

“If only I were Isis”: Remembrance, Ritual, and Writing in Lola Lemire Tostevin’s *Cartouches*

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We have learned that, if death cannot still the voice of genius, the reason is that genius triumphs over death not by reiterating its original language, but by constraining us to listen to a language constantly modified, sometimes forgotten — as it were an echo answering each passing century with its own voice — and what the masterpiece keeps up is not a monologue, however authoritative, but a *dialogue* indefeatable by Time.

— André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*

LOLA LEMIRE TOSTEVIN’S 1995 book *Cartouches* marks a major progression in the ongoing development of her poetry; it is a complex and highly accomplished work that operates in and across several dimensions. With *Cartouches* Tostevin presents not just a multifaceted meditation on death, an act of remembrance, but she also elaborates a ritual for herself and for the reader. This enacted ritual is a movement towards renewal and consolation. At the same time, part of the ritual is a postmodernist reflection on the ritual process of mourning in words. Tostevin’s writing and our reading take place multi-dimensionally: she is the mourner who remembers her father as she remembers herself. Not a believer in established religions, Tostevin still believes in the ritualistic powers of language, the possibilities for “miraculous transformation through language,” as Karen Press terms it (134). Tostevin the poet is the creator of the rituals of mourning, the mediator between cosmic planes. As readers, we participate in this charging of language by making the necessary connections, and thus in the resurgence of life for which Tostevin’s writing itself is the sacred site.

The volume includes poems and journal entries in French and English. Dedicated to the memory of her recently deceased father, Achilles Lemire, *Cartouches* mourns his death. The book tells the story of the

poet's pilgrimage to Egypt, where she learns about the ancient deities and the sacred Egyptian traditions concerning death. Embedded in this journey is a quest for a renewed self-identity in the aftermath of her father's death. The book comprises two movements, as the term is used with a musical symphony or requiem. The first is characterized by profound ceremonial solemnity; the later by informality and intimacy. The movements direct the mourning ritual from its being a public event towards becoming a personal experience.

The overall trajectory of the book may be suggested by two quotations. At the start of the poet's visit, in Cairo, she writes that "In a country where you can't read the signs, you can't always measure the extent to which you are lost."¹ After her experiences in Egypt, she is empowered to write,

In the depth of dreaming
a perfect moment blooms
against words closing in:
a trace more luminous than light
as you imagine yourself
no longer here or there, but everywhere.

The last line epitomizes the most extraordinary feature of *Cartouches* in referring to the universal conception of sacred space, lucidly formulated in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* by Mircea Eliade:

where the sacred manifests itself in space, *the real unveils itself*, the world comes into existence. But the irruption of the sacred does not only project a fixed point into the formless fluidity of profane space, a centre into chaos; it also effects a break in plane, that is, it opens communication between the cosmic planes (between earth and heaven) and makes possible ontological passage from one mode of being to another. (63)

Ancient Egypt's monuments and artifacts are well-known evidence of a culture's preoccupation with the sacralization of the dead; considering Tostevin's circumstances, Egypt was a good choice of a place to go.

1. Openings

Cartouche: a French word also used in English, meaning a scroll or tablet designed to take an inscription; called "shenou" by the Egyptians; the elongated oval shape signified everything that was encircled by the sun; the writing combines signs representing

sounds and signs representing ideas. Cartouches often contained royal names. The cartouche, therefore, shows that the regent whose name is written inside it is monarch of all that the sun surveys. (Watterson 18, 24)

Tostevin begins her enactment of remembering in language immediately with the book's title, *Cartouches*, and with the book's epigraphs. In her acknowledgement note to *Cartouches* Tostevin mentions the "master-name who gave me the definition of a cartouche that best describes the nature of this book: 'I not only have a cartouche, I am it. This is my cartouche, I'm the one who's stolen it. This is my body, the body of my name.'"

Writing about Tostevin's *sophie* (1988), Danny O'Quinn describes a process which amounts to an earlier iteration of the text/body relation created by *Cartouches*. With respect to the book's title, O'Quinn observes that

An apostrophe marks the absence of a word or syllable or letter from a syntagmatic chain. The answer, however, is only partial: it marks an absent signifier, but reserves a space for the corresponding signified, which is recoverable through a con textual operation. As Tostevin's [*siz*] text [*sophie*] explicitly states: 'an apostrophe in addressing absence turns that absence into presence.' (37)

Whereas with *sophie* the apostrophized absence is women as lovers of knowledge, with *Cartouches* the "recoverable" absence is both that of the poet and that of her father.

The cover illustration of *Cartouches*, drawn to Tostevin's specifications² by Zoya Niechoda, features a picture of an Egyptian cartouche whose symbols, "Lion Dove Lion Vulture," in one version of the hieroglyphic alphabet, spell "Lola." In a journal entry in *Cartouches*, Tostevin affirms, "All this I am and want to be: at the same time lion, dove and vulture." And in the poem which follows this journal entry she writes,

a cartouche
 puts into play
 the bodies
 of my name
 a lion
 a dove
 a lion
 a vulture
 oh mummified me.



The cover illustration juxtaposes the poet's name in Egyptian signs in the vertical cartouche³ with her names in the Latin alphabet in the horizontal cartouche. So the cover story, emblematic of the book's contents, could be read as "Lion Dove Lion Vulture, all this I am and want to be: at the same time, Lola Lemire Tostevin." (This name can also be pronounced both in French and English.) To parse this complex, we could read it as "a Franco-Ontarian poet travels to Egypt; she brings home a cartouche as a souvenir, with her name, her very being, she says, inscribed in gold. The cartouche is a remembrance, a memory, and more." Tostevin explains that a cartouche "was worn on the body so the wearer wouldn't forget her name, wouldn't forget who she was." She remembers, then. She remembers herself through language as she remembers her father.

More than an act of memory, this remembering is the enactment of a ritual re-remembering or resurrecting. Early in *Cartouches* the poet

recalls when she was a child and her father reassembled one of her damaged dolls, which she had placed in a box. This deed parallels the ancient Egyptian story of Isis's putting back together the body of her brother and husband, Osiris, who, after she flaps her wings over him, returns to life and thereby becomes the god of resurrection. Tostevin conceives the design for a trip to Egypt after her father dies, addressing him,

Now this. If only I were Isis.
 I would transform myself into a swallow
 and fan you with my wings. I would
 retrieve her recipes that can bewitch the heavens.
 If only. I would go to Egypt and retrieve
 the box from the base of the tamarisk tree.
 The iron box that contains other boxes like memory.
 The bronze box and the box of ebony and ivory.
 The box of silver and one of gold which holds
 a book whose words disappear into thin air except
 for the trace of a lingering story.

Here, early in the book (in the eighth poem of the "Small Amulets" section), we witness the poet focussing her quest onto language, the "trace of a lingering story." *Cartouches* is saturated with language. As Tostevin remarked once in a book review, "knowledge of the self is inseparable from the practice of language ("Smart" 171). In *Cartouches*, this knowledge and this practice do combine to return life to her father.

As compared with her novel *Frog Moon*, and her 1982 poetry collection *Color of Her Speech*, Tostevin's concern in *Cartouches* is not so directly related to how the French and English languages interface around and in her, being to some extent problematic in the senses that Shirley Neuman, Barbara Godard, Lianne Moyes, and most recently, Marie Carrière have eloquently explored. Instead, Tostevin's work is constantly evolving, and with *Cartouches* the poet's sensitivity to languages as whole cultures, and to how and what they signify, becomes a dynamic basis for interacting with the languages of Egypt. As with all of her previous work, though, the English/French concern in *Cartouches* is similarly an important feature of the book's unrelenting intertextuality: "Cartouche" is both a French and an English word. Also, *Cartouches* features a French and an English epigraph. The first, from Anne Hébert's "Les Mains," a poem in her collection *Le Tombeau des rois*, is

Les signes du monde
Sont gravés à même ses doigts. (24)

(The English translation, given in Peter Miller's original bilingual edition, is

The signs of the world
Are graven on her very fingers. [25])

This poem describes a woman — or is it a goddess? A mother? — “assise au bord des saisons”/“sitting at the edge of the seasons.” This figure graces our lives, but there is a catch:

From her for us
No place of welcome and of love
Without that pitiless offering
Of hands decked with sorrows
Open to the sun. (25)

Isis, the prototype of the good wife and mother for ancient Egyptians (and for many Christianized European worshippers of “Black Virgins,” possibly until the present), is also, along with her sister Nephtys, the singer of the lament for their brother Osiris, which became the official Egyptian funerary dirge (Sykes 106-07, 151). Like the woman in Hébert's “Les Mains,” Isis bears both darkness and light.

The connection between Tostevin's poetic interest in Egypt and her choice of this first epigraph is made more explicit by Hébert's title poem, “Le Tombeau des rois”/“The Tomb of the Kings,” the title Tostevin uses to identify her quote from Hébert. “The Tomb of the Kings” describes a visit by Hébert to Egypt, in particular to a royal tomb. During this visit, the poet becomes imaginatively enmeshed in the sacrifices depicted on the tomb's walls:

Ranged in a single row:
The smoke of incense, the cake of dried rice
And my trembling flesh:
Ritual and submissive offering. (89)

The poem ends with the wondering poet's question, “What glimmer of dawn strays here?” Hébert's “Le Tombeau des rois” sketches the general, much more complex, movement of *Cartouches* from death to resurrection, the profane to the sacred.

The English epigraph of *Cartouches* is a paraphrase of lines from the eighth section, Book I of the “Palinode” of H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*:

are you Hecate? are you a witch?
 a vulture? a hieroglyph?

Tostevin has slightly altered the original of these lines: in *Helen in Egypt* there are commas, not question-marks, in the second line; and Achilles's imperious questioning of Helen ends with a third line, "the sign or the name of a goddess?" (16).⁴ Reflecting later on Achilles's questions, Helen realizes that

... with his anger,
 that ember, I became
 what his accusation made me,
 Isis, forever with that Child,
 the Hawk Horus. (23)

The introduction to this section of *Helen in Egypt* observes that Helen "herself is the writing" (22), so that Achilles's accusing her of being a hieroglyph is accurate, and is directly relevant to Tostevin's understanding, mentioned previously, that "I not only have a cartouche, I am it." Helen is also identified with Isis in her aspect of mother of Horus, the falcon-headed god of the sun, of light, of day — of all goodness (Sykes 96). At the same time, she is Hecate, the Terrible Mother, and a witch. Recall Tostevin's "oh mummified me" after the Englishing of her own cartouche signs, the last of which is the vulture.

From *Helen in Egypt* these words too are obviously germane to Tostevin's project in *Cartouches*:

Helen achieves the difficult task of translating a symbol in time into timeless-time or hieroglyph or ancient Egyptian time. She knows the script, she says, but we judge that this is intuitive or emotional knowledge, rather than intellectual.... She says she is 'instructed,' she is enchanted, rather. For from the depth of her racial inheritance, she invokes (as the perceptive visitor to Egypt must always do) the symbol or the 'letter' that represents or recalls the protective mother-goddess. This is no death-symbol but a life-symbol, it is Isis or her Greek counterpart, Thetis, the mother of Achilles. (13)

Such invoking of the Isis hieroglyph is a part of the ritual through which *Cartouches* leads the reader. (H.D.'s mother's name was Helen; Tostevin's father's name was Achilles.) We remember Tostevin's father reassembling her doll, and the poet's "Now this. If only I were Isis." In summary, for the book's epigraph Tostevin abbreviates the stanza from *Helen in Egypt* because at the start of *Cartouches* she does not see herself as "the sign or

the name of a goddess.” Tostevin is not Helen, nor is she Isis — yet; but as a poet she begins to enter the mysteries of resurrection that H.D.’s Helen and the Egyptians’ Isis disclose.

The critic and poet Rachel Blau Duplessis writes about *Helen in Egypt* in terms that could equally apply to the Tostevin of *Cartouches*:

Helen’s major activity is decoding and remembering: decoding the Amen-script in a temple very like Karnak ...; decoding two hieroglyphs. One is the ‘bird’ of Isis, the other is nenuphar or water lily, which in this poem alludes to the Great Mother with child, around which all other petals are arranged in a ‘subtle genealogy’....(110)

Tostevin uses this lily image in an address to Isis:

A thousand pillars from the Moon
Gate to Sun Gate where you came

to anchor a thousand-petalled
lily in the Hall of Morning.
And now all that is left are
clumps of papyrus springing
from the head of the dead.

Perhaps the grandeur of ancient Egypt has diminished, but still the process of sacred rebirth is evident.

2. Heart

Immediately following two epigraphs in *Cartouches* are two poems that explain the heart sign and initiate the reader into the ritual that the book creates and animates. Tostevin notes that

In ancient Egypt the heart, the AB,
is represented by an inkwell in the shape of a heart.

The reference here is to *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, a collection of spells and illustrations, called vignettes, for use by people who had died and needed to gain entry to the afterlife of bliss in the Field of Reeds, the Egyptian heaven. The spells and vignettes were written and painted onto papyrus, then enclosed with the mummy in its tomb. From these ancient texts we have learned much about ancient Egyptian funerary customs. A key part of the rite of passage was weighing the dead person’s heart, the centre of life, to ascertain its purity; it was not supposed to outweigh the feather of Maat, which stood for truth, justice, morality, and balance.

When the deceased passed this test, the heart was stored in a jar to foil those who would like to steal a pure heart. Its place in the spiritual body was sometimes taken by a scarab-shaped amulet engraved with a spell which had the power to replace the heart in the afterlife — “Hieroglyphs in lieu of a heart,” in Tostevin’s words. Not surprisingly, the next section of *Cartouches* is entitled “Small Amulets.”

Each of the nine poems in “Small Amulets” is headed by the ideogram for the heart. Tostevin says that the AB, the heart, “is represented by an inkwell in the shape of a heart.” The concatenation of ink with the heart’s blood thus underlies Tostevin’s act of writing the “Small Amulets” for her father. The words of these poems become part of another dimension:

Spirit of the letter.... A prayer
recited over the amulet of the heart

prevents the heart from being carried off
by those who plunder hearts.

The first of the “Small Amulets” reveals how Achilles Lemire’s death has caused each word and line that Tostevin writes to be an invocation of her father’s name. In the second, Achilles answers the prayer and appears, in order to comment on his daughter’s writing:

‘You exaggerate
everything,’ he’d shrug, reading this.
His way of saying that the need
to recollect is just another metaphor.

The poet responds,

But exaggeration is the summit
of every living image, I want to tell him.
At least those we try to hang on to.
So, father, let these small poems speak.
Let them speak volumes.

The poignancy created here by the father’s presence and the poet’s intense desire to “hang on” to it accentuates the power of her words and draws the reader into the poet’s effort to have her father hear her words and thus rejoin the living.

The third of the “Small Amulets” describes how her father’s illness has reconfigured her family in ways strongly reminiscent of the multiple relationships among the ancient Egyptian deities:

... Bodies levitate beyond
 their usual boundaries. My father is my son,
 my son, my father. I am my mother's mother.
 My daughter is the grandmother I never knew.

In the next poem, the poet illustrates how this levitating sometimes took place while her father was alive. "If anything," she writes, far from being an abusive father, "he is the one who is intimidated by me." She then remembers a conversation they had during which she saw him as

The nine-year-old waterboy working in lumber camps,
 the fresh face of a child.

"Oh, father," she asks, "Are you afraid?" The question exists both in the past and in the present. Once again he is invoked. The rest of the poems in "Small Amulets" continue the conversation. In the seventh Tostevin reflects, in her father's presence again, on how others might take this writing:

I know. This order of language is not easy
 to accede to. Sentiment, they'll say.
 Yet these words also lie in the realm
 of my other, father, and you are not just
 another arbitrary sign. These poems
 are of a body that links us, inescapable,
 given.

The poet's intentions on a theoretical level seem clear: to expand upon the characteristically feminist project of writing the body. In this instance, she claims for critically frowned-upon sentimentality another dimension which validates her words beyond the aesthetic.

Another way that Tostevin pushes beyond the limits of feminist thinking in *Cartouches* is at first less apparent than this stretching of the notion of writing the body, but it is plainly noticeable to readers of her prose works prior to the publication of *Cartouches*. These words addressed to her father, just quoted, introduce the topic, "you are not just/another arbitrary sign." For years Tostevin has been distinctly uneasy with the dominant feminist and psychoanalytic theories regarding the figure of the Father, and she has written extensively on the subject. Generally, Tostevin is sceptical about all ideologies which limit people. "Let's hope," she wrote in *Sp/Elles* in 1986, concerning the ongoing development of feminist theory,

that it will be in the spirit of a poetics whose purpose is not only to perceive but to transgress and subvert in order to open new possibilities. Let's hope that it does not advocate absolute knowledge which only serves to repress in order to accede to idealization; and that theory is not replaced by another ideology which defines itself in terms of opposition or enemy resembling more a construct and less a human being with a capacity for change. (96)

In "Paternal Body as Outlaw," a brief article on bpNichol from the same year, Tostevin specifically addresses this "capacity for change" in the context of male/female patterns. She observes that "Since many women are now rethinking the maternal at the level of language and writing, it's conceivable that the same can be done by male writers, not only in terms of maternal but also in terms of the paternal" (78). She quotes Nichol as having stated that "the hierarchy's a difficult place to stand," and comments that the late 1960s, when Nichol said this, was "a period preoccupied with confronting the old within the new. The engendering of new life within old fictions" (78). Her description of Nichol's writing demonstrates that

his language is felt through all the senses, both writer's and reader's, so that the relation between inside/outside, between enveloping and being enveloped, moves inside and outside language. If we were to compare Nichol's writing to the sexual paradigm, it would be less phallic and more oral, moving towards what the French call *écriture féminine*. (79)

In 1990, when she interviewed Anne Hébert for *Brick*, she mentioned to Hébert the traditional formulation of patriarchal oppressiveness, at that time having been recently applied to Hébert's work by Patricia Smart in her book on Québec women writers, *Writing in the Father's House*. Did Hébert feel a need to rebel against her father?

'No, not at all,' Hébert replied. 'On the contrary, I was always encouraged by my father. He was responsible for much of my education.' ("Remembered" 23)

Tostevin's lines in *Cartouches* suggest that her regard for her father in this personal respect is similar to that of Hébert for her father:

It seems incongruous these day to write
about a father who never abused his daughter,
our ties unmediated by concept or mastery.

Another important strand of Tostevin's thinking about the Father more strongly emphasizes alternatives to some of the feminist thought which strikes Tostevin as dualistic and exclusive. She is very clear about this point in a letter to Smaro Kamboureli, published in *Tessera* in 1988, two years before the Hébert interview: "We must focus on an ideology of difference, not as binary opposition, but as multiplicity of differences which defy definition" (23). On the issue of the Father, she writes to Kamboureli that

It's high time we stopped being threatened by the term 'Father.' Sexual discrimination was caused primarily because half the population was threatened by the term 'Mother,' and I don't think simply reversing it will achieve much. (17)

She goes on to provide more detail in her remarks on Julia Kristeva's idea that the Father is a third element generated by the Mother/Child combination:

I'm not totally comfortable having it defined as 'Father' but neither can I see why, given the Mother/Child combination, we can't have the third element as Father. I don't believe this paternalizes 'woman' per se, but the child, and there shouldn't be anything wrong with that as long as we continue to 'maternalize' the child as well. We wouldn't be so threatened by this third term if the boundaries weren't so sharply delineated and divisive and if we didn't accord so much authority to the term of the Father. I have no doubt that Kristeva sees the Word, linear language, theory, as belonging to the third term (Symbolic), but I think perhaps the reason she doesn't mind assigning the third term to the Father is that she doesn't give it any more authority than that of the Mother (Semiotic). (24)

Tostevin does not leave her critique here, though; she posits further alternatives to the "divisive boundaries" model. In addition to her critique just outlined, these positive formulations are the underpinnings of her approach to the Father/her father in *Cartouches*.

Tostevin discovered in Walter Benjamin's writing a key idea that parallels a model she developed and provides a more practical approach for her work. In "Reading after the (Writing) Fact," a reflection on her book *sophie*, she says that she chose a painted allegory for the cover because she was

fascinated by [Benjamin's] concept of the allegorical as originary frag-

ment as opposed to the classical notion of the symbolic, which, according to Julia Kristeva, implies a language and culture fixed within grammatical and social constraints that are bound by paternal law. Benjamin's reflections celebrate the basic characteristic of allegory as ambiguous, capable of yielding multiple meanings, a richness of extravagance, a *jouissance*, to use one of Kristeva's favourite terms.... The voice of allegory is, in its very notion of multiplicity, a polyphonic voice. (62-63)

Tostevin alters Benjamin's aural metaphor to one of touch, and broadens it in another article on '*sophie* where she formulates the idea of "Contamination: A Relation of Differences." This article focusses on her inclusion of French and English in '*sophie*, but clearly the principle of contamination is more widely applicable:

Because I don't believe in a pure space of language anymore than I believe in a 'pure race,' I find the concept of contamination as a literary device rather appealing. Contamination means differences have been brought together so they make contact. It is from this point of view that '*sophie* (and to a great extent all my work) was conceived. (13)

If "the Father" — the Symbolic order — is substituted for "pure space of language" in this quotation, then the connection between that theoretical issue and her father in *Cartouches* becomes clear. Nothing, whether theoretical or physical or linguistic, exists in isolation. By developing the ramifications of this insight regarding contamination, the intensity of the mourning that occurs in *Cartouches* is truly startling.

Tostevin's focus on the powers of language, already noted with regard particularly to the eighth poem of "Small Amulets," "If only I were Isis," is reasserted in the Egyptian imagery of the next and final poem of the section. Here the imagery coalesces, bringing the reader full circle to the heart amulet, to a sense at once of closure for the first movement of the book, and of anticipation:

So with these words, father, I make you a pillow
to cradle your head toward the horizon.
With these words I give you a cake to eat
on the eastern side of the Lake of Flowers.
With these words I give you a heart
of lapis lazuli — a stone heart, maybe,
but nonetheless, everlasting.

3. Silence

Between the “Small Amulets” section and the succeeding poems is an italicized poem in French and an epigraph for the second, untitled, section of *Cartouches*, emphasizing that her book is moving into a new register. The italicized French poem is a signal of transition, reminiscent of the moments of passage in such myths as those of Odysseus’s and Dante’s visits to the underworld:

*La mort m’enjôle, m’humecte
la nuque, pendant que j’erre,
étrangère, dans cet espace
sans temps où le silence
s’engouffre, fait place
à son flot*

*(Death entices me, dampens
the nape of my neck, while I wander,
a stranger, in this place
out of time where silence
overwhelms itself, wave
after wave)⁵*

The mention of “silence” is especially noteworthy since, as Tostevin says in the last of the “Small Amulets,” “With these words I give you a heart.” In the silence of the death-haunted desert, however, she begins her project. The epigraph, a quotation from the American postmodernist poet Clark Coolidge, underscores what he believes to be the ancient Egyptians’ outstanding achievement: “they gained a clarity of the mystery.” Although, as a site for interaction with the dead, Egypt does indeed seem ideal, it involves a serious drawback. Barbara Watterson points out that “it is only from written records that we know ancient Egyptian; we cannot be sure how ancient Egyptian was spoken” (45). This verbal silence is part of the overwhelming silence Tostevin feels as she commences (again) with her *Cartouches*. The need for voice inspires, and is also a metaphor for, Tostevin’s quest to reincorporate into (her) life her father, much the way the apostrophe in *sophie*, “in addressing absence turns that absence into presence” (*sophie* 47). According to Tostevin’s statements in her article “Reading after the Writing Fact,” this “need” is, however, neither the traditionally defined location of art “in the archaic definition of desire, the experience of some originary loss,” nor in the more recent definition of “desire as impulse, a beat that liberates writing from its

metaphysical, historical and psychoanalytical treatment” (66). Instead, Tostevin claims, “I know that for myself it’s no longer possible to write from a concept of absence, of loss.” (66).

Other than the joy that writing gives me, I don’t know what I want to achieve when writing, what trace, what configurations I can fashion as I travel my trajectory.... I don’t know where I’m heading as I continually toss myself into the air, but as one of my favorite writers and mentor, bpNichol taught me, I trust the words to take me to what place I don’t know. (66)

She goes on in this article to quote a poem from *‘sophie* about Billie Holiday, invoking the experimental, free spirit of jazz as a parallel to her way of writing. Reconsidered in these terms, the silence which Tostevin experiences after her father’s death, in Egypt, is not absence at all. The silence is the melody of the dead for which Tostevin improvises words. She writes in *‘sophie*,

I write because I can’t sing I am the book exiled
 from my voice in search of a melody but like the woman
 who is blind because her eyes are filled with seeing
 and like the woman who is deaf because her ears are
 filled with hearing I am mute because my voice is filled
 with words and unlike music I can only be understood
 and not heard. (10)

4. Ritual

Following the opening movement of *Cartouches*, the second part of the book consists of journal entries and poems, a form similar to that of *Helen in Egypt*, but without H.D.’s work’s structure of *personae*. After the solemnity of the invocations of Tostevin’s deceased father in the opening movements, the journal entries sometimes seem offhand, even chatty. “Personal” might be the best word, different from “ceremonial.” “We’ve rented a room near Midan Tahrir, the main square in the heart of modern Cairo,” she writes, for instance. This change in tone is not consistent, but it recurs amidst entries and poems of varying levels of solemnity. (The change is strictly in tone; *Cartouches*’s artistic seriousness is omnipresent. It is the “heart” of the city where she rented a room, after all.) The impression which these variations of tone reinforces — along with the brevity of the individual pieces, their disjunctions as poetry and prose, and their achronological order — is of fragmentation. In parallel with Isis’s reassem-

bling of Osiris, Achilles Lemire's reassembling of his daughter's doll, and Tostevin's reassembling of her/the father, the reader is called upon to reassemble the poems and journal entries, to make them cohere as a whole.

This personal tone has other purposes in *Cartouches* as well. In *Figuring Grief*, her study of the fiction-elegies of Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro, Karen E. Smythe also says much about poetic elegy which illuminates elegiac aspects of *Cartouches*. Directly relevant to these matters of personal tone and reassembling the fragmented text is Smythe's argument that

an emphasis on the art of mourning as well as on the mourner — the artist and survivor — has always been a significant component of elegy... Poetic continuity is achieved in the very writing of the elegy; in this sense, self-consciousness functions as a trope of consolation.
(6-7)

So for example, in *Cartouches* Tostevin narrates the story of her trip to Egypt, often foregrounding her own actions, putting herself in the picture. One journal entry begins,

I am sitting on the veranda of the old Cataract Hotel in Aswan, recording my daily journal entry, jotting down ideas for poems, recalling other writers' lines on Egypt.

As well as the self-consciousness evident here, the trajectory of this piece is noteworthy. The entry concludes with the poet watching the sun set:

the moon already high in the sky. Thoth, god of the written word, was conceived to replace this setting sun. The moon is to day what speech is to writing.

The trajectory of the following piece reverses this "self-to-ancient-Egypt" movement of the focus:

Thoth has as many faces as there are names...
Beheader of men, women, children, he determines the manner in which all are written — fixes their thoughts into his. Seed, egg, great cackler, he is hidden father of all things. A wild card. Records the weight of heavy hearts, tips the scales to restore balance.
Today he is daughter. Wears on his ibis head
my cusped moon.

These two examples show Tostevin's use of "contamination," in these cases to bring together in a live relationship figures from ancient Egypt and herself. Tostevin also contaminates ancient Egyptian cultural artifacts and monuments with modern ones, and vice versa:

Crouched inside
 the museum door the jackal
 Anubis guards the dead
 with the sweeping curve
 of gilded ears while Elvis
 blares somewhere from
 a transistor radio.
 Transmuted, hieroglyphs
 live on within our own
 small daily alphabets.
 Anubis, you ain't nothing
 but a hound dog.

Elsewhere, while gazing at the Sphinx, Tostevin hears Fred Astaire singing, "Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak." These humorous coincidences (and many others in *Cartouches*) are interesting because of their mutual shedding of light. Such contaminations, though, are especially pertinent to the elegiac project of *Cartouches*, its seeking of consolation. As noted before, Tostevin was well aware of the possibilities for "The engendering of new life within old fictions" (see above), or in "reinventing the past from a present point of view," as she puts it in her interview with Christopher Dewdney (1).⁶

5. Language

Tostevin's mourning ritual in *Cartouches* is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional, but it starts and finishes with her faith in the power of writing. In this way, the consolation generated by *Cartouches* is based on a celebration of all kinds of language. Again citing Kristeva, Tostevin explicitly declares her belief in language's powers in a review of Miriam Mandel's *collected poems*:

Almost ten years ago, Julia Kristeva wrote: 'we have not yet grasped the importance of a change of venue that involves thinking about the subject on the basis of literary practice rather than on the basis of

neurosis or psychosis' (*Desire in Language*, 97). Since then, many women have come to realize that the poetic function can transform the dependence of the subject into a test of freedom in relation to language and reality. If poetic language communicates meaning, nevertheless meaning does not exhaust the poetic function. Poetic language cannot be reduced to phenomenological perspectives; it exceeds these perspectives and strives toward a space or language where social codes, laws and traditional concepts of the subject are exploded so that they can be revised, renewed. (52)

No wonder then, that one of the main intertexts of *Cartouches* is *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. As Tostevin notes in a journal entry after buying a copy in the Cairo Museum, she is

searching for spells that can unlock the jaw, open the mouth, and keep the heart from being plundered, again and again. Let's not fool ourselves. Language serves those who can use it best and these rituals were meant for the living, each hieroglyph a bated breath.

When Tostevin meets Isis in her temple at Philae, it is a moment of mutual self-recognition for them:

Surrounded by doves and pigeons and other low-flying prey, Isis leans back on her lions — one named Yesterday, the other, Tomorrow — while, above, an eagle whirls its black-armed swastika.

In your effort to recapture Yesterday, Isis, you fashion words into perfect bodies. Dictate for posterity your embalmer's craft: how to preserve flesh in unguents and spices; how to knit together bones. . . .

So, Isis, you are a poet. You transform ghosts into letters and images. Convert winter or summer, a lake, a few stars, into a fabric of echoes, until the entire world begins to rhyme and rhyme becomes the only reason for living.

In the end, Achilles Lemire, the poet's father, is resurrected through the power of languages. After reading *Cartouches*, the reader is convinced of the truth of this assertion. The experience of reading the book generates this transformation. To explore *Cartouches* further confirms the reader's impression: the world Tostevin creates does rhyme.

NOTES

¹ The pages of *Cartouches* are unnumbered.

² Telephone conversation, 2 October 2003. The cover of *Cartouches* is copyright Talonbooks, 1995; reprinted by permission.

³ Rather than a “dove,” the second sign is a quail chick, the phonetic symbol for “u” or “w.” During our telephone conversation on 29 April 1999, Tostevin declared that her calling the sign a dove was a “creative manoeuvre” on her part: there was no way she’d say “chick” – and she thought nobody would look it up.

⁴ In H.D.’s vigorously anti-war long poem, the real Helen is in Egypt, a place of peace for her. The Greeks and Trojans had fought their war over an illusion created by the Egyptian god Amen. The arrow that seemed to kill Achilles was actually “Love’s arrow” (9), and Helen believes that she was the one who removed it (8). The dialogue between these two figures and “H.D.’s” commentaries make up the text of Helen in Egypt.

⁵ My translation, for the reader’s convenience, with apologies.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon regards this reinvention as quintessentially postmodern (4), as is also the writer’s expressed self-consciousness.

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