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THE ANTHROPOLOGIC EYE: H.D.'S CALL FOR A NEW POETICS

"Every poem has the right to ask for a new poetics."
--Czeslaw Milosz

The depictions of ancient artifacts in H.D.'s poems have long been a signal of her interest in Hellenism, yet her engagement with antiquity exceeds the classical allusions to mythic characters common among modernist poets. Instead, she names ancient cities and ports, re-enacts rituals, and culls details of authentic dress from friezes, coins, inscribed gems, and vase paintings. She describes weaponry and architecture with precision, and demonstrates fluency with the flora, fauna and landscape details of the Mediterranean. More than Classical appreciation for the ancient world, H.D. exhibits an anthropological appreciation, filled with archaeological details. H.D. was not the only artist of her time pressuring the material remnants of antiquity with new questions: in those first Imagist editions of *Poetry* magazine in late 1912, both Pound and Aldington published poems featuring museum artifacts.[1] And other critics have underscored they way that the highly publicized excavation sites of Arthur Evans at Knossos and Heinrich Schliemann at Troy impacted the imaginations of modernist writers. [2] They began to wonder, like no others before, "what it might mean to believe that the *Odyssey* was composed by a real person in touch with the living details of real cities, real harbors, real bowls and cups and pins and spoons, real kings, real warriors, real houses" (Kenner 47). Interest in the sociological concerns of culture—the nature of community formation, the stability of civilizations, the necessity of warfare—grew alongside the more conventional aesthetic investment in classical constructions of beauty and truth that Keats once found central to his interaction with the Grecian urn.

[1] The persona in Pound's "Middle Aged" speaks as an excavated Egyptian pharaoh and Aldington addresses his thoughts to an ancient statue in "To a Greek Marble." Both of these poems were published in the first months launching the Imagist movement, the fall of 1912. H.D.'s poems appeared the following January.
[2] Thomas B. Swann's *The Classical World of H.D.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974); Eileen Gregory's *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Catherine Paul's *Poetry in the Museums of Modernism: Yeats, Pound, Moore, Stein*. (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

The museums in which modernist writers encountered the ancient artifacts they wrote about were not a *tabula rasa* for their thinking. Museum curators, some art historians and some archaeologists, fiercely argued and defended how artifacts should be exhibited and what learning objectives the museum should promote for their visitors.[3] The museum debate touched upon sensitive issues, because promoting ancient Greece as superior to other ancient cultures was bound up in the British sense of cultural identity for curators who saw Greece as a cipher for modern England. Thus most nineteenth-century curators had preferred to valorize or reject artifacts on modern British *aesthetic* premises, using a conceptual model known as a "Chain of Art" (Jenkins 9). The chain traced the stages of civilization, beginning with the lowest levels of savagery and ascending to fully civilized, using evidence derived from a modern person's sense of an ancient culture's *artistic* achievements. Aesthete curators asserted the hierarchy of aesthetic value by grouping cultural relics in an upward progression, from "primitive" forms to the "summit of artistic achievement in Greek art against which all else would be measured" (Jenkins 24). In this schema "every new acquisition was judged in relation to the standard of the Elgin Marbles and allocated its place within the shadow of their magnitude" (Jenkins 66).

In the late nineteenth-century, the aesthetes' paradigm of exhibition was challenged by "a new breed of archaeologists" (Jenkins 9). They argued that cultural artifacts should be exhibited such as to emphasize their relationship to a whole culture, rather than in a relational hierarchy determined by modern judgments regarding their value as extant artworks. As curators readjusted their practices to see beyond the Golden Age of Greece and its grand aesthetic monuments, they began to study and exhibit the humbler remnants of ancient village life and everyday rituals.[4] The transition was by no measure smooth, uncontested, or even permanent. However, the archaeologist-curators celebrated a major achievement for their theories at the opening of the Greek and Roman Life Room in 1908. As the exhibit's guidebook professes, the Life Room arranged exhibitions to "illustrate the *purpose* for which they were intended, rather than their artistic quality" (*A Guide to the Exhibition* vii).[5]

The values by which the Life Room was organized also framed those underlying *The Greek Anthology*, a text known to have been important to H.D.'s early development as a poet.[6] *The Greek Anthology* is not a common text in literary

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[3] Ian Jenkins has traced with great subtlety the theory wars at the British Museum in his study *Archaeologists and Aesthetes: The Sculpture Galleries of the British Museum: 1800 – 1939* (London: British Museum Press, 1992). Jenkins shows that in the late nineteenth century, near the end of major museum acquisitions of ancient sites, a curious rift took place in curatorial theory, and consequently the exhibition practices, of museums.
[4] The historical accounts of Franz Boas and Branislaw Malinowski also attest to a shift in the kind of attention that was paid to ancient civilizations.
[5] Smith, Arthur H. *A Guide to the Department of the Greek and Roman Antiquities in the British Museum.* Fourth Edition. (London: British Museum Press, 1912).
[6] *The Greek Anthology's* influence on H.D. has been critically accepted, but treatment of its significance in her poetry has been late to surface. In *The Classical World of H.D.* (1962), Thomas Swann mines *The Anthology* for mythic allusions, yet his New Critical

studies, though its assemblage of over two-thousand epigrams was the first anthology in the Western tradition. The poet Meleager of Gadara first compiled it in the 6th century b.c.e., as a collection of works by himself and forty-six predecessors. Meleager called the text an *anthologia*, or garland of poetry, introducing to western civilization the time-honored metaphor of poems as flowers. In the successive centuries, imitators bundled other collections of poetry with Meleager's original and it grew as well as splintered off into various manuscript copies eventually discovered in the great libraries of Mediterranean civilizations and republished during the Classical revivals of the eighteenth-century.[7] Editions of classicist J.W. Mackail, printed in the early 1900s and favored by the Imagists winnowed the bulk to the five-hundred lyrics the editor considered exemplars of style and spirit in the genre. Although he was a scholar, Mackail designed his edition to be charming and readable. His popular edition thus provides lengthy and lively commentary, explications of the poems, and a thorough rearrangement of the original sequence to emphasize themes he found cohesive to the content and Greek *ethos*.

The Anthology would have been interesting to H.D., however, not merely as a poetry collection but as a cultural artifact. It presents its readers with the voices of ancient Greek people—young and old, male and female, rich and poor. Mackail's introduction draws attention to the sociological and non-aesthetic qualities of the text, which he laments that "history passes over" and "the mass of Greek literature affords a very imperfect view of" (41). For Mackail, "a *truer* picture of Greek life is happily given us in those epigrams which deal with the material that their history passes over and their poetry barely touches upon, the life of the simple human relations from day to day within the circle of family" (40-41). This "truer picture" is not the record of high art, confined to court poets culled from and narrating the heroic achievements of the upper classes; its authors are everyday villagers and its contents lyrical rather than epic. While some the better-known epigram writers—Meleager, Plato, and Sappho—possess names which have endured through history, most of the two thousand lyrics are ascribed to authors historically unknown or the epigrams were composed anonymously. The anthology's brief, humble lyrics, Mackail explains, were gathered from grave steles and the wayside graves inscribed in seawalls, "by

readings only observe the text's existence and use within the poet's library. Robert Babcock has observed that *The Greek Anthology* was highly influential for the architects of Imagism, Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, and H.D. "Verses, Translations and Reflections from the Anthology: H.D., Ezra Pound and *The Greek Anthology*." (*Sagetrieb, Vol. 14.* Spring and Fall 1995: 201-216). Babcock shows that these poets borrowed heavily from a popular edition of the text translated by the Classicist J.W. Mackail (*Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*. New York: Longmans, Green, 1911). More recently, and most importantly, Eileen Gregory's *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines* (1997) demonstrates that H.D.'s unorthodox resistance to the mainstream Classical tradition most be understood in the context of her high regard for *The Greek Anthology.*

[7] A history of this transmission is published in F.A. Wright's *The Poets of the Greek Anthology* (London: Routledge & Sons, Ltd. 1923); H.D. also had a copy of Wright's edition and wrote about in an essay in the unpublished *Notes on Euripides, Pausanias, and Greek Lyric Poets* (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library).

harbours and headlands…[from] the graves of drowned men" (76). Epigrams were copied from the plinths of statues in cities now destroyed; inscriptions were recorded from dedicatory monuments to wedding ceremonies, burials and other social rituals. They record "the dying wife's last words of praise to the gods" (43) and those of the "humbler life of a country cottager…the forester, the beekeeper, the fisherman in his thatched hut on the beach" (42). Mackail's distinction of the lyric epigram from heroic poetry is essential in understanding H.D.'s differentiated approach to antiquity. His anthology, which became H.D.'s "bible" (Gregory 169) in her formative years, presents a myriad of cultural artifacts, vestiges of lives lived, a rare glimpse at the lives of ancient people more akin to a museum display than a book. Mackail himself associates the epigrams with museum artifacts, saying they "constantly recall Greek sculptured reliefs and engraved gems" (60).

The hybrid text-as-artifact links H.D.'s poetics to the new curatorial tenets of the British Museum and the philosophical issues emerging in archaeology, providing her a way of seeing the past anew: "one of the chief advantages of these dedicatory epigrams of *The Greek Anthology*…is precisely their distance from the over determined lyric speech of the late nineteenth century: their strangeness, strange gods, customs, creatures; their ordinariness, littleness, unloveliness (Gregory 171). The "strangeness" of Greek artifacts offered H.D. a counterpoint to the "Germanic dominance of classical learning," allowing her to see "her role in terms of a subversive, erotic, and visionary endeavor fundamentally challenging the assumptions of classical transmission" (57). The littleness and unloveliness of the artifacts inspiring H.D. resonates with the "smallness" for which Ezra Pound harshly criticized her, saying her *Anthology*-based poem about "Tycho, the god of little things" showed "no sense of modernity" (238).[8] The new archaeology afforded H.D. different standards of poetic value, standards disapproved by Pound but supported by a school of museum curators at the British Museum, standards by which little things, the quotidian of antiquity, matter in poetry. H.D.'s first volume of poetry *Sea Garden* (1916) bears especially close resemblance to *The Greek Anthology* and the Life Room at the British Museum as they all to attend to the "common lives" and "simple human relations" (Mackail 41) of ancient people. The approach to poetry through anthropology we might call H.D.'s "anthropoetics," a means of challenging conventional ways of viewing the past within both literature and history by reflecting the methods of each field onto the other.

Sea Sorrow in *Sea Garden*

As we learn to pay attention to the archaeological and material, with its investment in the quotidian experiences of everyday folk, *Sea Garden* begins to resonate with the "Prayers and Dedications" section of Mackail's edition of *The*

[8] In a letter to Dorothy Shakespear, Pound says, "The Dryad with no sense of modernity has writ a poem to Tycho the god of little things." *Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear: Their Letters: 1909 – 1914.* Eds. Omar Pound and A. Walton Liz. (New York: New Directions, 1984).The epigram titled "Tycho" appears in Mackail's edition.

Greek Anthology. In his text, as in H.D.'s, the steady accretion of voices convey the harshness of life endured by a culture consumed by seafaring and warfare. The anthology epigrams reveal, says Mackail, a profound "sea sorrow" (24) in their urgent, sometimes desperate, messages from the dead. The voices call out in direct but anonymous address from gravestones: "Oh passerby" (3.iv) and "stranger" (3.xxii), conveying impossible messages from beyond the grave: "I am an Athenian woman…and now I am dead" (3.xvi) and "I am a tomb of one shipwrecked" (3.xix). They deliver warnings to seamen: "Well be with you, O mariners, both at sea and on land; but know that you pass by the grave of a shipwrecked man" (3.xviii). And "Mariner, ask not whose tomb I am here, but thine own fortune be a kinder sea" (3.xxi). Often they present a tantalizing wisp of narrative in which the reader must imaginatively supply the context: "What stranger, O shipwrecked man? Leontichus found me here a corpse on the shore, and heaped this tomb over me, with tears for his own calamitous life" (3.xxii). They petition strangers to send messages to family: "tell his father Meno that he lies by the Icarian rocks, having given up his ghost at sea" (3.xxviii) and another: "tell Nicagoras that the wind from Strymon at the setting of the Kids lost him his only son" (3.xxix). Epigrams can also carry the disturbing message of a mass burial: "We are Eretrians of Euboea by blood, but we lie near Susa, alas! How far from our own land" (3.xii). While most of the lyrics speak urgently of the present, some direct their tragic messages to the future: "O Time, all-surveying deity of the manifold things wrought among mortals, carry to all men the message of our fate, that striving to save the holy soil of Greece we die on the renowned Boetian plains" (3.vii)

The *Sea Garden* collection shimmers with allusions, direct and subtle, to the anthology. Even the title's figuration of the poems as a garden parallels Meleager's figuration of the epigrams as *anthologia*, a garland of flowers.[9] *Sea Garden* also resounds the epigrams' plaintive tone and their persistent theme of sea sorrow. The reverberation can be heard, for example, in "Mid-day," delivered in the voice of a vanquished persona: "I am anguished—defeated" (4); "I am scattered in its whirl" (10); and "I perish on the path / among the crevices of rocks" (25 – 26). Often H.D. borrows from the titles of epigrams, such as "The Shrine: She watches over the sea" which alludes to two epigrams titled "Shrine by the Sea" (6.xxiii and 6.xxiv) in Mackail's edition. H.D.'s "Shrine" examines communal bonds as the poet repeatedly evokes messages passed by word of mouth between common people, first "landsmen" then "fisher-folk" then "sea-men," in their struggle to survive. The persona addresses a "useless" religious shrine that not only fails to protect its people, but seems to lure them to the rocky cliff edges where they are crushed by the surf:

You are useless,
O grave, O beautiful
the landsmen tell it—I have heard—
you are useless. (II.1 – 4)

[9] *H.D. Collected Poems, 1912-1944.* Ed. Louis L. Martz. (New York: New Directions, 1983).

The stanzas H.D. creates are steeped in sea sorrow akin to that expressed in the epigrams: "many warned of this, / men said / there are wrecks on the fore-beach / wind will beat your ship" (III.13 – 16) and "oak beams split / though boats and sea-men flounder, / and the strait grind sand with sand and cut boulders to sand an drift" (IV. 8 -11). Nearly all the inhabitants in *Sea Garden* struggle to survive on rocky coastlands; they are beaten by wind, waves, tides and rocks; they are attacked, besieged, driven out of cities—yet they cling to communal and personal bonds as expressions of their humanity. Characters are swept out to sea ("Loss," "The Shrine," "Night," "Sea Rose"), lost in malevolent chases ("Pursuit," "Huntress," "The Cliff Temple"), taken captive ("The Prisoner"), or pray to local gods to save them from some certain peril ("Sea Gods," "Acon," "Loss," "The Helmsman," and "Pursuit"). [10]

The *Sea Garden* lyrics often fill out the sparseness of the original epigram translation, layering images of the brackish atmospheric conditions that befit a psychological condition gripped by suffering and fear. It is here that H.D.'s experiments with *The Greek Anthology* overlap precisely with the principles of Imagism. The poems do, as Pound prescribes, establish an "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" without the use of abstraction. H.D. projects Mackail's coinage of the term "sea sorrow" quite literally in the poems, merging the psychological conditions of sorrow onto the tumultuous geography of the seascape. In "The Shrine," the interior terror of individuals being tossed about in a storm tangles with the exterior description of the sea itself. The unfixed pronoun "you" shifts its point of reference (or is tossed about by a shifting reference), settling alternately on the shrine, a human psychology, and a raging, personified sea:

But you—you are unsheltered,
cut with the weight of wind—
you shudder when it strikes,
then lift, swelled with the blast—
you sink as the tide sinks,
you shrill under hail and sound
thunder when thunder sounds. (I.21 – 27)

While the union of psychology with physicality neatly exemplifies a principle of Imagism, the "instants of time" that H.D. chooses are *also* set in familial or betrothed relationships, within "the circle of family" which Mackail posited

[10] A related theme of the epigrams, as Mackail points out, is the "long roll of the burdens of dead cities—Troy, Delos, Mycenae, Argos, Corinth, Sparta—as a foreshadowing of the wreck of the whole ancient world" (70). The mourning for a lost, unnamed city is evident everywhere in *Sea Garden* and is a persistent theme throughout H.D.'s middle-period novels. Lamenting the destruction of cities and the scattering of their inhabitants is a crucial subtext in "Tribute," "Loss," "Prisoners," "The Shrine: She Watches Over the Sea," "The Wind Sleepers," and "Cities."

"history passes over" and of which "the mass of Greek literature affords a very imperfect view" (41). The lyric continues:

terror has caught us now,
we passed the men in ships
we dared deeper than the fisher-folk
and you strike us with terror
O bright shaft. (III.2 – 6)

Like many poems in *Sea Garden,* the speaking voice assumes a plural, communal we, frantically searching, longing, or mourning a lost loved one. The plural "we" articulates the idealized memories of those who have not returned home. They send ritual gifts, repeatedly calling out and making offerings to absent, indifferent gods. The voices are centrally concerned—as in the epigram that spoke to the future, quoted above—with the "manifold things wrought among mortals" (3.vii).

The Nereid Monument

H.D. turned to material artifacts in the archaeological museums of Europe as she attempted to flesh out the lyric laments from *The Anthology,* relying heavily upon artifacts exhibited at the British Museum where she, in her own words, "spent her mornings, studying" for the better part of 1911 and 1912, four years before the publication of *Sea Garden*. She describes artifacts throughout her first volume of poetry, quite explicitly in "The Contest" where "Your stature is modeled / with a straight tool-edge" (I. 1-2), featuring "cropped hair" a "male torso," (II. 14) and "knees, cut from white-ash" (III.9). Inert statues also creep into the narrative tales. In "Loss," for instance, we are brought *in medias res* into a harrowing chase where enemy lance-bearers relentlessly pursue a small group of villagers, killing them one-by-one until the last one living, the loved one to whom the poem is addressed, drowns on a rugged coastline. H.D. word-paints with an eye for ancient sculpture, from the "slight lift of muscle and shoulder" as the fatal lance is thrown, to her description of the poem's speaker watching her loved one swept out by the tide:

And I wondered as you clasped
your shoulder-strap
at the strength of your wrist
and the turn of your young fingers
and the lift of your shorn locks
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and the curious knee-cap,
fitted above the wrought greaves,
and the sharp muscles of your back
which the tunic could not cover
the outline…. (42 – 54)

The poem incorporates details garnered through considered study, an act that conflicts sharply with the panicked motions of the poem's subject. Rather than conveying movement, the lines read like the frozen details of a frieze that has been projected onto the psychology of the speaker. H.D. employs the same technique to great effect in her next book, *Hymen* (1921), where she uses simile after simile to link such artifacts as friezes, coins, Tanagra statues, and painted vases to the ancient rituals of marriage.

Sea Garden, however, seems to suggest, and return to, a particular material remnant with which H.D. was very familiar: the Nereid monument, the excavated remains of an Ionic temple that had been brought to the British Museum from Turkey in 1842. In her novel *Asphodel,* H.D. refers to the Nereid Room as a place she frequently visited, especially in her early romance with Aldington.[11] The poet's interest in this monument is significant because from the standpoint of the museum, and the debate between the Archaeologists and the Aesthetes, the Nereid monument ranked low on the "Chain of Art" and was considered "artistically unimportant" (Jenkins 150). Its principal discoverer, Charles Fellows, grumbled that his efforts had not yielded grander, more beautiful, relics, saying he "could not help their being ugly" (Jenkins 150). Because of its low aesthetic status the monument was relegated to an out of the way exhibition room where it received less study and public attention. This, of course, made it perfect for the quiet reflection and close observation of a poet interested in ancient realities. And indeed, echoes of a conflict between beauty and violence depicted on the Nereid monument can be detected in H.D.'s *Sea Garden*.

Fig. 1: Drawing of the Nereid Monument from 1912 Guidebook
Fig. 2: Monument reassembled

The 1912 edition of the British Museum guidebook presents a snapshot of what H.D. would have known about the Nereid monument.[12] The guide explains that

[11]The novel shows the Nereid room's importance in this romance through a succession of encounters—he sought her, found her, brought her gifts there in an environment that wove "the marriage veil." But the conflict imbedded in the monument is also seen in that it is the site where she returns to contemplate the dissolution of those vows after the war (136).

[12]For descriptions I consulted *A Guide to the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (1912), and also a very specific guidebook, *The Nereid Monument and Later Lycian Sculptures in the British Museum* [Part IV (Volume II), of a Catalogue of Sculpture in the

the monument, originally an altar, "stood on the edge of a low line of cliffs, immediately above the main approach to the city" (63). The city, ancient Xanthos, sat on a wind-battered rocky coastline. The monument was both a temple and a tomb, although the privileged occupant of it was still unknown in 1912. In the museum guidebook, an accompanying drawing (see fig. 1) imagined what the shrine would look like if it were reassembled, but the museum did not actually reassemble it until after World War II (see fig. 2), which is how visitors to the British Museum see it today. The shrine in its assembled state certainly fits the description of the poem titled "The Cliff Temple" in *Sea Garden,* which begins

Great, bright portal
Shelf of rock
Rocks fitted in long ledges,
Rocks fitted to dark, to silver granite,
to lighter rock—
clean cut, white against white. (1 – 6)

H.D. vividly imagines a cliff temple—its portal, long ledges, and fitted stones—set on a rugged coastline similar to Xanthos where "sea-hawks shout, / gulls sweep past— / the terrible breakers" (14 – 16), perched "on the rock edge / where earth is caught in fissures / of jagged cliff" (18-20). Other images of altars in H.D.'s poems also recall this monument: the wind-swept altar in "Shrine," the "temple stairs" of "Sea Lily," the altar on "cliff edges" in "Wind Sleepers," and in "Acon" the altar where the water nymph Nereids bring offerings to the gods.

Figs. 5-7: Three Nereid statues "half running, half flying"

The nineteenth-century archaeologists who acquired the relic for the British museum named it "The Nereid Monument" in order to contextualize it within the aesthete curators' values. That is, they did not name it after the occasion of its construction (a maritime victory), nor after the ruler of Lycian Xanthos (Arbinas), but rather after the aesthetically pleasing sea-nymphs popular in Greek

Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities] (London: British Museum Press: 1900). Both of these books were available in the reading room where H.D. studied. Although H.D.'s library demonstrates her strong ken for reading texts like these, I do not know for certain that she consulted them. Considering their availability and her reading habits, I assume that she did.

mythology, the Nereids. These lovely female figures survived decapitated, but their lithe bodies have been restored in positions "half running, half flying…at intervals between the columns" (*Guidebook* 66). The statues carry associations of the sea in their damp garments and the distinct marine symbols at their feet—a water bird, a seashell, a crab, a cuttlefish.[13] The beautiful and elegant Nereids in their diaphanous drapery dampened by sea mist create a breath-taking first impression, but contrast strikingly with the images of atrocities in low relief around the temple base. In its visual mixed-message, the monument stands as a site of intense conflict, ambivalently committed to both beauty and brutality.

Fig. 3: The Nereid room circa 1915

The disassembled altar that H.D. would have seen in the Nereid room (see fig. 3) lacked the contemporary version's architectural cohesion. The two rows of engraved friezes surrounding the monument and depicting scenes of violence are centrally prominent. Their visual stories repeat the same themes of war, realistic human experience, and sea sorrow prominent in *The Anthology* and *Sea Garden*. Aside from a few scenes of feasting and hunting, the majority of the friezes depict armies clashing in fierce warfare, far more brutal than wars depicted in more typical classical scenes showing "battles of the Amazons" or "battles of the Giants," as in the battle scenes decorating the temple of Apollo or the Great Altar of Pergamon. The Nereid friezes depict the gore of war far more realistically than the comparatively tame contest between the Centaurs and Lapiths artfully arranged on the Parthenon friezes. The Nereid war scenes are given detailed treatment by the 1912 guidebook, which does not gloss over, for instance, the grisly scene of a Greek soldier withdrawing a spear from his enemy's head (see fig. 4). The guide draws one's attention directly to the gruesome details of the victim's physical agony:

[13] The guidebook speculates that the Nereids would have been appropriate visitors to the shrine in order to commemorate a great naval battle alluded to on the altar (*Guidebook* 34).

> The fallen barbarian is not yet dead. He raises his body and crosses his legs convulsively; at the same time the right hand instinctively tries to check the movement of the spear. There is an expression of compassion in the Greek's face, notwithstanding the ruthlessness of the action. (*Guidebook* 13)

Fig. 4: Retrieving spear from enemy's head

The vivid depictions of men (and, notably, *not* mythological characters) being carried off, stabbed, smashed, and trampled by horses do not illustrate a varnished, heroic war, but bear witness to the grim realities of hand-to-hand combat in ancient times. Like *The Greek Anthology,* the Nereid stones suggest a "truer picture" of everyday life; they hold the hybrid status of half-grand art, half-gritty sociological reality. The battle so gruesomely documented on its stones stands completely outside of written history, as the cause and outcome of the battle, or even the loyalties of the fighters depicted, all remain unknown. The images are historically real, yet they have disappeared from textual representation.

The dynamic interplay between the Nereid artifact, the voices and themes of *The Greek Anthology,* and H.D.'s first volume of poems continues to build. We've seen that the Nereid monument's original location shared geographic space with the rugged physical setting in H.D.'s *Sea Garden.* Much of the poetry also portrays what Mackail called "sea sorrow," a sense of impending danger among cliffs, rocks, ridges, and dangerous precipices haunted by water nymphs, where worshippers petition gods of the sea, ships collide with rocky shores, and war victims flee cities under siege. *The Greek Anthology*, the Nereid Monument, and *Sea Garden* share depictions of war as traumatic to communities, to families, and to loved ones, the "circle of family" described in Mackail's introduction to the anthology. The friezes from the monument carry inscriptions set beneath the reliefs that read like the titles of anthology epigrams: "Attack on a walled city" and "Siege of a city" echoing *The Greek Anthology*'s theme of "the long burden of

destroyed cities" (Mackail).[14] In kind, H.D.'s poems "Prisoners," "Loss" and "Cities" speak of battle scenes in ways that do not invoke the high-minded values of classicism and blind patriotism, but the physical horrors and mental scars of warfare. In "Loss," a communal voice, "one of us," describes the terror of people fleeing the enemy with the same unflinching depiction of violence to which the anthology and Nereid monument bear witness:

One of us, pierced in the flank,
dragged himself across the marsh,
he tore at the bay roots,
lost hold on the crumbling bank—
Another crawled—too late—
for shelter under the cliffs. (11 – 16)

Yet another speaker, in H.D.'s poem "The Wind Sleepers," depicts a small group fleeing a city: "we awoke and fled / through the city gate" (8 – 9). The poem ends with the image of an empty village in ruins, with sea birds circling and wailing the losses of vanquished and vanished people. Mingled with the pain and suffering of humans, *Sea Garden*—like both *The Anthology* and the Nereid monument—also depicts moments capturing the stunning beauty of the human form, the time-transcending recurrence of ocean tides, and the indomitable human spirit.

The Poetics of "Prisoners"

"Prisoners" is one of the longest poems in *Sea Garden*. It is a sorrowful and cryptic tale inspired by a found object: the last love letter passed, at great personal cost, between two captives in an ancient prison. The poem is not *about* the letter; it *is* the letter itself, an artifact presented without contextualizing commentary on the past or future of either the letter's writer or addressee. Like the frieze images carved on hefty rectangular stones, all we know of the object and the story of those within it is what the artifact itself tells us. The genders of the characters are unclear, as is the exact nature of the love bond between them, except that it has been deep, long lasting, and can recall better times in a warm and communal setting, "at the banquet / each flower of your hyacinth-circlet / white against your hair" (52 – 54). The letter's plaintive tone recalls the tragic voices of *The Anthology* that speak at the point of death or from beyond the grave, and in fact we soon discover that the speaker's death is very near. Both writer and addressee are "lost in this turmoil / about to be crushed out, burned or stamped out / at best with sudden death" (12-15). The poem-letter conveys a last request before an inescapable and impending execution, for the lover to see the face of the beloved once more.

It is strange that I should want

[14] These labels were created in the 1850s when the monument was first displayed, but were removed in the reconstruction. They are clearly visible in the photos from the early twentieth century.

this sight of your face—
we have had so much:
at any moment now I may pass,
stand near the gate,
do not speak—
only reach if you can, your face
half-fronting the passage
toward the light. (1-9)

The request admits there is no heroic salvation to be gained, no hill to take or wily escape in the fashion or tradition of Odysseus. Instead, the poet presents a speaker longing to affirm the ties of kinship: "I pray for one glimpse of your face" (50). The requested gesture of love, a prayer for the exposure of one prisoner's face to another, will provide a final moment of significance to their shared bond. The writing speaker hopes "you may yet be released" (28) and reminds repeatedly, "do not speak. / I was first on the list— / they may forget you tried to shield me / as the horseman passed" (70-73). The description of mutual heroics confounds the assignment of gender. The acts may have taken place in a battle, but neither of the gestures is anything grand. Rather, the poem describes small, intimate acts of love and loyalty. The primary desire expressed is simply the very human wish to see the beloved, that "your eyes and my eyes may meet" (48) and affirm a life shared.

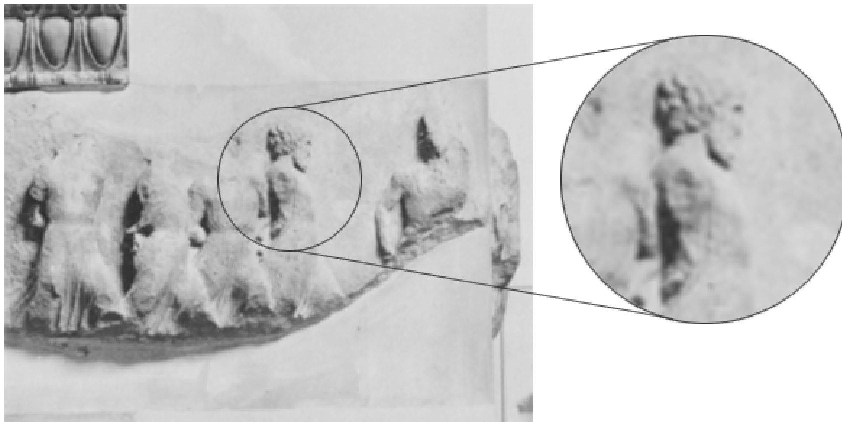

Fig 8: Nereid Monument Frieze titled "Prisoners," full and detail of lead prisoner

The tender story "Prisoners" evokes a tone and experience reminiscent of the epigrams from *The Greek Anthology,* although there is no direct allusion. However, the poet does capture something of the visual experience of studying the friezes on the Nereid monument. In fact, the story told in the poem comes remarkably close to one that can be imaginatively hemmed together from a small selection of frieze scenes. The poem's title "Prisoners" directly corresponds to a frieze slab of the same title, the latter depicting a row of prisoners being led by captors (see fig 8). The Prisoners frieze, which is not in very good shape, contains many indistinguishable figures. However, the prisoner in front, a muscular man with his hands bound behind him, is clearly discernable. He has a

bearing of pride; the aggressive stride of his front leg and the line of his set jaw still project a dynamic charge of bravery to the viewer.

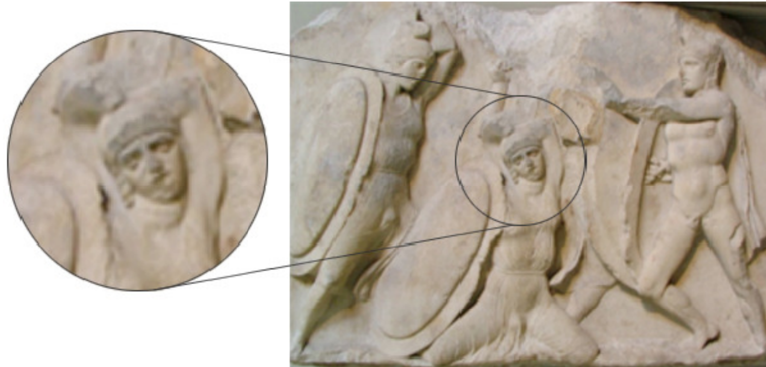

Fig. 9: Soldier being cut down, full and detail

The bravery of the lead prisoner in the frieze starkly contrasts with the apparent hopelessness depicted in other frieze images. In figure 9, for instance, a figure is sinking into the ground, his body absorbing sword strikes from soldiers on both sides. The expression conveys not the pain of the blows—which would have been horrific—but the hopelessness of surviving. The expression evokes pity for the end of a youthful life. In figure 10, one body lays trampled under a horse, while, above him, another body is jostled across a horse's back. Their facial expressions too stare out at the viewer in a way that evokes sympathy. Unlike the determined expression of the lead Prisoner, who marches forward as if he still has some sort of future, the bleak expressions of the dying are filled with pathos. Their deadened gazes look out from the chaos of war around them—feet stomping, horses bucking, military uniforms in aggressive motion. The frieze images correspond to the line in H.D.'s poem where the speaker is "about to be crushed out, burned or stamped out / at best with sudden death" (12-15).

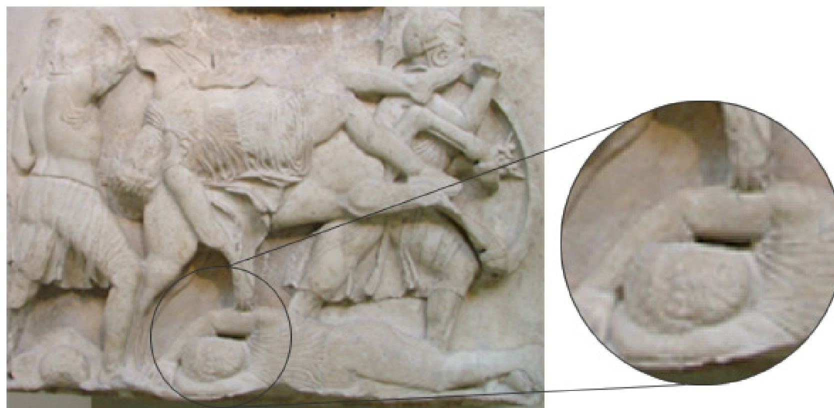

Fig. 10: Soldiers being cut trampled and carried off, full and detail

The final and perhaps culminating overlap of H.D.'s poetry with the friezes can be detected in the monument's image of a woman's face and upper body

protruding above the war scene. The guidebook describes her as "flinging up her arms in distress" (22) (fig. 11). Her unusual presence—a distressed woman in a scene of soldiers—could be imagined as a signal, like the one requested in the letter in H.D.'s lyric. The woman in the frieze is quite literally, at great personal risk, "press[ed] close to the portal" (20), lifting her face in the light.

Fig. 11: Details of "Attack on a Walled City"

The gesture of distress is odd in the context of classical friezes. It attracts the eye, as the woman's body defies the visual grain (see fig. 12). The woman's signal is central; though the soldiers' faces are subsumed behind visors, shields, and parapets or in profile, her face stands out in full view, with a determined expression on her unprotected head, arms extended to signal for attention. Hers is the singular, unguarded face in a mass of guarded regularity, a reminder of the individual, though often anonymous, lives behind the battle lines.

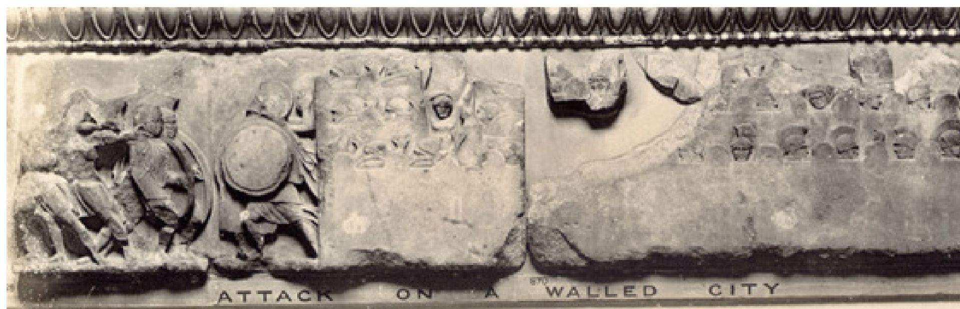

Fig. 12: Block of frieze from a 1905 photo

What appears on these ancient stones in mere wisps of provocative narrative reappears in H.D.'s poem, which constructs a larger poetic narrative by linking the two brave faces while maintaining the more interesting and philosophically provocative conditions of the ancient history. Who is this woman? What is she signaling and why? In what context does she expose herself? Is it a "distress" signal as the guidebook interprets, or is it an act of bravery, of loyalty, of love? The composition of the frieze compels us to ask: what is her story? Not only do we not know her historic condition, but we *cannot* know because the frieze image, like the poem-story that presents itself as artifact, exists without critical

exegesis. The woman's signal is its own story, within the story of this lost unnamed battle in this lost walled city, just as H.D.'s delicate letter-poem presents itself as a mysterious artifact of antiquity. The poet replicates the visual experience of stories told through artifacts. Her poem presents the trace of a moment of crisis, where all the total force of its meaning rises from a compressed utterance without past or future. The cry on the woman's lips, the signal of the upraised arms, the futility of such a rash, independent gesture in a scene visually suffocated by the rigid and relentless trappings of war, create a profound and human poignancy across time. What happened before that moment and what happens after is unknowable. Likewise the poetic feeling of "Prisoners" rests precisely on the unknowable quality of its historic contingency. It is within the poet's choice of evocation, of replicating the feeling derived from artifact (and perhaps learned from artifact) that H.D.'s differentiated poetic approach to the classics rests. This is not a technique shared by her peers; it is much closer in theme and feeling to *The Greek Anthology* and the type of humble artifacts central to the Life Room. Each presents strong narratives, capturing a sense of immediacy without context or conclusion. They offer *in medias res* the intense experience of a human relation, the epiphanic impulse to live and love.

H.D.'s Anthropoetics

The differentiated poetics in *Sea Garden* borrows methodology, materials, and values from social sciences to pose questions about the cultural process of history-writing and the cyclic obliterations of war. Anthropoetics figures centrally in H.D.'s entire early poetic project, up until about 1927 when she shifts her attention to the new visual and poetic challenges posed by film. H.D.'s novels and essays from the late teens and twenties are also driven by fundamental socio-historical inquiries: What truths of the past and present have we not been in a position to tell? Who were the people living outside the sweep of written history? What human experiences are unaccounted for in the knowledge base that forms the cultural hypotheses of the present? The approach is first detectable in a children's story titled "The Greek Boy," published under pseudonym in 1912, four years before *Sea Garden*. The majority of this narrative takes place at the foot of the Parthenon statues and demonstrates keen awareness of the curatorial battles between the Aesthetes and Archaeologists. Such queries became central in her unpublished (and little known) essays written between 1918 and 1928, *Notes on Euripides,* and *Pausanias and the Greek Lyric Poets,* where she makes surprising and unconventional connections between the textual and material approach to antiquity. In 1920, H.D. penned an enigmatic prose piece that directly called for "a new approach" to antiquity that "overthrows Grecian academics" ("Helios and Athene" 328). The new approach would access antiquity through artifacts. Other poems in this time period are inspired by museums and artifacts. "Demeter" cast off the mythological goddess Walter Pater taught H.D. to see as an "abstract symbol" (*Greek Studies* 42)[15] and a

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[15] Pater, Walter. *Greek Studies: A Series of Lectures* [reprint of the Macmillan 1st ed., 1897]. Prophets of Sensibility: Precursors of Modern Cultural Thought. (New York: Chelsea House, 1983).

harmless "goblin of the neighborhood" (48). Instead H.D. imagines an august Demeter who closely resembles the massive Cnidus Demeter statue at the British museum, with "wide feet on a mighty plinth/…wide of shoulder, great of thigh, / heavy in gold" (*CP* 111). These experiments in re-contextualizing literature within cultural settings are can also be detected in collected poems like "Telesila" "Nossis," and in poems more explicitly derived from *The Greek Anthology*, "Antipater of Sidon," "Helidora," and "Lais."[16] H.D.'s hybridization of literary texts with sociological content is found in *Hippolytus Temporizes* (1927), *Hedylus* (1928), and *Pilate's Wife* (1929).[17]

Palimpsest

Palimpsest, a novel written in 1926 toward the end of what is considered H.D.'s early career, is H.D.'s most fully realized exploration of the implications of archaeology for literature.[18] Here, characters reenact the erasures of history, meditating upon what has gone missing and reflecting upon their respective roles as witnesses and protestors to historic obliterations. In this novel H.D. specifically explores war's role in creating a chasm between actual human experience and what is recorded in history, the erasures produced when individual heroics subordinate the communal struggles of survival.

The text divides into three-parts: the first is set in ancient times and follows a female protagonist, Hipparchia, whose city once known for its culture and learning has been ravaged in martial conquests; as a woman of the court, she has been captured as a consort to a high-ranking Roman military leader. The next two parts of the novel are set in the war-torn 1920s where "antiquity showed through the semi-transparence of shallow modernity like blue flame" (224). The three sections form the layers of a palimpsest within history. The first part shows what has been lost in the shadows of time, largely through relentless cycles of war, which viciously erased the cultures of the vanquished. The second part portrays a poet first realizing then rising to her responsibility to prevent similar erasures during Great War; and the last part presents an archaeologist in Egypt uncovering secret codes of an ancient culture that had been lost as its culture had subsumed by dominant modes of history making. Like *Sea Garden*, *Palimpsest* bears a strong inter-textual relationship to *The Greek Anthology*. Epigrams figure heavily in the novel as historic traces, cultural signifiers that show through in modern times. Their recurrence demonstrates the union of art and artifact in the process of reading cultural history. As in *Sea Garden*, in order to make sense of what H.D. is doing in this novel, we cannot treat the recurrence of the epigrams

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[16] All poems listed, as well as "Helios and Athene," appear in *Collected Poems 1912-1944* (1983).
[17] *Pilate's Wife* was begun in 1924 and finished but rejected for publication in 1929. H.D. made extensive editorial notes on it in the 1950s. It finally saw publication in 2000**.** Ed. Joan A. Burke. (New York: New Directions, 2000).
[18] *Palimpsest*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1926).

aesthetically. They stand instead as the artifact-vestiges of fading cities and customs.

In Part One of the novel, Hipparchia collects, transcribes, and translates already-ancient manuscripts. These are the source material for a book she is writing, that will expose morals and mores that have been lost in history. Her room is "piled [with] various awkward parchments, tables, the various implements of her calling" (97). Her project is simultaneously literary, scholarly, deeply personal, and ultimately civic: "Her book was a correlation of gods, temples, flowers, poets…. Her book was a fervid compilation of poetry, religion and ethics" (100). Hipparchia's calling, the reason she, as a captive slave, has not surrendered to suicide, resides in the lofty goal of changing the minds of Roman authorities, of persuading them to care about what is being lost. She desires to disrupt the cyclic pattern of war by delivering a document so overwhelmingly pure and human that "Rome would reconsider" (98). Her goal is more than the survival of these texts. She believes that "long dead poems could yet remake a universe" (100).

The works and authors that the central character from *Palimpsest* collects are recognizably figures that H.D. and Aldington were also translating for *The Poets' Translation* series—Sappho, Euripides, Anacreon, and many poets of *The Greek Anthology*. Yet the work alludes to stacks of manuscripts suggesting a much larger body of work, unnamed and unfamiliar.[19] We may not recognize the texts from Hipparchia's writing tables, but the militaristic values of the Romans are certainly familiar. We recognize them, of course, because it is those values we have inherited and *not* Hipparchia's version of history. The disturbing subtext to *Palimpsest* is that her ancient revival project failed and thus the destructive cycle has persisted into our time, making our sense of history both malformed and misinformed. The long line of wars have continued, ethical ways we can only imagine have been lost to the repeated valorizing of grand heroics; we have lost the small and little ways of common people and become heir to monumental and militaristic cultural values. Hipparchia's life occurs briefly within a relentless cycle of indiscriminate brutality begun thousands of years before her time and continues a thousand after; her efforts as a translator and poet to make "Rome reconsider" are "utterly and irrevocably vanquished" (*Palimpsest* 5). Despite the hopelessness of Hipparchia's fate in the first part of this novel, ultimately the text is affirming in that H.D. forges optimism in the successive sections from two unlikely allies: a poet and an archaeologist. The war-impacted poet and the archaeologist act as two means of taking up where Hipparchia left off, of finding and presenting cultural alternatives that may yet "remake a universe."

Nereids in *Palimpsest*

Palimpsest returns us to the images and themes in *Sea Garden*. The anonymity we see in the *Sea Garden* poems, those tantalizing wisps of narratives, parallels Hipparchia's piles of mysterious parchments that were not transmitted through

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[19] See Gregory's more complex analysis of H.D.'s experiment with time and transmission in Chapter 2, "The Survival of the Classics," especially pages 48 – 52.

orthodox history. The Nereids that dance through the remains of the museum shrine that H.D. frequently visited and who flit above the gruesome frieze images, also figure heavily through *Palimpsest,* in a recurring epigram of the lost city of Corinth. In the first stanza of this epigram readers are presented with a series of haunting questions about the loss of the Corinth people, citadels, and unique customs, while the second stanza gives a disturbing response. War has been the cause of these erasures and it has been so relentlessly obliterating that it left no human witness:

War wreaked on you this hideous ravishment;
We, we alone, Nereids inviolate,
Remain to weep, with the sea-birds to chant:
Corinth is lost, Corinth is desolate.[20]

The city of Corinth, once a celebrated embodiment of charm with living testaments to high culture is lost with almost no trace of having existed. This little poem, this surviving prayer-like lyric, encapsulates an acute magnitude of loss, a loss that must remain vague, its exact nature undescribed and unnamed, for we have never seen the likes of this city. The author of this poem is known in *The Greek Anthology* as Antipater of Sidon, whose own works have survived in a few parchments although his output, as we know from Cicero, was great. Antipater bestows the ominous charge of witness to the birds and mythological water nymphs, the "Nereids inviolate / who remain to weep." The poignancy of the poem, which grows more haunting with each repetition in the novel, emerges in the slippage of the role of witnessing. Who carries the burden of this lost history? Does the record of this city and these "ten thousand people lost" (4) rest with the historian or the poet? The epigram shows the loss most horrific when it lacks human witness, when what was real is only preserved by myth and shrieking gulls. Thus, in *Palimpsest* H.D. returns to questions of cultural history and the connection between art and violence, reiterating the call for a new poetics we glimpsed in *Sea Garden*.

Traditional Critical Treatment

The connections between artifacts, archaeology, and H.D.'s early poetic project have been largely overshadowed by critics' unremitting search to discover textual allusions that match up with the poet's descriptions. Thus criticism has not always heard H.D.'s call for a new poetics regarding antiquity. More typical is the response to the *Sea Garden* poems in Thomas Swann's *The Classical World of H.D.* Swann takes particular issue with "Prisoners" and four other of H.D.'s poems, including "Loss,"[21] because they do not follow textual conventions. He

[20] From epigram 9.xx in Mackail's edition. This version is H.D.'s translation published in *Collected Poems,* 339.

[21] The five that Swann names are "At Baia," "At Eleusis," "The Gift," "Loss," and "Prisoners," all of which were published before 1925. The last three were published in *Sea Garden* (1912); "At Baia" in *Hymen* (1921) and "At Eleusis" in *Helidora* (1924). All published in *Collected Poems* (1983).

rightly associates the poems with *The Anthology*, but complains that they are "difficult to classify" and that their voices are those of "unidentified monologists for whom we can find no prototypes" (66). He discredits the poems on terms that they "suffer…from lack of detail" (70) and he becomes annoyed when the gender of the speaker is unclear. After summarizing the general storyline of "Prisoners," he complains "we are not given enough facts to identify Sappho or anyone else in the poem and the blurred outlines…make it difficult to relate their heroines to H.D.'s more fully realized women" (71). Swann ends his analysis disappointed, but confident that these poems do not detract from H.D.'s overall reputation because "these five monologues with their crippling faults of incompleteness and inaccessibility amount to but an insignificant segment in the body of H.D.'s work" (72). While one wonders whether a critic would be so quick to dismiss Eliot's or Pound's work for lack of understanding it, the sexism that vexes this period of criticism isn't the sole cause of the neglect. During the feminist revival of H.D.'s work, the same *Sea Garden* lyrics remained relatively ignored.[22] The poems that the feminist revival chose to elucidate are precisely the ones favored by Swann, those with "more fully realized women" or certain identifiable mythological characters. The poems do not appeal to feminist readings because, through their anonymity, they do not service any rescue, failing to tether lost names to the mainline tradition and thus fill the gaps of suppressed foremothers. Nor do they employ the tactic of "revisionist mythmaking," wherein the re-visioned character openly critiques the systemic injustices of patriarchy. Naming and knowing are essential for these tactics because they are invested in the machinations of the textual tradition—with or against the canonical grain. The trends in interpretation over the last fifty years have shifted attention from the well-wrought urn to the psychological mask, from Imagism to biography, from mythopoesis to revisionist mythmaking, and although these approaches serve other kinds of interpretations and texts, they have not accounted for the presence of material artifacts in H.D.'s work or the persistent themes connecting art to violence throughout her early project. The existing critical lenses within H.D. criticism have not helped us understand the bleak anonymity fused with violence and sorrow in "Prisoners," "Loss," and many other *Sea Garden* lyrics.

But make no mistake the anonymity that frustrates textual analysis is an essential tactic in H.D.'s early poetry. Ambiguity represents what has been historically lost, what literally cannot be named, defined, or charted. It represents what is outside of the textual tradition and mythology, as well as the boundaries of gender. It gestures toward the realities of ancient life elided by the classical approach to antiquity as well as Western history. In the manner of the Nereid friezes and epigrams, the poetry presents only a trace of a life lived. Just as we know nothing about the speared "barbarian" or the woman flinging her arms in

[22] Eileen Gregory, so often the exception, does appreciate the anonymity as a part of a boundary-less spiritual experience in her essay "Rose Cut in Rock: Sappho and H.D.'s *Sea Garden*" *Signets: Reading H.D.* Eds. Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990. 129-154).

distress in the frieze slab, just as we know nothing about the context in which epigrams on seaside grave steles call out "O stranger," H.D.'s poems purposefully suppress identity. There is only a frozen moment, a sorrowful scar of human suffering. "Prisoners" and "Loss" are significant poems as witness-bearing messages from the darkest shadows of history and from the unrecoverable scenes of war. H.D.'s lyric laments do not critique patriarchy per se, but the obliterating processes of history that are abetted by the annihilation inherent in wars. Their critique is aimed at the hierarchies of value history places on human lives. War blots out all the measures of individuality, reduces living cities to ash, and interrupts the potential for an artist's signature. War pulverizes the particulars of history, and history, in turn, casually sweeps over the holocausts. H.D.'s poetry, however, has a way of revivifying the sense of loss, of bringing it back into cultural play. In doing so the poems resist the full erasure of the anonymous moments tucked away in forgotten manuscripts and "ugly" museum monuments.

Moreover, the anonymity of the poems raises philosophical questions about the heroism we traditionally associate with the task of knowing and naming. Our own attachments to identity are questioned: are we primarily our subject position—our race, gender, and nationality—or are we first human? Does it matter what side we are on? What nation or gender we occupy? Whether we are from this century or that? H.D. has artfully subsumed individual identity beneath the communal cry of loss and longing to demonstrate the ethical questions we've also lost. The poet-archaeologist sifts through the traces of buried cities; the poet-anthropologist documents the details of strange and distant customs in search of alternative culture structures and buried wisdom that might "remake a universe" (*Palimpsest* 100). By recognizing H.D.'s differentiated approach to antiquity as an anthropoetic exploration of culture, her poetry enlarges our sense of history and diminishes any arrogant claim of individual or cultural superiority. Her work puts forward the critique that the normalcy and obviousness of history that we assume as citizens of Western culture, and that has been passed down by the textual tradition, are products of a shameful and merciless cycle of brutality.

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