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"At its best […] Imagist poetry is about […] the porous threshold between inner and outer, abstract and concrete, the intimate and the glitteringly impersonal" (McGuiness). How does the liminal operate in H.D.'s "Garden" and "Eurydice", and to what effect?

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"At its best […] Imagist poetry is about […] the porous threshold between inner and outer, abstract and concrete, the intimate and the glitteringly impersonal" (McGuiness). How does the liminal operate in H.D.'s "Garden" and "Eurydice", and to what effect?

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This essay proposes that the way H.D.'s poetry negotiates gender is possible by means of her liminal poetics. After discussing Turner's concept of liminality and its pertinence to H.D., it will look at how her poetics can be considered liminal; simultaneous to evolving an understanding of what a liminal poetics might be. It will use Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* to argue that in "Garden" and "Eurydice", H.D. disrupts the reader's expectations of poetry—and thus attempts to disrupt their relations with the world.

Diane Collecott writes that H.D.'s poetry "negotiates gender, sexuality [and] lesbian poetics as well as literary tradition."[1] This essay will argue that these negotiations are achieved by means of the liminal poetics of H.D.'s poetry, the "porous threshold" her writing creates. I will first clarify how "liminal" will be defined within this essay, by contextualising it within the content of H.D.'s poetry. I will then explore the idea of liminal poetics, and how they operate within H.D.'s poetry. Finally, I will examine what these liminal poetics achieve in her poetry, arguing that this porous threshold unsettles the reader, creating a "site of loss" that disrupts and ruptures the reader's relation to the text.[2] H.D.'s use of liminal poetics creates a liminal moment—and in doing so allows her to use the space to challenge notions of gender and sexuality.

This essay will focus on only two of H.D.'s poems, though it will use others to illuminate my arguments. I have chosen to concentrate on two that were published within three years of each other; "Garden" (1916) and "Eurydice" (1914–17). Whilst sharing much in terms of style, they demonstrate different tendencies on H.D.'s part. Importantly, I have chosen two poems from the beginning of her career, in the hope of showing that ideas of the liminal were central to H.D.'s work from the start.

Liminal derives from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold. This translates easily into thinking about space—one thinks of boundaries and of borders, of crossing into or out of somewhere. Such a literal, spatial threshold is the topos of "Eurydice", which concerns itself with the mythical moment at which Orpheus, having succeeded in bargaining with Hades for Eurydice's life, turns to look at her just before they reach Earth. His "glance" consigns her to the underworld.[3] The poem draws attention to the spatial liminality with its repetitions of "fringe of the earth" and "sharp edge of ".[4]

Victor Turner developed the concept of liminality while studying the process of rituals, defining it as that which is "neither here nor there"; specifically the space and time "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and the ceremonial."[5] Liminality thus

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[1] Diane Collecott, "H.D.'s Transformative Poetics," in *The Cambridge Companion to H.D.*, ed. by N. Christodoulides and P. MacKay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 57.

[2] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 5.

[3] Hilda Doolittle, "Eurydice," in *H.D. Selected Poems,* ed. by Louis L Marz (London: Carcanet, 1925), 37, l. 30.

[4] Ibid, 36, ll. 51–53.

[5] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), 94; 95.

operates not only in a physical or geographical sense—it also entails the moment between two states of being. This too can be pinpointed within "Eurydice", where Eurydice is momentarily between the state of being dead and being alive. A liminal moment is often one of transition, and therefore of possibility. In "Eurydice" this could be seen as the possibility of her leaving the Underworld and rejoining the "flowers of the earth".[6] However, this initial possibility is thwarted and instead the liminal moment—of coming close to returning to life again—allows her a different possibility. Eurydice returns to the Underworld defiant, her transition one of gaining authority and agency; demonstrated in the last stanza where she asserts "At least I have the flowers of myself."[7] Thus we see that the liminal involves edges, boundaries, and borders; it is concerned with change, transition, and possibility. We cannot map it exactly, for it remains "ambiguous and indeterminate".[8] Rather, this essay will explore the different ways in which the liminal can be expressed, and the effect of this.

What might liminal poetics consist of? McGuiness discusses the "porous threshold" of Imagist poetry.[9] H.D. was one of the first "imagistes"; her poetry appeared in Pound's 1914 anthology *Des Imagistes* and in the 1915 anthology *Some Imagist Poets*, which was edited by her husband Richard Aldington. In its early stages the "principles were economy, formal freedom, and precision."[10] It was dedicated to the idea of the "image", of which Pound wrote:

> present an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time[…]The presentation [should] give a sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time and space limits.[11]

> Imagist poetry would thus seem to be intrinsically liminal, operating outside of our understanding of time and space, moving beyond "the positions assigned and arrayed[…]by convention".[12]

To explore what is distinctively liminal in H.D.'s poetry, I want to consider each of McGuiness's conditions for the porous threshold, and examine how "Garden" adheres to these. McGuiness's claim of "abstract and concrete" seems to run counter to the motivations of Imagist poetry.[13] The first precept, outlined by F.S. Flint, was "1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether objective or subjective".[14] Yet looking at H.D.'s "Garden", this paradox—of treating "the thing" directly and concretely, and yet in an abstract manner—is apparent. The opening lines run:

> You are clear
> O rose, cut in rock,
> hard as the descent of hail.[15]

We are given a concrete image; almost overwhelmingly so since the rose is described in terms of its solidity. Not only is it "cut in rock", but the rose itself is "hard as the descent of hail". This simile

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[6] Doolittle, "Eurydice", 36, l. 75.

[7] Ibid, 40, l. 125.

[8] Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*, 95.

[9] Patrick McGuiness, "Imagism," in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, ed. by D. Bradshaw and K. Dettmar (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 187.

[10] Ibid, 184.

[11] Collecott, "H.D.'s Transformative Poetics", 55.

[12] Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*, 95.

[13] McGuiness, "Imagism", 187.

[14] Collecott, "H.D.'s Transformative Poetics", 55.

[15] Doolittle. "Garden," in *H.D. Selected Poems,* 7, ll. 1–3.

refers only to the rose—"cut in rock" is a subordinate clause—but due to being placed on the line below almost seems to apply for both, making the rock doubly hard. The images of the rock and the rose thus seem to be fused together; although individuated they feel intertwined, as they are literally described. The image then is deeply strange. The paradoxical nature of it—roses are not hard as hail—requires a stretch of our imagination, as both objects take on the qualities of the other, in a manner simultaneously concrete and abstract. In the second part of "Garden", imagery of a similarly paradoxical nature is used of the wind. The speaker demands that it

> rend open the heat,
> cut apart the heat,
> rend it sideways. [16]

Wind, which we would tend to think of as a mammoth and blustery force, is here being asked to "cut apart" the heat. The action of cutting seems a far too meticulous and accurate action for the wind to be able to perform. This same reversal of common sense occurs with the description of heat, which operates contrary to our expectations of it. Instead of ripening the fruit, it impedes its growth and fertility, meaning "Fruit can not drop/through this thick air."[17] We are given a concrete image almost impossible to conceive of, which thus become abstract. In "Eurydice" H.D. uses images similarly with the lines "dead lichens drip/dead cinders upon moss of ash."[18] She uses natural imagery—although it is that of fungi—and commingles it with images of destruction by fire, "cinders" and "ash". Thus H.D. draws on our assumptions of the concrete world; but due to the fact her concrete images are impossible, they become abstract.

McGuiness also notes the threshold between the "inner and outer" is present in Imagist poetry.[19] This threshold is particularly interesting if considered on the level of word and meaning, where we conceptualise the word as "inner" and its conventional symbolic meaning—the various meanings that radiate from it—as "outer". Friedman argues H.D. had a "revisionary treatment of the sentimental Victorian language of flowers" where flowers would tend to symbolise romantic love or beauty.[20] H.D. appears to be aware of this, for the effort of "Garden" is to purge the language of all trace of poetic metaphor or symbol. In the first half of the poem, the rose is not acting as a vehicle for a metaphor, but as an image in its own right. She refuses to let it signify more than its physical image. The reason that this, despite her attempts remains liminal, is that it is never going to be entirely possible. One does not read in a vacuum, and words will continue to bring their former connotations and range of symbolic meanings with them; thus H.D. sits on the threshold, acknowledging the "outer" meaning people will still perceive, whilst resisting.

This same threshold between "inner and outer" can be seen from a different perspective in H.D.'s "Eurydice", if we consider the "outer" meaning to be what the word normally signifies, and the "inner" meaning to be what a word evolves to signify across the course of its use in a poem.[21] The word "flowers" is repeated ten times across the course of the poem, and specific flower names are mentioned another nine times. This repetition means that they begin to take on another set of meanings specific to this context. They come to mean that which Eurydice is losing in her death; the chance to sleep "among the live flowers/at last."[22] Used repeatedly they gather force and strength atypical to

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[16] Ibid, 8, ll. 12–14.

[17] Ibid, ll. 15–16.

[18] Doolittle. "Eurydice", 36, ll. 9–10.

[19] McGuiness, "Imagism", 187.

[20] Susan Stanford Friedman, *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Poets, 1880–1945*, vol. 45 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1983), 125.

[21] McGuiness, "Imagism", 187.

[22] Doolittle, "Eurydice", 36, ll. 4–5.

the words' normal usages. They signify more and more poignantly what she has lost, for the connotations from the words last usage move through the poem with it; for instance the second time she mentions "all the flowers that cut through the earth" we recall her desire to sleep among them.[23] This means that when in the final stanza Eurydice tells us "At least I have the flowers of myself" we understand the full triumph of this; she has found enough strength within herself to live out her death in the Underworld.[24] Thus we see that repetition, a device H.D. was famous for, can be seen as a liminal device within the context of her work.

The final "porous threshold" McGuiness believes Imagism to be concerned with is that of "the intimate and the glitteringly impersonal".[25] I want to track how this operates in "Garden" by means of H.D.'s use of the device apostrophe. The device manages to collapse the borders between the intimate and the impersonal by its ability to simultaneously evoke an outer world, and tell us of the interiority of the speaker. In the first half of "Garden", there is a first person speaker, who Burnett suggests must be a dryad imprisoned in a tree.[26] But she does not appear in the second half of the poem, nor is there anything in the first half that directly informs us of the nature of the speaker—even her relations to the objects around her are in the hypothetical "I could" rather than telling us of things she has done or will do.[27] However we emerge from reading with a sense of the speaker, of her will to create and the fact she currently feels stifled and of the strength of her desires. This is made possible by the use of apostrophe, which posits an "*I-Thou*" relationship between the poet and that which she apostrophises.[28] Necessarily, we learn of the thou—the rose is "cut in rock", the wind is strong enough to "rend open the heat", and the heat is enough that "Fruit can not drop/through this thick air."[29] In addressing these objects or elemental forces, the speaker bestows upon them the ability to understand her, and agency within the world, creating a "glitteringly impersonal" world. However, they are animated only because of her, and thus the nature of the "thou" that she invokes reflects upon her; her desire to "scrape the colour" from the rose conveys her will to create, and her desire for wind that will rend the stifling heat depicts her claustrophobia.[30] This seemingly impersonal poem becomes even more intimate when we consider that the simple fact of using an apostrophe tells us something of the speaker, for it is a "figure spontaneously adopted by passion" and as such its use can imply the passion of the speaker and the intensity of their predicament.[31] The use of "O" in "O rose" and "O wind" works particularly to convey the desperation of the dryad. Culler comments that this is because it stands outside of our semantic references, referring only to other apostrophes, and thus gains rhetorical and sublime force.[32] This is also due to the fact that even its pronunciation has a certain strength, requiring as it does full breath drawn from the diaphragm. J.H. Prynne comments that it has "the appearance of being a sub-articulate outcry formed prior to a discriminated emotional profile" and this is how the speaker comes across—moved by emotion, and longing to an exclamation and forceful demand.[33] She addresses first an inanimate object, and then an elemental force; the fact she would dare

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[23] Ibid, 37, l. 54.

[24] Ibid, 40, l. 125.

[25] McGuiness, "Imagism", 187.

[26] Gary Burnett, "The Identity of H: Imagism and H.D.'s 'Sea Garden'", in *Sagetrieb* 8, no. 3 (2009), https://sagetrieb.wordpress.com/2009/12/15/sagetrieb-8-3 [accessed 11 November 17].

[27] Doolittle, "Garden", 7, l. 4.

[28] Jonathon D. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 142.

[29] Doolittle, "Garden", 8.

[30] Ibid, 7, l. 4.

[31] Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, 144.

[32] Ibid, 143.

[33] J.H. Prynne, *English Poetry and Emphatical Language* from the proceedings of the British Academy (LXXIV 1988), 168.

to do so shows the speakers strength and possibility. Collecott argues that "O" has specific significance to H.D.'s work, suggesting it has an erotic significance figuring both "the zero of impossibility or the possibilities of female sexuality", "the mouth open in horror or wide in delight", and "the absent sexual organ or the available vagina".[34] The ability to signify these opposites simultaneously once again brings us to ideas of paradox, and of the ability of H.D.'s liminal poetics to move between the threshold of two polars, in ambiguities and indeterminacies.

Having established what can be deemed liminal poetics, I will examine what they enact. Turner wrote that art can "function culturally like a rite of passage; it allows participants or initiates to move from ordinary social 'structure' into a liminal space of 'anti-structure.'"[35] Art, according to Turner, can thus function in a liminal manner, affecting the reader. H.D.'s "Eurydice" and "Garden" not only contain liminal poetics, but affect a state of liminality in the reader. Turner's theory recalls Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* in which he distinguishes between two kinds of text, "*plaisir"* and "*jouissance"*: the text of pleasure and the text of bliss. The text of bliss is one that "imposes a sense of loss upon the reader" by not meeting, and thus disrupting, the reader's expectations.[36] A text of bliss will not allow the reader to approach it in the manner that they are accustomed to, and will often render the reader's normal critical interpretations irrelevant. "Eurydice" and "Garden" are two such texts, for they eschew the techniques most often found in poetry, and require a different critical framework to understand. The difficulty of "Garden" provokes something akin to anger, due to initial lack of sense. A text of bliss of this kind thus requires affective engagement on the part of the reader: to understand the poems we must operate inside the space that H.D. creates.

McGuiness writes that Imagist poetry "aims to cut away the means by which we understand the world in order to immerse us in the world".[37] H.D.'s liminal poetics operate in this way—they force us to engage with her text within the parameters that she sets. These liminal poetics are imperative to her ability ability to "negotiate gender, sexuality [and] lesbian poetics as well as literary tradition".[38] "Eurydice" is a highly subversive poem; it not only gives voice to a character most often left mute in the classical myth, but allows her to inhabit the role of the male bard. H.D. situates herself within the patriarchal tradition by subverting a myth, and rewriting it with a female protagonist. This is even more significant in the context of Orpheus as a masculine symbol for poetry, the master of the lyre. She thus revolutionises the accepted symbolic order, and the essential struggle of the poem is a feminist one; Orpheus's backward glance is rewritten as a gendered personality flaw. To understand why her affecting the reader in a liminal manner is important for her writing, it is important to look at the gender norms of the period. Reductively, it was a time when traditional and patriarchal values were still maintained, with many women not educated, and women's suffrage still not realised. A woman's relationship to a man [mother, wife, or daughter] was still foremost to her identity.[39] To rewrite and challenge a foundational narrative of Western culture was, if not radical, very progressive. The creation of a liminal space disrupts readerly norms. This affects a similar state of transition in the reader, and thus prompts their engagement not only with the text, but with the world.

This essay has thus attempted to show how concepts of the liminal may be of use in understanding H.D.'s radical poetics; and how these contribute to her political and aesthetic aims, by creating a liminal space far from the world she denigrates. ■

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[34] Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.

[35] Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*, 128.

[36] Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 4.

[37] Patrick McGuiness, "Imagism", 186.

[38] Collecott, "H.D.'s Transformative Poetics", 57.

[39] Bonnie Kime Scott, *Joyce and Feminism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 29–54.

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