

Epilogue: HERMIONE'S CANTO ·

Edith M. Walden

[They] lived without cares, never growing
old or weary, dancing and laughing much;
death to them was no more terrible than sleep.

—Hesiod, 8th century B.C., writing about the
Golden and Silver Ages of goddess rule

Book Seven

[1]

But no. We are not finished yet. There is a chorus—sistrum and harp. A child was born—Euphorion? Helen? Achilles? A child was born. Helen has said, “and if I remember a child that stared at a stranger and the child’s name is Hermione, it is not Hermione I would stoop and shelter.” And yet, Hermione lives.

One yet has not spoken,
the child left at the work-basket,
abandoned with the spilled spools;

I am real, Mother,
let me remember
if you would forget;

let me remember, Helen,
let me remember staring with wide eyes
in a white face

at a stranger, Paris, Eros,
and a stranger, my mother,
who never looked back;

I remember Helen before the War,
I remember Pleisthenes, my brother,
cleaving to you on the water-stair;

I remember the leaving,
the crying, Mother,
Helen, Helen, come home,

I remember the stare;
I, Hermione, remember—
teach me not to remember.

[2]

Pleisthenes, a brother? This is news; but some say Helen and Menelaus had a son, Pleisthenes, who was taken to Troy with his mother by Paris. Why then was Hermione left? "Was it you or Paris who loved him best?" she asks. She cannot answer.

It was not I you stooped and sheltered
and carried with Eros to Egypt or Troy,
but the child Pleisthenes, the boy;

was it you or Paris
who loved him best?
I was left reeling;

I was left motherless—
brotherless—
and soon, fatherless—

Persephone lost
and no Demeter grieving,
no host;

no seasons but Death,
no hell like this drowning,
all breathless fury drawn in. . .

I would not know you, Mother,
could not own Helen;
Hermione, on her own—

her, my one, my own—
through the vale
and the shadow of tears;

who loved him best?
the veil of tears
pooled;

through the veil (or lifted?)
I saw the cistern
and reflection, my own, yes,

and the host—my Sister,
Iphigenia, and heard her Song—
Valé, be well, be strong.

[3]

We must be in Sparta, or a re-collection of Sparta. Iphigenia? Sister? Again, this is an alteration of the legend. It is said that Iphigenia was the child of Theseus and Helen, his child-bride, and it is said that Helen gave Iphigenia to Clytaemnestra to raise. Hermione and Iphigenia are united by the lifting of the veil. Their Song? This is Sparta; this is Troy; this is Greece. This is the War—this is the end of War.

How can I re-collect this?
O Iphigenia, Sister of salt,
Sister of secrets and sistrum,

Sister, the war-bride,
the crashing cymbal, Sister of sacrifice,
daughter of Theseus—dead?

this rent veil? is this the dream?
there was an Iphigenia
before there was a War;

Sister—
there was an Iphigenia—
before . . .

*could a Hero ever know
what the women felt,
what despair charged them with madness?*

the sword fell, the Walls fell—
the cisterns filled
with reflection;

Achilles fell
and was replaced
by the only man not terrified

in the Iron Horse,
his son, bloody Pyrrhus, the child-slayer;
and the sword fell, and the Walls fell,

and Andromache was replaced—
the spoils, Hermione, to Pyrrhus;
the War was over.

[4]

*The end of War? No, only another beginning — “they will always have War.”
This is a war of madness, perhaps led by Pyrrhus. This is the consequence of matricide.*

Orestes came home,
the Son, loyal only to the Father
and the loyal madness;

they will always have War—
no fault, no Helen?
they will find one,

the knuckle-players with their marbles
and dominoes—stones and bones
for counters—another and another and another;

mad Orestes, pursued by Furies (and Pyrrhus?),
found a cause, long lost,
followed the mercenary ghost—

ten-thousand-day war;
did he stay a year?
did he stay more?

the fatality of numbers—
whose hearts, whose minds
were won, or lost,

what token gained?
what broken?
Innocence? Mortality?

the cisterns filled with reflection;
salt, salt—Helen
was not necessary, not to blame,

the war not hers; not mine;
we were not asked;
mine only to gather the thousand host,

the One, the many,
the thousand script, the vigil,
mine to tear the veil.

[5]

This is mutiny. Or Love's arrow? We can only know it brought the madness to an end. Orestes has been purified through his madness and is acquitted and forgiven by Athene. Pyrrhus is ordered by the Delphic Oracle to be killed; Orestes complies, and marries Hermione. All is blissful for a while. But something lingers, the Erinyes? Or is it something in Hermione? Orestes needs healing; will Hermione refuse, like Oenone? We hear from Orestes, "I must have walls."

Orestes: Hermione, I cannot sleep;
you say, the Erinyes are gone,
all that is over

but I cannot sleep
for the red eyes, the flashes of fire
and un-membered bodies;

deep, deep in my heart
is the night—
I must have walls;

you say, we *all* were the cause
of the Fall of the House of Atreus,
the patriots, but *I* chose the law

of the sword, from the law
of my mother, and lost
all Innocence, in token;

*could a woman ever know
what the warriors felt,
what horror? what thrill?*

you say, I was between stone
and bone, that the night is broken,
that I must find light alone,

that a child must be born
of salt and fire—Euphorion?
the flint? I have lost that;

heal me, Hermione, cover me—
no light—the Child is dead;
I must have walls.

[6]

Suddenly Hermione is in Egypt, in an Amen tomb or temple. Or maybe she has been here all along. Helen is here; Love has reconciled them. Hermione has tried to heal Orestes, but he interrupted the cauterization, and she was badly burned. She has followed a rainbow, Iris, to this place for her own healing. She has transcended, and calls now for instruction in the Old Enchantment of the Mother Gods. She asks to be initiated into the Ancient Mysteries, to learn to "live with joy and die with hope."

I stood unwavering, covering,
but his walls were not water;
there was no diving down,

or under, or over;
there was no breaking through,
only the taking of cover

and the keeping out;
he could not live with my healing light,
the cautery, and chose the walls

of the cave, and Erigone,
who bore his child of guilt,
Tisamenus, then died, by her own hand;

I loved him as his mother,
I loved him as his sister,
his lover, his aunt—

Orestes, the last major Greek—
it was not the first time
I was deserted by Eros . . .

Mother, I have followed you here to Egypt;
I followed the rainbow of the rope
they hung you from in Rhodes,

the rainbow, Iris?
my eyes are open
and I left no child, took none;

no one remembers Helen,
or they do not want to know
that they remember—

they remember their stone walls,
their bone walls, their boxes,
blind to the light;

still they say, “Things fall apart;
the centre cannot hold;
mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”;

restore us to sight, Helen, Isis, Aphrodite;
tell us the proper herbs, Mothers,
Tellus, Tethys, Thetis—

sing me the Song of the Ament tomb,
instruct me in Demeter’s Mystery,
“to live with joy and die with hope,”

take me back
to the Old Enchantment, the sea;
guide me to Leuké;

I do not demand to know the name;
I know the name,
I do not know the name.

[7]

"I know the name, I do not know the name." What is the name? It is not important; only that Hermione has reached Leuké, the en-lightened island. She does not know quite how she arrived (the rainbow? — "it is very simple, it is very hard") but she knows where she is, recognizes the treasure and her mission (her Labor?), and knows there is a way back. She must complete the circle. She has been instructed; she has become the hieroglyph, the holy carving, the Scribe. She wonders, can "only Achilles . . . break his heart and the world for a token, a memory forgotten?"

This is the thousand-petalled lily,
the place of the Great-Mothers,
"the flower of all-time, the host";

Jewel in the Heart of the Lotus?
chrysalis, the healing shell,
its forgiving pearl,

I have found all that?
I have found the clear stone,
the cut light?

rainbow, all-color, white?
Leuké, white island,
O, blessed art thou

among the waves
of white light —
mirror of Moon,

power of Sun —
Alpha, white Star,
O, Jewel of my Heart;

it is very simple,
it is very hard;
it is the Dream, the Dreamer, and the Song;

it is the marriage of the sacred stone,
Omphalus (womb, phallus?)
parthenogenesis?

it is the birthplace, the wedding
of Euphorion, Espérance, Hermione—
health, hope, harmony;

there is no more marriage in Sparta—
Eros, Paris, Orestes?
may he find the way;

I love him now as a grand-mother;
let me draw the Lover to Leuké
as a magnet draws ore from a rock;

“what is Love without arrows?”
it is the one arrow of the circle,
the compass—compassion-love;

encompass the Infinite—
for me the Wheel is still;
the treasure cannot be brought:

there is going back to Sparta
only to show the way
to navigate by stars—

the familiar stars, familial stars;
the treasure is only the island,
O, Mother of pearl,

and the shimmering, fluttering sail;
enchant-ment, mantra, the Song—
Hypnos, Mnemosyne, Oneiroi;

Hermes, Iris, Thoth—
all the water-bearers, preparers—
the Wise Ones know Aquarius.

[8]

And Helen? Helen's work is completed, she exists beyond Leuké; she may remain in Egypt, in timeless-time, in the eternal moment. There are others there, guiding the way to Leuké and beyond. We hear a chorus of women's voices—Sirens? Yes, sea nymphs, daughters of Calliope, grand-daughters of Mnemosyne; half women, half birds (vultures, hawks?)—a chorus of Wise Ones. Destroyers? No. The enchanted ones, really hearing the Song, really understanding the Message, will find their own sustenance, will taste the honey-sweet music from their lips, the honey tears of Osiris, the resurrection.

Chorus: We ourselves are the Writing;
though we changed to rocks
(rock crystal?)

when men ignored our Song
and stuffed their ears with the wax of bees
and tasted not the honey,

our Song is the Old Song,
the old chant-ment of the mermaid—
Gaia, Anat, Atea, Tiamat, Ge—

genesis—in the beginning was the beginning,
the vibrating membrane—breath, chant,
dance, harp, sistrum, drum—

Om, Omega, Omphalus;
rhythm, pulsation, wave,
Om manipadme hum,

the secret is no secret—
a simple path, only
Dream and waking-Dream;

the Sphinx is seen,
the crystal answers,
and Basilea has slain the beast;

we ourselves are the Wheel,
the Writing, the phoenix nest—
life after life

and circles of light only:
En Soph, Pi, Shen, Ensō, One,
Om, Omphalus, Mandala, O.

NOTE

Hermione's Canto is more than anything an offertory response—both a contrapuntal reply and a psalm of praise. It is a response to my reading of H.D.'s epic poem, *Helen in Egypt*, and is written as if it were the final book—a coda or epilogue—of her last section, "Eidolon."

There is a terrible freedom in writing like H.D. I felt I had surrendered my known boundaries, abandoned those familiar but restrictive voices of my contemporaries that held me in line, that defined the "proper" form and content of the modern poem, particularly the modern female poem. Suddenly I was all-powerful. My subject was all of recorded history, all of measured time—the Grand Myth—and I owned all revisionary rights. I was free to weave a personal mythology into the pattern of a universal one, free to make a universe.

The music of the sea beats through *Helen in Egypt*, the drum and cymbal of the waves. The rhythm and sound of H.D.'s verse became my central guide, like a mother's heartbeat in the womb. There was comfort in using the steady and rolling triplets to propel the predominant two and three beats of the lines like a litany or drumming lullaby. The alliteration and assonance of her words, her use of rhyme, half-rhyme, internal rhyme all sang to me. I listened for my lines, and they came as music. The prose interludes at the beginning of each section seemed to work as rests, as recitatives, to break the cadence of the verse and to further understanding of the text. In working from my outline, I used the prose pieces as a sort of chorus to elaborate and comment on the verse, and to bridge sections. They felt like buoys in the ocean—temporary grounding.

The music came to an end with the final "O." I felt a total depletion and an absolute elation; I was exhausted, euphoric, and for the first time in my writing career, I felt a complete connection with my work. It was com-

plete, I was complete. I had a newfound respect for the timelessness and spacelessness of myth, for its boundless capacity to encompass both the personal and the universal experience in a lyrical narrative. I had a new appreciation for the experience of giving up boundaries, for the discovery that comes from the brave and foolish act of faith, the step into the unknown.

I recently returned to *Hermione's Canto* after four years. I did make minor revisions, mostly to fill in gaps in my personal myth that I had since discovered, or to correct stylistic errors. What surprised me again was the wholeness I experience from the poem, its healing light. It was a gift—this permission to become myself, to become the Scribe, the Writing—a gift from H.D., a mother's return to a daughter.