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The “end of seeing”: Description and Meditation in *Pieces of Air in the Epic*

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Abstract

The “end of seeing”: Description and Meditation in *Pieces of Air in the Epic*

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This Creative Writing Capstone Project investigates themes of place, memory, the body, and their respective relationship(s) to language. The poems range from short lyric pieces to longer, multi-sectioned meditations. Formalistically experimental, these works seek to actualize pace and breath through language and use of the page. Many of the poems draw on personal experiences and autobiography, while others inhabit a more abstract, mythic realm of description.

The “end of seeing”:
Description and Meditation in *Pieces of Air in the Epic*

In her title poem “Air In The Epic,” Brenda Hillman’s speaker thinks of the advice she gives to her poetry students: “Try / to describe the world, you tell them—but what is a description? / For centuries people carried the epic / inside themselves” (8). In thinking about my own approach to writing poetry, and particularly the contemporary (sometimes experimental) techniques I often use in my poems, it’s helpful to revisit such a seemingly basic question—to consider the place and the meaning of description in poetry. What possible function does a description fulfill and how does a description interact with other aspects of a poem? Is a description internal or external, and how does the form or particular enactment of that description change its effect on the reader?

When Wordsworth writes, “These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts, / Which at this season, with their unripe fruits, / Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves / ‘Mid groves and copses [...]” (“Tintern Abbey”), he—like most (*all*?) poets—seems to be recording a specific vision of a (*the*?) world. In this way, we might consider a line of description in a poem to be something originating from the external (if not from the world itself, at least from something outside the poem’s immediate frame of reference). But, language being an imperfect tool of representation, even Wordsworth’s description is by nature inexact; reading the word “green” is of course something very different from the color or experience of *actual* green; the word “grove” is something very different from an *actual* grove. If all the poet wanted to do was record or recreate the world, we’d simply take a photograph. Something more complicated than vivid documentation is at play in these kinds of poetic description; the external vision is filtered first through the writer’s perspective, secondly through the medium of language, and thirdly

through a speaker. Thus the vision endures multiple layers of transformation as it enters the realm of the poem.

As this transformation occurs, description often enters into dialogue with various voices, statements, questions, emotions, ponderings, or meanings—all of which might be grouped under the term “meditation.” A poem may create a vivid picture in the reader’s mind through description and yet it usually strives to do more. The tension and/or overlap between internal meditation and external description is one force that might drive a poem forward. “Tintern Abbey” illustrates this dichotomy, epitomizing the traditional concept of a “descriptive-meditative structure.” The speaker visits an external place (Tintern Abbey) and begins by describing that place; the place then awakens an internal meditation (in this case, the speaker reflects upon memory and nature as refuge); and finally, the speaker returns to re-describe the external place (a place which now holds a different meaning, in light of the speaker’s meditation). M.H. Abrams expounds the so-called Romantic structure in his essay “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” and Corey Marks discusses it almost half a century later in his chapter from *Structure & Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns*. In its Romantic realization, the descriptive-meditative structure is typically associated with investigations of human consciousness, more specifically the power of memory and imagination, but the structure has myriad derivative forms and adaptations.

In this critical essay, I’d like to consider this structure as it relates to a particular contemporary work, Hillman’s *Pieces of Air in the Epic*. While the book is by no means a direct re-enactment of the descriptive-meditative structure, it both invokes and resists the structure. In fact, it’s the very conflict between internal and external that Hillman interrogates when her speaker asks, “what is a description?” Instead of viewing description as external—*I see the apple*

in front of me and now I will describe the apple—Hillman entertains the possibility of an internal description, a description one can “carry” around the way “people carried the epic / inside themselves.” Similarly, she puts pressure on our understanding of meditation as something entirely internal, investigating meditation’s manifestation not just within the individual human consciousness, but also through the body and through collective modes of thought. As well as invoking and re-thinking notions of the descriptive and meditative, Hillman explores the idea of an epic (as her title suggests)—a genre connotative of questions of heroism, cultural identity and nationhood. I’m interested in how she puts these Homeric ideals in dialogue with understandings of the modern world, poetry’s vision of that world, and that world’s vision of poetry; how she re-envisions description and meditation in order to breach the distance between Homer and contemporary functions of poetry.

PLACE

According to Abram’s structure, the descriptive-meditative poem begins with a “composition of place.” Hillman invokes place in the title and opening lines of her first poem in *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, “Street Corner” (3):

There was an angle
where I went for
centuries not as a
self or feature but
exhaled as a knowing
brick tradesmen engineered for
blunt or close recall

From the start, Hillman challenges the reader’s traditional conception of “place,” as an “angle” becomes somewhere one can go. The literal then gets further confused with the figurative as the speaker claims not only to have gone to the “angle” but to have gone there “for / centuries.”

Despite the straightforward, non-metaphorical language, we are not speaking of real time. The speaker then elucidates her vision of the “I” — “not as a self or feature but exhaled as a knowing.” Ideas of the “self” or a “feature” of the self to which first person speakers typically correspond are thus dispelled, and the “I” subsists as a kind of disembodied voice, “exhaled as a knowing.” Hillman is particularly concerned with conceptions of breath and body (as the “Air” in the title of the collection would indicate). One “exhales” as breath leaves the body, possibly during the output of language or voice, but here it’s not words which are “exhaled” but rather “a knowing.” Already, Hillman seems to be connecting ideas of insight and awareness to the breath. The “knowing” is of course something “engineered” for “recall” — and it is indeed recalled retrospectively throughout the poem, perhaps in connection with the poet’s use of language (similarly “engineered”) and that language’s desire to withstand the passage of time.

Returning to the idea of “place,” in the eighth line of “Street Corner,” Hillman’s speaker recalls, “soundly there, meanings grew / past a second terror / finding their way as / evenings.” We now have an “angle” conceived of as a place, in connection with a disembodied voice, which then becomes a site for meaning-making. Such meaning-making, especially in its connection to emotion (“past a second terror”) seems firmly planted in the realm of meditation (as opposed to description), emotion being primarily internal. Thus the “composition of place” does seem to spur on a sense of internal meditation, as the descriptive-meditative structure delineates, even as the “meanings” transform into “evenings” — a term which seems connected to experience, or perhaps in this case memory of experience (as the narration is in past tense). As the verb tense indicates, the place (the “angle”) where the disembodied voice “went” is not where the speaker continues to reside. Just as the breath is momentary, the state of “knowing” and the “meanings” made aren’t permanent. The verb tense seems to suggest either that they

have dissipated (perhaps as an “exhaled” breath dissipates in the air), or that some change to the voice has taken place; some other direction (or “angle”) has been pursued.

Nevertheless, the speaker continues to describe the “meanings” and they begin to take on an animate quality; not only are they capable of growing and “finding their way,” but also of:

[...] hearing the peppermint
noise of sparrows landing
like spare dreams of
citizens where abstraction and
the real could merge.

For Hillman, sound itself becomes exactly that: a place “where abstraction and / the real [can] merge” (thinking back to the meaning-making, it’s in fact “soundly” that “meanings grew”). If we consider a description to be a poem’s offering of “the real” (even if the landscape described is fictional, we might consider it to be the “real” space of the poem) and the meditation it invokes to be “abstraction” in some sense, then “Street Corner” is a “spare dream” indeed. The speaker is after all still composing the place; we are still in the first sentence of the poem, and the “angle” is the poem’s landscape. Yet meditation seems to have leaked into the description; the description, with its discussion of “knowing,” “meanings” and “terror,” seems to “exhale” meditation naturally.

At this point in the poem, the first person pronoun “I” is abandoned, and the speaker takes up the plural “we”: “We had crossed / the red forest; we had / recognized a weird lodge.” A first person identity which is multiple seems fitting, given the mutability of the disembodied voice—something that could be a “self,” a “feature,” or in this case a “knowing.” There’s also a faint connection between the plural dreaming “citizens” who enter the metaphor just two lines before the first use of the “we.” Hillman sticks to the first person plural, finishing the poem:

We could have said
song outlasts poetry, words

are breath bricks to
 support the guardless singing
 project. We could have
 meant song outlasts poetry.

Here a dichotomy between “song” and “poetry” is introduced, as the two are weighed against each other. Language, or “words,” are likened to “bricks”—a metaphor which echoes the poem’s earlier mention of “brick tradesmen” who “engineer” language for “recall” (language as the “knowing” that poets “exhale”). The practice of “recall” is taken up here at the end of the poem, as one mode of breath or language is said to “outlast” the other. Especially in the wake of the “epic”—an example of words that have withstood the passage of “centuries”—it’s difficult to entirely separate song from poetry. We call Homer “epic poetry” and yet is it not also a “singing / project”? Traditionally rooted in oral (as opposed to written) traditions, the epic is perhaps a form of language that has one foot in poetry and the other in song. Hillman’s speaker also sets up a dichotomy between saying and meaning in these final lines. “We could have said [...]” seems to imply “we did not say.” However, “We could have meant [...]” is less clear. In this final sentence, the speaker plays with the idea of unfixed meaning; or as the poem earlier articulates, meanings (plural) that “grow,” especially through sound. Words may provide the landscape from which to take off, from which to make meaning, and yet they do not constitute that meaning. The “tradesman” Homer lays his “breath bricks” which “support” but do not comprise the “singing / project.”

If Hillman is loosely invoking the first two movements of Abram’s descriptive-meditative structure in “Street Corner”—firstly she conceptualizes a place and describes that place to the reader, and secondly she executes a slow pivot into the realm of the meditative—we must consider whether or not she returns to that “place” changed; if a kind of re-description takes place (thus fulfilling the third and final movement of the structure). Just as, through all of his

interior meditation, Wordsworth's speaker never leaves Tintern Abbey, during the course of the poem Hillman's disembodied voice never leaves the "angle." No epiphany takes place in the end, but rather an effort toward meaning-making, as the speaker explores the possibilities the "angle" and being present in the "angle" hold; what could have been "said" and what could have been "meant"? Thus, even though no resolution is achieved, the voice does end somewhere new. The whole poem takes place in past tense, but the final thoughts push the reader into the present moment. Given the question of song's versus poetry's lifespan, and the conceptions of language offered up, the reader might be prompted to consider their implications in the forthcoming poems, the rest of the "singing / project." We might also view "Street Corner" as a kind of first movement in the context of the whole collection, a carving out of the mind-scape or "place" in which these poems take place. And it is, of course, a place where the line between description and meditation blurs, where memory and perception reach across all of time, and where modes of being are multiple and mutable.

OBJECTS OF DESCRIPTION

What the descriptive-meditative structure often highlights (both for the Romantics and for Hillman) is a degree of separation between the self and the object of description. In "Statueless Architecture," Hillman's speaker remarks, "You / go through an arch / and aren't the arch" (32). In this case, the arch serves as a place in which the "you" exists momentarily, and yet that temporary inhabitation (seemingly a unification between speaker and landscape) actually serves to evoke a feeling of separation from that place. For the Romantics, this often triggers a crisis of self.

Hillman complicates matters throughout *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, when she turns description onto language itself. The “epic” becomes an object of description, as well as literal words and letters. In “Air in the Epic,” not only does the speaker reflect that “For centuries people carried the epic / inside themselves,” but a few lines later “The epic is carried into school / then to scooped-out chairs” (8). In the former line, the epic can be understood as an internalized story passed from generation to generation; it’s interior—“inside themselves”—and thus to some degree figurative. When Hillman’s present-day students carry the epic “into school” however, it’s both interior and exterior—an inherited entity within (even if the students don’t realize it) but also an external object, a book which can be placed on “scooped-out chairs.” Thus the object of description, for Hillman, can be at once literal and figurative.

Hillman pressures the boundaries of objectification itself when she objectifies words or letters. In “Reversible Wind,” she transcribes the sounds of a sprinkler, but then describes the transcription rather than the sprinkler: “Night sprinkler fsss fssssss fs-s-s-s-s-s / Vowels dropped in the three branched world” (7). And—stranger still—in “The *E* In *Being*” Hillman extracts the letter *e* from several utterances—“(—*eeee* in a mountain meadow” and “*eeee*’s of / glacier”—and describes this extraction, as a “harvest of: / doomed unsayable / letters” (38). The most extended example of this meta-descriptive technique occurs in “The Corporate Number Rescue Album.” Hillman describes the numbers 5 and 0:

as the executives take the 5th, the oxygen
in the cup of the 5
gets formal, crisp,
to support the *tilllllt* when the number
turns on its

back—] or > —before
being hooked to the verge ledge
of the planet; the 5
fears being next

to their zeroes, their one-inflected

zeroes' face masks,
all air zeroes,
zeroes choked,
choked air, all choked air zeroes (34)

Here Hillman plays with the literal shape of numbers—"the oxygen / in the cup of the 5," the 5's "tilllllt," and the "choked air" inside the circular zero. She uses the physicality of the numbers to personify them—"the 5 fears"; its air "gets formal." It's the men (executives) who "call on the number 5 / for help," in the beginning of the poem and in doing so (at least within the poem's governance) they seem to install a kind of lifeblood or agency into the number 5. A reversal occurs and the poem becomes about the numbers themselves rather than the men. The description reflects this reversal—rather than describing a *face mask round as a zero*, it's the zero that *has* a face mask. Hillman literalizes the figurative (or symbolic rather), and yet somehow the description becomes more figurative through this literalization. All the while, Hillman is of course drawing on the irony of the scenario—that as the men "call on" language "for help," they are doing so in order to enact their silence (they are "pleading the fifth"). This silence perhaps becomes the landscape for the poem's description. Are we to see this as a unification or separation of landscape and voice? In either case, Hillman seems to be disrupting our fundamental understandings and usages of description. As she emphasizes the physical exteriority of words and symbols, and complicates the question of literal versus figurative description, she begins to toy with a crisis not of self, but of language.

In the last stanza of "Doppler Effect in Diagram Three," Hillman likens the movement of language to the Doppler effect:

The sentence or the train passing
As it holds out its skirts of sound

The sentence has started its journey
 But has no idea for its mystic demise
 It rides in the firebox to the cave
 Looking out as pines their raw huts
 Bearing its constant falling
 Over the laughter in the night pool of those
 Who have not stopped & may not, ever (18)

Hillman enacts a twofold description in the first two lines, since it is either “The sentence *or* the train” which is “passing.” The compound subject is an effective descriptive technique here, as it provides a visual foundation for what follows. In the third line the subject becomes only “The sentence,” and yet the train sticks in our mind visually, and the sentence takes on aspects of a train passenger—it begins a “journey”, “It rides” and “Look[s] out.” Hillman seems to resist direct metaphor as a descriptive technique here; though it enriches the reader’s imagining of the sentence’s movement, the train never quite becomes a metaphor *for* the sentence. In fact the train ultimately acts as a descriptive vehicle without entering the language at all. Even though we might picture the sentence “rid[ing]” *on* the train and “Looking *out*” of it, the train itself isn’t directly referred to in the last seven lines of the poem.

The train and the sentence are only equated in that one or both are “passing”, and one or both (“it”) makes “skirts of sound,” a description that gestures toward the Doppler effect (from the title, of course). The sound of a passing train is likely a familiar sonance to the reader. But we might also imagine a sentence that, even as it picks up frequency, unknowingly “bear[s] its constant falling” (as a train’s whistle falls away from a listener due to the Doppler effect). An incremental vanishing occurs, and Hillman forecasts an end to this vanishing; the sentence approaches its “mystic demise.” The sound that finishes the poem is of course not the sound of the train or the language of the sentence, but “the laughter in the night pool.” This is the sound that holds the potential for permanence—“those / Who have not stopped & may not, ever.” This

sound exists outside language, and might even be read to contain a slightly sinister quality—both in its connection to “night” and its sheer relentlessness. If a descriptive-meditative “resolution” or “epiphany” takes place in this poem, it seems to be a vision of linguistic crisis: the poet-figure wrestling with a language that’s ultimately headed for a “mystic demise.”

FAILURES OF DESCRIPTION

One possible “mystic demise” that Hillman’s poems recurringly rub up against (and possibly “describe”) is the failure of description. In “Altamont Pass” she writes, “There’s a little shudder / At the end of seeing / You blink and that’s it” (25). Description, to some extent, relies on an act of witness, and in these lines the speaker points to the limitation of such sight. Much of the conflict embodied by the descriptive-meditative structure occurs on account of disparity between description and meditation. In this moment, for instance, the external limit or “end” triggers the internal “shudder”—a shudder which might provide a springboard for some departure from description (in other words a meditation). Hillman seems particularly fascinated by this moment of crisis and limitation at the “end of seeing” and puts pressure on it in several instances. In “Echo 858,” her speaker writes, “I would like to record // a feeling that isn’t there” (57). The speaker doesn’t ostensibly “record” this “feeling” and thus we see that when the object of description is absent, description becomes difficult, perhaps even impossible. The only way to describe something that “isn’t there” is to retreat into memory or imagination, to enter the realm of the meditative. Later in “Echo 858,” the speaker expounds,

what has never not
existed grows horizons

in it. Why bother trying to

trap it with description. (61)

Thus description is characterized as a “trap” rendering the object of description bound or confined. When describing the literal epic being “carried into school,” the object is confined literally to the pages of a book; and even when describing figuratively—“people carried the epic / inside themselves”—the object is bound to a body. Thus description becomes a confining space, insofar as it pertains to the sensory or the external; in some sense, the object of description has to be present for the description to take place. “Echo 858” also gestures toward the realm of the meditative, characterized by expansion and infinitude: “what has never not / existed grows horizons.” Thus meditation, the invocation of memory or mind, serves as a release from the confinement felt at the “end of seeing,” at the outer limit of description.

“Manzanita Description”—note the title of course; Hillman has labelled what follows a “description”—demonstrates a kind of descriptive experiment, as Hillman attempts to describe the Manzanita tree (and its surroundings) six different ways. Each “stanza” or description begins with an em dash, creating a list-like effect:

- Of the abstract green-&-a-half leaves, 38 have no other color than
nephew yellow
- A low u—— ~——hollow from behind Sierra granite more than
16 times the size of fair leaf ovals to forget the bombing
- Grainy brain clouds on top of the capillary silkish i-can’t-wait-to-be-
them clouds toward the lake

The first description addresses a physical aspect of the Manzanita’s leaves, its color—“abstract green-&-a-half” and “nephew yellow.” As difficult as it is to picture precisely what color “green-&-a-half” is, we’re firmly in the realm of the descriptive (even if that description is slightly “abstract”). In the second stanza, we encounter more of the external landscape—“behind Sierra granite”—and its history—a “bombing” has occurred. Hillman uses the cryptic horizontal line interrupted by a tilde, perhaps to suggest a strikethrough or omitted word, or perhaps to indicate

a failure of language to convey the precise description she's after. In any case, the second stanza offers details of the landscape, as well as the size and shape of the "hollow." Considering Abrams' descriptive-meditative phases, this constitutes a continued "composition of place." In the third stanza, the speaker uses a range of adjectives to describe the clouds, furthering this composition: the "Grainy brain clouds" are "on top of the capillary silkish i-can't-wait-to-be-them clouds." A lake enters the poem's landscape. And in the next two stanzas, the speaker fills in the landscape with further descriptive details; "graywood" holds up "succulent leaves" and jays and dragonflies fly by. Finally, in the sixth and final stanza, an edge of description is reached:

—Redwood only 2/3 facing the downhill slope, my mother's narrow shapely
summon bell rang just that color.

As the speaker aims to continue the description of landscape, turning to the "redwood" trees and their relation to the "slope," a disruption suddenly occurs. The color of the redwood triggers a memory in the speaker's mind, a kind of synesthetic association between color and sound. The poem has now entered the space of the meditative (whether that meditation has been invited by the speaker or not). External description has triggered an inward turn. The "end of seeing" has been reached, and thus meditation is the only direction possible (other than silence). It's no coincidence that the poem—"Manzanita *Description*"—ends where description itself fails to endure.

SILENCE

While in many cases the edge of description triggers a verbal meditation involving memory or thought, Hillman frequently acknowledges another possible direction—that of silence. She explores silence both as an idea in several poems and also enacts it in places through formal

techniques. At times, silence seems to be connected to the “mystic demise” of language—in other words, the death of the epic in its external form. Her notion of an internalized epic for example (the epic people “carried” around “inside themselves”) underscores the increasing soundlessness of poetic language, the gradual death of oral poetic traditions. However, a value is also placed on silence in its relationship to poetry. In “Altamont Pass,” Hillman’s speaker remarks, “Experience is peri-everything / Then thought then poetry / Silence is also everything / The silence part poetry” (24), pointing to the distortion of the human lens. If our experiences surround everything we hear, touch or view, then description can’t avoid slipping into meditation; memory and feelings of experience surround and shape that description, linking “Experience” to “thought” to “poetry.” Hillman then makes a connection between silence and poetry, but rather than being “peri-everything,” silence “*is*” everything—as if the absence of sound contains the sound itself. She deems silence “part poetry,” and thus presumably part something else. In this way, silence is able to contain both a life and death—both “poetry” and “mystic demise.”

Hillman explores the meaning of silence further in her reading sequence late in the collection. The composition of landscape—the sequence of twelve poems is set in the dusty stacks of the library—triggers a meditation on poetry’s endurance (or perhaps lack thereof) in the modern era. “:::Silent Reading:::” suggests a departure from the oral culture of the past, gesturing toward an experience of poetry that has become silent. At first the poem invokes images of decay—“Ruins cry stone / Pounded reeds Cracked bone prophecies” (69)—which are followed by a description of reading turned modern and soundless —“Thought becomes stylish” and “Joy marries doubt / in a font.” From this point, the speaker meditates on the future of reading as a silent act:

[...] Thenceforth some shall
 read noiselessly seated Some shall curl
 eyes to slightly mix air &
 script forefinger to lips To hold
 halfway letters from visible or with
 To have no cause but breath

Silence is embodied not only by the library patrons who “read noiselessly” or by the act of bringing “forefinger to lips,” but for Hillman the “breath” (or the “pieces of air”) must make themselves present on the page itself—in this case, through short gaps of white space within the poem. Silence for Hillman’s speaker seems to be equated with “breath,” the very lifeblood of poetry. “Breath” is the sole “cause” or origin of language, and thus contains the poetry—in this case words “h[e]ld / halfway letters from visible.” Hillman is concerned with the bodily experience of poetry (even in silent reading)—the “curl[ed] / eyes” and the words “h[e]ld” in the mouth but obstructed by the placement of “forefinger to lips.” Punctuation isn’t used in the poem, but isn’t needed as the breath embodied by silent white space provides the necessary pacing.

Hillman uses similar techniques in the final library poem, entitled “:::Epoch of Dust:::”, in which

Library lamps gold outly like a
 prom going dim & dust sails
 into the public sphere (79)

A waning visibility surrounds the books, the light by which to read “going dim.” Dust fills the air, on one hand symbolizing an old age of literature that has been forgotten or covered up, and

yet it is also that dust that “sails / into the public sphere,” filling the very air we breathe. Thus Hillman considers not just the breath contained in the space of “letters from visible” (on the page), but the history contained in the silence between words (the inhale before the exhale of language):

Between each word the century rests
its nothing air Write *dust* Write
live Live hidden Live hidden here

The dust-filled air is both “nothing” and everything, containing all of the language which has preceded it and yet is silent. In the speaker’s invocation, “Write *dust* Write / *live*” she seems to instil a kind of vitality into the seeming symbol of decay—drawing on that silence in her present act of writing. She commands herself (in a Bishop-like gesture): “Write” and “Live”. If the silence is brought to life through writing though, that life is still “hidden here” in the “Epoch of Dust,” in the white space that seemingly contains only “nothing air.”

Perhaps the ultimate embodiment of this “nothing air” takes place in Hillman’s “Nine Untitled Epyllions.” This series, occurring midway through the collection, alternates between using typical black typography on the white page and white words made visible by a black page. In other words, on the left-hand pages, the black ink forms the surrounding “white space” in which the poem exists and the words of the poem themselves are technically absent—being composed only of negative space. In this way, Hillman invokes a poetry literally composed of silence, or rather a silence that is not “part poetry” but all poetry. Given the epyllion’s close relationship to the epic, it seems significant that the language she uses to approach a modern rendering of that decayed or “dust”-ridden poetic form is literally “h[e]ld / halfway letters from visible.” In its half-silence, the sequence suggests a poetry that is both “*dust*” and “[a]live”,

both “hidden” *and* “here.” In terms of the descriptive-meditative structure, Hillman’s use of silence seems to embody that moment at the “end of seeing”; the point at which the visible stops being seen and starts being thought or felt, in which the memory of “the century rests”; a silence that foregrounds the meditation to follow. It materializes, if not breath itself, then “Something about breathing” (44).

FRAGMENT

As well as silence and white space, Hillman frequently uses the fragment to invoke a sense of “hidden” breath. In “Six Components From Aristotle,” she speaks of “The need to make form”: “We talked of this in class—how form can’t be an error” (29). As a syntactical construction, the fragment draws attention to its incompleteness, to what gets left out, to precisely what the fragment is not. In this way, it lends presence to absence, gesturing toward the whole and that whole’s unattainability (at least through language). In “Clouds Near San Leandro” she asks, “Aren’t there visions involving everything?” (67). If there are, then the question might be—how does one describe that kind of vision? The fragment is one possible approach. Given its embodiment of description’s limitations—because description is connected to the pictorial and to the human senses, it can’t be comprehensive—a fragment formally signifies incompleteness, an “end of seeing.”

And yet, the fragment also gestures beyond itself, perhaps beyond the outer limit of description, toward a totality which has been lost or is inexpressible through anything but the “breath” or “air” surrounding the fragment. The most extreme examples of Hillman drawing attention to this “air” take place on left-hand pages interspersed throughout the collection. On these pages, short, fragmented, titleless poems are printed toward the bottom of the otherwise

INFINITUDE

Though an “infinity” of meditative potential is implied by Hillman’s fragments, she seems to resist a linear understanding of this space. It may be triggered by the limits of description, but it also precedes descriptive utterance:

[...] the walk into
each word is infinite
and navigates the stumble (41)

For Hillman, a pre-verbal meditation occurs as language is attempted. In the examples of the bracketed fragment poems, the white space which precedes the poem is greater than the white space that follows. An inhale is needed before breath can be exhaled as language; and while the language itself may be limited (it “stumble[s]”), the inhale contains a totality of possibility. Thus there is an “end of seeing” but “the walk into / each word is infinite.” For Hillman that walk seems to contain the “epic,” the “dust” of the “centuries,” and all of the “nothing air”’s hidden capacity.

In the descriptive-meditative structure, the final movement is typically marked by a re-description reflecting a speaker somehow altered. Meditation thus becomes a means for change, a mode by which to transform landscape (or at least our understanding of it). Wordsworth’s speaker’s meditation strengthens his connection to nature, and he looks at Tintern Abbey with new eyes in the end of the poem. Hillman, on the other hand, doesn’t see meditation as a pathway back into description. Rather than a changed speaker or a changed object of description, description itself seems to be what’s called into question (we return to her initial inquiry: “what is a description?”). An “end of seeing” might be inevitable insofar as we try to describe what we witness, but Hillman wants to describe what she imagines, not only what she sees. *Pieces of Air in the Epic* wants to inhabit that “free space” in between brackets, where absence takes on

presence and a sound is described as a vision—in fact, not *a* vision but multiple visions. “The imagined comes from the imaged,” ends “Air in the Epic” (9); and if description emerges from the imagination, then it is not a trigger for meditation after all, but a meditative act itself.

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