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Reconsiderations of the Epic: The Woman and the Poet in the Age of Terror

I.

In *The Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser argues that poetry is integral to the survival of our species and our planet. Denying the responsiveness that poetry asks of us, Rukeyser believes, brings forth “the weakness that leads to mechanical aggression...turning us inward to devour our own humanity, and outward to sell and kill nature and each other” (41). Given the corrosive aftermath of September 11, the violence endemic in the Middle East, and the global terrorism and atrocity, no one could argue that the stakes are not—*turning inward to devour our own humanity*—this high.

The modernist poet H.D.’s profound relevance and resonance today is the rationale for recuperating her long-neglected, book-length *Trilogy* and placing this visionary work—what I consider a feminine epic—in dialogue with the very necessary “epic” visions of three contemporary women poets, all of whom focus on the unbearably high costs of war. They are Lee Sharkey’s *Calendars of Fire*, Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*, and Louise Glück’s *Averno*.

H.D.’s writings about war emerged out of direct experience. During World War I, she suffered profound trauma in London intensified by the death of her brother Gilbert, who fought in France. This series of shocks then converged with pneumonia that nearly killed her and her unborn child. Given such experience it is remarkable that she not only chose to remain in London during World War II but that she wrote each of the three long poems that became *Trilogy*. These poems

include “The Walls Do Not Fall,” written in 1942; “Tribute to the Angels,” which spans May 17-31, 1944; and “The Flowering of the Rod,” also written in a dizzying span of time between December 18-31, 1944. H.D. said of the composition of *Trilogy*: “The orgy of destructions . . . to be witnessed and lived through in London, that outer threat and constant reminder of death, drove me inward” (Pearson, v). Inwardness, in *Trilogy*, takes many forms. One of the earliest and most powerful examples occurs midway through the first book, “The Walls Do Not Fall”:

[22]

Now my right hand,
now my left hand

clutch your curled fleece;
take me home, take me home,

my voice wails from the ground;
take me home, Father:

pale as the worm in the grass,
yet I am a spark

struck by your hoof from a rock:
Amen, you are so warm,

hide me in your fleece,
crop me up with the new-grass;

let your teeth devour me,
let me be warm in your belly,

the sun-disk,
the re-born Sun. (31)

The speaker pleads with the many faces or incarnations of God to “take me home,” thereby invoking the safety and creative power that comes from living within, perhaps the only ‘home’ one can claim during wartime. In H.D.’s address to the faces of God, “Father” conjures the benevolent, shepherd God from the Judeo-Christian tradition, He who would “hide me in your fleece.” “Amen” invokes the Judeo-Christian tradition, but within it remains ‘Amon’ or ‘Amon-Ra,’ who is associated with Ra, the Egyptian sun god, chief deity, and father of all things, and ultimately with Jesus Christ, the “re-born” Son of God.

Integral to H.D.’s method is the recovery of, dialogue between, and ultimately the alchemy, both of language—“Thoth, Hermes, the stylus, / the palette, the pen, the quill endure” (lines 1-2, Poem 9, “Walls”)—and of religious, mythic, and cultural identities:

[39]

. . . I know, I feel
the meaning that words hide;

They are anagrams, cryptograms,
little boxes, conditioned

to hatch butterflies . . .

[40]

For example:
Osiris equates O-sir-is or O-Sire-is;

Osiris,
the star Sirius,
relates resurrection myth

and resurrection reality

. . . correlate faith with faith,

recover the secret of Isis,
which is: there was One

in the beginning, Creator,
Fosterer, Begetter, the Same-forever

in the papyrus-swamp
in the Judean meadow. (53)

For H.D., alchemy leads to the refinement, not of metals but of meanings, and the set of Osiris phonemes, the ability poetically to deconstruct words, leads the speaker and her readers to the mystical knowledge of the One [God]. In her own words: the “stylus . . . dipped in corrosive sublimate” will “scratch out // indelible ink of the palimpsest of past misadventure” (6). Osiris takes us back to the Lord God with ‘O-Sire-is,’ and with the evocation of ‘Sirius,’ to the star connected with Osiris’s wife Isis and yearly regeneration and resurrection. Linguistic alchemy thereby enables H.D. to restore the scribe to her place of authority, with art becoming the medium for the redemption of both individual and culture.

II.

Although H.D. would not have considered herself the hero of *Trilogy*, “hero” belonging to the patriarchal tradition she seeks to amend, she does conceive of herself as the conduit for a vision by virtue of the fact that she has done her “worm cycle,” the necessary prelude to a higher form of living/loving:

[6]

In me (the worm) clearly
is no righteousness, but this—

persistence; I escaped spider-snare,
bird-claw, scavenger bird-beak,

clung to grass-blade,
the back of a leaf

when storm-wind
tore it from its stem;

I escaped, I explored
rose-thorn forest . . .

. . . . I am yet unrepentant,

for I know how the Lord God
is about to manifest, when I,

the industrious worm,
spin my own shroud. (11-12)

[7]

Gods, goddesses
wear the winged head-dress

of horns, as the butterfly
antennae,

or the erect king-cobra crest
to show how the worm turns. (13)

These excerpts from “The Walls Do Not Fall” dramatize the self-authorizing, defiant power of the worm who is wise enough to intuit God’s coming—“I know how the Lord God / is about to manifest.” The worm emerges from its cocoon as butterfly or psyche—the soul; implicit in the worm cycle is death followed by rebirth, which H.D. conceived of as her own experience, and simultaneously as the path to a higher state of being. The butterfly—psyche or soul—is ultimately connected to the cobra that adorned the head-dress of Egyptian gods and goddesses—“to show how the worm turns”—and later the head-dresses of the pharaohs. In her rebirth as Psyche/the butterfly, H.D. therefore becomes both visionary and scribe, a divine vocation allied with the Egyptian Thoth (who also weighed souls in the afterlife) and later, with the Greek Hermes, the messenger god. Fundamental to the wisdom of the worm is its embrace of multiplicity, which translates into the power of finding value and commonality across religions.

III.

Poetry’s power, Rukeyser argues, lies in its capacity to enact a transfer of human energy—“which is consciousness”—and this in turn leads to “the capacity to make change in existing conditions” precisely because poetry invites a *total response* (emphasis added, 11 & 173). Rukeyser’s words have profound bearing on the revisionist vision of H.D.’s *Trilogy* and on the contemporary work of Lee Sharkey, Alice Oswald, and Louise Glück, each of whom participates in pushing further the vision of a feminine epic, one that I define as intrinsically meditative, open to the traditions and values of other cultures, and grounded in the need to salvage, preserve, and mourn the losses of war, all of which are necessary to the survival of human beings and our planet.

Calendars of Fire, Lee Sharkey's fourth collection, takes its title from Muriel Rukeyser's "Letter to the Front," the seventh section of which opens:

To be a Jew in the twentieth century
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
Wishing to be invisible, you choose
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.
Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:
Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood
Of those who resist, fail, and resist; and God
Reduced to a hostage among hostages.

"Jew" here could be replaced with "Poet," and *Calendars of Fire* is closely allied with the central concerns that Rukeyser maps out:

I came of age in poetry reading Adrienne Rich, whose work foretold my life and set me on the path of a poetry born of questioning [Sharkey told me in an email exchange]. I have always been politically engaged...and looked toward Rich's work, and later Muriel Rukeyser's, for what an aesthetic of engagement might look like. Carolyn Forché, in *The Angel of History, Blue Hour*, and her monumental anthology *Against Forgetting*, offered forms of witness that felt as if they were wrenched from the body. I wanted nothing less.

In "On Urgency and Form," forthcoming on Tupelo's website, Sharkey further defines the characters and historical events driving her need to understand and remain politically engaged:

My work is chronically inflected by issues of war and peace, in particular of late by two aspects of my

Jewish identity: my acute discomfort over the treatment of the Palestinians by the state of Israel and the persistent shadow of the Nazi Holocaust—by the human capacity to make holocausts. I don't mean these necessarily determine the subject matter of my poems; rather, they color my consciousness, torque my sentences, shape my broodings about life and human nature. Given humanity's proclivity to violence and our headlong if inadvertent rush to make the biosphere unfit for life, what instruments can poets summon for the transformation Langston Hughes invokes when he calls out, "I'm gonna split this rock. / And split it wide! / When I split this rock, / Stand by my side," that Celan summons, as if in prayer from purgatory: "One more word like this, and the hammers will be swinging free"?

In writing *Calendars of Fire*, Sharkey began with a question about pronouns. "What would it take to make of 'I' and 'you,' the other I am separated from by history, ideology, religion, nationality, or gender, a 'we'?" To bridge that gap—or gulf—Sharkey, like H.D. before her—draws upon mythology, archetypal psychology, and history. The title poem, a sequence in nine parts, comes at the end of the collection and is concerned with the conflicts in Sarajevo, Serbia and Iran, but also with violence dating back to the Spanish Inquisition. The poem brings these atrocities and sufferings into dialogue so that they become part of a larger continuum of violence.

"Calendars of Fire" begins by invoking Mnemosyne and Lesmosyne, Greek sister goddesses. The first presides over memory and is in legend the mother of the muses, the source from which all human culture including art, history, and science, springs. Without memory, the imaginative reshaping or re-membering of experience would be impossible. Lesmosyne presides over forgetting, and the tension between the will to re-member and the need to forget is

strong in “Calendars of Fire,” though it is memory which must abide despite the extremity of remaining present. The poem is composed primarily in couplets, many of which pair phrases that foreground action or image. The third of nine sections oscillates between memory/recovery/ recuperation and forgetting/death/the abyss:

If you remember a sax lilt wafting above the tree line
If you remember a house that arose from the fire

In Death’s walled face, the lids blink up
Eyes meet my gaze as if from a black backdrop

You, the eyes say, well, the eyes say, pull, the eyes say
Say, they say, I’ve got no time don’t skirt around

I want what you know. The whole past rushes forward
Folded flat as a kerchief, opening to flower

Once Death squatted with his monkey in the garden
Eating every bug the monkey ate (45-46).

Nearly seventy years after the Second World War, violence and terror are endemic, and we are making “the biosphere unfit for life.” Sharkey, unlike H.D., cannot possibly feel herself to be “on the verge of a new religion.” No, for her it must be enough to remember and recover, in language, fragments from the violence, and hold them up to the light. In remembering, Sharkey puts self and world in active dialogue, relying on parataxis that leads to strategies of juxtaposition. Ultimately, what she wants is language that moves by association across white space and silence that can rove across time, space, and modes of perception, generating a resonant field of consciousness:

I breathe him in
He inhabits me. He smells like balsam

I tell you this
Because quitting is not an option

Because I have seen the life spill out of him
Because the camera presents me with the moment the
 life spilled out of him

He becomes my chosen one
Pearl at the base of the spine

When the tear gas canister punctures his abdomen he
 is yelling
There are children here!

Waving his arms to draw the attention of the soldiers
To the rise he stands on to track what is happening
 below . . .

You too can watch it
At [youtube.com/watch?v=OI4d7pFKzSU&feature=fvsr](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OI4d7pFKzSU&feature=fvsr)

The soldiers take deliberate aim

He bellows once in surprise and outrage
Rolls down the slope and comes to rest in a curl (51-
52)

The man's identity is not given in the poem, and he becomes part of a continuum of men, women and children destroyed by violence. Yet the speaker remembers him—"He becomes my chosen one / Pearl at the base of the spine." The language here is reverent and highly symbolic. Sharkey goes beyond a poetry of witness to participate in remembering and honoring, a sacred act, what the Jewish tradition calls 'Zakhor'—the command to remember, a moral act with an impact reaching backwards and forwards in time. Troubling Sharkey's verse is

the reference to YouTube, which partakes of Lesmosyne's domain. As the constant television coverage of 9/11 demonstrated, the inundation and ultimately the commodification or fetishization of horror numbs the viewer to violence.

Like H.D., the speaker/poet of *Calendars of Fire* is less a prophet and more a conduit for a vision. "By your intolerable acts of grace," the last poem in the collection, articulates poetry's struggle to stay present during a time of violence, while acknowledging the limits of such a vision:

You are the teacher standing in the aftermath who
insists,
Kill us all, kill us all right now

I am the witness who forgets the prayer and where it
was made but swears, there
was prayer there, there is a prayer

You are the nurse who spoons egg yolk into the
prisoner's mouth. (58)

The 'You' in this section seeks both Lesmosyne's renunciation and Mnemosyne's preservation. It is the 'I' who is consistent, not that she does not forget "the prayer." Rather, she knows that it did and does exist:

You have labored to gather stone from the speechless
Tongues in the rock
On the drumskin of earth, we run. (60)

In these closing lines, Sharkey fulfills the quest with which she began: "What would it take to make of the 'I' and 'you,' the other I am separated from by history, ideology, religion, nationality, or gender, a 'we'?" That quest centers on being present, *not with Self but with Soul*, to the suffering endemic now and in the past. It is a quest charged with the sacred and ritual act of laying stones beside graves to acknowledge that

a life was—that lives were—lived and lost. Here, the ‘You’ gathers the stones from those who cannot speak. The stones are blessed with “tongues.” The final line evokes ritual and the ritual actions of tribal culture, locating that culture on the skin of earth. “We run.” Away? Towards? Or does the value of that ‘we’ lie in action, in the fact that ‘we’ do not remain static?

IV.

As H.D.’s *Trilogy* demonstrates, the oral tradition out of which epic derives emphasizes transformation and evolution. In her *Afterward to Alice Oswald’s Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad*, Eavan Boland writes:

Memorial is built on Homer’s *Iliad*. It stands squarely on an epic foundation. The names are the same. Some of the actions are the same. The locations are identical. The similes are comparable. But why, the reader might ask, do these young men need to die again? Didn’t Homer already lay them down in his great text? (84)

Boland provides an answer and attests to the oral tradition’s ability to renew itself by drawing upon Oswald’s description of *Memorial* as “an excavation of the *Iliad*”:

What we see above all is that the atmosphere of epic has no expiry date. The soldiers here are not ciphers any more than they are merely symbols in the *Iliad*. In fact, the opposite is true. They are the brothers, husbands, sons over every war. And as we put down *Memorial* we wonder whether we first met them in Homer’s epic or saw them on last night’s news bulletin (85).

Oswald lifts the *Iliad* out of the context of the Trojan War to make its violence speak across time, further enlarging the conversation surrounding contemporary women poets’

engagements of war. Oswald herself calls *Memorial* “a translation of the *Iliad*’s atmosphere, not its story”; and her goal is to bring forth what the ancient critics praised in the *Iliad*—“its ‘*enargeia*’” (ix). This is not, however, the nobility of action that Matthew Arnold singled out during the Victorian era. Rather, “it means something like ‘bright unbearable reality,’” Oswald writes in the Introduction. “. . .

[In] trying to retrieve the poem’s *enargeia*, [*Memorial*] takes away its narrative, as you might lift the roof off a church in order to remember what you’re worshipping” (ix). Here, Oswald seems to echo *Trilogy*’s opening lines:

[1]

. . . ruin everywhere, yet as the fallen roof
leaves the sealed room
open to the air,

so, through our desolation,
thoughts stir, inspiration stalks us
through gloom:

unaware, Spirit announces the Presence (1).

Narrative, in *Trilogy* and *Memorial* as well as *Calendars of Fire*, moves to the background; in its place is what H.D. calls Presence; and Oswald “what you’re worshipping.” The comparison reveals a great deal about the poets’ intentions, H.D.’s and Oswald’s but also Sharkey’s. In *Memorial*, Oswald draws intensively upon the oral tradition for the multiplicity of narratives they include; and the oral tradition invites revision; or in Eavan Boland’s words: “the old, sacred purpose of the oral tradition . . . is nothing less than to be an understudy for human memory” (87). After stripping away the roof, what remains in *Memorial*, Oswald says, is “a bipolar poem made of similes and short biographies of soldiers, both of which

derive...from distinct poetic sources . . . the biographies from the Greek tradition of lament poetry” (ix).

Memorial begins by listing the names of more than two hundred dead, the effect akin to gazing at a war memorial’s seemingly endless list of those who have been lost. The poem moves from this list to focus on the moment of each soldier’s dying. The concentration of Oswald’s technique builds in momentum as the reader tries to stay present with the chronicle of each soldier’s death. Here is *Memorial’s* depiction of Medon, the one hundred twenty-sixth soldier’s dying:

Poor wandering MEDON born out of wedlock
Struck his hand into this ice-cold world
And didn’t like it but he had no choice
Grew up in Locris under the smile
Of a slim respectable stepmother
And murdered her brother

Then it was years of sleeping under bushes
He went north to Phylace then north to Troy
And at last in the ninth year
Death kicked him and he kicked it back
He was close to no one

Like when a donkey walking by a cornfield
Decides to stop
Stands there being prodded and whacked
Thinking good I will wade and eat sideways
And does just that eats and eats sunk in a pond of corn
Exhausted farm boys beat him with sticks
Their arms ache their sticks break
But nothing moves that big lump of donkey
From the fixed statue of his eating
Until he’s full and of his own iron will
Walks on (51-52)

Oswald's encapsulation of Medon's brief life is so sharply etched that his unhappiness and his status as an outcast pulse through the opening stanza, an isolation punctuated by phrases like ". . . . ice-cold world / And didn't like it but he had no choice / He was close to no one." The extended simile that follows Medon's biography brings lyric intensity to his story and makes his death seem almost pre-determined, instinctual in the way a donkey is stubborn and greedy: "Like when a donkey / eats and eats sunk in a pond of corn / Exhausted farm boys beat him with sticks... /But nothing moves... / Until he's full and of his own iron will / Walks on."

Memorial relies on repetition, extended similes, and the absence of punctuation, so that its central question becomes: how does the poet and by extension the reader find her way out—if there is a way? Oswald's final stanzas, each of which occupies a page unto itself, so that the white space engulfs or starkly frames the narrative, focus intensively on the mythic endlessness of war and war's rapacity:

Like tribes of summer bees
Coming up from the underworld out of a crack in a
rock
A billion factory women flying to their flower work
Being born and reborn and shimmering over fields

[page break]

Like locusts lifted rippling over fields on fire
Fleeing to the river
A hanging banner of insects trying to outfly flame
They hide by drowning

[page break]

Like restless wolves never run out of hunger
Can eat a whole stag

Can drink the whole surface off a pool
Lapping away its blackness with thin tongues
And belching it back as blood
And still go on killing and killing
With their stomachs rubbing their sides
Haunted by hunger

[page break]

Like when water hits a rocky dam
Its long strong arms can't break those stones
And all its pouring rush curls back on itself
And bleeds sideways into marshes

[page break]

Like when god throws a star
And everyone looks up
To see that whip of sparks
And then it's gone (76-81)

Memorial's portrayal of the factory women as summer bees from the underworld brings to the foreground the presence of women—as wives, mothers and daughters—lurking at the margins. Their guise as factory women attests to *Memorial's* timelessness but also to its rightness in our historical moment of cheap global labor, becoming a window into the un-lives of the millions who toil in inhumane conditions. The workers are proceeded by the locusts—the displaced millions, the refugees—who “trying to outfly flame / ...hide by drowning.” It is a bleak yet dangerously luminous close, the ‘*enargeia*’ which drives Oswald’s vision, so that once we leave the force/presence/omnipresence of war, those “restless wolves [who] never run out of hunger,” to arrive at the swift, dazzling sign of the god—known only through “that whip of sparks.” Oswald ends the poem, not in a nihilistic universe, but one in which God or, significantly, ‘god’ is glimpsed but not necessarily known in a glimmer, an image that brings to

mind the bleakness or delusion that Emily Dickinson, in her darkest poems, associates with Hope which, according to the ancient Greeks, always appeared holding hands with Pathos:

The Truth, is Bald – and Cold –
But that will hold –
If any are not sure –
We show them – prayer –
But we, who know,
Stop hoping, now – . . .

(Poem #341)

When we think of hope, we think of expectations, wishes, faith in the future. Pathos, however, transforms Hope into something quite other; and for Dickinson, hope is only for the deluded. Oswald's *Memorial* understands the inevitability of Hope and Pathos's partnership; hers is not delusion; rather it is a bright, unbearable reality, and profoundly necessary in our endless end time.

V.

Whereas *Memorial's* conversation is with the *Iliad*, in *Averno* Louise Glück joins a continuum of poets going back to Virgil who travel to the underworld—and return—bringing with them the knowledge of what they have learned. *Averno* takes its name from the Lago d'Averno, a volcanic crater lake ten miles west of Naples, two miles in circumference and two hundred feet in depth. For the ancient Romans, the Lago d'Averno reached far deeper, becoming the portal to the underworld.

Averno's six-sectioned "October," the first of several long sequences, is a meditation on our most primal fears: the end of love, the dissolution of memory, and the aging of both the body and the spirit. It is simultaneously a war poem written in the aftermath of 9/11. The way light moves through "October" both echoes and enters into conversation with the 'enargeia' of the ancients that is Oswald's flame:

. . . . *Come to me*, said the world. I was standing
in my wool coat at a kind of bright portal—
I can finally say
long ago; it gives me considerable pleasure. Beauty
the healer, the teacher—
death cannot harm me
more than you have harmed me,
my beloved life. (9)

[End of Section Three]

The remembered girl that Glück conjures in such moments is idealistic, hopeful and naïve. The fourth section cuts immediately to the contemporary speaker's much more disturbing light:

The light has changed;
middle C is tuned darker now.
And the songs of morning sound over-rehearsed.

This is the light of autumn, not the light of spring.
The light of autumn: *you will not be spared*.

The songs have changed; the unspeakable
has entered them.

This is the light of autumn, not the light that says
I am reborn.

Not the spring dawn: *I strained, I suffered, I was
delivered*.

This is the present, an allegory of waste....

The songs have changed, but really they are still quite
beautiful.

They have been concentrated in a smaller space, the
space of the mind.

They are dark, now, with desolation and anguish.
And yet the notes recur. They hover oddly
in anticipation of silence.
The ear gets used to them.
The eye gets used to disappearances.
*You will not be spared, nor will what you love be
spared.* (11)

Alongside these stark, primal fears, Averno contains within it the language of faith or spirit—*I strained, I suffered, I was delivered*—set against absolute bleakness that refuses to give way to despair. This tension invests Glück’s work with a prophetic power, except that here prophecy moves both backwards in time and forwards into an unbearable present which must be borne—“The ear gets used to them. / The eye gets used to disappearances.”

Despite the lack of hope with which Averno views humanity and existence itself—*You will not be spared, nor will what you love be spared*—Glück makes conscious to the reader her gratitude to her vocation:

How privileged you are, to be still passionately
clinging to what you love;
the forfeit of hope has not destroyed you

Maestoso, doloroso:

This is the light of autumn; it has turned on us.
Surely it is a privilege to approach the end
still believing in something.

[End of Section 4]

The fourth line invokes two musical terms from the Italian, *majestic* and *sorrowful*, and sets them side by side, an act that ennobles her discovery and allies poetry with music, the most cerebral of the arts. Unlike H.D.’s language, rife with

triplings and the doublings and re-doublings of mythic echoes, Glück's language is spare, bracing, fierce. Her attention to the light of autumn inevitably recollects Keats's great ode. But whereas Keats's autumn burgeons with the harvest and with the sounds of the bees, in "October" the light "has turned on us"; the silence that remains is harrowing.

"October" attests to Glück's vision of herself as a speaker of truth, stripping away illusion. She is in Dickinson's company, and in the company of Oswald and Sharkey, "we who know." In *Averno*, truth glitters and terrifies, like the landscape and culture of Hades with which the collection is simultaneously engaged:

It is true there is not enough beauty in the world.
It is also true that I am not competent to restore it.
Neither is there candor, and here I may be of use....

The bland

misery of the world
bounds us on either side, an alley

lined with trees; we are

companions here, not speaking,
each with his own thoughts;

behind the trees, iron
gates of the private houses,
the shuttered rooms

somehow deserted, abandoned,

as though it were the artist's
duty to create
hope, but out of what? what?
the word itself

false, a device to refute
perception

(Opening of Section 5, p. 13)

The poem dramatizes a mind in dialogue with itself; both placing the poem and its speaker in time and moving them beyond this historical moment towards the end time that section four confronts. The landscape here and throughout much of “October” is both specific and mythic—“The bland // misery of the world / bounds us on either side, an alley // lined with trees.” Like H.D., Sharkey, and Oswald, Glück’s strategic use of repetition wrenches the poem free of its historical context to locate it in a meditative space concerned with all time in which repetition is allied with ritual, reoccurrence, refrain.

The profound difference between *Trilogy* and *Averno*, one that maps the distance in perspective that we in western culture have come since World War II, crystallizes in “October’s” sixth and final section:

. . . My friend the earth is bitter; I think
sunlight has failed her.
Bitter or weary, it is hard to say

Between herself and the sun,
something has ended
She wants, now, to be left alone;
I think we must give up
turning to her for affirmation

From within the earth’s
bitter disgrace, the coldness and barrenness
my friend the moon rises:
she is beautiful tonight, but when is she not beautiful?

(15)

Unlike H.D., whose path to redemption lies in recovering and reconnecting with the goddesses of prehistory, Glück rejects, absolutely, the possibility that the earth, sun, and moon—and the divinities associated with them—can still be called upon to aid us, to care. There is no scaffolding here for understanding the earth’s desire “to be left alone,” no context; but really, does the contemporary reader need any? Glück’s moon recollects, very subtly, the moon of Plath’s *Ariel*, the antithesis of the loving mother. For Glück, however, the moon was never a mother. She remains other, distant, rather like the god who ‘throws a star’ at the close of *Memorial*. The moon, beautiful though she is, has nothing to offer us; her presence is a chilling corrective or reminder against romanticizing beauty.

Averno’s vision is epic, and the central action is a dual one, for the poems replay the aftermath of the fall from innocence, again and again, to concentrate on living in the post-lapsarian state which is the condition of each of *Averno’s* poems. Whereas *Trilogy* recuperates myths from across cultures in order to build the scaffolding for a new religion to heal the world, *Averno’s* central and recurring myth is that of Persephone. That daughter/girl/initiate’s centrality is established in “October” with the vision of the speaker standing in her wool coat “at the bright portal” of the world, a vision that returns, later in the poem, with a painful difference.

Averno’s Persephone is both the girl of myth and a figure for the poet who has gone down to hell and returned. “Persephone the Wanderer” is the title of two poems, the poem proceeding “October” and the poem that closes the collection. In the first, Glück nods to Aristotle’s vision of epic, in which action and not character, is central:

You are allowed to like
no one, you know. The characters
are not people.
They are aspects of a dilemma or conflict.

Three parts: just as the soul is divided,
ego, superego, id. Likewise

the three levels of the known world,
a kind of diagram that separates
heaven from earth from hell

They say
there is a rift in the human soul
which was not constructed to belong
entirely to life

Song of the earth,
song of the mythic vision of eternal life—

My soul
shattered with the strain
of trying to belong to earth—
What will you do,
when it is your turn in the field with the god [Hades]?
(17-18)

The voice of “Persephone the Wanderer,” like the voice of “October,” is meditative, philosophical, and able to speak from that place beyond conflict, which is the space of psychoanalysis, a process Glück describes in *Proofs and Theories*, and a practice that, it could be argued, enables the unflinching perspective—the ability to stay present given the unthinkable—that she brings to bear on *Averno*. Here I would single out her emphasis on the “rift in the human soul / which was not constructed to belong / entirely to life.” To what, then, does that other part of the soul belong?

If Glück offers an answer, it must be “song of the mythic vision of eternal life” which *Averno* renounces, continually acknowledging that the light in which such a vision was possible, has changed—“middle C is tuned darker now. / And the songs of morning sound over-rehearsed. // This is

the light of autumn, not the light of spring. / The light of autumn: *you will not be spared.*”

By the time we arrive at the second and final poem, “Persephone the Wanderer,” Persephone has grown accustomed to hell, and her contemporary counterpart, a girl who is not the girl-self of Glück’s “October,” has set fire to a field. That girl’s legacy? The consequence?:

. . . The field was covered with snow, immaculate.
There wasn’t a sign of what happened here

The police didn’t catch the girl.
After awhile they said she moved to some other
country,
one where they don’t have fields.

A disaster like this
leaves no mark on the earth.
And people like that—they think it gives them
a fresh start.

I stood a long time, staring at nothing.
After a bit, I noticed how dark it was, how cold.
A long time—I have no idea how long.
Once the earth decides to have no memory
time seems in a way meaningless (62)

The girl’s story—like Persephone’s—speaks to our time, to the aftermath of 9/11 that is the subtext in “October,” and to the aftermath of all acts of terror—“A disaster likes this / leaves no mark on the earth.” Here, the earth herself detaches. The speaker strives to be like the earth—to detach—and at the same time knows that is not part of her journey. Despite her loss of hope, the poet is still “passionately / clinging to what [she] love[s],” and at the last it is this passion that grounds and safeguards her.

In this last poem, the focus oscillates between Demeter and Persephone. In losing her daughter, the mother is duplicitous, untrustworthy—“like a politician / she remembers everything and admits / nothing.” Persephone, who is inevitably subjected to the will / whim of her mother “haul[ing] her out again [each spring],” is a much more complicated figure. During her time with Hades, Persephone is wrenched free of ‘the feeling’ that living on this earth requires, a condition that returns us to Glück’s earlier “there is a rift in the human soul / which was not constructed to belong / entirely to life” At the poem’s close, Persephone’s identity merges with the poet-speaker’s so that the collection concludes:

I think I can remember
being dead. Many times, in winter,
I approached Zeus. Tell me, I would ask him,
how can I endure the earth?

And he would say,
in a short time you will be here again.
And in the time between

you will forget everything:
those fields of ice will be
the meadows of Elysium. (76)

It is a chilling way to exit, this transformation of the Ancient Greek conception of the afterlife, one reserved for those chosen by the gods for their righteousness and heroism on earth. H.D.’s concept of Elysium includes the Islands of the Blessed, and her voyagers aspire, ‘not merely [to] the will to endure.’ No, her voyagers possess as she does:

the will to flight, the will to achievement,

the will to rest after long flight;
but who knows the desperate urge

of those others—actual or perhaps now
mythical birds—who seek but find no rest
till they drop from the highest point of the spiral
or fall from the innermost centre of the ever-
narrowing circle?

for they remember, they remember, as they sway and
hover,

what once was—they remember, they remember—

they will not swerve—they have known bliss....

for theirs is the hunger
for Paradise. (119-120)

In H.D.'s vision, the recovery of Elysium is a legitimate and worthy quest. The birds she speaks of—also figures for the self and for the selves surrounding her—hunger for Paradise, and they will hold back nothing in order to arrive there. In *Averno*, Elysium has become hell. Or more accurately, because Persephone/also the poet-speaker “will forget everything” the ravaged world with its “fields of ice *will be* / the meadows of Elysium” (emphasis added). Elysium becomes its antithesis, and that antithesis Glück dramatizes, throughout her series of journeys back from the underworld, is where *Averno* claims we now live.

As bleak as Glück's vision is, it “stand[s] against the idea of the fallen world” that Rukeyser identifies as the vocation for the poet precisely because the vision makes the fallen or broken nature of the world *conscious*. And consciousness derives from the Latin verb *conscire*, “to be mutually aware.” The plurality of com/con “with, together” is central because it emphasizes poetry's charge to move

knowledge and awareness from the individual to the collective.

VI.

For H.D., consciousness is archetypal, and H.D. is the poet-visionary who initiates her readers in the path towards redemption. Lee Sharkey, Alice Oswald, and Louise Glück each in her own way follows in H.D.'s path. Their individual and collective acts of writing—of committing visions of horror to poetry and what's at stake in living in an end time—become the antithesis of “suffering in silence for the love of Truth.” Writing—poetry—becomes advocacy: action; and in fundamental ways, the creation of a contemporary feminine epic steps into the place once occupied by traditional religious faith, though these epic visions—unlike H.D.'s—do not seek solace in religion, a severe mark of how visionary women's poetry has moved in the last seventy-five years.

Yet each poet's ability to remain present and conscious during endemic violence attests to the sustaining value of poetry. To paraphrase Rukeyser once more: Poetry is an art that lives in time. It expresses and evokes the moving relation between the individual consciousness and the world. Stepping further back in time, in Book XI of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine meditates on Genesis—on creation itself—in his search for the meaning of time in our lives:

Suppose I am about to recite a psalm which I know. Before I begin, my expectation is directed towards the whole. But when I have begun, the verses from it which I take into the past become the object of my memory. The life of this act of mine is stretched two ways, into my memory because of the words I have already said and into my expectation because of those which I am about to say. But my attention is on what

is present: by that the future is transferred to become the past The same is true of a longer action in which perhaps the psalm is a part. It is also valid of the entire life of an individual person, where all actions are parts of a whole, and of the total history of ‘the sons of men’ [Psalm 30] where all human lives are but parts. (Clarvoe, 31)

Each poet considered here is engaged in a practice that Augustine articulated more than fifteen hundred years ago; the fact that this practice abides is itself an achievement. It is one that stretches the mind and memory two ways: into the past and into the future.¹ Such a practice bears on “the entire life of an individual person, where all actions are parts of a whole, and of the total history of “the sons [and daughters] of men [and women]” where all human lives are but parts.” The bracketed material is essential here for it returns us to H.D.’s quest to restore the feminine principle to the divine. Without this emphasis on creation and renewal, she understood, we would be lost.²

A poem does invite, it does require. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response. This response is total, but it is reached through the motions That experience will have meaning. It will apply to your life; and it is more than likely to lead you to thought or action, that is, you are likely to want to go further into the world, further into yourself, toward further experience. (Rukeyser, 8)

If there is a value of writing “epic” poetry in an age of terror, then, it is the value of remaining present to the jeopardized values that the visions of these poets embody and preserve. Remaining present and conscious are the first, necessary steps towards the preservation and transmission of

values that recognize and honor the value of life. This is poetry that requires the individual to be accountable, conscious and active in striving to salvage our world by drawing upon myth, psychoanalysis, and mnemonic devices, each and all tools for preserving, understanding, and transmitting the values that H.D. sought to bring into dialogue and so create “a new religion” amid the ruin of the Second World War. By virtue of committing their visions to poetry, each of the poets gathered here taps into the *enargeia* that Oswald describes: ‘bright unbearable reality.’ Their poetry compels the reader to look, witness, remain present, and remember. A central responsibility, then, centers on widening poetry’s audience so that “The life of this act of mine is stretched two ways, into my memory because of the words I have already said and into my expectation because of those which I am about to say.” Intrinsically meditative so that thought becomes action, this poetry has pushed further a new vision of the war epic, one that recuperates a regenerative force of the feminine that changes both poet and reader from within.

Notes

¹ ‘...gods always face two-ways’ is a reoccurring motif in *Trilogy*, for understanding the non-linearity of time and the ways in which pre-history—what seems past—is vaulted into the present (*Trilogy*, 5).

² That principle is the source of value that Glück herself acknowledges in “The Evening Star”:

Tonight, for the first time in many years,
there appeared to me again
a vision of the earth’s splendor:

in the evening sky
the first star seemed
to increase in brilliance
as the earth darkened
until at last it could grow no darker.
And the light, which was the light of death,

seemed to restore to earth
its power to console. There were
no other stars. Only the one
whose name I knew

as in my other life I did her
injury: Venus,
star of the early evening,

to you I dedicate
my vision, since on this blank surface

you have cast enough light
to make my thought
visible again. (39)

Venus, after the sun and moon, is the third brightest planet. And it is Venus to whom H.D. also turns or returns: "O holiest one," she addresses her, "Venus whose name is kin // to venerate, / venerator." She is the goddess of love; but for the poets considered here, it is love of all of our lives on this fragile planet.

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