

# Texts for Class 2: Retreat

## H. D. (Hilda Doolittle): Helen

All Greece hates  
the still eyes in the white face,  
the lustre as of olives  
where she stands,  
and the white hands.

All Greece reviles  
the wan face when she smiles,  
hating it deeper still  
when it grows wan and white,  
remembering past enchantments  
and past ills.

Greece sees unmoved,  
God's daughter, born of love,  
the beauty of cool feet  
and slenderest knees,  
could love indeed the maid,  
only if she were laid,  
white ash amid funereal cypresses.

## H. D. (Hilda Doolittle): Eurydice

I

So you have swept me back,  
I who could have walked with the live souls  
above the earth,  
I who could have slept among the live flowers  
at last;

so for your arrogance  
and your ruthlessness  
I am swept back  
where dead lichens drip  
dead cinders upon moss of ash;

so for your arrogance  
I am broken at last,  
I who had lived unconscious,  
who was almost forgot;

if you had let me wait  
I had grown from listlessness  
into peace,  
if you had let me rest with the dead,  
I had forgot you  
and the past.

II

Here only flame upon flame  
and black among the red sparks,  
streaks of black and light  
grown colourless;

why did you turn back,  
that hell should be reinhabited  
of myself thus  
swept into nothingness?

why did you glance back?  
why did you hesitate for that moment?  
why did you bend your face  
caught with the flame of the upper earth,  
above my face?

what was it that crossed my face  
with the light from yours  
and your glance?  
what was it you saw in my face?  
the light of your own face,  
the fire of your own presence?

What had my face to offer  
but reflex of the earth,  
hyacinth colour  
caught from the raw fissure in the rock  
where the light struck,  
and the colour of azure crocuses  
and the bright surface of gold crocuses  
and of the wind-flower,  
swift in its veins as lightning  
and as white.

### III

Saffron from the fringe of the earth,  
wild saffron that has bent  
over the sharp edge of earth,  
all the flowers that cut through the earth,  
all, all the flowers are lost;

everything is lost,  
everything is crossed with black,  
black upon black  
and worse than black,  
this colourless light.

### IV

Fringe upon fringe  
of blue crocuses,  
crocuses, walled against blue of themselves,

blue of that upper earth,  
blue of the depth upon depth of flowers,  
lost;

flowers,  
if I could have taken once my breath of them,  
enough of them,  
more than earth,  
even than of the upper earth,  
had passed with me  
beneath the earth;

if I could have caught up from the earth,  
the whole of the flowers of the earth,  
if once I could have breathed into myself  
the very golden crocuses  
and the red,  
and the very golden hearts of the first saffron,  
the whole of the golden mass,  
the whole of the great fragrance,  
I could have dared the loss.

V

So for your arrogance  
and your ruthlessness  
I have lost the earth  
and the flowers of the earth,  
and the live souls above the earth,  
and you who passed across the light  
and reached  
ruthless;

you who have your own light,  
who are to yourself a presence,  
who need no presence;

yet for all your arrogance  
and your glance,  
I tell you this:

such loss is no loss,  
such terror, such coils and strands and pitfalls  
of blackness,  
such terror  
is no loss;

hell is no worse than your earth  
above the earth,  
hell is no worse,  
no, nor your flowers  
nor your veins of light  
nor your presence,  
a loss;

my hell is no worse than yours  
though you pass among the flowers and speak  
with the spirits above earth.

## VI

Against the black  
I have more fervour  
than you in all the splendour of that place,  
against the blackness  
and the stark grey  
I have more light;

and the flowers,  
if I should tell you,  
you would turn from your own fit paths  
toward hell,  
turn again and glance back

and I would sink into a place  
even more terrible than this.

VII

At least I have the flowers of myself,  
and my thoughts, no god  
can take that;  
I have the fervour of myself for a presence  
and my own spirit for light;

and my spirit with its loss  
knows this;  
though small against the black,  
small against the formless rocks,  
hell must break before I am lost;

before I am lost,  
hell must open like a red rose  
for the dead to pass.

## H. D. (Hilda Doolittle): Helen in Egypt (sections recorded by the author)

few were the words we said,  
nor knew each other,  
nor asked, are you Spirit?

are you sister? are you brother?  
are you alive?  
are you dead?

the harpers will sing forever  
of how Achilles met Helen  
among the shades,

but we were not, we are not shadows;  
as we walk, heel and sole  
leave our sandal-prints in the sand,

though the wounded heel treads lightly  
and more lightly follow,  
the purple sandals.

the old enchantment holds,  
here there is peace  
for Helena, Helen hated of all Greece.

How did we know each other?  
was it the sea-enchantment in his eyes  
of Thetis, his sea-mother?

what was the token given?  
I was alone, bereft,  
and wore no zone, no crown,

and he was shipwrecked,  
drifting without chart,  
famished and tempest-driven

the fury of the tempest in his eyes,  
the bane of battle  
and the legions lost;

for that was victory  
and Troy-gates broken  
in memory of Patroclus,

wounded, stricken,  
the insult of the charioteer,  
the chariot furiously driven,

the Furies' taunt?  
*take heart, Achilles, for you may not die,*  
*immortal and invincible;*

though the Achilles-heel treads lightly,  
still I feel the tightening muscles,  
the taut sinews quiver,

as if I, Helen, had withdrawn  
from the bruised and swollen flesh,  
the arrow from its wound.

How did we greet each other?  
here in this Amen-temple,  
I have all-time to remember;

he comes, he goes;  
I do not know what memory calls him,  
or what Spirit-master

summons hm to release  
(as God released him)  
the imprisoned, the lost;

few were the words we said,  
but the words are graven on stone,  
minted on gold, stamped upon lead;



they are coins of a treasure  
or the graded weights  
of barter and measure;

“I am a woman of pleasure,”  
I spoke ironically into the night,  
for he had built me a fire,

he, Achilles, piling driftwood,  
finding an old flint in his pouch,  
“I thought I had lost that”;

few were the words we said,  
“I am shipwrecked, I am lost,”  
turning to view the stars,

swaying as before the mast,  
“the season is different,  
we are far from — from —”

*let him forget,  
Amen, All-father,  
let him forget.*

We huddled over the fire,  
was there ever such a brazier?  
a night-bird hooted past,

he started, “a curious flight,  
a carrion creature — what —”  
(dear God, let him forget);

I said, “there is mystery in this place,  
I am instructed, I know the script,  
the shape of this bird is a letter,

they call it the hieroglyph;  
strive not, it is dedicate  
to the goddess here, she is Isis”;

“Isis,” he said, “or Thetis,” I said,  
recalling, remembering, invoking  
his sea-mother;

*flame, I prayed, flame forget,  
forgive and forget the other,  
let my heart be filled with peace.*

*let me love him, as Thetis, his mother,  
for I knew him, I saw in his eyes  
the sea-enchantment, but he*

knew not yet, Helen of Sparta,  
knew not Helen of Troy,  
knew not Helena, hated of Greece.

## Giuseppe di Lampedusa: The Leopard (opening; translated by Archibald Colquhoun)

*Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae, Amen.*

The daily recital of the Rosary was over. For half an hour the steady voice of the Prince had recalled the Glorious and the Sorrowful Mysteries; for half an hour other voices had interwoven a lilting hum from which, now and again, would chime some unlikely word: love, virginity, death; and during that hum the whole aspect of the rococo drawing room seemed to change; even the parrots spreading iridescent wings over the silken walls appeared abashed; even the Magdalen between the two windows looked a penitent and not just a handsome blonde lost in some dubious daydream, as she usually was.

Now, as the voices fell silent, everything dropped back into its usual order or disorder. Bencicò, the Great Dane, vexed at having been shut out, came barking through the door by which the servants had left. The women rose slowly to their feet, their oscillating skirts as they withdrew baring bit by bit the naked figures from mythology painted all over the milky depths of the tiles. Only Andromeda remained covered by the soutane of Father Pirrone, still deep in extra prayer, and it was some time before she could sight the silvery Perseus swooping down to her aid and her kiss.

The divinities frescoed on the ceiling awoke. The troops of Tritons and Dryads, hurtling across from hill and sea amid clouds of cyclamen pink toward a transfigured Conca d’Oro, and bent on glorifying the House of Salina, seemed suddenly so overwhelmed with exaltation as to discard the most elementary rules of perspective; meanwhile the major gods and goddesses, the Princes among gods, Thunderous Jove and frowning Mars and languid Venus, had already preceded the mob of minor deities and were amiably supporting the blue armorial shield of the Leopard.