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**THE WEIGHT OF WORDS:
BODY AS TEXT IN H.D.'S (LATE) WORK**

By

GABRIELLE ANNE REGNEY

**A Dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York**

2000

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Abstract**THE WEIGHT OF WORDS: BODY AS TEXT IN H.D.'S (LATE) WORK****By****Gabrielle Anne Regney****Adviser: Professor Wayne Koestenbaum**

Since the late 1970s, much has been done to excavate the work of H.D. Once constructed as the *Imagiste par excellence*, she now speaks, as if from the grave, as Feminist, Lesbian, Goddess, mother, madwoman, and witch. This dissertation investigates these positions of articulation as they coincide with Julia Kristeva's figure of the *chora*: maternal space holding totality of primal drives. For Kristeva, semiotic discourse (expressions issued from the *chora*) is evident in such forms as wordplay, interruption, and insistent rhythms. H.D. can be more fully read through a holistic, especially aural, engagement with the text—body to body—keeping an ear to the ground and the space between the lines.

The purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate *how* the individual and collective female body means, in H.D.'s "late" work. The analysis uses feminist models of subjectivity against the phallogocentric traditions of modernism and

psychoanalytic theory; it further 'queers' H.D. by centralizing homoerotic desire. The results of such a reading demonstrate that the self created by H.D.'s corporeal poetics both threatens and is threatened by the symbolic (the law of the Father).

This study begins at the end, with some posthumous (and largely ignored) publications. First, *Notes on Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho*, the critical foundation of her career, establishes the proper framework for reading the bodywriting of H.D.'s body of work. Then, the autobiographical, homoerotic novels demonstrate the dramatic life experiences that formed her early writing and led to a new aesthetics. Ultimately, the restrictions of prose gave way to epic poetry. The chapter on *Trilogy* addresses madness; the chapter on *Helen* focuses on Goddess-centered vision, and the chapter on *Hermetic Definition* continues the discussion of the eroticized Mother. Witnessing these myriad semiotic articulations as viable purges some of the biases from Kristeva's labeling of them as precultural.

Reading H.D.'s corporeal poetics heals the mind-body split and provides a healing and empowering alternative to the mainstream, Lacanian positioning of the female as inaccessible object. The work is late, ironically, because it has been waiting for readers eager and able to receive its subaltern modes.

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The Weight of Words: Body as Text in H.D.'s (Late) Work

I. INTRODUCTION

this is the new heresy;
but if you do not even understand what words say,

how can you expect to pass judgement
on what words conceal? —H.D., *The Walls Do Not Fall*

“[. . .] we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal
ground of our intelligence” —Adrienne Rich

“The fascination for writing the never previously written and the fascination for
the unattained body proceed from the same desire.” —Monique Wittig¹

H.D. cherished her narrow but elevated status as the best imagist. So do
others. Until recently, one of the most common praises for the poet and her work
was “modesty.”²

As we begin the new millennium, H.D., a century-spanning witch, is
claiming a new and central place in the canon—not just the canon of imagism or

¹Author's note in *The Lesbian Body*, qtd. in Diana Collecott, “What is not said,”
93. Collecott may be today's leading H.D. scholar.

²See for instances: Horace Gregory in *Poetry* LXXV: IV (1950) and Bernard
Engel in *Contemporary Literature* 10:4 (1969). This same compliment was paid
by W.H. Auden, regarding the early work of Adrienne Rich.

even modernism—but in the larger canons of women’s literature, American literature, poetry, and modern Western literature as a whole. I use the term *witch* for a number of reasons. Recent theoretical and historical work on modernism is investigating the practices of witchcraft;³ in the autobiographical novels, H.D. and Frances Greg refer to themselves as witches (as does Pound); throughout her work reference to and reverence of goddesses is omnipresent⁴; throughout her life she had mystical visions and participated in occult practices, such as seances. Barbara Guest, though her biography does not centralize spiritual concerns, discusses H.D.’s hermetic passions. And recently, scholars are focusing much more on H.D.’s lifelong occult involvement and using this information to alter the meaning of *modernism*. Another major contemporary development in H.D. studies (which, like the occult interest, is part of a larger investigation of modernism) is the work of queer theorists. These contributions will both be investigated, as will the slightly older Feminist⁵ and Lesbian approaches to her work.

³ Timothy Materer, Leon Surette, and Peter Messent have recently published scholarly volumes on modernism and the occult—which includes witchcraft. While terminology varies, work on H.D.’s occult practices is being done by Burt Hatlen, Alec Marsh, Helen Sword, Stephen Scott Colis, Eileen Gregory, Holly Laird, and Kate Scheel.

⁴Both by force and by choice, goddess-worshippers, for centuries, have been called witches.

⁵I follow linguist Julia Penelope and others in my capitalization of *Lesbian* and *Feminist* to suggest the importance and foreign and theoretical nature of the categories.

Louis Martz edited the new edition of *H.D., Selected Poems*—first published 1925—in 1988. *H.D.’s Collected Poems 1912-1944*, containing much previously unpublished text, came out at approximately the same time, after a forty-year incubation. We can see that in the early eighties something dramatically shifted *H.D.’s* reception. Certainly she now has a wider audience and broader relevance than at the beginning of the 1900s—the time period in which academia continues to pigeonhole her. The majority of her own work and by far the exponentially expansive volume of critical discussion has been published in the last two decades.⁶ Finally, *wait* has become *weight*.

Rafaella Baccolini defines *H.D.’s* “late” period as 1945-61, that work written between *Trilogy* (composed 1942-4) and her death in 1961. Baccolini notes that during this period *H.D.* wrote much autobiographical prose. I agree that *H.D.’s* prose demands attention, but I am more concerned with recognizing (a) work written before 1945 but not *published* until afterward, and (b) work *published* after 1961. There is continuity between the writing of the 1919 *H.D.* and the *H.D.* still in a sense writing today. The post-1919 oeuvre will be investigated in its complex wholeness as Feminist, Lesbian, magical [*H.D.’s* preferred spelling], “mad,” mother-centered vision.

⁶Much of the late work is still unpublished, including the spiritualist *roman à clef* *The Sword Went Out to Sea (Synthesis of a Dream)*, *Magic Mirror* (autobiographical novel), “Compassionate Friendship” (journal/essay based on key relationships), *Hirslanden Notebooks* (on dreams and important events) and

H.D.'s Lesbian-Feminist⁷ mythmaking from the WWI period until her death is of primary interest for an analysis of her poetics and thematics of corporeality. In revisioning culture from this perspective, her prose, which often reads as poetry (as much as does some of Gertrude Stein's prose), exhibits many of the same qualities as the poetry: persistent rhythms, instinctual eruptions, wordplay. Using all major post-imagist work,⁸ I will investigate how, articulating desire, H.D. brings forth that which has been culturally figured as lost and or unrepresentable: the body—of the mother, the collective female, the fragmented self.

My approach, which I call a corporeal analysis, springs from Julia Kristeva's trope of the *chora* as maternal space that articulates, through non-symbolic sound, the body and its complex drives. I include, in my investigation of form, probing of such elements as insistent, agitated as well as hypnotic rhythms (such as trimeter, incantation and dream), feminine rhyme and meter, the physical effects and implications of sounds (for example, familial echoes, the containment of mutes, empowerment of aspirates, soft comfort of liquids). Also, just as a real bird becomes more productive when transformed into a

many other pieces.

⁷ Such terminology post-dates her work; however, I will substantiate its appropriateness.

⁸ I will exclude those texts whose primary purpose is tribute to the men in her life—*Bid Me to Live*, *End to Torment*, *Tribute to Freud*.

letter/hieroglyph, the poems become material, wordly and worldly, through majically structured stanzas. Thus following Kristeva's analysis of the *chora* and its semiotic articulations, I examine how life and death drives—thematically and formally—appear through textualization of the body.

Since H.D.'s inadequate (distorted, insufficient) status is integral to my choice of topics as well as to the functioning of the argument, I would like, here, to highlight some relevant aspects of the history of her publication and reception. I will investigate, diachronically, both quantitative and qualitative responses to her individual texts in respective chapters of the dissertation.

The label *Imagiste* which Pound assigned H.D. in 1912 partly fixed her place. But H.D. participated in her own entombment through complying with Pound's packaging of her, even after he pejoratively dismissed the movement. Moreover, she did not publish or collect her longer, more powerful, more personal poems, some of which expressed Feminist anger regarding the place of the female body both in literary myth and in the roles H.D. acted out in her own life. Self-effacement is also evident in the abridgment of some of her best work, a practice Louis Martz notes (viii), though he seems oblivious to H.D.'s homophobic impetus. For the homoerotic work of the early years, she used cut down versions of her poems and went so far as to disengage herself by disguising them as translations of someone else's work ("Amaranth," "Eros," and "Envy" were presented as translations of Sappho). Much of her oeuvre has only been published

posthumously (and that after a long wait), including all the autobiographical, homoerotic novels as well as the critical foundation of her career, *Notes on Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho* (which, if mentioned at all, is shortened in title to eliminate the Sapphic reference). Anthologies still emphasize the poems from her extremely brief *Imagiste* period and often neglect to do so much as make note of the posthumous work. More work of H.D.'s remains to be published; the work available demands further consideration. None of this may seem remarkable in light of the tendency of poetic recognition to be decades or centuries late. But Whitman, Pound, Eliot, and many other American poets were famous during their lifetimes, while H.D. has enjoyed only brief popularity and limited positioning. Furthermore, in a way that parallels the "Belle of Amherst" Dickinson myth, the H.D. admitted into academia's halls for most of the century is radically different from the one whose work has been opened up by recent scholars, particularly Feminists.

Knowledge about H.D.'s erasure provides a basis for contextualizing what constitutes the modern. For instance, Jeanne Kammer, among others, has argued that various silences and 'modernist' techniques such as fragmentation and juxtaposition are strategies women have always taken on to reflect their own experience. So modernism might be read as the feminization of culture. Yet its male-powered self-referentiality and divorce from external referents, specifically the body, did not allow a certain H.D. to be known as person or writer: the H.D. I

would like to flesh out here. Most pertinently, understanding the forces of effacing and exclusion is also necessary because H.D.'s writing practice depends so much on her own experience as a deconstructing reader, both critical and inspired. On the subject of why H.D. has not been read, Susan Friedman's work is a Feminist standard. She offers the answer to the riddle, "Who buried H.D.?":

And it lies in the response of her critics. She was a woman, she wrote about women, and all the ever-questioning, artistic, intellectual heroes of her epic poetry and novels were women. [. . .] H.D. explored the untold half of the human story, and by that act she set herself outside of the established tradition. (48)

One need not be familiar with T.S. Eliot's theories of the place of the poet to know that H.D.'s "act" disqualified her from the male-defined ranks of talent and official status. In that sense, H.D. knowingly buried herself, leaving her imagist work as a *cartouche*, an observable inscribed stone over a seemingly impenetrable casket, a cocoon expecting "to hatch butterflies" (*The Walls Do Not Fall* [39]), awaiting only an audience ready to appreciate its dormant splendor.

WHY H.D., WHY NOW?

To begin, her texts lend themselves easily to inquiry regarding the modernist inclinations toward boundary breaking (linguistic and otherwise) and mythopoeic creation. More to the point, current theoretical developments bring to

light both the constraints and the subversiveness of her Feminist, Lesbian, *choric* strategies. Then the face of modernism is altered by these understandings.

Queer theory and Lesbian-Feminist scholarship are suggesting ways to read literary modernism, ways that foreground texts and writers marginal to the short-list of Western culture. What was once deviant is now central to the concerns of readers (gay or non-gay), and even Eliot, Lawrence, and Joyce are being read with attention to encoded instances of writing that connect them to Lesbian and gay modernism (Jay 81), which is becoming, increasingly, what is understood as “modernism” itself.

In a related theoretical development, radical Feminism of the 1970s and then queer, multicultural, and postmodern studies—not to mention technologies of genetic engineering, genital and cosmetic surgery, and reproduction and dissemination of information—have offered new ways of reading the body, an increasingly theoretical and interdisciplinary practice. Yet, as Judith Butler and Elaine Scarry, among others, point out, escaping knowledge and articulation seems to be central to what bodies are and do. We keep trying to capture them under surgical and verbal dissection. But our more and more tangled spaghetti intestines of discourse are not up to the challenge of presenting the body. Thus I propose a largely physical approach to the hermeneutics of the flesh. To read the body, we must read with our bodies, as much of them as possible.

Holistic approaches to hermeneutics are beginning to make their way into

academic discourse. One of the first and most obvious of such practices has been reading out loud. This is especially important for poetry, which was originally⁹ meant to be recited with a profound reliance on sound for both delivery and effect. We do not, of course, always read out loud. H.D. scholar Eileen Gregory suggests our culture may be subject to a weak sensory capability she calls “phonophobia” (*Rev. of Sound States*, 1).¹⁰ Nevertheless, as we write and as we read, we hear the sounds in our heads.¹¹ And they affect different zones of the body. First there are the almost limitless vocal configurations of the quite limited symbols of the Roman alphabet.¹² Then there are the erogenous zones and chakras—again, making their way into our cultural consciousness—that react in

⁹ While there is no agreement over the time and place of poetry’s inception, there is agreement that poetry began, across cultures, as oral. Its primary characteristics were rhythm and ritual setting, both being tied to song. See M.H. Abrams’ *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (6th edition), C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon’s *A Handbook to Literature* (5th edition), Ruth Finnegan’s *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*, J.M. Foley’s *Oral Traditional Literature*, and Walter J. Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*.

¹⁰ At a recent seminar (New Modernist Association Conference 10/99, in which Eileen Gregory participated), I proposed that our discussion of H.D. should include at least *some* actual reading or citation from her work. I did not receive any support for this idea. The scholars were busy arguing about definitions and abstractions which are no doubt necessary but, it seems to me, should be secondary to the experience of the work under consideration.

¹¹For a recent persuasive account of *all* reading as “acoustic event,” (4) see Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).

¹²Among the possibilities of physical sites of articulation are labial, dental, palatovelar, and glottal, each with its own sub-sites (Pyles 29).

their own ways to different sounds. And if, as Ruth Salvaggio (and others, such as poet Joy Harjo) argue, the motion of words is akin to their sound, then the aural effects of language are perhaps infinite. A full reading takes into account all these contributing factors.

Another reason H.D. is getting attention is that her corporeal poetics redresses, so well, the historical dearth of women who are known to have spoken, heard, written or read about themselves. Adrienne Rich, a poet whose career can stand metonymically for the evolution of modern Lesbian and Feminist poetry, explains how hesitant she was to write in the first person in poetry or prose. She gradually managed to overcome this terror because of the necessity:

I think it has been a peculiar confusion to the girl or woman who tries to write because she is peculiarly susceptible to language. She goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities; and over and over [. . .] she comes up against something that negates everything she is about [. . .] precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together.

So what does she do? What did I do? I read the older women poets with their peculiar keenness and ambivalence:

Sappho, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Elinor Wylie, Edna Millay, H.D. I discovered that the woman poet most admired at the time (by men) was Marianne Moore, who was maidenly, elegant, intellectual, discreet.

(“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” 39)

By now we are familiar with one of the many double binds of female identity: to write like or as a man, a woman is an impostor, a fake; to write like or as a woman, she cannot be taken seriously.¹³ Marianne Moore, who negotiated this trap brilliantly, did not write about her own experience but rather about those areas of life traditionally deemed feminine: for example, nature.¹⁴ As a result, she is the one and only female modernist guaranteed a spot in anthologies, reading lists, college courses. Her limited field of subject matter is largely the same, even today, as those feminine categories in anthologies and college course units—and is the same for the early and canonically accepted H.D.

Not only did H.D. confine the scope of her vision, but she was restricted linguistically by the demands and contradictions of what linguist Robin Lakoff calls “female bilingualism”:

¹³As widely published linguist, historian, and editor Julia Penelope points out, women's speech has been devalorized as “*chatter, prattle, gossip, nag, wheedle, babble* [. . .] *gush, cackle, blather* [. . .] *blab* [. . .] (Intro. xiv).

¹⁴That is not, of course, to say her work has no other interest, nor that it has not been interpreted otherwise.

[. . .] she may never feel really comfortable using either [men's or women's language], and never be certain that she is using the right one in the right place to the right person. Shifting from one language to another requires special awareness to the nuances of social situations, special alertness to possible disapproval. It may be that the extra energy that must be (subconsciously or otherwise) expended in this game is energy sapped from more creative work, and hinders women from expressing themselves as well, as fully [. . .]. (Lakoff 7)¹⁵

In a patriarchal society, women are sapped by the pen. Rather than expressing women's experience, language used both by and about women has the evident effect of obstructing the achievement of identity itself (Lakoff 7). This situation is not natural but social; Lakoff and Spender¹⁶ agree it is the proper function of

¹⁵While one can hardly disagree that women have been restricted from expression of their experiences, I must note that Lakoff's theories of a separate women's language tend to follow stereotypes that have since been disproved by many respected linguists including Rolv Blakar, Dale Spender, and Julia Penelope. She refers to such stereotypes as a useful description of a minority feminine discourse she labels CUD, Cosmetic Universe of Discourse (Penelope xxi), a subgenre of PUD, the Patriarchal Universe of Discourse. One note about these stereotypes: they are not at all what Kristeva refers to as semiotic articulation nor what is called *écriture féminine*. In fact, they are the opposite: marked by an over-attention to grammatical rules and subservience to interlocutors.

¹⁶These are both popular feminist linguists. According to Deborah Cameron, herself a widely published scholar who has collaborated with, among others, Toril Moi and Cheri Kramerae, Spender's text, *Man Made Language*, "has done as much as any text has ever done to raise feminist consciousness about language"

linguistics to interpret and change it.

H.D. scholar Michael Boughn appears to be aware of the specific and changing, rather than generic, demands of literary interpretation. He explains how inadequate analysis of poetics has reified the early doctrines of imagism, whether Lowell's, Pound's, or anyone else's. When we focus on image or consider free verse as the absence of meter, we miss the sound patterns that govern the poetry naturally. Rhythm, meter, rhyme, alliteration, and assonance create "plenitude" and meaning without superimposing "the reductive, patriarchal authority H.D.'s work increasingly pitted itself against" ("Elements" 118). In H.D.'s work, echoes and sonal variations create "a forceful, ritualistic intonation that embodies the Goddess' voice" (Boughn 113).

It is the job of literary critics to open up texts to this recognition. H.D. struggled to express a feminine, Feminist, and bisexual identity with the resulting aesthetics unrecognizable to monoglots. Like the speaker who must forsake native tongue to converse with the monoglot, H.D. was divorced from herself. Her gradual acknowledgment of sexual affinity—especially when she was clear about object choice—may have aided her art, according to Megan Davies. Nonetheless, her "unlocalized desire" (Davies 39) has been, at least until recently, stuffed uncomfortably and dishonestly into the constricting box of her earliest bit of work, known (mislabeled) as *imagism*.

(146).

BUT HOW DO WE READ HER?

" . . . the feminine must be deciphered as interdict: within the signs or between . . .
the lines."

—Irigaray, "Blind Spot of an Old Tyranny"

Words bear meanings, but they do not always mean what they say. While women's literary silence and Lesbian silences, as well, have long been discussed, it would seem these so-called difficulties of articulation may well be the result of inadequate tools and methods of listening. Irony, for instance, of which H.D. has been criticized as lacking (see Camper 378-80), requires some sensitivity of ear. Most critics of H.D. hear only oedipal echoes bouncing back at them; many are exacerbated by H.D.'s fervor and white spaces—in short, her practice of "find[ing] sustenance elsewhere—a world behind or beyond the word, not in it" (Rettallack 79). It is my hope that a reading of the body,¹⁷ the gendered source of vision that speaks in and through H.D.'s poems and prose, will encourage movement beyond mimetic¹⁸ readings—which would be tragically limiting.

¹⁷By "the" body I mean the body of the poetic voice—often autobiographically H.D. herself, often representative of women and/or Lesbians.

¹⁸Most simply, I mean reading for the immediate referential signifieds of the symbolic code—not reading for tone, ambiguity, and between-the-lines suggestions.

The following lines, for instance, can hardly be appreciated without a Feminist and metaphysically “other” perspective:

No poetic fantasy
but a biological reality,

a fact: I am an entity
like bird, insect, plant

or sea-plant cell;
I live; I am alive;

take care, do not know me,
deny me, do not recognise me, [sic]

shun me; for this reality

is infectious—ecstasy. (*The Flowering of the Rod* [9])

To read these lines from a phallogocentric position is to repeat the paradigms that necessitated them but can not recognize their radical ontology—paradigms that lack tools to register the weight of female centrality and same-sex desire. How does one respond to a poem in which the speaker requests she be shunned rather than recognized? Perhaps such a poem can only be read by a reader who already

knows H.D. exists (“invisibility” is, by definition . . .). To take this poem literally, in the traditional sense of the word, is to read it for the idea, immediately represented by the symbolic code, that a speaker exists—a reading that renders the poem little more than silly. Instead, one *might* let oneself be hammered by the near-hysterical insistence of “T” sounds and then be transported to a liminal place that explodes dualities of presence and absence (the latter term constructed as ‘female’). Here I will suggest such readings.

Feminist criticism and theory, since the late 1970s, have done much to further appreciation of H.D.’s long neglected work. Foremost in H.D. scholarship, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Susan Friedman rescued the poet from obscurity, began to analyze her reception, and elucidated the many sources of her creative authority and patterns of literary and mythic revision. However, Lesbian desire (in all its variations, complexity, and centrality), while acknowledged by these groundbreakers as well as other excellent critics such as Deborah Kloepfer, has yet to be adequately addressed. More recently, there have been attempts to use poststructuralist understanding and even to consider the body, attempt to really *hear* it. Such accounts nonetheless usually remain within Freudian and Lacanian contexts¹⁹ as well as those of other patriarchal families such as

¹⁹Such critiques include, for example, works by Claire Buck, Brigitte Gerl, and Laurie Case.

modernism,²⁰ traditionally understood. They neglect subjectivity as expressed through bodily insistence and same-sex desire.

I will investigate writing as an activity generated by a body. According to Julia Kristeva, articulation is organized by the semiotic/somatic *chora*, a prelinguistic “totality” of rupture, rhythm, and all dispensations of drives (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, qtd. in Oliver 35), something Plato defined as “nourishing and maternal” (Crownfield 239) space. Pre-oedipal [pre-symbolic] drives all begin—as does the very identity of the subject—in relationship with the mother’s body. The libido, then, for the female, is always homoerotic in its roots. I would like to trace the movements of the libido as they occur in the chronological sequence of H.D.’s work.

Drives (most bluntly stated, ‘life’ and ‘death’), articulations of the *choric* totality, contradict each other. I will focus on how H.D.’s corporeal poetics work, within this energy field, to make the body stand for the real, the self, and the text. At the same time, H.D.’s individual works and the trajectory of her career suggest the text becomes an inter-subjective erotic space that may ultimately retaliate against its own creator. (Kristeva argues, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, that *choric* speech leads to obliteration of identity and of the “body proper”).

²⁰I believe I can assume an agreement as to the male-dominated nature of modernism. Jane Gallop, Alice Jardine, Marianne deKoven, Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano, among many other critics, do an excellent job of theorizing this.

Questions I will raise are: to what extent are the body and its desires overcome by a misogynist, logocentric, and homophobic culture, and to what extent does H.D. repudiate that culture's terms, in the process creating new meaning for the concept of "literal"? In other words, to what extent do the body and its desires speak within and remain behind, underneath and outside the text while simultaneously determining its order? And how do Feminist, psychoanalytic, poststructural, and queer theories help us to read H.D.'s work?

The vibrant explosions offered by H.D.'s writing are dangerous (to both the expressed poetic self and its Other), potentially ruinous, even in their beauty. H.D.'s corporeal poetics offer redemption and rebirth bought at the price of death—cultural and personal—figured in traumas sustained by the individual body. The permeability of boundaries, those of the symbolic code and those of the body, functions as a chief means for the author's creative and re-creative endeavors. Through echo, repetition, reversal, punning, pause, parallelism, juxtaposition, deceptively simple lines, projection, pre-oedipal rhythms, and other feminine²¹ strategies—otherwise called 'gibberish,' 'nonsense,' 'madness'—H.D. subversively puts herself into the writing. In fact, she repeats, "She [H.D., Helen] herself is the writing" (*Helen in Egypt*) and "I am the word Aum" (*Her/mione*). She cannot rely on an "objective correlative" to represent her.

²¹I use the term to highlight the poet's sex and to suggest indirectness, subversion, and the female nature of the *choric* space. It is not my purpose to argue that these

So much has been written about the modernism of Eliot and Pound; why would we want another lens to view the work of H.D.? For one, her conception of self and its relationship to language is radically different from the ideas of male modernists (Davies 40). H.D. fought to break out of the gift box of static perfection to which she was assigned:

I grew tired of hearing these poems referred to,²² as crystalline. Was there no other way of criticizing, of assessing them? But perhaps I did not see, did not dare see any further than my critics. Perhaps my annoyance with them was annoyance with myself. For what is crystal or any gem but the concentrated essence of the rough matrix, or the energy, either of over-intense heat or over-intense cold that projects it? The poems as a whole, and the “Greek” stories I have mentioned, contain that essence or that symbol, symbol of concentration and of stubborn enrage. The energy itself and the matrix itself have not yet been assessed.²³

The matrix is the context of her life and friends, especially as they parallel Greco-Roman history and culture. The energy—or source—cannot be captured but will be investigated in its partial performance in language.

devices belong to an exclusive province of female poets.

²² I retain the punctuation from all quoted texts.

²³“Notes on Recent Writing,” Postscript of *Madrigal* 207.

H.D. makes frequent reference to the act of reading. *Notes on Thought and Vision* has been called her “*abc’s of reading*.” Many places in her oeuvre present a woman who must interpret hieroglyphs—a process which, as DuPlessis points out, requires several simultaneous “streams” of reading. DuPlessis explains that hieroglyphs are far more complex and magical than mere ideograms: metonymic, alphabetic, “a world forever extensive” (“Language Acquisition” 266-7). She thus calls a feminine, multiform approach to feminine text:

[. . .] to foreground reading that is a part of writing, yet also to show a writing which has built inside it a plurality of reading.

If a woman reads as she has been read, she will be limited.

Reading the sign of the woman, reading signs generated around women, reading the presence of the sign, woman, in culture, means reading a situation of being read. A woman writer is never just written, she is read, as a woman. So, as a woman, she needs to originate her own reading. Her own methods.

(“Language Acquisition” 267)

Along with modernism and imagism in particular, H.D. has been analyzed within the context of psychoanalysis. As Susan Friedman points out (“The Writing Cure”), her engagement with Freud²⁴ needs to be investigated both in his

²⁴ There are many reasons for invoking Freud in relationship to H.D.'s source of creativity. First, there is H.D.'s personal relationship with the man and his

influence and in H.D.'s resistance. Whether in forbidden 'leaks' to Bryher, her journal, or unpublished poems, H.D. rewrote his text and escaped it. However, Freidman denies that woman's position is outside the authoritative text (such as in the language of the hysteric); she neglects to address the distinctively *unauthorized* nature of H.D.'s work.

As a child and young adult, H.D. was an intellectual failure. No one guessed she might be the one to fulfill the prophecy her mother received about having a gifted child. Only when she could do what men did better than they did it (but as they dictated), while still being feminine in poetic humility and outward sexuality, was she allowed brief recognition. Attempts to make her own life and beliefs into art were, until recently, misunderstood, shunned, mocked. So now, if I propose to perform a feminine and/or Lesbian-Feminist reading of H.D., am I not promoting the same semantic rule of negative female status that has excluded women for centuries, especially the last one? Because silencing, whether in

practice and 'science,' all of which were instrumental in her writing career and all of which she modified. He helped break her writer's block by allowing her to integrate her psychic experiences into the writing.

Then there is the usefulness of his models of psychic drive as life and death energy; the spiraling dynamic works well with pagan understanding of cyclical and interdependent forces. To see Freud in H.D.'s writing does not require that one relinquish occult allegoresis à la Jung, whose branch of psychoanalysis H.D. might be said to augur. Finally, in light of the increasingly popular critical application of Kristeva to H.D.'s work, though her modern and scientific Freudianism rejects mysticism, her postmodern—and arguably somewhat Jungian—conception of the semiotic *chora* weds psychoanalysis and the occult.

conversation or literary censorship, has been so devastating, my first concern is to provide information and tools for a richer reading. That effort will include attempting to allow H.D. to be analyzed on her own terms—a right/rite so often enjoyed by our modern critic-poets.²⁵

Moreover, I am interested in the semiotics of how H.D. has been read by many groups: women, Lesbians, poets, witches. These groups have had limited access to shaping H.D.'s reception, as they control a tiny percentage of literary, as well as worldly, resources. I believe then such space is corrective in that, as Dale Spender points out: "Males, as the dominant sex, have only a *partial* view of the world and yet they are in a position to insist that their view and values are the '*real*' and '*only*' values; and they are in a position to impose their version on other human beings who do not share their experience" and to declare women's reality "unintelligible, unreal, unfathomable" (1-2). To read H.D. from the position of one woman reading another woman is, while disagreeable to some (challenging patriarchy *always* is), to resist restrictive notions such as the self-perpetuating stereotypes of women as senseless chatterers and women as silent. To read H.D. from further positions of otherness—Feminist, Lesbian, occult scholar and/or practitioner—is to be open to other possibilities of meaning.

²⁵Even Eliot, whose theories have been central for reading not only him but all modern poets, has been shown to have been whimsical, contradictory, and dishonest in his theoretical justifications for his work—yet we still cherish them. So much for objectivity.

**READING IS *COMMUNICATING*, OR 'WE CAN'T READ WHAT WE
CAN'T UNDERSTAND'**

The first objection will of course be raised by positivists (including structuralists) who refuse even *human* interference with reading because, as cutting-edge linguist Mark Johnson explains, “the way human beings grasp things as meaningful—the way they understand their experience—is held to be incidental to the nature of meaningful thought and reason” (Johnson x)²⁶. Yet in the last few years scientific evidence has undercut this position and shown that “any attempt to provide meaning for abstract symbols via their direct and unmediated correspondence to the world [does this remind us of objective correlativism?], or any model of it, must inevitably violate our most basic understanding of what meaning itself is” (xi). Queer theory helps illuminate problems of meaning with its focus on epistemology. Within linguistics, many areas of investigation support the bodily and subjective nature of language.²⁷ Our imaginative capacities, determined in part by physical constitution, culture and historical context, are mapped onto every part of our world—language, concrete

²⁶Mark Johnson is one of the several top scholars of cognitive grammar, along with the Naom Chomsky and George Lakoff.

²⁷ These include categorization, conceptual frameworks, metaphor, polysemy, historical semantic change, Non-Western conceptual systems, and growth of knowledge (x-xiii).

objects, abstract reasoning.²⁸ And now the very constitution of the brain is shown to be built upon the foundation of our earliest experiences.²⁹

We are not aware how much our senses actually determine our thoughts and language. The apparently arbitrary relationship of homonyms, cognitive grammar studies have shown, is in fact a logical coincidence and one based on experience. Speech act theory finds another piece of evidence supporting the subjectivity of symbolic language. Entire sentences have radically variable meanings, depending on the pragmatic ‘force’ with which they are uttered (for instance, question, statement, or command). Moreover, even outside of situational variants, how we make sense of the abstract structures of language—such as metaphor—is largely based on nonpropositional, prelinguistic schemata. Johnson’s language sounds much like a description of *choric* experience. That *choric* experience, if metaphor is based on primal experience, might be read as more sacred than profane. According to theologian Stanley J. Tambiah,³⁰ these languages differ only in that the former tends to more metaphor. In summary, it is our nonseparation from the world—our bodily connection to it—that allows us to circumscribe it with language.

²⁸ Johnson shows, for example, how a concept such as “moral responsibility” is shaped by our physical reflexes (see Chapter 1).

²⁹ “In fact emotions, not cognitive stimulation, serve as the mind’s primary architect” (Greenspan 1).

³⁰ “The Magical Power of Words,” qtd. in Bell 144 n.6.

Additionally, meaning, based on understanding, is “*shared, public*” (Johnson 174). Language must connect similar experiences. While social construction theory may go so far as to argue ‘only one on the inside can know what the outside is’ (Diana Fuss, *Intro. to Inside/Out*), this sort of concept requires elaborate and slippery reasoning. According to Johnson’s more easily defended theory, a female reader and especially a Lesbian reader, because of shared experience and sensibility (and access to codes), will come closest to registering the ideas of H.D. Some literary historians imply this has only become possible recently.

Before the Lesbian-Feminist ‘movement,’ it would seem there was no such thing as Lesbianism or Feminism. Even Lillian Faderman, along with Carol Smith-Rosenberg and other scholars of Lesbian issues, argue that one may not call anyone or anything “Lesbian”³¹ that is not “out” in the most contemporary sense of the word. [We know that this concept means little or nothing to many people, even today; Michael Warner has discussed at length how ‘the closet’ is a heterosexist bogeyman.] This theory works to maintain the status quo in literature and life and is thus rewarded by those invested in it. Lesbians, unable to find language that validates them or their sexual experience, have trouble putting

³¹The following of Faderman’s tomes severely limit the use of the term: *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*; *Surpassing the Love of Men*; *Chloe Plus Olivia*. Faderman seems recently to have mitigated this judgement.

labels on what they do and what defines their experience, especially as sexual. Thus Marilyn Frye (and many others, including sexologists) can make such ironically true statements as “lesbians don’t have sex.”³²

So does a Lesbian reader produce a Lesbian reading? Does a Lesbian writer always produce a Lesbian text?³³ And—the first homophobic questions ask—who cares? There are universal values that all great literature shares, values such as those of Socrates, Shakespeare, Proust. But, as Eve Sedgwick points out (55), there have in fact been gay writers who demonstrate such values—and their names are . . . (Socrates, Shakespeare, Proust, Marlowe, Whitman, Woolf, Lawrence, Eliot, Cather, Dickinson, Barnes, etc.).

What we read, what we emphasize, and how we interpret it will largely be determined by the distinctions we make between universal and other (minority) interests.³⁴ Feminist and queer readings of H.D. emphasize a different body of work, a different H.D. They also produce many new volumes. Once we begin to consider sex and gender we realize that the canon, “unified by the maintenance of

³²See Frye, Marilyn. “To Be and Be Seen: the Politics of Reality.” *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Trumansburg: The Crossing Press, 1983; also “Lesbian ‘Sex.’” *An Intimate Wilderness: Lesbian Writers on Sexuality*. Judith Barrington, ed. Portland, Oregon: The Eighth Mountain P, 1991. 1-8.

³³See Jane Rule's *Lesbian Images*.

³⁴For a concise demonstration of the radical differences see “The Pea that Duty Locks”: Lesbian and Feminist-Heterosexual Readings of Emily Dickinson's Poetry.” Jay and Glasgow 104-125.

a particular tension of homo/heterosexual definition,” is loaded (Sedgwick 55), and to perform readings that address these issues is to explode it. For H.D., whose centrality rests on an image of ladylike perfection in life and letters, where do we get the—for lack of a better word, authority—to read her as a dyke? Do the following facts have any bearing on her poetry or prose: her number one and lifelong (becoming unspeakable) passion was a woman (Gregg), her lifelong relationship was with a woman (Bryher), the large majority of her work centers around female same-sex desire, maternal sexuality as well as sexualized young and old women and goddess worship are pervasive, and much of her work critiques heterosexuality³⁵? I will venture to show that these facts not only bear weight but constitute the late work.

Acknowledging these forces in her work provides keys to encodings. It provides deeper understanding of terms such as ‘female poet’ and ‘Lesbian literature.’ By teaching us to listen for “variations, fluctuations, blurrings, coded signals, and lapses into mimicry or a void,”³⁶ it enriches and broadens our individual readings as well as our understandings of the canon.

In *The Highest Apple*, Judy Grahn (poet, theorist, and historian, places

³⁵Barbara Smith reads Toni Morrison's *Sula* as Lesbian even with its portraying no erotic or gender transgressions.

³⁶Stimpson, Catharine. “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English.” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 363-79. Qtd. in Faderman “What is Lesbian Literature” 58.

H.D. in a tradition of foremothers that reaches from Sappho (noting that Sappho is also the *last* of a powerful era) through Grahn herself and beyond. Her genealogy includes Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde. Friedman writes of a similar lineage, noting its matriarchal relations turn Harold Bloom's oedipal theories inside out. Core concerns are "analysis of patriarchal violence and the symbolic primacy of the mother" as well as women's multifaceted bonds ("I go where I love" 230). In H.D.'s own words, "The Mother is the Muse, the Creator."³⁷ Desire for the mother, Friedman and Susan Gubar point out, is fulfilled through H.D.'s Lesbian relationships with Sappho and Bryher that allow her to (en)vision and articulate (*Sapphistries* 57-8). The Lesbianism of early modernists provided social, erotic, and literary community and served as "paradigmatic solution to the problem creativity posed to nineteenth-century women artists." Living as two-in-one, "*ex patria*, outside the father's country [. . .] the heterogeneity of homosexual coupling" allowed these women on the edge a nourishing place to write (*Sapphistries* 62). H.D.'s bisexuality must also be addressed, for it leads to a new Feminism in theory and practice.³⁸

³⁷*End to Torment* 41, qtd. in Collocott "Reputation" 14.

³⁸Gubar suggests this Feminism may be more perverse and also may be less powerful (Gubar, "I go where I love" 244-5) than H.D.'s own. While I am interested in such speculation, I hold that H.D.'s objects of desire and images of divinity, though sometimes male, exist within a Lesbian tradition. Attached to it are cultural orientations that appear to reach much further back than Sappho and

Karla Jay points out how shelving our homophobia provides new meanings for “modernism.” As applied to literature, it is a “movement fueled to a great extent by lesbian writers” (73). Gubar claims Sappho’s fragments were the chiseled, passionate models of imagism and the springboard, via H.D., of modern lyricism (*Sapphistries* 55). Yet, like the ghostly presence of Lesbian images within literature,³⁹ Lesbian writers have been pushed behind the curtains.

In several ways, Lesbian desire itself destroys identity by being oxymoronic in patriarchal language—impossible to read/hear: witness *Trilogy’s* “blank pages” [section 38]. If it succeeds in making itself heard, it threatens exclusive (male, heterosexual) realms of subjectivity through its many subversions of gender as well as subject/object positioning. Additionally, like heterosexual desire, it threatens the female subject by making her once again susceptible to “romantic thralldom” (see DuPlessis in *Signets*). It also threatens the speaking female subject by splitting her from herself.

For Freud there is only one libido and it is much more apparent as employed by men (Irigaray, *Speculum* 93-4). Women are classified by Freud and by our more general (war-oriented) society as passive objects of exchange (93-9). Freud cannot even conceive of Lesbianism, and thus it must be:

to be related to current and future trends.

³⁹See Castle. H.D. parodies this ghosting through such means as employing a phantom as heroine.

neglected in the therapy of the homosexual woman patient [. . .] remain obliterated, travestied—travestized—and withdrawn from interpretation [. . .] That a woman might desire a woman “like” herself, someone of the “same” sex, that she might also have auto- and homosexual appetites, is simply incomprehensible to Freud, and indeed inadmissible [. . .] value is the prerogative of the penis and its equivalents.” (*Speculum* 101)

Irigaray dryly discloses Freud’s convenient forgetting that “the little girl’s first love object is her mother or else someone of her own sex.” Even though he once admits homosexual desire is a direct extension of the libidinal daughter-to-mother attraction, he must attest that it is nonetheless, somehow, “surface,” “secondary” to the more profound hetero-norm. Why and how? Because, as Irigaray notes, for man there is only “*one* economy of origin. His own.” (*Speculum* 104)

Although H.D., unlike many other female and Lesbian modernists, embraced Freud and Havelock Ellis,⁴⁰ she was no less an exile from mainstream socio-literary concerns. The Freudian idea of the unconscious accepted by most modernists in a wide spectrum of the arts was a product of a fallen epoch (Bowie

⁴⁰She actually obliged the latter in fulfilling at least one of his kinky sexual fantasies.

4-5)⁴¹ whose values were replicated by “misogynist, racist, and anti-Semitic critics” and conservative theorists (Jay 72) such as Eliot and Pound (76). For Lesbians like H.D. who emigrated, the political and psychological effects made them doubly alienated (77). Lesbian modernism, then, by necessity as well as choice, practiced “silence . . . and cunning” (Joyce, qtd. in Jay 79). The Lesbianism of their texts was hidden and required insider sensitivity to be recognized.⁴² This made it more subversive and worthy of the modernist label. H.D. was extremely concerned with gender’s effects and equally preoccupied with managing her transgressions of gendered expectations.⁴³

Grahn points out how H.D. “advocated that like-minded people try to gain access to the love mind, and her examples indicate she also meant ‘like-gender’” (*Another Mother Tongue* 257). In her study of the historical role of homosexuals within their various communities, particularly their spiritual positions and their relationship to language, Grahn points out several metacultural trends. In addition to the intimacy of same-sex relations, there are several other reasons, she says, for

⁴¹Bowie considers psychoanalytic criticism as a launching point from which aesthetic expertise as well as consideration of material forces must take over. Furthermore, Freud’s models themselves should be seen as open and changing (16).

⁴²Jay points out, for instance, how Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* has had every possible interpretation *but* same-sex eroticism—at least until Louise DeSalvo exposed it (79).

⁴³ The biographies (what is found there and what is not) and other textual evidence of H.D.’s self-censure support this idea.

the extraordinary communicative powers of homosexuals. For one, gays have the often-cited perspective of being an outsider (while often simultaneously an insider): “Gay culture at its heart is continually, however unconsciously, trying to reveal the other side, sometimes just to reveal the *fact* that there are sides. [. . .] We act out irony, essential humor, and paradox.” Perversion—heterodoxy or heresy of desire—by its definition also leads to, or at least coincides with, an independence, “a particular inner vision that is compelling.” Most obviously, for someone to trust her own maligned desire and actively give voice to it, there must be a strong conviction of personal truth. And then there is the not-coincidental attraction of gays to the arts. Grahn believes, “We are the essential center of the entertainers, actors, musicians, poets, and playwrights who interpret and portray the social types, stereotypes, archetypes, videotypes of our society” (*Another Mother Tongue* 274). And last, gay folk, as she convincingly documents, have often played the role of spiritual leaders and guardians of the various crossroads: “In tribal culture we often formed a pool of potential initiates some of whom became the shamans and medicine people who can enter the spirit world, the wind, the mountains and rivers and the bottom of the sea; the worlds of the dead, or spirits, of other people’s minds [. . .]” (273).⁴⁴

That brings us to the last entry into the poems which needs to be addressed

⁴⁴See also Evans, Arthur. *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*. Boston: FAG RAG Books, 1978.

as an antidote to the reified readings of Pound/Eliot disciples: a spiritual perspective. DuPlessis, one of the first scholars to take H.D. seriously, in *The Career of that Struggle*, names three interconnected springs of H.D.'s authority—gender, sexuality, and the “Otherness” of psychic, visionary power. The radical contribution DuPlessis makes is to suggest that creativity is linked with both “sexuality and motherhood” (*Career of that Struggle* 31). It follows that it must be read subjectively with an ear for expressions of the distinctively female body. Cultural critic Cary Nelson makes a similar observation, arguing that H.D., along with Lowell, is unclassifiable:

With H.D., even in the early poems there is too much throttled self-expression displaced onto nature, too much rhythmic invention, for her work to fit easily with imagism's more regularly anthologized mode of pictorial detachment. [. . .] Yet the dynamic psychological torque in this work does not justify assimilating H.D. to the expressive subjectivity we have long associated with lyric poetry. [. . .] It hearkens toward an anonymous, sacralized voice, a ritual incantation [. . .] the body is an animate landscape of vital forces. (82)

Like the incantations of spells or ritual, H.D.'s “images [unlike “imagism” proper]

simultaneously concentrate and diffuse the mysterious energies they invoke.”⁴⁵

Like the spiral which is “the world view of Witchcraft,” H.D.’s poetry celebrates the ever deeper witchcraft that is, according to internationally renowned scholar and wiccan leader Starhawk, “a religion of poetry, not theology” (209). The poetry is charged, possessed with all the power of the delicate winding cochlea, haunting echo of seashell, spinning ball of earth, creative oceanic womb.

WHOSE BODY?

What I term “corporeal poetics”—writing from, about, and to the body—is an effective strategy for a woman-artist who seeks to redefine the relationship between female and text, to become reader and speaker rather than muse and un/attainable body. Like a chain of poets who have succeeded her, Grahn, Rich, and Lorde to name a few, part of H.D.’s mission is to mend the mind-body split that dates back at least as far as the appearance of Christianity.⁴⁶ Other poets have been similarly occupied. But what is at stake—in making the female body heard and allowing it to *mean*, in allowing the body to become the text rather than the

⁴⁵Benstock, Shari, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1986) 328, qtd. in Nelson 275n.

⁴⁶ Excellent work has been done on this subject by many scholars, especially Donna Wilshire. As she notes, an obvious source of this schism (among many other hierarchical, gendered dualisms) is the monotheistic Bible.

mind to chase after the body⁴⁷ and sublimate its desires through language—is the possibility of re-imagined female bodies. Jane Gallop points out that “if we think physically rather than metaphysically, if we think the mind-body split *through the body*, it becomes an image of shocking violence” (1). H.D.’s poetry reflects and answers to the effects of that violence on both minds and bodies. On a more abstract level, cultural phobia of female embodiment leaves its mark in feminine alienation and separation from language, a lack only barely disguised in the obsessive imaging of female as erotic or aesthetic object, worthy of contemplation as muse or some other culturally-defined image of passive perfection. H.D.’s early struggle with this positioning of the female body gives way to a messy poetics fired by the heterogeneity of her own desires and of her conceptions of her body and self.

Configuring language as based on the absence of the female body is a formula that repeats itself endlessly in literary descriptions of the writing process, in psychoanalysis, and even the most modern metaphors for textuality. “Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body” (Barthes 17). The text, and the writer behind it, become co-opted as markers of and passageways to Barthes’ (collective, royal) bliss, or rather his

⁴⁷The supposedly absent mother’s body I see as a figure of matrophobia and taboo around powerful female sexuality. Cassandra Laity, a leader in H.D. scholarship, explains it as a more general somatophobia to which H.D. responds with her mother/femme fatale women (see *H.D., Modernism, and Transgressive*

body's bliss: "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do" (16-17). Through a trick of words rather than bodies, we are made to transfer the possession of the text (pleasure) to the pleasure Barthes *takes* while still attributing his action to the volition of some disembodied second or third party. Slippery erotics here underline what is at stake in defining the rather *uncertain* body of the text: the potential for endless literary rape. If the materiality of language, its ability both to register and shape the world (outside and within it) is not outlined, the text and, indeed, the writer, move into the land of fantasy and become open ground for sexual colonization.

The struggle of H.D.'s career, or the "career of that struggle" as DuPlessis phrases it, is recorded in her poetic engagement with this dilemma of forced passivity. Taking her as sex object and even as artist, the men in her life (Pound, Aldington, Lawrence), and their successors in literary circles, used her to establish their own erotic and creative inscriptions—to 'pursue their own ideas,' while often attributing them to her. H.D.'s nervous breakdowns and her cultural muting were the result of practices that were later, not so uncannily, theorized and legitimized by Barthes' ideas outlined above.

I have chosen to write about H.D. because, decades after her death, her work has barely begun to be appreciated for its beauty, its influence, and its

Sexualities, 7).

richness as ground for new understandings of power and identity formation through language. Fiercely occupied with establishing her subjectivity within a variety of traditions that denied that possibility (the male modernist canon, academia, psychoanalysis are some), H.D. produced a large body of work that has been given little attention because mainstream critics, evaluating it as just one more case of penis envy, have been unwilling and unable to read it.

In fact, it was just that evaluation, in a 1969 *Contemporary Literature* volume on H.D., that cemented her dismissal for a couple more decades. It begins with essays by Joseph N. Riddel and Norman N. Holland that assess H.D.'s relevance as one more perfect example of the lack of a male organ (Friedman, "Who Buried" 48-9). Before she was rescued by Feminist and Lesbian critics, practically no one read her (47). Even now, when she is read, her later and grander work is ignored. The fact of her womanhood is a key piece of the equation of forgetfulness.

What demands to be heard is often a female (though not necessarily "feminine") voice, both personal and collective, grounded in experience, particularly that of a desiring, creative, and disruptive body. How that body is 'brought to matter' will be the subject of this dissertation. It is my hope that an appreciation of H.D.'s material [from *mater*, mother] poetics will contribute to the ongoing struggle (of many poets whose primary loyalty is not modernism) to reconnect the literary and real, art and life, a mission that incorporates intellectual

enterprise and worldly engagement.

KRISTEVA?

The appropriateness of Kristeva for reading H.D. is explained by her theories' synthesis of the most modern understandings of class, gender, psychoanalysis, language as practice, and religion. As David Crownfield, an expert on Kristeva, explains, her focus on the preverbal is more complex than Lacan's, utilizing "a semiotics of tactile and kinesthetic differences [. . .] the experiential territory of the somatic dyad of mother and child" that both shapes and is shaped by language. Her interest in the *chora* is the ground of exploring "borderline states" (xii) from infancy to childbirth to madness to sexual and religious⁴⁸ ecstasy—all interests of H.D. and positions from which she writes. Kristeva is ambivalent about the possibilities of meaningful articulation from these positions. I intend to apply her ideas about feminine speech to H.D.'s poetry to demonstrate how it does, in fact, signify. The interplay between semiotic and symbolic is especially appropriate for reading H.D.'s metaphor of text as palimpsest. Moreover, the omnipresence of "the sign of the reader" (DuPlessis, "Language Acquisition" 277) in all of H.D.'s texts signals the junction of the semiotic and the symbolic—the exact place where meaning

⁴⁸Crownfield notes that the association "of religion with femininity and illusion" is a tradition throughout psychoanalysis (xvii).

happens. We neither drown in the deep waters of the womb nor choke in the atrophy of the law's gripping repetitions.

Kristeva's theories of the abject explain the intense "repulsion/attraction toward the imagined maternal body" (Crownfield 100) in both psychological and social terms. She demystifies and universalizes its implications by explaining it to be "a thoroughfare, a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture'" (Kristeva, *Desire* 238, qtd. in Crownfield 99). Its power is its inseparability from drives (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 13 qtd. in Crownfield 99)—their articulation, satisfaction, and restriction. Using Kristeva to read H.D. thus allows us to investigate the relationship between body, identity, and language and at the same time to critique the culture's phobic suppression of the (female) body and its related substances and attributes, in a dualistic economy (dark vs. light etc.), allowing instead an appreciation of the heterogeneous possibilities of the *chora*.

To read from a mind-over-body position is suspect if not unintelligible, as DuPlessis points out. In other words, the poetic cannot be described from solely the symbolic. When we do so we are merely imposing or assimilating meaning into a belated order: infants gurgle in satisfaction—we then assign meanings to their sounds, based on convention. To remedy this backward system, we must read from the margins and place those margins at the center of meaning, lay them on the mother. Kristeva does not do this, as she is occupied with only male writers and male definitions of subjectivity ("Language Acquisition" 252-7). So

writers and male definitions of subjectivity (“Language Acquisition” 252-7). So Kristeva will be used *in spite of the apparent sexism and illogical homophobia* of her paradigms.

Many Feminists have objected to Kristeva’s theories on the basis of either their Freudian foundations or the way she has limited the application of those theories to male writers. The common argument would be that Kristeva repeats the exclusion of women from categories of fully developed human being and artist. However, I agree with Gail M. Schwab that Kristeva explodes Freud and Lacan as well as the iron chain linking penis and phallus or phallus and symbolic power:

And it was of course Kristeva who targeted the pre-oedipal mother-child relation as an area for particular exploration, and ‘discovered’ there the semiotic, the presymbolic *foundation* [italics mine] of language in the rhythms, sensations, and spasms of infantile experience [. . .] She demonstrated quite clearly that the symbolic order does not spring fully formed from the—head—of Zeus. (253)

Ironically, some of the most damaging critiques of Kristeva are from the opposite perspective: those who would deny any particular attributes or powers belong to female articulation. The red flag inscribed with “essentialism” is raised. To this warning, I would respond that every theorist who considers gender

(witness Freud and Lacan) must necessarily participate in some form of that academic anathema. Secondly, to argue that there are no gender-specific attributes is to be more essentialist than those who practice or validate *écriture féminine*, since such thinking assumes men and women are all the same.

Similarly to insist that women share nothing in common is to be a slave to trendy ideas of heterogeneity and to lose some critical opportunities for understanding and changing power relations. Lastly, to believe the female body has something to say by no means implies that that body is not subject to particular historical influences.⁴⁹

As with any theorist of cultural import, there are numerous other critiques of Kristeva. Some argue against her *anti*-essentialism. Or, more categorically, they question her rejection of feminine discourse. If she renders it subaltern, elusive, we can only note that this reflects its actual social position. The same defense might be used against her purported homophobia (see, for instance, Judith Butler). Perhaps the best comprehensive response to all these interpretations is that of Toril Moi. Moi explains that Kristeva's definition of femininity is one of "*positionality*" (166); in other words, both the limits and the revolutionary power

⁴⁹One more response to social constructionist paranoia comes from philosopher Arleen B. Dallery: "Against the dominant discourse, the male gaze, or the scopic economy, *écriture féminine* celebrates the radical otherness of woman's erotic embodiment. As such, it poses an enormous threat to the philosophical tradition of gender-free humanism and to the treasure ideal of androgyny, itself based on fear of otherness" (Jagger 65).

of poetic language depend on one's marginality to patriarchy—a place which is usually, though not always, occupied by those born women.

OTHER THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

My dissertation employs a range of theoretical sources. Kristeva's trope of the *chora* is central to my reading of articulation of the body and of same-sex desire and their roles in the development of self. There would be no Kristeva without Freud and Lacan. My reading argues with both of their models of female subjectivity. The dissertation builds on the work of Friedman, DuPlessis, and Gallop; likewise, Cixous, Irigaray, and Wittig are foundational. Finally, Judith Butler's theories of performativity offer support as well as radical challenges.

Lacan's theoretical legacy, that to speak is necessarily to sever oneself from the mother's body and simultaneously to attempt to reunite and repossess it, haunts all language/ body discussions since 1966. His phallic models as well as explicit statements exclude women from the domain of speaking/ authority. Strictly Lacanian theorists such as Deborah Kloepfer are limited to the extent that their work is derived from his phallogocentric dialectics. I will rely more on theories that address the heterogeneous subjectivity of theory (poststructurally and otherwise) as well as of all signifying practices. Thus the French Feminists of the seventies (to the present) who write from their bodies are useful for their contributions to theorizing desire; they, however, have largely left criticism of

actual female texts to others. The more materialist approach of American Feminists of the eighties and nineties allows for politicizing the position of women; these theorists, such as Friedman and DuPlessis, however, are heterosexist even when they do mention the word *Lesbian*. Monique Wittig, who accuses both parties of essentialism, provides the most extreme angle of vision by deconstructing the idea of “woman” and privileging “Lesbian” as the only escape from gender.⁵⁰ Finally, Kristeva synthesizes much of the above in a versatile account of the relationships between sex, body, desire, language, and revolution.

As a modernist, H.D. was always concerned with the limits of language. Moreover, as a Lesbian and as a self-proclaimed initiate of the goddess (much of her work, ‘autobiographical’ and otherwise, discusses this; see also Guest), the poet inherited additional challenges—and tools—for probing its Achilles’ tendons. In such areas of crisis we find, in *Trilogy*, *Helen in Egypt*, and *Hermetic Definition*, that her poetry puts words to work, prepares them “to hatch butterflies” (*Trilogy*). My reading of how (super)natural (mundane-magical, mythic) poetic events occur will be predominantly through semiotics (*le semiotique*—organization of bodily drives as they shape writing; also “semanalysis”—productive ‘dissolving’ of signs) and will include a survey of relevant critical receptions of H.D.’s body of work, both their meaning-making

⁵⁰ “Lesbians are not women.” (“The Straight Mind” 32; see also “One is Not Born a Woman.” Both in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*.)

and meaning-refusing conventions. The “weight” of H.D.’s words is the meaning H.D.’s corporeal poetics provides, both new and timeless; it is also a “wait”—a deferral and resistance to being pinned down.

H.D.’s SOURCES

While differences abound among women, among Lesbians, and between women and Lesbians, one can argue not only a tradition but a metacultural Lesbian aesthetic.⁵¹ Its first distinguishing characteristic is that it is poetic. As Paula Bennett explains, “to list Lesbian or bisexual American women poets is to provide a roll call of the most influential women poets of the last century [. . .]. Indeed, I would argue that where Lesbian novelists have been at their strongest [. . .] they have also written something closer to poetry than prose” (in Haggerty and Zimmerman 100-01). Bennett includes H.D.’s prose in this poetic genre. Poetic language, according to Kristeva, is more revolutionary than linear and conventionally limited narrative. In particular, poetry’s lyrical ability to render experience freshly—emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual and erotic experience—favors its potential healing of the mind-body and the I-you schisms. H.D. builds on a long Lesbian poetic tradition for aesthetic grounding. She also relies on it as part of her identity.

⁵¹Judy Grahn does this in *The Highest Apple* and in *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words/ Gay Worlds*.

As Gubar explains, H.D. uses Sappho and her island culture as a womb from which to rebirth herself. Both *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt* incorporate central islands and *Hermetic Definition* spells out that “the island is herself, is her” (H.D., qtd. in *Sapphistries* 54-5). As Jane Marcus has noted, scholars have gone to present Sappho as an exception, aberration, anomaly,⁵² and thus to neutralize/negate her central position in culture and literary tradition.

Paula Bennett places H.D. in the first of period of U.S. Lesbian poetry, “early modernism” (as opposed to “modernist poetry proper”). Like Grahn, she notes that early twentieth century Lesbian writing is a descendent of nineteenth century erotic writing by women towards women (“Lesbian Poetry” 100-01). According to Bennett, the imagery tended to be clear and derived from the Bible, Sappho, and nature. H.D.’s sources were wider—the whole classical tradition—but, as with the others, “it is lesbianism that made these poems possible” (102).⁵³

Poets and critics then responded with vehement attacks on, first of all, exactly those methods and themes of nineteenth century Lesbian poetry (Bennett, “Lesbian Poetry” 103). Perhaps H.D.’s turns toward prose and silence were

⁵²“Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny” in *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, ed. Carolyn Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higgonnet (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983), p.87; qtd. in Gubar *Sapphistries* 45.

⁵³Gubar points out that, due in part to contemporaneous translations of Sappho, H.D. was able to turn nineteenth century Lesbian schizophrenia into utopia and ecstasy (*Sapphistries* 44-7)

caused by modernism's homophobic and misogynist agenda [see Gallop on modernism and postmodernism].

Personally, H.D. associated her own mother with Lesbianism as the two of them, according to Francis Wollé, traveled to Lesbos together (qtd. in Gubar, *Sapphistries* 53). The Lesbianism of her relationship with Bryher and with Sappho allow her a poetic intensity she affiliates with ancient Greece and with the archetypal and personal Mother, "Hellas" (Helen) (58). Regarding specifically maternal central themes, initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries recurs in H.D.'s oeuvre as sacred, sexual, and a source of knowledge. From the early *Hymen* (title poem of collection) to "Hipparchia" (short story in *Palimpsest*) to the (autobiographical) *Hermione* and beyond, Persephone and Demeter are pervasive as archetypes and often specifically mentioned. There are also the lyric sequences of an *Electra-Orestes* trilogy, two of which were published in the early thirties and one which Martz published in *Collected Poems*—about desire for and loss of the mother.

Most of H.D.'s heroines are marked as autobiographical through names that share her mother's and the poet's initials. Two out of three *Palimpsest* heroines have *H* names (Hipparchia and Helen) as well as having life circumstances that mimic H.D.'s. Hipparchia, for instance, is stunned by a young female suitor who has memorized her poems and fallen in love with mysterious Greek islands—a girl who in these respects represents Bryher exactly.

Palimpsest also demonstrates the central preoccupation with language as embodiment. The plot of “Murex” is about the transforming of “Feet, feet, feet, feet, feet” of war into feet of a poem. The heroines of the other two stories both manifest a concern with the sound of people’s syllables and words as opposed to their symbolic meanings.

THE SENSE OF SOUNDING (THE BODY)

Of course sound as meaning is integral to the functioning of poetry. Modernists, more particularly imagists, whose philosophy required breaking formal rules and creating new rhythms, believed that “In poetry a new cadence means a new idea.”⁵⁴ In other words, there is a form of representation intrinsic to an idea (not vice-versa, according to Amy Lowell) and for modern ideas that form is most likely to be “*vers libre* and ‘polyphonic prose’”⁵⁵ (Lowell, *Tendencies* 243). The idea of meter or rhythm as constitutive of meaning is neither modern nor radical. As the standard reference work *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* puts it, the “m.[eter] of a poem, in and by itself, means” (“meter”).

⁵⁴Manifesto of anthology of *Some Imagist Poets*, rule #2, qtd. by Lowell in *Tendencies* 239.

⁵⁵Polyphonic prose is not prose but “makes use of all the ‘voices’ of poetry, viz.: metre, *vers libre*, assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and return” (Lowell 321). While it changes often, even abruptly, it must be perfectly balanced (279, 298-9, 321). Lowell finds H.D.’s sound never metrical but always “personal” and “perfect” (262, 279).

In many pages of biography, Lowell neglects to mention H.D.'s female friendships or erotic desires, though she analyzes her aesthetics psychologically and discusses her college 'health' problems and her having 'broken down' (250).

On describing the sound of H.D.'s poetry, Lowell takes more freedom:

Writing in a highly and most carefully wrought *vers libre*,
 "H.D."s poems achieve a beauty of cadence which has been
 surpassed by no other *vers libriste*. Indeed, her subtly changing
 rhythms are almost without an equal. Never, in her verse, do we
 find a prose suggestion [. . .]. Her poems are kept to a key; the key
 of haunted woodland, of nymph-bearing sea. Reading them, we
 hear pipe strains lost in the mists of forests, we hear voices calling
 through the wash of waves. They remind me of a story I once read
 by a French author, in which an ancient shell preserved within it a
 few moments of a siren's song. (256-7)

While American women writers have tended to receive early 'mental hysterectomies' (Hortense Calisher, qtd. in Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 90), in the 1970s women writers began their liberation by allowing their "muted parts [to] begin to explain themselves" Ostriker 92). *L'écriture féminine* does not belong solely to the French. In fact, as Ostriker points out, "The idea that the female body is a creative woman's chief liability has never been so fully argued and documented as in *The Second Sex*, which, since its first publication in France

in 1949 and in the United States in 1953, has been the great-godmother of all Feminist texts” (93). Moreover, plenty of American women, among them Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich, have championed the female body as source of radical truth and power (Ostriker 96).

Because women have been defined by their bodies, female artistic expressions often reflect such a close relationship between the two. Bleeding into print and childbirth are two options for models of creativity (Gubar “Blank Page” 248). Some Feminists argue that ideas of maternity and other bodily power may be used to imprison as well as liberate women, when biological essentialism is appealed to as rationale for social position. The critical distinction becomes that of intention. One metaphor, used by men as well as women, for the female body as text is “the blank page.” For women to make this speak is radically to transform object status symbolically and sexually (for instance, to reject the insistence of wedding sheets as male texts).

The problem also arises that to attempt to make the female body the locus of meaning is to be oxymoronic, nonsensical, as it is the pen/is which traditionally assumes the place of subject. But as Žižek points out, it is only the absence of the pen/is and of the related Mother that allows symbolism (142; 230-1). Moreover, subjectivity cannot be defined by physicality *qua* presence:

According to Lacan, Descartes thereby misrecognized the proper dimension of his own gesture: the subject which is left as a

remainder of the radical doubt is not a substance, a “thing which thinks,” but a pure point of substanceless subjectivity, a point which is nothing but a kind of vanishing gap [. . .].

(*For They Know Not* 147)

The subject is an unknowable origin, a position of *differance* or guaranteed excess and heterogeneity—ironically definitive of the sex of *ce sex qui n'est pas un*.

The subject cannot be located, but its silence has nonetheless been coded as feminine and Lesbian.⁵⁶ According to Wayne Koestenbaum, voice itself is feminine (“The Queen’s Throat” 211). The morphology of subjectivity has more recently attracted scientists invested in a certain labeling of hearing as Lesbian. An overlarge cochlea is the determinant⁵⁷—an organ also hidden from view and spiral or snailshaped, images evocative of both feminine sexuality (the vulva) and spiritual identity (the spiral is the chief energy symbol of Feminist witchcraft). Absurd and essentialist as these models may be, to claim extreme listening power

⁵⁶For the feminine labeling of silence, see Kammer (as above). As for the Lesbian nature of silence, Wittig holds: “[Lesbianism is] a theme which cannot even be described as a taboo, for it has no real existence in the history of literature. . . . The Lesbians, for their part, are silent —just as all women are as women at all levels” (Author’s note to *The Lesbian Body*, qtd. in Collecott, *What is Not Said*, 92).

⁵⁷The National Academy of Sciences backed a study that found Lesbian inner ears to be masculinized (Recer, Paul, “We Are Family/ Researchers Find Differences in Gays,” Assoc. Press 2 March 1998; <http://www.waf.org/familyarchives/or.../Researchers%20Find%20Difference%20in%20Gays.html>, p1).

is to engage in the mind-body music of the jelly-fish consciousness that H.D. argues (in *Notes on Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho*) is necessary for creating and receiving art. It is not coincidence that hearing and Lesbianism are being linked. How do we hear the beyond here, what the superabundance of sound whispers of meaning that is more than what is visible? Such hearing has been called schizophrenia (or, worse, satanism). Visual culture though we have, we all interpret lexical signs through subvocalization—e.g., hearing voices (Smith, Reisberg, and Wilson 117). The *hysteria* of the female body is a useful metaphor for what speaks—through the revolutionary activity of the *chora*. Opening ourselves to desire, in all its disruptiveness, desire for the unknown body that is language—this desire that is Lesbian theory⁵⁸—gives us tools to listen.

⁵⁸Judith Roof, along with Wittig, labels such desire "lesbian" (254).

**II. MEDUSA¹ MANIFESTO:
NOTES ON THOUGHT AND VISION AND THE WISE SAPPHO**

“[. . .] memory is the mother, begetter of all drama, idea, music, science or song.”

—*Notes*

Notes on Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho [*Notes*], in essence a ‘how to read’ manifesto, is the proper background for reading the bodywriting of H.D.’s body of work. Completed in 1919 and published in 1982,² its dates mark watersheds of the poet’s career. At the time of writing *Notes*, she begins to shed the burden of perfection (perfect imagist, perfect “poetess”) and become a poet of gigantic consequence; the latter date, 1982, is approximately the time the world begins to notice.

Contrary to most H.D. scholarship that presents the inter-war period as a sterile block for H.D., my reading assesses 1919 to be a rebirth for her. It is a time of prolific, inspired creativity. The facts that she published almost none of her work from this period and that what she did publish was largely ignored tell stories other than passivity. Eloping with Bryher, she comes to the Scilly Islands

¹ Kathleen Crown calls *Notes* a “Jellyfish Manifesto.” I use “Medusa” (which also means jelly-fish) to highlight the text’s monstrous body and frightening gaze as well as (through alluding to “The Laugh of the Medusa”) its connection to *l’écriture féminine*.

²*Notes on Thought and Vision* was written in 1919; its companion piece, *The Wise Sappho*, making up the second half of the text as published, was part of the largely unpublished contemporaneously written *Notes on Euripides*.

off the coast of Cornwall, the place from which Bryher took her own name. The end of World War I and of several heterosexual relationships, a nervous breakdown, the birth of a child, and the mutual rescue of H.D. and Bryher bring her to the place where she formulates the ecstatically induced theories of artistic mind that will model the rest of her writing career. *Notes*, a multi-layered piece, is a reflection on her emergent consciousness that postulates the importance of wholeness of response—that of integrating mind and body, spirituality and sexuality, and, to a lesser extent, masculine and feminine capacities.

Pound's response to the treatise was that H.D. should avoid critical activity. Perhaps in agreement, Susan Friedman calls the text a "prose-poem." The indifference of her is likely the reason H.D. never attempted publication (Friedman, "H.D. [1886-1961]" 87).

In *Notes* she describes this originating "jelly-fish" state of being as a usual one, though she adds that it is "abnormal" and requires an "agony" of transition (19). It is the greatest form of consciousness and feels like one has become a jelly-fish in a tight watery capsule—one I would liken to the amniotic sac. H.D. herself likened the container to a "balloon" or "bell jar" (as explained to Freud, qtd. in Guest 119). Some biographer-critics (see Albert Gelpi's introduction to *Notes*) label this island period a nervous breakdown and classify her psychic experiences as symptoms of illness. Whatever they are, Bryher encourages them, and they change both H.D.'s writing and her life—during which she has

numerous visions and epiphanies—for the next forty-two years.

H.D. doubted any of this would have happened had she not been with Bryher; she also describes this period of weeks as an experience of “floating” which accomplishes a breach from her past (Guest 119). Having the support of Bryher, H.D. now leaves imagism behind and becomes extremely prolific with a new writing. Yet, critics still ignore both the jelly-fish experience and the resultant text. They are completely absent in Robert Duncan’s chronology, a surprising omission in an otherwise thoroughly devoted source.³ Even close friend Havelock Ellis, a sexologist whose eccentric fantasies H.D. consented to fulfill, rejected it (Guest 121).

I will read this treatise for the following: how it privileges the body—particularly as homoerotically displayed, and how it treats the role of gender—chiefly through tropes of the maternal—in creativity. The relationship between gender and modernism is not of much concern in this treatise, except insofar as H.D. relies on a historically gendered culture—Hellas—as a reservoir for vision. Bonnie Kime Scott, one of the very few scholars to recognize *Notes* as a text of interest, points out in *The Gender of Modernism* that gender has traditionally been unacknowledged by modernist critics. Scott includes the famous feminists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in her allegation (3). Gilbert and Gubar do, however,

³*H.D. Book: Part 2, Chapter 6, 141-3.*

investigate the practices of female writers in choosing their foremothers. This preoccupation serves at least half of H.D.'s purposes in *Notes* (the *Sappho* part); the other half is the more general relationship between gender and creativity. Using a Kristevan model, the reader can apprehend a subject of any gender articulating semiotic drives. However, from a spiritual perspective—which is indeed H.D.'s throughout her career—the home of that modality is the space of the individual and cultural Mother. Friedman points out that the very form of the philosophical essay was revised to accommodate an erotic and procreative poetic (“H.D. [1886-1961]” 88). For H.D., the female body is the greatest source of vision, and the mother is the supreme creative subject and desired object.

“Where does the body come in?
What is the body?” (51)

These two questions (now taken up so provocatively by queer theorist Judith Butler) form a chapter, located centrally by theme and space, in *Notes on Thought and Vision*. The reader may ask, first, where does *Notes* come in on discussion of the body? H.D. enters a modern conversation (e.g. the Romantic privileging of altered erotic and spiritual states) about the role of the body in creativity. However, her unique contribution is to predate the theory and practice

of gynopoetics.⁴ Moreover, at the same time, she avoids essentializing gender by offering a third term to the patriarchal dualisms reflected in such constructs as the mind/body split.⁵

The female body has been objectified for male profit; it has been textualized as “inferior, sick, or even monstrous”—especially in its creative endeavors (Conboy 8). The body itself has been labeled feminine and so denigrated until *l'écriture féminine* (French school and its predecessors) championed the female body. The body, along with its many productions, has always been disciplined;⁶ in recent years, it has become a discipline. Increasingly we hear passionate arguments over individuals' corporeal 'rights,' especially the right to keep the activities of the body private. For all its new possibilities, the body remains a technology—a complex sedimentation of other practices, a means to an end.

For H.D., the body is a many-tendrilled reaching, a stretch toward the

⁴“Inspiration” scholar Timothy Clark situates H.D. in conventional philosophic space, as well as in a much more original feminine-Feminist perspective that escapes “crass sexual determinism” (182). He objects, however, in general, to the nonverifiable nature of psychological theories of artistic sources, preferring cultural constructionism.

⁵See Kathleen Crown.

⁶Religion was the old game whereby the threatening female body was disposed of (the female holocaust, or Inquisition). Theological practices have now been taken over by medicine and psychiatry as “the opiate of contemporary peoples” (Szasz 303-4), a communal defense mechanism.

other: “The body of a man is a means of approach” (46). “The body” she defines as “our concern”—in this text, the text/tissue of woven meanings, threads spun, connected, undone. All and nothing, it creates and disappears. Seven decades after *Notes*, science and philosophy begin to account for this paradox.

Breakthrough feminist theorist Donna Haraway attempts to counter the patriarchal privilege of disembodied omniscience: “I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway, *Persistence* 283).⁷ H.D.’s treatise is a poetic tribute to the meaning of situated, personal *choric* vision and Sappho’s perfect embodiment of it.

Follow, she says, the trail she blazes, and you may break free from “the murky, dead, old, thousand-times explored old world, the dead world of overworked emotions and thoughts” (24). The writing reflects the borderline feelings of her summer in the Scillies, and to grasp it the reader must go beyond the rational. Enter another underwater world where thoughts are felt by the body, a world which, mined, connects us to the “overmind” (a somewhat Jungian

⁷The prototypical assumption of objectivity we inherit is Emerson’s universal (white male heterosexual) eye/I. Haraway argues that how we see and how we interpret constitute each other and that neither can be unmediated. Rather than the boys’ school “death of the subject” she prefers “opening of nonisomorphic subjects” (288)—subjects accountable for a multiplicity of viewpoints. Then we can create community as well as breakthroughs in knowledge: “The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (292).

concept of embodied, transpersonal spirit). My overmind, she says, reaches out to you, because overmind knows through overmind. My jelly-fish feelers will reach down so you may find that place, “fluid yet with definite body,” a sea anemone where thoughts “are visible like fish swimming under clear water” (18-19), under the clear water of her sure, mysterious body.

The treatise begins by explaining the necessity of “sympathetic”—like-bodied, like-minded—love, the foundation of great art (21-2). We can hardly avoid reading the presence of H.D.’s current situations—the like-bodied two-in-ones of her maternity and of her Lesbian partnership. H.D. had her jelly-fish vision just before giving birth to Perdita in March of 1919. She wrote her descriptions of the love-mind in July, several weeks after her relationship had begun with Bryher (Grahn, *Highest Apple* 106-7).

Notes rejects the age-old hiding of the female, maternal body so often accomplished via metonymic substitution of its definitive part—the womb and its male children.⁴ Instead, *Notes* privileges the whole body, particularly as homoerotically displayed, and addresses the role of gender—tropes of maternity included—in creativity. From this point on, H.D.’s figure for the creative source

⁴Wilson argues that “squeamishness” over issues of sexism and racism leads to popular representations of wombs as transparent. Wombs and their corporeal homes are also forced to the wings of what should be centerstage. Even feminist perspectives like that of Planned Parenthood are not immune to such representational temptations. We do not see women’s *whole* bodies as subjects.

condenses into the individual and cultural Lesbian womb. Her reflections on Sappho are an exemplification of the Lesbo-maternal trope. Sappho and the Lesbian womb demonstrate the “tortured and torturing” nature of the artist and artistic process, how ‘terrible’ perfection emerges through “wave upon destructive passionate wave” (58).

The wave metaphor is germane to creativity’s origins in the amniotic sea/see. When H.D. enters it, all is “slightly blurred as if seen under water”; one might add ‘amplified’ and shifted into slow motion. The state of creativity draws down the “cap,” brings mind, body, and spirit together: “fluid yet with definite body, contained in definite space. It is like a closed sea-plant, jelly-fish or anemone” (18-19). Luxurious sounds and visual images rush over the reader in these words evocative of female genitalia as well inner reproductive organ/isms. These images first seem to place the visioning subject inside the womb. Yet true to the mother-child dyad, H.D. manages fluidly to shift centers so the visioning body now holds “this state of consciousness [. . .] centered in the love-region of the body or placed like a fetus in the body” (19).

Historically, Sappho is the great mother/lover. As muse, she is the “rockshelves” (58) of mother earth and “the sea itself” from which artists are born and nurtured (67). Maintaining a “flawless tradition” (59), she is the watershed between the old world and the new (59), between her mother Cleis and her daughter Cleis. H.D. refers to this young child Cleis as one who stands out

among, is included in, all of Sappho's beloveds (66). Sappho is the mother of Cleis, of Lesbian heritage, and of the best of culture. Sapphic poetry is unsurpassed (63). She may stand synecdochally for poetry. Meanwhile she is "terribly a human being" (59). Sappho and her tradition are the deep well of the cultural Lesbian womb. So H.D., too, can be, as Robert Gelpi puts it, alternately and both "womb and head" (13) of her jelly-fish experience, either part of an erotic and spiritual female coupling.

Can the body speak? If Sappho's words have survived the ravages of time and hostility, surely contemporary bodies can speak. Nonverbal language,⁹ we know, has long been devalued as lower and less advanced (because earlier in personal and collective history) than symbolic language. Thomas Szasz, M.D., splits language into two categories: "protolanguage" (indexical and iconic language, where there is a logical relationship between sign and signified) and "object"/"metalanguage" (signs and referents with increasingly distanced and

⁹I use the terminology "nonverbal language" following several recent theorists, because it is technically accurate. I refer to what is often called "body language," both popularly and scholastically, but my terminology acknowledges that it is *kind* rather than channel of communication that matters. It includes "posture, facial expression, inflection, sequence, rhythm, cadence and indeed the CONTEXT" (Wilden [caps his], qtd. in Anderson 3). Peter A. Anderson explains how voice can be "nonverbal when it communicates analogically [directly, with intrinsic relationship to thing represented] through grunts, screams, giggles, or vocal inflection during speech (4). In short, nonverbal communication (like what is often called "body language") is "all communication that is *analogic*, *nonlinguistic*, and typically governed by the right brain hemisphere (Anderson 3, italics his).

arbitrary relationships). He concludes, “it is not quite true that intelligible communication is possible only by means of object and metalanguages” (119). Yet, scholars in many disciplines continue to label as sick unconscious language that expresses experience through related, often somatic, signs (a definition of hysteria). Because protolanguage may be translated into, but is never identical with, secondary languages of the conscious mind, it is a reminder of our interpretive limits and of the need to listen on deeper levels. We, rather than the text, may be at fault for communication problems. Like the monoglot who has the power to insist on using his own language with a polylingual interlocuter, the scientist who cannot hear the body has the power to insist on his own, several times removed, codes. *Notes on Thought and Vision* is a guide that argues the necessity of, and provides some strategies for, meeting minds through the body.

As H.D. puts it:

Two or three people, with healthy bodies and the right [could she have known about hemispheres?] sort of receiving brains, could turn the whole tide of human thought, could direct lightning flashes of electric power to slash across and destroy the world of dead, murky thought.¹⁰ (27)

¹⁰Such “heady” pronouncements have found little sympathy or attention. Barbara Guest and Havelock Ellis are among H.D. fans that do not appreciate *Notes* because of them (see Guest 120).

How is this accomplished? As her above statement suggests, H.D. does not, cannot, explain the process in purely symbolic language.

At this point in H.D.'s career, sound, even in prose, is already an integral part of meaning. H.D., too, writes in waves, phrases strung together and rising to the breaking point. Sibilants excite, as in her description of Cleis as "so sweet, so spiced" (66). Structurally, in her tribute to Sappho, she closes with a reminder of Sophocles' praise of the Lesbian poet's rhythm (68). And the whispers and moans of H.D.'s last words leave a haunting presence as of a remembered wave or drift of desert: "roses, but many, many roses [. . .] palimpsest among the funereal glories of the sand-strewn Pharaohs" (69).

Receptivity is the means of effective communication. Moreover, she has said, receptivity holds the key to personal and worldly transformation. The *chora*, we recall, was likened by Plato to a "receptacle," receiver. As both Plato and Kristeva suggest, we can read its argument in the sounds as well as the referential meanings of poetic prose.

Brain, H.D. says, is only one kind of consciousness; "the majority of . . . vision is vision is of the womb" (21). Many terms float in this theoretical space. Let us sort them out, rank them, she teases: "The centre of consciousness is either the brain or the love-region of the body" (20). *Either* here, not both. We know which has been preferred for centuries. Nevertheless, if we choose the brain, well, H.D. suggests, we fall short of the mark. Her subtle thought leaves us

wondering just how humorous she intends her discourse to be. H.D. has fun with her pseudo-scientific models of being. She is precise in her terminology, mathematical in her explanations. After forty-five pages of exposition that comes finally to irresolvable confusion, she simplifies:

That is, I visualise [sic] my three states of consciousness in a row,

1. Over-conscious mind.
2. Conscious mind.
3. Sub-conscious mind.

He on the other hand visualises his three states,

1. Conscious Mind.
2. Sub-conscious mind.
3. Universal mind.

He means by universal mind exactly what I mean by over-mind but certainly my term overmind is not adequate, if this over-mind state is approached by others through the subconscious. (46)

The author demurs, falling just short of declaring “he’s wrong.” But what happened to the body in the scheme of things? H.D. seems to toss out both problems—terminology and metaphysics. Yet she continues:

But we both visualise these states in a row, though I suppose the universal symbol is the triangle, or taken a step further, the circle [. . .] though neither he nor I visualise them that way. (46)

Why does she digress so? Where are we going, and how do we get there? Next: “The body of a man is [. . .]” (46). With firmer footing, she goes on to compare bodies of fruit trees with musical instruments. Communication between bodies is musical love, energy channeled, “keyed to the same pitch” (46). Here we approach the sublime. Reading this poetic theory is as much a study of epistemology as it is aesthetics. Momentarily the body is a lump of coal, best fulfilling its purpose in burning. All this is true. However, in case we are still unclear, after a couple more pages of explanation:

The intellect, the brain, the conscious mind is the bridge
across, the link between the sub-conscious and the over-conscious.

I think at last I have my terms clear. [Ha!]

There are three states of manifestations—subconscious
mind, conscious mind, over conscious mind. (49)

Breaking it down so simply and thoroughly, does H.D. suggest we are idiots if we do not understand? “Manifestations” of *what*? Nonetheless, she is quite serious—and bold—in her revision of Freud. We must use all faculties if we are to reach vision.

Similarly, we must express all desires if we are to move from “kill” to “love” to “life” (39). These three terms remarkably parallel Freud’s two essential drives except for the significant move from dualism to multiplicity (characteristic of analogic/nonverbal communication). Megan Davies explains the progress H.D.

makes, in her prescient career, towards textualizing desire, concluding that her efforts are most successful when she can clearly identify an object (and its gender). Yet H.D. remains bisexual in Cixous' terms by eroticizing

the *other bisexuality* in which every subject not enclosed in the false theatre of phallogentric representationalism has founded his/her erotic universe. Bisexuality: that is, each one's location in self (*reperage en soi*) of the presence— variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female—of both sexes.

(*Laugh*, qtd. in Davies 52)

The potential irresolvability of desire emerges as a function of fully realized human identity. Desire as the ability to be seduced by beauty—or whatever kind—is necessary for learning discrimination: “If you can not be seduced by beauty, you cannot learn the wisdom of ugliness” (32). Who is to say which is greater, the rose or the excrement from which it grows, she asks, rhetorically suggesting there is no answer. But of sexual lust she is sure:

There is plenty of pornographic literature that is interesting and amusing.

If you cannot be entertained and instructed by Boccaccio, Rabelais, Montaigne, Sterne, Middleton, deGourmont and de Regnier there is something wrong with you physically. (30)

Articulation of female desire, in H.D.'s time, was a rare accomplishment.

Ironically, as the lower form of all our culture's dualistic pairs, the female/feminine has been historically associated with carnality

H.D.'s dilemma was to choose between embodying beauty and perfection and going the more hazardous route of swimming in unknown waters of her own desire. Pound, who initially wanted her as wife and imagiste par excellence, grew disparaging about H.D. and her female colleagues, both publicly and privately. He warned literary folks of Amy Lowell, whom he called "hippopoetess." Association was contamination. H.D., whom he rudely rejected through another engagement (as well as through a liaison with her lover, Frances Gregg), he secretly censored. He wrote to Margaret Anderson, who ran the influential *Little Review*, that H.D. was one of those poets who had not "gone on." Furthermore, he advises: "She has also (under I suppose the flow-contamination of Amy and Fletcher) let loose dilutions and repetitions, so that she has spoiled the 'few but perfect' position which she might have held on to." At his first meeting with H.D.'s lifelong partner Bryher, he treated her like a child. She was more open to him, but they became fierce enemies (Guest 127). In summary, if we can judge anything about the culture by the actions of the man who almost singly represented *P/poetry* (the genre and the journal), women had no place in making major contributions. This was also a world in which a husband could have extramarital affairs in his wife's home and then threaten to have her

imprisoned for her subsequent infidelity.¹¹ It was a world in which such a man could, in collusion with Pound, oust a woman (Rebecca West) from an editing position, take it over, bury the heretofore feminist journal (*New Freewoman*), and replace it with a patriarchal one (*The Egoist*)—on the basis of the woman's female body (she was pregnant). H.D. was similarly prevented from taking literary responsibilities while there were men around (not at war) or while she was pregnant (Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism* 152-3).

For H.D., object status became less of an option as she came to believe that imaginative desire, or creativity, is rooted in the female body. The jelly-fish womb may be used as a metaphor for male creativity but it is real, *material* for women:

Is it easier for a woman to attain this state of consciousness
than for a man?

For me, it was before the birth of my child that the jelly-
fish consciousness seemed to come definitely into the field or
realm of the intellect or brain. (20)

H.D. escapes a direct statement of affirmation in response to the preceding question by modifying, qualifying that she can *only* speak for herself. Yet there is an unspoken “yes” heard as the beginning of her answer, a “yes” that gives weight

¹¹Aldington's behavior is public knowledge; see Guest 200.

to her own modest testimony.

Can a woman speak for herself as a woman? Some, like Judith Butler, would argue “no.” In our millennial cynicism, we imagine there is nothing to say.

In 1919, H.D. believed she could make passionate and wise declarations:

So the body, with all its emotions and fears and pain in time casts
off the spirit, a concentrated essence, not itself, but made, in a
sense, created by itself.

I know that this has been said before but I speak for myself,
from my personal experience. (51)

Now I speak to you, with the authority of vision. It may have been said, “But today I saw for myself” (51). Well, H.D. does speak for herself by grounding her words in actual, lived experience. Unfortunately, she does not speak further about her pregnancy and childbirth—too much to hope for in a theoretical treatise of 1919. But her logical arguments suggest that while vision is accessible for men and women alike, “The majority of dream and of ordinary vision is vision of the womb” (21), which is the most embodied vision and the foundation of all others.

The desiring body, the body of experience, is both female and homosexual. As in much of her poetry, H.D. prose is suffused with representations of sameness, mirrored language/identity, both repetitive and diaphonic: “I would bind narcissus to narcissus. I would plait the red violet to the white violet” (37). Narcissus is, traditionally, a symbol for homosexuality.

She calls it the necessity of sympathetic understanding: “We must be ‘in love’ before we can understand the mysteries of vision” (22). Is this an instance of the “romantic thralldom” DuPlessis describes as a booby trap? H.D. insists on, as Adrienne Rich would describe it, loving with her intelligence. Sexual rites—merging, as in the mother-daughter Eleusinian mysteries she often invokes in her oeuvre, realizing the body’s oneness with the “Earth Mother”—are vision (52). The passions of “wave upon [. . .] wave” are poetry; “flower upon flower” is tradition. “Keyed to the same pitch” (47) we must be, in order to recognize

Christ and his father, or as the Eleusinian mystic would have said, his mother, were one [. . .] the body of nature, the vine, the Dionysus, as he was the soul of nature.[. . .]

Christ and his father, or as the Eleusinian mystic would have said, his mother, were one [. . .] the body of nature, the vine, the Dionysus, as he was the soul of nature. (52-3)

The semiotic repetition washes over us like the ecstatic waves she invokes.

H.D.’s images—pearls everywhere, in skulls, oysters, and heaven (see, for instance, 50-1) remind us of Dickinson’s homoerotic, clitoral imagery. Like Dickinson’s “garnet to garnet,” H.D.’s “violet to the white violet” and “flower upon flower” (*Notes* 37; 68) are typical. H.D. also echoes, ubiquitously, Dickinson’s erotic paeans to Susan featuring the same female and doubled

evocations.¹² H.D.'s reliance on a Lesbian tradition symbolized by Sappho has been investigated, yet as Eileen Gregory, author of *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines*, insists, "this literary affiliation is still more extensive and complex than has been estimated." In fact many poems, at least twenty-four (from Gregory's Appendix) borrow directly from Sappho, even when not citing her. If the critical lack of interest in this phenomenon does not surprise us, perhaps H.D.'s own relative silence on matters of Sapphic scholarship and intertextuality should provoke curiosity. Gregory finds it "remarkable." Judy Grahn points out that "Purple, violets, amaranth and similar references to high spiritual content recur in H.D.'s work, as is true of Sappho's fragments, and Emily Dickinson's poems" (*Highest Apple* 104). From amaranth to amaranth (love-lies-bleeding), these poets conjure the passions of eros (as well as the Lesbian Goddess Artemis, to whom Amaranth was sacred) that traverse the grave.¹³ Sappho is H.D.'s literary mother and model of desire. Her beauty and love of beauty, tempered by a fiery craft, add up to more than the worship of Aphrodite. A scholar contemporary with Sappho identified her as "The Wise Sappho" (63); H.D. agrees.

Remembering this matrilineal tradition, H.D. will cultivate pearl from pearl. "Memory is the mother," she says, of not only her own poetry but "of all

¹³H.D. uses the symbolism in the autobiographical *Asphodel*, originally an allusion to *Amaranth*, as well.

drama, idea, music, science, or song” (23). Without these roots, no art. Moreover, they are distinctly feminine. If such language is possible in relationship with the mother, why the tie between patriarchy and the symbolic order? As Dianne Hunter explains the developmental process, the tie is the result of a chance social structure, namely, patriarchy:

Although it is usually the mother who activates an infant’s capacity for speech in the oral, semiotic stage, subjectivity in the sense of being a separate, syntactical agent, a grammatical ‘subject,’ comes later in childhood, when, in the patriarchal family, the father’s role is being recognized. Discovery of the father’s role in the primal scene and the recognition of male dominance in the social world conjoin with the integration of the patriarchal child into the systematic organization of language [. . .] the power to formulate sentences coincides developmentally with a recognition of the power of the father. (265)

For a child to practice separation from others, to assume subject/object division, is not then the only possible progression into communication. Kristeva offers another: “To love is to survive paternal meaning” (*Desire in Language* 150). Resistance to patriarchal language¹⁴ is the insistence, for the female poet, on the

¹⁴Often referred to as ‘the patriarchal sentence,’ such language includes: the aforementioned rigid structure of one thing acting upon another; other main vs.

antisocial, revolutionary language of union with the mother.

Again, in our phallogocentric culture, such language is devalued and thus feared and avoided by many a Feminist poet and especially critic. Even the postmodern embrace of “readerly” texts—those that allow the writer to lose control by encouraging a polyvalence of meanings—is problematic for women who might get lost in such play. Feminist scholar Nancy K. Miller’s cautions that those who have subjectivity (identity, power) are the only ones who can afford to “play with not having it” (“Text’s Heroine” 53, qtd. in Baccolini 44). It is his own culture in which Barthes would lose himself, so why not? H.D. is aware of this trap and thus situates her poetic identity within a context that gives it meaning.

In *Notes*, H.D. presents her poetic identity as rooted in Sapphic origins and desire. Sappho loved both men and women but far preferred women. Her all-female island can be read as the womb of literary history, for while only fragments remain (the island was attacked literally and literarily), no poet has been more loved or had more influence. Grahn points out how Sappho was to her world what the Beatles were to theirs (she even had her image on coins). In H.D.’s words, Sappho means culturally: “Not roses, but an island, a country, a continent, a planet, a world of emotion [. . .] beyond their reach [. . .]” (58). Surrounded by a complex body of waters, this all-female island geography is safe

subordinate dualisms; and general unidirectional linear movement.

in its womb-like enclosure.

H.D. was not afraid to reach for the highest, nourishing apple. She makes the exotic familiar in her humanizing of the legend. Sappho “is embodied—terribly a human being [. . .] The underlip curls out [. . .].” Forbidding as a harsh mother or rejecting lover, “Her bitterness was on the whole the bitterness of the sweat of Eros” and of “serpent-tongue” (59). The forbidden and the desired: what H.D. found in the Lesbos of her own life, the relationship with Bryher—connection to the mother (Hellas/Helen) and assistance “to maintain the heretical concentration necessary to sustain the mystical experiences” of her poetic visions (*Gubar, Sapphistries 57*)

I am neither the first to point out nor the last to participate in an unavoidable paradox of linguistic study: that to attempt to define language by using language is a scientific frustration and, in fact, a matter best left to philosophers. A semiotic framework helps in understanding the philosophical issues relevant to H.D.’s close ties between the (her) body and meaning. What we consider the irreducible aspect of experience—perception—is both carnal and relational. When we spontaneously communicate such experience, phenomenologist David Abram explains, we do so not with “an arbitrary sign that we mentally attach to a particular emotion or feeling; rather, the gesture *is* that feeling [. . .] speaks directly to our own body, and is thereby understood without any interior reflection” (74). Verbal, conscious communication operates the same

way:

[. . .] the meaning is inseparable from the sound, the shape, and the rhythm of the words. Communicative meaning is always, in its depths, affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of experience, born of the body's native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole. Linguistic meaning is not some ideal and bodiless essence that we arbitrarily assign to a physical sound or word and then toss out into the "external" world. Rather, meaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation.

(Abram 74-5)

These first encounters are with the mother, from initial symbiotic communication between bodies to the language that emerges through imitation while we are in her arms. "The mystic, the philosopher" is one who can move to original encounter: "the mother, begetter of all drama, idea, music, science or song" (*Notes 23*).

There is another maternal basis for language. Judy Grahn explains, in *Blood, Bread and Roses*, how the first writing developed in cultures that worshipped the great mother goddess.¹⁵ Narrative came out of *cosmetikos*, body

¹⁵See 299.

marking that denoted menstrual ritual (209-10) and other representations of the female body and its ties to the moon. Alphabetic language, much later, was useful for more abstract communication that could transfer origin stories from female to male centrality (210). Written language, what she calls “Word,” moved “from skin to skirt, from skirt to script” (225).

Mary Daly also explains the loss of connection between words and their sources as an effect of patriarchal culture. However, she believes the conditions of motherhood in a land ruled by fathers are what choke women, denying them the air and space needed to be imagining, speaking subjects. As women have lost wildness, wilderness, so too have they been held in “bondage in the prisons of the omnipresent scripts of fatherland, where all are cast into roles of actors reading scripts” (*Pure Lust* 91), doomed to repeat meaninglessness. A shrunken environment of sensory deprivation is exacerbated by “uncritical use of conventional grammar” (64) and the effect snowballs. In *Gyn/Ecology*, she urges women as individuals and as a group to incarnate their experiences in text. Adrienne Rich also argues for a return to the concrete in order to allow imaginative change—linguistic and worldly (*Foreword to Blood, Bread, and Poetry* xi).

As Walter Kalaidjian points out, the colonized female body is both the foundation of patriarchal language and its potential destruction. The maternal body specifically will set us free if we listen to it. Its expression in poetic

language, in our time, brings an attack on “social institutions (state, family, religion), and more profoundly, a turning point in the relationship of man (sic) to meaning” (Kristeva, *Desire*, 140, qtd. in Kalaidjian 161).

To listen to this body speak we must be poetically literate, be, as H.D. says, sound receivers. The way words sound is more immediate than the way they look on a page (the latter is helpful for distant communities whose speech differs). It is closer to the natural way we learn language, which is *not*

by consciously studying the formalities of syntax and grammar or by memorizing the dictionary definitions of words, but rather by actively making sounds—by crying in pain and laughing in joy, by squealing and babbling and playfully mimicking the surrounding soundscape, gradually entering through such mimicry into the specific melodies of the local language [. . .].” (Abram 75)

The abstract meaning of words is only a remnant of their original wholeness, derivative of the way they taste, feel, reverberate, and are sung (Abram 75-6). And these “nonverbal” qualities of communication are, most researchers agree, “considerably more important” than language per se (Anderson 1). Whether or not we are cognizant of the speech around us, it is nonetheless there. Things speak through us and recognize our selves (Abram 85-6).

As Merleau-Ponty noted, the reason we fail to acknowledge the concrete relational nature of language is that we have become so accustomed to

regurgitating meaningless chatter that what we say is indeed detached from significance. Moreover, Darwin's legacy left humans with a need to justify their supposed superiority; language use (though not exclusively human—except regarding writing) came in to take the place of God (Abram 77-9). The loss of the (in the beginning) Word bolstered the word.

Latin, Greek, English, French, all have the same word for the bodily organ of speech and the mother language—*lingua*, *glossa*, *tongue*, and *langue*. The body's instincts and movements are further linked to poetic language in the realm of infant-mother relations: Kristeva's semiotic. Kristeva, who reconnects speaking and the body after structuralism divorced them, points out that the mother is the first being to speak through us (though socio-economic structures do influence even the prenatal self). Self develops in a space where sign and object are one—in the desiring wait of 'writing on the wall,' hieroglyphs of gestation (see DuPlessis "Language Acquisition"). But speech is still an act done by a subject (who has far more agency than a *sign*—what structuralists would flatten selves to be) and poetic language is that speech which allows for heterogeneity and breaching of systems. For Julia Kristeva, meaning is created in this struggle between the semiotic and the symbolic, the female *chora*/womb and the patriarchal order. The former is knowable only in its "vocal or kinetic rhythm" (*Revolution* 24, qtd. in Moi 161).

For those who argue that "preoedipal" is an impossible stage to know and

communicate, a woman can at least recreate it through the sense of being two-in-one. A male might parody *écriture féminine*, but only a woman has a Lesbian relationship with the primary object and only woman can recreate that relationship by herself being pregnant and giving birth.

More difficult perhaps than explaining language through language is explaining female experience through a patriarchal symbolic code. Such experience, like magic, pain, and ecstasy, appears to reside elsewhere. So how can we know it on the page? One strategy is the evocation of mythic truths created by revisionist feminism. This is H.D.'s project from the beginning. She allows previously silenced historical characters (Eurydice, Helen) to articulate their versions of stories and here, in *Notes*, re-envision Sappho as "Not roses,¹⁶ but an island, a country, a continent, a planet, a world [. . .] a song or the spirit of a song" (58). Similarly, H.D.'s devotees, like poet Frances Jaffer (Jaffer, "A Gift of Song"), return to her song.

Whether or not we retain even any of Sappho's writing—we will always have her legacy, says H.D., "though her last line were lost" (68). The Lesbian lyric tradition has roots too deep and widespread to vanish. *Notes on Thought and*

¹⁶The first paragraph of *The Wise Sappho* informs that an Alexandrine poet conferred on Sappho the order "Little, but all roses"; after having deconstructed this epithet, the last paragraph of *The Wise Sappho* repeats it, mentioning that Alexandrine poet's name. H.D. makes the fragments of Sappho reappear as beloved, sacred and permanent—invincibly echoing through the dust of the bodies of ancient gods (69).

Vision is both cultural critique and timeless. The poet has gained her voice through the trials of a real-life psychic rebirth. Like an initiate of the most sacred ancient rites, she has found the ability to see through objects as big as the earth. H.D. anticipates Sexton, Grahn, and Rich in her Eleusinian interests. These mythic, actual mysteries of underworld descent can only be known through experience, through stages of initiation requiring both intimacy and distance. They lead, through death she says, to “the highest life”(40).

For H.D., “vision” is an erotic, psychic receptivity, a listening more than a seeing. She asks us to stretch our jelly-fish tentacles out to hear Sappho, bring her into our bodies. Today, Feminist theorists are arguing for just such a “poetic literacy”¹⁷: an intellectual engagement, a breakdown of the artificial boundaries between reason and emotion, mind and body, masculine and feminine. This will provide an alternative to the homogenizing, static ‘knowing’ advocated by best-selling author E.D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy*.

H.D.’s vision restores to Sappho that place she occupied central to both literary culture and Lesbian identity, linking the two, personally and historically, to a degree that exceeds the suggestion of contemporary terms like *Sapphic*

¹⁷A play on Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy*, the expression is used by Ruth Salvaggio, who traces the development of this capability in contemporary feminist criticism which includes Haraway, Kristeva, Cixous, Scott. Her work demonstrates “the necessary fusion of sound and knowledge, the aural and critical, ear and epistemology [. . .] ‘Hearing the O’” (2).

modernism. From her early “liminal landscapes” that resemble the womb to her “recurrent presentation of herself as a translator of unearthed texts” (Gubar *Sapphistries* 54-5), H.D. centralizes Lesbianism, making its sound and fury signify everything. Thus Susan Friedman can argue that Sappho, through H.D., creates the “modern lyric” (*Psyche Reborn* 54-75, qtd. in Gubar 55). Listening to the muted signs, and arguing for her readers to do the same, H.D. re-members the Lesbian mother. *Notes* concludes with another tribute to matrilineal power—a tribute to Sappho’s golden daughter Cleis, real and beautiful as any of Sappho’s other poems. Larger, wider, deeper than Meleager’s famous tribute (“Little, but all roses”), Sappho is “the sea itself,” bitter and breaking, connecting all, an island from which springs “unexplored continents and realms of future artistic achievement” (67). Rather than does Plato’s friend, Sappho earns the title “morning star among the living” and “splendour to the dead” (68). We read her body of work as we read the tangible uni-verse around us. Her gift will continue to spawn blossoms. More even than beauty, her world is a garden of (Lesbian and motherly) love. That is—as H.D. repeatedly reminds us—wisdom.

III. *ASPHODEL* OUT OF THE GRAVE: THE NOVEL TRILOGY

“Hysteria is not a pathological phenomenon, and can, in all respects, be considered as a supreme means of expression.”

—Louis Aragon and André Breton, *La Révolution Surréaliste*

H.D.’s novels illustrate the development of the Kristevan aspects of her poetic voice. Primary desires, erotic and death-oriented, make themselves known through interaction with a culture that often labels such expression ‘nonrational’ at best. The three novels I will discuss all cover roughly the same period in H.D.’s life. They are experimental autobiographies whose central interest, for this study, is the emergence of a Lesbian-Feminist embodied voice within the *kunsterroman* structure. The poetic quality of the novels allows them to be read as experiments in writing from the *chora* that lead her to move to a new kind of poetry. Formal attributes of the prose, like the later poems, include its uneven, lurching, abrupt, sometimes rapturous rhythms: manifestations of the *chora*’s often disruptive attempts to be heard.

Part of my discussion will address how the above strategies, as well as more apparent manipulations of symbolic codes, are expedients against censorship. H.D.’s title, *Asphodel*, alludes to an epigraph from Walter Savage Landor: “There are no fields of asphodel this side of the grave,” part of a counsel on the advantages of dying young (Spoo, *Intro*. xv). Legend says the flower

grows well in the underworld (Walker, *Dictionary* “Asphodel”). H.D. attempted to bury both the novel and the passion (for Frances Gregg) the title represents; we might see this attempt as an act of love.

H.D. was driven to write the same story over and over again, in different forms, each having its own protective strategies. The only one version she published in her lifetime, *Bid Me to Live*,¹ is astonishingly heterosexual; in fact it leaves out the entire deadly and sustaining effects of her two, up to this point, if not for her whole life, primary relationships.² Biographer-critic Vincent Quinn is correct, then, in not even considering *Bid Me to Live* as a biography [*Hilda Doolittle (H.D.)*]. He is, like, Janice Robinson (the unfortunately definitive biographer, prior to Barbara Guest), interested in H.D.’s tributes to men, particularly Freud. But, unlike Robinson, Quinn believes her significant work ended in 1925 (29) and that she must remain, as R. P. Blackmur stated, a writer of “the lesser satisfactions” (31). Guest is the only biographer who recognizes the significance of H.D.’s Lesbian relationships and of the entire body of her work. Regarding the autobiographical novels, she says “*Paint it Today* and *Asphodel* are so reliably autobiographical that they have been drawn on many times to clarify

¹The novel is subtitled *A Madrigal*, a synecdoche that erases the other texts. “Two-thirds of the MSS” of her autobiography were destroyed—the material covered in *Paint it Today*—upon revision of *MADRIGAL* in 1948 (*Autobiographical Notes*, Beineke library, qtd. in Robinson 119).

²Rachel Blau DuPlessis investigates this erasure in *Writing Beyond the Ending*.

and explain the events in H.D.'s life" (146).

H.D. requested that the most Feminist and Lesbian of the whole *Madrigal* cycle—*Asphodel*—lie in ashes, but it survived in one manuscript copy marked "DESTROY." Perhaps against H.D.'s wishes, I intend to read the three recently published novels in their own burning lights and as that light destroys the story told by *Bid Me to Live*.

Friedman and DuPlessis point out the vital role of autobiographical prose fiction in H.D.'s work and life: "Fiction became the arena in which H.D. could both reflect upon and plot to resolve the conflicts that had repeatedly torn her life apart" (207), that is, the contradictions between being woman and artist. Add to that conflict Lesbian desire and there is every reason to read the silences and disturbances of this prose as the story itself.

In these "novels," H.D. struggles to articulate an emerging reality and eventually finds that she cannot quite portray it in acceptable terms. Within themselves, the texts have successes; as a whole, however, the voices of this prose trilogy are stifled for half a century. The author is profoundly aware of the conflicting ideologies, languages, and multiple realities of her characters. In fact, language is a primary focus. H.D. shows here, as Bakhtin explains any true novel must, that her language is not "the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological world" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 366, qtd. in Shinn 156). In prose, particularly the novel form, the culturally dominant languages reinforce their

hegemony.

HERmione was completed in 1927 and published in 1981. Thus, out of the three autobiographical novels under discussion, it was written last and published first. It has received far more critical attention than its counterparts. Both the most homophobic and least conclusive of the three, the novel is testimony to H.D.'s struggles, internal as well as with the world around her.

Her finally “came out” as the first autobiographical piece not edited to barely recognizable form. Diana Collecott, widely published H.D. scholar, calls it a prose poem. It is, in many ways, in continuity with H.D.'s later poetry.

To begin with, the names are deeply symbolic, personal and archetypal. As Collecott points out, Hermione is the young Hilda—daughter, in real life and Greek myth, of Helen (portrayed in *Helen in Egypt* and other works as well). In real life and in Shakespeare, she is the mother of Perdita. Mother and daughter come closer together as H.D.'s career progresses (“Reputation” 13-14). The poetic language of *Her*, as Kristeva would agree by general definition, is the language of incest—of siblings and of the mother-daughter dyad. To want what is the same as self becomes intelligible (DuPlessis “Language Acquisition” 263) in such a context. The edges between self, other and mother blur. Hermione and Nellie cannot conversationally distinguish Fayne (who is being called Paul and Pauline) from Fayne's mother (132). In some passages, Hermione seems to

desire Fayne's mother, and in others, each young woman has a romantic relationship with her own mother. The lovers are as two selves, each a mother to the other: "like amoeba giving birth, by breaking off, to amoeba," (158) boundariless in the *choric* space of desire.

These identification and desire dynamics can be viewed as normal, since, from a psychoanalytic perspective, at least, females do not break as decisively from their mothers as do males. H.D. desired "no break in consciousness" between herself and her mother (*Tribute to Freud* 33, qtd. in Kloepfer 17). This infantile desire, according to Freud, is what fueled H.D.'s mystical vision (*Tribute to Freud* 33, qtd. in Kloepfer 17) and helped her break through patriarchal prescriptions and become a female genius and artist (Friedman *Psyche Reborn* 137, qtd. in Kloepfer 19). Kristeva might call such desire regression or stunted development. But let us not forget this judgement applies only to a patriarchal world which threatens repression and punishment when same-sex desire is articulated otherwise.

In addition to homo- and matrophobia, there are several positions of weakness from which Hermione must deliver herself. The difficulty Hermione and Fayne encounter in achieving embodied subjectivity is suggested by the many references to them as fairies, as mythical creatures, or as distorted or invisible. Ability to communicate without words, philosopher and theologian Mary Daly says, belongs to women (whose communication is "ultrasonic"). Such power has

typically been attributed to lovers and to those practicing the occult. When Hermione says she is “unlettered,” meaning innocent of the world, George/Pound responds, with faulty logic, “‘You are simply witchcraft.’ [. . .] ‘Hermione, you and she [Fayne] should have been burnt as witches’” (172). There is no other connection between her words and his than the idea of language being an enforcement of the dominant religion/ideology. Those who do not or cannot use it are blasphemous in their very being, in their abject status that threatens (though helps to form) bodies and language that are considered legitimate.

Homosexuals have been forced to have silent codes—sometimes known as *pindropping*. Secretive existence and resultant covert communication have been tools of survival in a world, which, for several hundred years now, has often punished homosexuality with death. Terry Castle is one of several scholars who have investigated the ties between homosexuality and witchcraft:³ “the spectral metaphor had useful theological associations: witches, after all, dealt in spirits, and the witchcraft connection could be counted on to add an invidious aura of diabolism to any scene of female-female desire” (Castle 62). Literature has exploited this connection, making Lesbians vampires and miscellaneous monstrosities or, more often, ghosting them in ways that parallel their silencing in the world at large. The white and ethereal images always associated with

³Other excellent historical work has been done by Barbara Walker, Paula Gunn Allen, Judy Grahn, and Arthur Evans.

Her/mione and Josepha are precisely allusions to purity and death, charged with eros:

Snow wafted and fell. It was the white against white she had wanted . . . *art thou a ghost my sister* . . . it was the froth against breakers, it was the annihilation and the fulfillment. Snow caught against [. . .] hollowed cheekbone [. . .] snow stupefied Her, cleansed Her, breathing an anesthetic. (222)

Not only the imagery but the moaning sound and lurching motion possess Her and the reader. They are both also referred to as necromancers (179,183).

Contributing to the eerie nature of their interactions is the strange, oracular nature of their words, as if channeled, for instance from Swinburne.

Women themselves, of course, continue to be denied subjectivity, from equal protection under the laws to theoretical status of agency. To merely exist in such a context is a victory. To exist as a woman loving woman—without being the incarnation of sin—is the edge of possibility where H.D. leaves us, speechless, in the end. After her madness she settles on an unspoken plan to elope to Europe with her ‘marriage’ money—the last sentence sending her upstairs where Fayne—full of promise and threat—is alone waiting. We do not know whether Fayne—or or any quality of their relationship—will be part of the protagonist’s further development.

Hermione is a young woman struggling to define herself through her

relationships. Nonverbal language—or at least language outside of conventional symbolism—is the form of articulation suited for this feminine, right-brain activity.⁴ The heroine is constantly sizing herself against the mirror of others. Nothing plays a greater role than the weighing of voices. The following qualities or voice constitute meaning and identity: how sweet or saccharine, timing, tone, “Tact, tact; tact,” intonation and edges (*Her* 51). In fact a voice *is* a person, appositively: “A high pitched and intense vibration, the married sister” (58). Language is a game, like counting sheep, meant to fulfill purposes other than what it says. *Diana of the Crossways* purportedly represents a literary work, but comes into the text several times with no explanation/context—*Diana* being, of course, a code for Lesbianism and witchcraft.⁵ We are tipped off; we listen closely.

Similarly, intellectual conversation and name-dropping is a mere screen for the nonverbal seduction going on between Hermione and Fayne:

“Oh *James*—who reads *him*?” One I love, two I love, three

I love. Do you see me? No. I do not see you. Play hide and seek

⁴While gendered distinctions are suspect in some academic circles, there is much academic agreement (the information is used in college courses on communication) that much science proves women use nonverbal language more than men and such language is “the primary vehicle of interpersonal and relational communication” (Andersen 29, 122).

⁵*Diana*, the Roman form of the Greek Artemis, is probably the favorite Lesbian goddess; “Dianic wicca” or “Dianic witchcraft” is the tradition that is woman-only.

behind Henry James and Meredith [. . .] done a thesis, taken a degree.

Degree, degree, degree . . . Hermione went up like the mercury in the thermometer. Degrees, degrees . . . she would burst out of the top of herself like mercury in the thermometer. Mercury in the thermometer rise, rises . . . What does it feel like when it can't rise any higher and there, pulsing [. . .] “It is hot. *Terribly.*”

(58-9)

Such erotic play, juxtaposed to radically different currents of explosive desire, creates a contrast so strong and recognizable that we may laugh out loud. It is funny—but of course we are privy to thoughts that would be silent in the real setting. Moreover, the interest would be even more hidden than other erotic secrecy, due to the same-sex identity of the participants, and even more so in the very early twentieth century than now. Then there is a whole other danger to the possible bursting of the thermometer that is Hermione. It is a danger the young women would not be able to put into words. We can read the thoughts and verbalized language as subconscious articulations, concealed even from the internally divided narrator who may not know why it is so hot.

Sometimes punctuated as *Her/mione*, the title's rupture, whether through slash or illogical case change, looks forward to Kristeva's split subject. Like Monique Wittig's much later *j/e*, the title represents a woman multiple in her

femininity, auto-erotic in her fetishism, and suicidal in her *jouissance*, a woman opposed to the position her language allows her, a woman struggling to escape, a woman who is subject and object, one (a proper noun) and many/all women. Such a heroine resolves the supposed French vs. American Feminist conflict, which falsely separates erotic subjectivity from identity politics. She also meets Kristeva's criteria for solving the problem of sexual difference in language: both taking on its social challenges and exploring its erotic potential (*DL* 165).

Even at the end of the novel, the protagonist is still struggling to differentiate herself from Fayne: lover, sister, child, and mother. In their most intimate moments she reads and recites "*O sister my sister*"; they seem to share heartbeats, and Hermione's relationship to Fayne is that of a "suppliant across the dead body of its child or slain young lover." Then, again, her thoughts and words to George and fellow antagonists often run like "I will not have her [Fayne] hurt. I will not have Her[/mione] hurt. She is Her. I am Her," (181) and so on. Lastly, it is through embodying her own name, through the betrayal of Fayning [=feigning], that the lover brings about Hermione's psychological death and rebirth, in effect mothering her (also by preventing her from marrying George, which would have been her death as a subject and artist).

By the end of the novel, Her has passed through the mirror stage, differentiating herself from her old self and from Fayne while remaining forever

ted to her,⁶ identifying with what she desires. Identification, according to Freud, is the process by which internal and external reality are distinguished and brought into agreement. Observe:

“Go on, Fayne.” [‘Go away.’]

Suddenly in the region of that hollow space [womb?] that was or (she thought) should be the place a heart should be, a heart was [whose?] A heart [. . .] beat and made its answer. The heart [. . .] bound Her so that she could not run away from the other [. . .].

(186; bracketed interpolations mine)

A heart becomes a heart and George (her feeling of him), she says, becomes exactly George (the objective person). In other words, subjective, preverbal, *choric* experience has become aligned with conscious social functioning. In her love for Fayne (since Fayne, a stunted form of Hermione, desires George), there has been a rupture, but Her will always come back to that all-encompassing passion: she is “bound” (186). In real life, H.D., as the Swinburne poem swears, never forgot.

H.D. has revised Freud’s oedipal formula that places identification and desire at odds with each other. Her ideas about identity formation do not stop

⁶H.D. will name her daughter—Frances Perdita (‘little lost Frances’) after the real-life lover Frances Gregg; the family will be forbidden to mention the latter person. Barbara Guest (among other recent Feminist critics) explains that H.D. would have no subsequent passion to match that which she felt for Gregg (23;

there. Her's strength is through shamanic (also prototypically feminine) capacity to shape-shift, lose identity into that of others she desires: "I am the Tree of Life." "Climb" she says, unconsciously, to a group of young women. Later, she notes to herself that George (Ezra Pound) wouldn't know how to love a tree. In her tree statement she has created a new "I," one associated with nature, the body, and Life. This I is linked to homo-erotic and Feminist relationship, as the young women are advancing each other both intellectually and physically (up the tree).

Of course Hermione has been conditioned to believe it is a man who must confer identity upon her. H.D. makes it clear that such heteronormativity, rather than Lesbianism, is in fact regressive:

She wanted George as a little girl wants to put her hair up or to wear long skirts [. . .] She wanted George to define and to make definable a mirage [. . .] she wanted George to make the thing an integral, herself integrity. She wanted George to make one of his drastic statements that would dynamite her world away for her [. . .] She saw that her two hands reached toward George like the hands of a drowned girl.

She knew she was not drowned. (63)

And she knows she does not want George, as George represents that world from which she wants to escape, the world in which she is only an object, "a Her that

Guest also refers to the relationship as sisterhood and twinship).

he called decorative” (172).

The struggle for freedom is worked out on a linguistic plane in the dialectic between body and language. “People are in names, names are in people.” Words are traps and entrapped. “Names are in people, people are in names. Sylvania” (5). Words do not mean what we want them to mean but have their own lives, speak through us. One sign of the *chora*’s presence is the jarring use of names: *Rabb*, for instance, as Fayne’s surname, and the improper use of *Her* as subject. And *Her/mione* also uses words to ground her from the perpetual flights attempted by both mind and body. She roots her paradise, finally, by attaching a morpheme and entering *Pennsylvania* (5; italics mine), a fatherland which might lend her its tool if she can prove citizenship.

In addition to being something to grab onto, words have another use, and that is a veil behind which battles may be waged (seduction, for one): her words to Fayne “would win for her, they would lose for her” (62). H.D.’s discourse demonstrates that context is everything: who speaks to whom, where, and when. Words become magically alive in the presence of Fayne. They have the power to create the material world, beginning with the effects on her body and moving to the creation of meaningful language and even land:

Her cheekbones felt as if they were tinted with the most hectic point of the Indian paintbrush; colour seemed to have drawn a cycle across a world, to have marked out a zone, a continent.

There was a zone she had not explored. She could use the same counter, the same sort of password that she used with all these people, but she had passed out in a twinkling of an eye into another forest. This forest was reality. There, the very speaking of the words, conjured up proper answering sigil, house and barn and terrace and castle and river and little plum tree. A whole world was open. (62)

Her's strategies of escape include camouflage, often through gibberish. She parodies the terminology of madness, wearing it like a tight-fitting cloak as she spirals down, down, into the vortex of nothingness. Here, she sheds the meaning attached to her by leveling symbolic language, bringing signs together with their opposites—*marry* and *not marry*, *pretty* and *not pretty* (5). Each pair of options presents an illusory choice. The signifiers that she deconstructs specifically treat her prescribed feminine role, which would define her without her own sensible participation. It is that tyrannical rhetoric she rebels against with *choric* 'nonsense' or the female and Lesbian perspective George [Pound] calls "rot, what rot" (138).

All of these aesthetic strategies demonstrate what Her comes to know in retrospect: at this stage in Her's and in H.D.'s life, there were no words for Her self and Her experiences. Both Hermione and Fayne exist as other, as what is granted neither subject nor object status: "Do tell me all about it" means "tell me

all about *her*.” Grammar excludes their individuality from these positions: “How to get it across to Nellie [for she is HER and I am HER]” (131). She cannot formulate correctly because her feelings are taboo, unthinkable. H.D. returns over and over to a sense of personal impoverishment which is, in part, a result of historical factors: lack of psychological, political, and sexual understanding and terminology.

She has a “wider vision” than her provincial contemporaries and thus “her perception was ahead of her definition. She could put no name to the things she apprehended, felt vaguely that her mother should have insisted on her going on with music [. . .] It had not occurred to her to try and put the thing in writing” (13) and again “It had not occurred to Her to try and put the thing in writing” (71). The only possibility she can imagine for expression of her realities are music or perhaps painting—if she knew what kind. Language indeed fails her. Yet if “Words that had not (in Philadelphia) been invented” were at her service, she realizes they would only wreak worse devastation. The words she gives as examples are what, in retrospect, she can see as catch-alls: “Oedipus complex, inferiority complex, claustrophobia” (15) and mother complex, etc. (47). What does she need to achieve articulation of her deep and cryptic stirrings? If we remember *Notes on Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho*,⁷ the following

⁷“We must be ‘in love’ before we can understand the mysteries of vision. A lover must choose one of the same type [. . .] a general, a young man also interested in

noncontextualized clauses provide a clue, and we must give them extra weight because they are textual disturbances: “Nike, Athene gave her nothing . . . Love had not yet touched her” (11). These goddesses’ attributes—wisdom, victory, integration between self and world—require the like-minded passion she affirms in *Notes*. She will therefore not attain them from the male brain (which, we’ve been taught, births/bursts Athene) but from the female—and the female body, at that.

Fayne’s physical presence creates a sense of rightness, of fitting, or mutual understanding. Still, the feeling can only be articulated by nonrepresentational sounds: “once one sees a thing and it goes *click* into place, it becomes by the very act of its so falling with its *click* [. . .] the *bit* here, the *bit* there, the way it *fitted bit to bit*⁸ [. . .]” as she remembers and prepares for Fayne’s presence, “negroid”⁹ though it may be to others (138). We cannot help but notice the bitter staccatoed, military recitation of stops, mainly voiceless ones—a sound demonstration of silencing which reads as a protest against the social position which restricts

the theory and practice of arms [. . .] The minds of the two lovers merge [. . .]” (22). And this love must first be physical (22, 27-33).

⁸H.D.’s later poetry will take on this homoerotic device of joining similar to similar, often through images evocative of female sexuality, much like Dickinson’s “garnet to garnet.”

⁹ Italics are mine. For “negroid,” the reader may also read “other,” “female,” “Lesbian,” “witch”; H.D. demonstrates an understanding of the somewhat interchangeable nature of abject categories in a dualistic grammar.

articulation. Somatic sensation, pure movement and action (falling), is enriched by pun (“falling” is also “falling for”), sounds (by oral movement required and by aural effect) and semantics evoke fingers and tongues (*click*) and mouths (*bit* as past of “bite” and also as an animal’s mouthpiece) —those Lesbian, doubled words everywhere that suggest individuation through sameness of Lesbian partnership and mirroring, fragmentation beginning to come together in sense. The parts do converge; even Hermione’s division from herself is healed: her split head “became one mirror . . . as Fayne Rabb entered” (138). The mirror is a kind of placental wall they share, allowing a wordless communication.

Again, she tries to explain to the reader, by retelling the story in the next passage. It begins with everybody lost and saying meaningless things (“that she would always say to George now and to all the Georges”). Enter then the immediate opposition of definitive music, and, with that, Her’s “seeing a form [Fayne, of course] step forward . . .” (139). Thus she ends the first half of the novel. The ellipses, again hers, restate the lack of words; the music and *the form*, the body of the loved one, speak.

Being with another woman creates her identity. “Know” can be taken sexually: “I know her. Her. I am her. She is her. Knowing her, I know Her . . . I am a sort of mother, a sort of sister to her.” Through playing with homophones, speaker, object, and subject complement are elided (Collecott, “Reputation” 14). The palimpsestic being thus created on the one hand evidences loss of identity,

but on the other, a resistance to woman's social and grammatical position. This intersubjective "birth" becomes, according to Collecott, H.D.'s late poetic work (15). In fact, *Hermione* covers a symbolic nine-month period that births H.D. as a poet.

No clichéd "bee and buttercup" here, but for the woman she loves¹⁰ — H.D. explains, though Her is without the words to say it—they really do see and hear each other, carnally, with apprehension of the dangerous words, half formed, swirling around them, ready to fall. "Seek strength of arm and throat, touch" she argues in *Fragment 113*. Like a lover, like *Her/mione* and Fayne, H.D.'s prose is speaking, but not through signs as we have been accustomed to read them. The body knows and speaks a truth than words allow. What she does not yet know how to articulate is nonetheless perfectly clear to "instinct"—that her passion, indeed her own self¹¹ will develop from the Lesbian desire that is once again encoded by "blue eyes":

She saw the room as a room, the people as people, the teacups as small cups placed [. . .] the girl facing Her as a girl facing Her with rather staring slightly rude eyes and an irreverent manner. Her Gart saw the girl as that, all the time realizing with an instinct . . .

¹⁰I allude to an anti-heterosexual love letter from E. Dickinson to Sue; it also evokes H.D.'s "Not honey,/ not the plunder of the bee" (*Fragment 113*).

¹¹See in *The Walls Do Not Fall* [4] how self="pearl-of great-price."

that she had seized upon her pearl-of-price [. . .] a pair of exactly matched star sapphires. (60)

Her body may know before her conscious mind does (“all the time” suggesting contradictory experiences). Yet she sees everything perfectly clearly, exactly as it is and in proportion. There is more verbal mystification of homosexual desire and familial relations, such as the “fey” label given to both Fayne and Hermione (50), “fairy” historically referring both to homosexuals and magical creatures. One can hardly call Her’s ‘silence’ a regressive state. The failure is not Her’s: “How could anyone tell anyone about things?” Things, we know, are what they are. They are the only way to express ideas, myths, and beliefs. Bodies and body parts will stand metonymically for things with no names, as will the pre-oedipal joy in the materiality of language.

H.D. explains the secret nature of words: “The phrase was typical of Nellie [. . .] of her knowing air of accepting things she didn’t in the least realize meant things that, if she had recognized, she would have rejected. Nellie was taking stock of her immature blunder. The two she observed didn’t in the least look ‘fey’(50).” So language will speak the truth through us, prophetically, before we can understand it.

The protagonist struggles, at first, to identify herself, bring herself into being, through ritual repetition and through lovingly breaking down words, which stand for herself, into their (illogically used) parts and associations: “I am the

word AUM [. . .] God is in a word. God is in HER. She said, ‘HER, HER, HER. I am Her, I am Hermione . . . I am the word AUM.’” (32). Tautology, rather than being rhetorical failure, is magical manifestation: “predictable by star, by star-sign, by year.” Nonsense to others, this receptive reality nonetheless marks place and time (“star” and “year”). Language is liturgical when thing and its sign are the same: star=star-sign, syntactically. “Drowning” in the womb of oneness—her circles map out what could easily be labeled “dementia.” Astrological cues do better than the normative “I am Hermione Gart precisely.” H.D. tells us, “Her Gart was not that” (3) which others called her, she was not solely subject. Not “*mione*,” *my own*. Her. Object and possessed. However, possessed by the feminine, she insists. It is the patriarchal surname she sheds: “Gart, Gart, Gart and the Gart theorem [sic] of mathematical biological intention dropped out Hermione. She was not Gart [. . .] (4).

Her deconstructive play with language, in the beginning of the novel, however, leads to confusion and loss of identity. Located “swing-swing between worlds” (25), “what was she?” (4). In a dark and dangerous place where words fail:

Her Gart had no a, b, c Esperanto of world expression. She was not of the world, she was not in the world, unhappily she was not out of the world. She wanted to be out, get out but even as her mind filmed over with grey-gelatinous substance of some sort of

nonthinking, of some sort of nonbeing or of nonentity, she felt
 psychic claw unsheathe somewhere, she felt herself clutch toward
 something that had no name yet. (8)

Indeed, she clutches for any grounding.

“Man is man” gets her nowhere. So she projects her struggle: “Mandy—you’re mad, Mandy. You’re not mad Mandy” (27). Words fail to make a difference. There is no reason to say “I hate George’ or to say, ‘I love George’” (44). Yet underneath, pulsing like the volcanic *chora*, there are words waiting to be said—“Words beat and formed unformulated syllables” (25)—they are there, but not in syllable, alphabetic (abstract) form. They are profound sounds: “I am the word AUM”—an outburst, which, frightening her, she attempts to repress “UM, EM, HEM’ clearing her throat” (32). Her body intervenes when cognitive efforts fail. In the end, subconscious articulations are what make sense, whether or not she understands them at the moment:

“I mean, I can’t I can’t possibly see you.” Now why couldn’t she possibly see George? It was evident that she couldn’t see George, but why couldn’t she see George? Now just why can’t I see George tomorrow? (42)

and

Nellie was so obviously a climber.

“Climber?” “I said ‘Climb,’” (I didn’t know I had said

anything) "I will have to climb out of my own predicament." (54)

The truth is in the word—insofar as it is not consciously constructed. She knows when things snap into place, knows by the sound of them: "someone was saying, 'Oh , yes, *Diana of the Crossways*' and with the automatic click-click" (56) she 'comes to' because she sees the girl "who was 'fey with the same sort of wildness'" as Her. The recognition of another Lesbian witch (both terms implied by the barely veiled code "fey" and "fairy") ignites her subjectivity—a new mirror stage from which she emerges whole, but still mute.

Restricted by time and place, a woman is at the same time a human being unrestricted in imagination. She may borrow from other cultures to express cosmic oneness, the representative nature of her particular world. As Fayne notes, the protagonist stretches herself so her receptivity has "a definite octopus quality" (161)—one of the metaphors H.D. uses for vision in *Notes*. She takes in what her feelers grasp, including Fayne, becoming her in order to save her (220). Running away as fast as she can from the metaphorically slain lover and mother, H.D. is a "phoenix" (221) because the dead rise through her. It is a visceral revelation—no thought involved—to realize she holds all possibility in her feet. From carrying a message "in forgotten meters" her running and running and running finally comes to epiphany when she begins a new chapter planted solidly on her feet, feet she "realized that she liked" (220-2). The pun of course foreshadows the poetic feet of her later achievement. Her steps, "narrow black

crayon across the winter whiteness" (223), are actually writing! Her legs straddle past and future, so her center is the present (225). (*Tribute to Freud* 33, qtd. in Kloepfer 17). The moment becomes the node in which "flesh and the spirit, the world we see and the world we intuit," personal chance and eternal truth are united (Shinn, *Intro.* 8-10).

HERmione enacts the death of an old self through madness and the type of shamanic illness that often leads to the birth of a poet. H.D. tells us how to read the body of this text as it performs "its highest function when it is being consumed" (*Notes* 47). We follow HER on an Eleusinian journey where the protagonist must lose herself into the body of the earth, of mother or father (*Notes* 52-3). Rebecca Faery pays close attention to the sexual-textual (one might say "sexual"¹²) core of *Hermione*. According to Faery, the accomplishment of the novel is the protagonist's passing through the first stage of initiation as described in *Notes*: submission to the senses. Hell has been a stop on the way. She has been touched by love—by both Fayne and Eugenia (Hermione's mother)—and has heard her poetic calling. Both elicit the latent poetry in Her's body (56-8). Her also defines herself *against* the patriarchal order and joys in rejecting its symbol: George. This disruptive, nonsensical choric activity is nonetheless beautiful:

¹²The earliest use I have found of the word *sext*, an amalgamation of *sex* and *text*, is that of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in *The Newly Born Woman* (69).

She achieved a note, a song note that brought her back to a body that was vibrating, that was static yet vibrating here and there [. . .] Fire and water made rhythm in Her and she caught a note in her throat and she hurtled it forth, achieving by some miracle the key, pitched too high (could she sustain it?)—*Du meine Herzen, du mein Ruhe*. She wished George wouldn't try to join in, he had no voice whatever, neither tenor, baritone nor honest-to-god deep bass. He hadn't a voice really. It was George with his volumes who was wordless, who was inarticulate; not Her Gart sitting on a hearth rug [with music] going now too deep down into her insides.

(170-1)

It is the quality, the tone, the bodily vibration that constitutes voice, idea, articulation. The repetitive way Hermione expresses this knowledge suggests that it is a deep-rooted one and that both her and George's status as subjects is at stake.

Moreover, she is explaining not only metaphor but also fact (the repetition of George's lack with *really* added as a qualification). *Volumes*, of course, must be read as a sarcastic homophone: the first meaning, "books," is "wordless," in fact has no "volume." It loses on its own ground. H.D. continues with an anaphoric poetic outburst whose insistent initiatory *I*'s, combined with conditional verbs and passionate diction (both evoking desire), create a surging

rhythm characteristic of semiotic language: “I wish I were green fire. I would run along a birch tree. I would run along a pear tree. I would make our pear tree by the corner of the barn burst into flower this moment.” Her language embodies the action of fire; she would be that language, threads catching organically, spreading further and wider. In contrast, she continues: “Do stop chucking orange peel on the fire George. It’s smoking” (171). George knows not how to treat such fire, just as he knows not how to treat a tree. The closest he can come is iconic representation. This clumsy emblem of patriarchy, as Pound surely is to H.D. individually and to the world at large, always just misses the mark: all smoke and no fire, it is then a substanceless surface that does not incarnate experience. Yet it has authority, as George reiterates “I said your pomes [sic] were rotten” (167).

How can we explain her place as the *imagiste par excellence*, when men have largely written our stories about imagism? H.D.’s relationships with leading male figures (whom did she *not* know, who was not infatuated?) and her magnificent beauty, as well as the superconsciously constructed persona she created along with Pound and others, are partly responsible for her literary position. For even as recently as the publication of *HERmione* her very membership in the group “artist” was debatable.¹³

¹³William Pratt (*World Literature Today* 56.4, Autumn 1982, 690-91), reviewing the novel, notes that H.D. has not yet earned a spot in the halls of modernism:

Precipitating and reacting to her exclusion, H.D. reaches outside of Western white male representations of mythos to ritualize her own. DuPlessis examines how *HERmione* breaks the traditional plot pattern in several ways: through an open ending and through the inscription of bisexual, matrisexual and Lesbian desire, the latter being “definitive in the formation of identity” (71). Her own body becomes the text as she emerges from madness with feet that appear new to her—feet that will, we can see in retrospect, become a whole new kind of poetic feet. They are divine, immanent (“one Creator”) as they make hieroglyphic language on the body (earlier the snow) of the world. Hieroglyphs mean through image and sound. They are both mysterious, like the feminine mysteries which so fascinated H.D., and they are more directly material than “set symbolism.” The latter form of language, which can be read as the past’s alphabetic language, is a “hecatomb” that she leaves behind (233-4).

Only words that embody feeling and resonate meaning—like the feminine *Om*, or, as H.D. repeatedly expresses it, “Aum”— have authority. Jumping out like a recurrent Freudian slip, the nonsensical “I am the word AUM,” with its deep physical reverberations and refusal to leave the body, its translation of the

“was she an inspirer and innovator, or was she an artist in her own right?” He perpetuates the denial of female subjectivity by disingenuously avoiding a stance; he contradicts himself by simultaneously calling her “the spirit of the age incarnate” and “inimitable” and “pristine.” And, of course, he adds the obligatory chauvinistic and heterosexist patronage: “She did not write masterpieces; she wrote herself, and there lies the fascination of reading her. The style is the

individual human being into a (universal) sacred syllable, at this point, makes the most sense of all. H.D. the poet is in chrysalis stage, awaiting her *sortie*,¹⁴ her coming into writing as a new and free woman who can articulate her own desires with a clarity and force capable of making others listen.

Paint it Today. A sequel, this novel covers much of the same biographical material. Written in 1921, the first chapters were published by Friedman and DuPlessis in *Contemporary Literature* in 1986; the entire text came out in 1992 through NYUP's *Cutting Edge* series. The reasons for its delayed publication (especially ironic in light of the title) are apparent: strictly autobiographical and thoroughly homo-erotic, *Paint it Today* is the story of H.D.'s two most significant loves, Frances Gregg (here Josepha) and Bryher (here Althea).

Again, 'incestuous regression' characterizes the development of the protagonist, and, again, the role of language in that process is paramount. As Cassandra Laity points out, that sister-lover relationship becomes, as it was in H.D.'s life, inseparable from poetry itself (*Introduction xxvii*). In *Paint It Today* the poet-to-be lands in Europe as part of a mother-daughter-lover trio, one with a

woman, meaning that she was strongly feminine but never a feminist”!

¹⁴*Sortie* refers to the escaping, intact, of a woman from patriarchy into the meaningful ecstasy of communicating her own body in “Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays” (Cixous and Clement 7).

mysterious bond that is noticed by all but that cannot quite be explained.

Otherness as concept becomes solidified as Lesbianism. Through repetition, anaphora (both *choric* and ironic), ambiguity, coding and other condensed symbolism, free association, and weighty sensual detail, Lesbian otherness is both screened and, since equated with nature, naturalized. Most if not all of these devices are what distinguish poetry from prose.

For instance, the word *other* itself becomes an uncanny echo that questions which is the original and which the deviation, or who, in fact, is “other”: “could they guess at that *other* force, hidden and hardly guessed at by these *others*, transplanted Europeans, called Americans? If these Americans could not sense the fine trail winding through there midst, could these *others*, these Europeans, be expected to recognize it?” (14; italics mine). The *otherness*, then, is not in fact ethnicity (neither American nor European) but something hinted and whispered—note the *h* sounds of “hidden and hardly.” A Lesbian (whether by live experience or other training), particularly a literary one, is sensitive to such cues, having learned from necessity to listen for them. She recognizes the flirtation of arguing “in friendly enmity” and the romance of ““She has taken the tone from the spattered rock and gray and lump-of-paint rocks.”” She understands the mother’s jealous and homophobic denial of the attraction in ““It was only the gray veil [. . .] It was nothing at all”” (16-17). The inside, insider, nonrational knowledge of the narrator speaks through an ecstatic, though

controlled, medusa-like laughter in the following poetic repetitions:

She and Josepha and such as she and Josepha were separated,
irreparably, from the masses of their own country people. That
was *natural* [. . .]

She and Josepha were separated, and such as she and
Josepha were separated from the great mass of the people of the
nations of the world. They were separated from the separated [. . .]
They were separated from the elite, from the artist [. . .]

It was something in themselves. (20; italics mine)

So simple, and so cryptic at the same time, this writing; might the average reader be annoyed at the hammering cadence, want of explanation, and the climactic lack of antecedent for the symbolic “It”?

To make things worse, blue eyes then come in to symbolize this difference, a subjective, arbitrary code, as the blue eyes of each of her female lovers entranced H.D.. Colors often symbolize sexuality. As straightforward as they may seem to the uninitiated (remember the roles of pink and blue), homosexuals have metaculturally recognized their powers of both disguise and allure.¹⁵ Gay is a whole other world, one which many people resist. H.D. draws on this archetypal experience to poeticize her prose—for a particular audience.

¹⁵For instance, blue in Russia is a code for gay; the pink triangle is an international symbol; witness also the intricate denotations of handkerchief color-signs used by

The “blue scene” (23) which Midget and Josepha fell into for a moment, H.D. says, we may choose to experience by reading their story (23). A “truth too amazing” for the typical living and telling (23) leaves H.D. following Dickinson’s advice to “tell it slant.” Thus we have the *à clef* of the novel, which represents allusively and elusively in a very particular way.

Replete with short, choppy sentences, brief paragraphs, and documented, unexplained conversation, *Paint it Today* is like most modernist poetry in its sparseness, refusing rhetoric and connective structures. The language itself appears guileless, the text formulaic. The narrator is eager to communicate, breathless about conveying the facts:

They spoke very few words. They hardly touched each other’s hands. They spoke a few words, at least it was Midget who spoke the words.

Midget knew that she was speaking simple words and understandable words. She understood them herself and Josepha understood them, but she felt somehow that she was speaking the wrong language. She was speaking English. (12)

Yet what is communicated goes on between and beneath the lines, in the motion of body and words, the exchange of desire. It may take a Lesbian reader, trained and sensitive to silence, encoding, and elliptical discourse, to interpret the

gay men.

following (almost stanzaic) lyrical passage, ostensibly a translation:

You who have never loved. That was translatable enough.
 No one had ever loved. No one she knew had known what love
 was or could be. Love was a creature of the senses. Love was not
 the touching of hands, the meeting of lips. Love had nothing to do
 with the circumstances of your birth, or the conditions of your life.

The girl Josepha was, no doubt, an unwholesome influence.
 It would have been much better if the girl Midget had married the
 fiancé.

Poetry and the beat and drop of poetry, the swerve up and
 the swallow wing beating back. (10)

On the surface, we see more of H.D.'s modernist fragmentation, symptomatic perhaps of an unfocussed mind? But this is not the case at all. The concentration is profound, diamond-edged, burning like the blue tip of a flame. She is talking about sexual passion, rather than romantic or any other kind of love. Elsewhere she again distinguishes their love as counterculturally sensual; it is asocial.

Josepha has betrayed and will betray again, out of what she feels is social necessity. Midget's desire is syntactically parallel to, inseparable from poetry, as free, evasive, and melancholy as the birdflight that is poetry. She promises that later, when she manages to assimilate all the truth's infirm delight, desire, its fulfillment, and its constraints, she will write in black from "the fervor of dark

eyes" (23). Black, we remember, is all color: a place of integration at which she has not yet arrived, nor will by the end of the novel when she is just beginning to understand the emotional truth of white. Now she has only blue, the hot/cold language she associates with the body.

Her reality at present is sensual as the lips, tongue, and throat on the fetishistic language of Swinburne's 'sister swallow'; the allusion is cryptic and marginal, private. And, to noninitiates, it may appear incestuous. All this (granted heretically) paraphrased material, I propose, is second-nature knowledge for a sensitive Lesbian reader, though of course the process of so roughly handling it is unpleasant. Yet, what else can be done when every bit of this interpretation requires powerful defense to any other kind of reader? Perhaps the poetic opacity explains the lack of popularity of the text.

Let us try another example. When the foreign "Thou wert the morning star among the living" erupts into the text, what might a lay reader think? Possibly, H.D. is being characteristically difficult. A Lesbian reader, already sensitized to the anguish of the previous lines, an anguish that some would argue is only possible in a broken Lesbian relationship (one reason being it replays the psyche's original loss), reads this as an elegy for Josepha and something larger than human. A male homosexual reader (or one well-educated in homosexual culture) would be more likely to recognize the quote as Shelley's translation of Plato, written for Keats, entitled "Adonais"—a homosexual figure/symbol within

a gay triad.¹⁶ We must rely on subjective interpretation as there are no clues whatsoever for the relevance of the quotation and its abrupt insertions.

Opposed to these freely associated insider signs, H.D. presents the words of the “erstwhile,” Pound, and his companions, in a chapter entitled “Vulgar Details.” Rather than breaching decorum, she is commenting on a vulgar way of thinking she cannot comprehend—until forced. A typical conversation presents the erstwhile convincing her of the iniquity of continuing her relationship with Josepha while, in a rather phallic play of words, H.D. has him “beating the end of his stick”:

“Can’t you see what she’s up to? Can’t you ever see anything?”

Midget sat very stiff in the corner [. . .] She answered very seriously, “No, Raymond, I can’t.”

He suddenly stopped jabbing with his stick. He jerked toward her. “Can’t what,” he said, forgetting his fury of assertiveness.

“Can’t what you said,” answered Midget, “can’t ever see anything.” (33)

The break in her sentence, the hesitation, suggests a reaching for words that are

¹⁶See Walker, *Women’s Encyclopedia*, “Adonis,” regarding link between Adonis and other homosexual symbols Narcissus and Hyacinthus. See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 53, for Plato and Shelley as members of homosexual canon.

not hers; the semantics of the sentence reinforce this idea. Leading up to the vulgar chapter is a foreshadowing of the subsequent letters between Josepha and Midget, letters which manage to express some hideous facts poetically. Some of the words are sent, some not: it does not matter, because the thoughts are sent and we are lead to believe the receiver will have no problem registering them.

Paint it Today is written for such an audience. There is very little recognizable plot. Interjection of *glossolalias*, as in the other novels, is common. Suggestive of profundity, the repeated phrase "*Cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras amet*"¹⁷ is first introduced in its parts, clause by clause, over several pages, with, of course, no transitional guides. There is one part missing in its first presentation: the last 'let them love the more!' Is the voice omniscience, the unconscious of the narrator, one of her personalities, or something unimaginable asserting itself? If we want a plot, we must create it. At this point, the foregrounded use of language is of obvious interest, but there is a deep and cutting subtext. The latter may even be received as the primary story.

To begin, a reader may have to play Freudian detective to discover the latent meaning behind "'Oh, mother, that purple pigeon would look lovely on a hat.'" H.D. explains—*hat* means girls making a living means freedom! Why can

¹⁷The narrator translates this anonymous poem in many different ways, depending on her mood and stage of development. Editor Cassandra Laity translates it thus: *Let those love now, who never loved before; let those who always loved, now love the more* (92n).

she not just say what she means? Here is H.D.'s version of the answer:

There was another speech. That speech she could not rehearse in words. That speech was a hot wave across her brain. A fear possessed her, a fear that if they did not let her go, something terrible and tragic would eat out her heart and close over her head [. . .] There were no words to this speech. A fear possessed her that suddenly she might find words to this speech, that she might shout or sing those words, and that they would break, those good and simple people, shriveled to ash, before her utterance, or that they might seize her, somehow tear the fiery sandals from her feet and bind her down forever. (41)

Just as Hermione cannot utter those unthinkable words, H.D. cannot write them.

The patriarchal novel as lived or written does not accommodate her.

She is confused about who and what to 'rend,' having only patriarchal conventions with which to identify. "Mind," "birthright" and agency she quite logically associates with the father. All myths have taught her these affiliations, as she brutally describes. Can a woman with talent and drive renounce them? She is beginning to recognize that the mother (as an abstraction and personal figure) is an embodiment and victim of these laws and that the semiotic, her language of emotion, cannot provide a desirable escape from the omnipresence of gendered regulations.

The heroine, in her need to actualize through identification, has no appropriate model. Her frustration leads her to kill. Tragically, she must kill what she also loves. She kills her self: "I have a new game. I am a shell. There is nothing in a shell" (52). Like the language of her early modernism and the famous seashell section of *The Walls Do Not Fall*, the person and the word are emptied, her body and soul divorced (54). There is no transcendent vision because she cannot love: the hyacinths, homosexual symbol (borrowed from male tradition), that she shared with Josepha, are the only hyacinths (55). Since the Lesbian goddess Artemis is no longer with them, she conjures Josepha's death. This, she thinks, will allow her to grow up and write, make song (56-7). Nevertheless, not yet matured, she erroneously, blindly, rends. She has not integrated her desire and identification, not yet learned consciously to navigate the hazards the symbolic order throws against her gender. Therefore, the mother and she (in the mother) are next to fall.

The following 'Freudian slip' escapes from the *chora*, rupturing the text with violence against the mother—violence against herself, as well. Knowing "she was defeated," the protagonist can only explode with pointless, context-less anger: "'Do I care for Sissie,' she shouted. 'Do I care for Gladys? How many times must I tell you, Mother, that I hate them all. How many thousand times must I repeat that I am not coming back [. . .] you sit there, so placid, not knowing, not caring' [. . .]" (43). With a white javelin hovering about her like a

spirit that will propel her action, the heroine sobs and then *becomes* her mother as she answers “Of course, I cared. Of course, I cared. I cared [. . .]” (44). Again, there is no context for this outburst. The protagonist, unable to identify herself as male or female as well as unable to choose between her father and mother (“She was not Electra. She was not Orestes.” 44), must, to qualify her as what Kristeva considers to be an imaginative, truly creative artist, act out instinctually the semiotic’s role as “dissonance within the thetic, paternal function of language” (Kristeva, *Desire* 139). This is the aggressive and destructive side of the semiotic, that which enacts “the *unsettling process* of meaning and subject.” The *chora* turns back on itself, indicating “crises within social structures and institutions—the moments of their mutation, evolution, revolution” (125), and articulation appears—initially—as psychosis.

The ‘story’ makes increasingly clear that the narrator cannot articulate her reality in a form acceptable to those around her. Then, at the time she decides “Why not live,” her friend appears abruptly (and Bryher was abrupt!) out of nowhere; in H.D.’s life, she appeared as a savior sent by the gods. With no explanation, the whole tone changes to one of adventurous discovery of sensuous, sensual self and surroundings. Althea, as the friend becomes called, challenges her: “Is your world a cloud that you must make these curious distinctions between past, present, visible and invisible?” (81)

The question can only be answered in the poetic passages of lovemaking.

Neither represented nor hidden, erotic action occurs in that space of desire between the semiotic and the symbolic, where the body asserts itself and its experience nonmimetically. Grounded in the natural setting of bodies of water forests, the open air, and fireside, the elemental power of the surroundings legitimizes the expression of Lesbian desire therein. Kristeva argues that sensual drives (primal rhythm) regulate the law, indeed give birth to the structure of the law, so they may intelligibly self-reproduce. The prose attempts to *be*, rather than to tell, the lovemaking. The lovers are so present they make everything else seem to be illusory. Repeatedly, H.D. interrupts the 'narrative' to tell us "they loved." What, how, when, where—those qualifiers are given to the reader to know intuitively. H.D. spells out for the slow or reluctant reader that "Midget and Josepha [had] loved. That is obvious." Their love, however, is frustrated by the demands of a patriarchal world (including that of an overbearing, jealous mother) and the very reality of their own world is thrown into question (a possibility developed in *HERmione* as well—Her's world exists only in her poetry). The conclusive loving of Midget and Althea, however, takes place in the "Visible World" and is magically creative. The last page promises the birth of a child; a continuation of the story is promised by the last sentence.

We are left with the foregrounded bodies, neither boys nor girls, Hermione says. "Indeed alive," no fantasy, they are eroticized as young, strong, passionate. Every possible angle and each different backdrop presents a new opportunity for

the young women to observe each other and themselves, analyze imperfection, and fetishize attributes. This is a celebration of physicality. Yet, we are also left with an idea of the artifice of the novel, when the narrator moves into second person, breaking the suspension of disbelief, and furthermore tells us she cannot finish the story:

I must leave them there; their worlds, I think, are not so very many worlds apart. What of my world and your world? Are we worlds and worlds apart from their world, are we worlds apart from one another? *Cras amet qui numquam amavit*. Let him love today who never has loved. Has loved? Who has ever loved? Among the dead. (87-8)

The cut-off occurs immediately after Midget, flirtatiously, denies Aphrodite while simultaneously surrendering. We know what cannot be represented in this language, these literary conventions, and, up until this point in H.D.'s life, these social strictures. Yet, the tragic afterthought leaves us questioning whether this relationship qualifies as love, whether H.D. will ever be able to "be" a Lesbian again.

Asphodel, composed, initially in 1921-2¹⁸ and not published until 1992,

¹⁸Robert Spoo has suggested H.D. might have done substantial editing as late as 1926-7 and may even have later intended it for publication ("H.D.'s Dating of *Asphodel*").

has roughly the same dates of writing and publication as *Paint it Today*. A sequel to *Her/mione*, it picks up the themes and characters and continues the story from the point of the heroine's arrival in Europe. Its editor, Robert Spoo, notes the text's "strangely disembodied reputation," an oxymoronic configuration that is nonetheless noteworthy. Why is it that a work "akin [. . .] to Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, Stein's *the Making of Americans*," and other similar modernist breakthroughs should "have a status curiously similar to that of the poems of [her] beloved Sappho" (*Intro*. ix)?

It is more autobiographical (covering more time more accurately), more definitively Lesbian, and more politically subversive than any of H.D.'s other work. The central theme develops the relationship between life and letters and how sexuality shapes both. Here, H.D. makes her most direct sexual and political statements. Words count, terribly: "I am a Greek dead. Not a dead Greek" (168). She may be in the underworld, a Persephone waiting to be reborn, but she is fiercely alive. Not coincidentally, H.D. makes her statements with a practice that is rambling and dense, frustrating. She continues:

Hermione was the mother of Helen, or was Hermione the daughter of Helen? Hermione, Helen and Harmonia [. . .] H was the snow on mountains. . . .

Hellas, Hermione, herons, hypaticas, Heliadora [. . .] did names make people? (168)

Other than mourning sounds and a mind uprooted with uncertain identity, what are we to make of this? The writing has become jelly-fishlike—murky, circular, amoebic, stinging. The text which most closely reflects H.D.'s own model of vision, a jelly-fish of mind-body unity, has proven the most difficult to read. Why? What is worthy is often challenging. Yet, there is certainly more to the story, especially in light of H.D.'s own ambivalent relationship to the text.

The sexuality of the main characters in the story is a painful one. Here H.D. describes the temporary union between her young self and the great love of her life, Frances Gregg. Memories, contemporary social and familial pressures, and fear of the future torment it. Most, if not all, of these obstacles are due to the love's unconventionality and the related justification of others' hostility and jealousies. Hermione tries to cut through all the apparent complications by pleading her case directly:

"I, Hermione, tell you I love you Fayne Rabb. Men and women will come and say I love you. I love you Hermione, you Fayne. Men will say I love you Hermione but will anyone ever say I love you Fayne as I say it? [. . .] I don't want to be (as they say crudely) a boy. Nor do I want you to so be. I don't feel a girl. What is all this trash of Sappho. None of that seems real, to (in any way) matter. I see you. I feel you. My pulse runs swiftly. My brain reaches some height of delirium. Do people say it's indecent?

Maybe it is. I can't hear now, see any more, people." (52-3)

The unusual syntax beginning at the end of these lines conveys the speaker's stress. There are critics who would ignore or downplay these lines. If addressed, however, can the lines be said to convey anything other than extreme Lesbian passion and the countercultural status of that passion?

The above passage is framed by many discussions of desire as threatened by hostilities and thus necessitating strategies for maintaining appearances. George [Ezra Pound] repeats that the two women, in another time and place, would be burned as witches. Yet the worst enemy is within, the deadly internal homophobia manifested in such comments as Hermione's claims that Fayne's relationship with her mother is incestuous. George, although he hates Fayne and the women's relationship, will help them. Likewise Hermione's parents. It is Fayne who succumbs out of "convention manqué" and "hypocrisy" to returning home to the states, leaving Hermione in Europe, because she's "afraid simply" (53). While Hermione expressly allies herself with others like Wilde who "will come" and with her own pure truth—by the sign of her own face looking out—she finds a wall staring back at her and returning only senseless nonsequiturs or recriminations like "almost thou persuadest me to be a heathen" (53-5).

H.D. finds no satisfaction in a love that is too concerned with manners. However, is the fault Fayne's? The name does insist on a degree of deception—necessary deception, unless one wants to be killed, framed, or buried alive:

They had trapped her [Joan of Arc], a girl who was a boy and they would always do that. They would always trap them, bash their heads like broken flowers from their stalks, break them for seeing things, having “visions” seeing things like she did and like Fayne Rabb [. . .] Streets and the heat coming back and the reality and Clara [. . .] The English soldier was crossing the two sticks and the thin saint’s hand was reaching for the cross. The cross was in the hands of the witch and the people were shouting, “Crucify Him, crucify Him.” The witch was very tired and sick with all the noise and sweat of people [. . .] Not that I loved Caesar less—red anemones [. . .] “O don’t touch me. This heat. Get out.” (9)

Fayne may be wise to yield to such pressures, which are crucifying Hermione, which led her to the nervous breakdown that ends *Her* and leads into *Asphodel*. No release is promised. One can barely count the confusions that riddle the above silent outburst. To begin: gender is continually critiqued and shifting, people become flowers and then witches [and then moths], Joan of Arc and Hermione alternate back and forth as subjects, there is an apparently irrelevant allusion to a different time and place [ancient Greece]. We are entering a zone with few navigational guides.

At this point, the choices appear clear; they are the same as in *Her*—conformity or madness and persecution. “Hysteria” is precisely how Fayne

characterizes Hermione's personality, with "artistic" as an appositive (14). Each woman is rock strong in her own way, but each is also unsentimental and wise. These qualities combine with social pressure to cause Fayne/Gregg, midway through the story, to marry as a cover so she can travel freely, inviting Hermione/H.D. to join the couple. By this time, H.D., having lost her one great love, is irrevocably altered, on her own path, so she cannot accept the offer (and, of course, George/Pound physically intercepts her attempt).

Asphodel is a tale of a Lesbian artist emerging in a world that is hostile to, wars on, her primary passion. Understandably, our heroine is deeply torn. Her conflict is evident in the splittings of her own personality, which shape and are shaped by multivocal language. Intertextuality is unavoidable, but here we have *glossolalias* interfering with coherence and making the reader lose all bearings. We see such semiotic uprooting in the above passage. Phrases such as "*Helen thy beauty is me*" (4), nonsensical "Brrrr sous la livre—Brrrr sous la livre" (5), "*I search the meadows for the mirrored iris*" (13), as well as phrases from *Hermione* and *Paint it Today* such as pieces of the Swinburne poem (*O sister, my sister*) and "cras amet" surface without transition and often for no apparent reason other than the speaker's oral and generally associative semiotic pleasures.

Along with character, theme, and plot, *Asphodel* also continues *Her's* poetics. Spoo's description of the aesthetics suggest a layered, musical voice. Each part proceeds by building, sometimes through swerves and shifts, on a

central emotion. Variations of a theme “complicate even as they assist . . . the narrative” (*H.D. Prosed* 210-11).

Furiously passionate and sometimes transcendent, the conversations are nonetheless capable of subtlety—indeed “mimicry” (211)—a finding that contradicts critics who find only offensive seriousness in H.D.’s prose. For instance, the humor of “*dot-less marriage*” (4, editor’s italics) of one character plays on Fr. *dot*, “dowry,” as well as, in the context of “had (whispers),” spots of V.D., and also on the motif, that will later be developed, of Morse dots that communicate better than words.

Also subtle is the inexplicable vision, the paranormal timing that the reader can quite easily miss. When Hermione meets the thoroughly charming Walter and Véréne, for no reason, almost parenthetically, she thinks “Véréne would die at the first breath of frost. Walter (it was obvious) would kill her” (34). It is not at all obvious—unless one, like Hermione and Walter, has that inexplicable “Morse code” (34). This is the same Morse code ability she speaks of in *Notes on Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho*, the receptive, what is now referred to as “feminine” right-brain, what allows one to understand without speaking. Thus the ‘speaker’ can construct narrative from noise, ‘real’ and ‘imagined’:

The shaft of Walter’s *allegrettissimo* was the sun far up in trees
and the cold water running in, swift, swift, but water from an

iceberg. *Walter was water* [is she going *wa-wa?* nuts? regressing?]
 from an iceberg running in and in and in and the cello keeping its
BUZZZZZZ underneath was the inapposite hummmm of many bees,
 bees, bees, in chestnuts filled with rose spike of pink wax flower.
 Chestnuts [nuts in the chest?], rosesb[. . .]. (34)¹⁹

The impertinent *beeing* underneath is the semiotic voice like a deep and (almost) silent current of strange (her word is “odd”) beauty. Even “*pink wax flower*” connotes current through its sounds when they are split from conventional grammar. The alluvial voice rushes like music, carrying the words in pairs and then triplets, apparently held back by commas, and yet hence erupting with more force. Am I over-reading here, finding meaning in such sounds as repeated *pk*'s? I believe a reading that allows for an ecstatic (“*exaltée*”) consciousness to express itself is as valid as a reading which accepts only the representational meaning of the above words—which is, in fact, nonsense. Yet, there is fact underneath the text's predisposition to reading between the lines. Walter's²⁰ grandfather did invent the Morse code. Hermione suggests throughout that there is a genetic link between her and his “Telepathic. I mean telegraphic or something” (26) abilities.

The speaker is aware that her communication with Walter is

¹⁹The bracketed interpolations are mine.

²⁰The real life Walter Morse Rummel, Debussy champion, was a friend of H.D.'s from about 1910 on (*Asphodel* Appendix 209-10).

untranslatable: she does not know what they talked about, meaning she cannot *say*. Reporting to her sister/friend/lover Fay(ne), she explains that it was and it was not two in the morning; Fayne understands this as paradox rather than contradiction. Fayne calls her a street walker for being out so late and literal. Hermione replies “Street Walker? We did walk rather” (35). Attempting to adjust to the literal world, she is much more lost than when communicating by Morse code²¹ and native unwritten “formula.” Apparently unable to hear or at least assuage Fayne’s sarcasm, as well as to convey her experience, the speaker has not yet learned to integrate the different languages around and inside her. As Walter explains it, she is “all right” but just cannot yet connect what they “*hear*” with more linear composed history (35).

Building things up and then destroying them is what such talented artists who have mastered technique must do, Hermione thinks, in order to progress. This language is suggestive of deconstruction theory as well as Gertrude Stein’s practice, from repetitions to sound play to run-ons. New ideas are repeated obsessively, as when Hermione, on the edge of madness, is haunted by Morgan le Fay: the name is repeated half a dozen times in a page (for example, 161) and

²¹There are numerous references to “dots and dashes . . . common language of dots and dashes and colours” (25) that firmly tie *Asphodel* to *Notes*. Like Adrienne Rich half a century later, H.D. has a *Dream of a Common Language*. This “Spiritual Esperanto” (25) does not—in fact—exist. Searching for it, some paint, some do music—but are still unsatisfied (35—Walter wants voices, not music).

becomes a verb and an adverb and an adjective as well as a proper noun. In addition, words swap places: “Morals” is substituted for “manners” with no apparent reason other than sound association. Then there is the thematically and mechanically Steinian “Vérène. Vérène. Vérène. Was it a name. Was it a person. O, yes it was a person. It was herself and Fayne and Walter who were somehow out if it, out of the picture [. . .]” (36). H.D. may be less concerned with reinvigorating language, however, than with being true to the depths of her psyche and to portraying social reality, as in “She was stronger than men, men, men, men, guns” (164). “Goddess” literally becomes “less God” (25) a criticism of what the term connotes in our culture. H.D. strong distrust of patriarchal language is evident in the following tongue-in-cheek dialogue:

“I said you have to have more body to your clothes. Colour.”

“Yes.” “Yes. No. Yes. Have you heard a word I’m saying?” “No.

I mean Yes.” “Yes, I mean no. What in Hell’s name do you

mean?” “I mean really, George, does it all matter?”

She *does* really mean, though George can’t hear it. The language does not *mater* for George, but it is tied to the *mater*/mother body for Hermione, and she and H.D. have the last word. Is it feminine to hedge like this? The speaker appears confused, because she is cognizant of multiple realities. Typically, George must insist on his—that of male privilege: “Well, I as your nearest male relative—” a riotously funny counter, as George not only is *not* a relative but has no

recognizable claim to authority over her.

However, there is a more distressing side to limitations of verbal language. To begin with, conversations run together, making it difficult not only to *mean* but also to distinguish whom is speaking:

She wanted things in her own way, pulled and tore, “but you—
must—feel.” “But I don’t. I don’t, not *your* way. In my own way.
O if you only knew how it went on and on and on. As if a whole
book on one single page (like ancient papyrus) rolled on and on.”
We are here. We are *there*. We will go mad being here and there
unless we give up simply, stay here and are lost, stay there and are
dead.

There is little direction for determining who utters the quoted words. Nor are there references for “here” and “there.” Yet we can feel the meaning of the words; my own interpretation is that either woman could justifiably be making the accusation. “Here” and “there” refers to the women’s living in two worlds, whether those be homosexual and heterosexual, Europe and the U.S.A., independence and conformity. Why does H.D. not make her signifieds more obvious? In order for her writing to be acceptable, she has to encode her sense of otherness. Additionally, her reality is complex, palimpsestic, like the workings of her mind and the ambiguities of a poem. She cannot be pinned down to being one or meaning one thing. She rejects superficial fabrics that mask irrational reality

(20) in order to convey the passion itself, the burning force.

The dialogue of others throws her into uncontrollable medusa-like laughter, and she cannot convey, she repeatedly explains, any kind of laughter in writing. Nonetheless, Hermione begins the book insisting that *some* writing is “*true*” and “might come true [. . .] in one terrible instant became real, a reality [. . .] Writing. She must write. Hermione must write. She must write this: [. . .]”

(4) The “this” that follows is nonsense, rubbish. Nevertheless—by the end—the words are lifesaving, for the female trio of Hermione, Beryl, and Phoebe—the family that will take H.D. through the rest of her half a century.

In addition to being homoerotic at its core and deconstructive in its grammar, *Asphodel* is also a feminine text in its precocious *écriture féminine*²²:

Perhaps the least discussed aspect of H.D.’s narrative language is its strange, varied rhythms and its spectral glidings from third-person-limited discourse to first-person memoir to intimate, visceral stream of consciousness. Yet it is here, if anywhere, that H.D.’s claim to a unique feminine language must

²²When Cixous published “Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), none of these autobiographical novels had yet been published; H.D.’s *Trilogy* and *Helen* had just been released in the U.S.A. At this point, Cixous says only a shockingly few writers have ever written femininity—she lists three French ones. I hear the roar of “essentialism” rising and I will counter with Cixous’ defense [it is not a new theoretical development]: “It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist” (253).

be staked. (Spoo, "H.D. Prosed" 212)

Spoo, of course, does not mean "feminine" in the conventional sense; he even notes (somewhat paradoxically, it seems) that "H.D.'s much-discussed female difference" (213) is in fact a central critical preoccupation. As we have seen, the speaker feels neither boy nor girl. Yet some biographers and critics (including Laity) note that H.D. often assumed the role of androgyne or even boy to her male lovers! Here she demonstrates abhorrence to conventional female roles. They are unspeakable:

"Delia?" "Darling?" "You don't mind my asking—" "Ask anything, darling." "I mean Lillian talked about it—seemed to—want—them." "Dear Dryad—now what?" "I mean people *needn't* —" "What dear?" "I mean Lillian seemed to want them but could that Dalton woman ever—" (48-9)

What she is alluding to is, horrors—children. This aspect of the feminine role is both foreign and distasteful to her. The female role she prefers is that invoked by the adored character named "Delia," a name for Artemis (Laity, *Paint it Today*, 94 *note 40*), a goddess viewed as chaste or Lesbian.

Of course, Spoo's use of "feminine" refers to poetic elements at least as much as thematic ones. Some of these formal attributes represent the female body. Parallelisms inscribe the doublings (two pairs of lips) that Luce Irigaray has so boldly championed in *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Also *feminine* is the

casual chiasmus producing a maternal rocking effect: “There is some hollow of my arms you fill. You fill it completely” (151). [Note also that “it” has a “hollow” for an antecedent—in other words, shows language grammatically to signify emptiness/negative space—but also a hollow of the female body.]

Woman’s writing, says Hélène Cixous, must actively and effectively inscribe woman, in her specificity, onto the page; it must seduce reader and draw forth writer, much as Beryl/Bryher draws H.D. into her own picture, brings her back from the abyss to her practice as author. H.D. struggles to grasp her “self” through writing, finding the w/whole idea somewhat absurd:

She [*who* is unclear] was too young to talk about self, self, self—
 what was self? Self was a white carnation in a tall, green tumbler,
 (you can’t kill your *self*) self was a lotus-lily folded in the mud,
 self was the scent of pot-pourri across the fumes [. . .] . self was the
 sun caught in drawing room curtain [. . .] the scent of white wax
 carnations [. . .]. (178)

Self is an idea, an elusive, changing object of contemplation that is likely to drive one mad in its seductiveness and its fierce, aggressive defensiveness (178). It drives one both toward and away from the Other, much like the push and pull of writing. But in this case we have a third element. The trio of borderline Hermione, Phoebe (the child in her womb) and suicidal Beryl (the lover-to-be) will create three complete selves.

Psychoanalysts such as Nancy Chodorow and theorists of female writing, particularly autobiography, such as Carolyn Heilbrun, have noted how women construct self through relationships to other women. H.D., long before these contemporary well-known scholars were writing, proves the relevance of their theories:

[. . .] holding herself in so many layers, so carefully, housed, self and self and all confused and blurred by the cocoon state she was in. Self. What is self? Self is a lotus bud slimed over in mud. Small le Fay [her fetus, Bryher, her own infantile being?], you are more a self than I am, but I am giving myself to you to make a self. Are you giving yourself to me to make a self? What is a self?

[179; bracketed interpolations mine]

The self is made by the (m)other—the one who loves, touches, sings us forth, who is also inside, and by the child; every woman is her own (m)other, sister, lover (Cixous, “Laugh,” 252). A woman who writes woman, not as she has been defined but as she desires and creates sext, is a Lesbian. All true female writers are Lesbians (252-3); Wittig would agree, and, according to Cixous, so would American Feminists as well. H.D., in *Asphodel*, is becoming this kind of writer.

Yet, by the end of the novel, she has found the feminine intersubjective space that will allow her to create a living, writing, loving, powerful self. Lesbian love has caused her the “shattering” she writes of in *Eros*, but it offers a way out

of the abyss of suffering as well. Again, blue eyes serve as a code for Lesbianism: “But blue eyes, evil eyes, were calling her out of that nebulous world into which she had so softly fallen, blue eyes were dragging her ashore [. . .]” (183). The new love saves her, yet, in the tradition of demonizing Lesbianism, it is distrusted:

[it] unnerved [. . .] there was something odd, unseemly, difficult. Hermione wanted to get out, get away, hold on to her web of gauze, continue the melting loveliness into her own room, take it back with her to spread it like thin honey over the plain wheat-bread of her plain days [. . .] She wanted to take from this girl not give to her. (176-7)

This is the beginning of a relationship that will last a lifetime for H.D., yet Hermione/H.D. resists with her body and writing. Her homophobia surfaces in the diction of “unseemly.” Intellectual and physical attraction are read in the discomfoting fact that “The eyes were glazed over like the eyes of the blind.” Beryl/Bryher is embodying intense desire. Yet H.D. allows the reader to miss it if s/he chooses, letting it issue only through shadowy, unfit cataract. She herself would like to escape its potential dangers, while enjoying, even stealing, its charge.

The catastrophe of the loss of her first love is responsible: a loss due to homophobia and the lack of resources—financial, social, and psychological—

available to women. H.D. has suffered from both heterosexual and homosexual “romantic thralldom” (DuPlessis’ terminology). Having grown up, she has come to a place where she can live in both worlds: her unlawful Lesbian body and their language, the law of the fathers. We will never again in H.D.’s writing see such direct Lesbian battle as the opening:

“I, Hermione, tell you I love you Fayne Rabb [. . .] will anyone ever say I love you Fayne as I say it? [. . .] I don’t want to be (as they say crudely) a boy. Nor do I want you to so be [. . .] I feel you. My pulse runs swiftly [. . .] delirium. Do people say it’s indecent? Maybe it is. I can’t hear now, see any more, people.”

Now she will hear and see people; she will use revolutionary poetic language to achieve in their language what cannot be successfully said any other way.

CONCLUSION

These autobiographical novels have done much to revive interest in H.D., which has been growing exponentially since Feminists like Susan Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis revived her in the 1970s and particularly since Lesbian-Feminist and French Feminist readings have been applied—largely to the autobiographical novels. Fascinating in their own right, they illuminate her more scholastically recognized poetry. In fact, it is rare to find them studied

individually or as a group, without simultaneous consideration of her poetry. At the end of H.D.'s life she was still considered, even by some of her greatest fans, as limited to "a narrow play of intelligence" (Quinn's opinion in *Hilda Doolittle* 147). Her epics then extended her stature. Now we see "a neglected modernist entering a bright new phase at a rather terrific speed. HD. the poet is becoming . . . H.D. the prose writer" (Spoo, *H.D. Prosed* 217).

These publications are too new to the public for a reception history to be of much use. Yet a cursory look at their place in H.D. scholarship is illuminating. *Hermione* has received attention—attention that I would explain as resulting from (a) its appearance at a highpoint of Feminist scholarship, and (b) its relative homophobia. For the latter two novels I have found only one 'review'—a brief mention (Becker) that writes them both off as relevant only to scholars. *Asphodel* continues to be ignored.

Janice R. Robinson, the biographer, never mentions it. She barely mentions *Paint it Today*, and then only as a prelude to discussing what she assumes is a superior version, *Madrigal*—which is all about D.H. Lawrence. The earlier H.D. she considers only as a shadow grabbing at Pound. Frances Gregg is mentioned once or twice as a "friend." True, the novels had not yet been published, but Robinson had complete access to all H.D. material through the estate and Beinecke Library in particular. Robinson insists that "her sexual attraction was to men" (281)! Now that the autobiographical novels are

published, we know otherwise,²³ but they have yet substantially to influence the H.D. that is anthologized and canonized in the stolid annals of ‘Modernism.’

H.D.’s semiotic writing, and the readings it requires, are what many scientists and lay people discuss as right-brain activity, and, accordingly, they are not highly valued²⁴—especially when the writing is not poetry, and we continue to subscribe to our old (three) genre categories. Thus H.D.’s own daughter calls *HERmione* “overwrought,” and the consensus is that it works too much with the subconscious and the mythic as well as fighting against the fathertongue (Camper 378). Critics miss the irony.²⁵

Arch comments are not only misread—they have been expurgated. Like Dickinson’s texts, which have been similarly disemboweled, H.D.’s work has been subject to the silence of archives and then the silencing of editors. For example, undoubtedly believing she speaks the truth when she claims to present *Paint It Today* “exactly as H.D. wrote it” and “in its original form” (*Introduction* xxxviii, qtd. in Spoo, “H.D. Prosed” 215), Cassandra Laity nonetheless makes

²³This more recent knowledge which may contribute to the gendered status of H.D. studies: the majority of H.D. scholars are women.

²⁴“*HERmione* is an irritating book with many flaws. Effusive, indulgent, repetitious, rhetorically inflated, is also has a narrative that advances by fits and starts. It is, nonetheless, a very good introduction to [. . .] H.D.’s poetry [. . .]” (Camper 380).

²⁵“Ironic scrutiny has no place in this book” (Camper 379).

extensive alterations—particularly around commas, hyphens²⁶, and more substantive elements such as neologisms and absolute content. Such interference is typical of H.D. scholarship, which has yet to be taken as seriously as work on other modernists. In-house editors have butchered the texts even further, expurgating inscriptions of otherness (Spoo, *H.D. Prosed* 214-17).

While modernist strategies, such as stream of consciousness, coding of homosexuality, and the piecing of fragments, allow a degree of obscuring revelation—expressing the inexpressible, namely Lesbian desire—narrative conventions eventually proved inadequate and drove H.D. to return to poetry. These three novels are of one piece. Each participates in a Bakhtinian intertextuality which both bows to and critiques the discourses of its time, particularly those around gender, sexuality, and the necessary elements constituting the artist. H.D., as a woman, Lesbian, expatriate, artist, and visionary,²⁷ had more than enough qualifications to cross borders that would hold others back. Like the wavering of her sexuality and national identification, H.D.'s prose is uneven, layered. Sometimes coded and other times explosive, form is of primary interest—as is the case with poetry.

The semiotic nature of the voice, in Kristevan terms, becomes

²⁶A comparison between the editorial changing of Dickinson's punctuation and H.D.'s would be enlightening.

²⁷The latter biographical and literary content is mainly explored in my chapter on *Helen in Egypt*.

revolutionary poetic language. Largely ignored or criticized (if not removed from print), its movements are noted by Robert Spoo, who prepared *Asphodel* (for Duke University Press), the most radical of the autobiographies:

Her molten, mutating accidentals are crucial to her creative project and self-expression, for they choreograph a revisionary dance with syntax, odd rhythms, and pulsations that complement the volatile narrative voice. These phenomena are entirely consistent, moreover, with theories of a maternal semiotic, or presymbolic language, which Julia Kristeva has defined as “enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written [. . .] rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation [. . .] musical, anterior to judgement [. . .].” Spoo, “H.D. Prosed” 213)

The ‘novels’ are studies of a particular time/place and life. In the process of writing them, H.D. struggled to define herself: to “narrate” is to “know.” In an autobiographical *roman à clef* it was possible for her to write her story poetically and cryptically—though not enough to publish it or even permit it to remain intact as evidence. The version she authorized is both weak and dishonest.²⁸ The codes and conventions of fiction were still too limiting for her to express her jelly-fish

²⁸Quinn, in *Hilda Doolittle*, complains that though the narrator suffers her heterosexual frustrations more thoroughly than in H.D.’s other fiction, she does not suffer enough, since she finds hope in aesthetic resolution. DuPlessis is a much more sensitive reader, noting the rage in the *Eurydice* poem inserted at the

truth, that homoerotic womb-vision explained in *Notes*, and so she moved on to a medium with more radical possibilities, one which Kristeva says is more hospitable to revolutionary communication.

end and the tremendous power invested in feminine imagery.

**IV. MAD MARYS: LOONY LADIES AND THE RESURRECTION OF
*TRILOGY***

“Much Madness is divinest Sense—” —Emily Dickinson

“[. . .] beyond thought and idea,
their begetter,

Dream,
Vision.” —H.D., *The Walls Do Not Fall* [11]¹

“Hysteria or any mental illness may also be considered an indirect communication or language that is used ambiguously, usually in order to give the recipient of the message a choice between several alternative replies.”

—Thomas Szasz, M.D., *The Myth of Mental Illness*

If it is crazy to insist upon being the subject of desires and articulating them directly, outside of symbol, then H.D. proves the language of modern madness engaging and effective. Resurfacing from the grave, she redeems the feminine place of *hysteria*, or womb-language, with enough wit for any mad Mary, witch, whore, or fairy. Her body of work—with a glance over the 20th century—speaks iconclastically, poetry as symptom of an exploding canon.

¹ References in brackets are to section numbers of each poem (either *Walls*, *Tribute*, or *Flowering* will be noted).

H.D.'s abject voices, with the help of contemporary theory, have released themselves from culturally sanitized tissue-texts of gender and genre. Now they enact their intensely feminine subjectivity.

Trilogy appears to be a comeback for H.D., since little of her work from between the wars has, until very recently, been published or received much attention. She is publicly quiet for thirteen years following *Red Roses for Bronze*. Gary Burnett, evaluating her career, points out that the collection presages “one who died/ following/ intricate songs’ lost measure” and that it autobiographically hints at a fertile fallow period through her references to chthonic descent and eventual rebirth. H.D.’s chosen metaphor for the process is a joining with the mother—in the form of the Demeter and Persephone mystery—a preoccupation she held consistently throughout her ““silent”” period (138-42). The stories *Kora and Ka* and *Nights*, for example, as well the autobiographical novels I discuss, portray underworld rebirth. The Eleusinian mysteries were the most sacred and guarded: they involve power of the two perhaps most feared, traditionally linked and feminine entities—death and the mother. These are eroticized as a new and potentially scandalous H.D. emerges, one whose Hellenism² is increasingly transformed into “the power of the brazenly sexual, profuse, and horrific maternal body” (Laity, in Dickie and Travisano, 64). Yet, many critics, perhaps following Pound’s fateful decree, refused to consider her new work as new. Upon first

publication of *The Walls Do Not Fall*, Randall Jarrell dismissed H.D., along with her poem, as an embarrassing “anachronism.” The difference was lost on him.

As poet/critic Wayne Koestenbaum notes in 1986, the *Trilogy* poems finally restore H.D. to herself. What has been missing (because of “the dismemberment” that Pound performed) is now central: the erupting feminine and Feminist voice as “visionary power” (“Shattering Silences” 33). By the mid-eighties, a Feminist reading, of H.D.’s later poems at least, is standard. Andrew Howdle, from the perspective of spiritual studies, asserts matter-of-factly the female core of H.D.’s poetic project: in *Trilogy* “the feminine principle, the hermetic poet is quintessentially a bringer of creation and life” (28).

Koestenbaum goes on to integrate the formal poetics with the Feminist theme. Subject matter is broader than earlier work, lines correspondingly more elastic.

The effect of Feminist vision—thematic and formal—on literary reception is of paramount importance. And the reason *Trilogy* is still “all but ignored” (Collecott, “Reputation” 8) is because it is not the work of a “poetess.” In short, it is both long and public in nature—while personal in authority. Early readings considered the poem in light of WWII. In an *H.D. Newsletter* of 1988, R.J. Schoeck discusses it as a goddess-centered vision which, like Cather’s work, proceeds

“[. . .] like mining gold and precious stones out of rocks.” (Anne

² “Hellenism” can be read as classicism and as interest in her mother, Helen.

Porter on Cather, qtd. in Schoeck 22)

Listening to stones is a necessary activity at a certain point for the writer like H.D., and over even longer periods for the historical critic. *The Walls do Not Fall*, I would urge, is one of those rare books that demands—but then rewards—our listening to stones. (Schoeck 22)

Searching for the buried, eternal truths of Egyptian culture, H.D. based the “here” and “there” of the poem on her trip with Bryher, 20 years previous, to Karnak (thus the dedication). It is difficult to misread such a work (as her earlier work was misread) as escapist and self-destructive (Collecott, “Remembering Oneself” 8). Since epic poetry, especially that which addresses contemporary issues, is distinctly unfeminine for those who have “ears only for [. . .]. Smallness” (9), it is easy to understand the relative obscurity of the poem. Collecott cites Hugh Kenner’s claim that even in 1931 calling H.D. “The perfect imagist” is akin to letting a few of the *Harmonium*’s short pieces stand for Wallace Stevens’ oeuvre.

The ultraconservatism of the late forties and the fifties ensured that “a substantial majority of interesting poems” of the first half of the century, “by minorities and women,” be immediately disremembered. Academic and publishing circles became smaller, more white, more male (Nelson 35). There was no room for a Feminist epic.

Composed in 1944–6 and published as three distinct poems, *Trilogy* was

not published as one text until 1973. By that time Feminism and Feminist criticism had prepared the world for the ideas of female subjectivity, major poetry, and prophecy. H.D.'s prophecy of her own place in the world was uncannily accurate. In forty-five pages of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Volume 73) covering H.D.'s life work, there are no reviews of any of the books of *Trilogy*, separately or together. Her imagist work receives ample attention, as do her prose and poetry about men (for example *By Avon River* and *Bid Me To Live*).

Recently there has been more discussion about *Trilogy*, some of it brought on by an extensively annotated version published in 1998, with notes and introduction by Alike Barnstone. While no one loses interest in H.D.'s male sources—Dante has been one topic of investigation—Feminists are more interested in contemporary applications, such as teaching the work in college Gender and Modernism courses.³ For them, as discussed in the H.D. Society mail list, the “tradition” of innovation and of women’s so-called silences within it is paramount. Still, many find the work frustratingly difficult.

Usually called an epic, *Trilogy*, like the later *Helen in Egypt*, is a sequence of articulated visions. Freudian dream-vision is one truth source, but this can also

³Nonetheless, a Feminist colleague includes no H.D. in her ‘gender and modernism’ comprehensive exam list. In fact, the only woman on the list is (need I say?) Marianne Moore. [I have seen her name countless times as the token female, even in Women’s Studies.]

be read as a majical [H.D.'s spelling] experience. Through the speaking self's trials, in which history, myth, dream, and personal experience⁴ are all paralleled and through which various religions are merged, the individual and the world are renewed.

The poem (excepting the prologue) is in distich⁵ form, like the Bible and Greco-Roman formal elegies, which well lends itself to meditative expression. This form also allows for diaphonic buildup of metaphor, innovation by means of layering. Alicia Ostriker describes the prosody of *Trilogy* as appealing to "the receptive psychic states of dream and vision" ("No Rules of Procedure" 344). These states of experience and their voicing may be traditionally disparaged as feminine or romantic, but they are no less logical than the work of philosophers

⁴Peter Revell points out in *Quest in Modern American Poetry* that H.D. often (*Bid Me to Live, Kora and Ka*) mythologizes the personal as a means of remaking the war-torn world. Central to this strategy is the relationship of Demeter and Persephone—the mythohistorical version of H.D.'s own relationship with Bryher (Winifred Ellerman). H.D.'s revisionary mythopoesis is, according to Revell, an attempt to manifest her subconscious—as the doctor ordered (175-6). Revell also, however, attributes the significance of the first and third sections of *Trilogy* to male figures—"the world-father" and Kaspar, respectively (185). He tries to parallel H.D.'s mission with Pound's conception of the masculine One. Revell fails to note that the subject who relates [. . .] myth/ and [. . .] reality is *not* the speaker; moreover, the composite, supreme deity is Isis [40] (Revell, à la Pound, would privilege Osiris, her charge).

⁵I.e. couplets; though not generally rhymed in *Trilogy*, they are syntactically self-contained and express whole ideas. They are interlinked with other couplets and sections of the poem through repetition, echoes, harmonies, and metonymic association.

such as Derrida,⁶ whom we take so seriously, work often spinning elaborate theories on the basis of a locker-room pun. If metaphysical and political constructs can be so arbitrary, certainly body language and effects of sounds can signify.

One apparent subconscious articulation is the presence of archetypal females. The fact that, unlike other WWII epics, *Trilogy* comes together in spiritual and psychological triumph could be the result of the omnipresence of the divine maternal. As Ostriker points out, She surfaces in *Tribute* as the Lady who “endorses her [poet] as scribe, and in *Flowering* she is the two Marys, Virgin and Magdalen” (*WLW* 24-5). Many of the chief concerns of the poem are those of the rest of H.D.’s oeuvre: autobiography, resolution of conflict, the personal and world mother (here Isis), “finite definition/ of the infinite” (*Walls* [42]). Like all of her work, it is both female-centered and focused on self-definition through relations. Interdisciplinary scholar Alice Adams explains, in *Reproducing the Womb*, how relations between the one and community are another way of understanding the fetus-mother dyad—which has a third, “collective” term, thus creating a harmony of separate elements (x).

⁶For instance, the female nature of the law (narrative space or possibility) is arrived at through a heterosexually-determined-as-female knee (*genou*) placed seductively between the homosocial community of speakers, the I/we (*je/nous*) (*Acts of Literature* 247-8).

Or, as widely published H.D. scholar Donna Hollenberg explains the psycholinguistic development:

By means of the dream work, the dreamer's unconscious impulses, perhaps repugnant to his [sic] superego (the psychic embodiment of cultural values), are transformed into visual images and the doors of repression are partially opened. In the successive poems of *Trilogy* three revelatory dreams [. . . reconstruct] a female 'family romance.' (126)

Hollenberg's own language remains patriarchally exclusive, but she does note that in H.D. the most masculine associations, including father figures, are "feminized" or otherwise neutralized (127).

H.D.'s female voices are suicidal and nurturing, daughters and mothers: transcendent individuals. Schoeck finds that H.D.'s central figure, Isis, is a composite of mother, sacred prostitute, and even war-goddess (18). The poem's discourse mirrors many Lesbian descriptions of the matro-dynamics of women loving women, erotically. One such typical narrative explanation is Sue Silvermarie's recreation of the experience of each woman bringing the other to life and language and a new understanding of her sisterhood with (all) other women. The ecstatic merging is both a loss of boundaries and a renewal of

individuality.⁷ Thus the radical political potential. While women need to be careful, as canonical psychoanalytic theorist Nancy Chodorow points out, of unconsciously playing into fulfillment of cultural norms—such as lack of individuation from the mother and excessive reliance on and servitude of others—ignoring our interconnections does not solve the problem. Selves in process, as Kristeva and Adams would have it (see Adams 4; 244), within a sisterhood or female world/ womb (see Adams x), is another model for identity. A whole new romance⁸ beginning here.

***THE WALLS DO NOT FALL* (1944)**

As is characteristic of H.D.'s late work, merging is an ubiquitous condition. In *Walls*, time and place each lose distinctions and, more to the point, so do subject and object. Here, the mood fluctuates as well, alternately interrogative, imperative and indicative.

What is feared is also desired. That is “oneness lost, madness”:

the elixir of life, the philosopher's stone
is yours if you surrender

⁷See Rich's *Of Woman Born* 232-3.

⁸Reference is to Rich's 'a whole new language beginning here.'

sterile logic, trivial reason;
 so mind dispersed, dared occult lore,

found secret doors unlocked,
 floundered, was lost in sea-depth,

sub-conscious ocean where Fish
 move two-ways, devour;

when identity in the depth
 would merge with the best,

octopus or shark rise
 from the sea-floor:

illusion, reversion of old values,
 oneness lost, madness. [30]

Whether the juxtaposed concepts “oneness lost” and “madness” are the same or diametrically opposed remains unresolvable. “Oneness” itself is of two kinds—oneness of self, and oneness of self/other (as well as self/world). As joined appositively, “oneness lost” and “madness” may both represent “old values”—

and/or, paradoxically, the “new dimension” to which those old values are opposed. “Oneness lost” and “madness” are each multidimensional and each term is further complicated when we ask whether these states are original ones or returns. In a potentially threatening amniotic sea, movement of fish [an H.D. code-word for *thoughts*] is “two ways”—creating the future through recovering the past.

Like the gods and fish who face two ways (fish were sacred in Egypt), H.D.’s poems must be read as subversively ambiguous encodings of “an outsider” who “must express her views from a consciously female perspective, telling the truth, as Dickinson would say, ‘slant’” (Gubar, *Echoing* 202). Her epics both deconstruct history and rebirth the goddess—here Isis—through prophecy.

Jacob Korg asserts that the repeated “oneness lost, madness” lines are a warning against “uncontrolled mysticism” of the old ways, which he aligns with “chaotic subconscious” (143).⁹ In other words, “oneness” would refer to individualistic, unified ego—an undesirable loss. However, not only is the definition of “oneness” tenuous and the relationship between “oneness lost” and “madness” potentially a contradictory one, even if the two concepts are synonymous and mean what Korg says they do, they have no predicate, nothing to indicate that the state of mind is to be avoided. The repetition of the line-end

⁹Chaotic waters, easily tied to the mother’s womb and the unconscious, are the source of creation of the world in Egyptian lore.

“depth” with sea-depth (pun on “see” and “C”) and “identity in the depth” suggests that such a state may indeed be positive: would we prefer shallowness?

Moreover, “reversion of old values” holds a double meaning in itself—“reversion” can be a turning away from or a returning to. We are on shaky ground here. The above phrase is heavy and requires great generative effort (breath) to sound all the semivowels *r, v, r, v* (repetition of these sounds re-emphasizes the importance of *revers*), especially the repeated *s* [*z* sound]—the first time quite vocal, an outburst, but the second a breath stopping line-end. These difficulties of vocalization suggest that external pressures are working against articulation. Whether “old” or “new,” something wants to leave the body and be known—but is not yet recognizable as reason. The dissonance reflects inability to resolve conflicting forces; this is a poem of protest.

When critics are unaware of layers of meaning, it seems biased to label semiotic language as babble. For all the translucent fire and simplicity—sometimes criticized as childish and Romantic (read ‘feminine’) naiveté—of her poems, H.D. could simultaneously be ironic, complex, and/or detached. Indeed *Walls* begins this way and quickly moves to a denunciation of patriarchal-biblical misogyny which she holds accountable for the current mass destruction. At the same time, the source of healing will be the poet’s visions—subconscious language that will enable her to reestablish the ancient mysteries. What is clear is that *Walls* as a whole accomplishes “the recovery of the mother’s power [. . .] a

critique of Judeo-Christian misogyny and a prophetic call for the re-establishment of older matriarchal values” (Hollenberg 125).

To hear these visions we must listen carefully for subtle sounds. When the speaker reminds us parenthetically that she is “me (the worm)” [6], we may wonder how we missed this information before now. Such a matter-of-fact rhetorical device as an echo with no original is uproariously funny in its bizarreness. Is it mad (an implied question she answers later)? At the end of the section she juxtaposes the belligerence of “you,” paraphrasing a name-calling litany:

when you cry in disgust,

a worm on the leaf,

a worm in the dust,

a worm [. . .]. [6]

This is perhaps the kind of poetry we are used to, that which must drive its simple point home with the monotonous aggression of anaphora. H.D.’s repetends are more delicate

persistence; I escaped spider-snare,

[.]

I escaped, I explored [. . .]. [6]

Her operations are, by necessity, more clandestine. Thus the section finishes with her (“the Lord God”!) wrapping herself in a shroud—at once a symbol of death and the protective camouflaged womb of the caterpillar-becoming-butterfly.

Section [14] performs multiple identities, allowing the poet to be both mother and daughter, to mother herself as a worm in a cocoon. A monstrous conception, gynandrous, two-headed—she sounds like Sylvia Plath when she boasts “I profit/ by every calamity;/ I eat my way out of it” [6]. Ravenous as a pregnant woman or infant, she is unsatisfied, always in motion, throwing her desires in all directions. The “we” voice, double in itself, touching itself as does the female sex, shares one body (“dead shell”) but advises that body may change: “old-body” as a compound suggests a counterpart new-body. Rather than metrics or regular rhyme, what holds the pieces together is parallelism: “we are” and “we pull at” as opening successive couplets, “the old-body humours” and “old will, old volition, old habit” as parallel lines (the latter of course a triple parallelism in itself). The poetry grows, from the mundane “bad moments” of the first couplet of [14] to the magical last word—“star.” Diction is colloquial, even slang, juxtaposed to elevated. The single worm, royal “we” of the “bad moments [. . .] anyhow” crawling up her “individual grassblade” is simultaneously collective “we” opposed to trivial “you.” At the center of the last couplet is the repetend “individual.” The lines mirror each other but are slightly askew—as in mother-daughter twins or a Lesbian couple, allowing each reality and a shared synergistic

one. The signs of having “crawled” to this place like an infant or madwoman are both particular and significant: “up our individual grass-blade/ toward our individual star.”

In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. explains that Bryher gave her permission to go crazy. The multitude of perspectives in *Trilogy* reflects such a deranged, unsound self and locates disintegration as the source of vision. Each reader will interpret the “eternal realities” [*Helen in Egypt*] of H.D.’s words in her own way. A “gambler with eternity” [31] H.D. *dares* it (the word *dare* is repeated three times in this section) [30]. In the search for unity, shells are cracked open, boxes are hatched, all boundaries are thrown into question: “your (and my),” “there, as here,” “there are no doors” [1]; “ether/ is heavier than the floor,/ and the floor sags/ like ship floundering” [43]. Note the airiness of these lines: all the sound variations of “air” such as *there, here, there, ether, heavier*. The spacey depths hold dangerous sharks, but, mysteriously, allow integrity of self: “*Still the walls do not fall,/ I do not know why*” [43]. Here, temples are open to sun and nurturing waters, and discovery can occur.¹⁰

¹⁰Rich’s *Transcendental Etude* provides a fascinating comparison with *Trilogy* in its treatment of the relationship between language acquisition and self-discovery within the framework of the mother-child dyad. To save our lives, we remember our bodies

and disenthral ourselves, bestow
ourselves to silence, or a severer listening, cleansed
of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static
crowding the wires. We cut the wires,

Meanings are comprehended not by the intellect but rather by something more primal and mysterious. Witness the juxtaposition that vetoes the Cartesian formulation of *thinking* as the prerequisite to knowing and existing: “I know, [because] I *feel* the meaning that words hide; they are anagrams, cryptograms, little boxes, conditioned/ to hatch butterflies” [italics mine]. Such anagrams, according to Kristeva, manifest the “infinite possibilities” of the “nonrational, nonsymbolic signifying practice in poetic language” (*Desire* 15). The glyphs of language, an arbitrary code, can be read by the “‘pathetic’”[feeling] inner band, a circle within a circle, keepers of the “secret wisdom,” revealers of the “secret [that] is stored/ in man’s very speech,/ in the trivial or/ the real dream; insignia” (8). The descent into sublunar language becomes a form of resistance that threatens, by relying on the tides of the female body, both the violent

find ourselves in free-fall, as if
 our true home were the undimensional
 solitudes, the rift
 in the Great Nebula.
 No one who survives to speak
 new language has avoided this:
 the cutting-away of an old force that held her
 rooted to an old ground
 [.]
 where she herself and all creation
 seem equally dispersed, weightless [. . .]
 [.]
 but in fact we were always like this,
 rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference.
 Birth stripped our birthright from us,
 tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves [. . .].

phallogocentric world and the speaking self.

As is language, the individual self is subject to internal and more obvious, hostile external pressures. One may, contracting the anal drive, limit the opening of one's floodgates:

my shell-jaws snap shut

[.]

ocean-weight; infinite water

can not crack me, egg in egg-shell;

closed in, complete, immortal

full-circle, I know the pull

of the tide, the lull

as well as the moon;

the octopus-darkness

is powerless against

her cold immortality; [4]

Note, again, all the rhythmically reassuring c-l-u-cking and sing-song o sounds.

Yet, syntactically, the speaker and the moon overlap intersubjectively: she knows

the moon (position of power *over*), is intimate with the moon, and knows the tide as well as the moon knows it (and, since only as well, is subjected to the moon's knowledge). Her earthly position parallels that of the octopus-darkness and to that extent she is powerless.

In her retreat, when she reaches the heart of powerlessness—might she be silenced? Koestenbaum ponders whether H.D. every completely escapes the devastating attractions of silence:

[. . .] whether H.D. has succeeded in pushing language to its limits, moving vigorously and dangerously toward the silence on the other side of words, or whether in fact that silence is beckoning toward her and crippling her language with its seductive proximity. (33)

He is well aware that this is a question, that H.D.'s poetry is tenuously balanced. As a particularly queer kind of other (Lesbian, bisexual, witch), she has learned the power of the many different kinds of silence. Some of them, as Eve Sedgwick has recently theorized, speak at least as loudly and as precisely as verbal communication.

Women's wisdom lies partially in resisting the tides outside of them—replete with sharks, whales, and other violent beings such as war and phallogocentrism in general—but women themselves are tied lunarly to disruptive forces, forces that carry all dangers, by the cycles of their own bodies (and thousands of years of tradition that equate woman with moon). The filling and

the emptying, the light and the dark, the silence of the ultrasonic

Thus H.D. makes use of culturally gendered categories while also challenging the same gendered codes. The *Word*, for instance, usually interpreted as biblical, coming from a male god, and representative of patriarchal authority in general, is reclaimed through the journey inward and backward:

[. . .] remember, O Sword,
 you are the younger brother, the latter-born,

 your Triumph, however exultant,
 must one day be over,

in the beginning
was the Word. [10]

The pun on “borne” with “born” reminds us that not only must a sword be carried but there is only one gender capable of having “borne” and been “born.” The authoritative Word, since not associated with the sword, is that of the older clan of ‘nameless initiates.’ Knowing poets, “pathetic” ones (those who feel), are survivors of more ancient traditions, and even in their fragmentary (“remnant”) state are one, singular relic: “we, authentic relic,/ bearers of the secret wisdom,/ living remnant/ of the inner band/ of the sanctuaries’ initiate” [8]. The inner band of solidarity is the circle of those initiated into the mysteries (of the goddess) and

those who live their lives from within what is *already* the inside (“*inner band/* of . . . *initiate*); the sanctuaries are both actual temples and the temple of self. In this retreat one is protected from assault and also emerges triumphant, transcendent. A practical position, a fighting one, and, finally, a magically androgynous one, back “beyond death” at the crossroads ruled by Mercury/Hermes is a place where letters and lyre-notes are seized and the bond of phallus/word (or *pen/is*, in the formulation of Gilbert and Gubar) is severed. The phallus, which can not be dissociated, much as Lacan tries, from the penis, is the loser in this game.

Throughout the poem, there are all kinds of returns—in time, life form Several sections are full of “in” syllables (the letters sometimes reversed) when the speaker retreats into a worm’s shroud; additionally, she loses self by losing singularity—*s* sounds abound when she notes she is “unintimidated by multiplicity” [6-12]. Then section [13] is a watershed. The speaker joins a community of one “Name,/ we nameless initiates.” This bond of identity is spiritual but nonetheless “indifferent to your good and evil.” The most basic mark of individuality—a name—is forsworn, as is the most essential conceptual distinction (good vs. evil). In this place of unity, communication occurs readily:

we know each other

by secret symbols,

though remote, speechless,

[.....]

though no word pass between us,

there is subtle appraisal;

even if we snarl a brief greeting

or do not speak at all,

we know our Name [. . .]. [13]

The marks by which they know are, rather than alphabetic, themselves, their own bodies:

peril, strangely encountered, strangely endured,

marks us;

we know each other

again, without language symbols. Shared experience lends them recognizable identity and renders them dangerous to the symbolic order's hierarchies of difference.

Finally, sword/phallus comes to depend on Word (which provides the majority of *sword's* body), rather than vice/versa, a phenomenon which may

appear to be unremarkable deconstructive play for a female poet. But it is especially important in that it represents a pattern of concern with origins—one that finds the female, body or text, underneath all. We may begin with deferential, coy questioning about the stars (“O-sir-is” sounds like “Oh, sir, is?”):

For example:

Osiris equates O-sir-is or O-Sire-is;

Osiris,

the star Sirius, [40]

Some critics have complained this is inanity; they have not read “Osiris” as hieroglyph—historically resonant and loaded, associative, pure sound.

Elementally, when we strip (of course derivative) “myth” to concrete “reality,” when we get “Sirius” [serious], we know the unspeakable. Even the dazzling stars and sun/son (Osiris) are just an “example” of the “One”—by parallelism, “Isis”—the great mother, lover source, and reconstructor of Osiris. Words hatch butterflies:

recover the secret of Isis,

which is: there was One

in the beginning, Creator,

Fosterer, Begetter, the Same-forever [. . .]. [40]

Isis [double, emphatic “is”] is the closest we get to a name for the eternal “Begetter.” H.D.’s layered perspectives always come to rest with the goddess, and as is traditional in goddess worship, she has many names but is finally unnamable.¹¹

Personal regression is paralleled with historical and linguistic deconstruction. Immediately after the prologue we have a speaker identifying the master’s language—and its equation of whore and mother (“harlot” and “Isis”)—as a place to step into, contaminate with new truths based on “old values.” “Devill” masquerades as “Jehovah,” and “Good” is stripped bare to the kernel of grain and the unadorned woman. Similarly, the “palimpsest” of history is to be attacked with magical destruction by heart and pen [2].

The poem presents the female body, particularly its genitalia, as a hidden repository of erotic knowledge, “unintimidated by multiplicity” and “unrepentant.” The speaker is worm manifesting god in her spinning of silk self

¹¹Z. Budapest, one of the best known contemporary witches, invokes Her as She whose names are as many as the stars and refers to the traditional reference of the goddess of 10,000 names. See *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* (Berkeley: Wingbow Press, 1989) 39, 283. For an understanding of goddess worship as simultaneously polytheistic and worshipping the Goddess as the One (35), see Margot Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Boston: Beacon, 1986). Walker’s *Encyclopedia* (Goddess entry) also covers the infinite names of the Goddess as the One and the Mother, although Walker claims the ‘ancients’ referred to the Goddess as she of a thousand names.

and new language, mothering herself against forces battering her (war, culture and tradition, pursuing lovers) [6]. The mollusk is a symbol of the poet articulating self:

Hidden and therefore safe, a mollusk self is protected in precisely the way the poet craves asylum: neither fully alive nor fully dead, half in and half out, the mollusk in its shell becomes a tantalizing image for H.D. of the self or soul safely ensconced within the person or body, always and anywhere at home.

But the fascination goes much further because the ‘flabby, amorphous’ mollusk does not only protect itself with such impenetrable material as ‘bone, stone, marble,’ it also transforms living substance into formal object and thereby mysteriously creates the beautiful circularity of its house and also the perfectly spherical pearl. Shell and pearl are associated traditionally with art because the shell is a musical instrument, expressing the rhythm of the waves, and H.D. would know that it was Hermes who scooped out the shell of a tortoise, converting it into a lyre which he gave to Apollo. (Gubar, *Echoing Spell* 203).

Thus, early in the poem, the female body is deconstructively revealed and portrayed as gynandrously creative.

In the several first and last sections of *Trilogy*, we have the clearest

demonstrations of how the female body—as mother, child, and third term—is identified with the powers of language. In section [1] of *Walls*, a prologue (distinguishable as the only section not in couplets), an image of a birthing process shows the head of the perhaps collective (“us”) poet emerging from between the mother’s lips. At this moment, the mind, body, and speech are one. The poet as child is caught up in a battle whose lines are drawn around her own body in the process of becoming what the mother’s multiplicitous, and threatening, desire decrees:

we know crack of volcanic fissure,
slow flow of terrible lava,

pressure on heart, lungs, the brain
about to burst its brittle case
(what the skull can endure!):

over us, Apocryphal fire,
under us, the earth sway [. . .]. [1]

In spite of all the dangers, “the frame held.” But there is a death, or several deaths, in the process. The oneness of mother-child is killed as a new identity is born.

the flesh? it was melted away,

the heart burnt out, dead ember,

tendons, muscles shattered, outer husk dismembered

A mother might feel her heart die in giving up a child to the world and the law of the father. Certainly the mother's body is traumatized, ripped, emptied. But the child's body loses its outer husk only. The singular point of view in this stanza and the previous one suggests that even after birth the oneness of body remains, while identity has been multiplied.

The partitioning of the body that the mother experiences is a recollection of presymbolic chaos, which is a precursor to radical meaning. Having survived it, the emergent narrator begins what sounds like a nursery song of simple nominations. The voice, immediately after its prefatory volcanic birth, is childlike and naive, yet the seriousness of issues addressed and a continuation of a plural point of view imply a joint mother-daughter perspective:

Evil was active in the land,

Good was impoverished and sad;

Ill promised adventure,

Good was smug and fat;

Dev-ill was after us,

tricked up like Jehovah;

[.]

they snatched off our amulets,
charms are not, they said, grace;

but gods always face two-ways,
so let us search the old highways

for the true-rune, the right-spell,
recover old values; [2]

There is reason underpinning the linguistic frolic. Signifiers immediately, almost imperceptibly, swap signifieds with their opposites. “Good” goes directly from being impoverished to being smug and fat—has it changed places with “evil” or are they the same? Such tricky reversals are evidence of evil’s truth-disguising activity.¹² The wordplay appears gratuitous, nonsensical at first. Perhaps this is childish fooling. But a closer look reveals Evil, personified in the paralleled *Devill*, to be that which has spoken [“promised”].

The entrenched and active enemy emerges as the phallus or stylus of the fathers. The “smug and fat” powers that have kept “Good” suppressed and poor first usurped its name. Juxtaposed definitions suggest a substitution of parties

¹²Mary Daly expounds upon how reversal is an important strategy of phallocracy or sadosociety (see *Pure Lust*: especially 9, 67-8).

claiming the title of “Good.” The enemy has denied the legitimacy of original Good’s writing and insisted its only power is harlotry. They may be able to prevent it from moving forward. But there is at least equal access in moving backwards (the other of “two-ways”). The echo, familial/familiar sounds of “two-ways” and “highways” is both evocative of religious ritual or altered states and polemically meaningful; she who sees multidimensionally is “high.” Also, echo as reply suggests an intersubjectivity, a mother/daughter conversation, which is obviously, through the myth of Echo (who was disempowered), inherently feminine. The journey (one way) can be read as a voyage to earlier times or a voyage inward—as opposed to the “adventure” as outward quest that we expect in a masculine epic. Furthermore, there is the possibility of creating new language from the old, as in the neologized compounds “two-ways,” “true-rune,” “right-spell.” H.D. seems willing to forgo the traditionally feminine armor (“amulets”): “so” implies agreement or resignation. She does not agree, however, that their women’s rhythm or stylus or ‘scratching out’ strategies must be rejected. Her paraphrase of misogynist critics who question the possibility of female power is a rhetorical question. While the order of H.D.’s poetics is “flexible, generally unobtrusive [. . .] subliminal[ly], nonetheless it makes order of the “chaotic subconscious” (Korg 143).

In the next section [3] of “*Walls*,” the speaker argues that they must “however, recover” the “Scepter,/ the rod of power,” which may be the very same

stylus outlined above.

Let us, however, recover the Sceptre,

the rod of power:

it is crowned with the lily-head

or the lily-bud: [3]

Howdle explains that the transformation feminizes the androgynous god (Hermes), creating a “living poetic image” that is an extension of the poet, a “magically” (28) flowering lily.¹³ The ugly Sceptre becomes a tool for authentic articulation when it is turned into a figuration of the female genitalia as well as a worldwide emblem of the Great Goddess, particularly as virgin mother.¹⁴

After this redemptive movement, the lily-rod’s miraculous creative powers are transferred to a new object—a sea-shell—a word whose sounds (condensation evokes the pronoun *she*) and connotative weight (especially as image of vulva) are both feminine.

There is a spell, for instance,

in every sea-shell: [4]

¹³A similar return to etymological roots which become both the female body and language about it occurs in *cartouche*: the modern meaning as paper from which military cartridge cases are produced is traced back to its meaning as that which encircles the sacred female figures with whom H.D. identifies.

¹⁴See Walker, *Dictionary* “Lily.”

The female genitalia have thus become source of language, exemplification of the efficacy of *l'écriture féminine*. It is difficult to imagine how anyone who has read this poetry could assert, as the *Bethlehem Times* does, that H.D. “was not a feminist”—a disclaimer that is intended to be complimentary.

The iconography gets more blatant, to the point of being humorously crude, with “shell-fish:/ oyster [hear again *she* and *her*], clam, mollusc.” The aural effects exceed the visual images and their usual associations. Repeated *clk clk* sounds are glottal mirrors of the snapping-shut action advised, evocations of anal control and release as well as tones of parental reassurance. Sounds also embed traces of oral drives—the above lines read like sucking and swallowing; “shell-fish” and “oyster” make the mouth push away whatever is against it, then “clam” and “mollusc” demand it back with the “m”/pause/”m” requiring a plaintive effort like that of a child asking for its mother. The self-sufficiency of the mollusk [“self-out-of-self”], which can be seen as a metaphor for H.D.’s early poems, here becomes parodic. In her oral-aural pleasure and instruction, H.D. makes the mother-daughter relationship not only erotic but pornographic. Dianne Chisholm refers to her practice as “pornopoeia,” “precursor to *écriture féminine*, gender trouble, or queer theory,” and points out that its subversive intent was to transform the “most prized institution of Western culture: maternity [. . .]” (72).

H.D. is suggesting the adversarial relationship between patriarchy and the woman artist/seeker who is under an attack for which solipsism is insufficient

defense. The orality of the sounds and images in this section is threatening—think of the tradition of *vagina dentata* allusions and other monstrous female mouths like Medusa. Her mollusc stanzas are pure auto-erotic pleasure and suggestion of interior knowledge. But H.D. also cautions how tremendously imperiled the individual body is against the unfathomable forces against and within it, how easily “splintered the crystal of identity,/ shattered the vessel of integrity” [21]. Insistence on female orality and genitalia—both linked to speech—may be an aesthetic protest against the mind-body split of patriarchal writing.¹⁵ Broken into pieces, now the poet will accept the “paw-er” (father/ power) which destroys by tilling but also prepares for, makes fertile, new life, over and over again. Male and female, death, life, are presented not as opposites but as constituents of the much more complex “spiral” that is life [21].

By the middle of *Walls* we already realize the title is ironic: “[. . .] gods have been smashed before” [8]—the strongest walls do fall, around cities, bodies, words. The wall of self, bounded by flesh, is rejected: “let your teeth devour me,/ let me be warm in your belly” [22]. The speaker even takes the grammatically subjective place of commanding her deadly return to the womb: “*till* the Lord Amen,/ paw-er of the ground” [italics mine] can be read as an imperative form as

¹⁵The imposition of orality onto textuality in many ways constitutes a resistance to the graphic, the decontextualized word, or in more broadly cultural terms, to what McLuhan has famously termed the ‘making of typographical man’ (Mazzio 70, in Hillman and Mazzio).

well as a temporal reference. In all confidence she returns herself to the vortex of “the star-whirlpool”—a cauldron of re-birth—assuring through her craft that she “be cocoon, smothered in wool,/ be Lamb, mothered again” [21]. “Amen, Ares, the Ram” announces himself out of the star whirlpool in Spring, starting the zodiacal year. Our galaxy is here again like a giant womb. The *ooh* and *ah* sounds of the above lines evoke mother-child language before symbolic coding. With the transformation of Lord Amen to ‘mother,’ cosmic dimensions are made female. Although the speaker is a fighter who threatens to bring enemies down— “[. . .] gods have been smashed before”—she welcomes her own destruction in this ultimately creative process.

The womb as receptacle, fortress, place to create pearl, self-out-of-self, for H.D. is subversive. Her individual sections are wombanly in enveloping their nascent contents. Section [18] is typical in beginning and ending with the same words, in this case “Christos.” But it is not simply circular movement: the new Christos is at first Amen—whose hieroglyphic symbol signifies “pregnant belly” (Walker, *Encyclopedia* “Amen”). Not surprisingly, “Amen” as prayer or spell sealer is the last word of the previous section (sections [24] and [25] repeat this birthing pattern). So the two sections end the same, but differently, begin differently but are the same. Like a woman’s body, the poems flood forth and overflow boundaries. They express desire for the forbidden: “a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood” (Cixous 261).

Within the safety of woman's body lie "coals for the world's burning" [first line of 17], fires and a "new Sun" ("Amen" means son about to be born). For, as Cixous explains, "there is always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other" (252). Here the other is transformed from patriarchal icon of "pain-worship and death-symbol" to the feminine affirmation of "Dream" and song: "new paeans." This transformation can not be theorized but "once we've been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us— [. . .] first music from the first voice" (Cixous 251). The song is of love, the woman's body signifying, finally, in the flesh of the poem. Cultural warfare, a revolution against death, Cixous says.

"Oneness lost" then can refer to the finding of commonality and community—the necessary, though frightening death of the ego in "madness." Madness to whom? The unintelligibility is temporary. Closing section [30] these lines may leave us wondering (if we are listening enough to hear them). When they close [31], the echo is uncanny. In italics, they read like H.D.'s biblical quotes (which also, in their new contexts, are enriched in meaning). Like a mother's daughter, these lines are a sound mirror, but now they have gained authority. The process, one of "too many contradictory emotions" and "stumbling" [31] somehow succeeds in creating a "pearl"—Cixous' "white ink" is at times messy or invisible but nurtures nonetheless.

In addition to madness there are other ill-favored positions the speaker

occupies. In [35] she is stuttering with outbursts of *p*'s, then *t*'s then *v*'s and *s*'s.

For instance:

scrape a palette,

point pen or brush,

prepare papyrus or parchment,

seemingly getting us nowhere. Then there is the nonsensical

too little affirmation,

too much: but this, this, this

has been proved heretical,

too little [. . .]. [39]

And no woman truly writing woman would be complete without that which

Depth of the sub-conscious spews forth

too many incongruent monsters [. . .]. [32]

In *Walls*, the speaker plunges into the world's and her own almost inarticulate (pre)history. In the mess of old values, however, she rediscovers the powers of Isis and the symmetrical angles of "incidence" and "reflection." She emerges confident and dangerous, invoking "Hest, // Aset, Isis, the great enchantress, / in her attribute of Serget, // the original great -mother, / who drove // harnessed

scorpions / before her” [34]. Scorpions are reported as being self-destructive as they bring others down to the depths of drowning. The rest of *Trilogy* will testify to the success of this regression.

The battle ground “*papyrus-swamp*” [42] can be read as a blank page of unruly blundering where there is, as there is later for Adrienne Rich, “*no map*”¹⁶ [43]. Going into the land of the “*not-known*” to explore the wreckage of war—WWII but also the larger war of old vs. new values, Isis vs. her patriarchal replacements—is a dangerous return from which “*possibly we will reach haven./ heaven*” [43]. These words make of earthly port, where a ship is harbored, the place of bliss and salvation for all. In the land of dictionary connections, the words share no history; when in proximity, their sensual similarities transfer and elide meaning. It is the physical and spiritual proximity that interest H.D.; exploring uncharted waters is worth the risk of lost distinctions.

***TRIBUTE TO THE ANGELS* (1945)**

Tribute follows three of the most basic patterns of ritual. First, it begins with a cauldron brew and a chanted spell. Then it performs both banishing and invocation. If the reader can hear, magic is happening. The cauldron is “[t]he symbol commonly opposed to the cross, as the witches’ object of worship; in

¹⁶ Reference is to the poem “Diving into the Wreck” (in book of same title), one of the founding texts of feminism.

pagan tradition the Great mother's cosmic womb" (Walker, *Encyclopedia* "Cauldron"). It is a magical tool that functions for witches much like a womb in that it gives and takes, powerfully and somewhat dangerously. These properties all support its appropriateness as a tangible version of the *chora*. It is both universal and particular, within and outside of culture; it is a source of constructive transformation, while it has an unpredictable life of its own.

The most significant event of this poem is the incarnation, as woman/goddess,¹⁷ of the ambiguous presence in *The Walls Do Not Fall*. The climax is both Freudian and magical, when the poet and her tribe see the Lady in White, embodiment of all past goddess figures and at the same time something unimaginable to the unnamed other the poet addresses in this section. The vision is, quite significantly *of a female*. Furthermore, we can assume the addressee is male (individual or collective), and, from the complaints and solidarity of the inner band of initiates, we can also assume that this band visited by the goddess is, if not female, at least a group of goddess worshippers.

In her own life, H.D. links such a vision to the experience of having given birth—and suggests such creative powers have nothing to do with men. A shamanic vision in 1920 of a female oracular poet was brought on by a trip to Greece with Bryher (see Gubar, *Echoing Spell* 201). In a later dream she and

¹⁷Revell claims the central interest of the poem is the 'flame' in the crucible and the vision it represents—a reading for which I can find no evidence.

Bryher and a third woman (Joan), like Graces or Fates, are visited by a moon goddess, "Artemis,"¹⁸ yet she was pregnant. A perfect renaissance idea [. . .] VIRGIN but pregnant [. . .]. The moon, of course, equated mother [. . .]."¹⁹

Artemis is the chief goddess worshipped by Lesbians (and amazons): see Walker (*Encyclopedia*) "amazons"; "Artemis"; "lesbians."

The poem cultivates rebirth through first losing all and (invoking destruction) merging in a cauldronlike amalgamation:

Now polish the crucible [casting the circle]²⁰
 and in the bowl distill [invocations of elements and spirits]

a word most bitter, *marah*,

a word bitterer still, *mar*,

sea, brine, breaker, seducer,

giver of life, giver of tears;

now polish the crucible

¹⁹H.D. to Bryher, May 26, 1933, ms. at the Beinecke Library; qtd. in Hollenberg 110.

²⁰ In brackets is the generic format of neopagan and wiccan (witchcraft) ritual; I mean to suggest how well the poem follows such a format.

and set the jet of flame [raising energy]

under, till *marah-mar*

are melted, fuse and join [focusing energy]

and change and alter, [sending energy]

mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary,

Star of the Sea,

Mother. [8] [result/manifestation]

Punning is the basis of this ritual from which Mer-cury is feminized to “Maia,” “Mary,” and “A-star-te,” creative Aphrodite, as Howdle traces the movement: “feminist alchemy. This is Her-meticism and consummate H(ermetic) D(efinition)” (34). The most bitter essence, in the tides of word-magic which draws on alchemy and spellcasting, is transformed to sacred (pun on “altar”) water, mother of the crossroads’ Hermes, sexual goddess of beauty and death,²¹ and then hauntingly final “Mother”—of what? The personal word (there is no goddess named “mother”) suggests invocation of the poet’s own mother; the capital denotes a proper noun which either suggests again a particular mother or

²¹Aphrodite, also known as Mari and Queen of the Sea (see Walker, *Encyclopedia Aphrodite*).

sanctifies motherhood as something larger, even divine. The rebirth is both magical and tied to the female body. Both points are succinctly addressed by Howdle: “An hermetic procedure—distillation—is imagined in lines 1-2 of this poem. The crucible is a standard piece of alchemical equipment, her suggesting the female womb through its concave shape” (33). In the above tremendously powerful and central lines of section [8], furthermore, the absence of a named subjectivity as well as the use of passive voice suggest that through delicate incremental sound changes, the amniotic ocean regenerates itself. Negativity induces creation of identity. The body is the vehicle for action, insisting on articulation in its very pulsebeat (“beats yet,,” “gives off—fragrance?,” “heart-beat, pulse-beat/ as it quivers”) as repeated spondees (from Greek “used at a libation”) and irregular rhythms detonate in the “rose-vein” lines of 13 and 14.

So that the Her-metic alchemy may *mater*-ialize, the poet carefully stirs the pot. She first chants ritualistic questions in [9] to which the final, rhetorical question echoes back the answer “Mother.” Then this application is applied to (mother) earth and its reflection in both morning and evening stars: both of which turn out to be Venus. In choosing this version of the Mother, H.D. is again sexualizing Her. Again there is a merging: here, it is of near and far, morning and night star, Phosphorous and Hesperus. Yet the entities remain distinct.

The next two sections both open with the self-reflexive command to “Swiftly re-light the flame” as the witch carefully tends her Venus brew. In it

there is most definitely poison: mandrake, to be exact—known to sterilize men and to cause death. The mandrake also is equated with Venus and gives the witches screaming pleasure as they yank it; the image is suggestive of castration, especially since mandrake resembles a human form.²² Section [12] is about deconstruction on a number of levels—of the male anatomy and of patriarchal definitions of such terms as *Venus* and its cognate *venery*. So this is a banishing. Nonetheless, it serves an affirmative function of being “food for the witches’ den” [12]. The poet is performing what something “like” a mandrake would do. The simile bridging “root of the word” and “mandrake” then brings the poet into contact with word roots; doing what they do, she becomes language.

While this linguistic alchemy is working and while [8] is echoing as a base aria, while words associated by sound and meaning are crystallizing, the culturally constructed female bodies are demolished so they may be replaced by

²²“As for mandrake—it’s a very poisonous plant, classified as a controlled substance in this country. One can get something called mandrake but which is really American mandrake or May-apple in some herb shops, but it’s a completely different thing from the original British/European mandrake of magical lore (root thought to grow in form of miniature person, and can be cured and dried to make a powerful magical helper). The plant was thought to spring up at base of gallows (from blood—or more likely other secretion—of a hanged man), and it had to be pulled out by a dog or other means as it was thought to shriek when uprooted and whoever heard the shriek would go insane. So one was to tie the plant to a dogs tail and let the poor animal do the pulling. I believe it has some of the same alkaloids in it as belladonna, and hence the poisonous properties and illegal status.” From MarahCo@aol.com, email to the author (MarahCo) as forwarded to me 12/7/98.

the lady in the staircase, carrying “the blank pages/ of the unwritten volume of the new.” The poet knows a storm is gathering, that there will be a trial—for her, for the angels, and for the feminine. *Tribute* opens by again taking up the idea of the poet plundering the past. The finding of the secret of Isis begins under the guidance of Hermes Trismegistus, in Hermetic tradition the androgynous founder of ancient Egyptian culture whose other attributes include bearing the Word, carrying the wand of individuation, and ruling the underworld and all crossroads. [H.D. uses the name interchangeably with Thoth, Egyptian god of writing and magic.]²³ It is his job to sweep up, piece together the ruins of many churches.

Blasphemously, H.D. uses Christ’s authority in addition to that of Hermes. She questions (the angels) and parodies the law, symbolic order, what Lacan and contemporary academics calls the *sujet supposé savoir*, the big Other, by crediting it with creating “*Santa Sophia*, the SS of the *Sanctus Spiritus*” [36]— a formation that blends all historically and patriarchally authored female images into one. Male knowledge, whether from politics or religion, is often presented as fascistic, having constructed the idea of woman as satanic, disembodied, dead. The speaker teases the culturally privileged egotistical reader through parodic repetition of the reductive epithet “our lady of the [. . .],” the universally condescending male-authored images of women (Sybils shut up in caves, for instance):

²³See Walker, (*Encyclopedia*) Hermes, for the most thoroughly researched and documented synopsis of Hermes lore.

We have seen her
the world over,

Our Lady of the goldfinch,
Our Lady of the Candelabra,

Our Lady of the Pomegrante,
Our Lady of the Chair; [29]

and then

This is a symbol of beauty (you continue),
she is Our Lady universally, [. . .]. [37]

Get rid of it all, she is saying of the inherited notion of the feminine, the one put forth by the interlocutor (speaking as “we”) whom the poet derides.

In its place, like a hatched word, we have the fully formed goddess. None of the previously critiqued idols can match what the poet and her friends *really* see, which is, furthermore, not to be interpreted by the collective male “you” of “all you say, is implicit,/ all that and much more” [38]. We may note the slippery, manipulative language of this *you* in the mutually negating meanings of *implicit* as “tacit” and “virtual” (meaning not real); by this point the poet has lost interest in what might be meant by “all that and much more” and leaves the reference unspecified.

The newly born²⁴ goddess figure has the last word by speaking through her bodily presence:

but she is not shut up in a cave

like a Sibyl; she is not

imprisoned in leaden bars

in a coloured window;

she is Psyche, the butterfly,

out of the cocoon. [38]

So she is and is not Psyche—soul, lover of Eros; she is all that but free. Similarly, she is and is not the Virgin Mary: the iconography is similar, and the Virgin is invoked in negation, but this is a “virgin” in the older sense of the word—an independent woman.

The symbolism of Her clothes (“*white as snow,/ so as no fuller on earth/ can white them*” [32]) also takes on a twist. H.D. takes pains to clarify the significance of white: “White and white is *not* no-colour,/ as we were *told* as children,/ but all-colour” [43, italics mine]. To unite is not to be lost. Her quest

²⁴I use the expression to recall Cixous and Clément’s *La Jeune Née*—whose literal meaning—the newly born woman—puns, in French, with there I am born and there I am NOT.

for the infinite makes use of Christian imagery but does not rest there. The Lady is the holy mother, but bears no typical attributes nor, H.D. emphatically specifies—no Child [35]. The capital *C* alerts us that it is specifically association with the Virgin Mary that H.D. is repudiating—not maternal association in general. The Christ child has been replaced by a radical—stripped to roots—literary work. The word is now to be invented as attached to a female body. This body is a mother—created by the poet—a mother who will in turn recreate the poet. Dead imagery of woman as silent sufferer or as perfected, static art object has been replaced by the synergistic mother-daughter(s) dyad.

Section [35] is full of “she”s and “us”s, invoking the one, the two, and the all. The end of section [35] informs us quite matter-of-factly that the matron carries a “book,” a word that, especially as a line end, is unusual for H.D. She uses relatively few mutes, particularly the hard stops. Three lines in this short section end “us.” One pair rhymes “heritage” with “grave-edge”—soft sounds all. Juxtaposed to her “drift of veils,” this line-end (“a book”) snaps shut both diphthong and verse, as if the law/language were silencing the poet, attempting to repress the power of the artifactual evidence of articulation: “under her drift of veils, [and] she carried a book.” No more can be said. Indeed the next section [36] opens under the point of view, in the voice of, the interlocutor. But in the

open-ended *o*'s of "Holy Ghost,"²⁵ there is a theft—when the phrase is repeated in the next line, the speaker seems to have taken over again. In so many ways, H.D. breaks the patriarchal sentence, seizing a subjectivity that is outside of cultural walls. The radical change in point of view happens so simply it is almost imperceptible,²⁶ yet the tone has become much more *puissant*—the words get longer, full of open *o*'s and rumbling *r*'s; Latin is replaced by the childishly mundane "apple-tree." Full of rage and desire, "smouldering—or rather now burgeoning [sic]/ with flowers; the fruit of the Tree"—the imagery evokes not only Eve's tree but that of the aforementioned Hesperides,²⁷ the ancient—and geographically universal mythic—goddess gardens of golden apples.

H.D. digs up this heritage from Sappho²⁸ and beyond—the long lost

²⁵H.D. does not seem particularly concerned about the history/etymology of the Holy Ghost. She could capitalize on its female associations which were widespread throughout the Middle Ages.

²⁶*You* has been taken out of parentheses (as "you say") so the textual body of "your Holy Ghost"—referring back to an aforementioned Holy Ghost—can now be read as either party's ghost. Both the content and the ecstatic sound of the predicate, however, suggest that the *I* is now our female speaker. Whether it is she or the she through the other as ventriloquist, she has clearly assumed subjectivity by the closing line: "she brings the Book of Life, obviously." Just what that Book of Life *is*, however, is far from obvious.

²⁷Garden of immortality in the Far West, belonging to Mother Hera [. . .] the Garden being the temple itself, symbol of Hera's regenerative womb (Walker, *Encyclopedia Hesperides*).

²⁸[. . .] the apple gatherers have forgotten it—no, they have not forgotten it entirely, but they could not reach it. Sappho, *Greek Lyric*, vol. 1, David A.

branch that Judy Grahn argues has been waiting for the right touch, for just the womb-mind and over-mind that H.D. engages (*Highest Apple* 102-9). In establishing goddess vision, H.D. relies on sound and ancient imagery, letting them surface from the buried individual and cultural past. With another semiotic articulation, she disruptively breaks up the typical denotations of linguistic symbols. She bypasses the history of the Holy Ghost which, up until the Middle Ages, was viewed as feminine—the replacement in the trinity for the Virgin Mary. But we will see in *Flowering* how this apple tree links up with a new mother Mary.

The powers and limits of language in this process are specifically addressed in sections 13 and 14. When her (unnamed) patron asks the poet to name the alchemically created jewel, she can not do so because the name does not exist. Nor can she invent it. Parallel syntax emphasizes the failure here, reminiscent of Stein's belief that we must work with the language we have—neologisms in the form of root creations are inadequate. But where Stein succumbs to the frustrations of representation, H.D., also refusing to name, will instead:

concentrate on it
till I shrink,

Campbell, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 131. Qtd. in Grahn, *Highest Apple*.

dematerialize

and am drawn into it. [14]

Self becomes other in an attempt to know, and in the process of losing boundaries, communication occurs, language is made possible.

Sections 7-12 bring together a number of apparent dualities: death and life, night and day, east and west, hot and cold. Sections [9] and [10] continue section [8]'s ritual incantation as an invocation to Venus who is both "Phosporus at sun-rise, Hesperus at sun-set." The whispering sounds of *h*'s and *s*'s suggest a priestess chanting over her brew (section [8]) until it begins to reflect this world of feminine divinity and desire. Her play on variations of "venery" suggests worship of sex (echoes of *venereal*). Of course Venus and Aphrodite, who both appear repeatedly in these sections, are Roman and Greek goddesses of love—and death, although modern interpretations tend to forget this essential component. Thus female sexuality is tied to death and the rebirth it occasions in beauty, faith, and, in subsequent sections, the inventions of language.

Rebirth of both self and language are explicitly evoked through sound and its hermetic rites. Howdle explains how sound patterns are regenerative links:

The hermetic scribe calls music from within herself and the poetry is a concord between breathed song (the flute) and lyrical cadencing (the lyre). The instruments of Hermes, lyre and flute,

echo in her sung words and this relates her creative writing to the creative word or Hermes.

By a transition from Hermes/Mercury/Thoth, god of writing, to “*the Word*,” H.D. equates Hermes with the creative Logos at the opening of *St. John*. The Word of Christian theology, Christ, is an extension of Hermes, god of words [. . .].

(30)

The experience is mystical and overwhelming, taking her first to “another voice,/ hardly a voice, a breath/ a whisper” [search for the memory of the mother] and then the earthshaking engulfment by heavenly colors, smells, sounds, weight [mystery of the womb]. In this place of fusion, setting (Venice) becomes open to the messages and peace of the angels and, finally, God. One could argue this is a place of death, but did not Adam speak to angels while quite alive? In the next sections, H.D. gently brings the reader back to this world, one which has been magically transformed to welcome the Lady and her book and half burnt out tree.

Tribute to the Angels is a radically Feminist vision in which even a male angel is feminized: Anael becomes ANNAEL, as H.D. explains, in order to echo *Anna, Hanna*, and, by association, Grace and Venus (Howdle 37). Moreover, images of Mary are complete in themselves, even though traditional lore presents her as half of “androgynous Mercury” and of the holy wedded pair. We both hear and feel this achievement of integrity:

The poetic resolution in the second part of *Trilogy* is complete and a reader has to feel (because poetry and alchemy are inseparable) that alchemical wholeness is achieved. . . . A reader has to test *Tribute to the Angels* on her or his pulse and it does not feel like a half beat, as though Mary is only half of a quest. H.D. has set the feminine principle in the King's place and given her the higher throne." (Howdle 38)

Trial by fire ends "when the jewel/ melts in the crucible," when "*we pause to give/ thanks that we rise again from death and live.*" In this poem, and in others, things happen through pause (and through "paws"), savage gestational period that is animal physicality (through the pun), embodied prayer (emphasis on hands). Going back through spirals to the center/womb, we reach the place of silence that is death and creativity, an ecstatic stasis.

Here we have woman as phoenix, as daughter of mother who is same and different. Through echo, as Susan Gubar explains,

[. . .] H.D. presents her voice as derivative and thereby assures herself a defense against being defined and confined within the prisonhouse of language. Like her visionary Pythoness of Delphi whose utterances could be read two ways, H.D. hides her private meaning behind public words, so her story is always "different yet the same as before" (*TA* 39) and therefore "only" a repetition.

Herein lies both the courage and the anxiety of her art, as well as the reason why the echo is yet another infinitely decipherable (and therefore indecipherable) palimpsest. (*Echoing Spell* 216)

The new testament of faith (how the Lady's book has, within our Christian mythology, been read) actually far more resembles Monique Wittig's text in *Les Guérillères*²⁹—it is blank. The new book has been bought with death and destruction. But, the destruction is only of the misleading and dispensable.

***THE FLOWERING OF THE ROD* (1944)**

The new Psyche now relates, according to Louis Martz (*H.D.: Selected Poems* xix), a "relaxed happy fable" of redemption of European cities and London. Other critics read this as another simple Christian allegory (the birth of Christ, the healing of Christ by the washing of his feet)³⁰. H.D.'s reappropriation of the past requires a much fuller reading, one that, for instance, suspends ideas of linear time and fixed place. "The unwritten volume of the new," carried by the Lady in white, or spirit of the poet, here becomes symbolized in the rod, a Christian version of the more ancient and feminine Egyptian caduceus (Hermes'

²⁹Her women inscribe the significant zero because *le langage que tu parle est fait de mots qui te tuent* [the language you speak is made up of words that kill you] (162).

³⁰Angela Fritz sees it as a combination of the two.

rod), and thus another indication of renewal.

The flowering rod echoes the branch of the apple-tree smouldering—which, we recall, is a pagan reassessment of “*your*” Holy Ghost. The poem is in part, on the surface, a revision of Mary Magdalene’s obtaining of the substance in the jar. Walker (*Encyclopedia*) explains that this biblical character was “a high priestess impersonating the Goddess Mari”—the latter, in turn, across time and place, “was always Mother Sea” (“Magdala”; “Mari”). In this version Christ never appears (although at one point “His feet” do)! Nor does the Virgin Mary. The rising action all leads to the sweet, somewhat flirtatious exchange of glances and mutually healing empowerment of Mary and Kaspar—the reviled and common characters made heroic. We do not know what Kaspar actually does with the jar of myrrh—which is known for its powers over female fertility. (It can, among other things, bring about menstruation—see Walker, *Encyclopedia* “Myrrh”). But the magic of redemption is *already* in the arms of the whore and madwoman Mary—so is again tied to the body of a woman.

This woman shatters stereotypes of patriarchal culture (such as ideas of what signs, in clothing and body language, are proper); moreover she usurps privilege by, among other things, being a phallic symbol of strength (“a great tower”) and the Adamic authority of naming (“through my will and my power,/ Mary shall be myrrh”) [16]. By carrying myrrh, she is in control of her own body and fertility. By homonymy, as well as by virtue of being “unmaidenly,”

she is the mother, and by literary precedent she is a whore; thus the mother has been made common, accessible, and, most significantly, sexual.

Some read this figure, from whose point of view the poem ends, as the speaker reinvented “in-herself” (see Hollenberg 138). Reading H.D. offers plenty of difficulties in determining who speaks. However important the two apparently central characters are to the poem, their importance lies mainly in the meaning they lend to the speaker’s development. Kaspar’s vision, spawned via the body of Mary, is a vehicle for the entry of ‘pre-history’—pre-oedipal (and thus pre-tragic—before loss), archetypal redemptive images. And Mary is at times the universal mother, Aphrodite, Hermeticism’s Queen, the poet: “an echo of an echo” as in a shell [28], symbol of female sexuality and centrality of private self. Kaspar is able to recognize the goddess underneath because he does so through intuition and association, relating mother (“Ge-” and “De-meter”) with poetry (meter), meeting them in the “star” of his desire, “Venus” [25]. All of H.D.’s interests come together in these lines where she brings back Eve—the original Mary—and claims that lost, forbidden, intoxicating apple.

Her story is so overdue because women have had to bludgeon readers with the obvious:

No poetic fantasy
but a biological reality,

[Next, the tone is that of talking to a child:]³¹

a fact: I am an entity

like bird, insect, plant

[Chanting ritualistically, the energy cone rises:]

or sea-plant cell;

I live; I am alive;

take care, do not know me,

deny me, do not recognise me, [sic]

[The energy is focused and sent:]

shun me; for this reality

is infectious—ecstasy.

[section 9—the number of completion and transformation]

While the section ends by reaching for *jouissance* (that includes meaning by going beyond it), these lines are hardly poetic in the traditional sense. They are didactic crossfire, angry, condescending, simple—ridiculously simple, intentionally. Rather than resting with the first ‘literal’ level of meaning, reading

³¹ As in the “polish the crucible” section, the poem progresses like ritual magic; my annotations suggest how it fits generic ritual form. I point out the simple language addressed to a child-like listener because this also parallels ritual, which works with child-mind (she who imagines, hears, believes). Starhawk explains how, in the Faery tradition, “Younger Self” is equivalent to the unconscious and

for *jouissance* is leaping from the painfully obvious to what Mary Daly would call the other side of the moon, a place one reaches through bold faith in language's ability to mean. The oft-repeated pronoun "me"—1st person, emphasizing subjective power—is in the objective case.³² The speaker seductively invites us to join inter-subjectively. A joy ride beckons on which the speaker flies us along—we cannot resist the (infectious) rhyming of *me* with the *reality* and *ecstasy* that follow. Yet many critics read this last section of *Trilogy* (and indeed the entire poem) as a simple allegory of Christ's life.

Book Review Digest for 1946 summarizes the book as "the dream of Kaspar, who brought the offering of myrrh to the Christ child. Recently, Peter Revell claims H.D.'s mission is even more Christian than Eliot's in *Four Quartets* (197). Angela Fritz interprets all of *Trilogy* in this light, arguing that the Lady's book is inscribed with "resurrection, enveloped in the mystery of Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection" (131). She also claims H.D.'s "ecstasy" is the Christian God's "Word," (133) and Revell asserts "suffering" (194-5) to be the central fact; Fritz concludes with redemption (139).

No, this is not a poem about Christ-like martyrdom, obligation or self-negation; it is about passion. In *Flowering*, the speaker and her clan abandon

communicates—like the semiotic—through images, rhythm, and, in general, nonverbal experience (35).

³²We are being ordered to do something to the speaker, but from the syntax we cannot determine whether deny me is affirmative or negative.

interest in the world of war which is not theirs (H.D. develops this idea in *The Gift* as well): “the harvester sharpens his steel on the stone;/ but this is not our field,/ we have not sown this;/ pitiless, pitiless, let us leave” [2]. The first section offers no ethical basis for deserting the needy earth but simply parenthetical frustration—“leave the smouldering cities below/ (we have done all we could)” she commands.

I go where I love and where I am loved,
into the snow;

I go to the things I love
with no thought of duty or pity;

I go where I belong, inexorably,
as the rain that has lain long

in the furrow; [. . .
.....]
but if it will not grow or ripen

with the rain of beauty,
the rain will return to the cloud; [2]

A range of *o* sounds communicates both bliss and mourning.³³ The god voice is at least partially female—the Demeter who “has lain long/ in the furrow; I have given/ or would have given/ life to the grain” [2]. Robbed of her joy, she goes elsewhere, not caring about others [3] but fulfilling the “eternal *ur*ge,/ . . . the desire to equilibriate/ the eternal variant”³⁴—to find temporary oneness which is pain and Paradise.

The humming, grinding *ur* sounds in the previous lines continue as the willful (“will” is repeated six times in five lines) returning birds “drop from the highest point of the spiral/[. . .] innermost centre of the ever-narrowing circle?/ for they remember, they remember, as they sway and hover”—a sound which suggests an engine bringing itself to the point of explosion. Is this Christ on the cross? It is “certain ecstasy” [5] but it is drowning in momentary bliss—nothing eternal, and, again, nothing about pity (which is “a stone for bread” [6]). Only the consuming fire of love can transcend the fires of war and bring “us” to resurrection. This type of love, rather than saves, sucks all in as it “turns and turns and turns about one centre, reckless, regardless, blind to reality.” And then

³³These sounds are onomatopoeiac—reflective of sounds physically made in those states. They are also phonetic intensives—they subconsciously recall similar sounding words with associated meanings. For example. Long *-o-* or *-oo-* may suggest melancholy or sorrow, as in *moan, groan, woe, mourn, forlorn, toll, doom, gloom, moody* (Perrine 205).

³⁴As Perrine notes, *er* indicates repetition (205). The effect here is to emphasize the return of the particular, the cyclical nature of eternity.

we drown [6]. But the union also requires a fiercely individualizing mount to the highest point, through will and desire.

Another kind of love becomes apparent in the ‘mounting higher to resurrection’ of this section of *Trilogy*. Just as women have been attributed with different ways of perceiving, knowing, and communicating, so mother-love has its own dynamics, usually considered pacifist, egalitarian, global. In making Kaspar and Mary Magdalen—a thief and a madwoman/whore—the heroes of *The Flowering of the Rod*, H.D. makes evident the politically radical implications of this type of nonhierarchical affection. Of course connections between motherhood and communal systems are well theorized and documented; communist baiting (and on a psychological level, Freudian infantilizing) has been a strategy used to exploit male fears of loss of power under the supposedly anti-individualist effects of mother-love (see Adams 244-5).

Before resurrection is possible, the reader encounters destruction and abandonment to the death inherent in desire. The poem ends at the beginning: not just with birth and emptying of self, but regressed in time. Where *Trilogy* began in 1940s war-struck London, it concludes, after passing through medieval cities and ancient Israel, with a rewriting of Genesis—we return to paradise before Adam, before Eve. This place of power and safety is entered through sound (“an echo of an echo”), obtained by passage through female genitalia (“shell”) to the womb of matriarchal history where sins are expelled and “we” are reborn:

*and one born before Lilith,
and Eve; we three are forgiven,
we are three of the seven
daemons cast out of her. [33]*

The transformation is largely the result of movements of sound waves, or a “sonal field” that is constitutive of both structure and meaning. Michael Boughn mentions two of the “effects” of this intricate phenomenon—sonal mimesis and paronomasias (118). Many critics have discussed H.D.’s fondness for punning. Rather than a device of clever humor, it is more often used for harmony and dissonance, allusion, and rich sensuality. For example, in [10], from the double meanings of “madness,” “lie,” and “reckoning” to the homonymous “flower” (flour) as “grain” to the adnomination of “flowered,” “flower,” and “flowering,” H.D. plays with the possibilities of similarity in difference and difference in similarity—like the mother-daughter symbiotic, synergistic relationship.

In summary, the poet’s life and world are renewed, like words, through repetition, “as if the ground of life were one and the same as the ground of thought” (Dahlen 13). H.D.’s work has been described as growing itself from its own latent seeds. Similarly, in *Flowering, Mary*—who is Mary Magdalen, the Virgin Mary, mother (mère), and myrrh, carries (unknowingly) on her body the essence of resurrection. The overlapping of sounds, times and identities is typical

of H.D.'s desire to "equilibrate/ the eternal variant" [5], to transform particulars through returning them to their source—the sexual and maternal body, the oceans of air and water in which the ecstatic birds rise and drown, drown and rise.

By the end of *Walls*, we have 'possibility' of safe union. By the end of *Trilogy* we are seeking ecstasy, which happens through simultaneously losing and finding self.³⁵ This is poetry of desire, and the subject-object is that lesbo-maternal home where the individual is killed and born. H.D.'s world has been redeemed by passing through the individual's consciousness and life cycles, and the key to this salvation—of the self, and through it the world—is in the mystery of language associations: "haven/ heaven."³⁶ As Howdle records the progression of sounds, *Trilogy* moves toward increasing harmony and coherence as H.D.'s poetry goes "deeper into the sub-conscious" and relies more on hermetic arts (32). The annihilation of self, ego, through a return to pre-oedipal, pre-mirror stage embodiment, brings about renewal.

³⁵ the vehicle of transformation is accessible myrrh but is as yet unrecognized by its bearer; similarly, the birds of paradise have been there, but are not there yet).

³⁶Korg cleverly points out that H.D. parallels navigation of war-torn London with spiritual quest through language, citing this pun as an example (146). He also notes this is part of a larger preoccupation with immanence, often achieved through paralleling material revelation and religious ritual (see 148).

Critics on the Structure of *Trilogy*

Where do we place, historically, this major work of H.D.'s that seems to elude most canonical categorization? Marianne deKoven offers a variety of convincing arguments—all of which lead to the conclusion that this work *still* evades facile labeling. Along with all modernist texts, deKoven would position it in “the space of the maternal,” that rich, strange, and liminally magical waterland where artists enact Kristeva’s “impossible dialectic” of formally arguing with “culture’s hegemonic hierarchical dualisms” (deKoven 4, 6). Yet, unless we are satisfied with Alice Jardine’s periodization of modernism (*Gynesis*) as equivalent to 20th century writing, then *Trilogy* was written in the period *between* modernism and postmodernism—that of New Critical modernism before “gender war” and explicit concern with social issues (re)emerges in writing such as Adrienne Rich’s (deKoven 209).³⁷ The poem demonstrates the aesthetic deKoven describes as *sous-rature* (Derrida’s term, which, deKoven points out, comes half a century after the modernist practice of it)—one of holding on and letting go of self, historical moment, meaning. In 1946, a review described the prosody as just “as admirably designed for addressing archangels and giving etymologies as for

³⁷deKoven distinguishes between the largely misogynist male tradition of modernism and postmodernism and anti-canonical modernism where ambivalence (such as Stein’s) is a result not of alienation from the flood of the historical-maternal ‘new’ [. . .] but a fear of punishment [. . .] for [. . .] the revolution of the word (198). She finds H.D., even as early as 1916, in this category but unequivocally Feminist (201).

communicating rapture or a conversation” (Davidson). Now, we might say that its simultaneity invokes deconstruction but holds up to close reading. Asserting itself, but indirectly, circuitously, refusing to be pinned to place or literary trend, it portrays the particular and eternal, doing so with timeless style.

Modernist scholars M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall describe the non-narrative, non-descriptive structure of the poem. *Trilogy* is comprised of “‘felt relationships’ among ‘centers of intensity’ that interact with each other to achieve an *impression* [italics mine] of organic unity. The sequence exhibits both the ‘pressures’ and the movement toward balance and resolution [. . .]” (Rosenthal and Gall, qtd. in Korg 142). These pressures recall the volcanic womb of the prologue, two-bodies-in-one whose tumultuous relationship is symbiotic and mutually redemptive. Through all internal conflict and external shock (war, drunk men)—

yet the frame held:
we passed the flame: we wonder
what saved us? what for?

Jacob Korg describes the cohesiveness as “an anomalous mixture of freedom and control [. . .]. While there is no rhyme scheme, the lines are often interlaced with subtle phonetic echoes in the form of assonance, alliteration, or even outright rhyme” (142) and finds the sound system to be unique and deserving of recognition. Lines he cites as examples (with his emphasis)—

deserving of recognition. Lines he cites as examples (with his emphasis)—

Evil was active in the *land*,

Good was smug and fat

Dev-ill was after us,

tricked up like Jehovah:

Good was the tasteless *pod*,

stripped from the manna-beans, pulse, *lentils*:

they were *angry* when we were so *hungry*

For the nourishment, *God*; [*WDNF* 2]

While Korg notes that H.D.'s career reflects the overall progression of modernist interests and techniques, he acknowledges that her own motivations and reasons were different—concerns about gender, preoccupation with the mysterious aspects of science, and psychic relationships, both personal and cultural, that manifest in and are manifested by “prerational discourse” (137). Feminist and Lesbian theorists often distinguish Feminist and Lesbian writing from other writing that shares some attributes by their different purposes or fundamental concerns. Whether or not H.D.'s primary passion was poetry, she was inclined to be the “the founder of a new religion” [H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 145, qtd. in Korg

137]. For a writer who believed ““there are no frontiers of the spirit”” [*Tribute to Freud* 176, qtd. in Korg 137], the choric space of overlapping identities or the womb-brain were apt metaphors.

The gods themselves (which resolve to one general deity— *Sea Garden* space—which I would add is female) are psychic experiences. As a witch and as a Freudian, H.D. saw psychic truths as real; as a modernist, the poem was the thing—the experience, the god. But, according to both Korg and Eileen Gregory, even when she is ritualistic (imagist concision often precludes “incantational meters” à la Swinburne—Korg 139), H.D. declines to *perform* ritual, instead bringing the reader to “an instance of liminality, the threshold [. . .] independence, flexibility, and experimentation” (140). In other words, the reader must ritualize the poetry herself. The words are formulas with *potential* rather than fully actualized effects: “the ritual consciousness [. . .] maintains its independence of the experimental one” (Korg 149). In addition, Peter Revell links *Trilogy* with other modernist epics—of Pound, Williams, and Eliot—as quest poems requiring “an overflow of unrealized action” (237). Or, as H.D. constructs the new poetic platform, words’ meanings are things, embodied, but nonetheless hidden.

Such an agenda, particularly as put into practice by a woman, is bound to meet hostile opposition. In a period of backlash like the 1980s, critics were prone to mock H.D.’s desire to present ideas. Joan Rettallack objects to this priority as well as to her “lack of trust in language (first requirement of the poet) [. . .]. But

H.D. is addicted to formulas. The following is not wordplay but liturgical calculus with magical aspirations” (81-2) she says, citing the “O-sir-is” lines of *WDNF* [40]. “Hilda,” as she calls her, rises too far and ends up losing us (82). Not so for Denise Levertov who considers lines similar to those quoted by Rettallack (also about “*Sirius*”). In 1962 she is ready to read H.D. anew and understand her “transparent mode [. . .] of having gone further, further out of the circle of known light, further in towards an unknown center [. . .] such a marvelous musical whole [. . .].” (9). Through sounds and rhythms H.D. creates not “*manner*” but matter, “poetry both ‘pure’ and ‘engaged’” (10). Levertov considers her word associations “playful,” “subtle,” evocative of “the other Side” (8).

Bringing the eternal presence into the eternal present is a job for a woman: “*Trilogy* (1944-46) is part of a life-long and deeply personal hermetic search for ways of applying the feminine principle as a healing and creative agent to the problems of the individual and communal psyche” (Howdle 27), the rifts of mental and worldly war. H.D.’s *Trilogy* asserts an essence that endures, though hidden (perhaps because hidden). That torch is passed—through myrrh to moon goddess to Mary (and back to myrrh) by the individual and collective poet. We can hear something real speak to us from behind the words on the page, if we leave behind (hetero)sexist conditioning and formulaic constructions of modernism.

H.D. was obsessed with hieroglyphs—the hysteric’s code, according to Freud. Hysteria articulates the psychic, through the somatic, and the reason it has been disempowered as language is because it insists on a critique of the discourses that exclude it (Hunter 271-2).³⁸ Returning to the mother’s language of the body, the language of hysteria is primary, a “semiotic world of pure sound and body rhythms, oceanically at one” with she who determines language and individualized identity (Hunter 265).

Across the decades one encounters the expectations that H.D. should be concrete, obvious, and trivial. A 1974 review (“Maximum Dilution”) claims that her attempts to navigate “the ancient springs” are ridiculously weak and our consideration of “the worthless poem” is a “waste.” This review uses the common strategy of comparing her with Pound and finding her lacking—in, unsurprisingly, virility. A woman’s style cannot pull off profundity. Similarly, in 1944, H.D.’s attempts at treating “the eternal realities” were called insufficient because out of date or “too large for such narrow compass”—and, again, “lacking” (Babette Deutsch, *Weekly Book Review*, October 1: 18). John Berryman, in 1947, is unable and unwilling to say what the poem is about (though conceding it is presumably “vaguely Christian”); he complains of lack of a clear

³⁸While Susan Friedman denies that woman’s position is outside the authoritative text (such as in the language of the hysteric), she neglects to address the distinctively *un*authorized nature of H.D.’s work.

story line and action. Again, the attitude is that a woman should not be writing poems about philosophy or metaphysics. By 1988 and 1990 we have female critics reading the poem for its formal poetics, particularly its music, and arguing the poem focuses on gendered experience and personal and communal divinity (Montefiore), being “strikingly modern in its urgent attempt to redefine spiritual needs” (Kries-Schinck 97). In 1987, Beverly Dahlen gives the poem a poetic critical evaluation, the most appropriate tribute.

Her naming of the generations names persons, figures, the same yet different, the same names transformed or transmuted in a code which works (as in tapestry) their parts into wholes [. . .].

In H.D.’s presence the world is transformed, as if literal things, objects and events, were signs of the endurance of eternity, “present and future equally,” as if the *real* meant returning or repeating [. . .].

[. . .] a “flaw” in the woven veil [. . .] “a half-burnt-out apple-tree/ blossoming.” (10-11)

Brutally, H.D. insisted “a fact: I am an entity.”³⁹ Are we finally able to interpret this line—to hear her? As Feminist scholar Charlene Spretnak explains,

³⁹Several contemporary Feminist poets have also felt compelled to hammer *fact*. Judy Grahn’s famous *A Woman is Talking to Death*, for one, has “That’s a fact” as a refrain.

deconstructionists have much to gain by reconsidering their dismissal of the real and instead examining “*the violation of the real* by various philosophers’ claims that it is an external substance that exists separately from us [. . . as in] Plato’s anti-ecological sense of a ‘stable, unchanging’ entity.” Falling prey to the mind-body split, contemporary readers have usually been unable to register how their own experiences and theories “are embedded in the processes of the real—the dynamic physicality of the cosmos [. . .] the sacred whole” (66). They see a one-way relationship of construction (somehow within “radical discontinuity”) between culture and “dumb matter (the body)” (66-7). Spretnak suggests an alternative framework of “ecological postmodernism” based on “*experientialist insights*” developed in collaboration by George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics, and Mark Johnson, a professor of philosophy, as well as the separate work of the phenomenologist David Abram. These theorists all find rational thought exists as cross-cultural “metaphors [that] derive from *bodily experience in the world*” (75).⁴⁰

One such experience is that of sound—in poetry, the womb, the world. For instance, experiments have shown that the bodymind takes “certain tones and rhythms” and puts them to the uses of relaxation and learning. Similarly, classical music has been found to heal and strengthen the body and to activate the

⁴⁰See Lakoff and Johnson *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Johnson’s *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (1987), and

thymus (Spretnak 20). The body/mind, H.D.'s Lesbian "womb-brain" and "jelly-fish," creates sound and world, sound and world create the body/mind. At least from 1919 onward, this was H.D.'s aesthetic platform, existing in a Lesbian and Feminist framework. It is not so much that 'sound echoes sense' but rather that sound *is* sense. Doesn't the word *sound*—refer to the physical perception—also mean "valid"—? Isn't *sense*—"meaning"—rooted in the physical? H.D.'s wordplay is quite consciously magical, violent, mad. In its illogic, it means; the magic makes things happen—if we let it.

Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996).

La MÈRE, l'AMOUR, et la MORT:*¹ *HELEN IN EGYPT

“Feminists who identify their deep centering Selves with the term *witch* are not being merely metaphorical, or cute, or popularizing, or ‘trivializing.’”

—Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology*

“The scandal is not that scholars have dared to suggest that canonized authors [. . .] were tainted by occult² influences. On the contrary, the scandal is scholarship’s long-standing avoidance of the topic.”

—Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*

“But Witchcraft is a religion, perhaps the oldest religion extant in the West.”

—Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*

“magic is poetry, poetry is magic” —Freud³

H.D.’s life mission—leading her through Egyptian history, Hellenism,

¹Throughout the poem, H.D. employs the pun “*l’Amour, la Mort*.” I add the homonymous “*La Mère*,” the mother, an echoing base which H.D.’s associative mind probably heard as well (remember the pivotal role of *mère* in *Trilogy*).

²The occult has an effect similar to that of the uncanny: it disturbs. The difference is that the “fracture” in this case is between “two separate worlds, the material and the supernatural” (Messent 2). It is what renowned interdisciplinary scholar Tsvetan Todorov classifies as “the fantastic” (qtd. in Messent 5-6).

³qtd. in Barbara Guest *Herself Defined: the Poet H.D. and Her World*. Psychoanalytic theory provides a model for understanding the *experience* of the occult. Most who study H.D. with any openness to supernormal textuality arrive at the occult as an endpoint, after beginning with canonical writers, themes, and methodologies. I would like to start with the occult as a given and move backwards to its source in the primal, magical, mystical, and (trans)personal semiotic language of Lesbianism, hysteria, witchcraft. For more and more in her writing, H.D. found this *choric* space to be beginning and end.

cabala, mysticism, Moravian affinity, Hermeticism, spiritualism, tarot, astrology, Christian heresies, and, no doubt, more traditions—was part of a lifelong spiritual orientation, a search for “all myth, the one reality” (*Helen, Eidolon* 4.1).⁴ Poetry, with its ritual potential, was her medium of discovery.

With the power of the erupting repressed,⁵ H.D. and her Helen seem to be writing from the grave. More and more scholars—witness the recent New Modernist Association’s seminar on the Occult, heavily weighted with H.D.—are addressing occult knowledge as essential for understanding both H.D. and the modernist project at large. Yet few, if any, allow this foundational presence and central force to *mean*, at least in the way H.D. *believed* it meant. The Goddess may be addressed in their studies, but only as one structural element within either a syncretic, or Christian, or even Eastern spiritual system. These critics all shy away from reading H.D. on her terms. They also skirt the Lesbian and destroyer aspects of the feminine divine that H.D. incorporated from ancient traditions.

Articulating a desired and desiring Mother, H.D. unearths the erotic power—both creative and destructive—of the Mother, bringing forth that which has been culturally figured as lost and or unrepresentable: Her, in body and text. Her Eleusinian mysteries were the most sacred and guarded: they involve power

⁴ Herein I will refer to *Helen* by section (*Pallinode, Leuké, Eidolon*), book, and verse.

⁵ That term applies whether we use a Jungian, Kristevan, or occult lens.

of the two perhaps most feared (traditionally linked) feminine phenomena—death and maternity. These are eroticized as a new H.D. emerges, threatening the boundaries and difference-based symbolic order of patriarchy.

The insistence of the language of the Mother, that which underlies the Father's symbolic order, is more significant than individual psychological symptom and/or the aesthetic decadence. In *Hermione*, George [Pound] complains to Hermione [H.D.] "You are simply witchcraft [. . .] you and she [Fayne] should have been burnt as witches." In *Trilogy*, Kaspar can majically⁶ recognize the Goddess *because* he is "a heathen," [*Flowering* 25] says H.D., elucidating the word through pagan associations.⁷ In *Tribute to Freud*, she and the professor discuss her founding of "a new [old] religion'" (145, qtd. in Korg 137).

What is "occult" always depends on the sociohistorical context: answered prayers, prophecy, and other religious phenomena qualify only if they belong to minority traditions. Told from the point of view of a woman, the perspective of this epic is an occluded one: outcast, silenced, and unfamiliar. This perspective

⁶Again, I use H.D.'s spelling which is typical of those practicing witchcraft.

⁷He might invoke, she says, "Isis, Astarte, Cyprus and the other four"—a fundamental witches' chant for which the other four names, today's reader might fill in, are Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inana. (H.D.'s Cyprus is metonymic for Venus whose Eastern and Greek counterpart is Artemis/Diana.)

reveals a hidden history, buried beneath centuries of misogynic literature that blames Helen, and woman in general, for war. Rachel Blau DuPlessis has discussed several unsanctioned sources of power in H.D.'s work, including that of psychic vision. The poet's experience of this power is representative of a more general appeal of the occult: its practices and traditions are far more open to women than is mainstream society. H.D. seized the possibility of this authority in letters as well as life.

Harold Bloom takes a rather surprising move by editing an anthology of essays on H.D.⁸ Reprinted there is *H.D.: Hilda in Egypt*, an essay by widely published H.D. Society member Albert Gelpi. Gelpi summarizes the poem's status:

Even the reviewers who shied away from dealing with *Helen in Egypt* as a poem by detaching particular lyrics for dutiful praise (as though they were still imagist pieces) recognized dimly that *Helen* was the culmination of a life in poetry. But it is an event even more culturally signal than that: it is the most ambitious and successful long poem ever written by a woman poet, certainly in English. (123)

Roseanne Wasserman, using Pound's categorization, insists that H.D. is both types of important poets: "Inventor[s]" and "Master[s]"— both on account of

poetics (161). This poem, according to H.D., is her “Cantos” (Ostriker, *WLW* 37). As Leon Surette, Timothy Materer, and others, have argued, Pound’s use of the occult is lifelong and becomes increasingly central to his poetics; there would be no *Cantos* without this material and belief.

H.D. believed she inherited her creative and spiritual capacities from her own mother, Helen. She describes *Helen* as a coming to terms with herself, her alter-ego, and her mother (Gelpi 124-5), and indeed it has been read (by DuPlessis for one) as thus layered. However, one dominant trend (at work in both Gelpi and DuPlessis) has been to interpret it as a poem *à clef* about the various men who entered her life, at any time in any fashion. This trend is symptomatic of a defensive response to evidence of the occult in literature, what Surette calls “The ‘official manner’” of neutralizing such shaping forces by attributing them to psychological effects (9). While real men in H.D.’s life conceivably affect the characterization of Paris and Achilles, such focus seems both skewed and trivializing.

Helen’s many relationships contribute to her embodiment which in turn enables her storytelling. Her identity depends upon whom and how she loves. Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that *Helen* is a cultural critique whose purpose is to “break the sequence”⁸ of the heterosexual romance (meaning war for love). I

⁸Less surprisingly, the book is authoritatively entitled *H.D.*

agree that *Helen* offers an alternative vision; yet it is bought at a price. The heroine, born of the king of gods, plays mother and lover to the warrior who would kill her. Is this a new story?

In this chapter I investigate the occult nature of the poem and how, issuing from the mysterious semiotic space of what Julia Kristeva calls the *chora*, *Helen's* voice makes sub/versive sense, incarnating as the (m)other against which more conspicuous and 'rational' language is posed. Thematic exegesis and aural evidence (in rhythm, sound play, interference . . .) discover undercurrents of Lesbian eroticism within a larger frame of Goddess-worship.¹⁰ In the *Majic Ring*, H.D. autobiographically links her occultism to the "Great Mother" as her power has been passed down secretly through the ages. *Helen* is a cross-genred work that situates itself in the terrain known today, and in H.D.'s lifetime, as witchcraft (the forbidden Old Religion),¹¹ the practice of which has been as secret as the

⁹She distinguishes between plots that break the patriarchal *sentence*—those that give the other side of the story, and those that break the *sequence*—challenging the very epistemology of dualism.

¹⁰For studies of the ties between homosexuality and witchcraft, see Terry Castle, Barbara Walker, Paula Gunn Allen, Judy Grahn, and Arthur Evans.

¹¹The word *witchcraft* evokes all kinds of unfortunate and erroneous pop paranoia (including fear and loathing from occult scholars who respect all other forms of occultism). To clarify some common misconceptions: anybody rightfully calling herself a witch, in other words anybody practicing the religion of witchcraft, does not believe in Satan (a Christian construction), but *does* work *majic*, care for the earth, and connect with the Goddess (Adler, Starhawk, Budapest do particularly

language of hieroglyphs which *are* Helen ("She herself is the writing," a refrain).

OPPOSED AND OPPOSING

Much earlier, H.D. had written her famous *Helen* poem, a somewhat brutal depiction of the misogyny directed at this scapegoat of history. She had also written *Eurydice*, a savage protest against the egocentrism of the male gaze, one in which the object becomes subject by telling her version (and a different one it is!) of the story. The heroine bitterly condemns the figure who has been read as heroic, turning him into a cowardly murderer. She more than survives her banishment; she turns hell into a place full of mysterious flowers and her own intense light. The effect of these poems is to create almost divine images of heretofore mortal women. Just as importantly, H.D. demonstrates that patriarchal

well in clarifying these matters). Offerings are common; sacrifice is rare—and never human.

Witchcraft as a survival of old pagan religions has been studied (especially since the turn of the century) from many different angles. Because of its underground nature and because of our intense cultural biases and denial of the holocaust of witches (meaning destruction of much of old, Medieval, and early modern Europe and its peoples), historicizing has been difficult. Some of the best major work has been done by Margaret Murray (Egyptologist, folklorist and anthropologist—major work in 1921 and 1933), folklorists Jacob Grimm and Girolamo Tartarotti, German scholars Karl Jarcke (major theoretical work in 1828) and Franz Joseph Mone, historian Jules Michelet (1862), and well-respected anthropologist Mircea Eliade. The list could go on and on, with more contemporary and perhaps more familiar names (Leland, Bonewitz, Gardner, Graves . . .).

literature depends on the sacrifice of women—Orpheus would have no story without it. *Helen in Egypt* takes on these same functions. The author protests her personal and mythic status as well as that of others like Iphigenia. She empowers the feminine vocal passage (Helen and Iphigenia's throats) that comes literally and figuratively (the speech of Helen, Iphigenia, Eurydice) under attack. This gateway to hell will be an open wound through which the abject feminine will be heard.

In 1969, *Contemporary Literature* runs a masculinist fifteen page essay on H.D. that writes off *Helen* in one sentence—as too elaborate and too long.¹² Earlier Pound had issued a disparaging warning that H.D. should remain small. At the same time, in *Contemporary Literature* (523-36), Linda Wagner argues that *Helen* is a “‘must read,’ no, ‘a must read well.’” This female evaluation argues that H.D. is unsurpassed in “versatility.” Wagner cites earlier reviews by women such as Denise Levertov, prolific poet, translator, editor, who finds “alternations [. . .] of contrasted tone, as in a Bach cantata,” and “unassailable identity as word-music [. . .of] the interplay of psychic and material life.” By 1983, it is possible for a male critic to recognize *Helen*'s success, its “attempt” to escape the association of ‘male’ with ‘writing,’ as well as its “resistance to

¹²Bernard F. Engel, “H.D.: Poems That Matter and Dilutions.” *CL* 10.4: 507-22. Reprinted in *CLC* Vol. 73.

patriarchal structures and Pound in particular.”¹³

Read as epic,¹⁴ drama, and lyric, with its focus on one body/mind, *Helen* makes the individual female (split) subject the center of culture, a radically Feminist move in itself. Basing her story on the more Feminist versions of Stesichorus, a contemporary of Sappho, and Euripides (both of which had pre-Homeric sources), H.D. argues that the fall of Troy (and thus, by some standards, the success of patriarchy) came about through the mistaken idea that Helen was there, rather than in Egypt or somewhere else.

The writing is as much Helen’s attempt to write herself *out of* the stories told about her as it is her biography. The Feminist viewpoint is obvious, H.D.’s premise being that all we know of Helen reflects an image of her created by men to serve their own purposes. H.D. faults the flimsy ground supporting patriarchal culture. At the same time, the protagonist investigating this ground is herself lighter than air. This epic throws into question the most fundamental assumption about the body—that it can be located, that it exists as an object, in time (which is not the same as saying it exists objectively). However, the female body, while protected by its escape of time/place/death, is, less subversively, once again

¹³Paul Smith, “Wounded Woman: H.D.’s Post-Imagist Writing,” in *Pound Revised*, Croom Helm Ltd., 102-32. Reprinted in *CLC* Vol. 73.

¹⁴Unable to explain the particularities of *Helen* within traditional definitions of genre, Horace Gregory, in the Introduction, states, with no explanation: “Her poem is not an epic” (xi).

eroticized through absence and evasiveness.

The old myth,¹⁵ this version explains, shows that foolish warriors fought for¹⁶ an illusion of conquest created by jealous gods. Here Helen's dream and vision are far more powerful than the stories our culture passes down. The reality enacted is difficult for skeptics to comprehend. Thus DuPlessis' problem with the "revisionary Mythopoesis"—not understanding how it can be revolutionary and rejecting its bases in, and effects on, more objective truth (*WBE* 105-8). H.D. attempts to navigate the spiritual, metaphysical and emotional difficulty of the poem with her prose glosses.

The Lesbian nature of the poem is even more troublesome for most readers. Gubar, however, points out that "Sappho empowered H.D. to turn eventually toward a reinvention of Homeric epic in *Helen in Egypt*, where she perfected the interrelationships between individual lyrics and a prose gloss that contextualizes them" (*Sapphistries* 56). The poem, in its classical form and fiery

¹⁵The term is of course a loaded one with vastly opposed definitions, ranging from Northrop Frye's Christian typology to Sir James Frazer's portrayal of myth as sickness inherent in language to Freud's psychological pathology to naturalistic or political explanations I use the term to represent stories which are the result of spiritual experiences that can be told no other way. Leon Surette points out that this hermeneutical approach ("the mythical method") to the occult was central to Romanticism, to Nietzsche, and to the *Symbolistes*.

¹⁶By "old" I mean from a story prior to ours, if one can make such a temporal designation regarding this poem.

lyricism, is Sapphic. According to Mary Barnard, recent and well-recognized translator of Sappho, the Greek language “allows complicated tense structure and swift movement at the same moment [. . .] Of all her [Sappho’s] virtues, however. . . is that of fresh colloquial directness of speech” and with all the subtleties of sound and meter the most intense expression always seems natural (102-3). Many translators, preferring pretty adornments, have not been true to the raw and modern style of the original, but the truth of the poetry when fairly translated is even harsh.

The Lesbian desire of daughter for mother accompanies Sapphic form in this jelly-fish epic. There is further encoding of homosexuality, such as the mirroring doubles so often used by H.D., and here further explained to help the reader: “so they fought, forgetting women,/ hero to hero, sworn brother and lover” (*Pallinode* 1.2). DuPlessis acknowledges the importance of the mother-daughter bond:

The resolution *Helen in Egypt* proposes is the enhanced, majestic mother-child dyad [. . .] By rewriting the telos of the oedipal crisis [. . .] H.D. was attempting to end her submission to sexual polarization and romance, to construct . . . some set of relationships that would be less emotionally damaging to her than those she had actually experienced—and helped to construct—with men. To do this, she created a female quest plot whose final

answer was the revelation of mother and child. The “thousand-petalled lily” [. . .] sufficient because it [. . .] engages the preoedipal dyad. (*WBE* 83)

Despite all DuPlessis’ emphasis on the supposedly catalytic male characters, she concludes with this evaluation. The poem is about the love relationship—indeed *desire*—between two women (who are often and in many ways one). Yet she never alludes to anything remotely Lesbian about the situation.¹⁷ Surely Freud would have seen the queering of his theory of development, being so deeply aware of the sexual nature of familial ties. And most theorists, Kristeva included, are quick to denounce the regressive nature of mother-daughter and all other Lesbian relationships. It is still difficult to find academic—especially psychoanalytic—theorizing of *Lesbian* outside of negative contexts.

In general, the society in which H.D. found herself (perhaps quite similar to ours) was 180 degrees different from that of Sappho; the latter enjoyed an artistic and spiritual community of like-minded friends, lovers, and compatriots. Despite the radical differences in context, many Lesbian poets have felt that Sappho is their only predecessor (Gubar, *Sapphistries* 46). Between Sappho and them, they see a history such as that traced by Faderman¹⁸: men’s and women’s

¹⁷DuPlessis also argues that Bryher serves as sister and mother but not lover (*WBE* 82-3).

writing around “romantic friendship,” “sexual inversion” literature, vampires and other monsters, the closet, Lesbian-Feminist literature (and how short-lived this instant is, in Faderman’s scheme!), and its obligatory and immediate successor, *post-whatever*. In contrast, Grahn’s (*The Highest Apple*) history of the Lesbian literary tradition shows a continuity of more radical perspective that becomes less and then more public.

DEATH IS THE MOTHER

Whatever our focus, we know that the love and honoring of women—either by men or by women—has battled to survive, be expressed, be recognized. Under these circumstances, a self-sacrificing heroine is understandable. Moreover, for a poet prone to ecstasies, one who wrote “to sing love/ love must first shatter us” (“Eros”), all-consuming attraction is far from astonishing. Yet many female poets, as Gubar points out, have reacted against just this abandon in Sappho’s writing. No doubt it is even more objectionable when the slayer is a male and when the danger is physical as well as emotional, imposed from without rather than felt from within. But in this epic, we must appreciate that Helen, like Sappho, is allowed choice, including that of writing her own story—at least to the extent that H.D. feels free to revise history.

Both the poem and its first person narrator are intersubjectively created: Helen is teller and listener. Power is transferred in a symbiotic relationship

between two women, those taking on the roles of mother and daughter. As mythologized in the poem, Helen (who is both H.D. and her biographical mother, Helen) and Thetis (who is again both) harmonize souls. In a mutually supportive relationship, Helen and Thetis baptize each other with their own bodily waters. The exchange allows each to die to her old self; Helen leaves behind her object status and Thetis recovers her dignity after having made two mistakes based on fearful overprotection of her son.¹⁹

Albert Gelpi figures Thetis' relationship to Helen as one of psychopomp to initiate ("H.D.: Hilda in Egypt" 129); Thetis majically nurtures and instructs until Helen is capable of independence. Ritual riddling characterizes their exchanges. In a section with energy movement again characteristic of ritual and spellwork, this time suffused with eroticism, Thetis charges Helen:

A woman's wiles are a net;
they would take the stars
or a grasshopper in its mesh;

they would sweep the sea [anaphora raises energy]
for a bubble's iridescence

¹⁹As the myth goes, she first neglected to invite Eris to her wedding; later she was excessively passionate toward Achilles and failed him through such actions as hiding him in women's clothing and dipping him carelessly in the ocean so that his majical cover was incomplete.

or a flying-fish

they would plunge beneath the surface,

without fear of the treacherous deep

[.]

leaf upon leaf, hair upon hair [—typical homo-doublings]

as a bird's nest, [—spell focusing energy here]

[intention accomplished:]

Phoenix has vanquished [. . .]. (*Pallinode* 7.1)

The Phoenix is a perfect symbol of 'death as the mother of life.' Once again (as in more misogynic psychoanalytic theory—but with differences), we are brought back to the figure of the mother as *raison d'être* for expression through language. Here, as source of both life and death, She contains the two essential Freudian drives, and their reconciliation revises the past. Contemporary matrophobia is replaced with the more ancient worship of mother goddess (or in some contexts 'triple' goddess) as combining both sexual and destructive aspects. Thetis, Helen, and Oenone are each object of desire and bringer of death. As opposed to our familiar, limited, prescribed roles for women, she is multifaceted without contradiction. Bisexual desires need not be explained. Similarly, there is no rivalry between women: "Clytaemnestra gathered the red rose,/ Helen, the

white,/ but they grew on one stem" (*Pallinode* 6.5). The poem moves through counterpointing of opposites (for instance, of the two Helens, together yet separate). Finally, Helen's performance of the ancient mysteries join her to the mother,²⁰ bringing death and life together, absorbing Achilles' destructive impulses and claiming power over war itself.

Personally and historically, plot begins and ends with the mother, presented explicitly as the (only) fundamental object of desire. Helen finally realizes her deep need is to have Thetis (the mother and lifetaker of Achilles) hold her for a while "in this her island, her egg-shell" (*Leuké* 7.2). This greatest love is represented as guide, mysterious figurehead, "an idol or eidolon [. . .] a mermaid, Thetis upon the prow" (*Eidolon* 3.4, prose), a body ensigned, and is shared by Helen, Achilles, all.

MODES OF THE SEMIOTIC

An "eidolon" is at once a phantom (first meaning) and an idol, something hidden and something foregrounded, thus having a multilayered relationship with the thing/person it reflects and represents. As well as entitling the third and last section (*Eidolon*) of *Helen* with this unknowable and fearsomely powerful

²⁰As a signal to the continuity between her early and late work, I would like to point out that H.D. was writing of the female centered mother-daughter Eleusinian rites, most central to pagan culture, in "The Mysteries" of *Red Roses for Bronze*, published 1931.

symbol, H.D. repeats often, almost chants, the hauntingly ambiguous old word on whose definition so much rests. She does not resolve the definitional possibilities, but rather extends the term's complexities (beyond its reference to the mother) to probe the relationship between body and signifier of other entities (such as Achilles). Like the Mother, we shall see that Helen is also a sign. Terminology from the register of linguistics applies to the body throughout *Helen*. In ritual literature, the sign and the thing represented are the same.

The Mysteries, such as those of shedding years (*Leuké* 4.5), cannot be explained, only felt, seen, heard, intuited: "*What was that sorcery or magic? It can only be defined by the most abstruse hieroglyphs or the most simple memories. All between, Helen seems to tell us is 'nothing, nothing at all.' But there is something between. There is the old problem, 'how reconcile [. . .]?' (Eidolon 6.5, prose)* Definition may be difficult or impossible, but that does not negate the presence of "something" physical or noumenal. Indeed, for a witch or other occult practitioner, the senses are a necessary tool for the kind of vision (as H.D. takes such pains to explain, especially in *Notes*) that can change the world. The *how* of seeing is equally important to the *what* of seeing. Hieroglyphs are an open secret, as reconciliation of opposites is open to any who can sense the unity of all creation. A mystically associative mind can read between the lines of jarring poetic feet that represent Helen's actual wounded feet (which in turn link her to the podiatric vulnerability of Achilles):

“[. . .] laugh if you are Theseus,
and I think you are,

for you laughed once,
finding a Maiden
(Helena she was)

entangled in the nets
your huntsmen spread”

“—you spoiled our quarry—”

“—but to free the birds—”

“—and found yourself entangled—”

“—that is Love.” (*Leuké* 4.4)

Laughing Theseus, laughing Thetis, silent Oenone all work magic without words but through nonverbal expression. For Kristeva as well as practitioners of *l'écriture féminine*, laughter is a radical action.

Helen, like *Trilogy*, is ritual poetics: “she *invokes* (as the perceptive visitor to Egypt must always *do*) the symbol or the ‘letter’ that represents or *recalls* the protective mother-goddess [. . .]. Isis or her Greek counterpart, Thetis,

the mother [. . .]” (*Pallinode* 1.7 prose, italics mine). Her invocation brings a hooting night-bird, presence of the Goddess, in the shape of a letter, the hieroglyph. Many scholars have theorized about the feminine nature of the hieroglyph (and the Egyptian culture it represents). Controversial scientist and author Leonard Shlain²¹ argues further that this intuitive mode of communication crystallizes a whole civilization of Goddess worship whose decline resulted from the imposition and proliferation of left-brained alphabetic literacy. Regarding the lines quoted above, the prose gloss also explains that interpretation, indeed “instruction,” occurs through enchantment—a decidedly nonrational function. And, we may note, what the Goddess/letter says is “hoot,” not a word with symbolic meaning but a natural and often repeated semiotic articulation characteristic of pagan ritual.

Along with sounds, names and initials (typical of H.D.) bear associative and magical²² significance. Gelpi implies *Paris* stands for *Pound* and *Achilles* for *Aldington* (*H.D.: Hilda in Egypt* 126). Helen is, of course, both Hilda and her mother Helen. She herself, who “is the writing,” we are reminded, undergoes “translation” between places and planes. Interpreting language, then, is a process

²¹This surgeon has constructed a text remarkable in its breadth and depth although it may sacrifice some rigor for scope. He is praised by popular and established authors Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Jean Bolen, M.D., and Larry Dessey, M.D.

²²Freud explores how the associative mind is akin to the magical mind.

that has profound effects on the body, being capable of spiritually and physically moving it. The mother is the absolute locus, the primary determiner of incarnation, reproduction, mimesis. Thus the richness of the term *semiotic*, which refers to both the maternal function of the *chora* and the science of signs.

The mother's body, the first "outside," while object of primary desire, is also, according to Kristeva, under attack from both drives (anal, expulsion) and the consciousness which seeks to repress it (*Revolution* 148-9). And then, for women, the story of violence against the female body may also be theorized as revolt against the symbolic: Deborah Kloepfer similarly points out that women writers' violence against female characters can be read as displacement of anger. In *Trilogy*, articulation, at least from an alienated position, becomes possible when *la mort/l'amour* finally merge as the individual, battling with the pleasure principle, is sacrificed: when the heart pauses. As with the other texts under discussion, H.D.'s writing of *Helen* engages in the paradox of subjectivity as sacrifice. The poet protests her object status which is, nonetheless, the source of the poetry: "The desecrated female body that feels like the self of the poet bleeds into print" (Gubar "The Blank Page" 255). Gubar evaluates this *écriture féminine* as failure. Yet when H.D. says "*She herself is the writing*," she promises a new story—not a retelling of the same old myth. The occupied ghost becomes a *material* [maternal] presence.

The cold statue of the early Helen poem becomes drift of snow, a frozen

body allowed to speak, like Dickinson's heroines, from the grave:

it comes to me, Helena;
do you see the cloth move,

or the folds, to my breathing?

no, I breathe quietly,

I lie quietly as the snow,

drifted outside; [. . .

[.]

does the ember glow

in the heart of the snow?

yes — I drifted here,

[.]

draw near, draw nearer;

do you hear me? do I whisper?

there is a voice within me,

listen — let it speak for me. (*Leuké* 5.7)

We are reminded of "I felt a Funeral," "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" and other

ironic poems of woman-as-object become speaker. H.D. dares to suppose a whisper can perform miracles. In this poem and in others, she uses the word “dare” more than once, as in “a goddess dares reveal her soul” (*Leuké* 4.4) and “do you dare impersonate Her?” (*Leuké* 3.8). Also revolutionary is H.D.’s promise of an immanent text in the refrain “*She herself is the writing.*” With dark humor reminiscent of Dickinson, H.D. disinters and infuses the ghost of hated Helen with *materiality* through the act of speech.

Her body is at one with the natural and divine worlds and her expression may not be audible. In fact, the voice that is simultaneously “within” and speaking *through* her presents authorship as mediumship and links the sub- or unconscious with the spirit world. The poet, risking misapprehension, challenges the reader to listen—really listen—a practice she marks with the physical act of moving close, approaching the other, and also with a term, “draw,” which suggests the reader is a co-creator.

Attention is consistently pointed to the question of who is allowed to speak and know. In the first exchange between Helen and Achilles, he asks three times “what” is happening and then “where are we? who are you? where is this desolate coast?/ who am I? am I a ghost?” (*Pallinode* 1.8). The rising, echoing intonation of interrogatives (perhaps supported by ghostly *w* and *o* sounds) creates a haunted ambiance. In fact, the speaker describes the Troy of Achilles’ brain and our literature as precisely “phantasmagoria” (*Pallinode* 1.8). Not only is the old

story dissolved but the method of telling it (the premise of historically factual narrative, for instance) as well.

Like the autobiographical novels and *Trilogy*, *Helen* problematizes the correspondence between signifiers and signifieds. In accusing her of interfering with beloved war, Achilles ironically hurls back what he thinks is insult but will be the redeeming truth, calling Helen “a vulture, a hieroglyph,/ the sign or the name of a goddess” (*Pallinode* 1.8). The vulture evokes the Lesbian womb, that personal and cultural source of creativity she metaphorizes in *Notes on Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho*.²³ Ironically, in attempting to put her down by calling her “the sign or the name” rather than the thing itself, Achilles is reaching for power he knows through positioning woman as (Levi-Strauss would say) that which is exchanged between men. Achilles does not realize how right he is: Helen is in fact the sign of the Goddess *and* the (to him unspeakable) Goddess herself.

In rewriting the ancient plot, H.D. protests woman’s status as sign, object of exchange between men, “war booty, gift, ransom” (Gubar “Blank Page” 255). She comments on the ubiquity of female sacrifice in literature as well as life: plot becomes malevolent plan as well as cemetarial locus as she critiques the fate of all

²³Shlain points out the historical grounds of such a theory of creativity. One of the two original female Egyptian deities—who were a couple creating the world together—was symbolized as a vulture (54-5). A scholar of Egypt, H.D. might well have been familiar with this mythology.

women who, as Gubar notes, have found the “bridal pledge at the altar” to be a “pledge to Death,/ to War” [*Pallinode* 5.5].

PERFORMING THE MYSTICAL

Somehow, however, she moves beyond protest to a mystical acceptance of the old story of slaughter. Thematically and sonally she performs this in Book Three of *Eidolon*. While in part [1] the veil (of Isis and the ships), the dream and reality “were one” (238), in part [2] a preponderance of hard *c* sounds like clashing swords melt into the dominance of soft, hypnotic *er* sounds composing over half of the line-end syllables. H.D. remembers and remembers the lost women, asking “did any of them *matter*?”²⁴ A reader of the earlier *Trilogy* will remember H.D.’s ritual insistence on the root *mater*, meaning mother; a reader familiar with goddess vocabulary will also hear the Maat (Egyptian goddess of justice, from same root) invoked.²⁵ The litany created by naming sacrificed women and by the repetition that *er* sounds suggest²⁶ is no longer mournful but soothing, as she lays the ghosts to rest through forgiveness.

Kristeva argues that today’s Feminism transcends earlier versions which

²⁴Italics are mine.

²⁵We know Maat is present in this text through references to her attributes, such as the weighing of feathers (82).

²⁶Perrine offers *chatter*, *clatter*, *spatter* as examples (205).

participated in the oppositional politics (war and rationality) of the nation/state. Since 1968, like “the most ambitious projects for religious and artistic upheaval,” a new transcendent version draws on primal (pre-oedipal)²⁷ dislocation of boundaries and “rejoins, on the one hand, the archaic (mythical) memory and, on the other, the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements” (“Women’s Time” 354-5). The mission of *Helen*, and perhaps H.D.’s career—to find the unity of the moment and the eternal—is a function of this *choric* potential.

The setting contributes to the theme of particularity within sameness.

²⁷The *choric* space from which H.D./Helen writes is pre-oedipal in that it prefigures our socialized understanding of gender and sexuality. As Kristeva would put it, the grammar is pre-thetic, experiential rather than logical. Her understanding of the term is political as much as psychological (unfortunately some argue she does not stretch to spiritual cognizance). A problem arises in that our patriarchal contexts lead us to theorize writing from a post-Oedipal perspective. Thus the labeling of the female-to-female desire as “Lesbian” (rather than, simply, natural). Thus the need to interrogate the violence (again, this term is borrowed from patriarchal discourse) performed on the female body and psyche. The complex powers of the Mother cannot be comprehended as viewed through the lens of patriarchy.

The double bind is that one who practices other ways of knowing immediately becomes suspect and marginal. Helen and *Helen*, working through hieroglyphic exegesis—sound, movement, intuition, secret knowledge—rather than abstracted alphabetic and canonical constructs—become curious bodies subjected to the academic’s dissecting tools. To figure the writing as pre-oedipal is to assume that these bodies, and the unconscious from whence they form themselves (bodies, like words, are mutable), can speak, that there can be a subject who makes sense before language acquisition: that is, before the subject splits, separates from the mystical symbiosis of *choric* oneness with the mother to (self-divided) identification with the law of the father.

Placing Helen not in Troy but in Egypt accomplishes a number of objectives, one of which is the feminizing, or semioticization, of the setting. Like much of her other work,²⁸ *Helen* mythologizes Greece as a place where a woman can explore subjectivity as interpreter, speaker, and sexual being, active and passive. Helen mediates between times and renders the distinction between psyche and psychic immaterial. In other words, as an occult practitioner, she collapses the artificial boundaries between inside and outside, personal and sacred space, thought and reality. This *choric* positionality is a mode independent of gender.

Once again critics find the sonal field of the text of primary importance. Wasserman calls the setting “operatic,” and she describes both the organizational structure of the book and the plot with musical terminology. Her use of corporeal language to describe the reading process evokes the aural/carnal *chora*. Sound, and its echo, she says, is actually a theme of the poem (161-3). Similarly, Harriet Tarlo allows that “rhythm [. . .] seems to summarize the plot” (197).

There is another even more essential effect of sound on the poem and its reader. The poem was written in dialogue with new acoustic technology, namely tape recording. Adalaide Morris, H.D. critic and scholar of sound technology, points out that the timely development of “the wireless imagination” could not

²⁸*Secret Name: Excavator's Egypt* (short story), *Palimpsest* (trilogy of stories), *Trilogy*, to name a few.

help but be of interest to an artist. Still, H.D. was exceptionally intrigued, as we might guess from her occupations with poetry, silent film, the Movietone machine, previous radio broadcasts of her own poems, background in Moravian ritual, experiences traveling and translating But now “we in H.D.’s audience join her characters in a near-total orientation through sound” (Morris, *Sound States* 44-5). *Helen* was written to be “dramatized,”²⁹ H.D. said, and the tape recording allowed her—ecstatically—not only to explore moods and voices but to project them simultaneously to a wide audience (Morris 47)—and to transform self and poem through the oral/aural traditions of ritual. Here she could most incorporate the semiotic and majical powers of sound. One feels, in listening, as if H.D.’s voice has been taken over by something stronger and older than her will. Nonetheless, the particular historical moment in which the poem was shaped, in form and content, marks it as clearly autobiographical.

Helen, to begin with, is both reader and creator of her story. But H.D.’s method of composition suggests polysubjectivity even more than intersubjectivity. We might call *Helen* a postmodern occult epic. The structuring force of a chance aural invention allows limitless accessibility, intermedia,

²⁹ Strangely, neither Guest nor Horace Gregory, who writes the introduction to *Helen*, mentions the formative influence of what Morris calls the “phonotext.” Morris’ groundbreaking book comes accompanied with a CD (which includes performances by H.D., John Cage, Henri Chopin, and F.T. Marinetti, among many others). H.D.’s reading of *Helen* is also available online through the H.D. homepage.

communality, loss of authority.

Not least of the blossoms of sound's salient roots are the eerie prose notes that mirror, contradict, and maternally subsume the dramatic space of the text. After listening to her own reading on tape, H.D. was swept away by the fun of letting this oracular voice find its own way (H.D. in letter to Pearson, qtd. in Wasserman 169). Resembling a Greek chorus, which has religious ritual as its foundation,³⁰ the mysteriously wise commentary both promises and withholds information. The apparent loss of authority that such imposition suggests is that of mediumship, an occult practice with which H.D. had much commerce. The trope of mediumship, like that of maternity, complicates patriarchal metaphysics of identity by imbricating its primary (il)logic of "outside" vs. "inside." This epistemology, at the base of homophobia, is, as noted queer theorist Diana Fuss explains, "the very figure for signification and the mechanisms of meaning production" ("Inside/Out" 1). The danger of having the other within oneself (or vice versa) is that the other may turn out to be the same as oneself. For H.D. as well as Helen, the terror of recognizing the fluidity and even "lack" of identity has been met, sometimes in nervous breakdown, sometimes in sexual ecstasy, but, since we are taking the time to study her, apparently *not* without an outcome of significant signification.

³⁰See *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, "chorus."

I WANT, I AM

Thus recent psychoanalytic theory explains what H.D. accomplished—the reconciliation of what have been viewed as poles—desire and identification. They are purged of dualism and taboo: “There is in fact a plethora of incest in H.D. One of her tasks as a writer seems to have been to naturalize, normalize that ‘incest’ [. . .in] the mother-daughter dyad in *Helen in Egypt*” (DuPlessis, “Language Acquisition” 263). As DuPlessis points out, Kristeva suggests poetic language in itself is incestuous. However, she neglects or denies that it can be Lesbian. Since revolutionary poetic language must involve the semiotic and the mother, Kristeva’s homophobic position condenses into denying the possibility of female authorship.³¹ I hope I can assume this position to be easily dismissed.

The daughter’s desire for the mother, like the son’s desire, is only normal; it is a desire for grounding in origins. As we have seen, any desire for the mother threatens the patriarchal symbolic order, and the tension it causes is evidenced in Achilles’ defensive aggression, an attempt to forestall what’s inevitable: “the occult, the esoteric, and the regressive rush in as soon as the symbolic surface cracks and allows the shadow of the travestied mother to appear—its secret and

³¹Exclusionary qualifications work for Kristeva, as all her models are male.

its ultimate support” (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 194).³² The shadow of the mother appears, and it is also the shadow of the Mother.

Helen’s identity, as a result of historical and psychosexual misogyny/gynophobia, has become fragmented and ethereal. Under the Mother’s shadow, her identities move in and out of each other until she can find that place of oneness prior to language accession (it is in fact the stories told about her that have separated her from herself). In the semiotic world, loving and being are compatible. Can not a mother both love and nurture, hold and differentiate?

This *chora* may not be a blank slate; it may be already structured by culture, including language. But when we accede to the law of the symbolic and give it precedence over the mother’s law we enter a realm where identity is indeed threatened by intimacy. Thus Paris disappears in his love for Helen, and Helen is strangled by Achilles. While Paris, with a word, and at a word from Oenone (*Leuké* 2.1-4), can save himself, his passion for Helen forbids him such speech, and Oenone’s passion forbids her to heal him. Achilles similarly chokes Helen in the very embodied place of speech, just as the other females offer their throats at

³²All value judgments aside, the occult is regressive in that it always follows a communicator’s alliance with the symbolic code that denies its basis: the Mother, or “undifferentiated mother.” To construct a strained place of conflicting realities, where the uncanny (shocking congruence) meets the fantastic (undeniable and unexplainable truth), we must have already attacked and voided any archetypes or absolute signifiers. Thus we can only *discuss* the Mother as a return.

the bridal altar.

Helen's inexplicable but primal attraction to Achilles (her enemy) is also a mere constituent of her all-encompassing longing to be with the (M)other. Their union is a ritual, erotic, sacrificial enactment. The god and his mortal counterparts were often said to die in sexual ecstasy, for the good of the land and the cycles of nature. Similarly, Helen's *jouissance* involves a pleasurable self-annihilation. As Achilles assaults her verbally and physically, she finds herself calling to *his* mother to save her, couching her superficial plea for escape in terms that can be read as sexual ("*O Thetis, O sea-mother, / I prayed, as he clutched my throat / with his fingers' remorseless steel, / let me go out, let me forget, let me be lost*"), describing the death grip with an image that recalls the maternal body ("I prayed under his cloak"), and finally coming to imply her enjoyment of the sacred rite: "*let me remember, let me remember, forever, this Star in the night*" (*Pallinode* 1.18). Robert Graves said that poetry's rhythms bring on a trance in which an individual is highly receptive to the kind of consciousness-changing executed in magical work. The particular rhythm of the above mystical repeated clauses is the same as that rocking rhythm of Whitman's "out of the cradle, endlessly rocking." Thus a calming and receptive stasis is reached. At the same time, the heroine's emotion threatens a loss of power and identity through the lure of trance or the rhythmic induction to sleep.

H.D. shows that the Goddess absorbs all, a felicitous conclusion, though

H.D.'s own reading of the poem is quite mournful. Aggression—the wrath of Achilles and what he stands for—is enveloped³³ by the life force and the Goddess ultimately triumphs:

I do not want to forget his anger,
not only because it brought Helen
to sleep in his arms,

but because he was, in any case,
defeated; if he strangled her
and flung her to the vultures,

still, he had lost
and they had lost—
the war-Lords of Greece. (*Pallinode* 2.1)

Intuitively (“I was not instructed, but I ‘read’ the script”), even midst the fear during assault, Helen knows that all this is part of the goddess, the one, the (M)other, which she parallels and becomes:

they were mine, not his,

³³Again, the healing transcendent vision is not meant to suggest a dualism of genders. In other words, the Goddess absorbs violence; she also *is* ‘violence.’ See note 22.

the unnumbered host;

mine, all the ships,

mine, all the thousand petals of the rose,

mine, all the lily-petals,

mine, the great spread of wings,

the thousand sails,

[.....]

mine, the one dart in the Achilles-heel,

the thousand-and-one, mine. (*Pallinode* 2.4)

In witchcraft theology (and liturgy), all starts being Hers and ends being Hers,³⁴ including the deathblow³⁵ to the beloved.

At first Helen appears mortal, and the above voice is not hers per se but that of Thetis or her Egyptian counterpart Isis. Isis' primary symbol is her body's spread wings, an image, like the multi-layered rose and lily petals, that evokes the

³⁴For instance, the widely used "Charge of the Goddess" (see Starhawk 90-1 for a popular version) contains the lines "From Me all things proceed and unto Me they must return."

³⁵Insisting on the concurrence of sex and death might be seen as a refusal of patriarchy's 'divide and conquer' attack on the Goddess. Even without these attributes, however, she threatens: through love.

female genitalia. In the more feminine Egypt (as opposed to Greece), the patriarchal sentence of death³⁶ is broken by joining death to love. Sexuality, free from objectification, heals division. Helen more than once takes on that role of desired and desiring mother that Isis plays to her lover and that Thetis specifically is to Achilles: “*let me love him, as Thetis, his mother*”³⁷ (*Pallinode* 1.7).

THE SOUND SENSE OF MYSTICISM

All female figures overlap in sororal and maternal relations: “*She seems to have identified herself with her own daughter, Hermione [who is of course H.D. herself in two autobiographical novels], with her sister’s daughter, Iphigenia, and with Clytemnestra, her twin sister*” (*Pallinode* 6.8). Similarly, the names of the Goddess/goddesses who represents both love and death become interchangeable: “*It is Thetis (Isis, Aphrodite*³⁸*) who tells us this, at last, in complete harmony with Helen*” (*Pallinode* 7.1). Along with the typographical

³⁶Isis’ aspects include being queen of the dead and, according to the *Book of the Dead*, “destroyer of the souls of men, devourer of the bodies of men.” Yet she also assures, through her repeated re-birthing of the sun/son Osiris and sexual union with him, that day will come from night [and similarly summer from winter] One widely circulated myth refers to her as “The Witch in the Stone Boat” (Walker, *Encyclopedia* “Isis”).

³⁷The line can be read ‘let me love him as I love Thetis’ and ‘let me love him as Thetis loves him.’

³⁸Walker points out that Aphrodite was a “Virgin-Mother-Crone trinity” sometimes known as “Destroyer” (*Encyclopedia* “Aphrodite”).

evidence of the unity of goddess aspects (association through italic typeface, linking through parenthetical appositives) we also have syntactical evidence that the mortal and immortal feminine are of one piece; the indication of this profound relationship is aural—"harmony."

And yet oneness must be interrupted by identity. When one is a daughter (Persephone, Kore) one cannot "*compete with Demeter*" but must choose "*another Absolute [. . .] the Absolute of negation, if you will, or of completion, 'this immaculate purity,' and hence in a sense, of Death*" (*Leuké* 7.2). Of course Demeter and Persephone are aspects of the Goddess who was usually viewed, across cultures, time, and geography, as a trinity: a divine escape from the pitfalls of dualism. But the individual, in relation to lover and/or mother, is not granted this continuity, H.D. implies: "is it Death to know/ this immaculate purity,/ security?" (*Leuké* 7.1). In psychoanalytic terms, Feminist or otherwise, a pure 'one,' as defined as 'not the other,' must be suicidal.³⁹ The whole movement of the poem is the spiraling together of Eros and Eris, forces H.D. implies are perhaps beyond the gods themselves (*Leuké* 1.5).

³⁹The pure self will have expurgated all it incorporates of the other; since the other constitutes the self, the self is thus annihilated (see Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* 102-5). The purging of the other is particularly essential when that other is one who would deny the subject humanity (such as a person in patriarchal society in relationship to a woman, and, even more, to a Feminist, Lesbian, witch).

WE MUST READ TO BELIEVE

Is there logic in Helen's equations, and what is the role of the reader in this universe? "*Again, She Herself is the Writing*" (*Pallinode* 6.8). Can we believe in the writing?

If we view the self as poststructuralists do, a changing effect of language, the self cannot be killed. Right-brain reasoning is the logic at first promoted by Helen's androgynous teacher, Theseus: "*all myth,/ the one reality dwells here;/ so you are right*" he tells her, replicating the typical dualism of right vs. wrong. Then she becomes Theseus, as there is no change in speaker for the following first-person words that apply to Helen at least as well as Theseus:

he of the house of the enemy,

Troy's last king,

is Achilles' son, he is incarnate

Helen-Achilles; he my first lover

was created by my last. (Eidolon 1.5)

Time moves backwards: a modern and occult phenomenon. As Helen and Achilles join, gender, also, bends: a modern, Feminist, Lesbian phenomenon.

How do we make sense out of this strange world, if, indeed, we choose to do so? Bruce Boone, suggesting the meaning of *Helen* comes down to nothing,

makes a scathing criticism. After suggesting *Trilogy* might become to readers “wasted surface [. . .] empty holes [. . .] green slime,”⁴⁰ here is his evaluation of

Helen:

And *Helen in Egypt* is what I call her most *I Ching*-type book of them all, because going furthest in its ability to provide wherewithal for those looking into it to make their own forecasts. The ghost lines initiating this *oeuvre* only let out their spiritual quality or ghostliness in parentheses as a taunt in the guise of an uncalled-for confidence we’re surely not taken in by will this emptiness be contagious? (18)

He resents the ‘feminine’ oceanic quality of diffused authority and constructs it as disease.

The occult interest, if not nature, of the poem is obvious in its syncretic use of myth, its ritual characteristic, its metaphysical enactments. On this note, there are two postscripts. First, incidentally, *Helen* is of interest as a text of madness, along with the disparaged qualities I have investigated here; similarly,

⁴⁰The paranoia of defilement here is predictable. Kristeva explains “the danger of filth [not a real quality but the result of boundaries] represents for the subject the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed, to the extent that it is a device of discriminations, of differences [. . .] the frailty of the symbolic order itself” and the pressure of the maternal demands on which it is oppositionally founded (“From Filth to Defilement,” *Portable Kristeva* 259-60). The stronger the fear, she explains in *Powers of Horror*, the greater the need for misogynic notions of sin.

any other H.D. text could be analyzed with the questions I have used for this one in mind. All of the texts require entertaining non-euhemeristic interpretation, and they all require, if not sympathy for the spiritual, something of a suspension of disbelief.

In the early days of queer theory, Eve Sedgwick parodied academia's blinders:

Has there ever been a gay Socrates?

Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?

Has there ever been a gay Proust?

Does the Pope wear a dress? [. . .] not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but [that] their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, Proust: and, beyond that, legion—dozens or hundreds of the most centrally canonic figures [. . .]. (52)

What she calls “monoculturalism” is akin to the ostrich policies of modernist academia, which considers it in bad taste to ask or tell about the occult. Its presence can hardly be denied, but it can be ignored, which is no doubt one of the reasons why H.D. has waited so long for the attention due her.

Even occult scholar, and controversial and widely published literary historian, Leon Surette, who argues that modernism originates in and is thoroughly saturated with, the occult, does not include H.D. in the product of his impressive research on the subject. Yet he considers academia's avoidance of the

subject totally irresponsible. So why does he completely shun H.D., who is perhaps the best model of an occult writer?⁴¹

To highlight some print sources on the subject that do come close enough to touch these matters while still declining to embrace them, we can start with Friedman's and DuPlessis' early groundbreaking work. They both devote much time and space to discussion of female spiritual power and divinity; but, again, the Goddess is never interpreted as start or endpoint—in other words, as ritually enacted—nor as related to Lesbianism. She is one stop on an intellectually syncretic journey.⁴²

More recently, Harriet Tarlo metaphorizes the interest as mythopoeic—a common approach of modernist, positivist critics—and then goes on to Christianize the text and claim H.D. moved “finally to Hindu and Buddhist

⁴¹In conversation after the Occult Seminar at the New Modernisms conference (Penn State, Oct. 1999), Surette's response to these questions was uncannily alike to Boone's. He replied, in distancing discourse, that H.D. was both too difficult and too easy: we don't know immediately what she means, and finding out on her terms would be uncomfortably foreign. Because she actually means what she says, the role of the literary scholar is threatened. We can't 'go there.'

⁴²Friedman approaches a spiritual reading, but shies away from arrival, with “The resolution of Helen's quest for wholeness in the figure of the Goddess expresses what H.D. believed to be an essential component in woman's search for identity: the resurrection of the female divine spirit, the Goddess of matriarchal tradition” (*Psyche Reborn* 269). But the quest is ultimately couched in psychological and political terminology. Another problem is that Friedman insists the Goddess in H.D. is always only light and love while the masculine principle is all evil. I hope to dispel such notions in this dissertation and particularly in this chapter.

thought” (176): a provocative conclusion, perhaps, but one contradicted by most H.D. scholarship. Although she offers a few biographical and textual grains of evidence of H.D.’s *belief* in the occult, Tarlo completely rejects addressing the effective presence of this belief. In her account of *Helen*, Goddess-centered spirituality is nonexistent. Although Margaret Murray (author of the famous, almost biblical, *God of the Witches*) is cited, an author whose work H.D. knew well, no one would know that her work has anything to say about witchcraft.

Rosanne Wasserman, on the other hand, gradually approaches the possibility of “communal as well as spiritual concern” (172). However, for her the text rises from lyric to epic without approaching ritual, and voices only imitate power “as if” they were “priestess[es]” (165). While I agree the “haven” (171) of H.D.’s poetry brings us only *possibly* to heaven, as H.D. asserts in *Trilogy*, nonetheless an ancient or initiated reader can trace the steps to the threshold of majic.

The text, like the abject body of its heroine, is a liminal space. Wasserman implies the divine cannot be absolutely present in that the disembodied “commentator” (prose voice) leaves us with as many questions as answers. Isn’t that the nature of mystery? That voice tells us majic “can [only] be defined by the most abstruse hieroglyphs or the most simple memories”—a magic Helen does work. The occult nature of the text means that it is occluded, not inaccessible. Whatever one views as the secret, whether that be the

autobiographical facts or hidden history of the words, the ritual of reading makes them as open as the reader. It brings us, like Helen, to “this”: the sword-point of Love and Death that Thetis wields, the arrow that never fails the mark (which is also a possession of Diana, goddess of the witches), the arrow that breaks Achilles’ heart.

Shattered by love, dispersed in knowledge, H.D. does not gather the fragments for us. Secret knowledge, passed down through generations since witchcraft went underground (as is the case for H.D. in her recent autobiography *The Gift*), may help some individuals understand the mysteries; special powers, like those of the demigod Helen, may help others. As H.D. explains in *The Majic Ring*, ancient wisdom of the Goddess—here called “the Great Mother”—was available through the middle-ages until its practitioners all around the world were forced into hiding (*Majic Ring* 283-84). She offers that wisdom here to all who would embrace it. Ultimately, the occult is a nonhierarchical (as opposed to Pound’s conception of it) province.

The artist,⁴³ like H.D. and Helen, is predisposed to create majic. All-encompassing Thetis of *Helen* is, in the end, says *Helen*, Paphos—who, we recall,

⁴³“A Witch is a ‘shaper,’ a creator who bends the unseen into form, and so becomes one of the Wise, one whose life is infused with magic. Witchcraft has always been a religion of poetry, not theology.”—Starhawk, *Spiral Dance* 22.

is a majical child of the rather wicked⁴⁴ sculptor Pygmalion (aided by Venus). The power of the Goddess is available to all who are open to what H.D. calls, in *Notes on the Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho*, the over-mind: jelly-fish consciousness of the womb, which I argue, in Chapter Two, uncannily resembles Kristeva's (and Plato's) *chora*. Taking on the sacred and (for H.D., at least) maternal function of creation, the artist is a figure who, for many, serves as priest/ess or spellcrafter, guiding us on the journey "to establish or re-establish the ancient Mysteries" (*Pallinode 5.1*).

On the surface of the hieroglyphic text that is *Helen/Helen*, we have inscribed coded sounds which, to initiates, hermetically reveal deeper, taboo realms, desire for the Mother in the language of Lesbianism and witchcraft. *Helen* is an underground text demanding a visionary method of reading capable of embracing the occult—that opening/rupture between *seemingly* incompatible realities.

⁴⁴One might also say "wiccad," endowed with the powers of Wicca, witchcraft.

VI. AN OPEN SECRET: *HERMETIC DEFINITION*

Just when it seems H.D. has found peace, she produces a testimony of divine agony: that of her aged and still desiring self, that of the collective female creator. In *Hermetic Definition* she takes great leaps of word association. For example, Paris, who is both poem and lover, is broken into *par* and “Isis”—in other words, child of the goddess, a reflection of H.D.’s belief that patriarchal culture, ancient Greek and modern Western, is built on matriarchal foundations. The poems of *Hermetic Definition* express female centrality—which some critics (Barbara Smith, for instance) generally equate with Lesbianism—through their use of female autobiography as archetype; they express desire for the female through interest in the feminine principle as source of oceanic desire and hope, satisfaction of that desire, life-giver and life-leveler. The poet’s investigation of her selves brings together contradictory drives and roles.

In an ultimate portrayal of the vision of *Notes on Thought and Vision* and *the Wise Sappho*, poetry is also figured as occupying the place where life and death come together. It is a solstice child/lover, the Winter solstice being the time of year, in most cultures, that marks the global transition of death to life. It is the time of her writing this poem.¹ The female body must offer its creative gift up to

¹ It is also the time of Lionel Durand’s death, nine months’ gestation after she met him. He is the decades-younger black man she desires. Much could be said about this potentially scandalous configuration. An analysis of the gendered nature of H.D.’s feelings about race would also be useful. However, I am in

the world, in pain, resistance, but ultimately in ecstasy. Her sacrifice is a fertilizing of self as artist, and simultaneously it brings the lover/child back to life.²

H.D. scholar Vincent Quinn points out that once again the emphasis on self suggested by the “recurrent initials” of “Hilda Doolittle, H.D., ‘Hermetic Definition’” belies what the actual poem exposes: “the self-sacrifice she willingly, even proudly, made for the sake of art” (“H.D.’s *Hermetic Definition*” 52). Giving birth is a division and loss of self, just as in writing *on s’y mettre du sien* (one puts oneself into the writing). But her rapture, sexual and maternal, is the emblem of an extraordinary poetic career. *Hermetic Definition* functions as a condensed reflection on that career, celebrating sexuality, developing the relationship between individual body and fused and collective identities, and portraying the female principle (though it may be embodied in a male) as all powerful Other/lover:

I die in agony whether I give or do not give; [*die* can be sexually]³

agreement with Norman Holmes Pearson, H.D.’s literary executor, who has noted the over-arching feminine energy of the poem: H.D. had considered entitling it *Notre-Dame d’Amour*, and “Durand was simply a member of the congregation” (Foreword). Hugh Kenner seems to have missed the biographical role of Durand entirely. Lines that were about Durand’s heart condition are taken as invocation of Isis.

²This child is mythically Osiris, biographically Durand.

³*Die*=experience orgasm, a euphemism that has been common since the 16th century (and is found in various Shakespeare plays); in French the parallel is *mort*

cruel, cruel *Sage-Femme*, [midwife, body, Isis, mother]

wiser than all the regents of God's throne,

why do you torture me?

come, come, O *Espérance*, [hope, writing/childbirth, orgasm]

The last words illustrate the simultaneous life/death drives of the speaking self and the psycho-sexual-political possibilities of semiotic reading:

Espérance, O golden bee, [the latter—demands of male world]

take life afresh and if you must,

so slay me.

So *Hermetic Definition* ends.

It should be no surprise that *Hermetic Definition* is climactic:

The poet is in labour. She has been told that it will not hurt but it has hurt so much that pain and struggle seem, just now, the only reality. But at the very moment when she feels she will die, or that she is already in hell, she hears the doctor saying, 'Those are the shoulders you are feeling now' —and she knows the head is out then, and the child is pushing and sliding out of her, insistent, a

douce, "sweet death" (Alan Richter, PhD, Dictionary of Sexual Slang [NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1993]).

poem.⁴

The simultaneous transitions into death and life are presided over not by a gravedigger with forceps but by a female body. *Trilogy* opened with a volcanic fissure from which “we” emerge. In *Hermetic Definition*, the poet has become that birthing, orgasmic, dangerous volcano.

The poem is in part a revision of Dante, Pound, and Perse; she quotes from and alludes to their writing in her protest, which becomes an affirmation of femininity redefined. Majic comes from the alchemical:

“H.D. - Hermes - Hermeticism and all the rest of it,” as she wrote in *End to Torment*. She used her initials as ciphers with which to transmute her own identity in an eternally developing process of self-definition, where she herself—H(ermetic) D(efinition)—is the secret revealed and defined by the hermetic processes of her art. But H.D. did not accept the existing traditions of Hermeticism on trust. She redefined them according to the values of an art she saw as intrinsically and radically “feminine.” (Howdle 26)

Once again, “she herself is the writing,” with a difference: this poem brings in a third aspect of the female divinity—the crone, or old woman.

Because identity is multiple and this crone is only part of a larger concern

⁴Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* 107, qtd. in Collecott “Reputation” p.11.

with matrisexuality, I will not here investigate her as a spiritual or historical presence. For our purposes, simply put, the power, wisdom, and potential death-dealing of the more than seventy year-old speaker is sexualized in the complex image of the rose. In taking the place of the desired-one-as-flower, H.D. auto-eroticizes; in refusing to kill the lover, literally or figuratively, H.D. challenges subject-object distinctions. The mother and the Lesbian midwife (Artemis in mythology, Bryher in H.D.'s real life) are part of a matriarchal trinity which, through merging sounds of "elision and assonance [. . .] indicates a mobile, composite entity" (Collecott, "Reputation" 13). Again, as in *Helen*, the poet becomes this Goddess. In the process she accomplishes a major feat. She transforms the genre of love poetry, equating the oceanic, ecstatic Mother with writing as a mode. The *chora* has finally, in the last piece of H.D.'s career, established itself as the foundation of the symbolic.

There have been two standard readings of *Hermetic Definition*: one Feminist, the other visionary. They are best represented by Susan Stanford Friedman and Robert Duncan, respectively. More recently, the mutual exclusivity of these positions has been challenged by critics such as Burton Hatlen. He synthesizes the apparently incompatible readings, finding "her writings perhaps the most powerful feminist critique of Western culture, including Western religion—that we possess" (142). At the same time, he reconciles this political thrust with Duncan's assessment of H.D. as the chief modernist precisely because

hers is a poetics of majical embodiment (141). By the time *Hermetic Definition* was quietly published, the world was ready for such interpretations. Still, they are hardly forthcoming.

Prolific fiction writer Fielding Dawson explains why. The adequate interpreter of H.D., the one who might help explain her to the rest of us, would have to meet myriad criteria:

It would take a book written by a very perceptive person who is also a poet, and a good writer to make this book [*Hermetic Definition*] clear so we may understand. The person will have to have undergone extended clinical therapy, speak fluent French, have a solid knowledge of Egyptian mythology, be involved with and have a true feel for Christian religion, be much an artist in an awareness of color, and a musician with considerable expertise of the flute, with an ear to accompany subtle tones, and to grasp H.D.'s tones which change as the flow of the sea, all too often before the following line, thus her tone envelopes her language and its rhythms, and the entire work is autonomous, like its title, defining itself by closing itself, much like a rose at sundown.

(Dawson 24)

H.D. is a poet's poet, and it is no coincidence that many of her best champions

and critics are poets themselves.⁵ Some are called to her long before understanding why. Hers is a voice that can be irresistible, not as a siren but as the uncannily familiar primal Mother. Here's Dawson: "To me, she has been the most mysterious [. . .] and throughout my life my secret favorite. Yet, but for writing this [review], I would have never read her. [. . .] Or one word about her. It is a little odd. In particular as, from the outset [. . .] H.D. was my understanding of what great poetry was" (21). We come to her on her terms, as baffled, perhaps, as she, when at more than seventy years old—"so slow is the rose to open" (13, 17),⁶ insistent, "the reddest rose unfurls" (3, 11, 16, 49).

Desire for the mother surfaces in the speaker's longing for private female places such as a "cave" or "attic." Raffaella Baccolini's discussion of H.D.'s place in tradition investigates maternal presence at length. Becoming a gradually more conscious drive on the part of the poet (the Mother is always present and participatory), desire for union triumphs by the end of the poem (Baccolini 151). The mother goddess is able not only to write for the poet but also finally to transfer her power to the speaker's body, allowing the poet to rebirth her lover and

⁵ For a very brief list I will mention Robert Duncan, Barbara Guest, Judy Grahn, Denise Levertov, Alicia Ostriker. See also the *H.D. Special Issues of Sagetrieb*.

⁶ For simplicity's sake, I will make reference to page numbers rather than sections, treating *Hermetic Definition* as a single text. Its three constituent poems are, in order: *Red Rose and a Beggar*, *Grove of Academe*, and *Star of Day*. [Included under the same cover are *Sagesse* and *Winter Love*, which I shall not consider.]

her self (150-1). Baccolini points out that matrosexuality is allied with a rejection of heterosexuality (156). The products of generation, whether lover, poem, or child, belong to women alone.

The initials of the title make the poem a mirror for H.D., parallel to her identity. Of course, these were also the initials of H.D.'s mother, Helen Doolittle, the Muse and the Creator (Baccolini 41). The poet will define and create herself in the act of writing. First she must die in a prototypically shamanic descent for her powers. The method of suicide is unrequited love for a young man who, Friedman and Baccolini argue, represents a string of lovers who judged H.D. and her poetry harshly. In that sense, she dies by the real-life phallus. However, she also seizes it redemptively, for her "autobiographical poem records the woman poet's obsession with the archetypal lover and her search for autonomy. Only by (pro)creating the poem, the lover, and herself, is the woman writer able to transcend the destructive sexual politics" (Baccolini 119).

In *Grove of Academe*, intellectual acceptance by Saint-John Perse begins as a balancing of Durand's sexual rejection in *Red Rose and a Beggar*. However, the fascination with his legitimizing approval and all the order of academe that he represents soon turns to thralldom itself and must be replaced by the poet's own sense of self. Finally, *Star of Day* reconciles the two sources of poetic articulation. Then, as the passion of the *chora* meets and subsumes the order of the symbolic, the poet can bring the dead to life.

Within an overarching gendered genre conflict, H.D.'s identification with the Courtly Love tradition creates friction that moves the poem forward. The tradition's heterosexual, patriarchal formula of pursuit and transcendence defines the Western tradition and models of creativity. As opposed to troubadours and other traditional male love poets who were able to use women as muse, desired passive object, and means to immortality, in H.D.'s life, her own thralldom, DuPlessis claims, destroyed her identity—at least at first. Others, including myself, read her love poetry differently, especially the bold *Hermetic Definition*. Moreover, much earlier in her career, *Eros* demonstrates “to sing love,/ love must first shatter us.” Desire has always been a driving force in the poet's construction of self—and in the construction of her poetry.

In the year 2000 we seem ready to entertain broader Feminisms, like that of Baccolini, who finds that H.D.'s revisionist writing redefines woman through productive “matrisexuality—the daughter's desire for the mother and the reconstitution of the mother/daughter bond” (128). Both goddess-centered spirituality and the idea of experience as artistic source allow H.D. to articulate self.

And now virtually all critics are aware of the means of such accomplishment: “verbal alchemy” (Baccolini 132; Hatlen 149). Baccolini and Hatlen refer to many of the same sections as examples. The power of verbal alchemy, like that of the cauldron-like *chora*, is “unseemly, impossible,/ even

slightly scandalous”—seductive and dangerous. It pulls poet and reader in like an undertow, while posing as civilized (“I walk into you,/ Doge—Venice”).⁷ Early in the poem, the connection between *chora* and poet is suggested. The poet, like the demanding Mother, will “call and call again” [4]. Domesticated Venice becomes anarchic Venus, effortlessly.

Venice—Venus?

This must be my stance,

My station: though you brushed aside

My verse,

I can't get away from it (7)

That is her place and destiny; she cannot escape. As in *Trilogy*, the possession may be a dream but it is simultaneously real, the source of enlightenment:

[. . .] you would not care for this,

but She draws the veil aside

unbinds my eyes,

commands,

write, write or die. (7)

⁷ *Hermetic Definition 4.*

She might have said, “write, write *and* die.” These are two things she must do. In the end, they are not antithetical but have a much more complex relationship.

H.D.’s images of the identity-making process invoke Cassiopoea and Andromeda—and the *choric* space, if it could be visualized, where the individual has two possible losses of self: “not moving” or “moving with everything.” Baccolini concludes, logically, that “After reaching the highest point of absorption, the woman poet begins to assert her difference” (Baccolini 143). It is not so much that all things in their furthest extremity become their own opposite. Whether in relation with the mother or the male love subject/object, the poet becomes herself through unity and then division. Through annihilation she can be reborn.⁸ As Wallace Stevens said, “Death is the mother of beauty.”

Even in the beginning of the poem, we have, through sound repetition and gradual change, the foreshadowing of the poet’s move from object to subject, red rose to goddess/writer. Accompanying this progression, harsh-sounding words (“earthquake,” “darkness,”) make the heterosexual desire of their occasion appear increasingly dismal. Repetitive use of “desperate,” “(non) escape,” “nothing” and “lost” tonally emphasize absence. With “lost” as the climactic echo, desire and self-negation are firmly linked (Baccolini 133). The point of arrival for the poet is a surrender, the violently demanding Cybele who is the last door, that which we

⁸ The son/lover—Osiris—is dismembered first, before he is put back together. However, the common denominator is that all die and all come back to life.

come to at the end of going further and further into our psyches and deeper and deeper into the past. Part of what the poet gives up is the loved one. She recognizes that it is not so much Durand as the Lover she will always seek:

the ecstasy comes through you

but goes on;

the torch was lit from another before you,

and another and another before that . . . (14)

The two men [Durand and Perse] of the poem represent two kinds of destructive “orgy” (33) or thralldom, sexual and intellectual. She must move through and beyond both experiences. As Audre Lorde later metaphorizes gender war: “the master’s tool will never dismantle the master’s house.” For H.D., the Mother, and the vision she provides, is the source of making meaning out of fragments. In themselves, the men are dispensable and interchangeable:

Should we delete Asmodel [Durand]

and find another?

Who is he, anyway?

Angels may become devils,

Devils may become angels,

he’d better stay;

I must keep my identity
 walk unfalteringly toward a Lover,
 the *hachish supérieur* of dream. (21)

Angels and Devils become leveled through some of H.D.'s favorite techniques, parallelism and parataxis. We may wonder at the object of her quest—dream, if not intoxication. How is this compatible with with life's real lovers, how is it compatible with consciously developed selfhood,? The magic and identity are compatible when the object of desire is e/motion itself.

The poet's world is portrayed in terms, with registers, that traditional, patriarchy-identified readers could easily miss. That is because our culture's dominant mode of description—scopophilia, the vision which measures through distance the phallus and its absence—is replaced by marks of proximate touch and internal bodily sensations of hearing and proprioception as well as chemical alterations of smell and taste. Our ears must be tuned to recognize the sound of feet on flowers.

Other senses accompany the traditional five. We have, for instance, that corporeal feeling of suspension as the poet waits (as if with hand poised over paper) for another letter, while her "step [ability to write] is uncertain" (39). As demonstrated by the feet on flowers and step as writing, H.D. is fond of noting all the effects of feet, from tracks in snow to the fascination of horrific accidents.

This particular appendage makes a direct link—through its name—between poem and body. Similarly, the old “habit” (44)—nun’s clothing—she pursues represents both her previous aesthetics and the mother’s (nun’s) body and role. In explaining why she must cease to imitate Perse and instead find her own female mode of expression, she asserts “I can not step over the horizon;”—she cannot assert herself, poetically or otherwise, in his terms, within his boundaries/rules.

I can not step over the horizon;
I must wait to-day, to-morrow or the day after
for the answer. (44)

The horizon also suggests that line drawn around the female body connecting earth mater/ial and divine spirit/thought.

Again, she must “wait,” with the punning association of bodily heaviness as well as analogical association of pregnancy. The word *weight* in its syntactical arrangement becomes an auxiliary activating the infinitives “to-day” and “to-morrow”: the line reads “wait to— and to—” and thus “day” and “tomorrow” become verbs, feminizing time and place. By attending this female centered space, she incites “the answer.” The mysterious source of answers will be herself when she returns to herself, to turning pages, to “birth” (51).

According to Baccolini, self is allowed expression because “the use of the childbirth metaphor, creativity, and the empowerment from the mother allow H.D. to affirm a non-destructive fluid self for her questing poet” (148). So creativity

and femaleness are linked, whether the poet be mother or daughter. Modern in its assertion of solitary self, the elegiac last book, *Star of Day*, revises the genre by making the ultimate interest glorification of the female “(pro)creative” (Baccolini 149) force. Whereas elegy usually emphasizes separation and “repress[es] the maternal,” Hermetic Definition does the opposite (Baccolini 153). At the same time as she shatters tradition, she bonds with the mother in both desire and identification, contradicting Freud and Kristeva’s separation of the two conditions.

The poem might have been titled *Heretic Definition*. From the association of nun imagery with pregnancy to the inter-racial and inter-generational desire, H.D.’s poem is defiant. Moreover, the mother in whom the poet finds salvation, while suggesting the Virgin Mary, turns out to be none other than that original pagan harlot “Venice-Venus (Isis)” (49), the star of day (and night). Feminine place again supersedes more masculine time, as patriarchal city returns to its maternal roots, through hyphenation and parenthetical amendment. The tongue-twisting tripartite song of [is, us, iz] sounds infantile. The same voice juxtaposes, in the next line, two French nouns which imply again the body/text simultaneity: “générateur, générant”—generator, generating—that which makes, that which is made, claiming both as female. As in *Trilogy*, H.D. invokes the Christ child (“Christmas”) only to replace him with text. The pregnancy metaphor links articulation with the body: “the writing was the un-born,/ the conception” (54).

The Virgin has heretically birthed another child—the poet/poem. Other references to the text as child include the nine-month gestation period with an intact cord (47, 53).

Again, as in *Trilogy*, ghostly presences have several layers of meaning. True, H.D. had relations—some of them sexual—with men in her life. But this mysterious lover she always longed for—this Hope, or “Espérance”—who was that? First of all, one thinks of Frances Gregg. H.D. never loved again with such total passion. One testimony to the power of this attraction and loss is the fact that it was forbidden to mention Gregg in the household—while Perdita, whose name means *lost*, had Frances as her given name: in full, Frances Perdita. Gregg haunts H.D. and her family forever. Before that erotic and romantic coupling, however, there is an even more fundamental, primary one—the individual’s connection to the mother. For a woman, Lesbian desire may re-establish the primary relationship. The imagos materialized in writing are these forbidden loves made comprehensible.

Terry Castle has examined at length the predominance of apparitions in literature by and about Lesbians: vampires and other macabre cadavers, gestures such as the waving-away motion of a hand, body parts severed from their wholes/sources, unrequited and interrupted desires, ambiguity, shadow-play, necromancy, pursuing specters, mechanical and/or eerie repetition of gestures—in short, anything that takes the real body out of the picture. H.D.’s own writing is

loaded with apparitions. Since Lesbianism is what must not be there, we might guess, then, that when we are told something is *not* or is partial—this is a code or sign of Lesbian presence. In *Hermetic Definition* we have several such creations. One is the child/lover who never comes. Another is the mysterious *Grande Dame*, cruel *Sage-Femme*, merging with personified *Espérance*. In their charged non-appearance, they are Lesbianized, as is their embodiment, the poem.

In the end of this poem and of her career, H.D. chooses woman and chooses love, “finding in breakdown the source of poetry” (Koestenbaum, “Shattering” 33). Resurfacing all the stronger, H.D., explains Dawn Kolokithas, who has examined H.D.’s spirituality, “sought ‘to establish or re-establish the ancient Mysteries.’ But to speak of the Mysteries, one must first be initiated—or rather, once one is initiated, one is forbidden to speak” (67). In the silence, we may, provisionally or finally, hear.

VII. CONCLUSION?

“there is knowing with the eyes
with the hands,
and with all the fine, flickering hungers of the brain”
—Marge Piercy “The Moon is Always Female”

In just a few short years, H.D.’s cultural status was radically and permanently changed. In 1978, she does not exist in *Who Was Who Among English and European Authors 1931-1949*.¹ By 1986, the same publisher gives her thirty-five pages in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*.² Various movements of the last three decades, Feminism to occult³ studies, have opened H.D. archives to both publication and warmer reception. Yet many of H.D.’s majical texts remain literally sealed from the light of publication and sealed also by virtue of being hermetically closed. The latter obstacle is not an intentional retreat on the part of the poet. One of the so-called “obscure” difficulties of H.D. is the challenge of tone; it appears to perplex and stump readers. If we remember her mollusc lines from *Trilogy*, how they gradually become self-parodic, we may

¹ Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company. This publication includes American writers.

² Volume 45: *American Poets 1880-1945*, 1st series.

³ Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow, in their introduction to *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986), trace the resurgence) of interest (both popular and critical) in the occult to approximately 1970.

be more become sensitive to irony). The difficulty in reading her is the “alternative model to cognocentrism” (Kolokithas 69) both used and demanded by the writing. Scholars despair of any immediate change, at least before the world at large is more accepting of hermeticism.⁴ Then H.D.’s hieroglyphs will be given the respect of Pound’s ideograms. Until then, critical resistance continues.

Whereas Pound assumed the stance of omniscient scholar synthesizing the world’s best learned and aesthetic traditions, H.D. was foremost psychic and poet, neither of which is highly valued, particularly when associated with a woman. From the time of *Trilogy* up to today, her work insists on prioritizing the occult. In her own words:

Maybe, my whole urge toward self-expression has led me to this point—maybe, I am now able to express this quite difficult, indeed almost impossible philosophy of communion or communication. For actually very little acceptable writing has been done on the subject; although there are libraries of books open to any psychic-research worker, very little has been done by modern poets or writers.⁵

Helen Sword’s work with H.D.’s unpublished material (such as *Majic Ring*)

⁴A discussion of this matter can be found in the HD Society online listserve mid-March 1998.

⁵ *Majic Ring* 113, qtd. in Sword, “H.D.’s *Magic Ring*” 355.

reveals that while much of the best of H.D.'s material comes from the period in which she was deeply involved in seances, she was always afraid of introducing psychic and spiritual phenomena because the uninitiated and uninformed would balk.

H.D. was called "quasi-Jungian" by her friend and literary executor, Norman Holmes Pearson (Guest 328).⁶ In literary studies, a discipline that is almost desperate to prove its legitimacy through claims to scientific methodology, the connection to Jung is not in her favor. Scholars are sometimes embarrassed by anything that rings of the spiritual. Those who do not share her interests and beliefs may be unable to get beyond a general discomfort—even dislike—for the poet that then spills over onto the poetry (or sometimes vice-versa). The sparse and chiseled poetry might be labeled insincere or elitist for having the very qualities that distinguish its beauty. What characterizes most of the detractors of H.D. is their tendency to force upon her the age-old double-bind so familiar to women—write like a man and be criticized as a person, write like a woman and be denied status as a writer.

Alfred Kazin is one who would fault H.D. for having style. At the same time, he equates her "terseness (direct from priestess to goddess)" with "adolescent" impatience and limited intelligence (unlike the depth and complexity

⁶Guest points out that H.D. and Jung both spent time in Kusnacht (327).

of thought exercised by today's critics, he explains). One moment the complaint is that she is too shallow, the other that she is too intense. The worst insult, it seems, is that she was somehow guilty of thinking mythically, pretentious for taking on subjects such as Freud, absurd for being literary and making the literary real.

On a friendlier note, gentlemanly reviews praise the poetesses of the early part of the century for their charm, wit, and nurturing of male genius (see Rovit 72, for example). We do them a great disservice, the position maintains, by considering them significant poets (this is the condescending attitude taken by some of the most liberal academics regarding Toni Morrison and other women of her stature). Then there are those who resent H.D. for her extraordinary luck in having a partner—female at that—able to fully support her writing. So she has her enemies as well as champions.

The bias noted by many more sympathetic scholars—particularly interdisciplinary ones—is in fact a gender bias.⁷ H.D. is, there can be no doubt, “an important poet for women.”⁸ What is at issue—at the very least—is the empirical weight that women receive in the modernist canon. A decade or two

⁷ Even Bachofen regarded earlier civilizations as inferior because more feminine: read ‘tied to nature’ (78).

⁸ Rosenmeier, Rosamond. “Doolittle, Hilda (H.D.).” *Notable American Women: The Modern Period: A-Z*. Vol. IV. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.

ago, hardly anyone knew anything about H.D. Her own hometown neglected her, even fought to keep her memory quiet. In 1981 it was still compelled to assert “She wasn’t a feminist” (Gehman D-1). Now that she’s been rescued from obscurity and admitted to the exclusive club of modernist writers (as one of two or three token women, the others being Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein)—who might be next? Mina Loy threatens to follow suit, cross-genred works are being investigated, and queer writers are claiming space as well. There seems to be a general fear of the domino effect. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a mainstream publication if it is anything, Scott Heller recently understates the situation: “Adding new writers to the short list of modernists who are widely read and taught isn’t at the top of the scholarly agenda today.” Nevertheless, a persistent group of some of the best scholars is pressing the issues in places like the *New Modernist Association*. H.D. has helped to change more than the invitation list. The nature and tone of the discussions are being revisited as well.

What is at issue, even more, is the nature of modernism. Bonnie Kime Scott offers a new definition of “modernism”: “polyphonic, mobile, interactive, sexually charged; it has wide appeal, constituting a historic shift in parameters.” Yet early male modernism (which has been taken thus far to stand for modernism as a whole), while it tokenly admits a woman or two, does so only in so far as she fits its severely limited categorizations (Scott 4). It refuses to acknowledge an actual *shift* in consciousness between its proscription and (related) modernist

aesthetics. Those who equate early straight white male modernism with modernism as a whole are still not ready for H.D.

For instance, H.D. scholarship has always been concerned with the wordplay of her work, but, in general, theory of sound in literature still lags. Where are the ears in Piercy's above equation? Even the authors of texts whose very titles imply an aural focus (such as *Beginning with O*—source of much Feminist poetry—and *The Sounds of Feminist Theory*—a contemporary philosophical elaboration) do not address hearing. In part due to its under-rated value, the sensory resource of hearing is difficult to understand. It is essential to our response formations, though we do not know exactly how and why. The effect of the human voice—whether that of others or our (internal or external) own—is particularly disregarded: “Vocalics, or paralinguistics—the tones, pitches, and other nonverbal elements of the voice—has received relatively little attention,” declares communications textbook author Peter A. Andersen. Moreover, musical communication—inherent in poetry—has “been almost completely overlooked” (Andersen 81).

There are obvious advantages to being tone-deaf. The bilingual person may be forced to work in the other's primary—and only—language. Irony and satire, particularly that of Feminists, may be ignored.

The United States ranks third in the world for cultures overly 'literal'—

those that do not use contextual cues to interpret verbal messages (Andersen 99).⁹ These contexts include rhythms such as sacred/imaginary, metaphysical/paranormal, and natural timing of communication. We do not listen and we do not know how to listen. What's more, we do not know that we do not know how to listen. Yet some scholars have investigated hearing, finding that it has its own rules unlike those of the other senses as a group (Smith, Reisberg, and Wilson 117). These rules link sound to other undervalued constituents of culture: the body, the self, what is labeled madness (Smith et al., 117), and children (Watt 84-5). Childhood is another category linked to both aurality/orality and the feminine.

Children are much more likely to express and respond to emotions nonverbally—through facial and body expressions and through crying, laughing, screaming. These messages often modify or contradict what is said in patriarchal language (Andersen 73). Nonverbal communication is both holistic and more believable than its verbal counterpart (Andersen 29). It includes innate behavior, from which we, as we develop, become increasingly removed. The development we impose upon individuals parallels the development of our culture from holistic to strictly alphabetic. Yet when a culture moves to a furthest extreme, as ours has with logos and abstraction, it begins to swing back. Leonard Shlain traces the

⁹Great Britain is somewhere in the middle.

history of Western civilization as it moves into total domination by the arbitrary and abstract alphabet and then perhaps—perhaps even now—back into communication that draws on a range of bodily experience.

H.D. is part of this counter-movement, her influence on contemporary poetry and poetic art forms extending far beyond theme. Like Stein, her syntactical innovations lead to the even more radically free forms of text-sound art which is first written but intended to be illuminated by auditory practices. This apparently new phenomenon has its roots in sacred chanting but uses modern innovations—such as visual arts and sound technology—foremost sound recording—to bring itself up-to-date with postmodernism. We have seen how H.D. exploited these possibilities and made them integral to meaning.

We are better equipped now than in previous decades to appreciate the natural elements of H.D.'s poetry. Many aesthetic and political movements have prepared us to read her on her terms. Alicia Ostriker recommends we read the late H.D. "With the wind in our hair, a gleam in our eyes" (*WLW* 30). One immediately notices this is a corporeal experience. Some Feminists may recoil, as American Feminism has been largely preoccupied with escaping the body, presumably under the rationale that women's equation with corporeality has necessarily excluded us from participation in intellectual, social, and spiritual life. But such antipathy is useful only within Christian, Platonic, and heterosexist paradigms that denigrate the body and participate in the mind-body split. What if,

as Jane Gallop suggests, we (30) choose to *think* through the body? Helen has been a body known for her beauty; H.D. reconnects that body with intelligence (Grahn, *Highest Apple* 102).

What if, rather than isolating archetypes for analysis, we entertain the idea that an individual's most intimate experience has much to tell us about the world's so-called objective reality? Many women's search—a healing search—for the divine feminine has begun with history and come to dream; similarly, women seek historical evidence to confirm what they sense, on an intuitive level, is true. In both spheres, historical and personal knowledge, we have been robbed of powerful images. A culture lacking strong bonds between women and general confidence in the feminine will lack bold, loving goddesses. Psychologist Esther Harding writes, “the ‘gods’ are not beings external to man but rather psychological forces or principles which have been projected and personified in ‘the gods’” (*Woman's Mysteries* 162, qtd. in Downing, *The Goddess* 5). When we allow psychoanalysis, Feminism, and religion to coexist, *choric* articulation, rooted in the body's knowledge,¹⁰ is then revolutionary, re-connecting

¹⁰Naomi Goldberg argues that “For psychoanalysis the word ‘knowledge’ is similar to the word ‘thought’ or ‘idea.’ All [. . .] come from somatic sources.” Furthermore, Freudian theory escapes religion's view of the body as “hopeless” by granting it “all the qualities which most of Western philosophy reserves for the mind” (176-8). Moreover, *healthy thought* is that which is closely tied to drives and their charged objects, and thus words should be used to return us to those perceptions from which we create meaning. Their acoustic quality permits this return (180). In the last chapter of *Returning Words to Flesh*, Goldberg

(*religion*='bringing together') fragments of an alienating world. This isolation has been noted by many critics who see academia insulated from the larger society and individuals in academia sequestered from each other.¹¹

Freud was aware of the interconnectedness of personal and cultural development. The extremely important pre-oedipal phase, even more essential for women, was, according to widely published scholar Christine Downing, "analogous to the pre-Homeric Minoan-Mycenean period in Greek religion when mother-goddesses dominated" (6). Freud's *Totem and Taboo* is a presentation of ontogeny mirroring phylogeny. In addition, for Jungians, feminine immanence is a faculty inherent to the human condition, above and beyond either individual or collective manifestation.

Downing points out that the further back we explore concepts of feminine divinity, the wider ranging and richer they are. H.D. was limited by a severely restricted historical body of knowledge. She relied mainly on Greco-Roman culture and then increasingly on the more feminine Egyptian, as both worldly information and interpretation grew—and her own Feminism simultaneously flowered.

investigates other systems of thought—particularly religious/spiritual thought—in which body is far from "hopeless."

¹¹Dean Andrew Conrad of Mercer County Community College points out we have lost the understanding of "college" as 'a body of scholars who perform tasks together,' also the *O.E.D.*'s 1st meaning.

Judith Butler, queer theorist, claims that an object as apparently essential and natural as the body is in fact a fluid social construct. Elizabeth Grosz, body scholar, takes a quite different position in discussing the relationship between individual bodies and the culture that creates and is created by them. No knowledge can be situated outside of its particular roots in a body since “Corporeality can be seen as the material condition of subjectivity” (*Space* 103). This understanding of origins frees us from the simplistic dualisms on which so much philosophy—contemporary included—depends. Grosz, interpreting Plato, Derrida, and Irigaray, explains the relationship between the *chora* and all of phallogocentric knowledge. She insists on the *chora*’s association with “many of the paradoxical attributes of pregnancy and maternity” (*Space* 117). It would be maligned for its connection to the female body and its abandonment of linearity. In contrast, regarding patriarchal culture:

Its dissociation from actual female bodies is a travesty of the mother, a theft of the origins of all subjects *and* all perceptions and theories: elaborate attempt[s] to foreclose and build over this space with their [men’s] own (sexually specific) fantasmatic and paranoid projections. The production of a (male) world—the construction of an ‘artificial’ or cultural environment [. . .] is implicated in the systematic and violent erasure of the contributions of women, femininity, and the maternal [. . .]. Men

have conceived of themselves as self-made, and in disavowing this maternal debt, have left themselves, and women, in dereliction, homelessness. (121)

In other words, men's conceptions of themselves as subjects has depended upon shutting women out of their realms, assigning them to passive roles of representing body/space onto which a patriarchal world is inscribed.

According to some Feminist writers such as Luce Irigaray, Jane Gallop, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, the specificities of difference, in particular sexual difference, must be addressed to escape the "universalization" of "white, heterosexual male" perspectives (Grosz, *Space* 54). A male reader cannot read the same way as does a Feminist reader. If this is "essentialism," it is a strategic as well as theoretically viable one. Men's interests are not the same as women's, and their aesthetics will differ.

Ostriker continues her description of prerequisite sensitivities for reading H.D.:

[. . .] a sense of headlong forward motion. [. . .] Now the poems are not lapidary, not closed and finished artifacts containing tensions. There is a sense of lids sprung. There is arrowy speed. Or the poem glides like a stream, cutting the banks alongside it [. . .] fed by the poet's personal and history's suprapersonal underground springs (*WLW* 30).

Ostriker suggests H.D. intended her poems to enact, dissolve, and resolve the many realms of spirit. Her words are, in H.D.'s terms, "conditioned to hatch butterflies." Reading her with respect for these terms, we incubate and release them, take the spell and ritualize it through our participation.

Ritual is often used synonymously for *majic*. Ritual scholar Catherine Bell suggests the latter term might be avoided because within our culturally biased paradigms it is equated with primitive behavior—as opposed to more legitimated *liturgy* and prayer. Thus Bell, in language that echoes Scott's, refers to a *shift* in consciousness—both needed and perhaps occurring—of those studying *ritual*. This shift would refuse the dichotomizing of experience into such categories as *us/them* and *thought/action* (6). Again, under a new endemic logic, the sacred experience of the body counts as thought.¹² Perhaps some day we will also be able to avoid fractured conceptions of the sacred and mundane.

Activist, scholar, and spiritual leader Starhawk's work does just that, using poetic ritual to change the world. She explains: "Poetry, itself a form of magic, is imagic speech. Spells and charms worked by Witches are truly concrete poetry" (124). *Imagic* is a useful broad term that may refer to sound experience better than does the terminology "auditory imagery." What we may perceive as

¹²This move is evidenced in the work of Richard Rorty (philosophy), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (linguistics), Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari (critiques of psychoanalysis and capitalism), and of course in the work of Feminists, particularly French Feminists like Kristeva and Cixous (Bell 95-7).

auditory often has roots elsewhere than the inner ear (that corporeal determinant of Lesbianism, according to recent scientific experiment).¹³ Imagined sounds do not qualify as auditory; only body-rooted experience—such as subvocalization—is technically “auditory.” However, “imagic” includes all such sound constructions.

Poetry, often used as ritual, is, like ritual, a form of language that mediates between the individual and the social body. It has been variously interpreted as social symbol (V. Turner, Levi-Strauss) and as prelinguistic form of expression whereby the individual body projects its own experience onto the world (Lakoff and Johnson).¹⁴ It is the place where many layers come together, the once and the eternal, the concrete, symbol, and metaphor, movement and stillness, alternating, in each other’s places.

Perhaps we are not so far away from the integration of science, spirituality, and art. Psychologist and historian Elinor Gadon is one who identifies a change: “In the late twentieth century there is a growing awareness that we are doomed as a species and planet unless we have a radical change of consciousness. The re-emergence of the Goddess is becoming the symbol and metaphor for this transformation of culture.” Gadon mentions analysts Edward

¹³On the definitional problems of “auditory,” see, for example, MacKay 126-7.

¹⁴Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 24; 156n.178, 16-7n.183, 157-8n.184.

Whitmont, Esther Harding, and John Rowan as some scholars who are documenting the transformation. Scientists (such as James Lovelock of the “Gaia Hypothesis”), Third World shamans, the Feminist movement, and many artists have contributed to the evolving consciousness which is changing both the way people think and dream and the world itself (Gadon 229-32). In this process, art has again become ritual (232).

H.D. at the end of her life, finally coming home to herself, publicly: “Winged words make their own spirals. Caught up in them we are lost, or found.”¹⁵ Her poetry and prose make such spirals—the ultimate symbol of feminine energy and wholeness. Early in her career, H.D. complained that she wanted an audience to appreciate the energy of her poetry rather than its substance. With the above metaphor, spoken near the end of her life, she has found a symbol to guide our understanding. Starhawk’s explanation of spirals can bring additional light to the poetry:

Energy flows in spirals. Its motion is always circular, cyclical, wavelike. The spiral motion is revealed in the shape of galaxies, shells, whirlpools, DNA. Sound, light, and radiation travel in waves—which themselves are spirals viewed in a flat

¹⁵ H.D., upon receiving The Gold Medal for Poetry in 1960, awarded once every five years from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She was the first female ever to receive it. The quote is from Robinson 433.

plane. The moon waxes and wanes, as do the tides, the economy, and our own vitality.

The implications of the spiral model are many. Essentially, it means that no form of energy can be exerted indefinitely in one direction only. Always, it will reach a peak, a point of climax, and then turn. In personal terms, activity is balanced by passivity [. . .].

(142-3)

Self-assertion is followed by self-negation, life by death. The cycle repeats itself, as does the motion of H.D.'s poems, rising, falling, returning for renewal. To participate in the spiral dance of energy, to whirl in that womb-space of the world (see Walker, *Dictionary 2*, 14), one becomes something, everything, nothing. As H.D. presented the paradox, from beginning to end of her career, the creation of love and beauty demands a surrender, a loss of ego.

Ecstatic self-annihilation is not a new idea, neither as real-life activity nor as artistic process. Sexuality and literary theorist Karmen MacKendrick has recently investigated such themes. The transgressive nature of ecstatic practices has been convincingly argued, by George Bataille, for one, who “emphasized the transgressive potency of un(re)productive pleasures, linking the erotic to the sacred and both to the economy of sacrifice, of extravagant Nietzschean excess—another way out of the economy of production and consumption” (MacKendrick 5). Romantic thralldom is not subversive, and a Lesbian text is not always

subversive, particularly when it engages in cliché. However, the celebratory, sacred beauty of H.D.'s sexuality is.

By *sexuality*, I mean writing that embodies gender and desire. The artist's self and expression depend upon descent into the void, vortex—*choric* womb. Crediting such experience creates a shift of epistemology. Feminist epistemology: to insist that we know what we know, carnally and intuitively. Sexuality is also subjectivity. H.D. said, "I know, I feel/ the meaning that words hide" (*Trilogy, The Wall Do Not Fall* [39]). Likewise, Feminism is an approach, a method of inquiry that embraces hidden and multiple viewpoints. To read H.D. as a Feminist is to use as many angles as possible (including, for instance, recent developments in cognitive theory) to provide richer reading. Read the body and read from the body. Reject the dualisms of theory and experience, knowledge and feeling. Use positions outside of such Western constructs which themselves create falsely labeled 'objective' material. To read as a rebel is to encourage more readings and to decline claims of ideological neutrality or correctness.

Yet, we must be careful of romanticizing and otherwise simplifying certain readings as unconditionally subversive. Feminism in particular has been legitimately accused of homogenizing the variety of female experiences. As is the case with psychoanalysis, its usefulness in addressing Lesbian experience is limited. Feminist psychoanalytic theorist Teresa De Lauretis explains that both camps must either expand to accommodate female-female desire as *different* or

give way to new theories. De Lauretis argues for the existence of a particular Lesbian psychology.

H.D. was quite intentional about her location of otherness and “insistence on the authority of the outsider” (Friedman, *Intro. to H.D. (1886-1961)*, 89). She also consciously addressed, in art and criticism, the subtleties of marginality and its intersections, notably those of sexuality, nationality, race, religion, political affinity, and gender. She supported artists who were struggling from these margins (89-91). Yet, it is still so difficult for us to comprehend the significance of these positions. Friedman herself would appear oblivious to H.D.’s Lesbianism in the very introduction that discusses H.D.’s otherness. The closing paragraph begins: “Women, not only men, were important to the formation of H.D.’s modernism. The supportive web of friendships that over her lifetime included Bryher [. . .]” (90) it would seem was composed chiefly of men. Not only is “friendship” a total misnomer for the life partnership between H.D. and Bryher, but its centrality is implicitly denied. Our understanding of the work itself—and modernism—must be profoundly shaped by these cartographies of gender, by semantics of what counts as erotic, significant, or literary. Otherness was the very foundation of H.D.’s selfhood and ability to write. Always an American, for instance, she nonetheless found that she had to expatriate in order to locate her origins (Rosenmeier 200).

In H.D.’s time, the lines around legitimate discourse and inquiry were

even more clearly drawn than they are today. That which was inside and that which was outside culture—as in acceptable discourse—was apparent.

Dissolving boundaries of right and wrong, knower and known, is always a threat, as H.D. was well aware. This threat caused her to censor herself in writing and in other self-expression, as it did all the poets of her generation—at least those we read today. Thus the volcanic compression in her imagism and initials. Cixous and Clément explain the semiotic¹⁶ repression of Feminist articulation:

For a long time, still, bodily, within her body she has answered the harassment, the familial conjugal venture of domestication, the repeated attempts to castrate her. Woman, who has run her tongue ten thousand times seven times around her mouth before not speaking, either dies of it or knows her tongue and her mouth better than anyone. Now, I-woman am going to blow up the Law: a possible and inescapable explosion from now on; let it happen, right now, in language. (95)

But that is 1986—and it is certainly not canonical. H.D.'s tongue was still well in her cheek, loaded.

In H.D.'s time, recognizing the knowledge within her body, the

¹⁶I use the word *her* to mean “corporeal-linguistic” rather than more generally “signifying” or more specifically “*choric*” (being limited in English, unlike in French, to having one word for semiotic, which must then mean all of the above).

knowledge that came to her when she discovered her sexuality, was an act that would be disciplined to the extent that it might overtly provide new paradigms. Thus H.D.'s silencing into the confines of her passionate body, into pits of madness, retreating behind her seeing eyes, leaving perhaps that gleam to which Ostriker refers—that “mad glint” with which we must in turn read her.

Hysteria, etymologically, historically, theoretically, socially—is by definition that which reflects the female body. H.D.'s writing is then hysterical, attempting to live through the body. It reaches across disciplines, as madness is prone to do, according to psychoanalytic scholar Shoshana Felman (12). Today, though we might pretend to understand and discuss madness, we are still subject to biased belief that some people are able to speak intelligibly while others are not. For instance, Foucault's well-known definition of madness as that which cannot speak parallels Lacan's idea that woman cannot speak (because, after all, he says, she does not exist). But, as Felman points out, “since there is no metalanguage, could it not be that writing madness and writing *about* it, speaking madness and speaking *of* it, would eventually converge—somewhere where they least expect to meet? And might it not be at that meeting place that one could situate, precisely, *writing?*” (14) Madness in (and of) writing is a profoundly political issue, at the center of the questions “who gets to speak, when, to what effect?” Felman argues that madness must be precisely that which is literary, since literature is literary to the extent that it resists interpretation (253-4). That

which must be said and can be said no other way is that synthesis of the semiotic and the symbolic and of the individual and the universal. Yet, with its particular methodologies, it can be interpreted *as literature*: “it seems to me that, if only we knew how to listen, literature might have something entirely new to say about *rhythm*—rhythm being the story itself, that which mediates between meaning and meaninglessness. The rhythm of reading is in turn that which manifests our untold relation to the text” (Felman 254). May my rhythm be rich.

Reading H.D.’s ‘late’ work was a homecoming for me. For the first time since discovering radical Lesbian poetry (Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, Olga Broumas, Pat Parker . . .) in my teens, a world opened up that both spoke to and enlarged my own. Judging from the explosion of interest in H.D.—interest of Feminists, Lesbians, semiologists, and scholars of the occult, to begin with—I am not alone in this experience. First I came upon the treasure *Paint It Today* (as presented by Martha Nell Smith in a C.U.N.Y. course—*American Sexual Poetics*) and was astounded that I could have been missing this woman all along.

Had I read her imagist poems? Surely I had. Nevertheless, the profound enjoyment of this text—the first that truly convinced me of the difficulty of distinguishing prose from poetry—far overshadowed any previous introduction. This H.D. was a new one, and Cassandra Laity and Karla Jay had performed the

daring act of excavating her; *Paint It Today's* sisters—*Asphodel* and *HERmione*—came out around the same time. The cover, featuring a nostalgic and lovely photo of the young H.D., also boasted a labrys (Lesbian double-headed ax) with the imprint title—*The Cutting Edge*. What more could a third-level discouraged graduate student want? The adventure started, and I had my dissertation topic before I knew how I had chosen it. The more I read, the more was published by and about H.D., often, yes, along the same lines of inquiry that I was pursuing. Did I fall into romantic thralldom with H.D., who has had that effect on so many, during her life and posthumously? More than that, I was seduced by her rhythms and sensuous, majical sounds: the voice of the poet, beckoning and retreating, insistently there, whispering in my ears.

H.D. scholars refer to themselves as a community of friends (email from Cassandra Laity 6/3/1999) and “lovers” of H.D. (Jaffer 8). They are passionate about scholarship as well as poetry. Frances Jaffer is one who speaks eloquently of how coming across H.D. changed her life: “Discovering these poems was a turning point for me. I was fifty, just diagnosed with cancer and beginning to write. And I had found a great poet” (3). While at first she found H.D. “too crazy” and had to “learn to read” *HERmione*, the work paid her with the ability to write her own lyric poetry (6). It opened her eyes to the links among many goddess images. More tellingly, Jaffer says, “H.D. sanctioned me as a fully human woman and artist open to the deep unity of experience” (8). The

experience of reading H.D. is the important event, rather than the gathering of interpretations. Jaffer repeatedly discusses the sounds of the poetry in her essay titled *A Gift of Song*, and closes the essay with a summary of her ritual encounters of being regularly “transported again by her song” (8).

Robert Creeley’s brief diary of his relationship with H.D. is perhaps the most telling account. At first, he just did not get it because nothing prepared him to understand it conceptually and the emotions seemed foreign as well. Even after Pound’s bidding, another feminine quality discouraged his reading—this time the use of personal history. Finally, the “tangible measure—a pace [. . .] in literalizing sounds” did something so strong he is not ashamed to say “It broke my heart” (15). He finds her not only “heroic” but, by virtue of “that voice¹⁷ with its absolute sounding of each interval of word, each cadence,” an extraordinary poet by anyone’s standards. On multiple levels, he takes up her cause:

Much more recently, at a gathering committed to her honor, I was displaced by someone’s proposing that we, as readers, need not finally be possessed by the visions so insistent in her work—as though we might rationally understand and yet avoid what so compelled her. I do not think so. (16)

This is not the kind of writing Auden was referring to when he said that poetry

¹⁷His comment follows having listened to her recording of *Helen*.

makes nothing happen. For H.D., who was commanded, by an unidentified voice, to “write, write or die” (*Hermetic Definition*), poetry meant living.

The difference between H.D. and some other modernists with spiritual concerns is that H.D. is not creating “supreme fiction” (Stevens). Her prayer is more than posturing: it is real. Whether or not we believe in ritual’s magical effects on the outside world, we know it transforms its participants. H.D.’s work textualizes the historical and personal divine feminine. It connects women with their mothers, daughters, and sisters. It brings together body and intelligence. It infuses subjectivity with the female. It claims new identities for self and poetry and places them solidly in the center of the canon.

Writers like H.D. take us places for which we may not yet have names. As the tribute from her hometown noted, “She was an anachronism” (Gehman D-1). She used semiology, the body as pen (Kolokithas 73), before the rest of the world had begun to imagine it. Marginalized writers have often had to engage strange strategies to make their meanings known, even to conjure voices. They may, like Olga Broumas and Monique Wittig, prefer to start from “O,”¹⁸ that female space of vulva, womb, and mouth: *chora*. The “O” is a circle where every beginning is also an end. It is the place where subjectivity is first made

¹⁸ Several pages in Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* have marked on them only a single “O.” The dictionary she co-wrote with Sande Zeig (*Lesbian Peoples: Materials for A Dictionary*) defines itself as a “lacunary”; it attempts to erase the concept of

possible, both identity assertion and ecstatic merging. Like Cixous and Clément's *newly born woman (la jeune née)*, the self there born incorporates its own destruction/deconstruction: *là je née* (there I am born) is pronounced *là je n'est*: there I am not. Thus H.D.'s paradoxical articulation of composite life and death states has parallels with contemporary Lesbian-Feminist theory and aesthetics. We have circled around to her.

At the close of *Helen*, she warns us to remember. What is at stake in forgetting the Mother, as Achilles found out: our hearts and the world. Let us then hear the message, "though perhaps we do not wholly understand": "the seasons revolve around/ a pause in the infinite rhythm/ of the heart and of heaven." *Heart* and *heaven*. These two words which begin with heavy breaths link the body and the divine, what we can feel somatically and what we know in other ways, the woman's carnal self and the Goddess. The *uni*-verse, one, is yet made of many disparate elements. In the eternal present, time repeats itself. However, without breaks, without pause and without death, there is no possibility of change or event—no unfurling of the reddest rose. Stevens says, "Death is the mother of beauty." H.D.'s last literary words are "Night brings the Day" (*Hermetic Definition* 55). Her work is finally having its day.

"woman" with the definition "obsolete." Olga Broumas' tremendously influential and award-winning *Beginning with O* spatters the symbol throughout.

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