude throughout, including notably that of a Freud-figure, Theseus, whose psychoanalytically orientated attempts to help Helen understand herself lead to altogether more questions than answers. Hokanson reads the “formal indeterminacy” of *Helen* as a “commitment to modernist self-reflexiveness and detachment” (Hokanson 1992, p. 344). I would add that this is not just a formal choice, and one that might once again have marked her work as senescent, but also an answer to critics who impressed on the artist the necessity of giving a straight or truthful account of what happens in war. There is no way back to the facts of the matter in *Helen in Egypt*, not least because even Helen herself has come to doubt what the truth might be. My focus in this article is not, then, on H.D.’s experiments with voice which have been comprehensively covered by others, including Hokanson and Morris but on the cumulative message offered by these voices regarding the impossibility of making impartial or even defensible judgements as to the integrity of past actions and the reliability of the representation of these actions in the cultural record. Helen’s very first and most pressing question in *Helen in Egypt* concerns culpability and its misplacement: How can she be responsible for the disaster that befell the Greeks in Troy if she was in Egypt at the time, if the “Helen” who appeared on the walls in Troy was a phantom conjured up by Zeus? The obvious answer to this is that she could not be. Yet the poem refuses to let go of the idea that even if she is not responsible in *actuality* she might be burdened with guilt of a phantasmatic or illusory nature. Helen frequently assumes the culpability of other women mentioned in the poem, especially other mother figures: First Hecuba who, after dreaming that her unborn son would destroy Troy, allowed the newborn Paris to be exposed by a shepherd (and by analogy Jocasta in her plot to kill the infant Oedipus), then Clytemnestra who led her daughter to sacrifice at the hands of Achilles, and finally Thetis who abandoned her own son Achilles. Edmunds points out that Helen’s “repressed guilt” for Achilles’s death appears in the form of a hysterical symptom. She arrives on Leuké limping as if she has phantasmatically assumed the injury to the heel that killed her lover: “your feet are wounded” (Edmunds 1994, p. 107; H.D. 1985, p. 151). H.D.’s verse is punctuated with prose passages—suggestive of stage directions or a commentary on an ancient text—which initially promise to hold fast to actuality in the face of this free-floating sense of responsibility: “it was not her fault” (H.D. 1985, p. 15). But even this discursive voice gradually loses conviction “He [Achilles] did not *seem* to blame this death on Helen”—and eventually succumbs to the same suspicion voiced by other personae in the poem: “Was Troy lost for a kiss?” (H.D. 1985, p. 230).

The attempt to reach the truth as to “who caused the war” (H.D. 1985, p. 111) ends repeatedly in this kind of uncertainty. To dig into the backgrounds of the protagonists in this story is to discover, as Freud might have done, that not one of them is free of a sense of guilt that originates in the family. Thetis bears the burden of the “*mésalliance*” with a mortal that led to the birth of Achilles, Helen for abandoning her daughter to flee Sparta with Paris, Clytemnestra for the murder of Agamemnon, Theseus for stealing Helen away from her family, and Paris for dallying too long with Helen: “was it seven years?” (H.D. 1985, p. 235) Here the epic tradition is not simply a record of someone else’s culpability whether that someone is Helen as in the usual story or, to follow the pacifist line offered by the poem, the collective will of the “powerful war-faction” (H.D. 1985, p. 18) which valorises heroic and epic-worthy deeds over compassion and love. Although the poem sets out to defend Helen from the false accusations made by the heroes and poets, it is unwilling finally to condemn these forces in her place or to suggest in any reductive way that it is men and patriarchal values that caused the war. “[W]hat”, Helen asks, “can a woman know / of man’s passion and birthright?” (H.D. 1985, p. 294) The question is unsettling coming as it does near the end of a poem which seems to argue for the restoration of women’s voices to an epic tradition which, for the most part, had neglected to record them. Like the uncertainty which still remains as to Helen’s innocence—“Was Troy lost for a kiss?”—this question as to women’s knowledge of a male world appears to undermine the purpose advertised at the beginning of the poem (H.D. 1985, p. 230). *Helen in Egypt* is not, then, in any straightforward way, “a defence, explanation or apology” (H.D. 1985, p. 1) for a woman wronged, nor can it recover the events that were left out of the official record. In fact, the harder the protagonists try

to remember the actual events of the war, to see through the distortions which meant that the values of the polis (“passion and birthright”) have been privileged over those of oikos (“compassion and tender kisses”), the more opaque and confused these events seem to become: “I seemed to know the whole, / but as a story told long ago” (H.D. 1985, p. 55); “is it a story told, / a shadow of a shadow, / has it ever happened [ . . . ] do I myself invent / this tale of my sister’s fate?” (H.D. 1985, p. 69) *Helen in Egypt* cannot deliver on its promise to recover the “actual” Helen—“Is this Helen actually that Helen?” (H.D. 1985, p. 8). Instead, this ever-shifting and recoiling poem exemplifies the instability and unreliability of the cultural record—in the present as much as in the distant past—as a means of access to the truth of what really happened in war.

## 5. Outliving the Expected Ending

H.D.’s engagement with the epic tradition responds to contemporary events at a second-order level: Rather than approach them directly, it turns to the genre that makes arguably the most naïve claim to record memorable events for posterity and interrogates the validity of that claim. In an essay collected in *Notes to Literature*, Adorno suggests that epic cannot help but seem anachronistic because beneath its claims to universality its interests are altogether specific and local: “The epic poem wants to report on something worth reporting on, something that is not the same as everything else, not exchangeable, something that deserves to be handed down for the sake of its name” (Adorno 1991, p. 24). In this respect, it retains a “naïve” fidelity to “material concreteness” which is opposed both to the “spell” of mythology as a universal and all-encompassing system of thought and to bourgeois reason which resembles mythology in its drive to classify and to systematize. Thus, for Adorno, “a critique of bourgeois reason dwells within epic naiveté” (Adorno 1991, p. 26). We might, then, imagine a defence of *Helen in Egypt* that turns the argument of H.D.’s critics on its head: Epic’s specific form of anachronism—its naïve fidelity to the unrepeatable, non-exchangeable event—might be a way of resisting the fate of the avant-garde in its drift towards systematization and senescence. But the poem does not easily accommodate such a reading because, for all that it would like to be a record of events “worth reporting” and an argument for a new bottom-up approach to what does and does not fall into this category, it knows and admits this desire to be naïve. The message of the poem is that *nothing* can be taken at face value and the more we press towards the specific and the local, often through scientific or rationalistic means, the more even “small things”—“a certain sheen of cloth, / a certain ankle [ . . . ] a pearl, a bead, / a comb, a cup, a bowl” (H.D. 1985, pp. 164, 165)—threaten to give up their particularity to the magic of a system.

H.D.’s writing has often been said to attempt a synthesis between reason, or in H.D.’s preferred term “intellectuality”, and mystical or occult forms of knowing (H.D. 1997, p. 11). Adalaide Morris, for example, suggests with reference to *Helen in Egypt* that H.D.’s “epic ambition” was fostered by what appeared to her to be the magic of new acoustical technologies: Radio and television “restored some of the conditions of primary orality by [ . . . ] making perceptible a cosmos in which voices routinely emerged [ . . . ] out of nothing” (Morris 2003, p. 61). Miranda Hickman emphasizes the personal nature of H.D.’s quest to accommodate science to her own version of an enchanted cosmos: “H.D.’s use of scientific models is in part a way of dealing with the ‘ghost’ of her scientist father, a means of yoking her mystical insight to his rigorous intellectual standards” (Hickman 2005, p. 243). In *Helen in Egypt*, however, the synthesis of reason and magic gives way to a dialectic that operates in a similar way to Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectic of enlightenment: The attempt to discover the facts through the application of post-enlightenment methods of classification and measurement results only in the transformation of those facts into fetish objects invested with the magical power to be exchanged with other objects.

This process is most noticeable in *Helen in Egypt* in Achilles’s preoccupation with calculating the value of the lives and livelihoods lost in war. Peter Middleton expresses something of the peculiarity of this endeavor in his description of how as readers we are invited to approach the poem as “Insurance adjusters”. In this role, he suggests, we pick over the remains of the battle—“sort over and over,

/ [Helen's] bracelets, sandals and scarves" (H.D. 1985, p. 232)—in order to "assess the extent and priorities of the damage" (Middleton 1991, p. 358). This exercise in costing extends not only to the destruction of the war but to the value of the artwork itself. *Helen in Egypt* repeatedly invites the reader to join Achilles in weighing the transcendental capital of art—love, beauty, eternity (as captured in the fleeting glance)—against the tally of lives lost in the war: "Will he forever weigh Helen against the lost?" (H.D. 1985, p. 30); "Was it a trivial thing? To have bartered the world for a glance?" (H.D. 1985, p. 62). At the same time, other voices intervene to point out the futility of this game; it amounts, as Helen states at the beginning of the poem, to weighing "a feather against a feather" (H.D. 1985, pp. 30, 67). None of these losses—personal or collective, abstract or material (the actual number of corpses)—amounts to much at all when calculated in this rigidly formulaic way. Nevertheless, *Helen in Egypt* continues to play off one element of the story against another as if by these means they could be brought into relation according to a mathematical law: "Helen [is set] against the lost"; "the thousand ships / against one kiss in the night"; "the world [against] a glance" (H.D. 1985, pp. 30, 39, 67). For Adorno, the attempt to turn art into mathematics results in fetishism: "One thinks that one is following the laws of nature, whereas the organizations of the material, however cosmically they gesture, are themselves already the product of human arrangements" (Adorno 2002, p. 194). In *Helen in Egypt*, however, the objects to be reckoned with—the remnants of war—are already fetish objects, and none more obviously so than the "veil" which is glimpsed by Paris as "Helen" flees from the ramparts and then reappears in various different guises throughout the poem: "the rent veil", "the fluttering veil", "the veil of Cytheraea", "the veil to which Paris refers" and "the woven veil by the portal" (H.D. 1985, pp. 145, 238, 45, 125). There are multiple substitutions and doublings at work here, not least the first one in which Helen on the ramparts is magically spirited-away and replaced by the part-object, the veil—all too easily suggestive of the Freudian fetish. The phantasmagoric nature of things in *Helen in Egypt* does not, however, mean that they cannot or should not be represented: Rather, that even if their meaning is not self-evident, we should resist the temptation to impose meaning by means of a schema of any kind. Thus, for all that the repeated appearance of the veil seems to demand interpretation, the discursive voice insists that there is no secret to be explained: "This veil to which Paris refers as well as that other, 'caught on a fallen pilaster,' seems to have no occult significance, only that in both cases they suggest finality" (H.D. 1985, p. 125). This observation is unexpected coming as it does in the work of a poet who frequently draws on the symbolism and vocabulary of the occult in her poetry. In *Helen in Egypt*, however, even substituted and doubled objects have their own particularity and finality. If they cannot be returned to the absolutely singular and the local (which would be an impossible return to an imagined state of epic naivety), then nor should they be sacrificed to the magic of a system, even when the system is one which admits to its magical effects from the outset. Pre- and post-enlightenment epistemologies both fail here as a means of approach to the actual because they deny the transformations that have already taken place in the object and, in the case of science, those brought about by the scientist who wrongly thinks to have isolated the bare facts.

In his discussion of the primal scene, Freud confronts as he does on many similar occasions the charge that psychoanalysis is not a science. The particular objection he has in mind is that it cannot tell the difference between reality and "an artefact" falsely produced by the method of inquiry (Freud 1955, p. 48). In *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. confronts the same problem and discovers, as Freud did, that there are no reliable means by which we can distinguish what really happened from the erotic fantasies which have been conjured up after the fact to cover over the disavowed truth. H.D. cannot undo the multiple layers of "repression" which permeate and structure the historical and cultural record of war and thereby return her readers to an imagined state of epic naivety (H.D. 2015, p. 40). But she could, and did, find, *specifically* by turning to classical sources and models, a way of approaching actuality obliquely as well as critiquing the received view of what the actual is and the means by which the artist was meant to get at it. In *Helen in Egypt*, the desire to know the truth—to know which was the "actual Helen"—generates all manner of uncertainties, insubstantial objects and apparitions: In short, the Pallinode (defence, explanation or apology) at the beginning inevitably gives way to an Eidolon

(an astral double) at the end. This is not a failure, far less evidence that H.D.'s methods had had their day, but the condition of all art that tries to remember war—a truism that she felt was at risk of being forgotten in a period that set great store by art's purported ability to get directly at actuality.

H.D.'s critics claimed that her belated modernism was inadequate to the task of representing present-day concerns either because it represented a rote continuation in a classicizing mode that had little relevance to the contemporary and/or because it reanimated a Homeric epic tradition whose express purpose was to record and commemorate the deeds of “the powerful war-faction” (H.D. 1985, p. 18). H.D. had her own concerns on this score, as her response to Adorno suggests, and, indeed, she had good reason to be wary of too close an identification with other classicizing late modernists. Pound had claimed that the epic was a poem containing history and yet, in writing the *Cantos*, showed how easily “history” could be appropriated to serve a political, social and economic agenda that was anathema to H.D. In spite of these concerns, however, H.D. felt her critics had misunderstood her aims in relation to her use of classical forms and materials and had done so in regard to *Helen in Egypt* in particular. The problem, she felt, was the understanding of actuality which subtended the demand for the artist to get “in touch with events” (H.D. 1997, p. 9). Engaging with the epic tradition in *Helen in Egypt* provided her with a means of interrogating this misapprehension as well as giving representation to the recent past in the only way she felt she could—by pressing towards a mode of artistic practice that put itself and its past(s) into question.

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