CHAPTER 5

The Double Consciousness of Modernism

In the last chapter, I explored enigmatical poetics in Ahren Warner's 'Nervometer' and James Byrne's poems that are situated on the 'cusp' between mainstream and 'innovative' writing.[1] I now turn to explore the legacies of modernism in relation to two poets who have been categorised differently in the bifurcation of the 'poetry wars'. Despite his indebtedness to Brechtian poetics that I analysed in Chapter 3, Tony Harrison's work has never been confused with experimental writing, whereas Sandeep Parmar's poetry is clearly influenced by exponents of the London School: she has 'reviled' the 'Movement tones' of Philip Larkin and 'the small, digestible, miserable [artefacts] of everyday British life'.[2] Yet Harrison and Parmar have both responded to modernist writers' conceptions of myth: James Joyce and T. S. Eliot advanced a 'double consciousness' in their approach to mythic narratives that pervades Harrison's *Metamorpheus* (2000) and Sandeep Parmar's *Eidolon* (2015). Michael Bell argues that this process of counterpointing forms an integral part of modernists' engagement with myth:

> The story of Odysseus, in so far as it is a cultural myth, suggests a timeless structure of experience given to the writer, but Joyce's spatialising holds the archaic structure in *counterpoint* to its modern re-enactment. As the modern *construction* of a world enfolds the older sense of a *given* form, neither has complete meaning by itself.[3]

This double consciousness is not unique to modernism: in the ballad opera *Penelope* from 1728, for example, John Mottley and Thomas Cook set the *Odyssey* in a working-class tavern in London.[4] Nearly a century later, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) formed a version of the Prometheus myth rewritten in the light of scientific discoveries. However, an intensification of double consciousness permeates early twentieth-century literature that inscribes a desire to explore 'the problematics of history under the sign of myth'.[5] Similarly, in Harrison's film-poem *Metamorpheus* there are

structural counterpoints between the Orpheus myth, homosexuality, the modernist poet Geo Milev and the author himself. This mythic 'counterpointing' that underpins Harrison's work indicates that his modernist influences have been neglected – as I argued in Chapter 3 – by critics eager to position his writing as eschewing unnecessary complexity. In *Eidolon*, Parmar similarly interweaves mythic narratives about Helen of Troy with contemporary narratives about a disillusioned model, a duplicitous wife and racism in an American supermarket. Akin to the work of Byrne and Warner, Parmar has produced work that could be labelled as mainstream or 'innovative' poetry, depending on its formal propensities. Section two of *Eidolon*, for example, blends parataxis with the euphonious iambs of 'Helen, dispirited | camera-bound', and juxtaposes these opening lines with the more prosaic 'Helen | fetching the paper from the front lawn in her dressing gown a lot of the time' (p. 10). Indeed, *Metamorpheus* and *Eidolon* would both be symptomatic of metamodernist literature in Andre Furlani, David James and Urmila Seshagiri's understanding of the term, since both poets draw on specific modernist antecedents.[6] However, it is only in Parmar's *Eidolon* that the legacies of 'fractured' writing allow for an enigmatical account of one of the most enigmatic figures in Greek myth.[7]

Modernism and 'Double Consciousness'

As Edith Hall notes, Joyce was not the first author to locate a mythic narrative in 'a contemporary context', but 'it was *Ulysses* that prompted the flood of updated *Odyssey* plots in the fiction and cinema of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries'.[8] In contrast, during the Romantic period myth operates as frozen symbols locked in time that are suitable for incorporation into poetry as solidified emblems. This process is vital to John Keats's 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' and 'Lamia': myth becomes available for intertextual manipulation within literature, but it is not fully 'textualised', as in early twentieth-century literature.[9] In Alfred Tennyson's 'The Lotus-Eaters', the mariners, 'consumed with sharp distress', do not root their conflict in the contemporaneous, unlike Joyce's account of Bloom's ablutions in *Ulysses* (1922).[10] Furthermore, Tennyson's 'Ulysses' is – in the poet's own words – about the struggles of life in general: its structure, akin to the 'companion' poem 'Tithonus', does not depend on a counterpointing between myth and the particularities of Tennyson's suffering after the death of Arthur Hallam. In contrast, one of Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land* (1922) argues that Tiresias unifies the narrative's

personages.[11] Put another way, in Tennyson's poetry we are closer to classical myth than the contemporaneous, whereas, in *The Waste Land*, Tiresias' underworld is re-enacted with the deadened commuters wandering through their daily katabasis. To redeploy Michael McKeon on allegory, there is a fictionalisation of myth in modernist literature that is quantitively different to previous literary ages.[12]

Of course, modernist engagements with myth are not identical: as opposed to *Ulysses*, in which, for example, the rogue drinker is both the imbiber and the Cyclops, Bell criticises the deployment of myth as mere 'scaffolding' in Ezra Pound's work and 'ordering' in Eliot's poetry (p. 122). Yet Tiresias' centrality to part three of *The Waste Land* is surely more than 'ordering': as in *Ulysses*, the personages are both mythical and literal; the typist and suitor are locked into the contemporaneity of gramophones as well as imaginative reconstructions of Tiresias' mythic unity of the sexes. Nevertheless, Bell asks if myth is 'merely a method of enabling the artist to *express* the futility and anarchy' of modern life in Eliot and Pound's work, comparable to the moments when Tennyson expresses stalwartness in the face of suffering in 'Ulysses' (p. 122)? Pound's translation of lines from Book II of the *Odyssey*, for example, locates contiguity with myth in the very first word ('And'), as well as signalling – as Harrison does – the rootedness of his poetry in what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer referred to as 'the basic text of European civilisation'.[13] Pound's use of myth in the *Cantos* (1925) thus seeks to 'find the proper human viewpoint overall' that Bell finds central to modernist literature, the 'Archimedian point from which the whole culture can be judged and improved' (p. 131). However, at the beginning of the *Cantos*, Pound does not establish a double consciousness between myth and the everyday, unlike Joyce in *Ulysses* with the activities of Bloom and Dedalus. Tennyson's 'Ulysses', Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and the initial sections of the *Cantos* have 'complete meaning' in and of themselves without the '*counterpoint* to [myth's] modern enactment' in Tennyson's grief, Shelley's polemics or Pound's lauding of 'the basic text'.[14] In contrast, the legacies of modernist double consciousness are evident throughout Parmar's *Eidolon* and in Harrison's plays such as *The Common Chorus* (1992), which sets Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (441 BCE) in Greenham Common.[15]

In *Eidolon*, Helen of Troy appears as various figures from classical texts that present alternative views of her elusive character, such as Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (415 BCE) and *Helen* (412 BCE), and Stesichorus' *Palinode* (C7th BCE), as well as Helen in the guise of an office worker, a guest on a television show and a downtrodden wife. In Harrison's

film-poem *Prometheus* (1998), the mythic theft of fire enters comparable 'chains' of meaning that encompass Auschwitz crematoria, Pontefract coal and the firebombing of Dresden.[16] Since the publication of Michael Rothberg's influential monograph in 2009, this double consciousness would now be deemed inextricable with unfolding multidirectional and transnational memories.[17] Some of these 'chains' link to egregious ideology: as in Thomas Mann's *Dr Faustus* (1947), Harrison is required to wrestle myth from its fascistic misappropriation. Harrison sets myth against myth – as Bell puts it in relation to *Dr Faustus* – accepting that the rejection of 'regressive political ideologies is to be overcome by a recognition of the mythopoeic basis of [Mann's] own humanism' (p. 2).[18] Although Parmar's collection is less self-conscious than Harrison's work about its engagement with humanism, *Eidolon* also draws approvingly on Virginia Woolf's sense that the Greeks celebrated every moment of existence, at the same time as Parmar critiques Woolf's conception of classical impersonality in relation to traumatised survivors in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*.[19] Parmar argues that Woolf's endorsement of the cold objectivity of the classics is a replication of formal violence: the enslaved women at the end of *The Trojan Women* become the 'blackest coals of mourning' in *Eidolon*, 'hard' in their infinite wailing (p. 51).

Both *Metamorpheus* and *Eidolon* thus draw on Joyce and Eliot's sense of the contemporaneity of myth, but Parmar's collection is more attuned than Harrison's work to Adorno's conception of enigmatical poetry. Parmar reimagines H. D.'s *Helen in Egypt* (1961) within a complex series of fragmented sections and experimental vignettes that also engage with the diverse versions of Helen throughout literary history. In contrast, the framing of Harrison's work in terms of double consciousness and modernist antecedents requires a recalibration of his critical reception: as I indicated in Chapter 3, Harrison's work has been characterised as the product of an anti-modernist by the author himself, critics and fellow poets. Simon Armitage, for example, recalls the revelation of first encountering Harrison's sonnets whilst reading

> the more impenetrable outer regions of Ezra Pound at the time, so the contrast couldn't have been greater [. . .] the classical references were just as thick on the ground, though far more assimilated and accommodated in Harrison, as opposed to being set up like snares and trip wires in Pound.[20]

Armitage's references to 'assimilated' and 'accommodated' mythic narratives implicitly respond to the double consciousness that I engage with

throughout this chapter. This criticism of Pound's work also shares Bell's concern that the deployment of myth may be mere 'scaffolding' in the *Cantos* (p. 122). Yet it glosses over the variety of modernist and proto-modernist influences on Harrison's work, including Pound himself, Basil Bunting, Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire, in its caricature of Harrison's poetry as anti-modernist. From Armitage's perspective, Harrison is the poet of 'openness and approachability', rather than the writer who quotes Rimbaud when he wishes to distinguish himself from a local skinhead in *V* (1985).[21] As I illustrated in Chapter 3, Harrison includes long, uninterrupted passages of untranslated Greek in his play *The Labourers of Herakles* (1996): he also deploys Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' to corroborate a distinctly modernist vision of democracy and popular culture in the poem 'Summoned by Bells' from *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992).[22] Harrison's work thus adheres to James's sense of a 'recrudescence' of modernism in contemporary literature: his poetry engages with a variety of modernist influences, deploying 'models of continuity and adaptation (rather than demise)'.[23] However, whereas Parmar and Harrison both allude to modernist antecedents, *Eidolon* develops allusive and elusive poetics that, like Pound's Cantos, challenge the reader's idioculture and adherence to the 'reality principle'.[24] In a counterargument to Armitage's conception of 'assimilated and accommodated' classical references, it is possible that Harrison's re-workings of Greek myth are enervated through formal conservatism, and – unlike *Eidolon* – are univocal, rather than entertaining the productive and ambiguous 'constitutive darkening' of enigmatical poetry (p. 124).

Metamorpheus and Double Consciousness

Nevertheless, in *Metamorpheus* there is certainly a 'self-conscious reconstruction of the already given' in its rigorous investigation of the Orpheus myth.[25] Workbooks held in the Brotherton Library reveal Harrison's extensive research on transformations of the Orpheus myth, including a picture from the sixth century BCE of a 'sculptured metope' in which Orpheus was depicted as a musician for the 'first time in history', records of how he was punished by the gods for accusing them of theft, adultery 'and many other kinds of outrageous conduct', and ruminations on how he was 'generally reckoned a Thracian, like other legendary poets of the Pierian group – Linos, Pamphos, Thamyris, Philammon, Musaeus, Eumolpus'.[26] Screened in December 2000, a Poundian fascination with myth as source runs throughout *Metamorpheus*, as the film-poem persists in returning to

the classical preoccupation with Orpheus as the first suffering poet and homosexual. This deployment of myth as Poundian 'scaffolding' is mirrored in the deployment of Harrison's 'Orpheus' workbook within the film-poem itself in an early scene; indeed, the workbook contains notes on Pound's discovery of the Sappho fragments that inspired the poem 'Papyrus' in 1916.[27] Rather than transforming the workbook into a final creative piece, Harrison's 'work in progress' features in a section of the film-poem in which the poet discusses his recce in Bulgaria with the academic Oliver Taplin. A postmodernist delight in tracking the legacies of myth in eclectic popular culture endures in Harrison's film-poems, and *Metamorpheus* is no exception: the workbook contains pasted-in photographs and reproductions of Orpheus chocolates, café and restaurant signs, T-shirts, nuts and even a football team calendar. However, as with Pound's work, Harrison's interest does not lie in a fascination with popular culture itself. In Harrison's film-poems as a whole, myth is figured dialectically as both an ancient source and powerful imaginative material that metamorphoses as it engages with exigent concerns. *Metamorpheus* thus provides the opportunity for Joycean double consciousness in its account of Orpheus' homosexuality and his status as a persecuted poet. Harrison re-imagines the myth of Orpheus in terms of contemporaneous homosexuality when images of a Bulgarian boy's head are juxtaposed with an image of Orpheus and shots of Lesbian bathers at Skala Eressos.[28]

An extension of such montage into an allusive and elusive artwork could have encompassed a critique of the suppressions inherent in the classical world that are inextricable with Greek myth. Indeed, an article pasted into Harrison's workbook recounts that 'Contrary to popular opinion, [ancient Greece] was not a paradise for homosexuals [. . .] There were laws that forbade homosexuals from entering the agora [marketplace] or participating in rights and rituals that involved the state, like the Dionysian festivals in Athens'.[29] This workbook also illustrates Harrison's interest in the medieval artist Albrecht Dürer's use of the word '*puseran*' ('bugger') in relation to Orpheus.[30] Jonathan West, who worked in the Early Modern German Text archive at Newcastle University, replies to Harrison's request for further information on '*puseran*':

> English *bugger* is also derived from *bulgarus* 'Bulgarian' (see Onions, *Dictionary of English Etymology*), although whether this practice was associated with the Bulgarians via popular etymology, the name word having a different source (e.g. Lat *bulga* 'bag'), or whether it developed out of their being heretical Eastern Orthodox (i.e. Greek) Christians, I'm afraid I haven't had time to consider properly.[31]

In the final film-poem, traces of this research remain in the opening word ('Bugger!') as the impious engagement with myth registers Orpheus' homosexuality. Intriguingly, the workbooks for *Metamorpheus* also trace an early desire to parallel Orpheus' suffering with the plight of the modernist Bulgarian poet Geo Milev, scourge of the police authorities in Sofia, who was brought to trial for the publication of a new magazine, *Plamak* ('Flame') in 1924, and then murdered the following year in 'massive repressions which followed a terrorist bomb explosion in Sofia'.[32] Another article included in the workbook that was written by his daughter Leda recalls how he left with a policeman for questioning about the terrorist incident and never returned. After sustaining horrific injuries to his head during the First World War, Milev described his skull as a '"blood-stained lantern with shattered windows"' (pp. 7–8): the double consciousness of myth in *Metamorpheus* thus counterpoints Orpheus' head with Milev's skull, that was 'found in a pit near Sofia, together with the bones of hundreds of other victims'.

These mythopoeic possibilities that are never fully developed in *Metamorpheus* contrast with the informative documentary narrated by Taplin in the second half of the film-poem. Taplin's main concern is not to impart new narratives in old bottles, as Angela Carter conceived her approach to fairy tales, but a Poundian desire to explore the rootedness of myth: 'I'm going right back', he states at one point, 'to [the myth's] source'.[33] The most powerful sequence of *Metamorpheus* arises at the end of the film-poem, in which Harrison ruminates further on 'the problematics of history under the sign of myth' in relation to Orpheus' severed head in Lesbos.[34] Joycean counterpointing entreats the viewer to consider Orpheus' visage alongside a modernist vision of the poet as rooted in history, suffering in an attempt to forge 'barbaric' poetry out of atrocious history, like Milev in his poem on the brutal suppression of the uprising in Bulgaria:

> Sun and sea in gerbera hues
> salute this servant of the Muse.
> Gerbera, orange, yellow, red
> flow in the sunset round his head.
> Though his head is dead and cold
> the voice still turns shed blood to gold.
> The voice, that heals and seeks to mend
> men's broken souls that men's deeds rend.
> When men are maimed and torn apart
> they call on Orpheus and his art [. . .]

> I think it needs that ancient scream
> to pierce the skulls of Academe
> to remind them that all our poems start
> in the scream of Orpheus torn apart.[35]

As I discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to 'Commitment', Adorno questions the aesthetic purchase gained when writers turn atrocious events into potentially redemptive art that 'seeks to mend'. Whilst acknowledging that poetry arises from the 'deluge' of atrocious events, Harrison's emphasis is different here. As the original poet, Orpheus passes on his lyre to future writers who must grapple with its legacy in terms of its rootedness in the Thracian's individual suffering, as well as modern events such as the Bulgarian uprising when 'men are maimed and torn apart'.[36]

Such artistic commitment relies here on the opposition between the poet and scholar sustained throughout the film-poem, in a Brechtian rejection of conceptual intricacy that simultaneously precludes any engagement with enigmatical poetics. Any camaraderie established between the 'pontificating poet' and 'my friend Taplin' (p. 381) in the workbook scene is eroded throughout the film-poem in order to perpetuate a suspicion towards the intellectual in *Metamorpheus.* The latter extends to the form of the poetry: rather than the 'remainder' in enigmatical poetry, Harrison strives for accessibility with the simple diction, couplets and iambic tetrameter that he favours in his film-poems.[37] However, any charge in this passage against academic activity is belied by Harrison's extensive research on Orpheus within the workbook, which contains extracts and notes on, for example, Ivan Mortimer Linforth's *The Arts of Orpheus* (1941), Z. H. Archibald's *The Odrysian Kingdom of Thrace: Orpheus Unmasked* (1998) and Giuseppe Scavizzi's 'The Myth of Orpheus in Italian Renaissance Art 1400–1600' in *Orpheus: the Metamorphoses of a Myth* (1982).[38] The film-poem's caricature of academic complexity attempts to evoke dramatic tension: as opposed to Harrison's attempt to endorse an ancient genealogy of poets wrestling with suffering, 'Codgers' in the workbook are 'cloistered in calm Academe', and relish their summers touring around Europe.[39] Yet the work of both Taplin and the author-poet is intimately bound up with research into historical violence: as Taplin himself writes in an article on the classics in contemporary poetry, Harrison has always been an 'avid scholar'.[40]

The Orpheus workbook indicates that this dramatic tension between poetics and the intellectual arose early in the drafts for the film-poem: Harrison first introduces Taplin as a 'complacent academic cunt' (p. 234).

Such expressions – which do not make the final cut – become part of the film's syntax: an extreme close-up on Taplin's mouth during the workbook scene establishes the supposed gluttony of this character, who will later gorge on chocolates and be witnessed lecherously gazing at a can-can in a hotel basement. Poetry then literally interrupts the scholarly, first when Taplin discusses Orpheus by a bridge in Svilengrad, and then when the severed head induces him to drop his sheet of translation in the final scene. The poet's need to 'pierce the skulls of Academe' at the end of the poem draws on the leisured complacency of the Taplin character throughout the film-poem, and the supposedly parasitic scholar who 'Scoffs his fill | then leaves the poet to pay the bill'.[41] Yet Harrison sidesteps Adorno's charge that *any* writing that arises out of atrocity is inevitably tainted by association: poetry as well as criticism would ultimately, to rephrase a section from *Negative Dialectics* (1966), be parasitic 'garbage' in this context.[42] Moreover, the dismissal of 'Academe' at the end of the poem is ironic in the sense that an academic and Harrison's scholarship have created the entire film-poem. This anti-intellectual ending simultaneously records Harrison's artistic failure to transform his workbook into a more extended piece of mythic double consciousness about Orpheus in the present, rather than Taplin's documentary about sources of the myth that predominates in the second half of the film-poem.

The Enigma of Myth in Sandeep Parmar's *Eidolon*

As I argued in relation to Warner's 'Métro' and '*Lutèce, Te Amo*' in the last chapter, then, the assimilation of modernist antecedents in Harrison's *Metamorpheus* does not lead to enigmatical poetics. As I have argued throughout this book, modernist influences do not necessarily result in metamodernist poetry. Similarly to *Metamorpheus*, the double consciousness of *Eidolon* relocates myth within the politics of recent history, but Parmar's collection does so with a more successful integration of narrative counterpointing. Unlike Harrison's work, the 'fracturedness' of a specific modernist intertext impacts on the allusive and elusive narrative in *Eidolon*.[43] The parataxis in H. D.'s *Helen in Egypt* guides the form of *Eidolon*: in a review of Parmar's collection, Nabina Das emphasises its 'staccato sentences, jaunty phrases [and] abrupt transitions'.[44] These three characteristics predominate in the fragmented sections of *Eidolon*, as when the felicitations of a call centre operator are juxtaposed with the lamentations of the enslaved women at the closure of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*: 'Good morning | blight | Good morning |

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blackest coals of mourning' (p. 51). Harrison's engagement with Joyce and Eliot's work involves a perpetuation of their double consciousness at the same time as he formally repudiates their 'fracturedness', and their creation of enigmatical poetics through the elusive 'remainder'.[45] In contrast, Parmar quotes approvingly from Robert Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying* (2005) in her article 'Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK': Sheppard criticises mainstream poems that consist of 'empirical lyricism', and laud 'discrete moments of experience'.[46] Yet despite their stylistic differences, Harrison and Parmar's work similarly draw on the narrative counterpointing of myth: in *Eidolon*, Parmar fictionalises various classical and post-classical reworkings of the story of Helen of Troy in, for example, Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Euripides' *The Trojan Women* and *Helen*, Stesichorus' *Palinode*, Virgil's *Aeneid* (19 BCE) and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592). As with Harrison's comparison between Orpheus and the modernist poetry of Milev, Parmar also draws on more recent artistic iterations of the Helen myth, such as Gustave Moreau's painting *Hélène à la Porte Scée* (1880–2) and Lawrence Durrell's 'Troy' (1966). However, unlike the protestations of the anti-academic narrator in *Metamorpheus*, Parmar is forthright about the scholarly apparatus that underpins these creative reclamations and interpretations of classical myth. As she outlines in an afterword to *Eidolon*, entitled 'Under Helen's Breath', Parmar's research includes work on Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* (144 BCE), Virginia Woolf's 'On Not Knowing Greek' (1925) and Bettany Hughes's *Helen of Troy* (2005). Rather than espousing a modernist 'belief' akin to Harrison's Nietzschean sense of an aesthetic life, Parmar analyses the 'ancient scream' of classical poetry in terms of its suppression of specific issues of gender and race: she interprets, for example, Woolf's commentary on the impersonality of classical literature as a form of textual violence when women cry 'on the banks of Scamander | Where the troops drew lots for them' in Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (p. 7).[47]

Throughout the fifty allusive and elusive sections of *Eidolon*, Parmar is absorbed in confronting the sheer variety of available narratives that Hughes terms 'a promiscuous range of "Helens"'.[48] H. D.'s *Helen of Troy* alone draws on the treacherous Helen depicted in the *Odyssey*, an alternative version in which the Greeks and Trojans 'fought for an illusion' on Troy's ramparts, and a lesser-known myth in which Helen returns to Sparta and is hanged on Rhodes, where 'the cord turned to a rainbow'.[49] Parmar refers to the enigma of Helen in the afterword to *Eidolon*:

> there are several versions of Helen's fate and several differing views of the cause of her elopement [with] Paris, starting of course with the apple of discord and culminating in a ship chase to Asia Minor sometime in the 11th century B.C.E. What Hilda Doolittle, the modernist poet, clings to is the Helen/eidolon best celebrated by Euripides' 5th-century tragedy simply entitled *Helen*. (p. 66)

Before the action of Euripides' play begins – following Herodotus and Stesichorus' versions of the mythic events – Paris and Helen depart from Sparta for Troy, but their ship is blown off course; washed up in Egypt, King Proteus is so disgusted by Paris' behaviour that he dismisses him. An eidolon or 'shadow' of Helen then appears on Troy's ramparts, whereas the 'real' Helen spends ten years in Egypt.[50] After Proteus' death, she consistently rebuffs the advances of his successor, Theoclymenus: Parmar writes that in Euripides' *Helen*, the queen 'is redeemed by the simple replacement of the real flesh-and-blood Helen for the image/ghost who vanishes into thin air at the war's end' (p. 66). In *Eidolon*, Parmar primarily follows the narratives of Euripides and H. D.'s reclamations of Helen, but – as in Harrison's *Metamorpheus* – she is attuned to the disparity of mythic narratives; hence in section xlv Parmar refers to the Helen in both of Euripides' plays, *The Trojan Women* and *Helen*, who is 'dragged by her golden hair | onto Argive ships to be judged by the widows of those who fell | or blown off course with Paris | to be subsumed by middle age' (p. 56). Euripides and H. D.'s versions thus allow for Parmar's counterpointing in the guise of Helen as a bored office worker, 'camera-bound' model (p. 10) or trophy wife trapped thematically and formally in the chiasmus of 'mindless purposeless walking' and 'hands waving mindless purpose' (p. 14). In this section of Parmar's *Eidolon* (vi), Helen's office is 'a place of palor where | silk shrinks around her throat': mythic double consciousness here encompasses Euripides' Helen patiently waiting for the return of her husband Menelaus from Troy in the form of a 'denuded' Helen, a 'Demi-goddess – not woman, not god' (p. 10), whose clothing indicates her lost status and sense of constriction (p. 14).

'[S]ilk' also deftly indicates Parmar's contemporary construction of Helen as a postcolonial subject: the word links three sections later with the Silk Road (p. 17), the territorial and maritime routes that connected ancient Asia and Europe. Even Stesichorus features in this section in a moment of counterpointing: the Sicilian poet was allegedly blinded for an initial negative treatment of Helen in his verses (hence his atonement with the later *Palinode*); in *Eidolon*, he loses his sight just 'for watching her | cross the street' (p. 14). In this section (vi), the contemporary Helen

features as an extraordinarily beautiful office worker who enraptures Stesichorus, but her identity then multiplies in section xvi, that draws on the older myths of Helen as culpable in her elopement with Paris. The leitmotif of anxious phone calls pervades the collection, as with the Plathian 'plugging numbers into the godhead' (p. 20), and in this passage it registers the potential adultery of Helen in her plea to her partner that she '*went to the Fair*', and '*tried to call | but it rang and rang*' (p. 25). However, even in this scenario the enigmatical poetry is able to hold the disparate narratives about Helen in balance. Identities often shift or merge in the 'fracturedness' of *Eidolon*: it is ambiguous in this section's counterpointing whether the 'peck on the cheek' that 'does not stir him' refers to the husband representative of Menelaus or the potential lover in the guise of Paris (p. 25).[51] The evening's 'warm air' then sticks to Helen 'like a poisoned memory' as the spouse or paramour 'blinks and sips'. Similarly, in section xvi it remains unclear whether Helen imbibes a 'gauntlet of gin', or whether the cuckolded husband consoles himself with alcohol whilst she gallivants at the fair (p. 25). In these elusive vignettes, the 'peck on the cheek' may be for the lover as she returns to her spouse, or the desultory husband as he challenges her plans when she departs the conjugal home.

Attuned throughout the sequence to Helen's enigma, Parmar frames her response to the mythical figure in the context of Walt Whitman's poem 'Eidolon'. Whitman's eidolon endures as a puzzle throughout the poem, which begins by describing it as an apparition gleaned from but also surpassing art, philosophy and concretion, and concludes that it remains an elusive 'entity of entities'.[52] The latter phrase might suggest that it embodies the soul, but Whitman denies this possibility at the closure: the 'round, full-orb'd eidolon' only forms one of the 'mates' of the Christian conception of an immortal element. Whitman's eidolon perseveres as a wider puzzle about existence: as in Eleanor Cook's discussion of the enigma in relation to Aristotle, the concept of the eidolon embodies the 'largest of tropes, a trope of the human condition'.[53] In 'Under Helen's Breath', Parmar similarly figures this conundrum as 'the enduring shadow into which life is subsumed *and* the force from which life springs eternal' (p. 65). The eidolon endures in Whitman's poem through diverse embodiments – as a ghost, for example, a troublesome portent or exquisite product of an artistic community – and remains elusive at the end of the narrative. Perhaps its most striking figuration is as this spiritual embodiment of artistic perfection that Whitman argues is strived for in ateliers. For Parmar, this spectral figure or essence resonates instead in the ghostly

versions of Helen haunting Troy's ramparts, and luring the Greek and Trojan heroes to their deaths, only to vanish when the battle and epic narrative concludes. In Parmar's reading of Whitman's poem in 'Under Helen's Breath', the apparition is not symptomatic of a puzzle that Whitman refuses to solve, and is summarised more specifically as 'an image, a ghost, a spectre, a scapegoat'; 'the idea of an eidolon is something beauteous' (p. 65). The gaps in Parmar's open form vignettes thus indicate that Helen as eidolon is present in the scene, but also elusive, shifting identities as swift as a break in the diction. These lexical absences also indicate the 'remainder' in Helen's mythical narrative that can never be solved: frustrated by the aporetic aspects of her legend that remain beyond interpretation, Parmar regrets Helen's silence, her lack of excuses and absence of narratological redress in 'Under Helen's Breath'. In addition, the double consciousness of *Eidolon* allows for a more contemporary concretion of Whitman's apparition in Parmar's collection. '[F]actories' remain 'divine' artistic communities in Whitman's poem, but in Parmar's sequence Helen's 'beauteous' idea transforms the elusive spectre into a commodity: new 'eidolons of false value' haunt the book, from the supermarket shelves to the model's diurnal activities.[54]

As with the form of *Aesthetic Theory* itself, enigmatical poetry can be Delphic, and 'inimical to exposition'.[55] This is not the case in *Eidolon*, which shifts between these accounts of Helen as an allusive ghost, and less elusive embodiments of her figure as, for example, the maligned plaything of a daytime talk show. *Eidolon* contains enigmatic sections, such as the vignette above set in 'warm air' (p. 25), but it is not Delphic in the sense of wilfully inscrutable: hence Parmar criticises Whitman's poem as beguiling but also 'too grand. It is too vague' (p. 65). Indeed, in these sections about Helen's amorous behaviour, *Eidolon* takes the form of a specific feminist project – akin to H. D.'s – to save Helen from her fate as the archetypal 'Whore' (p. 66). In section xvii, Helen blots her lipstick and indulges in small talk in a hotel room (p. 26): the potentially adulterous scene is then interrupted with a quotation from the first book of H. D.'s *Helen in Egypt*: '"I am a woman of pleasure"' (p. 12).[56] H. D. adheres to a version of the Helen myth in which she endures the afterlife with Achilles: 'I am a woman of pleasure' is spoken 'ironically into the night' in *Helen in Egypt*, since Achilles has simply 'built [her] a fire' (p. 12) in an empty landscape. This irony encompasses Achilles' temporary forgetfulness in H. D.'s collection: addled with traumatic flashbacks of the ten-year war, he 'knew not Helen of Troy, | knew not Helena, hated of Greece' (p. 14). Whereas Helen worries that Achilles will soon remember the liturgy of 'Goddess, Princess,

Whore', the double consciousness of Parmar's collection engages with a less impressive hotel lover who has 'no "*sea-enchantment in his eyes*"'.[57] The latter quotation also originates in *Helen in Egypt*; the phrase recurs three times in H. D.'s book. Achilles has lost the '*accoutrements of valour*' in his afterlife, and is left only with '*"the sea-enchantment in his eyes"*' (p. 7): Helen then notes 'the sea-enchantment in his eyes | of Thetis, his sea-mother' (p. 7), and prays to '*love him, as Thetis, his mother* [. . .] I saw in his eyes | the sea-enchantment' (p. 14). In contrast with Helen's maternal response to Achilles' traumatic behaviour in *Helen in Egypt*, Parmar's Achilles courts bathos in a Conrad Hilton hotel, and Helen is, significantly, 'misplaced' in the adulterous scene, 'blotting her lipstick | on industrial-quality tissue' (p. 26). Section xvii of *Eidolon* effectively reverses the Tiresias and typist scene in *The Waste Land*: instead of the post-coital woman Eliot imagines marooned among her supposedly tawdry possessions, Parmar presents an absent male lover denuded of any mythic pretensions.

Lawrence Durrell: Helen as 'Fig'

Rather than ruminate on the eidolon or enigma of the mythical Helen, Lawrence Durrell portrays her instead as a tiresome seducer in 'Troy'. Published five years after H. D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Lawrence Durrell's poem is particularly culpable in *Eidolon* of endorsing the 'whore' myth, alongside Euripides' *The Trojan Women*. Helen is attacked by the second word of Durrell's sonnet: she is 'maunding', a seventeenth-century coinage meaning a counterfeiting demand or trick.[58] Durrell alludes to Helen's lasciviousness before the infamous beauty that launched a thousand ships in *Doctor Faustus*: in line two, she is figured as an 'Eater of the white fig', the 'candy-striped' or Adriatic fig that comprises an extra sweet version of the fruit – as opposed to, for example, the Calimyrna or Kadota varieties – and one that has obvious sexual connotations (p. 273). Parmar quotes the third and fourth lines of the Durrell poem at the beginning of section xlv in *Eidolon*: in Durrell's misogynist vision of Helen, she has '*Some beauty, yes, but no more than her tribe | Lathe-made for stock embraces on a bed.*'[59] It is not clear whether the 'tribe' refers to Spartans or women in general, and the metrical leeway at the beginning of the fourth line allows for the heavy stresses on 'Lathe-made' that emphasise the poet-narrator's contempt (p. 273). He registers astonishment that the monotonous whining of this 'drone' should have been such a 'test for cultures'; in his final references to Helen in this sonnet, she is merely a 'doll', and then just a synecdoche,

a 'sarcastic cheek' (p. 273). Significantly, the mythic female figure in Durrell's companion poem 'Io' does not fare much better: modernist counterpointing transforms Zeus' lover into a Greek prostitute, a 'contemporary street-walker'; she contains 'repulsion' and 'joy in one' body, and an 'inward whiteness' which 'harms not | with dark keeping' in an unsettling and potentially racist ending to the poem (pp. 273–74). In *Eidolon*, Parmar quotes the lines from 'Troy' that include the 'sarcastic cheek' and 'astonished' poet (p. 273), and then attempts to exculpate Helen from his unnecessarily scurrilous charges through interjections between the quoted Durrell lines. 'Valves of lips' in Durrell's poem 'Strip-Tease' become the *Hello!* magazine face in Parmar's collection as an 'eidolon' counterpoint to Parmar's 'flesh-and-blood' Helen (p. 66). Mythic beauty is figured in Parmar's collection as the counterpart of 'immortal' selfies in what Anna Reading has termed our 'memobile' age: Parmar's point is that both are equally insubstantial as distracting eidolons.[60] Unlike the reversal of the typist scene in *The Waste Land* in section xvii of *Eidolon*, Helen is reminiscent of Eliot's postcoital typist in this passage, 'a little dumb, a little worn down by the machinery of love' (p. 56). Compared to Helen's 'maunding' account of her actions in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, her 'defence' is promised in the middle section of xlv, but is then never actually 'offered' (p. 56). In a retort to Durrell's 'sarcastic cheek' (p. 273), Parmar reverts to Helen's aristocratic and haughty tone in *The Trojan Women*: the tear for Menelaus is 'for you to keep | commemorative souvenir | of the royal bedchamber' (p. 56).

Parmar's rebuttal of misogynistic visions of Helen that attempt to reduce the enigma of the mythical character to univocal misogyny is much more surefooted in her critique of Euripides' play. In *The Trojan Women*, Hecuba follows the usual condemnation of Helen when she introduces the infamous Queen of Laconia as 'the whore of Sparta, | Menelaus's loathsome wife, | Who caused the death of Priam | And all his fifty sons' (p. 11). As opposed to Durrell's anti-mythic vision of Helen as a commonplace, 'Lathe-made' 'drone' (p. 273), Andromache in *The Trojan Women* abhors the hyperbole of 'Evil', 'Murder', 'Death' and a 'monster' that begat 'the infernal butchery of her eyes!' (p. 31).[61] Menelaus initially complies with Andromache and Cassandra's indictments, but then assures them (unconvincingly) that 'It was not so much for her that I came to Troy, | As men seem to think. No, it was for him: | To meet that honoured guest of mine [Paris]' (p. 35). As an appendage in this purported erotic triangle, Helen's voice is silenced until the end of the play: she then excuses herself due to the immortal powers that intervened in the action. Euripides

concurs with the version of mythic events that discloses Aphrodite's present of Helen to Paris after he announced that Aphrodite was the most beautiful goddess as opposed to Hera or Athena. In the afterword to *Eidolon*, Parmar takes issue with the impersonality that Woolf detects in Euripides' descriptions of the 'enslavement of women by the noble Greeks': Parmar asks whether we can 'model a civilisation on one that exploits, ensnares and silences women, the more "advanced" it becomes?' (p. 68). As she underlines, the 'real' Trojan war was more likely to have been initiated due to disputes over trade routes and strategic geographical dominance than the serendipity of a 'Lathe-made' beauty.[62] Through Parmar's double consciousness of myth, Helen becomes a woman simply shopping for 'donut peaches' in a supermarket, 'Lathe-made' not in terms of her provocative sexuality but a diurnal performance in 'the cash only express line', trying, on this occasion, to conjure a suitable response to a racist rebuke addressed by 'The blonde man' to a Mexican attendant.[63] In section xxxi, she confronts the textual violence of the 'narratological failure' of the account of the enslaved women in *The Trojan Women* by countering with the image of war as the 'pitiless circle' of a crop duster: instead of the space filling with children's 'laughter', the 'outriggers of war' dominate the field as they 'pitch and move in | a merciless circle' (p. 41). Unsurprisingly, Parmar endorses Euripides' second version of the Helen myth when – following Stesichorus and Herodotus' narratives – she remains in Egypt and maintains herself as 'a virtuous lady of great wit and charm' (p. 55). In Euripides' *Helen*, the steady wife of Menelaus opines that 'if only my face were like some picture | That could be wiped clean and done again' (p. 64). Gustave Moreau's painting of a ghostly Helen adorns the cover of *Eidolon*: as Hughes argues, in this image 'She is white and insubstantial, an *eidolon*, more akin to the wisps of smoke rising from Troy than to a real woman'.[64] Elsewhere in *Helen of Troy*, Hughes notes that 'the wonderful irony about the most beautiful woman in the world is that she is faceless' (p. 3): Helen's enigma encompasses the fact that she is representative of no particular woman, and all women, at the same time. In a sense, Parmar's mythic counterpointing does 'wipe' Helen's face and replace it with a woman queueing for fruit in a riposte to the version of the myth in Durrell's poem and Euripides' *The Trojan Women* in which Helen is a composite of an unambiguous and misogynist version of 'many women' (p. 42).

Despite her strictures against Woolf's version of Greek impersonality in 'Under Helen's Breath' and *Eidolon* as a whole, Parmar nevertheless quotes approvingly Woolf's comment on the ancient Greeks' attentiveness to 'every tremor and gleam of existence' (p. 65). Woolf, Parmar and

Harrison all share this humanist insistence on what Adorno disapprovingly termed 'limiting situations': in contrast, for all three poets such 'tremors' form antidotes to what Woolf derided as the 'confusion' of Christianity 'and its consolations' (p. 65).[65] Harrison's dialectical humanism allows him to enjoy swimming in Lesbos whilst lamenting Orpheus' demise in *Metamorpheus*, or to celebrate with a glass of wine under the shadow of Vesuvius and twentieth-century atrocities in the poem 'The Grilling' from *Under the Clock* (2005). Das's review of *Eidolon* points to an equivalent 'sparkle' in Parmar's language that eulogises Imagist moments in which, for example, Helen rolls down the 'cool glass' of a cab's window, 'quiet as water' (p. 23).[66] The legacies of modernist double consciousness thus allow these two poets to achieve moments of aesthetic and ideological salvation amongst the chaos of the more bigoted ideologies of racism and misogyny that are condemned outright in *Eidolon*. Harrison and Parmar also both draw on the modernist legacy of mythic counterpointing in order to target the banalities of popular culture: Parmar even imagines Clytemnestra on daytime television, debating the tag line: 'So your husband sacrificed your only daughter [Iphigeneia] that he might win the war' for his brother Menelaus' wife? (p. 44). However, despite their shared suspicion towards the 'fearful eidolons of false value and worthless commodity' (p. 67), the gender politics of the two poets differ vastly. Whereas Harrison's 'The Grilling' ends with the satyrs and their defiant 'cock tips high', Parmar remains excoriating of any 'buffed-up version of [Greek] heroism' that elides women and occludes the machinations of ancient masculinities with the chimera of a woman who can destroy cities merely with 'her sighs'.[67] Stylistically, too, the texts diverge in terms of the enigmatical poetics that I have discussed throughout this book. Harrison's work could be described as metamodernist in terms of its early twentieth-century antecedents, and indebtedness to the development of double consciousness in Joyce and Eliot's work, but this would preclude any discussion of formal achievement. Partly due to the structural inducements of the film-poem, *Metamorpheus* relies on 'accommodating' the reader, denies its underpinning research in order to dramatise a clash between an academic and the poet as a modern-day Orpheus, and neglects to give full expression to the counterpointing between the modernist poet Milev and classical myth.[68] In contrast, with the fractured vignettes, narratorial aporia and paratactic sections in *Eidolon*, Parmar deploys enigmatical poetry to engage with the most elusive character in classical myth.