

"If Only I Were Isis"

Remembrance, Ritual, and Writing in Lola Lemire Tostevin's Cartouches

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 constancy modified, sometimes forgotten-as it were an echo answering each passing century with its own voice-and what the masterpiece up is not a monologue, however authoritative, but a dialogue indefeasible by Time.

ANDRÉ MALRAU, *The Voices of Silence*

LOLA LEMIRE TOSTEVIN'S 1995 BOOK *Cartouches* is a complex and accomplished work that operates in and across a number of dimensions. With *Cartouches* Tostevin presents not just a many-faceted meditation on death, an act of remembrance, perhaps, 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 in the process. Tostevin's writing and or reading take place multi-dimensionally: she is the mourner who remembers her father as she remembers her self. She 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 also 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 tell 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 a 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 center 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, and so, considering Tostevin's circumstances, Egypt was a fitting place to go to.



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)

Tostevin begins her enactment of remembering in language immediately with the book's title, *Cartouches*, and with the book's epigraphs. In her acknowledgement, Tostevin mentions the "master-name who gave me the definition of a cartouche that best describes the nature of this book [*Cartouches*]: '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.'"

The cover illustration of *Cartouches*, drawn 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,

Tostevin writes: "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,

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 cartouche with her names in the Latin alphabet in the horizontal cartouche.² 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.) Franco-Ontarian poet travels to Egypt, brings home cartouche as souvenir. Her name, her very being, even, inscribed in gold. A remembrance. A memory. 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. Remembers herself through language as she remembers her father. Re-members.

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' 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 hatches 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's focussing of 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 combine to return life to her father.

Compared to her 1994 novel *Frog Moon* and her 1982 poetry collection, *Color of Her Speech*, Tostevin's concern in *Cartouches* is less directly related to how the French and English languages interface around and in her. In *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 relentless intertextuality. "Cartouche" of course is both a French and an English word, and *Cartouches* features a French and an English epigraph. The first, from Anne Hebert'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 the 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 106-07,¹⁵)—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 more explicit in Hebert's title poem, "Le Tombeau des mis" I "The Tomb of the Kings" —the title Tostevin uses to identify her quote from Hebert. "The Tomb of the Kings" describes a visit by Hebert 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 from the eighth section, Book I of the "Pallinode" of H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*:

are you Hecate? are you a witch?
a vulture? a hieroglyph? (15)

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' imperious questioning of Helen ends with a third line, "the sign or the name of a goddess?" (16). (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*.) Reflecting later on Achilles' 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' accusing her of being a hieroglyph is accurate, and is directly relevant to Tostevin's understanding of cartouche, 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 transcription into English of her own cartouche signs, the last of which is the vulture.

These words from *Helen in Egypt* are obviously germane to Tostevin's project in *Cartouches* as well:

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 mothergoddess. 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's reassembling her doll, and the poet's "Now this. If only I were Isis." In summary, for *Cartouche'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 which 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.

Heart

Immediately following *Cartouches'* two epigraphs 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 ajar 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 in *Cartouches* 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 invocations 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 "SmallAmulets" 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 that 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, but 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 Hebert for Brick, she mentioned to Hebert the traditional formulation of patriarchal oppressiveness, at that time having been recently applied to Hebert's work by Patricia Smart in her book on Quebec women writers, *Writing in the Father's House*. Did Hebert feel a need to rebel against her father?

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

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

It seems incongruous these days 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, "Contamination: A Relation of Differences," 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 which parallels a model that she developed, 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 fragment 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 focuses 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, the intensification of the mourning which occurs in *Cartouches* is truly startling.

As already noted, in the eighth poem of "Small Amulets"—"If only I were Isis"—Tostevin focuses on the power of language. The Egyptian imagery of the next and final poem of the section 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.

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' 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 jlot
(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)^B*

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 of—Tostevin's quest to reincorporate her father into (her) life. According to the statements Tostevin makes 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)

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 structure of *personae*. After the solemnity of the opening movements' invocations of Tostevin's deceased father, 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 maintained consistently, but it recurs amidst entries and poems of varying levels of solemnity. (The change is strictly in tone; *Cartouches*' 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' reassembling 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's 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, dps 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 (and many other in *Cartouches*) humorous coincidences are interesting partly because of their mutual shedding of light. Such contaminations, though, are especially pertinent to the elegiac project of *Cartouches* and its seeking of consolation. As noted before, Tostevin was well aware of the possibilities for "The engendering of new life within old fictions," or in "reinventing the past from a present point of view," as she puts it in her interview with Christopher Dewdney (I).⁴

Language

Tostevin's mourning ritual in *Cartouches* is multifaceted and multidimensional, 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*, p. 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 powers of language. Of the truth of this assertion a reader is convinced after reading *Cartouches*. The experience of reading Tostevin's book generates this transformation. To explore *Cartouches* further confirms the reader's impression: the world Tostevin creates does rhyme. And rhyme.

NOTES

- i. The pages of *Cartouches* are unnumbered.

2. Rather than a "dove," the second sign is a quail chick, the phonetic symbol for "u" or "w." During our telephone conversation, 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.
3. My translation, for the reader's convenience.
4. Linda Hutcheon regards this reinvention as quintessentially postmodern (4), as is also the writer's expressed self-consciousness.