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Palimpsesting: Reading and Writing Lives in H.D.'s 'Murex: War and Postwar London (circa A.D. 1916-1926)'

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On the title page of her first prose work, *Palimpsest* (1926), H. D. defines a palimpsest as 'a parchment from which one writing has been erased to make room for another'.¹ Palimpsests were created from the seventh to fifteenth centuries primarily in the scriptoriums of the great monastic institutions such as Bobbio, Luxeuil, Fleury, Corbie and St. Gall.² Such recycling of vellum arose due to a combination of factors: the scarcity and expense of writing material; the physical deterioration of existing manuscripts from which reusable vellum was then sourced; and the changing historical and cultural factors which rendered some texts obsolete either because the language in which they were written could no longer be read, or because their content was no longer valued. Palimpsests were created by a process of layering whereby the existing text was erased using various chemical methods, and the new text was written over the old one. But the most peculiar and interesting fact about palimpsests is omitted from the H. D.'s definition. Palimpsests are of such interest to subsequent generations because although the first writing on the vellum seemed to have been eradicated after treatment, it was often imperfectly erased. Its ghostly trace then reappeared in the following centuries as the iron in the remaining ink reacted with the oxygen in the air producing a reddish brown oxide. This process has been encouraged by the use of chemical reagents and ultra-violet light in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and by more advanced imaging technologies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A palimpsest is thus a surface phenomena where, in an illusion of layered depth, otherwise

unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other.³

H. D.'s use of the metaphor of the palimpsest takes place in the context of a figurative history that stems back as far as the first century A.D. The earliest recorded figurative use of palimpsests occur in Plutarch's *Moralia*, but the first *sustained* figurative engagement occurs in Thomas De Quincey's essay 'The Palimpsest' published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in June 1845.⁴ Coupling 'palimpsest' with the definite article 'the' (for the first time in a non-specific sense) De Quincey *inaugurates* - that is, both introduces, and initiates the subsequent use of - the substantive concept of the palimpsest. Subsequent to De Quincey's essay the palimpsest has entered the figurative imagination not just in a proliferation of literary and critical texts, but also in areas as diverse as architecture, geography, geology, palaeontology, glaciology, astrophysics, biochemistry, genetics, neuroscience, neurobiology, neurocomputing, and information technology.⁵ H. D.'s use of this figure is thus part of a history of the palimpsest that cannot be reduced to a linear or evolutionary narrative, nor located in a specific historical or cultural period, nor in an isolated intellectual discipline. Rather, the history of the palimpsest is best defined by its own nature and structure - it is a complex network of superimposed and otherwise unrelated texts in which various usages and definitions of the palimpsest have been inscribed, erased, reinscribed and persist.

In the first part of this article, I provide a close reading of the central story of *Palimpsest*, 'Murex: War and Postwar London (circa A.D. 1916-1926)', in order to show how the story evokes the palimpsestuous nature of history, both national and personal, textuality and subjectivity. In the second part, I purposefully refuse to offer a biographical or culturally contextual reading of 'Murex'. Rather, by paying close attention to the movement of the text, I argue that the story itself is a subtle reminder of the palimpsestuous intimacy of life and writing - where each informs and inhabits the other - which seduces the reader into,

at the same time as warning her of the reductive dangers involved in, any biographical textual reading.

Palimpsestuous Resurrection

‘Murex’ is the stream of consciousness of Raymonde Ransome during one afternoon in London in 1926, before, whilst, and after, she is visited by a beautiful Hampstead Jewess called Ermentrude. Ermentrude’s lover, Martin, has recently been stolen by the same woman, Mavis, who stole Raymonde’s husband, Freddie, ten years previously. Guided by the structure and logic of the palimpsest, as is H. D.’s text, the following reading of ‘Murex’ reveals how Ermentrude’s visit to Raymonde reactivates the buried layers of the past that she has been attempting to forget, causing a shift in her mental state from a feeling of blurred obliteration to one of acute perceptiveness of the palimpsestuous nature of temporality, history and subjectivity. Whilst the former state is associated with the inactivity of her time in London, the latter causes a return to poetic creativity.

Prior to Ermentrude’s visit, after six months occupancy in London, Raymonde’s thoughts and feelings are in a state of blurred obliteration that is part of her attempt to forget the past. London enables her to achieve this state of forgetfulness since ‘it blurred over too alert perception, it, so to speak, snuffed out vibration of too keen thinking’ (95). Raymonde’s mind, and the text which exhibits it, achieves a lack of clarity, a sense of ‘merging’, that reflects that of the surrounding environment. In London, the natural markers of temporal change such as day and night, summer and winter, lose their distinction and merge together in ‘an ineffable half-light’ that corresponds to Raymonde’s ‘twilight of the spirit’ (95). But the ‘delicious over-blur’ (96) of the text, Raymonde’s mind and the environment, is strained. The blurring is interrupted, intruded upon, by that which it is ‘over’, by that which it is trying to cover up. Raymonde’s insistence on forgetting - her assertion that ‘she had utterly forgotten’

(98) - is simultaneously disturbed and haunted by the 'sound of feet' of young man marching to war: 'There were feet, feet, feet, feet passing up Sloane Street on the way to Victoria. London had forgotten. She was one with London. She had forgotten. She came to London to forget - feet, feet, feet, feet.' (98) These feet haunt the streets of London and Raymonde's mind, just as their repeated refrain echoes, from this point onward, throughout the lines of the text. They also anticipate her own poetic feet that inhabit the latter part of the text, since the forgetting of the war is linked with a repression of the poetic creativity that only returns after Ermentrude's visit.

The alternative to this blurred and desperately forgetful London is the town of Cret-d'y-Vau where Raymonde normally winters. Raymonde associates Cret-d'y-Vau with a clarity and acuteness of vision linked with the ultimate 'clear seeing' - the prophetic and the extra-sensory power of clairvoyance: 'The clear Alpine air inevitably focussed, brought her mind to almost clairvoyant intensity of vision' (98). Cret-d'y-Vau requires Raymonde to think and write in a way the 'cocoon-blur of not-think-ing' (96) facilitated by London does not. Ermentrude's visit to Raymonde disturbs her blurred state, reactivates the buried layers of the palimpsest of history - both her own and her nation's - that she has been attempting to forget, and prompts her definite decision to travel to Cret-d'y-Vau, to thinking, and to poetic creativity.

Ermy, an 'odd enchantress' (142), brings with her the power of seeing that Raymonde associates with Cret-d'y-Vau: 'Ermentrude was some sort of witch, some mage, some clairvoyant who had power as well to let others see what she so oddly must be seeing.' (108-9) She acts as a reagent that brings to light the layers of Raymonde's past that have so long lain buried. She resurrects the figures of Mavis, Raymonde, and Freddie, just as palimpsest editors use reagents to resurrect the underlying scripts of palimpsests. In fact, Ermy is 'a witch as potent as the Erichtho of Lucan', the Thessalian witch who specialised in reanimating

the dead to whom Thomas De Quincey compares the nineteenth century palimpsest editors.⁶ Ermy's mention of her own husband, who she lost during the War, initiates this process of reactivation. For the fact that Ermy was widowed at 18 is 'part of the miserable thing that they were all forgetting' (100).

Raymonde strongly resists the reactivation of the past, containing as it does such unspeakable tragedy. She struggles to forget both the nation's past and her own personal history that is intertwined with it. To confront the past, to pull any one thread out of the complex weave 'of her life's fabric' (101), is to open up the present to the past in an 'odd searing gash and tear' (101). Raymonde would rather 'let well enough alone' for 'the past was the past' (101). But the rest of Raymonde's thoughts and feelings show the erroneousness of this platitude - the past is in fact anything but the past, anything but past. Rather, thinking through the palimpsest, temporality is figured as the erasure, superimposition and persistence of one temporal moment in another, a spectral temporality which is defined by the inhabitation of the present by the past, by what Geoff Bennington, after Jacques Derrida, has called 'the necessary non-coincidence of the present with itself'.⁷ In fact, the present only has meaning for Raymonde, she only exists in it, both emotionally and literally, precisely because it is part of the past: 'the present only as it was part of that past was part also of her' (101).

Raymonde desires to forget, but cannot do so. Just as in a palimpsest the underlying script is preserved as a result of its palimpsesting, the layers of her past have survived precisely because of her burial of them. Raymonde's repression of her anger and judgement of Mavis has been ruptured by Mavis' repetition of her treachery. Now Raymonde realises that her repression has preserved, concealed from sight, 'a whole realm of past memories with their corresponding vistas' (139). They 'had been there all the time and it was Mavis who had kept them there, kept them fresh, for Mavis had been the very obstruction, the lava,

the ashes, as it were, of that past disruption.’ (139) Confronting her past self, and Mavis, Raymonde confronts Freddie. In doing so, she realises that in a complex movement of palimpsesting, Mavis has both obscured and preserved her husband for her:

By facing that straight, a whole area of Raymonde’s subconsciousness was shifted, was opened up as if a layer of hardened, protective sand and lava had been sifted. Behind that layer, the things that had been (really because of that layer) blighted were, by the same token, now fresh. The thing that had ruined her memories, had kept them from her consciousness, kept them forever static, frozen eternally, images, eternal witness of the spirit. Mavis had blighted Freddie. She had saved him. (143)

The reactivation of the underlying layers of the palimpsest of Raymonde’s life provokes a change in the quality of her perception: ‘now having so far opened up this so far so hermetically watertight compartment of her own subconsciousness, she could see further’ (138). The obliteration and blurring of the opening dissolves. It is replaced by a new and insistent clarity of vision that perceives the palimpsestuous structure of paintings, memory, cities, mental images, and people.⁸ This shift in perception occurs when Raymonde considers Botticelli’s ‘Primavera’. She perceives that ‘it has some sort of veil across it. You can almost pull it aside and see them dancing. Back of the Botticelli there is another Botticelli’ (103). From this point on, palimpsestuous words, ideas and expressions saturate the text. Raymonde thinks in terms of ‘under-strata’ (96), of things ‘over-lapping’ (133), of things behind things (for example, of the ‘*arrière-pensée*’, ‘behind thought’ (134)), of ‘over-layers’ (135), of things ‘overlayed and interworked’ (134), of the ‘interlayer’ (163). The repetition, overlaying, and interworking of these expressions in ‘Murex’ performs that which they

describe - it contributes to the reader's sense of the palimpsestuous fabric of the text, of an interwovenness that is characteristic of memory and subjectivity, and of the involuted experimental modernist writing that attempts to bear witness to it.

Queer Frills

During her first round of therapy with Sigmund Freud, H. D. wrote a letter to her long-term partner Bryher in which she discusses the relationship between her life and writing. On 15 May 1933, referring to her traumatic experiences during World War I, she writes,

evidently I blocked the whole of the 'period' and if I can skeleton-in a vol. about it, it will break the clutch...the 'cure' will be, I fear me, writing that damn vol. straight, as history, no frills as in *Narhex*, *Palimp.* and so on, just a straight narrative, then later, changing names and so on.⁹

The 'frills' of *Palimpsest* are the fictive embellishments in which H. D. clothes the events of her life which provide the body of the stories that *Palimpsest* tells.¹⁰ But *Palimpsest* is also 'frilly' in a very different sense. For a 'frill' is not just, literally, an ornamental edging, nor, figuratively, an embellishment. It is also 'a kind of scallop-shell'.¹¹ It is precisely the kind of shell that a 'murex' has, the shell-fish that provides the title of 'Murex'. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explains that a 'murex' is 'any of the marine snails constituting the family Muricidae (subclass Prosobranchia of the class Gastropoda). Typically the elongated or heavy shell is elaborately spined or frilled'.¹² *Palimpsest* is not a 'straight' narrative, a direct and unswerving transcription of the events of H. D.'s life, because of the 'queer' frills to which she refers directly in this letter, and to which she alludes in the title 'Murex'. In fact, the queer frills of 'Murex' reveal the organic interconnectedness of life and writing, which

prevents any text from ever simply being a ‘straight’ history. In the second part of ‘Murex’ the reader witnesses the workings of Raymonde’s mind as she composes a poem provoked by Ermentrude’s visit. The poem is both produced by that visit, and influences Raymonde’s life in the moment of writing about it.

The palimpsestuous structure of temporality, memory and history which Raymonde perceives after Mavis’ visit also extends to the structure of the self. After Mavis’ visit, Raymonde’s identity is fractured by the constant intrusions of her poetic under-self, the androgynous figure of Ray Bart: ‘Behind the Botticelli, there was another Botticelli, behind London there was another London, behind Raymonde Ransome there was (odd and slightly crude but somehow “taking” nom-de-guerre) Ray Bart.’ (104) Ermy’s reagency recalls the past, and reactivates Raymonde’s creative and poetic self: ‘it was the poet, the young spearman who was Raymonde’s genius. Ray Bart held a sword of pure steel and it was Ermy who recalled her’ (127). The power and importance of this poetic figure lies in her ability to make people remember, in contrast to Raymonde’s refusal of the past and her desire to forget.

From the moment this figure emerges, the text delineates the thought processes of Raymonde-Raybart-Ransome in the act of poetic composition. Raymonde resists the feet of the poetic metre which bring to mind too forcibly the feet of soldiers marching to their deaths, and the ‘feat’ that testifying to those deaths would be. Despite this resistance, those feet visibly interrupt, and erupt into, her thoughts:

Feet, feet, feet, feet. No, Freddie, no Freddie not metres. Not poems. Not that kind of feet. Not trochaic, iambic or whatever, not verse, free or otherwise. I am listening to something. To feet, feet, feet, but not that kind, not your kind Freddie. No not iambic feet, not beat and throb of metre, no Freddie. I don’t want to write it.

Now she may say that I adore her face -

(145-6)

Raymonde resists writing for the same reason that she resists confronting the past: ‘it was easier to forget than to remember. To remember. Poetry was to remember’ (155). But in the latter stages of the text, Raymonde-RayBart’s stream of consciousness is constantly interrupted by the lines of poetry which push through into it, at the same time both sought and unbidden.¹³ The reader encounters the mind of the poet Raymonde-RayBart in the act of creation, and is shown the palimpsestuous intimacy of life and writing.

Raymonde’s mind wanders through, amongst other things, thoughts about the process of writing poetry, Cret-d’y-Vau, Mavis and betrayal, hospitality, whether it’s too late to eat supper, borrowings from other poets, the quality of her verse, Ermy, art and antiquity; she even holds a telephone conversation with Mavis. At the same time, both produced by, and producing, this stream of consciousness, the lines of verse begin to appear. Sometimes they appear in the prose, and are then transcribed as verse; sometimes they appear in the verse and are then repeated and considered in the prose; sometimes they are rewritten, sometimes they remain the same. Raymonde-RayBart recopies, makes corrections, alterations. She produces a poem that arises from her experiences with and thoughts about Ermentrude, Mavis and herself, but also from a picture on a rug in her room, her thoughts about the far past (antiquity), the influence of other writers, the sound of the words together on the line. The poem produced is a palimpsest of every aspect of Raymonde’s past and present life, thought, reading and experience. It is a poem that could quite easily be read as the address of Raymonde to Ermentrude on the subject of Mavis and Martin. However, it is also an independent text that must be read as such. Its interwovenness in the body of Raymonde-RayBart’s stream of consciousness undoubtedly makes it difficult to allow it such

independent status. This is so much the case that few critics mention the poem at all - it is a layer of 'Murex's own textual palimpsest that has yet to come to light.

In the closing pages of 'Murex', the reader experiences the reciprocal interrelation of biographical experience and poetic writing - Raymonde's prose thoughts produce and modify the poetry, the poetry produces and modifies her lived experience, both in the past, and as and in the very moment of writing. In 'Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis', Maud Ellmann concludes her reading of Jacques Derrida's reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, with a reflection on Derrida's understanding of the relationship between life and philosophical writing:

For Jacques Derrida, the 'autobiographical' refers not to the fullness of a human presence, nor to the intentions of the author, but to the intrusion of the accidents of writing into the abstractions of pure reason. The autobiographical makes itself felt (in Robert Smith's words) in "the dehiscence [or gaping] of the literary into the philosophical"...Hegel insisted that the "sole aim of philosophical enquiry is to eliminate the contingent"; Derrida, by contrast, insists that the author's name, the author's body, the author's position in space and time are obstinate contingencies that philosophy can never exorcise.¹⁴

In the same way, 'Murex' exhibits the interpenetration of autobiography and fiction, the inhabitation of the fictive by the biographical, the haunting of the biographical by the fictive. In *Derrida and Autobiography*, from which Ellmann is quoting, Robert Smith chooses Hegel's metaphor of 'dehiscence' or 'gaping' to portray this relationship. But the title of the volume in which 'Murex' appears - *Palimpsest* - offers the most appropriate metaphor for the relationship of life and writing, retaining, as it does, an emphasis on the textuality of each.

Life and writing exist in a palimpsestuous intimacy that queers the very notion of the ‘fictive’ and the ‘autobiographical’: the ‘straight’ autobiographical narrative to which H. D. aspires is always queered by the fictionalising frills of memory and narrative; any fictive narrative is always already inhabited and queered by the life of the author who composes it.¹⁵

The palimpsestuous relationship between writing and experience figured in ‘Murex’ lends support to the reader’s own desire to draw connections between Raymonde-RayBart’s life and writing process in this text, and that of the life and writing process of the signature on that text, Hilda Doolittle-H. D. In playing out the life-writing relationship, the text seduces the reader into such a critical activity, as does the similarity of Raymonde’s experience to that of H. D.’s. Like Raymonde-RayBart, Hilda-H. D. suffered great loss and romantic betrayal during the war years, that also provoked a writer’s block that was only relieved with the reactivation of the past by an uncannily perceptive Jew. But ‘Murex’ exhibits the fact that just as fiction is always queered by its palimpsestuous relationship with life, so too is life always queered by its relationship with fiction. Any reading that focuses solely on the biographical layer of a work fails to read both the texts which comprise any ‘fictional’ palimpsest. In negotiating the connections between writing and experience in a ‘fictional’ text, the reader is engaged in a risky enterprise of creating relations where there could or should be none. In doing so she must be aware of the reductive dangers, and the productive inventions, arising from such an enterprise.

NOTES

1. H. D., *Palimpsest* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press and London and Amsterdam: Feffer & Simons, Inc, 1968; orig. pub. 1926), title page. All further references to *Palimpsest* are to this edition and are given in parenthesis in the text.

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2. For more detailed information on the history of palimpsests see L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, 2nd edition); Bernard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Dáibhí ó Crónín and David Ganz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; orig. pub. 1979); and Sir Edward Maunde Thompson, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (New York: 1911; 11th edition), 633.
 3. For more on the contemporary significance of the palimpsest see my 'Re-inscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Critical Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies', *Textual Practice*, 19:3 (2005). For a discussion of its significance in the nineteenth century see Josephine McDonagh, 'Writings on the Mind: Thomas De Quincey and the Importance of the Palimpsest in Nineteenth Century Thought', *Prose Studies*, 10:1 (1987), 207-24.
 4. See Plutarch, 'Concerning Talkativeness' in *Plutarch's Moralia*, Vol. VI, with English trans. by W. C. Helmbold (London: William Heinemann, 1957), 504D, 411 and 'That A Philosopher Ought To Converse Especially With Men In Power' in *Plutarch's Moralia*, Vol. X, with English trans. by Harold North Fowler (London: William Heinemann, 1960) 779C, 47. De Quincey's essay is collected in *Thomas De Quincey: Confessions of An English Opium Eater And Other Writings*, ed. Grevel Lindop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
 5. Since De Quincey's essay, the figure of the palimpsest has been employed by writers as varied as Thomas Carlyle, Arthur Conan Doyle, D. H. Lawrence, Umberto Eco, George Orwell, and Jeanette Winterson. For a more detailed account of the history of the palimpsest and its diverse employment see my unpublished doctoral thesis, 'A Critical History of the Palimpsest in Modern Literature and Theory', University of Sussex, 2005.
 6. De Quincey, 'The Palimpsest', 143.

7. Geoff Bennington, 'Demanding History' in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, eds. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington and Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 17.

8. My reading of 'Murex' on this point takes issue with that of Deborah Kelly Kloepfer's in 'Fishing the Murex Up: Sense and Resonance in H. D.'s *Palimpsest*', *Contemporary Literature*, 27:4 (1986), 553-73. Her excellent close reading of *Palimpsest* is sensitive to the language of the text as well as to the metaphor of the palimpsest and has informed my own reading. Kloepfer uses such a reading to argue for therapeutic power of H. D.'s writing in relation to her past experience. My reading differs from her in this respect, and with regard to her lack of differentiation between the initial state of blurring in 'Murex' and the subsequent state of palimpsestuous vision – Kloepfer herself blurs these two states, referring to 'H. D.'s pervasive sense of and preoccupation with the "ineffable quality of merging" that underlies palimpsest' (564). Such a conflation leads Kloepfer away from thinking about the complex relationality embodied in the palimpsest.

9. Cited in Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H. D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 30.

10. Critics have frequently emphasised the resemblance of the three female protagonists and their experiences to H. D. and the events of her life. For example, in the jacket blurb of the 1968 edition of *Palimpsest*, Harry T. Moore says that 'the use of the palimpsest motif gives the reader the impression that one story has been imposed upon another and that the protagonist is always the same woman – in essence H. D. herself'. In "'I had two loves separate": The Sexualities of H. D.'s *Her*', Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau Du Plessis describe *Palimpsest* as 'a work composed of three stories about three seemingly different women whose lives at different historical eras in fact constitute versions of the same life story – near H. D.'s own', in *Signets: Reading H. D.*, eds. Friedman and Du Plessis

(Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 205. Sarah E. Witte summarises Susan Stanford Friedman's reading of *Palimpsest* as 'a palimpsest of "personal disaster" which records H. D.'s enslavement and betrayal by men during the years of World War I', see 'H. D.'s Recension of the Egyptian Book of the Dead in *Palimpsest*', *Sagetrieb*, 8:1-2 (1989), 121-47 (121).

11. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, definition 2.

12. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 8 (1995, 15th edition).

13. I make use here of Klopfer's opening engagement with the palimpsest where she describes its 'strange, marginal writing that is both intentional and accidental; it must be excavated, sought after, at the very moment that it is seeping through unbidden', see 'Fishing the Murex Up', 553.

14. Maud Ellmann, 'Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis' in *Deconstruction: A User's Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2000), 228. She is quoting from Robert Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.

15. For reflections on the relationship between the palimpsest and the genre of autobiography (in contrast to the 'autobiographical') see Michael Meyer, 'Gibbon's *Memoirs*: The Palimpsest as Paradigm for Autobiographies?', *Anglistentag*, (1997), 463-76, and Linda Chown, 'Palimpsestic Biography: *The Black Room*' in *Critical Essays on the Literatures of Spain and Spanish-America*, eds. Luis T. Gonzalez-del-Valle and Julio Baena (Boulder, CO: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1991).