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H.D.'s *Palimpsest* and a weaving practice
Weaving as method in literary studies

ABSTRACT
The relationship between text and textile is ancient and multi-faceted. This paper aims to extend this relationship by placing a weaving practice in dialogue with H.D.'s novel Palimpsest. *Weaving has a distinctive relationship with time, and therefore provides fertile ground for thinking through the way time is depicted in literary fiction. Time operates in weaving at various scales and rhythms, and* Palimpsest *furthers this understanding of time through its own rhythms and invocations of the image of the palimpsest. Drawing on my own weaving practice, my aim is to provide an account of how a craft practice might enable a particular method of reading texts that extends beyond traditional close reading methods.*

Keywords:
weaving, Palimpsest, time, repetition, rhythm.

INTRODUCTION
This paper examines the potential of craft in interdisciplinary research, namely weaving as method in literary studies. Craft practices have a distinctive relationship with time, and illuminate unique understandings of time, and this has potential to help develop how time is understood in forms of cultural production, including literary fiction. Novels are always, whether deliberately or not, engaged in a representation of time in some way. In this paper I explore the structural and temporal connections between weaving and H.D.'s novel *Palimpsest*. My aim here is to provide an account of how a craft practice might enable a particular method of reading representations of time in literary texts that extends beyond traditional close reading methods.

H.D., pen name of Hilda Doolittle, published *Palimpsest* in 1926. H.D.'s prose and poetry has largely been read through what we know about her life, and her writing is often interpreted as her attempt to make sense of her past (Kloepfer, 1986, p. 554). Within a short timeframe, she experienced a miscarriage and the breakdown of her marriage, her brother died at war and her father passed away shortly after. She soon became ill with influenza while pregnant and gave birth, a labour which doctors

predicted she and the baby would not survive. She was cared for during this time by Bryher, the woman who was to become H.D.'s lifelong partner. She experienced the effects of trauma throughout her life and underwent analysis with Freud. Notably, H.D. also had a craft practice; she turned to needlework and tapestry to help her 'conceptualise, theorise, and overcome traumatic wartime experiences' (Elkins, 2016, p. 1). According to Amy Elkins, 'craftwork was fundamental to H.D.'s conception of literature as an art form' (2016, p. 2).

The relationship between text and textile is something that has been explored by many in recent years. Anni Albers observed that 'along with cave paintings, threads were amongst the earliest transmitters of meaning' (Albers, 2017, p. 50). Tim Ingold locates the relationship in the early days of the development of writing, exploring how writing came to be modelled on weaving; he writes that text began 'as a meshwork of interwoven threads rather than of inscribed traces' (Ingold, 2007, p. 61). For the ancient Greeks, poetry was synonymous with song, and 'weaving was closely linked in the Greek mind to singing.' Lyric poets such as Sappho, Pindar and Bacchylides 'may all have been said to have conceived of their craft as a process of 'weaving' a patterned tapestry of song' (Snyder, 1981, p. 193). There is also a wealth of scholarship on the depictions of weaving in Greek and Roman mythology, particularly in relation to the character of Penelope, who is known for her *un*weaving. Barbara Clayton develops what she calls a Penelopean poetics; a *poesis* 'modelled upon Penelope's weaving, unweaving and reweaving,' that focuses on *how* she creates rather than *what* she creates (2004, p. 1). Weaving in ancient texts is equated with language and poetry. It has been observed that 'Greek women do not speak, they weave. Semiotic woman is a weaver' (Bergren, 1983, p. 71). For example, the character Philomela weaves signs into a robe to communicate after her tongue has been cut out. Kathryn Sullivan Kruger observes that weaving outdates writing by up to 20,000 years, suggesting that textiles were a fundamental pre-textual tool for transmitting social messages, or that 'the ancient production of texts first occurred in the form of textiles' (2001, p. 13). Kruger therefore argues for 'an expanded definition of literary history' (2001, p. 13) that includes textile history. Considering the central role of women in the textile industry since ancient times, this would consequently 'recover a large community of female authorship' (2001, p. 12). Kruger also examines the semiotics of textiles, extending Julia Kristeva's early theory of signification to the text-textile relationship, likening the text to the infant and the textile to the Mother. Kruger writes 'at some point in history…the text separated from the textile through a process of abjection analogous to the infant's abjection of its mother's body' (2001, p. 36). This paper extends the scholarship on the relationship between text and textile, by placing a weaving practice directly in dialogue with a literary studies practice.

STRUCTURE

H.D.'s *Palimpsest* invokes the palimpsest first through its structure. Palimpsests are dynamic material and temporal objects. They are manuscripts, commonly of parchment or vellum, upon which a process of layering occurs; an earlier text is erased, and new text superimposed. An erasure would occur when it was decided that a text was no longer needed, or rather, when the value of the text is outweighed by the value of the material upon which it is written. Over the following centuries, traces of the effaced text would begin to reappear as the ink reacted with oxygen in the air. A palimpsest is a site for the accidental collisions of time and text; the past is preserved within the palimpsest-object awaiting its re-emergence. The re-appearance of a past text unsettles a linear concept of time, or one where the past passes, and instead gestures toward a cumulative concept of time, one where the past is contained in the present. A palimpsest is often spoken of in terms of its layers and superimposition. The problem, however, with an image of superimposition is that it does not account for intersections and interlacing. Texts that have coincidentally come to occupy the same roll of vellum and would otherwise have no connection are now entangled and new meanings are created in this entanglement. A palimpsest is the meeting of planes as they transgress their parallelism. It was common practice for the new text to be written running perpendicular to the undertext, evoking the warp and weft threads of a woven cloth, the construction of which relies on this interlocking structure. A palimpsest equally relies on its entanglement, to undo the fabric of the palimpsest, to unpick warp from weft, is to destroy it.

Structure is fundamental in woven textiles. Indeed, both text and textile have a corresponding relationship to structure through their different and similar operations of binding threads and stringing together words (Smith, 2017, p. 240). As I've already mentioned, the perpendicular lines of writing in a palimpsest gesture toward the warp and weft threads in weaving. Prompted by this and the layered intersections of a palimpsest, I've been working with a weaving method called double-weave (or double-cloth). Double-weave is a particularly structural and three-dimensional weave. It essentially multiplies the basic structure of a weave, so that there are two sets of warps and two sets of wefts. The principle behind double-weave can also be extended to triple, quadruple, and so on. The process of making a double (or multi-layered) weave essentially involves weaving two or more layers of fabric simultaneously on a loom (Figures 1 and 2). The fabrics can be joined at the sides or at any point within the fabric, connecting the multiple layers into a unified whole. Not all the layers are necessarily visible from the front or back of a double weave, so double-weave invites a looking through the side of the fabric, instead of only at the front-face or back-face, in order to see all the layers. The selvedges (the edges along the length) of double-weave become a focus point and its three-dimensionality becomes apparent (Figures 3 and 4).

FIGURE 1 AND 2. Triple (Figure 1) and double (figure 2) weave fabrics on the loom.

Double-weave is both analogous and complementary to the structure of the palimpsest and its hidden layers. Texts and textiles are both planes composed of lines. Following Ingold's taxonomy of lines (2007, pp. 41–43), for the palimpsest, these lines are traces, whereas for the double-weave, they are threads. Furthermore, palimpsests and double-weavings each are constituted by intersections of multiple planes (planes of text for the palimpsest, and planes of fabric for the double-weave). In the case of a palimpsest, the intersection happens in time, the planes of text are always occupying the same space, their moments of simultaneous visibility being the point of intersection. Inversely, for a finished double-weave, the intersections happen in space, and are fixed in time; they are constantly there. Intersections of these planes are made possible through simultaneity of some sort. For a palimpsest, the simultaneity is spatial; they are written in the same space. For a double-weave, the simultaneity is temporal; they are woven on the loom at the same time.

FIGURE 3 AND 4. Finished triple (Figure 3) and double (figure 4) weave fabrics with their layers visible at the selvedges. Photography by Rachel Schenberg.

The arrangement of the palimpsest is mirrored in *Palimpsest*'s three-part structure; the parts are distinct in their stories, but not altogether discrete. Like the layers of text in a palimpsest, the parts can be understood as entangled layers. Each part is grounded in its own space and time setting, but is not contained by it, and is visible/perceptible in the other parts. Part I is set in ancient Rome and follows Hipparchia, the imagined daughter of Hipparchia of Maroneia, the ancient Greek cynic philosopher. This Hipparchia is a poet and weaver living in ancient Rome as a slave. Part II, set in London during the interwar years, concentrates on Raymonde Ransome, also a poet and a war widow. Part III takes place in Egypt also in the early twentieth century, where Helen Fairwood, a British woman working in Egypt, is secretary to an archaeologist and Egyptologist. This structure is somewhat involuted. Raymonde and Helen are both preoccupied with an awareness of modernity, viewing antiquity as something that lingers but is obscured by modernity; 'antiquity showed through the semi-transparence of shallow modernity like blue flame through the texture of some jelly-fish-like deep-sea creature (H.D., 1968, p. 158). Through these repeated references to antiquity, the first part of *Palimpsest*, which is set in Ancient Rome, is brought into these subsequent sections. The 'jelly-fish of modernity' (1968, p. 159) reappears continually throughout Raymonde's stream-of-consciousness as a 'semi-transparent substance that lay between herself and antiquity' (H.D., 1968, p. 163). In Part III, in Egypt, Helen is acutely aware of how the past is always present, as she stands on 'the dust that for four thousand years had lain, still lies on the highroads of Egypt' (1968, p. 191). Sentences like this act as small interstices in Helen's thoughts that allow light from the ancient setting of Part I to filter through. While she may not be conscious of the characters who preceded her in the novel, it is suggested that she may possess some kind of subconscious memory of them as she reflects 'past, present, all commutations of past and present (as light through darkened glass) were merged at one within her. The just past, the far past' (1968, p. 218). This merging or colliding of selves and time is again reminiscent of the palimpsest. It is particularly this mention of 'the just past, the far past' that suggests that Helen's feelings of all the pasts and presents within her encompass both her own past on a personal level but also the distant past, other 'versions' of herself throughout history, namely Hipparchia and Raymonde.

The narrative structure is also reflected in the text's construction of the self as multi-layered or multidimensional especially in the tying together of the three protagonists. They each are grappling with other selves, or additional layers to the self. Hipparchia is grappling with another Hipparchia, namely her mother, whose name she shares. Seeing her reflection in a pool, 'Hipparchia regarded cold Hipparchia' (H.D., 1968, p. 53). Likewise, Raymonde's identity is split and her stream-of-consciousness is interrupted by an androgynous alter-ego named Ray Bart, 'behind London there was another London, behind Raymonde Ransome there was… Ray Bart' (H.D., 1968, p. 104). Likewise, Helen struggles with 'the measuring of self against self…the self of intellect, the self of the drift and dream of anodyne, the intermediate self, the slender balancing pole that held the two together, joined the two, keeping them strictly separate' (1968, p. 209).

REPETITION AND SCALE

The structure that underpins *Palimpsest* also implies a concept of time that resonates with how I have come to understand/experience time via my weaving practice. Through practising weaving, time can be understood to operate at different scales. I notice this through the repeating of different elements of the practice at varying scales. One session of weaving, sitting at the loom, may last for an hour or two, and will involve a dense set of repetition: repeating a pattern and its corresponding gestures over and over. Weavers understand that patterns are fundamental in weaving and that 'patterns are the result of repetition in time and space' (Kraft, 2004, p. 277). Shifting scales, another part of my practice involves the slow collection of material for natural dyeing over the course of my day-to-day, for example onion skins and avocado pits. I am regularly depositing these 'acquisitions' into a collection that slowly accumulates, usually over the course of months, until there is enough to dye with. What I find myself with—this stash of dried organic matter organised neatly in individual paper bags—constitutes an archive of sorts, a repository of ruins, or shreds of recent quotidian encounters. And when it comes time to use them, they are not simply exhausted and then thrown out, but are quite literally transferred into a substrate—wool thread, usually—which then becomes a component of those smaller scale series of repetitions. The different scales of repetition, and by extension scales of time, are therefore within each other; they are not independent of one another. Additionally, this gradual accumulation has necessitated the forming of habits (remembering to save them after cooking, gathering loose skins from the bucket of onions at the supermarket each time I visit, reminding friends to save them for me, and so on). My practice is therefore always semi-active, always happening at this daily scale, even when I'm not at the loom or actively making something.

Weaving also needs to be considered on its largest scale. Like many other craft practices, weaving has a distinctive relationship with the past. Learning and practising weaving usually involves repeating traditional methods, and then perhaps observing how they eventually modify themselves within one's individual practice. So, there is a repeating happening on a scale that far exceeds the life or memory of any one person. When it comes to craft, there is a particular tension between the contemporary and the traditional. Its anachronistic quality has been both embraced, as a resistance to industrialisation, and a source for derision, a reason for craft to be seen as outmoded, old-fashioned or domestic (Bryan-Wilson, 2013, p. 8). However, it needs to be recognised that craft's (and therefore weaving's) 'distinctive ontology is its very connection to the past, to the entire rich terrain of thrift and ingenuity, to knowledge production passed down through the hand… craft embodies its histories in its materials' (Bryan-Wilson, 2013, p. 8). Put this way, weaving's constant link with the past does not simply speak back to it, but continually draws it into the present.

There are multiple scales of time at work in *Palimpsest* too and this is similarly noticeable though the various scales at which the many forms of repetition appear. Exact phrases are repeated numerous times across the novel, recalling earlier sections and challenging the ordered and linear chronology imposed by the specific spatiality of the book form. The phrase 'recalled her to herself' is repeated at least three times across the novel: 'her body recalled her to herself' (H.D., 1968, p. 38), 'rain beating on a low roof recalled her to herself' (H.D., 1968, p. 79), and 'the cold of her sheets recalled her to herself' (H.D., 1968, p. 222). There are also small, tight clusters of repetition. In Part II, the phrase "feet—feet—feet—feet—feet" is repeated every page for twelve consecutive pages, sometimes two or three times on a single page.

At its largest scale, *Palimpsest* takes place over millennia, with the first part taking its setting in ancient times, and the second and third in the twentieth century. These three parts are repetitious in plot and character as it follows a distinct narrative pattern. Each part focuses on a female protagonist, from whom the narrative unfolds. Hipparchia, Raymonde and Helen each contend with internal conflicts in a 'split-identity', grappling with a suppressed or alternate self. They also all in some way work through a relationship with a male character, each eventually leaving said male character behind. For Hipparchia and Raymonde, it is with the help of another female character, whereas in the third iteration of this plotline, a break from the established pattern occurs and it is Helen who guides another woman. This narrative pattern takes place within the novel, across its three parts, however we can also step back and understand it as taking place on a scale larger than the novel. Repetition is often involved in storytelling

in some way. Stories themselves get repeated in their telling and re-telling, and newly written stories often draw on previous ones, or speak to them in some manner, whether deliberately or inadvertently. *Palimpsest* tells three typical female plots: the spinster, , plots we have seen before: the married woman and the "loose" woman,
(Dunn, 1987, p. 55) each following a similar pattern where the woman 'conforms to a traditional pattern up to a point, they then take active command of their lives' (Dunn, 1987, p. 57). So, in its repeating of these typical female narrative tropes, *Palimpsest* breaks away from their patterns in its first and second parts, and then in the third part, in its continual process of differentiation, it breaks from its own patterns.

RHYTHM AND PATTERN

Repetition also gives rise to rhythm. Many parts of weaving are very rhythmic; weaving has a lot to say about rhythm. Different rhythms emerge during the different stages of weaving. While winding the warp, one hand guides the thread around the spokes of the warping board, while the other hand gently holds the thread up to prevent it from becoming tangled in the warping path. After the first few laps around the warping board, my hands find their rhythm and move in and out of the best positions for this particular warp as they guide the thread back and forth. It is important to ensure while winding the warp that there is consistent tension throughout all threads that are wrapped around the spokes. Tension is most consistent when one is able to find and settle into a rhythm, and this is felt in the arms and the entire body. Although the aim is towards regular movement, no two movements around the warping board are identical, although they may appear identical. The paradox is that consistent tension is usually found when one is not 'trying'. This is a difficult thing to understand as a novice weaver, but it highlights how something like weaving draws on so much tacit knowledge and practice.

The actual weaving stage is arguably one of the most visibly rhythmic parts of weaving. I use my hand or foot to raise one of the loom's harnesses, which lifts some of the warp threads, creating a *shed* (opening) for me to pass or *throw* through the *shuttle* (containing the weft thread). I then lower the harness, closing the shed, and swing the beater towards me, which locks the thread in place horizontally. *Lift, throw, close, beat*. I repeat these movements and sure enough I will find a rhythm. This rhythm is exaggerated and made audible by the soft sounds of the loom. When I swing the beater, I move my whole body back with it, rather than just my arm—'proper' weaving posture entails moving one's whole upper body with the movement of the beater, not only the arm— and my body rocks with the loom. The force with which one beats the weft into place determines the density of the weft threads. Usually an even density is desired. This is similar to the situation with tension in warping.

As Henri Lefebvre points out, externality is necessary in order to analyse a rhythm, 'yet in order to grasp a rhythm one must have been grasped by it, have given or abandoned oneself 'inwardly' to the time that it rhythmed' (2004, p. 88). For weaving, this means that in truly 'abandoning oneself inwardly' to the rhythms of weaving, one cannot be consciously thinking about the rhythm, it is only in hindsight, or in stepping outside the rhythm that one can attempt to analyse it. Repetition is implied in rhythm, which he defines as 'movements and differences within repetition' (2004, p. 90). Weaving is composed of the two types of repetition described by Lefebvre that constitute rhythmed time. These are cyclical and linear repetition. Cyclical repetition is the repetition of returns, 'the rhythms of beginning again' (2004, p. 90), such as the newness produced by nights and days, or the rhythms of weaving's continual renewal over time, or the using up of slowly collected materials and beginning again. Linear rhythm, on the other hand, is constituted by the 'consecution and reproduction of the same phenomenon' (2004, p. 90), the string of almost identical arm movements around the warping board, or the throwing of the shuttle and beating of the fabric. Cyclical rhythm and linear rhythm are in 'perpetual interaction and are even relative to one another, to the extent that one serves as the measure of the other' (2004, p. 90), meaning that the various levels or scales of rhythm that make and are made by weaving are encapsulated within each other. The series of arm movements winding a thread around a board is nested within the cycles of warping which begin and end perpetually.

Ingold compares sawing a plank to going for a walk. He notes that the rhythmic quality does not 'lie in the repetitiveness of the movement itself. For there to be rhythm, movement must be felt. And feeling lies in the coupling of movement and perception' (2011, p. 60). There is a similar relationship between movement and perception in weaving, just as the practitioner sawing a plank, I need to take up a movement and a certain level of perception. Winding the warp involves a certain kind of attunement to the whole system that the practitioner is embedded within (materials, tools, practitioner).

Essential to this level of perception are the time constraints I have introduced into my weaving practice. The constraints provide a predetermined path for the weaving to take which removes the need for a certain amount of decision-making while weaving which makes room for this level of perception to expand and for practitioner to be fully immersed in that coupling of movement and perception. This perception is also necessary for the practice of timing, or what the ancient Greeks knew as *kairos*, a propitious moment, something which seems to simultaneously appear and disappear, where the success of particular course of action is greatly determined by the timing of its execution. *Kairos* therefore is not only a kind of moment to be seized but also the 'quality of attention and perception needed in order to harness that opportunity', it is a 'qualitatively different mode of time to that of linear or chronological time' (Cocker, 2017, p. 133). Weaving is thick with *kairotic* moments, such that weaving is largely a practice of negotiating timing.

The constraints isolate and amplify different aspects of the timings involved in weaving. The first one involves a pattern called *rosepath*, a variation on twill. My version of rosepath is woven over a sequence of ten different treadling combinations, the repetition of which constitutes the fabric. I set myself the task of weaving for exactly one hour, setting up a timer to sound every six minutes. At each sounding I would repeat whichever individual combination I was up to within the sequence at that moment. The effect of these repeats every six minutes turned out to be hardly noticeable little 'glitches' in the overall pattern, which, if you did not know what was behind them would appear as mistakes. However, what resulted was a layering of one pattern over another. A plain rosepath pattern would usually be considered spatial, the result of repetitions in space. But as the additional six-minute pattern marks out weaving time, it sits in a temporal dimension as well as a spatial one. Layering repeating over repeating creates divergent scatterings that while are not evenly distributed throughout the fabric by any means (my weaving is not perfectly consistent over time), still create a pattern which signifies in space but denotes time.

The next constraint came out of my interest in the way that a weaver familiarises themselves with a pattern sequence. When beginning to weave an unfamiliar pattern, the weaving movements are fairly unsteady and I usually refer to the pattern sequence written out on paper until I have memorised it and its movements, and it is at this point that something shifts. This constraint involved refreshing the pattern as soon as I knew I had memorised it. I rolled a dice to generate random patterns, in order to make totally new patterns that I was not in any way familiar with, and for each new 'round' I increased the sequence by one more combination, so in theory it might take a little longer to learn. Weaving under this constraint, it was as I approached the point of not needing to look at the pattern that the weaving rhythm took hold. This 'pre-rhythm' phase is similar to the 'setting out' phase described by Ingold in his account of the processional quality of tool use, which at a certain point 'gives way to [what he calls] carrying on' (2011, p. 55). He describes the switch from 'setting out' to 'carrying on' as analogous to rowing a boat, 'turning from the initial and rather awkward pushing of the oars in back stroke to the more comfortable and efficient movement of pulling once a sufficient depth of water has been reached' (2011, p. 55). As soon as I felt that I was familiar enough with the pattern to not need to glance at my sticky note, I would bring myself back to the awkwardness of setting out, beginning the cycle again, only allowing myself to enjoy the relaxing sensations of being in this kind of rhythmed time with the loom for a moment. Because of this almost constant state of adjusting to a new pattern, the resultant fabric had a very inconsistent density, reflecting the inconsistent movements of the arrhythmia of the constant 'setting out'. This echoes what I observed with the rhythm of winding a warp and managing a consistent tension. It is as if while concentrating on the pattern, there is no space for the level of perception required to establish rhythmicity with the tools. Once the pattern is committed to memory, however, the weaving can take on the rhythmic quality that results from the pairing of perception and movement.

Returning to the narrative pattern that plays out in each section of *Palimpsest*, the three archetypal female characters, and the ways in which, as I discussed, these patterns both repeat and alter what comes before them, these repetitions can be thought through in terms of rhythm. If (following Lefebvre) rhythm is movement and difference within repetition, then, like with weaving, these repetitions can be largely understood as rhythmed time. They are also cyclical, as they are repetitions of returning, and beginning again. Nestled within these cyclical repetitions are linear repetitions, and these two forms of repetition are in a relationship that is mutually constitutive, in other words, they are constantly giving birth to one another. *Palimpsest*'s repetitive plot cycle must happen in order for the linear rhythms generated by phrase or word repetitions to be produced and vice versa. Hipparchia, Raymonde and Helen all follow the same cyclical rhythm creating the conditions for the linear rhythms to emerge. For example, Hipparchia repeats lines of poetry to herself throughout her section, almost incessantly. The line *I kept no tunic with bright gem* is a line from a poem written out near the beginning of the novel, taken from an epigram that may have really been written on the real Hipparchia of Maroneia's tomb. In reckoning with her relationship with her mother, she constantly repeats lines from this poem in her head. This linear repetition furthers her progression through the narrative, so that we can reach the next character's part of the cycle.

CONCLUSION

The unique connections between text and textile that many have observed are what prompted me to explore the potential of weaving in literary studies, and similarly the usefulness of a literary approach to practising weaving, specifically in regard to time. I have not attempted to address the application of craft practices more widely in this context, however, I have provided a framework through which to consider the operation of time in practice and this could certainly be applied in the context of other creative practices. It would be interesting to see how structure, repetition, scale and rhythm operate within other making practices, and what other readings of literary fiction this could generate.

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