

**"AT LEAST I HAVE THE FLOWERS OF MYSELF":  
REVISIONIST MYTH-MAKING  
IN H.D.'S "EURYDICE"**

**"AT LEAST I HAVE THE FLOWERS OF MYSELF":  
REVISIONISMO MITOPOÉTICO  
EN "EURYDICE", DE H.D.**

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**Abstract**

Taking its cue from the rediscovery of H.D.'s works initiated in the 1980s, this article aims to advance the efforts destined to recover the modernist poet's revisionist legacy and, in particular, her revisionary myth-making. To this end, adopting a myth-criticism interpretative approach, I will analyse one of the most relevant examples of H.D.'s work in this respect: her lyric poem "Eurydice" (1925). In particular, I will examine H.D.'s 'tactics of revisionary mythopoesis', that is, narrative strategies which distance her poem from the dominant account of the myth and that enable the poet to contest the established classical tradition. The examination will ultimately bring to the surface H.D.'s invaluable contribution to the re-shaping and re-writing of myth from a female perspective and the way in which she created a different, subverted, version of the classical account.

**Keywords:** Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), poetry, myth-criticism, re-writing, mythology.

**Resumen**

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo último contribuir a desenterrar el legado revisionista de H.D. y, en particular, su uso revisionista de los mitos. Para ello, y a través del enfoque de la Mitocrítica, analizaré uno de los ejemplos más relevantes de dicha

práctica: el poema breve “Eurydice” (1925). En particular, examinaré las estrategias narrativas que alejan “Eurydice” de las versiones clásicas del mito y que sirven a la autora no solo para cuestionar la tradición clásica, sino, también, para transformarla. En último término, el análisis pondrá de manifiesto la contribución de H.D. a la tarea de reescribir los mitos desde una perspectiva femenina, así como el modo en que la autora propone una nueva y subversiva versión de la historia de Eurídice.

**Palabras clave:** Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), poesía, mitocrítica, reescritura, mitología.

## 1. Introduction

Rome and the outposts of Rome. That runs in my head, arma virumque, that beats down the battered fortress of my brain, cano. I sing of arms and a God... What do I sing? I don't know what I sing. What anyhow does it matter what I sing, I, a nebulous personality without a name. (H.D. 1920: 7)

In 1975 Stanford Friedman launched a feminist recovery of H.D.'s work with her article entitled “Who Buried H.D.? A Poet, Her Critics, and Her Place in the ‘Literary Tradition’”. The title already hints at the idea that H.D.'s poetic legacy, which consists of more than fifty works—including lyric and epic poetry, novels, essays, theatre plays, translations and scripts—was already buried or at least in the process of becoming so. The recovery initiated by Friedman has been successful, as several of H.D.'s poems now have a rich critical history and other hitherto unpublished poems have been issued in recent years. Indeed, much work has appeared since 1980 on H.D., especially from the point of view of gender, her lesbian vision, and her relations with other modernist male and female writers.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that H.D. studies have thrived, with many critics contributing in the last four decades, it is also true that close readings of the author's relation to and revision of the classics are scarce. In light of the scant critical attention H.D.'s revisionist myth-making has received, this article seeks to advance the efforts to unbury the modernist poet's revisionist legacy. For this purpose, I will analyse one of the most compelling instances of H.D.'s work in this respect, i.e. her lyric poem “Eurydice” (1925). The investigation will be divided into three distinct parts: firstly, I will offer an overview of H.D.'s special relation with the classics in order to thoroughly appreciate the poet's ground-breaking response to classical myth; secondly, moving on to the examination of the poem itself and by means of employing a myth-criticism interpretative approach, I will study the manner in which H.D. constructs her female figure and the extent to which her recreation departs from the classical source, thus proposing a different version of the well-known myth; thirdly, having examined the poem, I will trace the revisionary tactics

—of form and content— H.D. makes use of in the construction of her mythological woman. For the most part, the scrutiny will reveal that H.D.'s manner of re-elaborating myth is highly innovative and uncanonical, as she does so from a female perspective, hence re-shaping the established classical tradition. Ultimately, this essay will bring attention to the necessity of acknowledging (and studying) H.D.'s pioneering and revisionist poetic legacy.

## **2. H.D.: "An Inspired Anachronism"**

Hilda Doolittle —henceforth, H.D.— has been called "an inspired anachronism", "a Greek reborn into modern times" (Swann 1962: 1): she devoted her entire professional career to the reading, translation, imitation and recreation of the classics as a means of developing herself as a writer. H.D.'s extensive output of poems, memoirs and novels is thus characterised by a pervasive Hellenism which evolved in accordance with the shifting conditions of her life and art, but remained her constant idiom (Murnaghan 2009: 63). However, to be a woman classicist, even in the early twentieth century when improvements in the provision of education for women had already taken place (Winterer 2007: 71), constituted a highly arduous undertaking for two main reasons: on the one hand, twentieth-century women with classical aspirations suffered from what Gilbert and Gubar have termed "the anxiety of authorship" as a result of the inexistence of female precursors from which to derive support (1979: 49) and, on the other hand, they experienced feelings of inferiority due to the inadequacy of their classical education and their inability to catch up with the knowledge to which their male counterparts had been exposed from a very young age (Hurst 2006: 7).

H.D. enjoyed an intensive classical education,<sup>2</sup> and yet, as her biographer Barbara Guest has pointed out, the poet did experience some of these difficulties during her educational years. Despite the writer's initial enthusiasm to enter Bryn Mawr, she withdrew from the college after three semesters. Her motives for leaving are not certain; nonetheless, the catalyst may have been her struggle against the authority of her parents (they wanted her to choose a different career path), illness, poor grades, a sense of inadequacy or her problematic relationship with her father, who forbade H.D.'s romantic relationship with Ezra Pound (Guest 1984: 86). Therefore, even though she was not barred from studying the classics, her incapacity to meet the required standards and thus to conform to expectations led her to a distressing state of anguish, estrangement and negativity. She would not be Marie Curie, as her father had wished, nor a schoolteacher, as her mother had been (Showalter et al. 1993: 85). Except for a brief enrolment during 1908-1909 at the University of Pennsylvania's College Course for Teachers, her formal

education had reached its end (85). Interestingly, these difficulties did not prevent H.D. from infusing all her literary production with a pervasive and ever-developing Hellenism (Guest 1984: 8-10).

Insofar as entering the classics entailed confronting the issue of cultural authority, since knowledge of the classics, previously barred to women and certain males, was in the words of Rachel DuPlessis, “the sigil of knowledge and authority, the main portal of the liberal humanist hegemony” (1986: 17), H.D. was able to assume a degree of critical cultural authority by selecting subjects and methods which directly challenged the prescriptive, normative models of classical modernism. H.D. “was the woman against male culture, the mystic against the scholars, and the intuitive supporter of all who pierced the word to its spirit” (18).<sup>3</sup> From this it follows that the character of H.D.’s classicism was marginal not only because of her problematic status as a woman poet, but also because she deviated from the classical line proposed by the founding fathers of modernism, adhering to a tradition which was, at the turn of the century, branded as “effeminate”, impure and non-canonical. In an effort to build a space of her own in a field which appeared as exclusionary, elitist, regulatory and masculinist, H.D., similar to other twentieth-century women classicists, approached the classical text as a site in which to contest and subvert the dominant understandings of classical material, developing, in the process, the poetics of an opposition.

More specifically, H.D. was prompted by a desire to put an end to female silence as a characteristic of classical literature; she sought to rewrite the traditional canon of classical literature from a woman’s perspective. With this in mind, H.D. set out to reconstruct written traces of the female presence in the main genres of the classical world. Her goal was clear: to put women’s hitherto untold stories, motives and thoughts at the centre of the narration. Indeed, H.D.’s lifelong ambition to “re-invoke”, “re-create” what has been “scattered in the shards/ men tread upon” (H.D. 1983: 303) materialised in her revisionist poems, which configured a literary landscape in which women’s lives and voices could be heard. In what follows, I will examine what is, arguably, one of the most powerful examples of H.D.’s oppositional and revisionist practice, one which emerged from the poet’s “revisionary” seeing and which inexorably came to challenge the very foundations of myth.

Before starting the analysis, one thing should be made clear. H.D. has a revisionist attitude towards myth, and she presents classical themes from a new, female perspective. Yet, her innovations, revisions and remaking of myth need to be considered within the general modernist agenda to “Make it New!” H.D. belongs to the great modernist tradition that renewed poetic language; indeed, she forged close ties with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Together with them, she

would discuss both the work of others and the poems which they themselves had begun to write or translate (Showalter et al. 1993: 85; Swann 1962: 45). In this manner, they read and examined the Latin and Greek poets, Shakespeare, Balzac, Swedenborg, Swinburne, Ibsen, Shaw, William Morris, and others (Debo 2012: 34; Showalter et al. 1993: 85). This collaborative exposure to the classical sources influenced her thinking about classicism and about writing in general, and helped shape her literary career (Debo 2012: 34). What is more, upon reading her earliest poems, Ezra Pound described H.D. as "the perfect imagist", and her writings as "pure Greek" (1913: 205), thus solemnising her position as the most prominent exponent of Imagism. In a letter to Harriet Monroe, the founder and editor of the Chicago based magazine *Poetry*, Pound referred to H.D.'s poems "Hermes of the Ways", "Orchard" and "Epigram" in the following laudatory terms: "I've had luck again, and am sending you some *modern* stuff by an American, I say modern, for it is in the laconic speech of the Imagistes, even if the subject is classic" (Paige 1971: 11, emphasis in original). Furthermore, in the Vorticist manifesto *Blast* (1914), it was again H.D.'s poem "Oread" which Pound selected as a paradigmatic example of the Vorticist aesthetic. Pound effectively introduced H.D. into the modernist literary scene, providing her with the indispensable confidence that would later in her career help her to reshape original classical sources.

Finally, it is also important to mention that, during her time in London, H.D. fully immersed herself in the study of antiquity: she would spend her mornings at the British Museum Reading Room painstakingly perusing volume after volume. In the evenings, she would meet with other writers and editors of the period, namely D.H. Lawrence, May Sinclair, Brigit Patmore, Amy Lowell and Richard Aldington. By way of these associations, H.D. widened her knowledge and experience in the literary world: she learnt about emerging literary theories, concepts and authors (e.g. the existentialist point of view, the stream of consciousness technique; the impressionistic manner of composition, etc.); she gained an acquaintance with the classical modernism propounded by T.S. Eliot and Pound in their manifestos and, ultimately, she became familiar with the work produced by her contemporaries, participating in discussions which enriched her overall grasp of the classics and of the literary scene in general (Guest 1984: 85).

### 3. Eurydice: "At Least I Have the Flowers of Myself"

As Reid and Rohmann's *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1900s* reveals (1993: 52-80), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book X) constituted the main classical source through which the myth of Orpheus (*Orpheús*) and Eurydice (*Eurydikē*) —which has become one of the most acclaimed and memorable love

stories in Western literature— was disseminated to the Western world. According to this source (Ov. *Met.* X. 1-85), Eurydice, “the newly wedded bride”, was walking through the grass when “a bite on her ankle, from a snake” killed her. Upon knowing the tragic event, the Thracian Orpheus, “the poet of Rhodope”, travelled to the Underworld to “see if he might not move the dead”. Stirred by Orpheus’s tune, Proserpine and Pluto decided to release Eurydice on the condition that Orpheus should not turn “his eyes behind him”, until he had emerged from “the vale of Avernus”. Unhappily, when the couple was “drawing near to the threshold of the upper world”, the poet, “afraid [that] she was no longer there, and eager to see her”, glanced back, and, as a result, Eurydice was immediately “dropped back” to the Underworld where she was doomed to remain forever.<sup>4</sup> Her hope shattered, Eurydice articulated no recriminations whatsoever, merely muttering “Vale!” (“Farewell!”) before slipping back to the Underworld.

Ovid dedicates two final lines to Eurydice before continuing with the narration of Orpheus’s ensuing exploits: “Dying a second time, now, there was no complaint to her husband (what, then, could she complain of, except that she had been loved?)” (Ov. *Met.* X. 1-85). The Roman poet thus shows no interest in acknowledging Eurydice’s state of mind after having been propelled back to Hades; what is more, from Ovid’s perspective, it appears that Eurydice has no right to feel dejected and that the only “appropriate feeling” she has a right to experience is that of gratitude for Orpheus’s immense sacrifice. Remarkably, the narrative abandons Eurydice as a character in order to subsequently draw attention to Orpheus’s quandary after having lost Eurydice forever. From this it follows that Ovid’s preoccupation for his characters is gendered, and Eurydice’s feelings are, as a result of that, deemed unimportant. Taking their cue from Ovid’s narration, successive classical authors accepted Ovid’s unconcerned disregard of Eurydice’s plight.<sup>5</sup> Still more relevant is the fact that modern recreations of the legend, adhering to the model set by the classics, still pay no heed to Eurydice’s thoughts and experiences.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, while most sources provide a detailed account of Orpheus’s suffering, no report is offered about Eurydice’s feelings, this being a void in literary and mythological history that demands to be filled. Ultimately, at the level of what Sword (1989: 408) terms ‘symbolic baggage’, and as a direct corollary of the treatment Eurydice has received, this heroine has consistently been denied meaningful archetypal significance (and thus her symbolic baggage is scarce), while Orpheus has come to embody universal values of life, death, love and art.<sup>7</sup>

In view of this lack of representation of Eurydice’s thoughts and emotions, numerous twentieth-century female writers endeavouring to find a space of their own in the overwhelmingly-male classical tradition set out to explore the Orpheus and Eurydice story from the point of view of the woman.<sup>8</sup> Rejecting the well-

exploited Eurydicean role as forgiving wife, abandoned lover, patient and selfless muse, and death-filled archetype, they carefully examined Eurydice's thinking and feelings and offered this mythological woman a voice with which to challenge the dominant renderings and readings of her being and her story (Sword 1989: 413). H.D.'s 1925 poem "Eurydice"<sup>9</sup> constitutes one of the main twentieth-century contestations to the canonical version of the Eurydice myth, this poem being a key instance of H.D.'s project of appropriating lost female voices of antiquity with the purpose of telling stories which have remained untold. In contrast to Ovid's narration where Eurydice is relegated to a supporting role, in H.D.'s reconstruction Eurydice is placed as the heroine at the centre of the story, while Orpheus is demoted to a secondary position. Moreover, H.D. wrote "Eurydice" as a dramatic monologue, allowing her heroine to talk in the first person singular; thus, arguably for the first time in literary history, Eurydice is granted a voice with which to recount her own story. Regarding Eurydice's newly-acquired voice, it should be mentioned that although H.D. adheres to Ovid's narrative pattern, the interpretation of each event related in the classical text varies by putting the female eye, concerns and voice at the centre of the tale. Overall, the narrative displacement to the "other side" of the story—that is to say, to the non-canonical, Eurydician side—alerts the reader to the fact that disparate causes and different responses occur in the same Ovidian plot (DuPlessis 1985: 109).

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As indicated above, one of the main concerns of H.D.'s poem is Eurydice's long-disregarded suffering after her condemnation to Hell by Orpheus's imprudent turn. Fittingly, the poem is divided into eight stanzas which follow Eurydice's evolving emotions and thoughts subsequent to Orpheus's backward glance. Section one begins with Eurydice addressing Orpheus from her new abode, the Underworld; she is filled with rage, resentment and bitterness at her lover's failed attempt to rescue her:

So you have swept me back,  
I who could have walked with the live souls  
above the earth,  
I who could have slept among the live flowers  
at last[.]<sup>10</sup> (H.D. 1983: 51)

Eurydice's bitter resentment at having looked forward to release and then being forcibly returned to death is immense. She has all along been at the mercy of others—first, the gods determined her fate, and then Orpheus sealed it—and the complete lack of choice has enraged her. Whereas H.D.'s Eurydice never blames the gods for her decease, she accuses Orpheus of "arrogance" and "ruthlessness" in trying to outwit the natural order of things: "so for your arrogance/ and your ruthlessness/ I am swept back" (H.D. 1983: 51). In stark opposition to the passive

Eurydice of Ovid's poem, H.D.'s heroine, rather than submissively accepting her fate, cries defiance against Orpheus and his oppressive power over her own destiny. What is more, Eurydice rejects the widespread image of Orpheus as the faithful lover whose glance back signals both "his ambitious aspiration and his human imperfection" (Sword 1989: 414). Orpheus's backward glance, this Eurydice reassesses, is more an act of callous greed than one of love or passionate need (414). Eurydice further relates that she had grown accustomed to the "dead lichens" and the "dead cinders upon moss of ash" (H.D. 1983: 51), and that she was at last in the process of acquiescing to her new-found situation (51); yet, Orpheus's arrival had aroused the prospect of regaining life "above the earth", an expectation which soon evaporated (51). Having twice lost life upon the earth, Eurydice confesses "I am broken at last" (51), which points to her fragile emotional state, and to the great impact Orpheus's actions have on her. Ultimately, it is worthwhile noting that even though the poem follows the classical plot sequence, by shifting to the woman's point of view H.D. arouses our sympathy not for Orpheus, who has lost his wife twice, but rather for Eurydice, who has twice lost life upon the earth (Dodd 1992: 10).

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In the midst of her resentment towards Orpheus, in section two, Eurydice earnestly looks for the answers she has never been offered. She demands to know what indeed was Orpheus's motivation in turning around, for the familiar explanation (his great love) no longer suffices for her. The enraged Eurydice of the first section now adopts a critical attitude to inquire into the real reason that compelled Orpheus to glimpse back:

why did you turn  
 why did you glance back?  
 why did you hesitate for that moment?  
 why did you bend your face  
 caught with the flame of the upper earth,  
 above my face? (H.D. 1983: 52)

She continues to confront Orpheus asking him "what was it that crossed my face/ with the light from yours/ and your glance?/ what was it you saw in my face?/ the light of your own face,/ the fire of your own presence?" (H.D. 1983: 52). In these lines, Eurydice suggests that Orpheus turned back only for fear that, in losing his muse, he would also lose his chance to become a great poet. H.D.'s heroine realises that Orpheus's descent into the Underworld was, rather than an act of true love—which is how it has been traditionally glossed—an act of selfishness since he was interested in her not as a lover but as a muse. Eurydice is, indeed, accusing Orpheus of ruthlessly "seeking to regain her in order to reappropriate her presence as a muse" (DuPlessis 1985: 70). As the critic Margaret Bruzelius has posited, in this



poem H.D. questions the notion of an all-powerful (implicitly male) artistic gaze whose gain must necessarily come at the expense of the object-muse (1998: 455). By giving enraged speech to the object of the male gaze, H.D. challenges the main assumptions promulgated by the workings of the artistic gaze, namely that the creation of art only takes place within a hierarchical paradigm in which a passive (and female) object, exposed before the artist's active (and male) eye, submits to the power of the latter.

Such a notion of the artistic (male) gaze is further developed in the last part of this section, when Eurydice asserts that in her face the Thracian poet sees only the "reflex of the earth/ hyacinth color/ caught from the raw fissure in the rock/ where the light struck" (H.D. 1983: 52). Through her mouthpiece, H.D. is hinting at the idea that Eurydice existed for Orpheus only as a reflection of the earth, a realm which she has now irrevocably lost by being looked at by the man (Bruzelius 1998: 455). In addition, it is suggested that Orpheus's relation to Eurydice was based exclusively and inexorably on the woman-as-mirror (muse-object), a relation wherein the woman continued living only insofar as she fulfilled her role as an object of contemplation, as a reflection of the earth and of Orpheus himself. Interestingly, Eurydice's abandonment by her husband has enabled her to comprehend a situation later explained by Virginia Woolf in her celebrated essay *A Room of One's Own*: "women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (1998: 45). Orpheus found the self-confidence he needed for his grand mission as a poet in the satisfying mirroring interaction with Eurydice; indeed, he depended upon the woman's praises (hence women as magnifying mirrors) to feel at ease with himself. As many other mythological female figures such as Helen, Medea or Iphigenia, Eurydice was relegated to the object position, her agency curtailed to that of Orpheus's mirror image: deprived of the agency to create, the only role available to her was that of being the object on which the artist (i.e. Orpheus) shed his creative light. This situation is reversed in H.D.'s "Eurydice", as the poet has given the woman —traditionally, the object-muse— a creative voice of her own.

In the middle sections of the poem (sections three and four), Eurydice laments what she has lost as a result of Orpheus's fatal backward glance. Significantly, among the pleasures of the upper world she lacks in Hades, Eurydice does not refer to Orpheus's love. This is relevant since, in this manner, the poem deviates from one of the most poignant and renowned stories of heterosexual loyalty and love in Western culture. What she does allude to is the very presence of the living earth, described in imagery of beautiful flowers and intense colours (Dodd 1992: 10). For Eurydice, flowers symbolise the epitome of earthly existence, an existence

for which she longs and which, nonetheless, is now beyond her intrinsic grasp; all life has left her:

Fringe upon fringe  
of blue crocuses,  
crocuses, walled against blue of themselves,  
blue of that upper earth,  
blue of the depth upon depth of flowers,  
lost[.] (H.D. 1983: 53)

In section five, H.D.'s heroine returns to the notion of the artist as someone who controls the light and who has, unlike the muse-object, a fully self-governing presence: "you who have your own light,/ who are to yourself a presence,/ who need no presence" (H.D. 1983: 54). As a result of her abandonment by Orpheus, Eurydice seems to have gained a deep understanding of the workings of the artistic (male) gaze. Towards the end of section five, after having bemoaned the loss of her world, Eurydice becomes determined to make the best of her lot. Once she has expressed (and hence liberated) her feelings of intense anger towards Orpheus, Eurydice is ready to move a step forward in her emotional growth and thus abandon hostility in search of more useful feelings that allow for self-actualisation. In the remaining three stanzas, Eurydice conveys her renewed faith and confidence in herself and in the Underworld. Such a transformation from helplessness and powerlessness to female power and self-assertion provides the poem's turning point:

yet for all your arrogance  
and your glance,  
I tell you this:  
such loss is no loss,  
such terror, such coils and strands and pitfalls  
of blackness,  
such terror  
is no loss[.] (H.D. 1983: 54)

Furthermore, these lines represent what the critic DuPlessis has termed "a thematic displacement" (1985: 109), that is, a reversal of the values which have historically been regarded as good, valuable and legitimate. The "loss" of the earth (the light, the man, and other "live souls") is redefined as "no loss" by the woman herself, who declares that she has attained a better position in Hades than Orpheus has achieved on earth— "Hell is no worse than your earth" (H.D. 1983: 54). As can be observed, "Eurydice" operates on the opposition established between two separate visual levels— the upper world has flowers, colour, light and Orpheus, and the Underworld has blackness, red sparks, "colorless" light which is "worse than black", and Eurydice (Bruzelius 1998: 448). The woman is proposing a

change of paradigms —from male to female, from heterosexual love to self-love, from the upper-world to the Underworld, from light to darkness— in which the other side (which had previously been discarded) is once and for all valorised, put into the centre, made powerful and significant (DuPlessis 1985: 71). This is the reason why critics such as Helen Sword have perceptively contended that H.D.'s poem executes an Orphic "turn" of its own, a "Eurydicean" turn away from patriarchal dogmas (1989: 414). In fact, in an act of defiance against her oppressor and the society that has relegated her to silence, Eurydice has appropriated Hell —the negative space of marginality into which the woman has been forced— as a power source. In the Underworld, Eurydice claims to have gained fervour and creative light of her own, the light of which she had been deprived in the upper world:

Against the black  
I have more fervour  
than you in all the splendour of that place,  
against the blackness  
and the stark grey  
I have more light[.] (H.D. 1983: 54)

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Eurydice has reappropriated the space to which she has been condemned by turning it into a place of self-creation. She has decided to reign in Hades and turn to her own self for inspiration. In the words of DuPlessis, Eurydice, locked in a space she cannot escape, has declared "the colourless and contingent hell of the poem as the sufficient space of poetic creation, not the arena of rejection, negation, and loss, but of the splendor of her essential life" (1985: 411). Eurydice has been forsaken by Orpheus's attempt to rescue her, but she eventually regains her autonomy in response to this act, transforming the place of otherness and marginalisation into a powerful realm. Now, although embracing (and celebrating) the space to which she has been confined constitutes an act of indisputable courage and vigour, it should not be forgotten that Eurydice is there against her will. The Underworld is the epitome of a space normatively constructed as "feminine", and it is into this space Eurydice is inexorably hurled. The mysterious Other as a feminine space, rooted in male clichés of the feminine as a dark, unknowable continent<sup>11</sup> and the masculine as a light, knowable land, is a restricting space for women, which offers no room for deviation.<sup>12</sup> Thus, although Eurydice's response is subversive and to some extent liberating, it does not constitute a solution in its own right, as she remains imprisoned within the boundaries carefully designed by a patriarchal society to contain her.

What is undeniable, however, is Eurydice's emotional growth and enlightened understanding of the dynamics of her relationship with Orpheus. Having definitely

abandoned the mad rage of the opening sections, in the final movement of the poem she again asserts herself, declaring her reliance on her own personhood and at last feeling safe from external intrusions on the part of Gods and mankind alike:

At least I have the flowers of myself,  
and my thoughts, no god  
can take that;  
I have the fervour of myself for a presence  
and my own spirit for light[.] (H.D. 1983: 55)

With this statement Eurydice seems in fact to have become Orpheus, but a female Orpheus, who is to herself “a presence” and who has light of her own (H.D. 1983: 52). Eurydice’s presence is a powerful one, capable of illuminating the darkest of all places, i.e. the Underworld. Notwithstanding the fact that the woman can no longer revel in the external beauty of the earth, she will always own “the flowers of [her]self”, which symbolise her inner and all-transformative light— a light she employs to illuminate the place into which she has been swept. Eurydice’s death has offered her the opportunity to discover her self-worth, which she previously had not completely appreciated. The apocalyptic description of the final lines with its imagery of hell as a red rose opening —“before I am lost,/ hell must open like a red rose/ for the dead to pass” (55)— further endorses the idea that Eurydice’s “flowers of myself” are powerful blooms indeed (Sword 1989: 414); ultimately, the motif of the blooming rose mirrors Eurydice’s resurrection as a self-reliant woman.

In summary, “Eurydice” constitutes an exploration of the woman’s tumultuous emotional development as she comes to terms with what has just taken place and adapts to her newfound independence in Hades’ abode. Her feelings of intense anger in the first sections are superseded by more useful feelings of self-assertion, independence and resolution in the final stanzas of the poem. The poem thus traces Eurydice’s self-actualisation from an enraged, helpless wife to an autonomous, powerful woman who is able to embrace and rejoice in the marginal place she has forcefully been swept into, making this place her own, and ascribing to it the positive qualities she inherently possesses and of which she was hitherto unaware, i.e. “the flowers of her own”. Eurydice’s emotional growth and acquired understanding of the dynamics of her relation with Orpheus ultimately reinforce the poem’s subversive nature, since H.D. has traced a story in which Eurydice’s gains are not dependent on Orpheus or the gods, but on herself as a woman and creator of light. Similarly, H.D. rejects the portrayal of Eurydice as the passive object of her heroic husband’s quest and makes her stand as a figure who uses her own voice, as Bruzelius puts it, to “successfully articulate a vibrant female reality that contests the dominant masculine worldview” (1998: 448). Remarkably,

H.D.'s heroine effectuates a turn of her own, a Eurydician turn, as she rejects the former representations of her self and her story through which she had been confined to the role of subservient and dependent wife, thereby becoming a different, more outspoken and, above all, self-sufficient Eurydice. Most of all, H.D.'s poetic landscape has opened up a space for the drawing and re-drawing, for the picturing and the creation of a story that has all along remained untold, repressed and disregarded.

As a final point, H.D. infuses Eurydice, a dead woman and a lost soul, with consciousness, thus succeeding in giving shape to the intangible, to the indescribable, to the elusive. H.D.'s revisionism is thus of considerable scope: she re-writes myth from a gendered perspective and, at the same time, she dares to address the complex issues of existence, experience and the afterlife. H.D. faces and gives voice to the unsayable: Is there an afterlife? Is life worth living?

#### **4. Tactics of Revisionary Mythopoesis: Towards a Poetics of Displacement**

Having examined the poem in great detail, it remains to be seen how the poet succeeds in deviating from the classic line in crafting an alternative story and heroine. H.D. resorts to what I call the 'tactics of revisionary mythopoesis', that is, narrative strategies which distance H.D.'s poem from the dominant account of the myth and that serve the poet to contest the established classical tradition. Three revisionary techniques are deployed in "Eurydice": the selection of a canonical story and heroine and the telling of such a story from a non-canonical perspective, the writing of an anti-war and anti-heroic version of the myth, and the evocation of a different Eurydice, one which transcends and surpasses the traditional conception of this mythological woman as the faithful wife. As shall be seen, these techniques constitute a novel manner of understanding myth, one which directly challenges its classical conception.

To begin with, it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that H.D. recreates an Ovidian heroine in "Eurydice"; she thus chooses to rewrite a hegemonic and time-honoured narrative. Undoubtedly, the union between Orpheus and Eurydice is a constitutive story of Western culture, one which is deeply ingrained in the collective imagery and which has been the object of recreation throughout centuries of literature and mythology. Thus, to assume cultural authority as a woman poet, H.D. throws her revisionist dart at a founding story highly relevant in the configuration of Western societies. As has been shown, in her revisitation H.D. does not depart completely from the canonical narrative and thereby create a completely different story; rather, she introduces certain innovations and

subversions into the Ovidian story that ultimately challenge the well-recognised myth. According to De Certeau, “a tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (1984: xix). H.D.’s revisionary tactics depend on adopting “well-accepted attitudes” and, at the same time, introducing “subversions, deviations” (32). By means of this combination, marginally-positioned people, “without leaving the place where they have no choice but to live and which lay down its laws for them, establish within it a degree of plurality and creativity” (30). Accordingly, H.D.’s tactical proposition constitutes a weapon of everyday life (in De Certeau’s definition of the term) through which she recomposes one of the most fundamental places of resistance—the classical literary tradition.

While H.D. chooses to rewrite a canonical story with a traditional heroine, she relates the story from a non-canonical perspective, i.e. the woman’s point of view. The woman in “Eurydice” is offered a voice with which to tell her own story and, in this manner, contest the dominant renderings and readings of her being and her experience. In contrast to Ovid’s narration in which Eurydice appears as a silent figure relegated to a supporting role, in H.D.’s reconstruction of the myth, the mythological woman is placed as the heroine at the centre of her narrative, while the man is relegated to a secondary position. By way of a slight shift in perspective and voice, H.D. presents an alternative destabilising perspective of the well-known episode. Furthermore, it is possible to observe how this narrative displacement to the ‘other side’ of the story conditions its overall interpretation. The change of perspective reveals that the new interpretation of each event narrated in the classical text differs by putting the female eye at its centre. It is only when Eurydice’s line of reasoning is explored that the reader is able to realise that, for her, Orpheus’s rescue attempt was an act of selfishness. Without the woman’s point of view, half of the story is missing. Most important of all, H.D.’s poem constitutes an argument for the necessity of reconfiguring a classical literary tradition that does not speak for the woman so that it lets the woman speak for herself. H.D. is suggesting that the woman’s voice (Eurydice’s) cannot be replaced by the man’s, owing to the fact that when this happens, misunderstandings and misrepresentations ensue. Thus, mythological women require a voice of their own to speak their own story. And this is what H.D. accomplishes not only in “Eurydice”, but also in many other poems where she gives voice to Homer’s and Ovid’s voiceless heroines.<sup>13</sup>

The repercussions of letting the woman speak are multiple, since to bring to the surface “the other side” of a myth is to contest the dominant masculine worldview, that is, the values a culture assumes to be universal, natural or archetypal.<sup>14</sup> While most people are aware of the dominant side of the story, which is to say Orpheus’s plight after losing his wife, Eurydice’s emotions when she realises that she has been

doomed to Hell for a second time have not been explored (at least not to the degree to which the story of Orpheus has been examined). And H.D.'s revisionist poem attempts precisely to fill this void in literary history. Accordingly, when H.D. re-enters myth, she does so from the perspective of, to use DuPlessis's words, "taboo, despised, marginalised" (1985: 27) individuals who articulate opinions systematically disregarded in the classical accounts. In this manner, the understanding of well-known events is not just destabilised, but also potentially delegitimised, as prevailing interpretations are challenged in a process of renegotiation of the rules previously regarded as legitimate and true. As an illustration, in "Eurydice" the woman's critical view challenges the archetypal representation of Orpheus as the faithful lover. He is presented as a selfish artist uninterested in the woman and, in this fashion, the normative ideals of marriage and romantic love are undermined. The displacement to the other side of the story is, therefore, conducive to the realignment of narrative elements: disparate causes and different responses occur in the same classical plot; hitherto unknown motivations and resolutions are unveiled; new sequences and material which rupture the story-as-usual and dissent from social norms are introduced and sympathies towards previously-disregarded characters are aroused.

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At this point it is worth noting that, in her recreation, not only does H.D. enact a shift of perspective, but she also effectuates a shift of subject matter. The modernist poet removes the focus from Greek heroic and epic culture, putting emphasis on neither war nor adventure (central for an epic poet) but on other feelings hitherto disregarded by classical authors (DuPlessis 1985: 19-20). Accordingly, the narrative core of *Metamorphoses* is in H.D.'s reworking omitted and, instead, the woman's emotional development, desires and needs occupy a pivotal position. H.D. is more interested in examining Eurydice's evolving emotions and thoughts following Orpheus's backward glance than in recounting the minute particulars of her confinement in the Underworld. While classical accounts—and subsequent recreations—tend to opt for chronicling the exploits of great mythic (male) heroes, recording in detail their battles and adventures, H.D. puts the stress on the woman's internal struggle, the product of which is emotional growth, thus enacting an interpretative displacement from Greek heroic culture. In view of this, it is my contention that, by bringing attention to the woman's feelings and emotions, H.D. is indeed proposing an anti-heroic and anti-war version of myth—a female approach to mythology or, in Pater's terms, an "Ionian" approach (1980: 162). Ultimately, the change of perspective—from man to woman—in conjunction with the change of subject matter—from adventure and battle to inner feelings—operates to inscribe H.D.'s work within an alternative, underground tradition of classical literature, one which develops in defiance of the established classical canon.

Another thing H.D. does in her poem is to offer a different portrayal of Eurydice, one which greatly differs from that proffered by Ovid. To the classical poet's submissive Eurydice, H.D. opposes a woman who is able to overcome the rage she feels at having been betrayed by Orpheus and to move forward in her search for self-reliance and agency. In a deliberate attempt to transcend the plain and limiting rendering of Eurydice as the faithful wife, the modernist poet fashions a woman beyond the archetype, a particularised and complex Eurydice who, as a result of her newly found state —of independence, abandonment, confusion and grief— sets out to re-assess the dynamics upon which her relationship with Orpheus relied. H.D.'s poem shows the process by which the 'I', which represents the voice of a strong female figure, embarks on a hermeneutic quest to reread herself, to reinterpret the dominant story that has confined her, to re-consider her role as woman, wife, lover, etc. The heroine in "Eurydice" becomes argumentative and insistently requests answers from Orpheus in order to gain a further understanding of who she is and of her story. Eurydice demands that Orpheus tell her the reason why he glanced back, condemning her to a life in Hades. H.D.'s heroine thus assumes the role of reader, interpreter and translator of her own life, story and self: she is engaged in a project of unearthing who she was and of coming to terms with her past self in order to subsequently plunge into the mission of reshaping and rewriting herself. Accordingly, her quest is not for heroism or fame, but for authentic self-definition, for redefining and rewriting a self which, albeit internally felt, has been externally constructed and circumscribed. Ultimately, H.D.'s revised Eurydice departs from the traditional representation of woman as a static, symbolic object of a quest, displayed to be seen and interpreted from the outside, since she is a paradigmatic instance of woman-as-subject, actively engaged in an individual quest for identity.

The above tactics of revisionary mythopoesis set out to propose a new manner of approaching myth, both at the level of form and content, thus challenging its canonical conception. In fact, H.D. forges for herself an oppositional poetics with which to contest dominant representations of gender in the classical world.

## 5. Conclusion

The objective of this article has been to explore H.D.'s largely-unrecognised practice of revisionist myth-making, acknowledging in so doing the poet's contribution to furthering an alternative tradition of classical literature. I decided to focus on an examination of one of the most relevant examples of H.D.'s revisionist practice, i.e. her lyric poem "Eurydice". After having offered a general idea of the poet's relation with the classics, I set out to examine the poem itself,



concentrating specifically on the manner in which H.D. crafts her mythological woman and on the degree to which she deviates from Ovid's account, hence producing a non-canonical version of the well-known myth. Lastly, I have traced the revisionary tactics —of form and content— the poet makes use of in the creation of her Eurydician story. "Eurydice" has served as an example of the growing revisionist dialectic in H.D.'s use of classical materials.

At this point, it is of the utmost relevance to emphasise that H.D.'s project of revisionist myth-making necessarily exceeds this article's selection and scope: there is plenty of material for future lines of investigation. In "Eurydice" H.D. explores a very specific aspect of the mythological woman, namely the woman as lover; however, the author's repertoire includes many other female mythological and historical figures that assume other roles traditionally assigned to the realm of womanhood. For instance, her short lyric poems "Circe" (1921) and "Cassandra" (1924) focus on the woman as a witch (a figure already hinted at in H.D.'s "Calypso"), and offers an original interpretation of such a classical figure, considerably challenging the symbolic meaning the figure of the witch carries, both in antiquity and in modern times.<sup>15</sup> Another representation H.D. recasts is that of the mother: in poems such as "Demeter" (1921), "Leda" (1921) and "Thetis" (1921), H.D. suggests a reading of woman as a very different kind of mother to that traditionally represented.<sup>16</sup>

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H.D. devoted her entire professional career to reformulating the trace of the female presence in antiquity: she looked back to ancient women writers for inspiration, she read the works of nineteenth-century women classicists for guidance and, eventually, she wrote about mythological and historical women. All the ever-questioning, artistic, intellectual heroes of her epic and lyric poetry and novels were women. As a woman writing about women, H.D. explored the untold half of the human story, and by that act she enhanced and changed the classical tradition. In her endeavour to re-imagine and reconceive the lives and experiences of women in the ancient world, H.D. ended up crafting a woman's mythology in which women's stories and experiences were not covered over or made absent, but became the centre of a vibrant female reality. The study of "Eurydice" has brought to light H.D.'s revisionist pattern of interaction with tradition, one which is grounded on the re-writing of myth from a female perspective.

As a final point, H.D. was successful in supplying subsequent female classicists with a revisionist pattern of myth to follow and, in this respect, she stands as an influential precursor for the many women writers who, from the mid-twentieth century on, have retold myths from the perspectives of women and other marginalised figures, articulating viewpoints and values that are not fully explored in the male-authored versions we have inherited from antiquity.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1.</sup> Of particular interest are the essays indexed by MLA and the many books published about H.D., as well as the new editions of her work. I particularly recommend work by Morris (1986 and 1991), McCabe (2000), Detloff (2002), Bryant and Eaverly (2007), Vetter (2010 and 2017), Debo and Vetter (2011), Debo (2012) and Walsh (2015), to name some of the most representative.

<sup>2.</sup> In 1901 H.D. started attending the Miss Elizabeth Gordon's School (Friedman 1990: 32) and, a year later, she enrolled at Friends' Central School, a Quaker preparatory school ranked among the best-performing academic, athletic, and artistic schools, highly respected by the elite colleges for the quality of its education (Showalter et al. 1993: 85). Having successfully completed her secondary studies, H.D.'s father, liberal in his beliefs about the education of women, encouraged his daughter to enter Bryn Mawr, the college that trained the era's New Women to excel in fields hitherto reserved for men, and that offered an educational programme modelled upon those of men's schools (Winterer 2007: 191). H.D.'s having been granted access to Bryn Mawr positions her as one of the first twentieth-century women who profited from the changes in the educational provision for women that were being implemented at the turn of the century, changes which resulted from the nineteenth-century struggle to achieve classical parity (Guest 1984: 8-10).

<sup>3.</sup> H.D. has been associated with the "classical" as much as any other modern poet; nonetheless, her Hellenism is not situated within the range of variants propounded by the most prominent figures of the modern period (Gregory 1997: 22-40). Concerning H.D.'s reading of direct classical sources, she developed an interest in non-canonical authors, namely female classicists and critical male figures. With regard to her exposure to non-literary discourses, the new findings in the field of archaeology informed the manner in which she described the ancient world. Her reading of the anthropological studies of the period, especially those of Jane

Harrison, awakened in her an interest in the occult, the mysteries and primitive religion. H.D.'s encounter with Freud and his novel ideas about myth further shaped her view of myth's spiritual dimension (Friedman 1981: 157-206). Her early affiliations with non-canonical classical authors (i.e. Sappho and Euripides) and untraditional ideas (i.e. Jane Ellen Harrison, Robert Graves, etc.) marked her variance from the modernist classical line, and thus placed her within an alternative tradition. Overall, H.D.'s early allegiance to a pattern of cultural iconographical resistance foreshadowed the path she would take as a female classicist.

<sup>4.</sup> Different authors across time and space have interpreted Orpheus's turning back in a different light, which accounts for the productivity, richness and malleability of mythical sources. Thus, while some writers have emphasised Orpheus's great love and sacrifice as well as his internal conundrum regarding a promise made to him by the gods, others have focused on the fatal consequences his backward glance had on Eurydice. For a thorough account of the reception of the Orpheus figure and story in English literature and culture, see Miles (2002).

<sup>5.</sup> See, for instance, Virgil's *Georgics* (IV. 453) (cf. Sword 1989: 408).

<sup>6.</sup> See, for example, Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922) or Maurice Blanchot's *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays* (1981). An exception to this tendency is Rilke's short poem "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes" (1907), which renders Eurydice's subtle and inexpressible anxiety as she follows Orpheus out of Hades.

<sup>7.</sup> Helen Sword asserts that Eurydice is a mythological nobody, as her only obvious "archetypal significance is a negative role, that of woman-as-Other, woman-as-death, the 'dark continent' Freud found so threatening and irresistible" (1989: 408).

<sup>8</sup>. This revisionist practice continues today, one very recent example being Sarah Ruhl's 2003 play *Eurydice*.

<sup>9</sup>. Written during the painful disintegration of her marriage to Richard Aldington, "Eurydice" is included in her first collection of poems *Sea Garden*, a collection which is dominated by imagist practices. "Eurydice," however, lies outside the core of H.D.'s early imagist poetics and has been read as a prelude to the poet's later appropriations of the lost female voice of antiquity (Bruzelius 1998).

<sup>10</sup>. All quotations from H.D.'s poems are from the *Collected Poems 1914-1944* (New York, 1983), to which the page references in the text refer.

<sup>11</sup>. See Freud's "Female Sexuality" (1932) and Lacan's *La sexualité féminine* (1964) for an insight into the postulations of the female as the mysterious Other.

<sup>12</sup>. As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, through this major image of Otherness, men and women escape fully authentic life, since people are expected to fit into prescriptive ontological categories which ultimately limit the possibilities of being and living to a set of already-closed alternatives (1970: 48). Further, de Beauvoir contends that human evolution will only come about through the rupture of dualisms (the gender binary, among others) which problematise the conditions of choice for both genders (65).

<sup>13</sup>. See, for example, "Helen," "Calypso," "Demeter" and *Helen in Egypt* (Friedman 1990: 56).

<sup>14</sup>. As Ostriker phrases it, aligning with "otherness" involves the reevaluation of "social, political, and philosophical values, particularly those most enshrined in occidental literature, such as the glorification of conquest and the faith that the cosmos is —must be— hierarchically ordered with earth and body on the bottom and mind and spirit on the top" (1982: 87).

<sup>15</sup>. The witch's most recurrent role in the Greek and Roman imagination was that of a destructive, emasculating force that challenged the established dogmas. Overall, the witch functioned as a negative model for

proper female behaviour, and classical authors (e.g. Hesiod) tended to portray witches as evil and deceptive beings (for an updated study of the figure of the witch in antiquity, see Stratton and Kalleres 2014). In contrast to such negative readings of the witch, H.D.'s revised Circe is portrayed as the most powerful sorceress on Earth, a sorceress respected by everyone: she controls men —"it was easy enough/ to bend them to my wish,/ [...] It is easy enough to summon them to my feet/ with a thought" (H.D. 1983: 118, 119)—, and the natural elements —"It is easy enough/ to make cedar and white ash fumes/ into palaces/ and to cover the sea-caves/ with ivory and onyx" (120). The figure of the witch has maintained the same connotations in modern times, when this word has usually been applied to any woman who, in one way or another, challenges the social conventions (Ballesteros 2005).

<sup>16</sup>. For instance, in "Demeter" we hear the goddess comment angrily on the conventions through which she is normally portrayed ("Ah they have wrought me heavy/ and great of limb—" ) and reject the male-centred tradition by advocating the recuperation of the mother: "Enough of the lightening/ enough of the tales that speak/ of the death of the mother" (H.D. 1983: 113). At the end of the poem, Demeter turns to Persephone and contrasts her own strong maternal arms, which tend and protect her beloved daughter, with the grasping arms of Hades: "Ah, strong were the arms that took/ (ah, evil the heart and graceless),/ but the kiss was less passionate" (115).

<sup>17</sup>. Some of the most prominent examples include Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood, Rita Dove, Linda Pastan, Adrienne Rich, Judy Grahn (of whom the last two have been especially clear about H.D.'s importance for their own revisionist, feminist, and lesbian poetics).

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