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HELEN OF TROY: HER MYTH IN MODERN POETRY

City University of New York PH.D. 1986

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HELEN OF TROY: HER MYTH IN MODERN POETRY

by

ROSANNE WASSERMAN

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

1986

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19 Mar 86 — Executive Officer

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Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

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Abstract

HELEN OF TROY: HER MYTH IN MODERN POETRY

by

Rosanne Wasserman

Adviser: Lillian Feder

Helen is one of the best known, most frequently named figures of classical mythology, the image of female beauty as the world's desire. The popularity of her myth in the twentieth century rivals that of Hercules and Odysseus. However, few students of modern English and American poetry are familiar with the complexity of her legends, or comprehend the extent to which modern poets and writers have recreated her figure. This study categorizes the main variations of Helen's figure and studies their appearances in several modern works. It focuses on a set of closely interrelated poetic texts that have been particularly influential on contemporary ideas of Helen.

The first chapter reviews ancient versions of Helen's myth, by authors whose influence has been felt most strongly by modern poets. These sources range from Vedic poetry to Homer, Sappho, Stesichorus, Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, Theocritus, Vergil, Ovid, and Gnostic literature. Four main variants of Helen's figure are identified: Helen of Sparta, the maiden before the Trojan War; the adulteress Helen of Troy; the innocent Helen in Egypt, hidden by King Proteus while an eidolon, an image of air, took her place in Troy; and the mystic Helen

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of Tyre, the Gnostic reincarnation of the Greek Helen, a holy prostitute who accompanied Simon Magus and inspired his heresies.

The three central chapters are devoted to the major modern revitalizations of Helen's figure created by W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and H. D. A chapter on each poet examines the literary and biographical influences that drew each writer toward Helen's figure--the "mythos" from which her form was reborn--then offers detailed readings of poems, examining "poesis"--each poet's unique textual strategies for the recreation of her myth.

The final chapter studies Helen's appearances in works by several American poets. Santayana, Teasdale, Benèt, and Jeffers are briefly reviewed, then works by Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, John Ashbery, and Judy Grahn are examined in detail. The conclusion analyses various contradictory dimensions of Helen, including beauty and rape, light and blindness, divinity and humanity.

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Preface

Several mentors have helped me to write this dissertation. The support and criticism of my thesis advisor, Lillian Feder, has kept me from wandering. Charles Molesworth read the manuscript and offered praise while encouraging fresh directions. John Ashbery delighted me with his spontaneous offer of "The Egyptian Helen" for my use in this study, and with his generosity in agreeing to act as a reader.

My loved friend Ned Hoopes, who died in 1984, nurtured this work in its inception and sat with me for hours revising the prospectus.

Jane Epstein has been a rare and valuable friend, a persevering and thoughtful reader. Her conversation helped me to organize the texts and to orchestrate a set of critical approaches; she also opened her home to me, and much of this dissertation was written there.

I come to the figure of Helen much as H. D. did, in a net of relationships; as poet, woman, daughter, sister, and wife. Among my friends in poetry whose lives and writings have led me to this work are Ruth Stone and her daughter Blue Jay Stone. Tom Weatherly first showed me H. D.'s writings in 1974. I owe thanks to my parents for their patient encouragment and support, and my brothers' interest in my work has meant much to me. Eugene Daniel Richie, my husband, has listened to my ideas, read my writings, given me criticism and praise, and continues to win my heart each new day.

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Acknowledgements

Quotations from the letters of H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) are used here through the kind permission of David E. Schoonover, Curator, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. I wish to thank Perdita Schaffner for access to H. D.'s unpublished work.

"The Egyptian Helen" appears here by permission of the author, John Ashbery, to whom copyright reverts.

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Chapter 1. Facets of Helen

ONE OF THE BEST KNOWN, most frequently named figures of classical mythology is Helen, the embodiment of "all that is perfect in woman,"[1] female beauty as the world's desire. The popularity of her myth in this century rivals that of Hercules and Odysseus.[2] Yet seldom does a reference to her myth acknowledge the complexity of her legends, or reveal the extent to which modern poets and writers have recreated her figure. In literature from Homer's time to ours, Helen's myths have awakened powerful questions: aesthetic and ethical issues, emotional forces, complexities of the imagination, and fierce social conflicts. Perhaps the study of her figure has been subject to the same "deep cultural and religious biases" that account for a former scholarly avoidance of Aphrodite.[3] Certainly the complications and variations of

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[1] "All that is Perfect in Woman," by William Carlos Williams, The Collected Later Poems, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp. 139-141.

[2] W. B. Stanford's The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963) is a well-known example of thematological studies devoted to mythical figures; another is G. Karl Galinsky, The Herakles Theme (Oxford, 1972). Other subjects of monographs include Zeus, Prometheus, Orpheus, Dionysos, the Great Mother, and Apollo; and more recently Aphrodite, Hera, Psyche, and various female figures.

[3] As Paul Friedrich describes in The Meaning of Aphrodite (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 2, 211 n.

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her myth are too vast to catalogue.[4] But given the generative and symbolic power of her figure in modern literature, it is vital to understand and explore the meanings and implications of Helen and her myths, both in ancient versions and major modern revitalizations of her figure in English. The persistent dimensions of this mythic figure involve motives and intuitions that have long informed our civilization and its history.

Methodology

My theoretical approaches are interdisciplinary, concerned with several dimensions of Helen's myth--with the psychological structures, semiotic implications, historical background, and poetic creation of the texts in which her figure comes to life. In the first two of these approaches the works of Melanie Klein and Julia Kristeva serve as points of departure. For the third, I am inspired by Paul Friedrich's interdisciplinary study of Aphrodite. The poetic aspect is inherent in the lives and works of the poets themselves. While focusing on W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and H. D., I examine the works of several other poets as well, including Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and John Ashbery, and Judy Grahn.

Myth and psychology have had a long interaction. When studying a mythic figure such as Helen, it is especially important to offer elucidation of adherent emotional responses and motivations as well as

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[4] For example, a diachronic study of just one of her main aspects, the eidolon, contains more than 550 pages: William Andrew Prost's "The Eidolon of Helen: Diachronic Edition of a Myth" (diss. 1977 The Catholic University of America).

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an intellectual analysis of texts and poets. Few poets or readers can approach Helen free from intense feelings about this superlatively beautiful and desirable feminine figure, who is simultaneously human and divine. In fact, the emotions her figure arouses are easily the most persistent aspect of her myths, and are far more accessible than the many contradictory narratives in which she figures.

To understand this emotional level of Helen's myths, we must ask first how myth functions, which arouses semiotic and social questions. First, if myth is, as Lévi-Strauss holds, a system of language with both langue and parole,[5] the kind of information it conveys is distinct from an empirical language of fact. The langue of myth flows from a source in the unconscious. As the poet Robert Duncan writes, mythos recreates the "story of what cannot be told, as mystery is the scene revealed of what cannot be revealed, and the mystic gnosis the thing known that cannot be known. The myth-teller beside himself with the excitement of the dancers sucks in the inspiring breath and moans, muttering against his willful lips; for this is not a story of what he thinks or wishes life to be, it is the story that comes to him and forces his telling."[6] Such langue of myth is not collective dreaming, as Jung held.[7] It is codified for the larger community by means of the

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[5] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., Myth: A Symposium (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 81-109.

[6] Duncan, p. 7.

[7] Ruthven, pp. 79-80.

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parole, the verbal artifice, oracle, prophecy, ritual interjection.[8]

Second, the myth is not the tale alone, but the telling. The word mythos, "anything delivered by word of mouth, word, speech,"[9] reminds us that the myth must exist in a text, a frame, a mouth, a telling; like parole, each crystallization is distinct. As facts are the stuff of langue, so myth is a particular speech about a generality. Though classical authors offer unique versions of Helen's figure and fate, "what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future."[10] Thus Homer, Sappho, and Aeschylus, for example, preserve archaic versions of Helen's figure in their texts, versions that are in turn contained within the Helens of the twentieth century.

"Myth is the truth of the fact, not fact the truth of the myth."[11] That pattern, the truth of those facts most persistently represented by Helen's figure, are, I believe, among the earliest human feelings,[12]

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[8] Jane Harrison, Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion (Cambridge, 1912). As Ruthven suggests, "the moderate position . . . is to believe that myth and ritual 'replicate each other; the myth exists on the conceptual level and the level of action' (Lévi-Strauss) [op. cit., p. 232]," p. 39.

[9] Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford, 1889).

[10] Lévi-Strauss, p. 85.

[11] Kathleen Raine, "On the Mythological," Defending Ancient Springs, quoted by Robert Duncan, The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography (Fremong, Mich.: Sumac, 1968), p. 5.

[12] See, e.g., the sun worship of the Rig Veda (Friedrich, pp. 36-39), the bird mother goddess of the Old European Civilization in Marija Gimbutas, The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 7000 to 3500

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emotions ambivalent at conception, convictions composed of both the real and the unreal. Because myth embraces dream and the mind's dark or confused perceptions, it can reveal areas inaccessible to factual language, beyond the realities of material body and society. These structures that appear where no conscious battle is waged, when disbelief is suspended, are, like the structures of dream, both unrepeatable and universal, at once false and true.[13] Myth signifies an unknowable content by its structure; it means more than its symbolic language. Like da Vinci's mysterious figures pointing beyond the borders of his late drawings, myth points to a locus of being and becoming beyond its frames of narrative and character. In the myths of Helen, conflicting emotion appears at every angle of the narratives; truth and falsehood can be found on all sides, within each character, as the vision and desire of the teller sway the tale's perspective.

What is true and what is false has no relevance to the magical transformation inherent in the ritual recreation of a myth. An analogue to that ritual may be found in modern views of poetry; for example, W. H. Auden writes: "In poetry the rite is verbal; it pays homage by

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B.C.: Myths, Legends, and Cult Images, rev. ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

[13] "It is both false and true at the same time," writes Lillian Feder: "Myths, of course, express man's deepest self-deceptions--his creation of gods in his own image, his attribution to himself, or to a creature formed to mirror his marvelous fantasies, of powers of control beyond those of any human being ever born. Yet only in these fantastic forms can man reveal certain of his fears, his desires, and his tentative apprehension of the real world and his own nature. What he discloses about himself in myth can be expressed in no other way, for the expository language of rational thought cannot contain it." Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 78.

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naming."[14] Auden's words seem to turn on the derivation of "homage" from homme; the rite transforms what it names into an equal of the namer. When a poet uses Helen's name to praise, describe, or condemn a certain woman, object, or idea, several acts of identification and transformation occur: the poet identifies with the one named as Helen; the one named as Helen is transformed for the community, who adopt her figure as a form of absolute desire, extending Helen's name and significance to the named one, the namer, and even to the seductive tale itself.

This linguistic ritual has roots in the infant's psyche. Myth grows from our world not only as we perceive it, but as we love and hate it--as we receive the world before we can choose, distinguish, judge; as we hear it spoken before we can answer. Melanie Klein describes the process of introjection, in which the infant "in his phantasy, takes into himself everything which he perceives in the outside world," through his mouth and the senses and functions of his entire body. Every pleasant stimulus is related to the gratifying breast; every unpleasant one to a "hostile" or denying breast. Further, aggressive and erotic feelings focus on the breast as well, producing greedy and destructive fantasies of plunder and revenge.[15]

Klein's theories of projection and introjection help to explain the genesis of the dialectic between beauty and rape, as well as to

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[14] "Making, Knowing, and Writing," The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 57.

[15] Melanie Klein, "Weaning," Love, Guilt, and Reparation & Other Works 1921-1945 (New York: Delta, 1975), pp. 290-293.

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show how the same figure can be viewed as both passive and active, good and evil. Projection both deflects the death instinct outwards toward the child's first object (usually the mother) and imbues the object with libido, creating of that same object an imagined bad mother and good mother. Klein adapts Freud's theories of the death instinct to her own research. She theorizes that introjection combats the death instinct, because it takes in life-giving objects (first of all food). During the infant's first three months of life, the mother's breast provides both the idealized good object taken in by the child, imagined as part of the child, and the frustrating bad object, imagined as withholding and denying the gratification and comfort the child desires. The child projects onto the breast the grateful and positive emotions felt when satisfied, as well as the angry, negative feelings when hunger or greed prevent full satisfaction. Thus, the breast is seen as good or as destructive, as giving or withholding. When the good mother is not present, the child imagines she is lost, injured, or prevented from returning by the bad, envious, greedy mother who wishes to keep her benefits all to herself.[16]

Helen's figure can be read in light of these theories. As the most beautiful woman, she remains a supremely idealized good object. Such idealization, as well as the jealous anger that has its roots in infancy, make it possible for her loss to be imagined as rape; yet the agency of that rape is ambiguous. She steals herself, or Aphrodite steals her, as much as she is stolen by her lovers. This very absence

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[16] This summary draws from Klein, "On the Development of Mental Functioning," Envy and Gratitude, pp. 236-246.

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gives rise to the vision of Helen as evil. Greed for her benefits--beauty, love, sovereignity, immortality--further complicates this vision. Greedy for the good object, the mother's nourishing breast, the child desires to ravish or devour it completely. But fantasies then project this oral greediness onto the breast, and a fear is born that the mother will in turn want to incorporate or destroy the child.[17] So the thousands of dead warriors at Troy seem as if devoured by a selfishly sexual queen.[18] The Trojan Horse provides an image of another idea from Klein, that of the introjected bad object, as the idol pregnant with warriors invades a beseiged city. Are Troy and Helen contiguous as victims in this episode, or is she actively calling forth the city's doom? Homer and William Morris suggest the first of these perspectives; Vergil and D. H. Lawrence[19] offer examples of the second.

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[17] Klein, "The Theory of Anxiety and Guilt," p. 30. The same ambivalent emotions are entailed by those experiencing the loss of a loved one to death; thus Helen relates psychologically to Kore. There is a fascinating suggestion of this ambivalence in the Greek verb élko, which may refer to introjection as in the phrase "to suck the breast" or may connote a sparagmos, as in "to tear in pieces" or "tear the hair"; its basic semantic quality is that of drawing or dragging by force. It may also suggest a kind of sexual magnetism, a type of dance, and even rape (as in "to drag about, esp. with lewd violence"). The derivative noun élkos means wound or loss (Liddell and Scott, p. 250). Also of interest is its first syllable's likeness to Helen's name.

[18] As a telling sidelight from Homer, Helen is considered blameless by the men of Troy but shunned by the women; but Paris is repeatedly reprimanded by other warriors for his greed, for being "woman-crazy." This divergence suggests one way in which preoedipal attachments to the mother are differently resolved by male and female children.

[19] See, e.g., Lawrence's "Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabacthani," Complete Poems (New York: Penguin, 1977), pp. 741-743, as discussed by Sandra M. Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 8, no. 3 (Spring 1983), p. 424.

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Certain ideas of Kristeva also seem useful for understanding the development of such a figure as Helen in myth and poetry. Kristeva formulates two linguistic realms available to the infant: a "semiotic" world inhabited by the mother and the preverbal child, to which is opposed the "symbolic" world of the father, in which the sounds of language are given meaning.[20] "Poetic language" is in the mother's realm; it comprises, for Kristeva, all of those rhythmic and musical dimensions of human sound that can be perceived prior to linguistic meaning. This realm of language later persists as a sign of "an other," specifically of the lost mother who was once coextensive with the self. When language is acquired, the child must abandon the purely "semiotic realm" in order to recognize an individual self. The mother and her body, her voice, her milk, are rejected as other than that self. The task of definition of self creates this place of abjection, terror, meaninglessness, and loss, a place where the self does not exist. "All abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded."[21] But also dwelling in this non-place are sublime emotions of coextension with the cosmos lost to one who wields symbolic language. "Poetic language" thus contains, Kristeva posits, a feminine spirit who is either sublime--perfect in

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[20] For these specialized meanings of "semiotic" and "symbolic" see Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 17-19, and the essay "From One Identity to Another," pp. 124--147. See also Kristeva's Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, trans. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 7-9, 12-13, ff.

[21] Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 5.

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beauty and wholeness--or abject--rejected and denied. As emotion toward the mother, so emotion toward this nonsensical, nonsymbolic part of language.

I find these ideas relevant to the mythic figure Helen. As the most beautiful woman, Helen equates with that good object most desired by all. She does not represent the "symbolic," meaningful names of the realm of the father, but the "semiotic" sounds of the mother: names do not adhere to her figure so firmly as music does. The words of a "symbolic language" are not even adequate to describe her appearance, which frequently is likened only to a sublime light. But as a type of "the lost one,"[22] she embodies the inescapable separation between the self and the good object coextensive with the self, a separation that must result with the accession of language. Like other lost goddesses, Helen also has negative aspects, a chthonic nature, whether as destroyer of ships, men, and cities or as abject whore. As such, she embodies the child's fear of loss of life or of self if it remains coextensive with the mother, in a place where no signs can be made to communicate with the living world. Is it therefore paradoxical that among the Gnostic names for the prostitute Helen of Tyre are Sophia, "wisdom," and "Ennoia," thought or conception? I believe not--since the Gnostics claimed to know their truths beyond language itself.

Many early myths and rituals rehearse the constant departure and return of a beloved and beautiful object. Such goddesses as Demeter-Persephone, the early Vedic dawn goddess, and the Muse are described as

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[22] For Helen as "lost one," see Richmond Lattimore, Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964).

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lost and found, departing and returning, and sometimes as responsive to a call from those whom she has abandoned.[23] The child's earliest cries express at once a desire that only the return of the beloved mother can satisfy, and at the same time an unfulfillable frustration and fear of destruction so powerful that infant cries can sometimes bring her back. Helen's image and her myth are signs of, signs for this first desire.

In many societies the woman has remained an object serving as property to be exchanged between masculine subjects.[24] This view of women was the case at the time of the codification of Homeric epic.[25] Women are exchanged between warriors throughout the Iliad--notably Briseis between Agamemnon and Achilles. Helen is also an object, but her retrieval is of ultimate importance, whether because she is Menelaus' property-deed to kingship of Sparta, or because she is the most convenient excuse to ransack Troy.

A second and much later cultural development had an equally power-

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[23] See Friedrich for dawn goddesses, pp. 193-195; for analogies between Aphrodite and Demeter-Persephone, see pp. 181-184, 210.

[24] See Joan Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society," pp. 263-280; Karen Sacks, "Engels Revisited: Women, the Organization of Production, and Private Property," pp. 207-222, in Michelle Zimbalist Rosalod and Louise Lamphere, eds., Woman, Culture, and Society (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

[25] See Marilyn B. Arthur, "Early Greece: The Origins of the Western Attitude Toward Women," in John Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan, eds., Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 17: " . . . the moral code encompassed men alone. Chastity or faithfulness for women in such a period was not a moral obligation but a simple regulation which was ordinarily adhered to; when the rule was broken it was a matter between the men in whose power the women were understood to be and whose responsibility they were."

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ful influence of the modern perceptions of Helen's myths. During the fifteenth century, courtly literature created an idealized woman whose value was her immutable, infinite, and mystical position as other. Scholars have theorized that the origins of this cult of the lady are located in ancient Chinese poetry, whose influence arrived in Southern France by way of Arabic verse.[26] In addition, the orientalized religion of the Gnostics, pursued by modern devotees of the occult, presents a similar Helen at once holy and wholly other than human. To a large degree, these related historical models--the classical, the Gnostic, and the courtly--inform the ideas of Helen in the twentieth century.

A third and especially insidious cultural factor in the modern reawakening of Helen's figure seems to implicate the industrial revolution itself. New excesses of time and leisure, new technology and products for the housewife as consumer, led women to spend more of their time and money on beauty.[27] In addition, the search for alternatives to the patriarchal deity, a search reflected in the writings of the decadent poets and exacerbated by the emotions of World War I, began to place a subtle pressure on women to fulfil the expectations of lovers who increasingly idealized women as goddesses of beauty, strength, and wisdom.[28]

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[26] See, e.g., Alois Richard Nykl, Hispano-Arabic Poetry and its Relations with the Old Provençal Troubadours (Baltimore: J. H. Furst, 1946), cited by Kristeva, "The Bounded Text," Desire in Language, p. 61.

[27] For a discussion of this phenonomenon in popular American culture, see Lois W. Banner, American Beauty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[28] See Gilbert, "A Soldier's Heart."

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In a selected group of texts, the poetic aspects of the myth unify the other dimensions--psychological, semiotic, and historical. Since the myth exists in a text or a telling, as the product of a given cultural horizon, located in time and space, a study of the texts of a myth should include and extend beyond both diachronic cataloguing and synchronic descriptions of features. I explore here, in Friedrich's words, "the history of a structure and the structure of a history."[29] Yeats, Pound, and H. D. brought an intense poetic attention to bear upon Helen, revitalizing her figure with their poetry to such a degree that their versions will long influence our conceptions of the myth. This mythopoetic interaction resulted from what Pound would have called a vortex--synonymous, I believe, with Friedrich's idea of a time horizon, in which a myth is formulated. He contends that "by looking hard at dynamic in time and through time and, on the other hand, within one given time horizon, we can attain to insights that are denied to the advocates of an exaggerated historicity, on the one hand, or of an extreme 'synchronic' position, on the other."[30]

I distinguish four main ways in which a mythic text reflects the concerns of its cultural horizon: by permitting a conscious enshrinement of ethical and aesthetic values; by embodying in its actions and

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[29] Friedrich, p. 5.

[30] Ibid. If it is true, as Ruthven states, that a drawback of thematological studies consists in their all teaching the same lessons--for "myths go through much the same stages in mirroring the different preoccupations of different ages, with the result that a diachronic analysis of any one myth provides a model for all the rest" (Myth, p. 73)--then what Friedrich calls a "panchronic" approach should avoid this drawback by providing both specific information and nonredundant insights into poets, texts, and myths.

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assumptions the integrative and disintegrative structures of a society; by revealing in its themes, plots, and characters the psychology and spirit of the individual and his culture; and by providing a form for the emotional expression of both poet and audience. Thus, the text of a myth reflects the intellectual, historical, psychological, and emotional coordinates of its creator and time, making identification of its structures lend to the interpretation of its meanings.[31]

In analyzing Helen's meanings for the cultural milieu shared by Yeats, Pound, and H. D., I use three frames or categories: mythos, poesis, and synthesis. Mythos considers the texts and traditions, classical and later, from which the poets draw, as well as their immediate poetic experience, which determined new developments.[32] Poesis deals with the textual strategies that present each poet's formulations. Synthesis summarizes the features of Helen synchronically, assessing the dimensions of meanings that she retains or acquires in these new poetic manifestations.

In order to determine Helen's significance for these poets before they reclaimed her myth for new incarnations, I turn first to a largely diachronic presentation, discussing texts and dimensions of Helen from pre-Homeric sources through the Gnostics. A great body of mythological literature, from Greek epic to contemporary opera, first presents a poet with knowledge of and attitudes toward a mythic figure. Each poet

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[31] Although the structure of that meaning can be far too complex to identify completely, as its dimensions "interlock along many planes and angles" (Friedrich, p. 72).

[32] By "mythos," I mean to imply not only the narrative texts containing the myth, but also the pattern of meaning underlying those texts.

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fits the inherited figure into a unique poetic context, as the myth informs and illuminates personal responses to beauty. In the following chapters I refer to these precedent texts, asking, for example, to what extent the poets borrowed or departed from their sources.

But the poet's participation in a mythic structure only begins with these inherited forms and traditions. Equally powerful influences are personal revelations of mythic content--situations in society, community, or family; spiritual epiphanies; intense emotional experience--that cause a poet to recognize the myth as a personal gnosis, to appropriate its forms as poetic necessities. What biographical factors determined the poets' responsiveness to Helen? How did they identify Helen with the beautiful thing or with beauty itself?

However, not only the forms of mythic figures are inherited by literary precedent. Tradition also stipulates certain technical mysteries that the poet retains or alters; for example, ancient Greek precedent supplies not only a set of names related to any mythic figure--characters, gods, places--and their various relationships, but also the genres of lyric, drama, and epic; and such points of view as bard, first-person narrator, or extratextual commentator; or dramatic dialogue. Thus H. D. yokes the Stesichorean voice of the Palinode's bard to a Sapphic, first-person lyricist in Helen in Egypt, resulting in a poet-Helen who refashions her own myth with a passionate, questing music. While involved in such responses to traditional forms and formulas, however, a poet may at the same time generate new forms of the myth: as name suggests name, image begets image, and emotion rekindles precedent texts. The invention of fresh methods for invoking

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the mythic figure is of special importance to these poets concerned with modernism. The exigencies of poetic creation have participated in refashioning the myth, and special textual strategies have interacted and counteracted to produce new versions of Helen's myth.

Modern Poets

Among the many writers who turned to Helen's myths in the twentieth century are three outstanding poets in particular. W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and H. D. brought Helen's figure into poetry, prose, and drama, drawing extensively on earlier traditions as well as adding new plots, characterizations, and dimensions of meaning to the myths. Close emotional and artistic interactions influenced one another's formulations of Helen; nevertheless, their approaches to and involvements with the mythic figure could scarcely be more varied. Among other poets in English drawn to Helen's myths are William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, John Ashbery, and Judy Grahn. In addition, major modern Helens have been also been created by continental authors Jean Giraudoux, Nikos Kazantzakis, George Seferis, André Suarès, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal.[33]

My three central chapters present an interpretive assessment of Helen's meanings for Yeats, Pound, and H. D. Focusing on these three closely related conceptions of Helen's figure not only reveals new aspects of the myth, but also suggests why the myth resumed intense life in our times. Generally, I would agree with Paul Friedrich that the richest insight into a mythical figure can be obtained from "one or

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[33] See bibliography for these references.

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two complex, clearly defined, and more or less bounded sets of excellent texts."[34] Following is a brief preliminary map of Helen's appearances in each poet's work.

Helen assumed a complex symbolism for Yeats. Initially, she embodied his long and unfulfilled love for Maud Gonne, the beautiful Irish patriot of "No Second Troy." As his use of Helen evolved, Yeats also employed her traditional connections with aesthetic creation. The fateful consequences of Helen's beauty are invoked with the rape of Leda by Zeus as swan, and by the burning towers of Troy. In "When Helen Lived," the myth is no longer solely a mask for Gonne, but implies every "beauty that we have won/From bitterest hours"[35]--the poet's struggles with his art. Yeats found analogues for Helen in Irish history and legend, producing such stories as "Dust Hath Closed Helen's Eye" and the plays Deirdre and Diarmuid and Grania. Within the mystical system of A Vision, Helen is called one of "those women who are most touching in their beauty," possessed of a "unified antithetical energy," and endowed in "a strange irresponsible innocence."[36] This Helen, at the moon's fourteenth phase, is approaching the inhuman perfection of a dancing girl at the fifteenth; she is strangely impassive: "Is it not because she desires so little, gives so little,

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[34] Friedrich, p. 6.

[35] W. B. Yeats, from Responsibilities (1914), in Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 108-109.

[36] W. B. Yeats, A Vision (New York: Collier, 1966), pp. 132, 133.

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that men will die and murder in her service?" Yeats asks.[37] In "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," Helen is still more closely related to the dancing girl, who appears between Buddha and Sphinx at the fifteenth phase. Similarly, a Helen dances between stanzas on Caesar and Michelangelo in "Long-Legged Fly." Unlike the Victorians' fantasies of Helen, Yeats's real-life and Irish heroines, as well as his inclusion of Helen in a great mythical system, inspired later poets' interpretations.

For Pound, woman's beauty was no less a motivation to high poetry and great deeds than for Yeats, although many more women, texts, and attitudes informed his references to Helen. "Homage to Sextus Propertius" includes a Helen whose "unsuitable behavior" immortalized Homer.[38] This dual theme of the immorality of the lady, the immortality of her poet, appears throughout Pound's work. His notions of beauty swung between a paradiso and an inferno, between aestheticism, troubadours, and the "old high way of love" that Yeats professed for Maud Gonne on the one hand,[39] and on the other hand the explosive modernism of Wyndham Lewis and vorticism, with its dislike of "femininity" and its distrust of emotion. Pound strove to practice Richard of St. Victor's method for creating paradise by means of "naming over all the

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[37] Ibid., p. 133.

[38] Ezra Pound, "Homage to Sextus Propertius" (1917), Personae: The Collected Shorter Poems (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 218, V:3.

[39] Yeats, "Adam's Curse," Collected Poems, p. 79.

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beautiful things we can think of"[40]--one of the functions of poetry. "The Lady contains the catalogue" of beautiful things, Pound asserted. "She serves as a sort of mantram."[41] Helen's name, however, not only draws back a "heavenly splendor," but also trails with it all the hell of the Agamemnon, the destructions of history. In The Cantos, she symbolizes other war-wed beauties, such as Eleanor, de Maensac's stolen bride, and Elizabeth Tudor; her myth is linked with histories of unhappy lovers. Helen of Tyre is invoked along with Circe, Tellus, and Madam Hyle. One of the most paradisiacal visions of feminine beauty occurs in Canto 63, when an eidolon, as of Helen's image at Troy while she was in Egypt, glimmers in Pound's Pisan incarceration, "a new subtlety of eyes," an apparition "careless or unaware it had not the/ whole tent's room/ nor was place for the full Eidós."[42] Pound's insistence on the immediacy of deity and his recurrent visions of beauty, so similar to H. D.'s intense vision, inspired a generation's idea of Helen.

Only H. D. allows Helen a voice with which to know herself. She has finally made of Helen not an object but a persona, creating one of the most extensive identifications by a modern poet with a single mythical figure. This choice of Helen was strongly determined: H. D.'s

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[40] Pound, "Psychology and Troubadours," The Spirit of Romance (New York; New Directions, 1968), p. 96; and "The Approach to Paris VI," The New Age, Oct. 13, 1913, quoted in Agenda, vol 17, nos. 3-4, p. 71.

[41] "Psychology and Troubadours," pp. 96-97.

[42] The Cantos of Ezra Pound (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 520.

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mother's name was Helen, and people often remarked H. D.'s beauty.[43] Other poets' appropriations of her as muse threatened to undermine her vocation; nevertheless, she desired to be a poet herself, a hero-subject, experiencing rather than inspiring. Her themes became not only the danger to beauty presented by the world that perceives, desires, and destroys the beautiful thing, but also the problems of being and accepting beauty, "a curse, a blessing, a responsibility."[44] H. D. moved among powerful influences--Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Sigmund Freud, and others--yet she continually struggled for an autonomous self in her writing. In Helen, she develops a complex but congruous character whose self-conception, self-value, and self-motivation make the myth utterly new in meaning while maintaining the detailed structures of its ancient forms. In her early lyrics, Helen is a pale Kore, a scapegoat hated by both warring nations. Later, the symbolic, autobiographical lyrics of Winter Love insist that "There was a Helen before there was a war,"[45] as if to remove the stain of guilt and to return her to a self defined before the world's assessment. In the book-length Helen in Egypt, H. D. creates a complex and prophetic modern Helen.

The final chapter carries this discussion of Helen's figure more

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[43] See, for example, Bryher's description in Heart to Artemis: A Writer's Memoirs (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), p. 186.

[44] H. D., "The Cinema and the Classics: Beauty," Close Up 1 (July 1927), p. 33, quoted by Charlotte Mandel, "Garbo/Helen: The self-projection of beauty by H. D.," Women's Studies 7 (1980), p. 132.

[45] H. D. Hermetic Definition (New York: New Directions, 1972), pp. 91, 110, 111, ff.

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deeply into contemporary American poetry. Crane, Williams, Ashbery, and Grahn have each envisioned distinctive versions of Helen. Their images of Helen offer new and peculiarly American aspects of the ancient myth. This study then closes with essays concerning the most evocative persistent dimensions of the figure of Helen.

Helen in Classical Mythology

Helen of Troy has an exceptionally ancient and entangled history in myth and literature. Her presence is invested with mystery from her earliest appearance in literature. The Homeric epic heroine is unquestionably a "faded" goddess: the diction of the poems retains the evidence.[46] At the same time, a goddess Helen was already the center of a cult, which remained active throughout classical civilization, perhaps even enlivened by the popularity of the epic heroine. The goddess Helen has been associated with various other goddesses of the Greek and Mediterranean peoples. These associations are made on the basis of such evidence as parallel stories and themes, etymologies of names, epithets in literature, locale of cults and similarities of cult

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[46] "Helen . . . is one of the most plausible examples of a 'faded' goddess, i. e., one whose original deity has been forgotten, and who has been consequently made into a mortal woman in mythology" according to H. J. Rose and C. M. Robertson, Oxford Classical Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1970), s.v. Helen. Linda Lee Clader modifies this statement: "The divinity of an epic figure is not necessarily 'forgotten,' but is translated into new terms peculiar to the epic genre" (Helen: The Evolution from Divine to Heroic in Greek Epic Tradtion [Leiden: Brill, 1976], p. 2). Paul Friedrich warns that "the issue of 'variants,' 'faded goddesses,' and 'allomorphs' is a subject of controversy among scholars," but he feels nevertheless that "Helen herself is not only a faded Aphrodite in a diachronic sense but is also one of the main variants of Aphrodite within the synchronic system of the eighth and seventh centuries [B.C.]" (pp. 47, 60).

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practices where known. Although some scholars have questioned whether her worship was prior to her appearance in epic, much evidence has been offered to prove her sisterhood to deities antedating Homer.

Two distinct but interdependent versions of Helen's myth resulted from this dichotomy. Most familiar is the Helen of classical epic. More human than divine, this version of the mythic figure derives largely from Homer and the surviving epic cycles, Sappho, certain plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, and Ovid. The Helen whose persona is outlined by these poets was received in turn by Chaucer and Shakespeare.[47] The second direction produced a mystical and philosophical version of the myth, inspired by Stesichorus and developed by Plato and Euripides, but equally influenced by elements surviving from the old religious traditions in Herodotus, Pausanius, and others, and by embroideries in Vergil. The Gnostic Helen is the culmination of this mystic tradition.

Helen's descent into epic[48] made her, instead of the equivalent of the sorceress Circe or the nymph Calypso, one of the company of heroes

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[47] Mihoko Suzuki studies Helen and her analogues "as either emblems of doubleness or figures of ambiguity in the Homeric epics, Virgil's Aeneid, Spenser's Faerie Queene, and Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida, in "Helen's Daughters: Woman as Emblem in the Matter of Troy," Diss. Yale University 1982.

[48] There are no exact epic precedents for the Helen of Homer (for what precedents have been isolated, see Kenneth J. Reckford, "Helen in the Iliad," Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 5 [1964], pp. 5-20), although the plot of a lost wife or sister whose retrieval required the siege and/or sack of a city has analogues in other early epics: the Ugaritic tale of Keret, the biblical stories of Sarah and of Dinah, and elsewhere (Cyrus H. Gordon, The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations [New York: Norton, 1965], pp. 284 ff.). Geoffrey Kirk holds that Keret need not have provided a source for the rape of Helen, since the motif of the abducted wife is so widespread as to be in no need of such specific provenance (The Songs of Homer [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962], p. 107).

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begotten by gods, with Odysseus, Achilles, and Theseus. However, so strong were the daimonic religious aspects of her myth that she never quite became an entirely human figure, such as Penelope or Iphigenia. Even in her most earthly incarnations--in Euripidean drama, for example--uncanny things occur.[49] In many of the texts that treat her myth, her appearance is too bright to see, her femininity too absolute for personality, her actions too ambivalent to understand, her value too great for flesh and blood. She seems, like Hera in Zeus' golden chain, to hang suspended between earth and heaven.

And yet her story has remained deeply responsive to human realities. Homer's Helen is by no means entirely a religious invention. Her epic dimension has roots in actual histories, not only of ancient society but of the individual psyche. It has long been known that a city situated at Troy, on the seventh archaeological level, was destroyed by Achaians from Mycenae, the Greek mercenary center. And in fact it seems that the martial element entered the older Great Goddess myths from such oriental cultures as Troy. Ancient Babylonian texts preserve tales full of lamentations of kidnapped queens and cities ransacked in vengeance.[50]

The religious and social aspects of Helen's myths point to a blend of ancient cultures: the agricultural and matriarchal Old European

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[49] Such as the Dioscuri's intervention in Orestes, or their announcement of her apotheosis in Electra.

[50] See translations by Stephen Langdon, Babylonian Liturgies (1913), reprinted in Judy Grahn, The Queen of Wands (Trumansburg, N. Y.: Crossing Press, 1982). For the historical Helen, see Jack Lindsay, Helen of Troy: Woman and Goddess (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), pp. 57-83.

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Civilization, whose forms were preserved in the Minoan-Mycenaen cultures; and the nomadic, patriarchal, aggressive proto-Indo-European, from which the Semitic and Phrygian civilizations descended. "That the Greeks were matrilocal, the Trojans patrilocal, is supported by the myths, which make Menelaus king of Helen's native city, while Paris carries her from her home to Troy."[51] The extent to which these cultures were able to blend is mirrored in the differences between Iliad and Odyssey. In the first, one woman is surrounded by patriarchal warriors, the strongest of whom is son of a sea goddess. The "poem of force" comprises several types of human power--social forces of shame and guilt, anti-societal force of warfare, emotional forces of love and anger. In the Odyssey, one man moves from goddess to queen to nymph, from female-dominated islands or cities, encounters "feminine" monsters from Scylla to the dark one-eyed Cyclops, is rescued by maidens, and returns at last to the patriarchal Trojan-war model: a single woman besieged by men. The later epic concerns quick cunning and patient endurance, antitheses of the Iliad's aggressive forces.

Later classical times found Helen's myth relevant to other political realities. For instance, in Euripides' Cyclops and Isocrates' "Encomium," she supplies the perfect excuse for warfare, either through greed or idealism. Cyclops's Odysseus takes the sophist's line with Polyphemus, declaring that the Greeks have saved Hellas--which includes the Cyclops' territory--by destroying Phrygian power, but like any threatened barbarian, the Cyclops bristles at inclusion in the imper-

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[51] Sarah B. Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity (New York: Schocken, 1975), p. 19.

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ialistic sweep of Greek empire. The pun on Helen-Hellas invokes a recurrent landscape-mother motif, which Euripides used not to express earth's beauty but to ironically justify patriotic war through appeal to matriotic sentiment.

Latin authors synthesized the earlier Greek plots and themes. By combining existing traditions and regrouping figures and deeds, by investing their characters with deeper emotions and more complex psychologies, and by placing the myth in contemporary social contexts, the poets of Rome pointed new ways of reviving the myth for their own times and for successive cultures. In modern literature, the figure of Helen continues to reflect social, political, and psychological issues with exceptional flexibility, as writers search more deeply into history and psyche for the motivations of aggressive warfare and the meanings of desire.

The mystical uncanniness of Helen's character has also remained deeply relevant to her persistent significance. Her function as goal and motive of strife seems to invest her with a remarkable self-reflective or doubling quality. In the Iliad Helen knows that she and Paris will be "made into things of song" (6.358). Sappho, justifying Helen's choice, redoubles her beauty by calling her most beautiful of mortals, who followed what she believed the most beautiful thing on earth: the one she loved.[52] For Euripides and others, she is both a real woman and an image or eidolon of herself. In the Gnostic gospels, she represents the first thought of God made flesh; in modern psycho-

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[52] Fragment 38, in J. M. Edmonds, Lyra Graeca (London: Heinemann, 1928).

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analysis, she is called the anima itself, the soul of man.[53] Modern poets have availed themselves of all these nuances of Helen's myth, in order to address questions of spirit and flesh, marriage and divorce, love and death, the sacred and profane, masculinity and femininity--questions renewed with each return to her figure, since her name was first sounded in the Iliad.

Versions of Helen

The versions of Helen's myths that appear in typical compendiums of ancient mythology usually run along the following lines. Born of the mortal Leda, wife of Tyndareus of Sparta, and Zeus, who ravished Leda in the form of a swan, Helen hatched from an egg along with her mortal twin sister Clytemnestra. From another egg hatched her brothers the Dioscuri, called Castor and Polydeuces. Helen's beauty was superlative, as befitted Zeus' daughter. Abducted in youth by Theseus, she was rescued by her warlike brothers, who sacked Athens and captured Theseus' mother. When Helen sought a husband, all the heroes of Greece competed for her hand. She chose Menelaus, the brother of the great king Agamemnon of Mycenae; the remaining suitors swore to defend his right against any interloper. But Zeus' will prevailed: during the wedding banquet of the nereid Thetis and the mortal Peleus, the

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[53] C. J. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): "If you want to know what happens when the anima appears in modern society, I can warmly recommend John Erskine's Private Life of Helen of Troy. She is not a shallow creation, for the breath of eternity lies over everything that is really alive." Like Helen, the anima "lives beyond all categories, and can therefore dispense with blame as well as praise" (pp. 28-29).

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Olympians were disturbed by Eris, "Strife," who threw among them an apple or prize marked "for the fairest." Three goddesses claimed it: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. They consulted the shepherd-prince Paris on Mount Ida as judge, each bringing appropriate bribes. Offered the hand of the most beautiful woman by Aphrodite, Paris awarded her supremacy over the others. He sailed to Sparta to become Menelaus' guest, and during his host's absence abducted Helen. The events of the Iliad ensued. Reclaimed at the fall of Troy, Helen saved her life by exposing her still-desirable breasts to Menelaus, who dropped his sword and led her home. They returned to Sparta to hold court in luxury and relative harmony.

Many of the key events even in this short sketch are subject to replication, contradiction, elaboration--any of those means by which poets weave tales. Helen's birth, abduction, sojourn in Troy, return, death, and especially her character are complicated by variants early and late. Human and divine elements are tightly interwoven. Greek and Roman literature preserved several more or less mystical variations on the epic mythology. Three main forms of Helen can be isolated in their texts: the "battle-girt" beautiful woman in Troy;[54] the innocent and faithful wife in Egypt; and the Eidolon, an image made of air, that appeared in Troy while the true Helen was in Egypt. The innocent child Helen in Sparta, a dancing girl described by Theocritus, is related to the good wife Helen in Egypt as well as to early maiden-goddesses; the

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[54] The term "battle-girt," perimachetos, seems to be a survival from Stesichorus, quoted by Plato, Republic 586b-c, and by Isocrates, Encomium on Helen 40, as proposed by Prost, "The Eidolon of Helen," p. 229.

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guilty Helen who died by hanging in Rhodes derives from ancient vegetation rituals. The Helen who lives forever on a white island called Leuke reflects an otherworldly symbolic tradition as old as the Odyssey and Sappho.[55]

A plainly mystical fourth Helen was added some centuries later, during the cross-fertilization of cultures in the first centuries A. D. The Gnostics who arose from this ferment of theologies envisioned a Helen whom they called the Divine Mind made flesh. This feminine principle existed before the world's creation, but fell into material creation and so eventually became Helen of Troy, and continued to fall until she became the whore Helen of Tyre. Although the most powerful texts embodying this figure were lost until recently, enough of her tradition survived to inspire mystics and poets throughout European history.

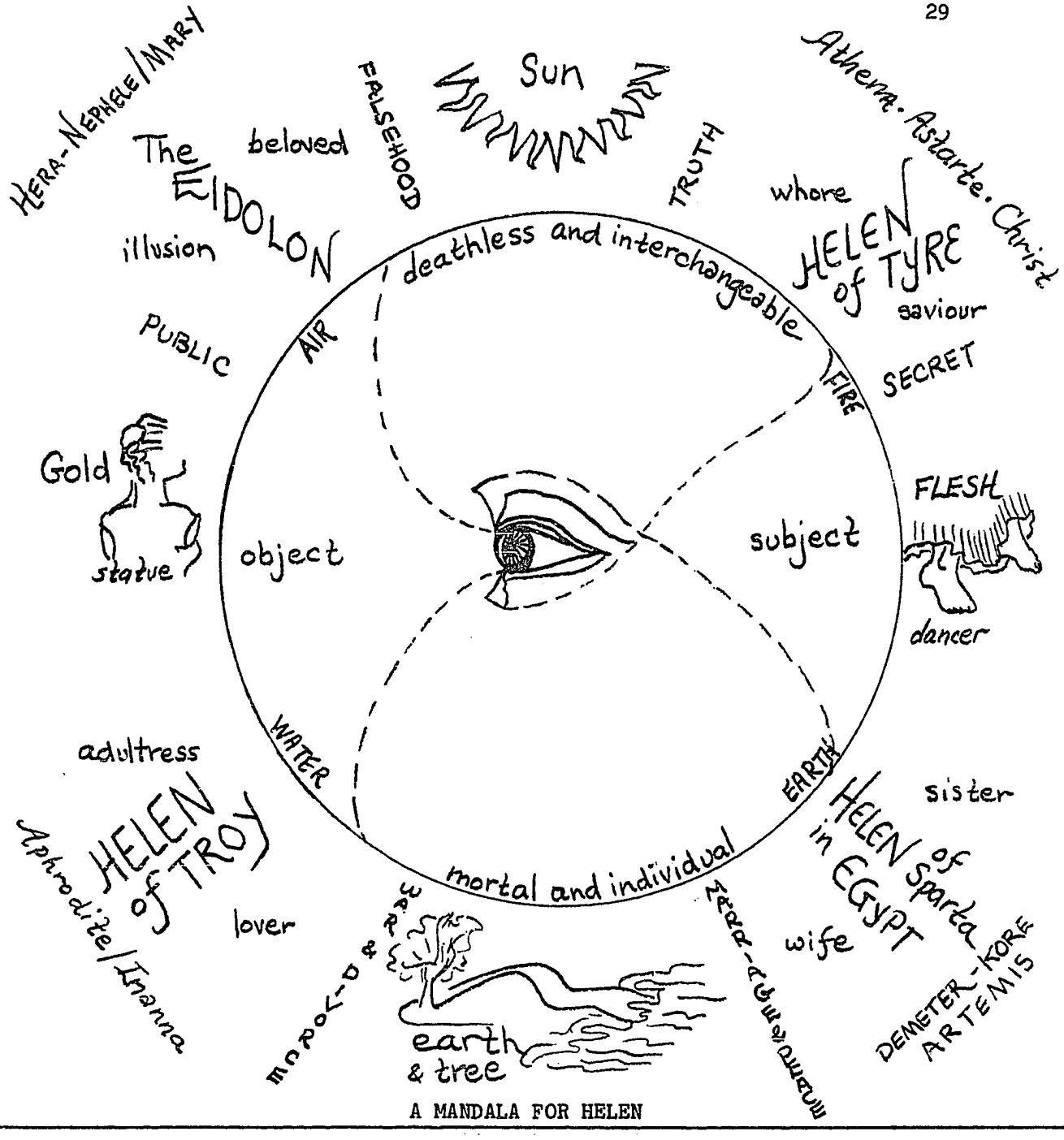
These four main versions of Helen can be arranged in the interrelating pattern of a mandala, like the Jungian scheme that Erich Neumann designed for the great mother goddess archetype[56] (see figure on following page). Once the three earlier Helens are in position, it is easy to see by what necessities the fourth arose. In the sections that follow are detailed discussions of those archaic, epic, and mystical traditions, authors, and texts from which modern poets drew their images of Helen.

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[55] Gregory Nagy, "Phaethon, Sappho's Phaon, and the White Rock of Leukas," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 77 (1973), pp. 172-177.

[56] Erich Neumann, The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype (Princeton: Bollingen, 1955), p. 83.

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A MANDALA FOR HELEN

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Archaic Helens

While many of these ancient traditional associations were restored toHelen through Gnostic mythmaking, their hidden persistence adds a special aura to her figure even in texts following epic conventions.

Aphrodite. Of her several ancient associations with divine figures, Helen's Aphroditic nature is the most evident in Homeric epic, from the bribe offered Paris to the dialogues of Helen and Aphrodite. As Paul Friedrich's study The Meaning of Aphrodite shows, Aphrodite derives from goddesses whose worship was even more ancient and pervasive than her own. Many strands tie together the most beautiful woman and the goddess of love. First, Aphrodite's attributes contain similarities with Helen's myths of origin. Both are associated with water-birds.[57] Helen is the daughter of a swan; moreover, in the Cypria of the Epic Cycle, her mother Nemesis, also a shapechanger, becomes both bird and fish.[58] Aphrodite appears with the duck, swan, and goose in art; and with the wryneck in poetry, as well as with the nonaquatic dove and sparrow. These bird- and water-maiden dimensions may be as ancient as 7000-3500 B.C., dating from the Old European civilization from which bird and fish goddesses survive as figurines.[59] "The divinity sym-

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[57] For bird dimensions of Aphrodite, see Friedrich, pp. 76-77.

[58] The Cypria 8, in Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homerica, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, Mass.: Heinemann, 1914), pp. 499-501.

[59] Friedrich, p. 11.

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bolized by a waterbird must have been a giver of nourishment" for Palaeolithic hunters, who carved their images from ivory as early as about 14,000 B.C. "In contrast to the Indo-Europeans, to whom Earth was the Great Mother, the Old Europeans created maternal images out of water and air divinities, the Snake and Bird Goddesses. A divinity who nurtures the world with moisture, giving rain, the divine food which metaphorically was also understood as mother's milk, naturally became a nurse or mother."[60] That Zeus can take the same form as these archaic goddesses reinforces the bisexuality of the deity: the long neck of the bird approximates phallus and snake.[61]

Aphrodite is related more nearly to the Sumerian and Semitic goddesses of love and war, an "Oriental" origin theory favored by commentators as early as Herodotus.[62] Aphrodite's martial associations are evidenced by her lovemaking with Ares in Odyssey 8. But the scene is more one of contrast than of sisterhood, and she is notoriously

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[60] Gimbutas, pp. 132-134, 142.

[61] Gimbutas, pp. 135-136. The fact that Helen is born of a swan and a goddess or faded goddess implies her parthenogenesis: she is born from an appropriated version of the ancient European Bird Goddess. Nemesis' flight in fish-and-bird-form suggests the goddess's split against herself, if not the very process of her appropriation by the patriarchal god. Helen's hatching from the egg with a mortal twin also suggests such division; both she and Clytemnestra, like their brothers Castor and Pollux, are sky-deities, solar or lunar, life and death, rising and setting planets. But the swan is both winged breast and breasted phallus: male/female, air/water, snake/bird: yoking elements, combining binaries, pregnant with itself. A "phallic mother," clearly, but that term describes only part of the goddess's significance. Helen as daughter of the swan is something greater than the Diòs thugâter--she is universe in female form.

[62] Friedrich, p. 4.

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inept on the Iliad's battlefield. Helen, too, is married to warriors, abducted by warriors, a bride of war, "battle-girt." Her mother Nemesis is a violent spirit of retribution. Helen and Aphrodite share with the Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna (ca. 3000-2000 B.C.) the attributes of love and war, golden ornaments,[63] beauty and female attendants, astral natures and deceitful intelligence, and the patronage of love and fertility. Nevertheless, in early texts, Inanna is also "a devastator of the land, crushing vegetation, destroying by fire and flood, terrifying mankind, filling rivers with blood, raging, malevolent, smiting, devouring, and . . . destroying love among those who do not pay her homage."[64] This supremely active aspect of Inanna, who like Kali delights to play with skulls, is far from any form of Aphrodite, and her queenly power also contrasts with the passive lamentations of Homer's Helen, so ashamed by the extent of the war she has caused. But later Helens, notably Vergil's, seem more than worthy successors to Inanna. Other Semitic love and war figures, Astarte and Ishtar types, derive from Inanna. In art, these goddesses may be flanked by lions and may wear wings as well as golden ornaments. Lions and gold are recurrent motifs throughout the texts of Helen's myths.

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[63] Gold ornaments also appeared on the goddesses' familiars. Aphrodite's swans are cognate "with those of the Rig Veda and the early Slavic and Germanic peoples and with 'the wealth of swans' in early Celtic myth; swans with chains of gold or silver about their necks are also important in early Old Irish literature as a form taken by goddesses" (Friedrich, p. 77). Yeats found such swans in the myth of the lovers Baille and Aillinn.

[64] Friedrich, p. 15. See also Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth, Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).

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Also like Helen, these figures are related to tree worship and navigation.[65]

Most striking of the divine prototypes of Aphrodite and Helen are the Indo-European solar goddesses: *Áwsōs, Uṣas, and Sūryā. The first two are dawn goddesses cognate with the Greek Eos; the third, a sun princess whose name is the feminine of Surya, the sun.[66] The Dioscuri provide the strongest link between these goddesses and Helen. These Hellenic divine twins are distinctly recognizable as the Baltic and Vedic divine twins, known in Sanskrit as the Aśvin, or horsemen. Like the dawn goddesses, the Aśvin, "they who bring back to life and light," preserve and enlighten mankind. They share with the Dioscuri an identification with the morning and evening stars, and thereby with dawn and dusk. Both sets of twins are called lovers, rivals, or brothers-in-law of the moon, and are also lovers or brothers of Dawn or the sun-princess. The mother of the twins and their sister in the Vedas is named Saranyu, a river-goddess who dispenses prosperity and healing;[67] Friedrich has suggested that the name Saranyū is cognate with Helen.[68]

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[65] Friedrich, pp. 17, 19: Ishtar is called "She who walks the sea." She has a lover whom she turned into a wolf, referred to in the Epic of Gilgamesh (p. 16); cf. Pound's "Piere Vidal Old."

[66] Friedrich discusses Aphrodite's derivation from these divinities at length; see also Linda Lee Clader, pp. 30-49.

[67] Arthur A. MacDonell, A History of Sanskrit Literature (New York: Appleton, 1929), p. 93; Lindsay, p. 246.

[68] Friedrich, p. 35.

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In Vedic poetry, only Usas carried the epithet divá(s) duhitár-, cognate with the Greek Diòs Thugáter, daughter of the sky-god. (Diós is the equivalent of Dyaus, the Indo-European prototype of Zeus.) In Homer, this epithet belongs to Aphrodite above all others, and is given to Helen as well. Usas appears in the "Hymn to the Dawn" (Rig Veda 1.113) as "The White One," "most beautiful light of lights":

> The daughter of the sky has appeared,
> A radiant young woman in dazzling white . . .
> Radiant Dawn, arousing the living
> But not awakening anyone dead.[69]

Helen, too, is often described as or in terms of a bright light, in various positive or negative contexts.

A late tale of Eos, the Greek dawn goddess, parallels a later tradition of Helen's. Eos was the lover of Orion the hunter, who was blinded as a punishment for raping Merope--his sister, stepmother, or fiancée--and restored to sight by letting the rays of the rising sun fall on his eyes.[70] This tale is a type of the legend of Stesichorus, blinded by Helen herself.

One last example of Helen's Aphroditic nature occurs in a story related by Herodotus (ca. 480-ca. 425 B.C.), a kind of miracle tale of her powers. A child born of well-to-do parents in Sparta was so ugly that its parents and nurse were ashamed. Every day the nurse carried the infant to Helen's temple in Therapne and prayed that the child be delivered from ugliness. One day a woman appeared and asked to see the

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[69] Friedrich, pp. 193-194, Appendix 1, "Hymn to the Dawn."

[70] Carl Kerényi, The Gods of the Greeks (London: Thames and Hudson, 1951), pp. 202-203.

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child. She stroked its head and predicted that she would be the most beautiful woman in Sparta someday. From that day, they say, the child's looks changed.[71] The woman is identified explicitly as Helen by Pausanius (3.7.7). This power to change an ugly duckling into a swan is clearly divine. It is related to the gift of Aphrodite's kestós to Hera in Iliad 14.198-221. Even in modern literature, Helen retains the power to bestow beauty on others.

Demeter and Kore. Helen is also associated with early fertility goddesses, and especially with Kore, or Persephone. Rape is the key in their identity: Helen is often linked to Kore for no other reason than her tendency to be abducted, by Theseus and by Paris.[72] The competition for Helen's hand and her successive marriages also suggest a fertility aspect. According to an Orphic story, Demeter, like Nemesis, was raped by a shape-changing Zeus; both had taken the form of serpents.[73] So she begot Kore, another Diòs Thugáter. In other versions, she was raped by Poseidon in horse-form, and became Demeter Erinys, a vengeful fury, counterpart again to Nemesis. Later, Aeschylus' Helen is also called an Erinys, in relation to the retributive war. A third mate of Demeter is Ploutos, wealth, whose underground realm holds all the earth's riches, especially gold.

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[71] Histories 6.61-62; see Prost, pp. 128-129.

[72] E.g., in Clader, . 71: "The most convincing evidence in myth for identification of Helen as a fertility goddess is the fact that she is consistently being raped."

[73] Kerenyi, pp. 113, 115, gives the sources of this tale as O. Kern, Orphicorum fragmenta 58.59; and Ovid, Metamorphosis VI.114.

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In Euripides' Helen, the chorus sings a hymn of Demeter's search for her lost child; Helen appears in this play as both lost maiden and rescuing mother. Theseus abducted the young Helen from her playmates as they danced together and gathered flowers, just as Hades abducted Persephone; in fact, the motif doubles in this tale, since Theseus next attempted the queen of the dead herself. The devastations of nature expressing Demeter's mourning and anger for her raped daughter parallel the devastations of Athens and Troy that follow Helen's rapes by Theseus and Paris. Kore's loss, however, constitutes a natural cycle of seasons; Helen's, a nemesis in human nature. The relation of the beautiful woman and rape remains a primary motif in Helen's myths, extending to the great themes of love and death.

Helen Dendritis. As Kore has dimensions of a grain-maiden, so Helen is associated with trees. Pausanius preserves a tale of Helen Dendritis (19.9-10):

> They say that when Menelaus died and while Orestes was still wandering, Helen was exiled by Mikostratos and Megapenthes, and came to Rhodes as a friend of Tlepolemos' wife Polyxo, who was an Argive by birth and blood . . . . Now that Polyxo had Helen in her power, the story goes that she wanted to take vengeance on Helen for Tlepolemos' death; while Helen was washing Polyxo sent slavewomen dressed like the Furies who took her and hanged her on a tree, and that is why the Rhodians have a sanctuary of Helen of the Tree.[74]

The hanged goddess pattern includes Artemis, Ariadne, and Hera.[75] In addition, Dionysus has aspects of a tree-deity, and shares with Helen

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[74] Pausanius, Guide to Greece, p. 70.

[75] See Martin P. Nilsson, The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and Its Survival in Greek Religion, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Biblo and Tanner, 1971), pp. 527-531; Lindsay, pp. 220-234, 237.

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the epithet dendritis.[76] The theme of a vegetation god dying on a tree naturally extends as far as the Christian god; Helen comes at last to be associated with Christ's martyrdom.

Artemis, another type of "dying and rising" vegetation deity, also bears the Homeric Diòs Thugáter epithet. Frazer describes her cult connections:

> In Greece the great goddess Artemis herself appears to have been annually hanged in effigy in her sacred grove on Condylea among the Arcadian hills, and there accordingly she went by the name of the Hanged One. Indeed a trace of a similar rite may perhaps be detected even at Ephesus, the most famous of her sanctuaries, in the legend of a woman who hanged herself and was thereupon dressed by the compassionate goddess in her own divine garb and called by the name of Hecate.[77]

Artemis Orthia was the Spartan patron of unmarried girls, whom she led in choral dances as Helen does in Theocritus' Epithalamium. In the Odyssey, Helen's golden distaff earns her the comparison to "Artemis of the golden distaff." Artemis is the archer whose arrows slay Orion, lover of Eos--"distaff" and "arrows" are possibly from the same word, elakate.[78]

The epic heroine Iphigenia, familiarly considered the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, has divine aspects closely linking her with Artemis, to whom she was sacrificed at Aulis. Variants of her myth tell how she was saved by the goddess, who substituted a deer at the altar

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[76] Lindsay, p. 219.

[77] Sir James Frazer, The New Golden Bough, ed. Theodore Gaster (New York: Criterion, 1959), p. 318.

[78] Clader, p. 60, from O. S. Due, "The Meaning of the Homeric Formula chryselákatos keladeinè," Classica et Mediaevalia 26 (1965), pp. 1-9.

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while carrying the maiden to Tauris to become her priestess, or to become Hecate herself. Other versions claim that Iphigenia was the daughter of Helen by Theseus, suggesting a chthonic nature for Helen herself. Again the theme of sacrifice of maidens is connected with Helen's myths.

As in the myth of Ariadne, the crafts of weaving and spinning are repeatedly associated with Helen in Iliad and Odyssey. For both, the thread spun is the thread from which the spinner hangs. Ariadne's shame drives her to suicide after challenging Athena; Helen is driven to her self-defining loom by the arts of Aphrodite. While more chthonic associations return to Helen's figure in Gnostic texts, in the following section on Homer we will see a closer association of Helen and Athene, as these archaic versions of the goddess resolved into the epic figure.

Epic Helens

Homer. Homer's Helen is the earliest surviving textual version of her myth (ca. eighth century B.C.). The subtlety and depth of her characterizations in the Iliad, the conflicting claims of motivation in the Odyssey, cause her Homeric figure to transcend the formulaic stereotyping inherent in epic convention more thoroughly than any other figure in the epics. Helen's divine origins account for much of her mystery; as scholars have discovered, the diction of the poem shows her to be a composite of motifs from Indo-European and Mediterranean myths. If Homer's characters were ranked on a scale of relative divinity, Helen might stand with Calypso, below Circe, above Achilles. Like

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Helen, Calypso originated as a form of Aphrodite.[79] Helen's semi-divinity most nearly matches that of Heracles, who in the Odyssey inhabits Hades in eidos-form while his true self dwells among immortals, a possible model for the Eidolon of Helen. But in Homer, only palimpsests of her religious origins remain, so that Helen's divinity becomes veiled without losing its brilliance.[80] She seems, like Yeats's image of Maud Gonne, a burning cloud.

Although we can distinguish in Helen several divine codes--seductive beauty and war as of Aphrodite and Inanna, loss and sacrifice as of Demeter and Kore--her humanity in Homeric epic makes each of these divine functions subject to a humanistic moral and spiritual interpretation. Gregory Nagy warns that "we must not confuse the code of a myth with its message. Whatever its message, the Phaethon myth operates on a code of solar behavior. For example, the motif of riding across the sky counts as a solar function for Helios but as a human deed for Phaethon."[81] Helen's epic humanity creates messages that the mythos of a divine Helen could avoid. Her human deed of elopement with

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[79] Nagy, p. 157, n. 63; Friedrich, p. 47.

[80] Homer alludes, in fact, to those traditions not only in the famous description of her appearance in Iliad 3, but also in Odyssey 15.180-181, when Telemachus says, after hearing Helen's heartening prophecy of his father's return, "May Zeus, high thundering husband of Hera, so appoint it./ Then even at home I would make my prayers to you, as to a goddess." The same prayer is offered to the maiden Nausicaa by Odysseus in 8.430. The translations from Homer are those of Richmond Lattimore, The Iliad (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951); The Odyssey (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

[81] Nagy, p. 154.

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Paris, for example, does not equate with the divine function of Aphrodite seducing Anchises. Ambivalence toward Helen is heightened by this added human dimension. When Aeschylus turned to her figure, her human character was further underscored by moral disapprobation.

Because of its closeness to the divine traditions and the freshness of its epic humanity, the Iliad still offers the richest portrait of Helen in literature. She pervades warriors' dialogues and delivers the last lament over Hector in Book 24. But she appears most powerfully in the scenes on the wall of Troy, in dialogues with Priam and Aphrodite, in her chamber with Paris. Book 3 begins with the cessation of warfare as Achaians and Trojans decide that the question of Helen's possession must be resolved by Menelaus and Paris in single combat. The rainbow messenger Iris summons Helen to the wall to watch their confrontation. Passing the elders of Troy, she makes them marvel at her beauty, but they nonetheless wish she would leave the city (Iliad 3.156-160):

> Surely there is no blame on Trojans and strong-greaved Achaians
> if for a long time they suffer hardship for a woman like this one.
> Terrible is the likeness of her face to the immortal goddesses.
> Still, though she be such, let her go away in the ships, lest
> she be left behind, a grief to us and our children.

Priam greets her kindly and asks her to identify the Greek warriors below the wall. She names Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Ajax, then wonders where her brothers are, but both have died since her sojourn in Troy. The fight begins: after arming, Paris sends his spear glancing off of Menelaus' shield; Menelaus returns the stroke, piercing Paris' shield. Next he breaks his sword on Paris' helmet, then grabs it and begins choking him with the helmet's chinstrap. At this Aphrodite intervenes,

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breaks the strap, covers Paris with mist and transports him to his bedchamber. She then takes on the likeness of an old woman and calls Helen to hurry to his side. Seeing through her disguise, Helen sharply replies to the goddess in the most intimate, spirited dialogue addressed by a human being to an Olympian goddess in all the Iliad (3.389-420):

> . . . Aphrodite spoke to her:
> "Come with me: Alexandros sends for you to come home to him.
> He is in his chamber now, in the bed with its circled pattern,
> shining in his raiment and his own beauty; you would not think
> that he came from fighting against a man; you would think he was going
> rather to a dance, or rested and had been dancing lately."
> So she spoke, and troubled the spirit in Helen's bosom.
> She, as she recognized the round, sweet throat of the goddess
> and her desirable breasts and her eyes that were full of shining,
> she wondered, and spoke a word and called her by name, thus:
> "Strange divinity! Why are you still so stubborn to beguile me?
> Will you carry me further yet somewhere among cities
> fairly settled? In Phrygia or in lovely Maionia?
> Is there some mortal man there also who is dear to you?
> Is it because Menelaos has beaten great Alexandros
> and wishes, hateful as I am, to carry me homeward,
> is it for this that you stand in your treachery now beside me?
> Go yourself and sit beside him, abandon the gods' way,
> turn your feet back never again to the path of Olympos
> but stay with him forever, and suffer for him, and look after him
> until he makes you his wedded wife or his slave girl.
> Not I. I am not going to him. It would be too shameful.
> I will not serve his bed, since the Trojan women hereafter
> would laugh at me, all, and my heart even now is confused with
> sorrows."
> Then in anger Aphrodite the shining spoke to her:
> "Wretched girl, do not tease me lest in anger I forsake you
> and grow to hate you as much as now I terribly love you,
> lest I encompass you in hard hate, caught between both sides,
> Danaans and Trojans alike, and you wretchedly perish."
> So she spoke, and Helen daughter of Zeus was frightened
> and went, shrouding herself about in the luminous spun rope,
> silent, unseen by the Trojan women, and led by the goddess.

In Paris' chamber, the goddess herself pulls up a chair for Helen by the bedside. Helen has no kind words for Paris, either, but he is deeply moved by her beauty and leads her into lovemaking. Meanwhile,

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Menelaus rages outside, searching for his enemy.

A different Helen appears in Book 4 of the Odyssey. Telemachos and Peisistratos, son of Nestor, arrive at the palace of Menelaus in Sparta, seeking news of the long-lost Odysseus. They find the king giving a wedding feast for his son Megapenthes and for Hermione, the daughter who is Helen's only child. The two strangers are welcomed to the feast, and they marvel at the shining wealth of the palace. After dining, Menelaus names Odysseus, and Telemachos is forced to hide his tears. Helen enters at that moment, bearing a distaff of gold; her handmaids carry her chair, workbasket, and blanket. She immediately identifies Telemachos, and Menelaus recognizes Odysseus' son. All indulge in sorrow, remembering lost relatives at Troy, until Nestor's wise son admits to having "no joy in tears after dinner." Helen then stirs a drug into the wine, an Egyptian nepenthés, "no-sorrow," anesthetizing the hearts of her company to the pain of loss. Then she begins to speak, "taking up the story," and tells of Odysseus' spy mission to Troy, in which she succored him. Menelaus follows with a very different tale: how Helen's voice nearly betrayed them all when they hid in the Trojan horse, but Odysseus restrained the men from answering her calls. Menelaus later reveals that Odysseus was long held on Calypso's island, as he learned from Proteus, old man of the sea. In Book 15, Telemachos departs, bearing gifts from the royal couple; as he exits the gates, an eagle flies by on the right, a white goose in his claws. Menelaus ponders the portent's meaning, but Helen anticipates him, declaring that Odysseus will soon return, or is home already, to take revenge on the suitors and claim his home.

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The discrepancies between the Helens of Iliad and Odyssey, between a captive princess in Troy and a queen in Sparta, are wide indeed. The goddess who holds Helen in Troy is scarcely apparent in the Odyssey; instead, Helen bears the distaff, an attribute of Artemis, and speaks as an oracle rather than as a god-driven maenad. She is not less daimonic, but the daimons are different. Only in the tales of the war told by her husband and herself do the earlier Aphroditic and Inannic connections recur. The Helen who reigns in the Odyssey's Sparta has transcended her status as object; she is queenly, mantic, and aggressive in speech, independent of Menelaus in action or decision, supernatural not so much for her beauty--which is not explicitly named--but for her knowledge of drugs, superlative handcrafts, and intelligence. But even in the Iliad her characterizations are multiple, and she practices similar arts. Her personality appears differently to each army, within each camp, at different times, and to different speakers. On the whole her portrayal is sympathetic: not only is her beauty presented aslant, but her rape is reenacted in the scene with Aphrodite, so that the audience relives and realizes the agon in which she is caught. Still, we never forget that she is the center of a struggle even greater than her personal torment.

Yet at that center she is most ambivalent. Her passive responsibility for the war is repeatedly expressed by the phrase héineka Helénе, "for the sake of Helen," or some variant of this formula. Spoken first in Iliad 2.160-162, "Argive Helen, for whose sake many Achaians/ died in Troy, away from their dear homeland," the idea recurs through both epics and thereafter in nearly all versions of the Troy

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myth. Its simplicity is irresistible, but, like many formulas, it points in two distinct moral directions: toward the Greek's claims as righteous rescuers and toward their unfeeling, aggressive warfare (Iliad 2.354-356):

> Therefore let no man be urgent to take the way homeward until after he has lain in bed with the wife of a Trojan to avenge Helen's longings and her lamentations.

The phrase implies both "for Helen's benefit as a wronged wife," and "for the prize of war, Helen among others; for the return of our property." Helen's belongings are often named along with her: "for the sake of Helen and all her possessions" (Iliad 3.70). Both woman and goods are the goal of Paris' and Menelaus' combat, but when the truce is broken neither prize is as valuable as the opportunity to ransack the city utterly.[82] The reiteration of héineke Heléne and "the woman and her possessions" emphasizes the cultural devaluation of woman into an object of exchange. The imbalance so created leads to an opposite extreme: such an object-woman becomes divine, daimonic, incomprehensible, irresistible, terrible to view, destructive, dangerous, and beyond blame.

However, Homer's Helen transcends this objectified daimonism. She feels personal losses in human terms and responds with particularly human emotions. When Iris calls her to the wall, the Achaians' claims of rescue seem for a moment justified (Iliad 24.773-775): "the goddess left in her heart sweet longing/ after her husband of time before, and her city and parents." She lets tears fall, and describes herself as

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[82] "Now let none accept the possessions of Alexandros,/nor take back Helen; one who is very simple can see it,/that by this time the terms of death hang over the Trojans" (Iliad 7.400-402).

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"worn with weeping." She mourns Hector and herself in Iliad 24.773-775: "I mourn for you in sorrow of heart, and mourn myself also,/and my ill luck. There was no other in all the wide Troad/who was kind to me, and my friend; all others shrank when they saw me." This final lament is hyperbolic: not only Priam, but the elders speak kindly of her, and her own maidens as well as the Trojan women attend her. In fact, her sufferings at Troy are detailed only in her own speeches. She is threatened by no one but Aphrodite. Nevertheless, her feelings toward the Trojans are ambivalent, bitter toward Paris, but sweet toward Hector and Priam. She fears the mocking of the Trojan women.[83]

This isolation from women and affection is meaningful, since while it retains certain divine elements its human pathos is deeply moving. Helen's relationships to men are more strongly stressed than her "kinship"[84] with women; Clytemnestra is a kind of double, rather than a sister. Helen is called "a fair woman . . . whose lord's kin were spearmen and fighters" (Iliad 4.48-49); she is able to name all the Achaian warriors Priam points out; she mentions her divine twin brothers, and addresses Hector as brother (Iliad 6.354). The supernatural twinning motif extends to the brotherhood of Menelaus and Agamemnon as well as of Hector and Paris. Helen also names her husbands

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[83] In Odyssey 4.259-263 a more queenly and secure Helen represents herself as having been already removed from their society and wishes: "The rest of the Trojan women cried out shrill, but my heart/ was happy, my heart had changed by now and was for going back/ home again, and I grieved for the madness that Aphrodite/ bestowed when she led me there away from my own dear country."

[84] For kinship as a dimension of Aphrodite, see Friedrich, pp. 82-85.

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repeatedly, whether Paris or Menelaus is intended.

Despite this network of male kinship, aspects of the older great mother deities persist. Helen has no male child; her daughter Hermione is her only offspring, as Kore is Demeter's. Helen's ability to sound to each Achaian like the wife he left behind--related, ironically, by Menelaus in Odyssey 4--is an extreme example of the power she wields even in masculine systems, implying that she is an object of desire in relation to the entire army. But she figures more directly as a human object of exchange, a token by which war is justified. In this aspect of Homer's Helen, it is striking how far the power of ancient matriarchal deities has been mitigated by the new patriarchal regimes. Yet this complex dichotomy of Helen's function in the Iliad as a great mother besieged by male armies, continues to resonate on levels divine, human, political, and psychological throughout the fortunes of her myths.

A natural extension of her centrality to the Greek army are later tales of her alliance with the central hero Achilles. Originating in the Cypria, the story is embroidered in Pausanius and Philostratus. A wounded general was sent by the Delphic oracle to Leuke, a white island in the Euxine or Black Sea, opposite the Danube estuary. When he returned, he claimed to have seen Achilles living with Helen. Sailors who passed the island could hear the two at night, singing the story of their lives in the verses of Homer. This paradisiacal afterlife motif attracted Walter Savage Landor, and later figured largely in H. D.'s Helen in Egypt.

Closely related to Helen's male kinship is the theme of blame-

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lessness for the consequences of her actions, extending to apologia for the war itself. Not only she, but the misguided armies are excused in the elders' speech. Priam excuses her actions as human (3.164-165): "I am not blaming you: to me the gods are blameworthy who drove upon me this sorrowful war against the Achaians." Hector is kind to her, and Paris does not cease to desire her despite her derisive speech. Only Achilles has a harsh word, after the death of Patroclus, when he thinks of his father weeping "for me, who now in a strange land makes war upon the Trojans for the sake of accursed Helen" (19.324-325).

Helen's humanity appears again in her refusal to forgive herself. Whether her abduction was forcible or voluntary, she expresses self-blame and death-wishes. She calls herself "bitch-eyed," the only speaker in Homer who uses that epithet self-reflexively. She wishes she had died before coming to Troy, that Paris had died in combat with Menelaus, that she had been the wife of a better man, "one who knew modesty and all things of shame that men say" (Iliad 6.350-351). She wishes she had died when she was born. Nevertheless, when Aphrodite threatens her with certain destruction, "caught between both sides," she is frightened and submits to the goddess's will. Like Penelope who says neither yes nor no, Helen waits and weaves, while longing and lamentation accompany her. And it is Penelope who speaks at the close of the Odyssey with the most empathy for Helen, an apologia for her behavior (23.218-224):

> For neither would the daughter born to Zeus, Helen of Argos,
> have lain in love with an outlander from another country
> if she had known that the warlike sons of the Achaians would bring her
> home again to the beloved land of her fathers.
> It was a god who stirred her to do the shameful thing she
> did, and never before had she had in her heart this terrible

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wildness, out of which suffering came to us also.

Penelope does not mention Helen's beauty, but the "terrible wildness," ἄτε, more in keeping with the Iliad's Helen than the Odyssey's. The Homeric Helen is caught by a powerful fate, an ἄτη that cannot be reversed except at the price of the great war itself. And only allegiance to her daimon Aphrodite can protect her from becoming a sacrifice like Iphigenia or Polyxena.

Another divinity more successfully contests the power of Aphrodite in the epic. Athena shares with Helen the Aphroditic epithet Διὸς Θυγάτηρ, "daughter of Zeus." As patron of wars of just retribution, Athene is a type of Nemesis. Although Hera and Aphrodite cooperate sometimes in the Iliad, Athene is much more hostile toward the rescuer of Paris. In Book 5, she actually gives Diomedes permission to wound no immortal except Aphrodite. Afterwards, Athene mocks her in terms not far distant from Helen's own rebuttal (Iliad 5.421-425):

> It must be the lady of Kypros, moving some woman
> of Achaia to follow after those Trojans she loves so hopelessly,
> laying hold on the fair dresses of the Achaian women,
> tore the tenderness of her hand on a golden pin's point.

Two other dimensions link Helen with Athene. First, Athene is patron of weaving, Helen's craft par excellence in both epics. Helen is described in the Iliad as ". . . weaving a great web,/ a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles/ of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armed Achaians,/ struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god" (3.112-128). The robe depicts not

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love but war.[85] The garments that Helen wears, as well as those she weaves, are remarkable, luminous, and shining; they receive the unusual adjective "nectarous," with its connotations of divinity.

Second, Helen's behavior and speech, as noted, is intellectual. Especially in the Odyssey, she questions, explains, tells stories, interprets oracles; she also speaks of her own thought processes. However, as an immortal, Athene has an immunity to Aphrodite that Helen cannot achieve.[86] Helen's Diòs Thugáter epithet serves ironically only to stress her subjection to the "sweetly-smiling" or "penis-loving" Aphrodite.[87] Although Helen rebukes the cowardice of the beautiful Paris, her sisterhood with Athene does not become overt until much later in the fortunes of her myth.

Caught between Aphrodite and Athene, between Danaans and Trojans, wearing and weaving splendid fabrics, half divine, half human, Homer's Helen brings to mind an ancient contest between the works of Aphrodite --the twistings of lovemaking into a fabric of flesh, a loose rope that

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[85] Odyssey (15.104-110) describes another robe she has woven:

> Helen went to stand by the storing boxes
> where there were elaborately wrought robes. She herself had made them.
> And Helen, shining among women, lifted out one of them,
> that which was loveliest in design and the largest
> and shone like a star. It lay beneath the others. She went on
> her way, further and out through the house, until she came
> to Telemachus

to whom she gives the robe. These lines almost exactly repeat the Iliad 6 episode in which Hecuba chooses a robe to dedicate to Athene.

[86] Friedrich suggests that the episodes of the wounding and mocking of Aphrodite here, her comic position in Odyssey 8, and her humiliation in the "Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite," all document "the deeper fact that Aphrodite is the most potent goddess," p. 62.

[87] Friedrich, pp. 202-204. The word is philomeidès.

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comes unspun in a single lifetime; and the works of Athene--a deathless tissue woven from the mind.[88] As such she seems to represent the poet's work. Especially in an oral tradition, the two modalities blend, returning language to the rhythmic life of flesh, using flesh to spin undying language. No wonder Helen speaks the most powerfully metapoetic line in the Iliad (6.356-358): "Zeus set [on us] a vile destiny, so that hereafter/ we shall be made into things of song for the men of the future." It is a self-fulfilling prophecy, since she sings of her own deeds in the Odyssey, giving birth to herself in metamythic parthenogenesis.

Sappho. Missing from Homer's Helen is the subjective experience of love and desire, with its attendant sense of divided emotions.[89] Homer's concept of love is foreign to us:

> A husband can love his wife because of her beauty or her other virtues; and when they are separated from one another, they can yearn for each other, as Odysseus longs for Penelope. But a spiritual sense of belonging to each other is nowhere in Homer described or motivated. One can be especially friendly with someone, as Achilles is with Patroclus, but an inner spiritual union is never stressed. . . . The linguistic means of expressing these qualities was not yet in existence.
>
> The Homeric word for "love," "to be friendly with someone," (philein), does not mean a spiritual attachment but

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[88] Leucus of Lesbos, in Nonnus, Dionysiaca 24.242 ff., quoted in J. J. Bachofen, Myth, Religion, and Mother Right, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 58.

[89] Bruno Snell, The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origin of European Thought (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p. 19: "There are no divided emotions in Homer; not until Sappho are we able to read of the bitter-sweet Eros."

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rather a friendly act.[90]

The ambivalence of love did not appear in Greek poetry until Sappho, especially as felt by woman as subject.

Born about 600 B.C. on the island of Lesbos, closer to the Troad than to Achaian territory, Sappho celebrated and sang moods for which Homer had no terms. Her Aphroditic vision of love came to inform ideas of a human Helen's motivation, social responsibilities, and shame. Further, Sappho's sense of the holiness of the beautiful thing added a new dimension of divinity to the human and a new spirituality to the inanimate. She repeatedly invokes the beauty of objects and experiences, and links them with love, memory, and desire.[91] The vision of Gongyla's robe in Fragment 45 makes Sappho joyful. As Maximus of Tyre writes "In Defense of Idols,"

> the most beautiful sight will be the actual lineaments of the beloved, but for remembrance's sake they will be happy in the sight of a lyre, a little spear, a chair, perhaps, or a running ground, or anything in the world that wakens memory of the beloved. Why should I further examine and pass judgement about Images? Let men know what is divine, let them

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[90] Snell, Poetry and Society: The Role of Poetry in Ancient Greece (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), p. 8.

[91] "Sappho's circle feels united by a recollection of the beautiful things they have experienced together . . . . Full of sadness she says--obviously to a girl of her circle: 'But you have forgotten me.' Another time, in two papyrus fragments she urges: 'Remember, for we too have done this in the time of our youth; for many beautiful things. . . .' And as a friend takes leave of her in tears, she calls out to her: 'Remember me; for you know how we have cherished you. But if you don't remember I shall remind you so that you won't forget how beautiful all our experiences were,' and she then enumerates all the joys they had together: the flowers and precious unguents, the festivals in spring, the music. And since her friend Arignota has returned to Sardes, she consoles Atthis, who has remained behind, by saying 'Arignota calls to mind the gentle Atthis, and in her tender heart is weighted down with longing'" (Snell, Poetry and Society, pp. 44-45).

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> know: that is all . . . only let them know, let them love, let them remember.[92]

This complex of ideas concerning love and beauty, memory and longing, becomes the heart of Imagist poetics.

Helen is named relatively often in Sappho's work, considering how little has survived. Fragment 97 concerns Helen's birth: "They say that the lady Leda long ago found an egg the color of hyacinths." Fragment 44 mentions a blonde Helen and Hermione. But in the poem to Anaktoria a revolutionary Helen appears, reenacting the judgment of Paris by choosing the beloved as most beautiful. Sappho's identification of the beautiful thing with the best beloved is an unprecedented concept:

> Some say the most beautiful thing on the black earth is an army of horsemen, some say a host of infantry or ships; but I say that it is what one loves. It is easy to make this understood by all, for she who far surpassed mankind in beauty, Helen, left her husband, noblest of all men, and went sailing to Troy, and thought not at all of her child or dear parents, but was led astray.[93]

Who or what led her astray is lost, but most restorers interpolate some reference to love or Aphrodite. The armies and ships recall Iliad and Odyssey, but also the active goddesses from whom Aphrodite and Helen descend, martial and nautical Astartes and Inannas. Elsewhere in Greek mythology, Helen is rarely shown as active in love; rather, she is victim or pawn controlled by men or Aphrodite. Although Paris is held responsible for his lust by Hector, who calls him "evil Paris,

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[92] Quoted by Gilbert Murray, Five Stages of Greek Religion (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), p. 77, n. 1.

[93] Fragment 38, Edmonds. Trans. Richard Jenkyns (with my emendations), from Three Classical Poets: Sappho, Catullus, and Juvenal (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 54.

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beautiful, woman-crazy, cajoling," Helen's actions are qualified by projecting blame onto greater deities, Zeus and Ate. In the Iliad, only Aphrodite expresses "love" for Helen, although Paris feels desire; and the love of the goddess is as dangerous and threatening as the desire of the armies. In Sappho's version of the myth, however, Helen is fully Aphroditic, an active lover like the poet herself. She follows a seducer for love of his human beauty; there is no question of rape, unwillingness, or force.

Sappho's own beauty was the subject of a strange debate in later classical times. Socrates and others called her "the beautiful Sappho."[94] But other sources called her ugly, short, and dark, "a nightingale with deformed wings enfolding a tiny body"[95]--a portrait as unattractive as Alcibiades' image of Socrates, another notable lover, from the Symposium. While the lover and creator of beautiful things in classical myth is often deformed--as Aphrodite's husband Hephaistos was crippled, Homer blind--Sappho's detractors deride her appearance especially in concert with her sexuality, her love of women. Helen, too, tends to lose some luster from her beauty when poets must deal with the problem of her sexuality. Whatever her features, however, Sappho's poetry won her from Plato the epithet of "tenth Muse."

Sappho's poems contain several Aphroditic motifs also associated with Helen. Like Helen, the girls she loves are described in terms of

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[94] Perhaps after Sappho herself, who quotes a letter from Atthis that calls her kalista Sappho, "beautiful Sappho," if the restoration is correct; see Fragment 82, Edmonds.

[95] Scholiast on Lucian's Portraits 18, Edmonds.

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light. The face of her beloved Anaktoria is lámpron, "radiant," as of the sun and stars. Fragment 118 states "I love habrosúna"--a word connoting tenderness, delicacy, grace[96]--"éros for the sun gives me both radiance and beauty." Legend tells that Sappho leaped into the sea for love of the ferryman Phaon, whose name means light. Sun, moon, and stars appear in connection with love and longing. The Aphroditic color gold is also an image of beauty and desire for Sappho, although ambivalent. Appropriately, Sappho gives gold the divine epithet of Aphrodite and Helen, "a child of Zeus," in Fragment 110: it too is immortal and can overpower a man's heart. Finally, light and life are linked, as are absence of light and death. The presence of the beloved can make the happy lover godlike, the unfulfilled one near death. In the Phainetai Moi, Sappho's detailed physical symptoms of desire recall the Iliad's almost clinical descriptions of deathblows. As cause of war, Helen, too, is said to have "unstrung the knees of so many men" (Odyssey 14.69).

Light and love, poetry and memory, preserved Sappho's desire for those who were separated from her. From that ability to love and speak of love's symptoms came an intuition of immortality. Knowledge of the Muses, daughters of memory, not only alleviates the pain of desire but grants immortality to initiates. "Someone will remember us, I tell you," reads Fragment 76. The Muses' work is immortal: the thread they spin does not decay. But ignorance of the roses of Mount Pieria is tantamount to Lethe:

When you have died, you shall lie there, nor shall there ever

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[96] Nagy, pp. 176-177.

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> be any memory of you thereafter, for you have no share in the roses of Pieria; but unseen in the house of Hades also you shall walk among the dim dead, having flown away from here.[97]

The power of poetry to grant immortality is associated with memory and sight of a beloved person. Possession of Helen, similarly, grants immortality to lovers, to Menelaus in Homer or Achilles in later traditions.

Friedrich demonstrates that the Greek hímeros, "desire," is cognate with Sanskrit smárati, "to remember, to bethink."[98] In Homer hímeros signifies desire to weep. Thus longing for a lost beloved and feelings of sexual desire are represented by the same word. Demeter and Hades, Menelaus and Paris, feel the same hímeros toward a Kore, a Helen, lost or gained. Sappho's poems demonstrate the achievement of a difficult happiness by blending love and memory, as her lyric voice expresses both longing and desire. But darker meanings of hímeros appear in Aeschylus' Agamemnon. Menelaus finds the sight of beauty hateful since losing Helen, and it is her absence--the phantom in the palace, her winged form in dreams--that leads the armies to war.[99] Aeschylus. The Agamemnon creates a Helen who resounds through tradition with terrible strength, although she is not a character in the play. But in the choral odes, her behavior and its aftermath are continually lamented and her name's syllables catalogue the evils she has caused. Agamemnon is the first play in the Oresteia trilogy, performed in 458

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[97] Fragment 71, Edmonds; Jenkyns translation, p. 76.

[98] Friedrich, p. 100.

[99] See note 86.

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B.C. It dramatizes the war-lord's murder by Clytemnestra on the night he returns from Troy, with Priam's daughter Cassandra among his spoils. Clytemnestra is a bereaved mother as well as a powerful queen, embodying the fury of a Nemesis and the efficacious revenge of a Demeter.

Helen is named primarily when the chorus reviews the history of the war. In the first ode Paris and Helen receive strict moral approbation; she is called a woman of many husbands, polyánoros, often translated "wantonness" or "promiscuity." The second ode elaborates how Paris seduced Helen and broke the guest-law. The doom of Troy is called her dowry; this fatal marriage motif matches the play's larger theme of Agamemnon's murder. Helen's elopement with Paris was caused by the force of Persuasion, child of Ate, whose effects are made apparent by the awful events that ensued: "Not hidden is the harm: it shows forth plainly as a terrible bright light [phós ainolampés]" (ll. 388-389).[100] The Greek phrase contains the word aínos, used by Homer to describe Helen's likeness to goddesses.

The chorus condemns Paris, follows Helen's flight, and mourns with Menelaus, describing his vain dreams of a lost wife.[101] The phantom

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[100] Eduard Fraenkel, trans., Agamemnon, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1956).

[101] Lines 399-426: "Paris, who entered the house of the Atridae and dishonoured the hospitable board by theft of the wife. She, leaving behind her, for the folk of her city, bustling stir of men with shield and spear and armament of seamen, and bringing to Ilion, for dowry, destruction, was gone stepping nimbly through the gates, having dared a deed not to be dared; while the seers in the house, with many a groan, spake thus: 'Alas, alas for the house, alas for the princes! Alas for the bed and the husband-loving steps! One may see the silence of those who are forsaken, a silence without honour, without reviling, without belief. Through longing for her who is beyond the sea, a phantom will seem to rule the house. The grace of shapely statues is hateful to the husband, and when the eyes are starved, all charm of love is gone. And

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(phásma) that seems to rule the palace, the statues that the husband has grown to hate (kollosôn), and the winged, elusive dream vision (ópsis--the word for eyes as well as for vision) all suggest the Eidolon of Helen; furthermore, "beyond the sea" implies not only Helen's flight to Troy, but also death.[102] Whether or not Menelaus exhibits symptoms of reactive depression, as one critic argues,[103] his visions and fantasies recall Achilles' thoughts after losing Briseis and his dream after losing Patroculus. As if forced to be faithful to his bereavement, Menelaus is conspicuously the only leader in the Iliad without a concubine.

Helen's effect on the Hellenes is still more dreadful:

> The gold-changer Ares, changer of bodies, and holder of his scales in the battle of the spear, sends from Ilion to the kinsmen what has felt the fire, heavy gold-dust bitterly bewailed, freighting the easily-stowed urns with ashes in exchange for men. And they lament them, praising each man, this one for being well-skilled in the fight, that one as nobly fallen in the murderous battle, through another man's wife (ll. 433-448).

The equation of corpses and gold is striking, condemning the hidden

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appearing in dreams fancies of mourning are present, bringing a joy that is vain; for in vain a man, when, fancying that he sees what is dear--aside out of his arms the vision is gone, never again to draw near on wings, the companions of sleep.'"

[102] Nagy, pp. 150-161: "the significance of Okeanos is that when you die, a gust of wind carries your spirit to the extreme West, where it drops you into Okeanos; when you traverse the Okeanos, you reach the underworld, which is underneath the earth." See Penelope's death-wish in Odyssey 20.61-66.

[103] George Devereux (Dreams in Greek Tragedy: An Ethno-Psycho-Analytic Study [Oxford, 1976]). He also believes that the "husband-loving steps" might be better translated as "husband-loving tracks," implying the imprint of Helen's body in the abandoned marriage-bed (pp. 86-91).

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motives of war, the exchange of live men for profit.

In the third ode, in addition to the renowned Helen pun elénaus élandros eléptolis, "destroyer of ships, men, cities," there appears an expanded simile comparing Helen to a lion's cub. The lion becomes the Argive host in a later speech by Agamemnon. Still more extreme, Helen is called an Erinys, a fury.[104] A wind motif describes her elopement; "the blast of Zephyrus" parallels many mythic rapes and deaths accomplished by a gust of wind. The rape of Oreithyia by Boreas is mentioned in the Phaedrus; Dante's lovers are blown in a whirlwind in Inferno, Helen among them.[105]

The last references to Helen appear in dialogue between Clytemnestra and the chorus after the murders. Again, responsibility for destruction is debated. Helen is called paranous, out of her mind, and compared to Eris, Strife, who began the war with the contest of

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[104] Lines 681-749: "Who can it have been who gave the name with such entire truth--was it someone whom we do not see, guiding his tongue aright to the mark with thoughts anticipating destiny?--to her of the spear-wedding, for whom two sides contended, Helen? For fittingly it was that ship-destroying, man-destroying, town-destroying, she came out of her luxuriously woven chamber-curtains and sailed forth, before the blast of giant Zephyrus and (after her) many men, shield-bearers, hunters upon the vanished trail of oars, the trail of those who had landed on the leafy shores at the mouth of Simois, by the will of bloody Strife.

So, once, was a lion's offspring reared by a man in his house . . . But matured by time it showed the character it had from its parents . . . by the will of the god it had been reared in the house to be a sacrificer in the service of Ate.

At first, I would say, there came to the city of Ilion a temper of windless calm and a gentle delight of wealth, a soft arrow of the eyes, a heart-stinging flower of desire. But then she swerved from this, and accomplished a bitter end of the marriage-rites, rushing upon the sons of Priam as an evil settler and an evil companion by the sending and guidance of Zeus Hospitable, an Erinys bringing tears to brides."

[105] Nagy, p. 159.

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goddesses.[106] When Clytemnestra defends her sister, denying that she alone was the destroyer, the chorus decries instead the daimonic injustice of the house of Atreus.

Aeschylus' Helen is no longer human, but woman as embodiment of desire, at once object and subject. As subject, her own desire is more reprehensible than that of men, since she alone is responsible for arousing masculine lust and military anger. The beautiful thing is too powerful for human safety. In effect, Aeschylus' characters have come to hate the light: it is terrible, a vision of evil; gold is a deathly substance, the ashes of corpses. The Agamemnon's obsession with responsibility for the terrible cycle of war and vengeance fastened the deepest and most persistent shadows to the name of Helen of Troy. Euripides I. The Helens of Euripides are remarkable especially for the variety of their dramatic and relentlessly human characterizations. Helen appears on stage in three of the surviving plays: The Trojan Women, Orestes, and Helen. In six others--Andromache, Hecuba, Iphigenia in Tauris, Iphigenia in Aulis, Electra, and Cyclops--she is named in choral odes or the speeches of principals. The earlier plays closely follow Agamemnon's Helen; however, as Euripides returned to her figure, she became less daimonic, despite a continued dependence on divine intervention to resolve plots. While his most unusual version is the

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[106] Lines 1454-1460, 1462-1467: "Chorus: . . . O thou mad Helen, that didst alone destroy those many, all those many lives, under the walls of Troy! now thou hast crowned thyself with the last and perfect garland unforgettable, blood not to be washed away. In truth there was an Eris then in the house . . .
Clytemnestra: Nay, pray not in grief at this for death to be thy fate; nor turn thine anger upon Helen, saying that she was a man-destroyer, that she alone destroyed the lives of many Greek warriors and wrought a woe that none might stand against."

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heroine in Egypt in Helen, discussed later, the Helens of Orestes and The Trojan Women--one preoccupied with public opinion and her own vanity, the other a sly and intelligent sophist battling for her life--are also original and influential. As Hamlet attests, Hecuba was one of the most popular plays of the Renaissance; the Helen in Hecuba prefigures the unpleasant character in Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida.

The leading characters in the Andromache (ca. 426 B.C.), Hecuba (ca. 425 B.C.), and Electra (413 B.C.) name Helen as source of destruction, cause of war, promiscuous and seductive. She is an Ate, an Erinys, as guilty of murder as her sister. Aeschylus' lioness simile reappears as a lion figure representing Helen on Achilles' shield. Unique, however, is Electra's accusation of Helen as a free agent: "When she was raped she walked of her own free will to ruin" (Electra 1065).[107] Hecuba laments that Polyxena should die instead of Helen; Clytemnestra voices the same sentiments on behalf of Iphigenia. Although Helen is acknowledged by the Trojan women as "loveliest of women the sun has ever seen" (Hecuba 635-636),[108] they also roundly curse her. In the Andromache, before a sputtering-mad Peleus, Menelaus attempts a rhetorical defense of his wife:

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[107] Electra, trans. Emily Townsend Vermeule, The Complete Greek Tragedies, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959). As Snell observes (Discovery, p. 31): "Homer's man does not yet regard himself as the source of his own decisions; that development is reserved for tragedy."

[108] Hecuba, trans. William Arrowsmith, The Complete Greek Tragedies, vol. 3.

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> Poor Helen had a time of it, not choosing,
> But chosen by the gods to exalt her country.
> For innocent before of arms and battles
> Greece grew to manhood then. Experience, travel--
> These are an education in themselves.
> If coming in the presence of my wife
> I steeled myself and spared her, I was wise.[109]

His arguments anticipate the sophistries of Isocrates, who would defend Athens' aggression in the Persian Wars and her sanctions for empire by claiming that her actions had saved Hellas from barbarian rule. Even more contradictory is the appearance of the Dioscuri at the end of Electra, bringing the disheartening news that Helen, who has been so convincingly blamed for every retaliation in the play, never went to Troy at all. Instead, the Eidolon is responsible for Helen's seeming presence in Troy. Introduced here for the first time, Euripides' Eidolon of Helen fulfills the hints that survive in Stesichorus and Herodotus. Iphigenia in Tauris supports this negative portrait of Helen, although its plot closely resembles that of Helen itself.

The Trojan Women (415 B. C.) and the Orestes (408 B. C.) develop themes of the early plays. By bringing Helen into the drama in person, they further demythologize her character. She is not an offstage presence, an unseen force like Peitho or Ate, but a human being on the same scale as the others, judged by the same standards. Nevertheless, she remains frustratingly beyond the reach of death and death-wishes. Hecuba tries and fails to convince Menelaus to kill her; Orestes and Pylades actually draw swords and cut her down, only to be foiled by the same dea ex machina sleight-of-hand that saved Paris' neck in Iliad 3. In Trojan Women, Helen delivers her own rhetorical defense and so

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[109] Andromache 680-685, trans. John Frederick Nims, The Complete Greek Tragedies, vol. III.

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rescues herself; in Orestes the Dioscuri announce that their vain and self-absorbed sister has, surprisingly, become a star. Helen's qualities in these plays--cunning and manipulative or vaguely benevolent but irresponsible--are all unattractive. The mysterious effect of her beauty is reduced to sheepish lust, her divine immortality to an absurd mechanism. Nevertheless, for all his dislike of her human character in these plays, Euripides does not show her death. Perhaps he hesitated to stretch the myth that far because he saw even the fallible woman as an image of unkillable human illusion and desire.

Furthermore, Euripides was aware of male fallibility as well. He not only parodies the figure of Helen but also those of the choruses of bystanders and the apologies of their leaders in the satyr-play Cyclops (423 B.C.). The satyrs ask Odysseus what became of her after Troy:

> Coryphaeus: Did you take Helen when you took Troy?
> Odysseus: We rooted out the whole race of Priam.
> Coryphaeus: When you took that woman, did you all take turns
> and bang her? She liked variety in men,
> the fickle bitch! Why, the sight of a man
> with embroidered pants and a golden chain
> so fluttered her, she left Menelaus,
> a fine little man. I wish there were
> no women in the world--except for me![110]

The satyr-play reveals the greed and vengeance, jealousy and destructiveness that Helen's actions arouse in the warriors of the Iliad. Similarly intense and ambivalent sexual angers and greed toward Helen or desirable women are expressed in modern texts by de Gourmont, Lewis, and Pound, but only Lewis achieves such self-mocking comedy.

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[110] Cyclops, trans. William Arrowsmith, The Complete Greek Tragedies, vol. 3.

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Euripides II. In Helen, Euripides finally separates the divine but destructive beauty of Helen from the human character. It has been suggested that the play's theme of mystery and deception reflects the cult of Helen at Sparta and the Eleusinian mysteries of Kore, the lost one. Its premises raise philosophical questions as well as spiritual ones, since the Eidolon presents the bringer of evils as a phantom, while the woman of flesh and blood remained both beautiful and good. The Eidolon motif opens into enigmas not only of intellectual perception of the world but also of emotional responses to the beautiful thing and the beloved object.[111]

The action of Helen begins on the shore of the Nile, before the palace of Proteus, the old king who had sheltered Helen during the long war. Helen speaks the prologue, revealing her identity, the myth of her birth, the story of the judgment of Paris, and the background of the Eidolon:

> Hera, disgruntled in defeat, deprived
> her rival's solid promise of all substance:
> she gave the Trojan prince not the real me
> but a living likeness conjured out of air,
> so that believing he possesses me.
> he possesses only his belief. Then Zeus
> compounded these misfortunes . . .
> he loaded with a war the land of Greece
> and the unlucky Phrygians. Yet all those years
> the Helen who endured the siege of Troy,
> The Helen the Greek spears fought for as a prize,
> was me only in name. For I myself
> was wrapped in a cloud, hurried through pockets of air

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[111] For an excellent discussion of this play in Euripides' canon, see Froma I. Zeitlin, "Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes' Thesmophoriazousae," Critical Inquiry 8, no. 2 (Winter 1981), p. 303.

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and set down in the palace of Proteus.[112]

She is taking sanctuary at Proteus' tomb because his son Theoklymenos, now king, wants to wed her. The action begins when the Greek exile Teucer appears, meets Helen without believing her to be what she claims, and tells her that the war is over but Menelaus' ship has disappeared. She learns of the deaths of her mother, brothers, and the heroes, one by one. In despair of her fate, she leaves the tomb to consult the king's sister Theonõe, a prophet. Menelaus then appears, shipwrecked and lost; he has hidden the survivors of his crew, with the "Helen" retrieved from Troy, in a nearby cave. An old woman at the gate gives him his bearings, but warns him of danger: the king hates Greeks since one might steal Helen from him. Menelaus is astounded and confused, but the return of Helen to the stage, consoled by Theonõe, shows that confusion is easier to handle than truth. He is about to leave her, concluding that "the pain I felt at Troy outweighs your talk," when a messenger from the crew reports that the phantom has vanished, confirming the real Helen's story and clearing her name. In the happy reconciliation following (ll. 588-616), Helen speaks a version of the Palinode: "I never ran away to seek that foreign prince's bed of shame, hurried away by oars, carried away by lust." The rest of the play devolves upon a plot in which Helen's intelligence and courage match that of any Euripidean heroine. The couple enlist Theonõe's aid and Helen deceives the king with a story of Menelaus' death by drowning, which requires proper mourning rites at sea, after

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[112] James Michie and Colin Leach, trans., Euripides' Helen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

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which she will marry again. The disguised Menelaus offers his ship for the ritual and puts to sea, escaping with his crew and Helen.

One surprise in Helen for the audience familiar with such story patterns from Euripides' Iphigenia in Tauris and perhaps even aware of the myth of the Eidolon, may well have been the long choral ode to the Mountain Mother, Demeter, which is sung at a particularly crucial point of the action. The ode relates the tale of Persephone's rape by Hades and the Mother's search for her, as in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. References to sacred objects and rituals--the fennel-stalk and midnight vigils--suggest Eleusinian mysteries at the heart of the play. The ode not only stresses Helen's association with Kore, but signifies Helen's motherhood, her role as a protectress, a theme far less familiar but not absent from her myths.

The Helen is above all a play about a benevolent, loving, powerful Helen, whose bereavement is as great as that of any woman involved in the Trojan War. Her ability to invent a plan of rescue for her husband and herself from the deadly foreign country of Egypt marks her with the powers of a Demeter, a restoring deity. And yet, despite the deepening of Helen's mythic meanings, Euripides has created a character that most modern readers find human and admirable, in a drama remarkably similar to romantic comedy. The effect of this play has been vastly to broaden and complicate the figure of Helen in the mythopoetic imagination. Helen in Egypt has provided one of the richest sources for modern mythmakers, inspiring such diverse works as H. Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang's adventure tale The World's Desire, an opera by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, H. D.'s Helen in Egypt, and a mythic tale by

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John Ashbery.

Stesichorus and Plato. The poet Stesichorus, "leader of the dance," is believed to have lived during the first half of the sixth century B.C. Plato claims that he was born in Himera, Sicily, of a father named Euphemus: born in a town whose name means "desire," of a father called "speaking well."[113] Of his twenty-six books of poetry, only some fifty lines survive; the three most influential are preserved in Plato's dialogue on love, the Phaedrus. This tiny fragment is the keynote from which all the overtones of Helen in Egypt and the Eidolon resound, although neither Egypt nor the Eidolon are mentioned. Whether or not Stesichorus was responsible for the original Eidolon story, the Palinode and the legend surrounding its composition initiated one of the major versions of Helen's myths:[114]

> It is not true, the story told:
> you never boarded the well-benched ships,
> nor did you arrive at the towers of Troy.[115]

Plato quotes these lines in the context of their legend in Phaedrus 243. Homer as well as Stesichorus mishandled the myth of Helen, he implies, with some irony:

> For those who have sinned by lying about gods or heroes there is an ancient rite of purification, unknown to Homer but

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[113] As in "euphemism"; Phaedrus 244, trans. W. C. Helmbold and W. G. Rabinowitz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956).

[114] There are several parallels and precedents for the eidolon in Greek myth: Hera deceives the rapist Ixion with an eidolon of clouds, Nephele; Odysseus encounters the eidolon of Hercules in Hades, while the true form feasts in Olympus; Aeneas is spirited from battle by Aphrodite while his eidolon faces the Greeks.

[115] My translation, from Edmonds, p. .

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> familiar to Stesichorus. When he was struck blind for speaking evil of Helen, he was not, like Homer, ignorant of the reason. Like a true artist, he recognized the cause and immediately wrote [the three lines]. And when he had completed this so-called Recantation (Palinode), he recovered at once his sight.

Recantation of evil speech and denial of evil actions, as well as the first suggestion of the Eidolon, recur in this and other Platonic texts, showing the extent of Stesichorus' influence.

Literary detectives have created an edifice of conjecture from the legend of Stesichorus and the Palinode. The subject of the first, condemnatory ode has been variously proposed as Helen's abduction by Theseus, who fathered Iphigenia on her; or as her voluntary abandonment of Menelaus for Paris. The poet's blindness has been called real, metaphysical, even astronomical--a solar eclipse[116]--or "muse-inspired," mousikos. Stesichorus learned the reason for his blindness because Helen appeared to him in a dream, or a wounded soldier brought him a message from Helen on Leuke. His sight was restored by Helen or by the Dioscuri. Some believe the Palinode comprised more than one poem. All agree that the poet claimed Helen never went to Troy, but opinions differ on where he sent her--whether to Egypt, Leuke, Therapne, the stars, or even home to Sparta. In her place, the Eidolon or a painting (also "eidolon" in Greek) went to Troy.[117] This patchwork illustrates

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[116] Lindsay, pp. 123-125; in addition, the poet wrote of eclipses. Stesichorus reportedly created the story of Daphnis' blinding because of his rejection of a nymph (Snell, Discovery, p. 285, from Aelian; see H. J. Rose, p. 179, n. 15).

[117] This synopsis follows that compiled by Prost, p. 73, who notes "except for the statement that Helen never reached Troy, not a single scrap of the reconstruction above can be supported by a direct quotation from Stesichorus."

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how myths are built, recalling for example the late classical "Great Pan is dead" craze that swept the Greek imagination, based on some sailors' mishearing of water-borne voices from the islands mourning the death not of Pan, but the yearly demise of Tammuz (Adonis).[118] Nevertheless, the tradition is evocative. It reveals a hidden divine power of Helen, belonging also to Dawn, who blinds and restores sight to Orion.

The myth of Stesichorus' blinding has important psychological aspects, which persist throughout the fortunes of the myth. Freud's insights on the unconscious equation between blindness and castration are relevant here.[119] The blinding of a denouncing poet, the restoration of vision to the epideictic or excusing poet, suggests impotence caused by disgust or fear of woman. Healing is effected through the power of imaginative fiction, recreating the good object by separating the beloved's form and actions from the disappointing or threatening woman.

For Plato, the invention of the Eidolon served to illustrate the double nature of all things of perception in this world as opposed to the world of true reality, divine truth. The Phaedrus preserves and explicates the Palinode stanza--those three strong denials of Helen's guilt--at the beginning of Socrates' second speech, which he delivers

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[118] Patricia Merivale, Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 12-15; the tradition is preserved in Plutarch's Moralia, "De Defectu Oraculorum," xvii.

[119] "The Psychoanalytic View of a Psychogenic Disturbance of Vision," SE 11, p. 217; "The Uncanny," SE 17, p. 231.

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as a palinode. Many other allusions to Helen inform the dialogue. For example, the plane tree under which the speakers rest was held sacred in Sparta to Menelaus and Helen. The Phaedrus responds in several ways to the sophist Isocrates' ornate set piece, the Encomium on Helen (ca. 370 B.C.). Socrates' description of the nature of truth resembles a list of the properties of air, the element from which the Eidolon was formed. But Plato reverses the Eidolon's implications: instead of a false, lying, and deceitful illusion, the airy image is the truer one. Memory of divine reality arouses divine desire, but the sight of the Eidolon arouses profane lust.[120]

Other important Helenic themes informing the Phaedrus include the function of memory and desire and the vision of beauty as shining. Memory of the soul's sight of true reality brings man to desire, makes the soul grow wings, moves it toward immortality. For Sappho, too, beauty had power to grant immortality, but such beauty lived in the world, whether in song or in the faces of girls. Socrates, by contrast, uses a heavenly light to represent beauty. His imagery reflects the pastoral noon of the dialogue's setting, but also points toancient associations of beauty and light:

> But beauty! We were once able to behold it shining clear at the time when we followed in the happy troop, some of us with Zeus, others with another god; . . . in the pure light of

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[120] Plato mentions the Eidolon of Helen in the Republic with the same purpose in mind: "The pleasures [of the hoi polloi] are necessarily mixed with pains, are they not? Their pleasures are eidola of true pleasure. Their pleasures seem real due to the illusion of perspective, bright by contrast with their pains, so that these pleasures appear great in combination with pains and engender in fools rabid lusts and are battle-girt--just as Stesichorus says the Eidolon of Helen was battle-girt by those at Troy because of ignorance of the truth" (586b-c).

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> final revelation. . . . It shone brightly among those former sights and, even though we have descended here on earth, we can still recapture it, gleaming most clearly as it does, through the clearest of our senses. For sight is the keenest of our physical perceptions (250).

As in the Phaînetaí moi, beauty is both divine and visual, but the lover's reaction is physical and deeply human: "a shudder runs through him and something of the old awe steals over him. . . . Once he has received the emanation of beauty through his eyes, he grows warm, and through the perspiration that ensues, he irrigates the sprouting of his wing. . . . The whole soul, wounded time and time again in every part, is goaded into anguish; yet again it retains the memory of beauty and so rejoices" (251). Beauty inspires both awe and anguish, joy and fear, but--to paraphrase Yeats--where the hurt is taken, the hurt can be forgot. "For not only does the soul revere the possessor of beauty, it has found in him the only healer of its terrible sufferings" (252). So the Odyssean Helen mixed nepenthe in the wine of the weeping company, to help them bear the pain and loss she caused. Plato seems to have bridged the split in Helen's image between Sappho's Aphroditic lover and the lioness of Aeschylus.

We have briefly noted the relationship between weaving and song in Homer. The dialogue's mention of the effect of the written text on memory adds some insights to Helen's weaving, which enfigured the deadly events occurring on the Trojan plain. The encoding of events in memory produces true song; the encoding in writing petrifies and distorts truth. Penelope unwove a text(ile) in order to remain faithful to the memory of Odysseus: she did not substitute an eidolon for his absence. In contrast to the changeable mnemonics of oral song, writing

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is only another type of eidolon, removed from a greater truth; "Zeus-Ammon's method of delivering prophetic truth" was exclusively oral, Socrates declares (275). Helen does not weave in the Odyssey, but sings her own side of the story through Homer's voice. H. D. in Helen in Egypt would remember this.

In his Socratic texts, Plato transferred false eidola to the immediate world, reserving truth to a higher sphere where reason alone, not the senses, could perceive it. He gave truth to the noetic rather than to the aesthetic. These powerful ideas have had tremendous repercussions throughout the history of Christian thought, both mainstream and heretical, influencing among the rest the Gnostic's Helen of Tyre and Richard of St. Victor's concepts of paradise.

Theocritus. In keeping with the paradisiacal beauty celebrated by Plato is the Helen of Theocritus, whose innocence brings her exceptionally close to her earliest divinity. The Hellenistic poets preserved some forms of the antique goddess Helen but also added a few original elements to the myths.[121] Theocritus' Epithalamium of Helen (Idyll 18) of about 275 B.C. contains a portrait of a maiden Helen as dancer and bride, in nature closer to Artemis than to Aphrodite. The wedding hymn praises her beauty and domestic talents, but ends with a ritual garlanding of a plane tree inscribed as an object of worship: "Adore

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[121] The work of Lycophron, the tortuously allusive play Alexander (ca. 273 or 190 B.C.) introduces the story of Paris' earlier love for Oenone, and further expands the liaison of Helen and Achilles, as suggested by a Cypria fragment. Oenone as the wronged wife provides a counterbalance to the deserted husband Menelaus; Ovid would use her story to compose one of the Heroides. Both Oenone and the Helen-Achilles themes were popular with Victorian poets, particularly Landor and Tennyson.

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me; I am Helen's tree."[122] Theocritus never forgets her divinity, giving her the Aphroditic epithet "golden" and comparing her to rising Dawn and radiant spring, emblems of Eos and Kore. His praises extend to her likeness to trees as of Helen Dendritis, and to Thessalian steeds, calling to mind her brothers, the divine horsemen.

This peculiarly anaphroditic Helen excels at spinning and weaving with loom and shuttle, and singing hymns on the lyre to Artemis and Athene. The arts are related by Homeric metaphor: the lyre's strings and plektron are comparable to the loom's warp and shuttle.[123] The union of song, dance, and weaving at the close of the first stanza is also striking. Frazer's Golden Bough documents tribal associations between these activities and adultery while men are at war:

> An old historian of Madagascar informs us that "while the men are at the wars and until their return, the women and girls cease not night and day to dance, and neither lie down nor take food in their own houses. And although they are very voluptuously inclined, they would not for anything in the world have an intrigue with another man while their husband is at the war, believing firmly that if that happened, their husband would be either wounded or killed. They believe that by dancing they impart strength, courage, and good fortune to their husbands . . ." The magic also extends to weaving; "in the islands of Leti, Moa, and Lakor, the women and children are forbidden to remain inside the house and to twine thread or weave."[124]

It is possible to consider the domestic activities of dwelling in a house and weaving as being as harmful to the absent warrior as that

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[122] A. S. F. Gow, Theocritus (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1952).

[123] Jane McIntosh Snyder, "The Web of Song: Weaving Imagery in Homer and the Lyric Poets," The Classical Journal 76 (1981), p. 193.

[124] Frazer, pp. 21-22.

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other domestic activity of sexual intercourse: man's life is a coarse thread easily untwisted, the work of Aphrodite twining flesh in copulation. In this light, Helen's weaving in the Iliad appears as sinister as her lovemaking with Paris while Menelaus hunts his escaped enemy. She seems as if in league with the evil Ate that will make her the stuff of song. Conversely, Penelope's unweaving is beneficial to the interests of her absent husband. Helen's dancing in Theocritus is, by contrast, a positive magic that parallels the communality and physical expenditure of masculine warfare. The problem of Helen's innocence and guilt does not approach resolution until her own voice examines her myth in H. D.'s poetry.

Vergil. From the Greek poets and dramatists, Vergil derived two major versions of Helen that appear in the Aeneid (30-19 B.C.). His Helens are unique in their combinations of elements and exerted an especially strong influence on the medieval view of the Trojans as martyred heroes. Ironically, his vision of Helen is particularly close to that of Pound, whose low opinion of Vergil is notorious. In Book 2, Aeneas encounters a most human Helen in a most supernatural setting, as a woman huddled for sanctuary while the gods themselves burn Troy around them (ll. 567-585).[125] Notable are the old light and fire motifs, here with new connotations:

> "And now that I am left alone, I see
> the daughter of Tyndareos clinging
> to Vesta's thresholds, clinging silently
> within a secret corner of the shrine;
> bright conflagrations give me light as I
> wander and let my eyes read everything.

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[125] Allen Mandelbaum, trans. The Aeneid of Virgil (New York: Bantam, 1972).

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> For she, in terror of the Trojans--set
> against her for the fall of Pergamus--
> and of the Danaans' vengeance and the anger
> of her abandoned husband; she the common
> Fury of Troy and of her homeland, she
> had hid herself; she crouched, a hated thing,
> beside the altars. In my mind a fire
> is burning; anger spurs me to avenge
> my falling land, to exact the debt of crime.
> . . . though there is no memorable name
> in punishing a woman and no gain
> of honor in such victory, yet I
> shall have my praise for blotting out a thing
> of evil, for my punishing of one
> who merits penalties.

The sacred home-fire of Vesta, the flames destroying the city, and the emotion of anger are made more striking when Aeneas speaks of ashes, recalling the money-changer Ares' exchange of live bodies for corpses in the Agamemnon chorus. Nowhere to my knowledge is the Greek Helen linked with Hestia, however; the terrible irony of her taking sanctuary at Vesta's shrine recalls Euripides' innocent Helen seeking sanctuary at the tomb of Proteus.

However, this daimonically evil but despicably cowardly woman is saved from the hero's vengeance by a sudden apparition of Venus as "pure light," who stays Aeneas' hand and speaks an apologia--Priam's apologia, in fact: "it is the gods' relentlessness, the gods', that overturns these riches, tumbles Troy" (602-603). In Stesichorean fashion, Venus unclouds her son's eyes, and he can see the Olympians shaking the city, directing the Greeks. No hint of Helen's beauty appears in this dark scene; but her second appearance is even darker.

In Book 6.511-528, the Trojan Deiphobus in Hades tells Aeneas of Helen's behavior during the fall of Troy. The shade of the mangled warrior bears marks of a sparagmós: his trunk mangled, face and hands

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torn, his ears cut off, his nostrils slit. This butchery is Helen's fault. As in the Odyssey, Helen was familiar with the plot of the wooden horse, but not even the traitor Sinon is so vividly evil as she appears in welcoming impending doom under guise of celebrating victory. She treacherously led the Trojan women in a wild dance, shrieking to drown the sound of rattling armor from the hollow horse. She carries the torch foreseen in Hecuba's dream (in earlier versions of Troy's fall carried by Sinon). "It was she herself/ who held a giant fire-brand and, from/ the citadel, called in the Danaans." The innocent Theocritan dancing girl has become a Bacchante; Deiphobus, the victim of her orgies. Finally, like Telemachus she clears the house of weapons, but acts for the benefit of invading Menelaus, to whom she opens the house.

Although Vergil's Helen has lost her own divinely Aphroditic qualities, the dimensions of her evil are akin to the characteristics of such actively destructive goddesses as Inanna or Kali. Vergil seems to have absorbed influences from the far and middle East in this portrait of Helen; if so, he anticipated the orientalized goddess of the Gnostics.

The Gnostics. Surprisingly, the Judeo-Christian imagination concocted one of the most important myths of Helen to survive from early traditions. Her name among the first-century Gnostics was Helen of Tyre. The dimensions of this Helen not only embrace Greek philosophy and mythology with their later Hellenistic and Latin developments, but also return to ancient Semitic and Oriental rituals and goddesses. Helen of Tyre is preserved in texts that for centuries were known only

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through the writings of early church fathers--Iranaeus, Tertullian, Clementine, and Epiphaneus, among others. Most of these theologians had only one purpose in mentioning her: to condemn and suppress the heretical ideas that included her figure. However, from the remains of Gnosticism, the Manichaean heresies would adopt many ideas, including that of a feminine principle that pre-existed material creation. From Manichaeism, in turn, the Catharist and Albigensian heresies would emerge. These roots would flower again in the decadent and occult literature from which Yeats, Pound, and H.D. drew versions of Helen. Not until the middle of our century were original Gnostic texts recovered, which revealed the sublimity of this goddess reviled by the Church.

The passages from Iranaeus and Epiphaneus below offer the image of Helen of Tyre most familiar to early twentieth-century poets and mystics. Iranaeus' account, of about 180-185 A.D., contains the first mention of Helen of Tyre. The Simon he names is the same who appeared in Acts of the Apostles 8.4-24, a magician and false prophet who tries to purchase the power of Peter and John, the transmission of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. Peter rebukes him for trying "to buy this gift of God with money," saying "pray to the Lord that the ambition [or conception: epinoia] of your heart may be forgiven."[126] Simon repents and does not reappear in scripture. But this episode was the seed of the Gnostic-Christian controversy in the following centuries, as Simon Magus confronted Simon Peter. Simon Magus became

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[126] J. Munck, W. A. Albright, and C. Mann, eds., Acts of the Apostles, Anchor Bible (New York, 1967), in Prost, p. 323.

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the incarnation of the Father, appearing to be a man among men; Helen, his mind-born daughter. Further, those who trust in Simon and Helen will be saved through his grace rather than through good works, and consequently may live as they please. The sect earned the disapproval of the church fathers through its use of sexual rites, love potions and other magic arts, and pagan images of Jupiter and Minerva. In Iranaeus we can see the effect of one hundred years of embroidery:

> Simon of Samaria, from whom all sorts of heresies derive their origin, formed his sect out of the following materials: Having redeemed from slavery at Tyre, a city of Phoenicia, a certain woman named Helen, he was in the habit of taking her about with him, declaring that this woman was the First Conception of his Mind, the Mother of All, by whom, in the beginning, he conceived in his mind [the thought] of forming angels and archangels. For this Ennoia leaping forth from him and comprehending the will of her Father, descended to the lower regions [of space], and generated angels and powers, by whom also he declared this world was formed. But after she had produced them, she was detained by them through motives of jealousy, because they were unwilling to be looked upon as the progeny of another being. As to himself, they had no knowledge of him whatever; but his Ennoia was detained by those powers and angels who had been produced by her. She suffered all kinds of contumely from them, so that she could not return upwards to her Father, but was even shut up in a human body and for ages was decanted in succession, from one female body to another, as from vessel to vessel. She was, for example, in that Helen on whose account the Trojan War was undertaken; for whose sake also Stesichorus was struck blind, because he had cursed her in his verses, but afterwards, repenting and writing what are called the Palinodes, in which he hymned her, he was restored to sight. Thus she, passing from body to body, and suffering insults in every one of them, at last became a common prostitute, and she it was that was meant by the lost sheep.

There is a fascinating linguistic aspect of this passage. It lends itself to reading as an allegory of Kristeva's semiotic/symbolic language. Helen before her fall is that perfect masculine-feminine bridge between the two realms, conceived, like Athena, as a defending sign, as the thought of communication. The angels she begets are mes-

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sengers, words, who abuse that original thought when she is made flesh, as language itself fails of perfect communication on human lips. The words are jealous and rebellious like the infant who attempts self-definition, refusing to acknowledge the semiotic as creator, and yet still ignorant of the omnipotence of meaning created by the symbolic.

Epiphaneus follows the same format as Iranaeus, but he embroiders the earlier version and adds long quotes from texts supposedly written by Simon. These texts were important whatever their provenance, since so little original Gnostic literature survived. His work, of 370-400 A.D., summarizes and condemns the Gnostic gospel:

> Being lustful by nature and prodded by shame for his own undertakings, the vagabond [Simon] altered the facts to those deceived by him, using a corrupt allegorical explanation instead--lest any liaison between them leak out. For having found himself a certain woman named helen, a roving slave-girl from Tyre, he carried her off for himself. Embracing the woman in a filthy corner, the wizard explained it to his disciples by fabricating a certain myth about the psychagogia of the soul. Then saying he was the Great Power of God, he dared to claim that his meretricious mate was the Holy Spirit and that he had descended on her account. He said:
>
> "In every heaven I took on another form in keeping with the form of the beings in each heaven, so that I could escape detection by the angelic powers and could come down to the Ennoia, who is the very same as the Prounikos and is called the Holy Spirit. Through her I created the angels. But the angels created the world and men."[127]

The prounikos, who is called Barbero or Barbelo in other heretical sects, was a power from on high that descended into the world in female form. Her beauty caused the angels to lust for her and fight among themselves, as well as to hold her and copulate with her, preventing her from ascending again. She was reincarnated over and over, into

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[127] Translated by Prost, pp. 418-420, from K. Holl, Epiphanius: Panarion haereseon GCS (Leipzig, 1915), 21.2, 2-3.6.

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various human, animal, and other forms, so that the warring powers would continue to fight for her until they had destroyed themselves. She could then ascend back into heaven. Simon reportedly writes:

> She was the same woman then among the Greeks and Trojans as on high before the world came to be and after the creation, having made copies of things through the invisible powers. She is the woman now with me and the one for whom I have descended. And she has awaited my coming. She is the Ennoia, the one called Helen in Homer. And for this reason Homer was forced to cross out that she had stood on the tower and by a torch revealed to the Greeks the scheme among the Phrygians. He means by the brilliance of the torch, as I have said, the indication of the Light from on High.

Epiphaneus also attributes to Simon an interpretation of the Trojan horse as the ignorance of the gentiles, and the equation of Athena with Ennoia and Helen, as well as with the lost sheep of the Gospels. The battle of textual explicators in these passages is almost comic: the quoted "Simon" offers readings of Homer and Paul; Epiphaneus belittles him with shrill indignation.

In 1945 a library of Gnostic manuscripts was discovered at Nag Hammadi. When the texts were published, the figure of Barbelo whom Epiphaneus equates with Helen appeared in stunning glory. Few of the new finds were published during the lives of Yeats, Pound, and H. D., but rumors of their existence stirred interest on many fronts. The modern resurgence of women-centered worship and the intuition of a feminine divinity have found an uncanny herald in the return of this goddess's voice. In "Thunder, Perfect Mind," Barbelo, one appellation of the great Mother Goddess of the Gnostics, offers a revelation of herself:

> Do not be ignorant of me.
> For I am the first and the last.
> I am the honored one and the scorned one.

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I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
I am the mother and the daughter.
I am the members of my mother.
I am the barren one
and many are her sons.
I am she whose wedding is great,
and I have not taken a husband.
I am the midwife and she who does not bear.
I am the solace of my labor pains.
I am the bride and the bridegroom,
and it is my husband who begot me.
I am the mother of my father
and the sister of my husband
and he is my offspring. . . .
I am the silence that is incomprehensible
and the idea whose remembrance is frequent.
I am the voice whose sound is manifold
and the word whose appearance is multiple.
I am the utterance of my name. . . .
I am the one who has been hated everywhere
and the one who has been loved everywhere.[128]

Barbelo's labyrinthine paradoxes become more and more linguistic and psychological in this litany. She ends with a statement that could belong entirely to Helen. Gnostic myths and rituals reveal other intersections of Barbelo and Helen. She is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, sharing with Helen arboreal aspects; she is able to create a shadowy image of herself to avoid being raped in person, like the eidolons of both Hera and Helen. Helen of Tyre purges from the mythic figure of Helen the conflicts set upon her character in epic. At the same time, this Gnostic figure restores a long-denied femininity to the highest gods.

Ovid. Among the most important later authors who transmitted a classically human Helen is Ovid. Ovid's Helen is far more civilized

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[128] Trans. by George W. MacRae and Douglas M. Parrott, in J. M. Robinson, director, Members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, The Nag Hammadi Library in English (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 271-177.

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than Vergil's: she is a native Roman, not a barbarian. She and Paris exchange letters in his Heroides ("Heroines' Letters"). Familiar with the mystic traditions of Helen, Ovid nevertheless creates a most worldly woman. He invokes the Palinode at the beginning of his third book of the Ars Amatoria ("Art of Love"), offering women an apology for his advice to men in the first two books. He promises at the bidding of Cytherea to even the balance by instructing women in the arts of attraction, seduction, and retention of the male. In Heroides, composed before 8 A.D., Letters 16 and 17 seem to apply the principles of the Ars as Paris attempts to seduce his host's wife, and she responds with neither advance nor retreat. Ironically, fire is again an important motif, but as Paris interprets Hecuba's dream, he is a firebrand because of his burning love for Helen. Helen is also intelligent and lively in her letter. She encourages him subtly but succinctly:

> I both desire it and I am afraid. So far my will is not determined; my heart is wavering in doubt. Both my lord is away from me and you are without companion for your sleep, and your beauty takes me, and mine in turn you; the nights, too, are long, and we are already come together in speech, and you--wretched me!--are persuasive, and the same roof covers us. May I perish if all things do not invite me to my fall; and yet some fear still holds me back! What you basely urge on me, would that you could in honour compel me to! You should have cast out by force the scruples of my rustic heart. Wrong sometimes brings gain even to those themselves who suffer it. In this way, surely, I could have been compelled to happiness.[129]

Whether or not this Helen is a responsible wife and an adorable woman,

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[129] Grant Showerman, trans., Ovid, vol. 1: Heroides and Amores, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Heinemann, 1977), ll. 177-188.

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as some readers have found her,[130] she is as vivid as the Vergilian Erinys, and certainly in command of her situation, however coy.

Later Incarnations. Helen's image underwent, through medieval and Renaissance Europe, metamorphoses inspired by that poetic instinct which refashions a myth for new audiences, new world views. Chiefly, Helen's name, beauty, and abduction by Paris remained in the memory of courtly poets and troubadours. The medieval courts adopted Ovid as "Venus' clerke," the supreme poet of chivalric love, for his depictions of yielding-unyielding lovers.[131] Although her story held a minor place in the myths made over into courtly literatures, the Ovidian Helen's character lent piquancy to the actual behavior of women.[132] Her Ovidian wavering seducibility informs the character of Criseyde by Chaucer and Shakespeare's Cressida. Helen is essentially a light-minded and lightly moraled woman in both renowned English versions of Troilus and his betrayal.

The more arcane myths became dissociated from her epic figure largely due to the repressions of the church, and were hidden or lost

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[130] For example, W. S. Anderson, "The Heroides," in J. W. Binns, Ovid (London: Routledge and Kegan paul, 1973), pp. 49-83.

[131] In Roman de la Rose, Jean de Meung would put the words of the Ars Amatoria into the mouth of an old woman, the form in which Aphrodite appeared to Helen in Iliad 3. The Helen whom Dante sees blown in the whirlwind in Inferno 5.64-65 is Ovidian despite his guide, accompanied by the heineka Helêne formula and followed by Achilles, Paris, and Tristan. The strategies of these letters would eventually inspire such novels as Les Liaisons Dangereuses.

[132] As in the "courts of love" held by Queen Eleanor and Elisabetta Gonzaga, Duchess of Urbino.

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during the Middle Ages. However, a mystic Helen became attached to the Faust legend through Simon Magus and Helen of Tyre, and so was memorably recreated by Marlowe. Helen of Tyre, the fallen female principle, resides near the heart of several Arthurian themes: love triangles as of Mark, Isolde, and Tristram; love triangles that destroy kingdoms, as of Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot; seductions by love potions or by eidolons; the Grail quest and the elusiveness of the Grail, which has its eidolons as well.

The great Helen created by Goethe to wed Faust, give birth to Euphorion, then vanish into a dream of ancient glory, revives Helen's Eidolon and the epic heroine at once. Further mystical overtones were returned to Helen with the courtly lady idealized by Romantics and Pre-Raphaelites. Beautiful and chastely unattainable, she was largely the creation of such imaginations as Sir Walter Scott's and William Morris, who derived her figure from remains of the troubadour's Catharism and ultimately from the Gnostic.[133] As in courtly literature, these sublime versions of Helen gave rise to a burlesque fabliaux tradition. A misogynistic, cynical perspective reinterpreted Troy, returning Cressida's personality to Helen. The most popular Helen in this line to appear in the nineteenth century, just a year before Yeats's birth, was La Belle Hélène, heroine of Offenbach's light opera.[134] The Victorians also revived obscure Greek mythic traditions,

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[133] See Denis de Rougemont, Love in the Western World (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 75-102.

[134] First performed in 1864, the opera achieved immense popularity in the cynical France of the Third Empire. Its lyrics occur to Sigmund Freud in his essay "The Theme of the Three Caskets," SE 12.

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as in W. S. Landor's Imaginary Dialogues.

Poets of the twentieth century drew variously from these and other incarnations of Helen. In the following chapters I discuss how later reception of these texts came to influence various poets, comparing for example Goethe and Yeats, the troubadours and Pound, Gnostic mysticism and H. D.

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Chapter 2. W. B. Yeats: Helen as Beautiful Woman

> Find out what men lose who are not in love with Helen.
>
> W. B. Yeats
> "What is Popular Poetry?"[1]

THE CONCEPTION and formation of Helen's figure in Yeats's poetry began with the Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite poets whom he read as a youth in Sligo. His developing images of Helen were later influenced by the decadent fin-de-siècle tastes of London, by colleagues in the Rhymer's Club, by occult researches and experiences, and by Celtic myths and Irish folk tales. The weight of literary tradition invested the poet with a feminine imagery so powerful that it shaped his perceptions, choices, and rejections of living women. But throughout his life, Yeats struggled against these myths inherited and imagined, especially fighting Romantic prototypes and their decadent counterparts. While committed to a spiritual otherworld of art, he strove for mythic images faithful to the reality of his political and social experiences.

Consequently, although Yeats encountered literary Helens far earlier than real lovers, the vitality of his myth of the beautiful woman owes most to the person of Maud Gonne. His first poems alluding to Helen were composed for this extraordinarily active and self-directed woman. Later, his Helens came to reflect other women and

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[1] Essays and Introductions (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 7.

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concepts as well.[2] His understanding of women deepened as his knowledge of himself deepened. This movement can be traced through his responses to his first romantic interest, a cousin, Laura Armstrong; his theatre romance with Florence Farr, the actress; Olivia Shakespear, his first lover; his cannily uncanny wife George Hyde-Lees Yeats; Iseult Gonne, Maud's daughter; and the much younger dancer and poet Margot Ruddock.

Among the concepts that Helen symbolized for Yeats are eternal beauty; poetic inspiration and, eventually, the poet and poetry itself; warlike superlative femininity; and mystic sexual perfection. Although he invokes her most often in his lyric poetry, and occasionally uses her image as metaphor in prose and stories, his epic and dramatic verses also contain images and actions related to her myths. Her myths inspired the dancers in the exquisite tableaux based on Noh theatre, and informed the heart of the mystic system of A Vision. While this chapter concentrates on the lyric poetry, I also draw from Yeats's dramas, memoirs, tales, and other works.

There are few aspects of Helen's myths that Yeats's poetry did not in some way renew. Among symbols related to Helen from earlier literature, Yeats revived the lion metaphor of Aeschylus and the statue motif of Euripides. He added medievalized Romantic elements, in particular the great medieval Rose symbolizing the Virgin. He also used Salome, the dancing girl so dear to the decadents, and the Oriental queen of Sheba who counters intellect with physical wisdom. Yeats

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[2] The most complete study of this topic is by Gloria C. Kline, The Last Courtly Lover: Yeats and the Idea of Woman (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research, 1983).

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linked her dusky face and Arab eyes with the coloring of his wife.[3] In the poems, these symbols interlace: the Rose is a Pre-Raphaelite Muse, musing and musical; Sheba and the dancer join in a system where beauty has "an ignorant ear" and the dawn is ignorant and wanton.[4] The Rose is at last spiritualized into a type of eidolon of Helen, opposed to both the "good wife" Helen in Egypt who relates to Sheba, and the destructive dancing girl, a Helen of Troy careless or ignorant of her effects. The mystic whore Helen of Tyre relates to all three, since for Yeats she is, as we will see, eternal and unearthly, beautiful and dangerous, all-knowing and all-suffering: ultimately, a great mother analogue.

Yeats's Helens run a gamut from sublime to humble, but all are informed by a mother imago. As previously noted, in ancient literature Helen as "the lost one" or as betrayer seems closely tied to the longing for a beloved but distant or absent mother. Both the eidolon, an intense phantom appearance, and the "fallen" all-mother, an object of sadistic punishment, suggest Klein's theories of the infant's fantasized perfect and imperfect mother.

Yeats tends to associate Helen with ideas of place or time, usually past heroic times or futures unattainable. He finds her within the landscapes of nostalgia and reverie--for example, the Mary Hynes of

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[3] Kline, p. 95.

[4] Yeats, The Poems: A New Edition, ed. by Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1983): "The Scholars," p. 140; "The Dawn," p. 146.

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rustic or romantic Ireland.[5] As he wrote, inspired by Castiglione and considering, like Pound, the perfections of Italian culture in relation to visions of Helen:

> Perhaps we may find in the spectacle of some beautiful woman our Ferrara, our Urbino. Perhaps that is why we have no longer any poetry but the poetry of love.[6]

Yeats continually revised his successive associations of woman, place, and beloved with Helen's myths. He tested, discarded, or transformed symbols, projecting both inherited tradition and his own imagination over the uncontrollable lives of real women and his slowly achieved self-mastery. Rose becomes Mask, mother becomes child, dreamer becomes statue, statue becomes dancer. In A Vision, Yeats enfigured an apocalyptic new Helen, born from Leda's lost egg. Good and evil join in her, as in the figures of the Sphinx and unicorn, apocalyptic beasts. She represents complex metaphors of art and death at Phase Fifteen, signifying simultaneously annihilation and rebirth.

After this final revelation, Yeats unwound his tangled skein of myth, abandoning "lion and woman and the Lord knows what" to the

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[5] These associations of Helen or the beautiful woman with the idea of mother and landscape may be elucidated by Melanie Klein's association of goodness, beauty, and the breast: "By a gradual process, anything that is felt to give out goodness and beauty, and that calls forth pleasure and satisfaction, in the physical or in the wider sense, can in the unconscious mind take the place of this ever-bountiful breast, and of the whole mother. Thus we speak of our own country as the "motherland" . . . In the explorer's unconscious mind, a new territory stands for a new mother, one that will replace the loss of the real mother. He is seeking the "promised land"--the "land flowing with milk and honey" ("Love, Guilt, and Reparation," Love, Guilt, and Reparation, pp. 333-334).

[6] Memoirs, ed. Denis Donoghue (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 156.

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insights of Crazy Jane, an anti-Helen. Like the "wild old wicked man," this ancient madwoman realizes that woman's beauty is earthly, like her flesh: "Bodily decreptitude is wisdom."[7] The apocalypse is not forgotten, but flesh can be accepted. Yet it remains second-best to the absolute ideal: Helen herself continued to symbolize an immortal and divine beauty for Yeats until the end.

Yeats never dissociated extreme feminine beauty and death, nor did he question his insistence upon some incarnation of beauty as eternal, although love's objects aged and vanished. He always found it necessary to imagine the poem and memory, the practiced artifact, as immortal. However, he thoroughly undermined the mood of decadence, if not the myth. Adopting a life of action the better to win Gonne's respect, he abandoned the image of Romantic poet as limp aesthete, paralyzed with ennui and obsessed with vampires. He also exhausted the last possibilities of courtly love, as he tried to practice the "old high ways of love" sung but hardly followed by William Morris.[8] Gonne and Ireland kept a utopian image of Helen in Yeats's imagination, frustrated love and desperate politics exacerbating his desire. War, violence, mystery, and magical visions, created an immediacy demanding action from both man and poet. Through the pressure of these experiences, every aspect of Helen's myth occurred to Yeats's hand, and he in turn made a new

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[7] Poems: "The Wild Old Wicked Man," p. 310; "Words for Music, Perhaps: XVII, After Long Silence," p. 265.

[8] As in "The Defence of Guenevere and "King Arthur's Tomb," Vol. I, The Collected Works of William Morris, ed. by May Morris (London: Longman, Green, 1910-1915; New York: Russell & Russell, 1966).

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vision of Helen available to poets after him. His Helens dramatically reflect the violence of love and politics that inflamed his life.

Mythos

Helen among Romantics

Goethe's Faust. Few visions of Helen after classical times could rank with that of Goethe, who spent a lifetime in the composition of Faust. He completed the first and second parts thirty years apart. Helen's appearance and loss in Faust I are magnificently fulfilled in Faust II, when the rejuvenated sage is transported into mytholiterary realms of medieval Europe and Arcadia. Here he dwells with the restored Helen, who gives birth to her reckless son, Euphorion, based on Byron. When this sublime figure dies, Helen joins him in the underworld, leaving only her garment and veil in Faust's hand. The complexity of Goethe's Helen was unrivaled until Yeats renewed her figure, like Goethe in a lifelong meditation on the myth.

Yeats preserves certain aspects of Goethe's Helen. The Irish poet enacted Faust himself, adopting magic as a most necessary adjunct for poetry and acquiring the reputation of magician among the country people.[9] A comparison of Goethe's Helen as taxonomized by Gilbert Highet and of Yeats's, analyzed by Giorgio Melchiori, reveals their relationship. Highet lists seven aspects of Helen in Faust's symbo-

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[9] Memoirs, pp. 76-77.

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logy.[10] All are based on the primary identification of Helen with Greek antiquity. This highest of Romantic Helens combines 1) supreme physical beauty; 2) supreme spiritual and aesthetic experience; 3) following from these, the experience of Greek culture--Helen acts for Faust as Vergil for Dante; 4) aristocratic rarity and difficulty, the courtly lady motif; 5) stimulation rather than satisfaction (she can be won but not kept); 6) as such, motherhood of energy and ambition, personified by Euphorion and exemplified by Byron; and 7) foreignness, because Greek and antique, to the spirit of the men who love her and strive for her in modernity. Melchiori's list can be compared to Highet's, to show how many of these ideas Yeats retained, despite the intervening decadence of Romanticism.[11] Helen represents for Yeats 1) beauty as destructive; 2) love and war, the union of contraries; 3) physical decay and the waning of beauty; 4) the unity of all mythologies, especially Greek and Irish; 5) beauty as the bringer of madness, frenzy, vision, and inspiration.

Several paradoxes join in Yeats's Helen; beauty and wisdom, as of Greek excellence; past and present; truth and myth; but especially love and war. In his earliest Pre-Raphaelite verses, Yeats was concerned with the destructive power of beauty. The "stimulation rather than satisfaction" aspect of Goethe's Helen leads ultimately in that

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[10] Gilbert Highet, The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 387-390.

[11] Giorgio Melchiori, The Whole Mystery of Art: Pattern into Poetry in the Work of W. B. Yeats (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 115-130.

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direction. Highet equates Euphorion with "the poets and thinkers of the revolutionary era, their short ardent lives, their violent self-assertions . . . and the early deaths which they all challenged or welcomed."[12] But the beautiful woman may also suffer early death "because the gods loved her," as did Mary Hynes, Yeats's Irish countryside Helen in "Dust Hath Closed Helen's Eye."[13] The motif of Helen old, symbolizing destruction of beauty itself, is associated with the loss by rape or death of the beloved. Envy, fear, and aggression are expressed by the need to imagine the beautiful woman as faded in beauty and hence in power; as made ugly by time or anger, spoiled by jealous spite; or as near death or dying.[14] The poet transfers to the beloved his own desired or imagined fate, the death he courts at her hand.

In this vulnerability, Yeats's Helen departs from Goethe's unaging ideal. In the first place, she is near and human, "suffering with man" like the Rose and dying for man like Christ. Secondly, she is enshrined in the memory of the simple people, part of folk tradition, rather than belonging to an exclusive aristocratic literary imagination. Nevertheless, Yeats endows even Mary Hynes with a spiritiual aristocracy in her excellence and attitude, and she retains difficulty of access in a

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[12] Highet, p. 389.

[13] In The Celtic Twilight, Mythologies (New York: Collier, 1969), pp. 22-30.

[14] See Klein, "Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse," Love, Guilt, and Reparation, pp. 210-218, esp. 217.

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rustic way.[15] Also, in the woman Yeats loved most, he found a spiritual foreignness as of Goethe's Helen: he calls Gonne "a proud woman not kindred of his soul."[16] But when his real-life Helen was aged, Yeats invented Crazy Jane, an anti-Helen. He retained Helen's name for the eternally beautiful memory of his beloved women, and for the life-in-death eidolon of the dancer at Phase Fifteen, so like the insubstantial bride of Faust.

The Helens of Goethe and Yeats have one more strong point of contact. The unity of mythologies that Yeats at last embodied in Helen transcends his earlier vision of a country Helen in Mary Hynes. A mystical Helen leads Yeats into an otherworld of mysterious knowledge, just as she had led Goethe up towards the aesthetic heights of Greek culture, and as Vergil had led Dante through visionary landscapes of the Inferno. Through the Theosophists, Yeats discovered Helen of Tyre, in whom the most diverse mythologies were combined during the early Christian-late Roman era. Eve, Mary, Astarte and her relations, Athena-Minerva, Aphrodite-Venus, as well as the Oriental female principles signified by "yin," are all explicitly present in the Theosophical Helen-Ennoia. And she herself is mad with inspiration.

Nowhere does Yeats use these traditions of a mystic Helen so openly as in his story "The Adoration of the Magi."[17] In the tale,

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[15] Yeats contrasts the Rose with Shelley's intellectual beauty "in that I have imagined it as suffering with man and not as something pursued and seen from afar," Poems, p. 589.

[16] "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," p. 236, Poems.

[17] Mythologies, pp. 308-315.

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three old men hear a strange voice bidding them to "set out for Paris, where a dying woman would give them secret names and thereby so transform the world that another Leda would open her knees to the swan, another Achilles beleaguer Troy." They find "a beautiful woman asleep," her face with a look of "unquenchable desire," and "porcelain-like refinement of the vessel in which so malevolent a flame had burned." They kneel "at the death-bed of one that has been beautiful" --the "Helen old" motif. One of the old men suddenly crows like a cock, announces himself as the voice of Hermes, and explains

> The woman who lies there has given birth, and that which she bore has the likeness of a unicorn and is most unlike man of all living things, being cold, hard, and virginal. It seemed to be born dancing; and was gone from the room wellnigh upon the instant . . . Bow down and very low, for they have chosen this woman in whose heart all follies have gathered, and in whose body all desires have awakened; this woman who has been driven out of Time and has lain upon the bosom of Eternity.

This apocalyptic dancer appears in later poems as Helen. The unicorn-dancer-Helen, whose conception heralds the end of a millennium in Yeats's mythology, is "most unlike man," but the adjectives "cold, hard, and virginal" might describe either a withholding woman or the phallus. She is not androgynous or sexless but a fetish, a symbol, the symbol of a symbol. The woman, described in terms recalling Helen-Ennoia in Flaubert's La Tentation de Saint Antoine,[18] dies murmuring oxymorons and the name of a symbolist painter--very likely Gustave

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[18] Flaubert's Tentations was published first in Paris, 1874, and translated by the American Lafcadio Hearn beginning in 1875 or 1876 (The Temptation of Saint Anthony [New York: Alice Harriman, 1910]).

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Moreau.[19]

The mystic Helen at the heart of A Vision is deeply related to the visionary Helen of Goethe. She is also both prophetic inspiration and the prophecy, the need to speak and the word spoken, just as Helen becomes Muse and poem at once. As early as Homer, Helen contains both the inspiration to create beauty and beauty's self. Because she is both desire and fulfillment, she is unpossessable, since imaginative desire must exceed its imagined object for the poet to continue in his trade. Yeats attempted to tie his unfulfillable desire always to real objects, but when his woman-object was attainable he renounced her. Finally, through one clever woman, he found a great mystic system with the feminine symbols of wheel, moon, and Helen at its heart. A Vision absorbed imagination and embraced experience in the world, ordering and explaining it with a mystical network almost as wide-spread as that of Blake's prophetic books, if not so psychologically detailed.

Shelley and Blake. Although the seminal influences on Yeats's romanticism are Shelley and Blake, the two are little concerned with Helen of Troy. Rather, Yeats found her myth in the Iliad itself, which he first read in a boy's paper retold in prose.[20] Shelley, however,

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[19] Moreau painted classical subjects including Leda and the swan, as well as a canvas of magical unicorns and ladies in a forest setting; Yeats was particularly fond of his work and visited, it seems, the Musée Moreau (Ian Fletcher, "'Leda and the Swan' as Iconic Poem," Yeats Annual No. 1, ed. Richard J. Finneran, p. 97.

[20] Autobiography, p. 28.

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provoked his first poems and plays.[21] The feminine characters in "The Revolt of Islam," "The Witch of Atlas," and "Alastor" remained in Yeats's mind, along with the concept of intellectual beauty and an ideal of perfect love. He tells of himself at seventeen:

> When I thought of women, they were modelled on those in my favorite poets and loved in brief tragedy, or like the girl in The Revolt of Islam, accompanied their lovers through all manner of wild places, lawless women without homes and without children.[22]

Such models recall Helen's companionship with Faust and Simon Magus. An eidolon or presence of a beautiful woman often accompanies romantic magicians, from Byron's Manfred to Yeats's adolescent playing at being a "sage, a magician, or a poet."[23] She represents spiritual ideals and the perfection of the quest, the power and practice of magic.

Shelley's influence extended beyond the years of youthful imagination, however. Yeats writes, "I had gathered from [Shelley and] the Romantic poets an ideal of perfect love. Perhaps I should never marry in church but I would love one woman all my life."[24] This ideal kept him from joining the excesses of his decadent friends, but it also prepared him for years of frustration as he attempted to practice perfect love with Maud Gonne. Finding that "he could not play Laon to

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[21] As studied by George Bornstein, Yeats and Shelley (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Yeats, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," Essays and Introductions, pp. 65-95.

[22] Autobiography, p. 39.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., p. 142, n. 1; Memoirs, p. 32; A. Norman Jeffares, Yeats: Man and Poet (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), p. 58.

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her Cythna in liberating the Golden City of Dublin from the English,"[25] he idealized her in a form closed to those he found among the decadents: that of the destructive and unattainable Helen of Troy.

From Shelley, Yeats borrowed many elements later worked into his Helen symbols. Shelley symbolized the idea and pursuit of perfect love by the star, with adjuncts of tower and forest, and by the quest, with its denouement in the lover's death. These symbols reappear in Yeats's early drama "The Island of Statues," as well as "Mosada" and "The Indian to His Love."[26] Yeats admired Shelley's subjectivity, emotional poetry, and visionary stances; his turning away from everyday subjects and the marketplace, from rationality and vulgar themes, seemed to justify the young poet's occult researches and worship of aristocratic heroes. The Evening and Morning Stars symbolized Intellectual Beauty for Shelley--the stars related to Helen's brothers, the Dioscuri, and to her patroness Venus. In the same way, Yeats chose the symbol of the Rose "to free his own subjective art from barrenness just as he thought that the star had freed Shelley's."[27] The Rose, however, was to be "Something suffering with man, not . . . pursued and seen from afar." Furthermore, "both poets treat beauty as a kind of Muse, who both informs the shapes of the external world and stimulates the poet to

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[25] Bornstein, p. 144.

[26] Bornstein, pp. 18-19.

[27] Bornstein, p. 49.

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sing the glory of that immanence."[28] These aspects of Rose and Muse met repeatedly in Yeats's concept of Helen, the first relating to Helen of Tyre, the second to the beautiful Helens of folk poetry and the memories of the old.

Despite his many sublimely beautiful women, Shelley's only reference to a classical Helen occurs in a translation of Euripides' comic Cyclops. Blake, Yeats's other main Romantic influence, hardly deals with Helen's myths at all. However, although Yeats's understanding of Blake was filtered through the intervening notions of Pater and Swinburne, he read this great mythmaker with the eye of a "natural Gnostic."[29] The emanation in Blake is combined by Yeats with Shelley's Muse, Intellectual Beauty or perfect love. Yeats's idea of Blake also distanced him from current London fashions:

> One day a woman I know came face to face with heroic beauty, that highest beauty which Blake says changes least from youth to age, a beauty which has been fading out of the arts, since that decadence we call progress set voluptuous beauty in its place.[30]

So Yeats writes introducing a vision of the Irish Sidhe queen Maeve in The Celtic Twilight. Eternal beauty, an attribute of Helen-Ennoia, is always in his mind, whether he contemplates Gonne or the immortality of

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[28] Bornstein, p. 52.

[29] Harold Bloom, Yeats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 78: "With Blake's image of the emanation Yeats compounds always the Great Mother of the Gnostics, Helena, whom Simon Magus took as his bride . . . . Yeats has more in common with Simon Magus than with Blake, for Yeats sought the Romantic Muse as his Gnostic Helena, and would have found her in Maud Gonne had the lady permitted it.

[30] Mythologies, p. 57.

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his own poetry. He repeats, in fact, the same idea from Blake years later in his Memoirs, to describe Gonne as she first appeared to him:

> I had never thought to see in a living woman so great beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past. A complexion like the blossom of apples, and yet face and body had the beauty of lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty because it changes least from youth to age, and a stature so great that she seemed of a divine race.[31]

Late Nineteenth-century Helens

However, before Yeats would reengage her subtleties, Faust's Helen, the "heart-rendingly lovely ghost . . . who has never had a real existence except in the minds of men, a strange, beautiful, mythological being,"[32] fell to minds less sublime than Goethe's. Although Shelley and Blake, seminal mentors for Yeats, would imagine an eternal intellectual beauty as feminine, most authors in the nineteenth century consigned Helen to a pantheon of femmes fatales expressing "the pathology of Romanticism," in Frank Kermode's phrase.[33] These late romantics connected beauty and death, pain and desire, a mode begun as early as Novalis[34] and reaching extremes by the end of the century. Few writers indeed were immune to the model of la belle dame sans

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[31] Memoirs, p. 40.

[32] E. M. Butler, The Fortunes of Faust (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 233.

[33] Foreword, Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. vi.

[34] Novalis's "Hymns to the Night" were composed between 1799-1800.

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merci. Helen wore the mantle of sadist-queen with Cleopatra, Salome, the queen of Sheba, Faustine, and a host of less familiar antique beauties.[35]

It would be Yeats's task to free himself from that pathology, to understand the women he loved apart from his projection of these half-inherited inhuman ideals. His loved ones and his frustrations drove him at length to recognize that the fatal woman was the product of his own imagination, brought into being by his desire for her. He would learn that the women he idolized were not only other than his visions of them, but were themselves not free of self-idolizations, struggling under the same half-imagined, half-inherited ideas. This recognition led to Crazy Jane.[36] Although Crazy Jane remains a type of sacred whore, seductive and holy in her decreptitude, she represents a major step toward desacralizing the courtly lady, the supreme and unattainable beauty. This step made Yeats the "last romantic," as well as

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[35] See Praz, pp. 215-216.

[36] Many years later, Kristeva discusses Beckett's failure to touch "the unapproached, avoided mother": "Beyond the debris of the desacralized sacred that Beckett calls upon us to experience . . . does there not persist an other--untouched and fully seductive? The true guarantee of the last myth of modern times, the myth of the feminine--hardly the third person any longer, but both beyond and within, more and less than meaning: rhythm, tone, color, and joy, within, through, and across the Word? . . . And that will have to do until someone else comes in a burst of song, color, and laughter to conquer the last refuge of the sacred, still inaccessibly hidden in . . . remote Madonnas. To give them back to us transformed, secular, and corporeal, more full of language and imagination" ("The Father, Love, and Banishment," Desire in Language, p. 158). Yeats's Crazy Jane remains among the closest poetic approximations to this desacralized and humane feminine voice.

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the last true courtly lover.[37]

The experience of unfulfilled love--what Yeats called "the troubling of my life"[38]--was long in preparation for the poet. Early reading of decadent and Romantic poetry led him to visions of beautiful women borrowed from the literatures of longing and despair, and to an idea of love and loveliness infused with death. His later meetings with writers and artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and its satellites contributed an imagery of dreamlike opulence, a static other-worldly setting. The influence of the "Tragic Generation"[39] of the Rhymer's Club--including John Todhunter, Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, as well as Oscar Wilde--unavoidably strengthened a decadent view of women, but at the same time created an atmosphere from which Yeats rebelled. When Helen's name appeared in this company's works, she was accompanied by the image of Troy in flames. She was a destroyer and a beauty, and already related in some works to the warlike queens of Irish legend as well as to conventional femmes fatales..

At the same time as this literary comraderie offered ideas of

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[37] "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," Poems, p. 245; Curtis Bradford, "Yeats and Maud Gonne," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 3:4 (Winter 1962), pp. 452-474; Kline, pp. 1-4.

[38] Memoirs, p. 40: "I was twenty-three years old when the troubling of my life began. I had heard from time to time in letters . . . of a beautiful girl who had left the society of the Viceregal Court for Dublin nationalism. . . . Presently she drove up to our house in Bedford Park." This is of course Maud Gonne.

[39] Yeats's term for his literary friends of the first years in London (Autobiography [New York: Macmillan, 1953], pp. 166-120).

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women, Yeats's occult researches expanded the figure of Helen into its deepest mystic proportions. In Flaubert's Tentation as well as through the Theosophists and the secret society of the Golden Dawn, Yeats found Helen-Ennoia, Helen of Tyre. She had become a type of persecuted maiden, the masochistic victim of Simon Magus and of the archangels and men who misused her feminine body without knowledge of her divinity. The figure blended easily with the chaste young poet's courtly ideals, later underscored by his patron Lady Gregory with whom he read the works of Castiglione.[40]

In England, after the Romantics, Helen became the concern of Victorian necclassicists, whose work does not at first suggest its interest to a follower of Blavatsky. Walter Savage Landor sings at length of Helen's betrothal and marriage, and her danger when Menelaus reclaims her at the fall of Troy.[41] His Helens are passive, gentle, and genteel, belying the violence of their surroundings. Later, William Morris followed Landor in seeing Helen as more sinned against than sinning, in The Earthly Paradise, which Yeats found in his father's library. Its third book concerns the death of Paris, a topic Tennyson also versified.[42] Paris realizes that Helen will endure despite his

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[40] See Corinna Salvadori, Yeats and Castiglione: Poet and Courtier (Dublin: A. Figgis, 1965).

[41] W. S. Landor, Poetical Works (Oxford: Clarendon Pres, 1937): Vol. 2, "Menelaus and Helen at Troy," "Achilles and Helena on Ida," "The Marriage of Helen and Menelaos"; Vol. 3, "Helen," "Ianthe."

[42] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1972): "Oenone."

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death; Oenone, his jealous first lover, is the villain rather than she. Morris wrote several other "Scenes from the Fall of Troy," in which Helen plays greater roles: Helen arming Paris, Helen and Paris in her chamber, Menelaus reclaiming Helen. Yeats drew imagery from many of these pieces. The most startling of the set, however, portrays Menelaus murdering Deiphobus in his bed, then raping Helen there. This fragment was not published until 1910.[43]

MENELAUS
A-bed, Helen, before the night goes by!
HELEN
I cannot lie there in the blood, my lord--
--I loved it once; yea smite, but slay me out
And not so with your unarmed hand, my lord.
Here give it to me, feel here upon my breasts,
Smite so betwixt them with the sword I pray.
MENELAUS
Ah struggle, Helen, nought shall it avail.
Yea but I am the stronger in the wrists:
Feel the steel sword-point cold against your skin
And so lie quiet--ah but you hate me--
--I loved you once--
HELEN
May the Gods pity me
That ever you should love me![44]

Whether Yeats knew this violent and dramatic scene, a similar ambivalence of passion echoes in The Rose, his early poems for Gonne.

Yeats drew his women after standard Pre-Raphaelite models in The Rose, rather than portraying Gonne or Shakespear, despite the strength and distinctiveness of their features. Even such later poems as "He

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[43] See the introductory essay by May Morris to "Scenes from the Fall of Troy," Vol. 24, The Collected Works of William Morris.

[44] William Morris, The Earthly Paradise: A Poem: III, "The Death of Paris," Vol. 5; and "Scenes from the Fall of Troy": 11, "Helen and Menelaus," Vol. 24, pp. 47-48, The Collected Works of William Morris.

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remembers forgotten Beauty" and "He tells of the Perfect Beauty" (Poems, pp. 63, 67) seem to read otherworldly faces from the canvasses of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his colleagues. The feminine personae in this style are often etherealized, if not etherized:

> O cloud-pale eyelids, dream-dimmed eyes,

and

> For that pale breast and lingering hand
> Come from a more dream-heavy land,
> A more dream-heavy hour than this;
> And when you sign from kiss to kiss
> I hear white Beauty sighing, too

Yet the Helen of Rossetti's "Troy Town" (ca. 1871-72) is no dreaming beauty; she is a Sapphic petitioner, wooing the goddess who will set Troy aflame for the sake of "the heart's desire":

> Heavenborn Helen, Sparta's queen
> (O Troy Town!)
> Had two breasts of heavenly sheen,
> The sun and moon of the heart's desire:
> All Love's lordship lay between.
> (O Troy's down,
> Tall Troy's on fire!)[45]

This Helen kneels at Venus' shrine, offering a cup molded to the shape of her breast, bared before the goddess. She compares her breasts to apples, and sues the goddess to give them to Paris as he once gave her an apple. Not until late in life would Yeats approach feminine desire with as much emotional subjectivity as this lyric of Rossetti's.

The Helens of Morris and Rossetti are anomalous among Pre-Raphael-

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[45] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Poems and Translations 1850-1870 (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), pp. 9-12. The "heart's desire" motif was used by H. Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang in their Odyssey sequel of 1890, The World's Desire, which featured a mystic blond Helen in Egypt wearing a star on her breast from which fell teardrops of blood.

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ites. More typical heroines, following Swinburne, exemplify the decadent trio of sphinx, vampire, and death-goddess.[46] Yeats's Helen-destroyer of cities and civilizations belongs among these fatal women, although he could also imagine Helen victimized or dead, as in "A Dream of Death" (Poems, p. 42), drawing from an earlier Romantic pose typified by Manfred's beloved in Byron's poem. Yeats felt the limitations of the decadent style from the beginning; in a letter to Katherine Tynan of 1887, he wrote:

> Do you not think there is considerable resemblance between the heroines of all the neo-Romantic London poets; namely, Swinburne, Morris, Rossetti, and their satellites? For one thing, they are essentially men's heroines, with no separate life of their own; in this, different from Browning's. Tennyson's are, I believe, less heroic than any of the others and less passionate and splendid but realised, as far as they go, more completely, much more like actual, everyday people. . . . The heroines of the neo-Romantic school are powerful in conception, shadowy and unreal in execution; Browning's and Tennyson's poor in conception, perfectly realized in execution.[47]

Yeats wanted to lose nothing passionate and splendid, and was by no means committed to the everyday. He saw in Gonne a woman so out of the ordinary, so self-directed, that she could transform a myth from the "shadowy and unreal" into fiery life. Through her he found a passage not to fairyland but to an Inferno, as in the old ballad of the demon lover.[48] By choosing as Muse a woman whose interest and ideas

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[46] See Praz, pp. 199-300, esp. 223-258.

[47] The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 46.

[48] "House Carpenter" or "James Harris or the Daemon Lover," Child 243.

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were so unlike his own, he challenged his very psyche, beyond the difficulty of the poem. As Swinburne tried at one time to heal himself of his sexual obsessions through involvement in Italian politics,[49] so Yeats would follow Gonne into Irish activism. More successfully than Swinburne, Yeats was eventually able to sublimate some of his obsession for Gonne first by becoming both her ally and later her enemy in the political arena.

As in Swinburne, a strong French influence can be found in Yeats, affecting his ideas especially in relation to the dancer, Sheba, and Helen of Tyre. Salome was especially dear to the Francophile Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, and received much attention in Gustav Moreau's paintings, described with particular emphasis by Joris Karl Huysmans in A Rebours (1884).[50] Moreau also painted a Helen on the walls of Troy above the dying warriors.[51] Flaubert's Tentation, written in 1874, presents a decadent queen of Sheba in addition to Helen of Tyre.

Flaubert's Sheba is all that Helen is not; she is led by no one, has an enormous retinue of servants, wears and is surrounded by opulent wealth. Her meaning is worldly temptation, as that of Helen is other-worldly desire: one excessively fulfillable, even to ridicule and nausea; the other never to be attained, tragic, and pathetic.

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[49] Praz, pp. 246-248.

[50] J. K. Huysmans, Against the Grain (A Rebours) (New York: Dover, 1969), pp. 50-57.

[51] Jean Paladilhe and Jose Pierre, Gustave Moreau, trans. Bettina Wadia (New York: Praeger, 1972).

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Helen is both a Mary and a Christ figure, and is preceded by the image of a blue flame and the sound of a weeping voice in Anthony's vision. He sees

> a weeping woman approach, leaning upon the shoulder of a white-bearded man. She is covered with a purple robe in rags. . . . There are marks of bites on her face, traces of blows upon her arms; her dishevelled hair entangles itself in the rents of her rags; her eyes appear to be insensible to light.

Her companion Simon Magus introduces her as a type of medium (foreshadowing, rather distressingly, the automatic writing of George Yeats). When Helen speaks, she tells of earlier lives, and describes a Gnostic Tree of Life. Simon gives Anthony the tale preserved by the Church fathers but extended to its original heretical conclusion:

> Behold her, Anthony, she whom they call Sigeh, Ennoia, Barbelo, Prounikos! The Spirits governing the world were jealous of her; and they imprisoned her within the body of a woman.
>
> She was that Helen of Troy, whose memory was cursed by the poet Stesichorus. She was Lucretia, the patrician woman violated by a king. She was Delilah, by whom Samson's locks were shorn. . . . She has loved adultery, idolatry, lying, and foolishness. She has prostituted herself to all nations. She has sung at the angles of all crossroads. She has kissed the faces of all men . . .
>
> Innocent as the Christ who died for men, so did she devote herself for women.[52]

Yeats first invokes Helen-Ennoia in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" (Poems, p. 31)--"eternal beauty wandering on her way"--and in "The Rose of the World" (Poems, p. 36). The latter, dedicated also to Maud Gonne, names a beauty that existed before archangels or men, for whom "He made the world to be a grassy road/Before her wandering feet."

Flaubert alone did not resurrect Helen of Tyre; she was also

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[52] Flaubert, Temptation, pp. 135-136, 138-139.

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available in the writings of the Theosophists. Madame Helena Blavatsky recirculated Gnostic wisdom in The Secret Doctrine of 1893-97, discussing the fallen feminine principle.[53] In 1900, her disciple G. R. S. Mead discoursed on Helen's many faces at greater length:

> Sophia in her various aspects [is] possessed of many names. Among these may be mentioned: the Mother, or all-Mother; Mother of the Living, or Shining Mother; the Power Above; the Holy Spirit; again, she of the left-hand as opposed to the Christos, Him of the Right hand; the Man-Woman; Prouneikos or Lustful one; the Matrix; Paradise; Eden; Achāmoth; the Virgin; Barbēlō; Daughter of Light; Merciful Mother; . . . Hidden Mother; . . . the Holy Dove, which has given birth to Twins; Ennoia; Ruler, and the Lost or Wandering Sheep, Helena, and many other names.
>
> These terms refer to Sophia or the "Soul"--using the term in its most general sense--in her cosmic or individual aspects, according as she is above in her perfect purity or in the midst, as intermediary, or below as fallen into matter.[54]

Another admirer of Flaubert, Walter Pater, created a well-known version of the beautiful woman that also echoes Ennoia as a successive reincarnation of eternal beauty with its sorrows, secrets, and sins. Yeats admired the passage so much that he broke the prose of The Renaissance into poetic lines and began the Oxford Book of Modern Poetry with it:

> She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
> Like the Vampire,
> She has been dead many times,
> And has learned the secrets of the grave,
> And has been a diver in deep seas,
> And keeps their fallen day about her;

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[53] Helena Petrova Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893-97).

[54] George Robert Stowe Mead, Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: Some Short Sketches Among the Gnostics (London and Benares: Theosophical Publishing Co., 1900), pp. 334-335.

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> And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants
> And, as Leda,
> Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
> And, as St Anne,
> Was the mother of Mary;
> And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres
> and flutes,
> And lives
> Only in the delicacy
> With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,
> And tinged the eyelids and the hands.[55]

Typifying the complex associations that Helen accrued for Yeats and his predecessors, this passages ties the face of the Mona Lisa to other da Vinci canvases: the Leda and the Swan, the Saint Anne with Mary and the Child. The fatal woman in these paintings retreats as far as Demeter or Nemesis in mythic background. The daughter who comes forward is half-human, half-divine: a Kore-Helen fathered by aesthetic reiterations upon a concept of the eternal feminine.

Huysmans also embraced this exotic conception of feminine beauty, albeit with less distance from its perversities. To his inbred aesthetism, peopled with ventriloquent sphinxes and bisexual acrobats, Oscar Wilde owed much of the atmosphere in The Portrait of Dorian Gray. Yeats, in turn, received many ideas from Wilde, who provided the kind of criticizable idol that Yeats would become for Ezra Pound. Both Wilde and Yeats undertook to apotheosize real women into Muses. What Yeats would feel for the beauty and reputation of Maud Gonne, Wilde had already professed for Lily Langtry, a "professional beauty," actress, and paramour of Edward VI. Wilde wrote "The New Helen" for her, and

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[55] The Oxford Book of Modern Poetry 1892-1935, ed. W. B. Yeats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 1.

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inscribed it "To Helen, formerly of Troy, now of London."[56] Published with Rosa Mystica in his Collected Poems of 1881, its ten stanzas replay the themes of eternal recurrence of Helen-Ennoia, liken Helen to Aphrodite and oppose her to Mary, and finish with a preview of Yeats's images for The Rose:

> Lily of love, pure and inviolate!
> Tower of ivory! Red rose of fire!
> Thou hast come down our darkness to illume:
> For we, close-caught in the wide nets of Fate,
> Wearied with waiting for the World's Desire,
> Aimlessly wandered in this House of gloom,
> Aimlessly sought some slumberous anodyne
> For wasted lives, for lingering wretchedness,
> Till we beheld thy re-arisen shrine
> And the white glory of thy loveliness.[57]

Helen is transformed into Muse here by turning from the self-destructiveness and ennui of decadence to a Great Mother as saviour figure. Shaw's "life-force" is recalled in the concept of a beautiful woman whose strength and liveliness replaces aesthetic decay. Again, description of the features of such beauty are generic rather than particularized. Although Wilde opposes his new Helen to the Rossettian decadent mistress, he does so in terms of Rossetti's canvases themselves: "No sullen poppies stain thy hair,/ Those scarlet heralds of eternal sleep."

Both Wilde and Yeats use the word Greek to describe beautiful women, following Goethe's high Romantic Helen. Comparison of face or form with a classical statue or Greek sculpture is superlative praise.

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[56] H. Montgomery Hyde, Oscar Wilde (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 40.

[57] Wilde, The Poems of Oscar Wilde (Boston: Luce, 1909), pp. 73-77. The "World's Desire" foreshadows the Haggard and Lang adventure-story sequel to the Odyssey.

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But the effect is, like that of Greek sculpture, to erase the woman's individuality, her distinctions of form and personality. First, Wilde on Langtry as actress:

> It is only the best Greek gems, on the silver coins of Syracuse, or among the marble figures of the Parthenon frieze that one can find the ideal representation of the marvellous beauty of that face which laughed through the leaves last night . . . Pure Greek it is, with the grave, low forehead, the exquisitely arched brow, the noble chiseling of the mouth shaped as if it were the mouthpiece of an instrument of music.[58]

Then Yeats on Gonne:

> She looked as though she lived in an ancient civilisation where all superiorities whether of the mind or the body were a part of public ceremonial, were in some way the crowd's creation. . . . and if her face, like the face of some Greek statue, showed little thought, her whole body seemed a master work of long labouring thought, as though a Scopas had measured and calculated, consorted with Egyptian sages, and mathematicians out of Babylon, that he might outface even Artemisia's sepulchral image with a living norm.[59]

The Greek statue motif is used by many writers to describe women.[60] It demonstrates not only that a poet must invoke superlative aesthetic precedent in order to convincingly illustrate superlative fleshly beauty, but also that the woman so imaged is less visible to the poet than the weight of that traditional image. She is neglected in favor of the superlative eidolon, as Helen in Egypt was.

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[58] Hyde, p. 78.

[59] Memoirs, p. 88.

[60] Praz, pp. 218, 219. For a parallel in the American novel, see Judith Fryer, The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth Century American Novel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), "Celia Madden: The Temptress as 'Greek,'" pp. 54-62.

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Celtic Helens

Yeats was able to turn more strongly away from Goethe's Helen by annexing Irish myth. These worlds conjoined early in his imagination, even before John O'Leary encouraged him to study Celtic literature.[61] Yeats was just seventeen when John Todhunter, later a colleague in the Rhymer's Club, brought to Dublin a production of his play Helena in Troas, concerning the death of Paris.[62] Todhunter's heroine, unlike Landor's and Morris's, is no victim of violence. She herself is violent and passionate, a type of Nemesis or Ate in Greek perspective, but owing still more to the women warriors of Irish legend, particularly recalling Aoife, a mother-warrior responsible for bearing the hero Cuchulain's only son and later for Cuchulain's death. Gonne herself found the role attractive.[63] This exceptional Helen tells Hecuba:

> The mother of great Theseus was my slave,
> Theseus, the touch of whose heroic hand
> Laid like a conquerer's on my virgin breast,
> Made in my startled heart the ambitious blood
> Leap with strange yearnings. I would have such deed
> Done, as would make that Theseus pale in fame,
> Achilles but the terror of a dream.[64]

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[61] Many authors were turning at this time to the folkloric materials of Ireland, translating and compiling the Gaelic myths; among Yeats's sources were his patron Lady Augusta Gregory, Standish James O'Grady, Eugene O'Curry, Sir Samuel Ferguson and others (see Poems, "Notes to Appendix A," pp. 600 ff).

[62] Autobiography, p. 80. The play impressed Yeats at the time, although later he criticized it.

[63] Memoirs, p. 41.

[64] Todhunter, Helena in Troas (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1886), p. 33.

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Helen's sentiments are uncannily like those inspired in Gonne by father and lover. Thomas Gonne told the four-year-old Maud, over the corpse of her mother, "You must never be afraid of anything, even of death."[65] He taught that will was the most powerful force in life. Her lover Lucien Millevoye, an ardent Boulangist, urged her to adopt the Irish Republic's cause as the proper field to exercise her beauty and to expand her power.

Several Irish queens and goddesses appear in Yeats's work long before allusions to the classical mythologies. Following Todhunter and others, Yeats based epics and dramas on Cuchulain's seduction by the fairy Fand; on Niamh and Oisin, on Diarmuid and Grania, also called Devorgilla; and on Deirdre, her lover Naoise, and his two brothers. Moreover, he literally followed Lady Gregory from cottage to cottage as she collected variant myths and folklore from her tenants. He claims that "almost every story I have used or person I have spoken of [from Irish legend] is in one or other of Lady Gregory's 'Gods and Fighting Men' and 'Cuchulain of Muirthemne.'"[66] These Celtic myths were recorded in epic poetry during the eighth to twelfth centuries, and have noteworthy parallels to Greek and Roman myth as well as later European story cycles.

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[65] Maud Gonne MacBride, A Servant of the Queen: Her Own Story (Dublin: Golden Eagle, 1950), p. 11.

[66] The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 1282. I follow Lady Gregory for the retellings here: Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster (London: John Murray, 1911) for Cuchulain, Fand, and Deirdre; Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha de Danaan and of the Fianna of Ireland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), for Grania and Diarmuid.

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"The Wanderings of Oisin" of 1889 (Poems, p. 355) presents Niamh, a fairy bride anticipating Helen-Deirdre-Gonne of "The Sorrow of Love":

> A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode
> On a horse with bridle of findrinny,
> And like a sunset were her lips,
> A stormy sunset on doomed ships.

This vision with citron-colored hair and a white dress full of red embroidery is a Pre-Raphaelite medievalization, although we hear Homeric echoes in "doomed ships." Niamh leads Oisin away to the land of the Sidhe, for one century of revels, one of battle, and one of sleep, until he longs to return to his comrades. Her name means "brightness" or "beauty," as does the German schoen, cognate of "shine." The complex of associations encompasses the archaic Usas and Shelley's high Romantic star and quest.

Cuchulain is a rough version of Achilles, a hero-warrior who has chosen fame over long life and who clashes with his chief. He has dealings with several queens of men and fairies: Maeve of Connacht, lover of Fergus, who began the war described in the "Irish Iliad," an epic called Tâin Bó Cuailgne; Fand, a water goddess, wife of Manannan Mac Lir, seduces him; Emer, his wife, whose name is probably corrupted from that of Aoife. The Morrigan, a goddess related to the Arthurian witch Morgan le Fay, takes on the forms of wild beasts and pursues the hero.[67]

Like Thetis and Aphrodite, Fand is related to water. She appears as a dancer in Yeats's late play "The Only Jealousy of Emer." Her wordless image holds Cuchulain in an enchanted trance. By contrast,

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[67] See Ann Ross, Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 220-221.

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the hero has won his wife Emer with riddles, in a sort of Solomon-Sheba dialogue.[68] Emer is tremendously proud, in "The Green Helmet" demanding precedence over other heroes' wives as her husband's due. But she overlooks his adulteries with other women, also as his due. Only Fand, who would remove him from his own world and his winnings, threatens her. As the loyal, erotic, intelligent woman, Emer is a type of Helen in Egypt, opposed to the dangerous eidolon of Fand.

The heroine Grania, like the supernatural Niamh and Fand, is aggressive, a "man-picker." But like Deirdre, she is in flight from an unloved wooer. She chooses the reluctant Diarmuid to help her escape from Finn mac Cumhail on her wedding day. Her attraction to Diarmuid was not his fault: he had been given a fairy "love-spot" that rendered him irresistible to women. The two fugitives are still considered responsible for bringing the Normans to Celtic Ireland, as allies in their war against Finn. Yeats uses the two in "The Dreaming of the Bones," a Noh-based play with Dantesque overtones.

Deirdre's legend was especially popular with playwrights. Todhunter, Yeats and George Moore, and John M. Synge all based plays on her. She is the most innocent destroyer of this group of Celtic beauties. As at the birth of Paris, she enters the world bearing prophecies of doom. The king, Conchubar, hides her, hoping to annul the predictions and marry her in time. But her presence is discovered by Naoise of the Red Branch heroes, and they fall in love. With his two

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[68] Cuchulain calls her breasts "a sweet country . . . I could rest my weapon there," and Emer responds with the formulaic "No man will travel this country until . . ." many impossible deeds are accomplished, all of which he manages. See Thomas Kinsella's version of The Tain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 27-38.

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brothers, they flee to Scotland. Later assured of amnesty by Conchubar, the heroes are obliged by fealty to return to a feast. Accompanied by the good-willed Fergus, they are nevertheless betrayed and slain. Deirdre kills herself rather than wed Conchubar.

These Irish heroines and goddesses have features common to early Indo-European deities from whom Aphrodite, Helen, and other classical figures descend. They may change into swans or other water-birds (as of Baille and Aillinn, the Morrigan, and the kisses of Aengus);[69] they are warlike or surrounded by violence; they betray or are betrayed with broken vows; they engender love triangles that cause nations to dissolve; they are mobile and sexually aggressive. Their association with cattle is ancient, as a cattle-theft precipitates the action of the Táin and figures in sections of the Odyssey; Usas bears the epithet "Mother of cows."[70] The Sidhe are also called "the folk of the air," and snatch away brides or children, men or women, in a gust of wind, as Boreas carried off Oreithyia.[71] Several decadent femmes fatales share similar attributes, but the primal strength of both male and female characters in these myths infused fresh vitality into Yeats's conceptions of Helen of Troy.

A more recent Irish myth gave Yeats the one role Gonne accepted from his pen--the figure of the Shan Van Vocht, the Poor Old Woman who

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[69] Ross, p. 219; Friedrich, p. 215, n. 14.

[70] Friedrich, p. 37.

[71] Poems, pp. 624-626 (note to poem 44, "The Host of the Air").

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has lost her four green fields, Cathleen ni Houlihan.[72] While the Rose, Roseen Dubh or "the little dark rose" symbolized a nostalgic and romantic Ireland,[73] Cathleen was far more effective in Yeats's revolutionary times. Gonne gave a performance so stirring that Yeats would later feel guilty for writing it: "Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?"[74] The title of Gonne's autobiography, A Servant of the Queen, refers to Cathleen, certainly not to Victoria. A vision of Cathleen appeared once to Gonne, as she returned from a relief mission:

> Tired but glowing I looked out of the window of the train at the dark bog land where now only the tiny lakes gleamed in the fading light. Then I saw a tall, beautiful woman with dark hair blown on the wind and I knew it was Cathleen ni Houlihan. She was crossing the bog toward the hills, springing from stone to stone over the treacherous surface, and the little white stones shone, marking a path behind her, then faded into the darkness. I heard a voice say: "You are one of the little stones on which the feet of the Queen have rested on her way to Freedom." The sadness of night took hold of me and I cried; it seemed so lonely just to be one of those little stones left behind on the path.[75]

Gonne herself was mythologized by the poor tenants whom she aided; they called her "The Woman of the Sidhe."

The heroic woman defending her nation might appear out of character for a Helen figure. Gonne may well have preferred Millevoye's

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[72] The figure of Cathleen is drawn from James Clarence Mangan's "Kathleen-ni-Houlahan" of the 1840s (Kline, p. 89). Yeats joins this figure to that of the Shan Van Vocht.

[73] For genesis of the Rose, see Poems, pp. 589, 600, 610, 628-630.

[74] "The Man and the Echo," Poems, p. 345.

[75] MacBride, p. vii.

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vision of her as an Irish Joan of Arc to Yeats's poetic one of an Irish Helen of Troy.[76] But the saint and Helen share a story: Pausanius records that a phantom image of Helen and her brothers once turned back invaders from sacking Sparta, even as Saint Joan would do for France.[77] The beautiful woman symbolizing a nation or political ideal is ancient and persistent, from Athena's protectorship of Athens through Goethe's Helen signifying Greek culture and its enlightenment. Poe's poem of 1831 presents Helen as at once soul, statue, and idealized locale: "Ah! Psyche, from the regions which/Are Holy-Land."[78]

Yeats's heroic liberating Irish queens spring from the same nineteenth-century conceptions as the great figure of "Liberty Enlightening the World"--the Statue of Liberty. With a torch like that of Helen on the ramparts or Poe's Helen-Psyche's lamp, and a nimbus originating with Helios,[79] she is related to the Gnostic Sophia and Helen of Tyre, as well as deeply Celtic in spirit. Conceived as a gesture for

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[76] Nancy Cardozo, Lucky Eyes and a High Heart: The Life of Maud Gonne (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), p. 53.

[77] Donald Ward, The Divine Twins: An Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 19; Pausanius, 4.16.5-9. The most familiar of these city-protecting heroines is Athena.

[78] Edgar Allen Poe, Collected Works of Edgar Allen Poe, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), Vol. 1, pp. 163-171.

[79] Marvin Trachtenberg, The Statue of Liberty (New York: Viking, 1976), p. 72. See also Praz, pp. 247-248, for the goddess Liberty, "a sublimation of Swinburne's own feminine type, a divinity intolerant of restraint or law (substitute for the woman of uncontrolled morals), fatal and cruel in exacting the sacrifice of human life (substitute for algolagnia)."

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French freedom, to be placed monumentally but safely distant from France, the statue was unveiled in 1886. Yeats and Gonne, during their "spiritual marriage," would share a vision that recalls the statue of "a mighty woman with a torch whose flame/Is imprisoned lightening." In the winter of 1898, writes Yeats,

> we were sitting together when she said, "I hear a voice saying, 'You are about to receive the initiation of the spear.'" We became silent; a double vision unfolded itself, neither speaking till all was finished. She thought herself a great stone statue through which passed flame and I felt myself becoming flame and mounting up through and looking out of the eyes of a great stone Minerva.[80]

This shared dream is remarkable, not only for its physical and sexual symbolism, but also in its profound relation to classical symbols and the aesthetic position of Yeats. Kafka, in 1913, would begin Amerika with a vision of the statue holding a sword rather than a torch;[81] Freud and H. D. would later dwell on an image of Athena which had lost its spear.[82] Notably, here Gonne does not feel herself to be lacking anything, while Yeats imagines himself subsumed within the life of the great female warrior-god.

Helen in political terms may become utopian, her beauty equated with political order and righteous peace. But such a Helen is dangerous as earth-mother or Muse, since her superlative beauty implies inhuman perfection, human sacrifice. Both Gonne and Yeats fall prey to impos-

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[80] Memoirs, p. 134.

[81] Franz Kafka, Amerika, trans. Edwin Muir (New York: New Directions, ca. 1946) p. 1.

[82] H. D., Tribute to Freud, Writing on the Wall, Advent (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 68-70.

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sible aggrandizements of themselves and those they love. The liberty of the libertine must be distinguished from the liberty desired by the enslaved; the dialectic between inhuman or human, the eidolon or Helen in Egypt, embodies this distinction.

Yeats found a contrasting Irish Helen in the memories of old cottagers, tenant farmers, and weavers in Ballylee. The blind poet Raferty loved Mary Hynes, a celebrated beauty of about 1840. His Gaelic ode to her was translated by Lady Gregory and included in "Dust Hath Closed Helen's Eye":

> There was no part of Ireland I did not travel,
> From the rivers to the tops of the mountains,
> To the edge of Lough Greine whose mouth is hidden,
> And I saw no beauty but was behind hers.
>
> Her hair was shining, and her brows were shining too;
> Her face was like herself, her mouth pleasant and sweet.
> She is the pride, and I give her the branch,
> She is the shining flower of Ballylee.
>
> It is Mary Hynes, the calm and easy woman,
> Has beauty in her mind and in her face.[83]

The first verse makes Mary Hynes sound as if she rivaled the Irish countryside itself; she is equated with landscape here and elsewhere in the poem. Again the shining of beauty and the flower appear, and again the blind poet forgoes description for a startling simile. Her face, like Jehovah's, is what it is, and yet is not terrible but calm and easy. While Raferty makes his beautiful woman as divine as any Helen, she is far more pastoral and benign than those Helens of war and magic that Yeats would sing.

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[83] Mythologies, p. 25.

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Love: Imagination and the World

The literary and mythological precedents detailed above would not have supplied Yeats with a Helen so complex and and so complete, without the poet's experiences and frustrations in love, which he enhanced both by choice and chance. Many women influenced his life. His two sisters, Lily and Elizabeth, would work with Morris and publish their brother's work. His mother, Susan Pollexfen Yeats, told him local folk traditions and ghost tales. A distant cousin, Laura Armstrong, interested him romantically long before Gonne. In London, Florence Farr and Olivia Shakespear attracted him before and during his consuming infatuation with Gonne; and after his marriage to George Yeats he continued to form romantic attachments to young women, notably Margot Ruddock.

The feelings Yeats records about his mother are ambivalent, from resentment and embarrassment to pride and affection. His memoirs record an image of a mastless toy ship with a scratch on the stern as representing an injured or powerless mother.[84] This relation of mother and boat is clearly made in the popular graphics of Augustus Egg: in "Past and Present" one engraving shows a wretched mother, the typical Victorian "fallen woman," beside a wrecked rowboat, hauntingly like the mastless ship of Yeats's dream. However, in the Autobiography Yeats credits his mother for his deepest love of Ireland, and says that she had once been a great beauty. Homesick for Sligo his first year in London, he writes:

> I longed for a sod of earth from some field I knew, something

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[84] See Brenda Webster, Yeats: A Psychoanalytic Study (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), pp. 6-7, for the poet's identification with Susan Pollexfen Yeats.

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> of Sligo to hold in my hand. It was some old race instinct like that of a savage, for we had been brought up to laugh at all display of emotion. Yet it was our mother, who would have thought its display a vulgarity, who kept alive that love. She would spend hours listening to stories or telling stories of pilots and fishing people of Rosses Point, or of her own Sligo girlhood, and it was always assumed between her and us that Sligo was more beautiful than other places. . . . ten years ago when I was in San Francisco, an old cripple came to see me who had left Sligo before her marriage; he came to tell me, he said, that my mother "had been the most beautiful girl in Sligo."[85]

Both homeland and history of the mother are related by the themes of superlative beauty and unfading desire.

Shortly after the family moved to London, Yeats's mother suffered a paralytic stroke that left her without speech, an invalid for the rest of her life. Ten years later, in "The Adoration of the Magi," Yeats would recreate his ghost-tale-telling mother in the dying woman who gives birth to a new god. She is supposed to tell the visiting magi the names that her mystic child must obey, several names of an Immortal; however, she seems to disappoint them, saying only

> names of endearment, and yet strange names, 'Harsh sweetness,' 'Dear bitterness,' 'O solitude,' 'O terror,' and after lay still for a while.[86]

She names only a symbolist painter who "used to go to something he

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[85] Autobiography, p. 19. Sexual timorousness could also bring on homesickness in the poet; Yeats connects the embarassment caused by two young girls' flirting with the impulse for writing "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Nostalgia for Sligo led him to compose this poem, which he calls "my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music" (Autobiography, p. 94). See Klein, op. cit.; see Kristeva, "Ethics of Linguistics," Desire in Language, pp. 28-34, for relation of rhythm and "the simultaneous affirmation of the 'ego'" in a solar contest in which a mother helps her children fight against the paternalistic sun.

[86] Mythologies, p. 314.

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called the Black Mass, and it was he who taught her to see visions and to hear voices." The painter suggests Yeats's father, who, although no occultist, opened Yeats's life to the Pre-Raphaelites.

Yeats worried as late as 1909 "whether I have and always have had some nervous weakness inherited from my mother."[87] His Memoirs record himself as "imperfect," in contrast to a "perfect" Gonne: Yeats sees her as a thimble, himself as a shapeless "lump of meershaum not yet made into a pipe. She was complete; I was not" (Memoirs, p. 63). Gonne showed no nervous weakness: she once held a gun on would-be kidnappers.[88] Her appearance in Yeats's life was so soon after his mother's disappearance that he may well have been impressed by both her strength and her verbal ability in contrast to his stricken mother's losses. In fact, he paints her arrival with an auditory metaphor: she brought "a sound as of a Burmese gong, an overpowering tumult that had yet many pleasant secondary notes" (p. 40).

Laura Armstrong's temperament seems to have been closer to the poet's. He met her in his most romantic boyhood setting, on the hills of Howth. "A wild creature, a fine mimic and given to bursts of religion," he called her; "I had known her to weep at a sermon, call herself a sinful woman, and mimic it after."[89] He became her confidant over troubles with her betrothed, and wrote some poems for her as well

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[87] Memoirs, p. 156.

[88] Nancy Cardozo, Lucky Eyes and a High Heart: The Life of Maud Gonne (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), pp. 55-56.

[89] Autobiography, p. 46.

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as the play "Time and the Witch Vivien." He never told her of his feelings, yet must have made them clear enough to his own confidant Katherine Tynan. In a letter to Tynan of March 21, 1889, he compares Armstrong with Gonne, whom he says was "reminding me of Laura Armstrong without Laura's wild dash of half-insane genius." But the letter seems to use this faded memory of Armstrong to mask his true feelings for Gonne: "Do not mistake me, she is only as a myth and a symbol. Will you forgive me for having talked of her? She interests me far more than Miss Gonne does and yet is only as a myth and a symbol."[90] Yeats would try to force Gonne, too, to fit the form of his myths and symbols, but she never adjusted to his Procrustean imagination. Instead, Yeats would expand his symbolism and mythologies in an attempt first to contain, then to explain, and at last simply to "shadow in a glass" the uncapturable flesh and will of a vital woman.

In 1890, the actress Florence Farr came to Yeats's attention, through her role in Todhunter's "A Sicilian Idyll." Her speaking voice and timing of poetic lines so impressed Yeats that he longed to write plays for her:

> She had three great gifts, tranquil beauty like that of Demeter's image near the British Museum reading-room door, and an incomparable sense of rhythm and a beautiful speaking voice, the seemingly natural expression of the image.[91]

"And yet," Yeats continues, "there was scarce another gift that she did not value above those three." Her intellectual curiosity and self-directedness prevented a lasting relationship with Yeats, who had

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[90] Letters, p. 117-118.

[91] Autobiography, p. 74.

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certainly not found in her a woman "Who gives up all her mind/ . . . Nor quarrels with a thought/ Because it is not her own."[92] (Ironically, these phrases were first written to describe his roommate Arthur Symons.)[93] George Yeats writes "Their brief love affair came to an end because 'she got bored.'"[94] It irked Yeats that she did not value her beauty as he did:

> She would dress without care or calculation as if to hide her beauty and seem contemptuous of its power. If a man fell in love with her she would notice that she had seen just that movement upon the stage or had heard just that intonation and all seemed unreal.[95]

She insisted upon playing the aged nurse's role in a classical drama with "all an old woman's infirmities" rather than with the majesty of a Sybil. No professional beauty, Farr later retired to teach in Ceylon at a Buddhist college.

The story of Yeats and Maud Gonne is one of the best documented love affairs in poetry. Her entrance in 1889 provided Yeats with the perfect foil for his imagination, and she would lead him a desperate chase for years. Her appearance was all that a romantic young poet could ask from reality:

> In that day she seemed a classical impersonation of the Spring, the Virgilian commendation "She walks like a goddess" made for her alone. Her complexion was luminous, like that of apple blossom through which the light falls, and I

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[92] "On Woman," Poems, p. 164.

[93] Memoirs, p. 87.

[94] Memoirs, pp. 72-73, n. 4.

[95] Autobiography, p. 74.

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> remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window.[96]

But her character was all that he would both admire and oppose. She shared his interest and faith in the occult, even joining the Golden Dawn until she suspected it of Masonic influence. They shared incredible visions like the one of the flaming statue, and entered a "spiritual marriage" in which their astral bodies met in dreams. Yet even at their first encounter, she spoke of "war for its own sake," "of her desire for power, apparently for its own sake."[97] Yeats proposed to her in 1891, 1894, 1899, 1900, and 1901. In 1903 she broke their spiritual commitment by marrying Major John MacBride, a war hero and Irish patriot. After the inevitable collapse of the marriage, Yeats proposed once more, in 1916. Denied, he proposed to her daughter Iseult Gonne the next year, then married George that October.

Only one of Yeats's many poems to Gonne appears in full in Servant of the Queen. Her choice is telling, as if to suggest to posterity the impossibility of their union. When, in 1891, Gonne returned to France exhausted by her work in Ireland, Yeats heard rumors of her impending death. He sent her "an agitated letter"[98] including the first draft of "A Dream of Death":

> I dreamed that one had died in a strange place
> Near no accustomed hand;
> And they nailed the boards above her face,
> The peasants of that land,

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[96] Autobiography, p. 75.

[97] Ibid.; Memoirs, p. 41.

[98] Cardozo, p. 90.

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> And, wondering, planted by her solitude
> A cypress and a yew:
> I came and wrote upon a cross of wood,
> Man had no more to do:
> She was more beautiful than thy first love,
> This lady by the trees":
> And gazed upon the mournful stars above,
> And heard the mournful breeze.[99]

Gonne was, she writes, "greatly amused" by this epitaph, "written with much feeling."[100] But, as Mark Twain might say, reports of her death had been greatly exaggerated.

Gonne came to understand well the roles that she played for Yeats. She records her response to one of his many proposals:

> You make beautiful poetry out of what you call your unhappiness and you are happy in that. Marriage would be such a dull affair. Poets should never marry. The world should thank me for not marrying you.[101]

Yet Yeats needed an intricate system in order to understand Gonne; as with Florence Farr, it deeply disturbed him that she did not value herself as he did:

> She hated her own beauty, not its effect upon others, but its image in the mirror. Beauty is from the antithetical self, and a woman can scarce but hate it, for not only does it demand a painful daily service, but it calls for the denial or the dissolution of the self.[102]

Yeats describes here not only women's beauty but the labor of writing: both poets and beautiful women must labor to be beautiful. Mask and

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[99] MacBride, p. 147. Compare revised version in Poems, p. 42.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid., pp. 329-330.

[102] Autobiography, p. 218.

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Muse would intersect in such a woman if she could only accept the appearance and the role from the hand of the poet. But Helen's face and fate are dangerous not only to her lovers but to herself. Neither Gonne nor Farr would sacrifice to Helen what Yeats was prepared to sacrifice for her.

At last Yeats had an irrefutable excuse for his celibacy and delicacy. Passing a whore at Hammersmith, as he recalls, "I thought of offering myself to her, but the old thought came back, 'No, I love the most beautiful woman in the world.'"[103] Yeats wavered in accepting any sexual love with ease; he may have preferred the difficulties that Gonne gave him. Olivia Shakespear, who appears in his memoirs as Diana Vernon, was abandoned despite her beauty--again couched in terms of Greek sculpture by the poet. "Her face had a perfect Greek regularity, though her skin was a little darker than a Greek's would have been and her hair was very dark."[104] How Yeats imagined the coloring of ancient Greeks is curious; is he thinking of the actual tones of marble, or of Gonne's apple-blossom complexion?

Yeats's liaison with Shakespear began when he was thirty-one, after much deliberation and soul-searching. He could not keep his own self-image out of the image he had of her; he thought her "like the mild heroines of my plays. She seemed a part of myself."[105] This lack of distance would at last excuse his inability to love her:

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[103] Memoirs, p. 72.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid., p. 86.

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> It will always be a grief to me that I could not give the love that was her beauty's right, but she was too near my soul, too salutary and wholesome to my inmost being. All our lives long, as da Vinci says, we long, thinking it is but the moon that we long [for], for our destruction, and how, when we meet [it] in the shape of a most fair woman, can we do less than leave all others for her? Do we not seek our dissolution upon her lips?[106]

The da Vinci passage mentions neither a woman nor sexuality, but rather the return to a homeland or to primal chaos, or the moth's attraction to light, and impatience at the passing seasons. Where da Vinci saw homesickness, Yeats saw sexual desire; where da Vinci means the body's material longing for dissolution, Yeats means the spirit's need to sacrifice itself for beauty or art. This translation from landscape to woman recalls the sublimation of desire for the femme fatal into participation in revolutionary politics. In this memoir, Yeats was still influenced by the decadent vampire woman, who offers dissolution expressed in physical terms. But this image slowly faded as he learned that women, too, may seek destruction by means of images, and as his instinct for survival ripened under George Yeats's loving care.

The disastrous marriage of Gonne to MacBride provided the poet with one opportunity for such revelations, as did his brief romance with her daughter Iseult. He predicts for the young girl dancing by the shore that she will "suffer as her mother suffered,/be as broken in the end."[107] So it seemed she would, after wedding Francis Stuart, an aspiring writer for whom Yeats had no fondness. Another younger woman,

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[106] Ibid., p. 88, n. 3.

[107] "To a Child dancing in the Wind," p. 112; "Two Years later," p. 122, Poems.

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Margot Ruddock, whom Yeats sponsored by publishing her poems and finding her readings on radio, became the subject of "Sweet Dancer" and "A Crazed Girl" (pp. 296, 303):

> That crazed girl improvising her music
> Her poetry, dancing upon the shore,
> Her soul in division from itself . . .
> . . . that girl I declare
> A beautiful lofty thing, or a thing
> Heroically lost, heroically found.

Ruddock, of all the women Yeats cared for, was most tragic in her self-dissolutions, moving in and out of a sanity eventually lost.[108] The "heroically found" element is not found so much by her as by a member of her audience: Yeats. He sees in her that intensity of artistic expression in which he would lose himself.

By the time Ruddock entered his life, Yeats was long wed to George. In 1917, his marriage became a new focus for his symbolic obsessions, conjoining poetry and the occultism he had long studied. George had been initiated into the Golden Dawn a few years before their marriage; four days after their wedding, she began suddenly to take dictation from spirits, the powerful instructors who revealed the system of A Vision to the poet. Yeats conveyed his great excitement at the first sight of this talent in his wife with the poem "The Gift of Harun Al-Raschid" of 1923. He presented a memorable symbol of psychic transformations through this experience (p. 450):

> A woman's beauty is a storm-tossed banner;
> Under it wisdom stands, and I alone--
> Of all Arabia's lovers, I alone--
> Nor dazzled by the embroidery, nor lost
> In the confusion of its night-dark folds,

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[108] See Ah Sweet Dancer: W. B. Yeats/Margot Ruddock, A Correspondence, ed. by Roger McHugh (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

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Can hear the armed man speak.

Beauty's marriage to wisdom always interested Yeats; he distinguished Deirdre from other mythological beauties, since she "alone among women who have set men mad had equal loveliness and wisdom."[109] He mourns the "crazy-salad" lives of Helen, Aphrodite, Iseult and Maud Gonne.[110] By contrast, George could play Sheba to his Solomon, and all earlier antimonies might be resolved in the marriage bed.[111] The symbols of wisdom and beauty in "Harun Al-Raschid" relate the banner to Helen's veil, visible to warriors in the field from the ramparts of Troy, and to Helen-Ennoia, whom only Simon could understand.

Although Yeats found in George's visions an effective and powerful diversion from his frustrated love for Gonne, Helen continued to dominate his imagination. She is at the center of A Vision. The system dictated by the spirits is based on a Great Wheel of twenty-eight points, representing days of the moon's phases. As Helen Vendler points out, "the point of primary interest in the Wheel" is Phase Fifteen, the "phase of the attained object, where Sun is consumed in Moon and all is beauty."[112] If the Wheel is viewed as a process,

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[109] "The Celtic Element in Literature," Essays and Introductions, p. 186.

[110] "A Prayer for my Daughter," Poems, p. 188.

[111] The Solomon-Sheba theme is developed in "Solomon to Sheba," p. 138; "On Woman," pp. 146-147; "Solomon and the Witch," pp. 176-178, Poems; see also Memoirs, pp. 144-145.

[112] Helen Vendler, Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 8.

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whether in history or the individual life, then Phase Fifteen is the culmination of that process. At Phase Fifteen are the dancing girl, Buddha, and Sphinx in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," but no human life is possible there. Yeats's description of the resolved antimonies of the phase makes it resemble the moment of release in Zen archery: "Body of Fate and Mask are now identical; and Will and Creative Mind identical"; "The being has selected, moulded and remoulded, narrowed its circle of living, been more and more the artist, grown more and more 'distinguished' in all preference," and "contemplation and desire" are "united into one."[113] The self dissolves and an inactive action occurs. (An important archer symbol in Yeats's mythologies is that of a beautiful woman who shoots an arrow into the heavens; he interprets her as a great mother slaying her star-son.)[114]

Helen dwells just before and just after this climactic phase. She is named in Phase Fourteen and alluded to in Phase Sixteen. The earlier Helen recalls Olivia Shakespear; the later beautiful woman is cast in Maud Gonne's mold. Phase Fourteen involves renunciation of responsibility as an instrument of power; Phase Sixteen involves "a desire to accept every possible responsibility."[115] At Phase Fourteen are born

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[113] A Vision, pp. 135-136.

[114] The vision of the archer is prsented in detail in the Autobiography, pp. 223-225, 342-344; the star-son was associated with Parnell ("Parnell's Funeral," p. 359, Poems; Jeffares, New Commentary, pp. 339-343. Is there a blending here of Helen and her lover Paris, a bowman; or of the arrows of Eros and his mother Aphrodite?

[115] A Vision, pp. 132-140.

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"those women who are most touching in their beauty," in other words, those whose appeal to others is emotional and sentimental, yet who are themselves never at peace. They are irresponsible innocents like Helen of Troy:

> Helen was of the phase; and she comes before the mind's eye elaborating a delicate personal discipline, as though she would make her whole life an image of a unified antithetical energy.

Her discipline is that of the woman who must labor to be beautiful. "She draws perpetually upon glass with a diamond" as if to perfect and preserve her image on a mirror. The more perfect her discipline, the closer her approach to the inhuman Phase Fifteen, "the final union of primary and antithetical, where she will desire nothing" because her beauty is perfected at last. Just this perfect beauty, a repressed violence in her nature, causes her peril and the peril of others: "Is it not because she desires so little, gives so little that men will die and murder in her service?"

In contrast with this Helen are the women of Phase Sixteen, "whose bodies have taken upon themselves the image of the True Mask" instead of the Mask's being incised upon their bodies by the obsessive will in Phase Fourteen. These women have a radiant intensity, a sun-quality, and "they walk like queens." They are Artemisian and violent like the woman-archer of Yeats's vision or the warrior-queens of Celtic myth. Further, they act like Maud Gonne:

> They walk like queens, and seem to carry on their backs a quiver of arrows, but they are gentle only to those whom they have chosen or subdued, or to the dogs that follow at their heels. Boundless in generosity, and in illusion, they will give themselves to a beggar because he resembles a religious picture . . .

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Flaubert's Helen-Ennoia is recalled once again in this description of deluded generosity, as well as in the following antithesis:

> or if they take another turn and choose a dozen lovers, die convinced that none but the first and last ever touched their lips, for they are of those whose "virginity renews itself like the moon."

The first of those whose virginity was renewed, in Homer, is Hera; Helen, too, has this quality in her ability to return to her betrayed husband in the Odyssey. Yeats mocks such delusion in his play "The Herne's Egg," but it is touchingly presented here. Archers these women may be, but "out of phase" they miss the mark: "Venus out of phase chose lame Vulcan." Beautiful not through discipline but through the body, these women are imperfect in mind. Nevertheless, though the disciplined Helen of Phase Fourteen seems to parallel the disciplined poet, Blake is of Phase Sixteen, and Shelley of one phase past that, with Dante and Landor.

Poesis

Helen, like the rose, is a myth and a symbol for Yeats rather than a character to be dramatized. More likely to be alluded to in passing than to acquire any substantial personality, she is nevertheless intensely present in his work, a symbolic focus of attention and meanings much like the vortex or the imagists' image, despite the lack of precision of her appearance in Yeats's poems. Although she does not have a voice in his works, her Celtic analogues, as well as other Helenic women, speak in Yeats's dramas. In addition, the dancer, the queen of Sheba, and other Helenic symbols engage in dialogue in several poems. Yeats's great anti-Helen Crazy Jane is one of his most fully

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achieved poetic voices.

The poems concerning Helen become increasingly weighted with multiple meanings as the myth grows with Yeats's work. But the development of major themes is clear. Beginning with the Helen of The Rose poems (which some critics call "the Helen poems," although only a few refer to her myth[116]), Yeats drew upon the mystic image of Helen of Tyre, an eternal and victimized beauty. With the Helen of The Green Helmet and Other Poems, he meditates upon a warlike Helen of Troy. Responsibilities contains a Helen Muse, and The Wild Swans at Coole a Helen most entirely Yeats's own, a type of eidolon-dancer. In other poems of this collection and of Michael Robartes and the Dancer, Yeats develops the symbols of Sheba and Solomon and of the dancing girl. In The Tower, a complex of these early Helens with the addition of great mother aspects is presented as Yeats meditates on innocence and evil. The Winding Stair's Helens are mere memories, but anti-Helens are full of vivid speech. Finally, in Last Poems, all Helens become present, young and old, dancer and warrior, mother and madwoman.

Yeats uses Helen's name almost exclusively in lyric poetry.[117] The ancient relation between the lyric and the poetry of love and desire informs his idea of lyric. In addition to the popular folk ballads, which Yeats also composed throughout his life, the Romantics and

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116 E.g., Bernard Levine, The Dissolving Image: The Spiritual-Esthetic Development of W. B. Yeats (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970).

117 Although she is mentioned in certain essays in The Celtic Twilight and is central to A Vision, the myth develops most distinctly in the lyric poetry; she is not a character for epic or drama in Yeats.

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Pre-Raphaelites wrote both brief lyrical works and longer verse dramas and epic. The early romantic Yeats must have encountered the decadent taste that preferred Sappho to other classical poets. Her passionate love lyrics, especially the suffering passion of the Phainetai Moi, greatly appealed to such sensibilities as Swinburne's.[118] From early to late, Yeats's poems reflect this inheritance, using the lyric as Sappho, Catullus, and the great troubadours had done, to praise and complain of the beloved, to describe love.

Yeats also used unfulfilled desire to compose lyrics, as long as he had any hope of its gratification. But he wrote only one lyric during the nearly six years between Gonne's marriage in 1902 and her reappearance in 1908 ("O Do Not Love Too Long," p. 83). When Maud's telegram arrived informing him of her wedding to MacBride, he felt like the lover in Sappho's Phainetai Moi, and recorded his symptoms in "Reconciliation" (p. 91), its first line a companion to the opening of "No Second Troy":

> Some may have blamed you that you took away
> The verses that could move them on the day
> When, the ears deafened, the sight of the eyes blind
> With lightening, you went from me . . .

Without the Muse to sing to, the mother to call to one's side, there is no music in the poet. For this very reason, a femme fatale or withholding woman is useful; her unattainability assures her lover of a constant object for song and continual need to sing. Troubadours took advantage of their ladies' religious chastity; so Yeats, rejected by his far more sophisticated beloved, imagined her to be just such a

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[118] See Praz, pp. 236-240.

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lady. Maud's secretiveness about her liaison with Millevoye, her unhappiness at the loss of her first child by him, and the danger of scandal surrounding any political figure at the time, combined to make her irresistibly mysterious and unattainable. But neither the Muse nor Gonne would remain such romantic images; as Yeats's poetry toughened, so his vision of Gonne became tougher. She became a Pallas rather than a Helen, and in old age Yeats considered her to be more his child than a lover.[119] The Muse, similarly, begins to descend the ladder of imagination toward Crazy Jane. In A Vision, Yeats writes (p. 24):

> Muses resemble women who creep out at night and give themselves to unknown sailors and return to talk of Chinese porcelain--porcelain is best made, a Japanese critic has said, where conditions of life are hard--or of the Ninth Symphony--virginity renews itself like the moon--except that the Muses sometimes form in those low haunts their most lasting attachments.

Helen of Tyre, at once goddess and whore, underlies this Muse.

Yeats revised his own various masks in relation to these revisions of myth. The voice of the lover in his Helen poems is not that of the original Theseus--Millevoye held that position--nor of Paris the seducer. Irish politics and the love of excitement and power played that role for Gonne. Since he romanticized poet into hero, he became a Menelaus rather than a Homer, abandoned lover rather than bard or beloved. He speaks with the voices of Cuchulain-Achilles; Simon Magus; Menelaus, Conchubar, and Finn; the deposed king Fergus. Not until quite late does he achieve the blessing of Homer and Raferty, the blind poet's gift of renunciation.

The mysterious link between Helen's beauty and the poet's blind-

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[119] As in "A Bronze Head," p. 340, Poems.

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ness bemused Yeats.[120] What kept the half-blind Raferty from falling in the bog on the way to Ballylee? Such blindness may signify freedom from greed and jealousy, from destructive desire, as the stone eyes of the Buddha or the self-blinded Oedipus. But hatred and condemnation may also blind the singer, as Yeats discovered in "Reconciliation." The terror of the truth of Helen's behavior is the fear of inevitable loss: light leaves us, the mother goes away, life does not last. But rage and desire are no less dangerous to her lovers, who are subject to her direct and divine interventions, as her husbands and lovers are seduced by the essential fictionality of the eidolon.

Helen of Tyre and the Rose

Helen's myth first appears in Yeats's poetry in the series of poems about the Rose published in 1893. "The Rose of the World" (p. 36) contains his earliest reference to her myth, as well as a reference to Deirdre; in addition, it is one of the first lyrics inspired by Gonne:

> Who dreams that beauty passes like a dream?
> For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,
> Mournful that no new wonder may betide,
> Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,
> And Usna's children died.

Usna's children--Naoise and his brothers--are equated with Troy, as sacrifices to a pair of Rossettian lips, like those of Niamh in "The Wanderings of Oisin." Helen and Deirdre are not named in the poem because both myths are subsumed under the multi-formed eternal beauty, Helen of Tyre. The "new wonder" may refer to Gonne's love of spectacle and excitement or Yeats's dream of apocalypse, but in context suggests

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[120] "Dust Hath Closed Helen's Eye," The Celtic Twilight, pp. 28-29.

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a decadent Helen entertained by the destructions that she causes. Yet the last stanza contradicts such bloodthirstiness:

> Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode:
> Before you were, or any hearts to beat,
> Weary and kind one lingered by His seat;
> He made the world to be a grassy road
> Before her wandering feet.

Despite AE's petulant criticism of "weary and kind" as a portrait of Gonne worn out by a day's hike,[121] the goddess who walks here is drawn from Gnostic tradition, which created a Helen whose being preceded the creation of the archangels, and whose lonely face lives on as men's souls and the laboring world pass by.

Homeric imagery is invoked in other poems of The Rose. "The Rose of Battle" (pp. 37-38) speaks of "God's battles in the long grey ships," and "tall thought-woven sails" that recall the fabric of Athena. "The Sorrow of Love" (p. 40) places laboring ships beside a Pre-Raphaelite mournful beauty:

> The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,
> The full round moon and the star-laden sky,
> And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves
> Had hid away earth's old and weary cry.
>
> And then you came with those red mournful lips,
> And with you came the whole of the world's tears,
> And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,
> And all the burden of her myriad years.
>
> And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,
> The crumbling moon, the white stars in the sky,
> And the loud chanting of the unquiet leaves,
> Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry.

Yeats's 1922 revision made the Homeric element more overt:

> A girl arose that had red mournful lips
> And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,

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[121] Jeffares, New Commentary, pp. 27-28.

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> Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships
> And proud as Priam murdered with his peers.[122]

As in "The Rose of the World," two sets of heroes are named and equated with the beautiful woman.

The poem offers an idea of Helen's place and her effects in the poet's universe. Like Wallace Stevens's round jar in Tennessee, she reverses orders of being. She changes the traditional to the personal, the fulfilled to the unattained, love to literature. In the second version, "Man's image and his cry" are blotted out by the more sublime images of moon and sky, the more prefect harmony of leaves, the more natural and spontaneous birdsong, until the advent of the girl. She is "a-rose"[123] from religious and classical literatures, literally an earlier creation of man's image and cry, just as the round jar is an artifact of man. Her advent turns the universe into signs, for man, of his sorrow and love. The world's objects that Yeats chooses to use in the poem are already heavily symbolic. It is strange how, in the revision, he mixes human and inhuman, objectified and deified, as opposed to the less dynamic original version:

> The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
> The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
> And all that famous harmony of leaves
> . . .
>
> Arose, and on the instant, clamorous eaves,
> A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
> And all that lamentation of the leaves . . .

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[122] The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 119.

[123] John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to W. B. Yeats (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1959), p. 81.

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Sparrows, of course, are the birds of Aphrodite; they draw her chariot in Sappho's hymn. Here, although they brawl like peasants, the adjective "clamorous" puns on "amorous," "eaves" on "Eves." Aphrodite, too, reverses orders, as her reply promises Sappho. The "full round moon," later "the brilliant moon," and the "milky sky" inevitably become images of the breast. The girl's rising removes this great mother imagery from the sky, leaving there suggestions of unfulfilled desire--the moon climbs, the sky is empty which had held milk. The leaves represent poetic voices, first the weight of tradition's "famous harmony," revised into a personal lamentation of loss, a loss that nevertheless permits the poet to sing.

Helen's place in "The Sorrow of Love" is to mediate between the insignificance of the personal and subjective, and the universal subjectivity of the Yeatsian persona. She is invoked indirectly, unlike the heroes, although she seems to belong to their literary reality. Yet "the greatness of the world in tears" foreshadows the transformation of the world into that subjectivity in which the personal becomes universal. This Helen is not a personally visiting Muse or Aphrodite, but a translation of reality into literature, giving the poet permission to live in fairyland or "The Island of Statues," among images in romantic imagination.

Helen of Troy in Ireland

The next major invocation of Helen occurs in the poems written after the dissolution of Gonne's marriage and her reconciliation with Yeats. It had long been clear how deeply Yeats's self-granted permission to

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dwell in dreams conflicted with the ideals and actions of Gonne. "No Second Troy" of 1908 (p. 91) records a partial fulfillment of this transition into heroic image and the heroic past: a description of Gonne's beauty declares her of another time. But physically she is, as "A Woman Homer Sung" admits, more "shadowed in a glass" than mirrored or captured. Furthermore, her love of action is interpreted as a frightening thing, violent and apocalyptic, the deliberate sacrifice of others to a self unable to be loving, gentle, or human due to its archaic superiority. A series of abstractions presents Gonne's form, actions, and personality; the Homeric allusions are simply another type of abstraction:

> Why should I blame her that she filled my days
> With misery, or that she would of late
> Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
> Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
> Had they but courage equal to desire?
> What could have made her peaceful with a mind
> That nobleness made simple as a fire,
> With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
> That is not natural in an age like this,
> Being high and solitary and most stern?
> Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
> Was there another Troy for her to burn?

Yeats uses a questioning first person to voice the theme of Helen's blamelessness, aligning himself with lovers and heroes rather than with blind poets who praise or condemn her. Yet even this poem seems blind to its Helen's physical being as to her human nature, presenting only a stunning abstraction, as Paris and the armies were misled by the eidolon.

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The image of beauty as a tightened bow[124] and nobleness simple as fire, are key metaphors for the idea, not the body, of Helen, similar to Homer's evasive "terribly like the immortal goddesses." Both of Yeats's comparisons allude to war; Paris was a bowman, and fire destroyed Troy. Cause and effect interweave, the little streets hurled as if from beauty's bow, Troy burned as if by nobleness. The adjectives "high and solitary and most stern" seem to derive from Shelley's "Alastor"; they might describe the prince's tower itself. If they are applied to Gonne here, it is because a transference of dream and desire has occurred: Yeats has attributed the qualities of the poet-magician-sage to the beautiful woman. Thus, Helen begins to incarnate Simon Magus. The poem is an early attempt to restore Yeats to himself, but first the imaginary self must reunite with its feminine half.[125]

"A Woman Homer Sung" of 1910 (pp. 89-90) retells more clearly the essential story of "The Sorrow of Love," with some distance achieved by Yeats from his need to transform the world into "a heroic dream":

> If any man drew near
> When I was young,
> I thought 'He holds her dear,'
> And shook with hate and fear.
> But O! 'twas bitter wrong
> If he could pass her by
> With an indifferent eye.

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[124] Blakean imagery for sexual desire (Jeffares, New Commentary, p. 88); but also implying the great mother imagery of Yeats's vision: see Webster, pp. 113-112.

[125] There was, among Yeats's colleagues, one poet whose experiments in this sexual-spiritual transformation mystery went far beyond anything Yeats would attempt: the poet William Sharp, who created a full alternate identity under the name of Fiona MacLeod, a woman and poet. It was Sharp whose story of The Archer paralleled Yeats's vision (Memoirs, pp. 100-104).

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Whereon I wrote and wrought,
And now, being gray,
I dream that I have brought
To such a pitch my thought
That coming time can say,
'He shadowed in a glass
What thing her body was.'

For she had fiery blood
When I was young,
And trod so sweetly proud
As 'twere upon a cloud,
A woman Homer sung,
That life and letters seem
But an heroic dream.

Gonne's usefulness to the poet is, first, like that of Niamh, to assist his enchantment of the world and his writing into the realm of a literature of romantic heroism; and second, like that of the Muses, to permit his poetry to reach the highest possible achievements. Yeats is always sensitive to "coming time" and its opinions, and his idea of the immortality of beauty is not by any means limited to the face of a beautiful woman. Poetic ambition and personal utopia create Yeats's need for a Helen. She is a superlative but specialized beauty, a feminine persona who inspires poetry as well as jealous suffering, whose memory casts a heroic dream over objective reality. Key motifs are "fiery blood" and the motif of Helen walking, but again no attempt is made to describe her body. Homer is garrulous about his Helen's image, in comparison. Nevertheless, that Homer sung Yeats's Helen-Gonne is one of her most important attributes, since Yeats thereby enters the lists with immortal bards.

In "Against Unworthy Praise," the half-lion, half-child image of

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Gonne recalls first the fleshly sphinxes of the decadents.[126] But it also foreshadows the mystic sphinx of "The Second Coming." The Helen-lion simile from Aeschylus' Agamemnon underlies the motif, yet the link of lion to woman seldom has the positive charm of this poem for Gonne, written to soothe her dismay at the mockery she received from a crowd in 1905, at the time of her break with MacBride. Although this Helen is still destructive, as half-child she is also somehow innocent, not unlike Blake's tiger. Yeats associated his "Vision of Evil" with the images of the tiger and the woman, as he had found them in childhood reading:

> One of the sensations of my childhood was a description of a now lost design of Nettleship's. God creating Evil, a vast, terrifying face, a woman and a tiger rising from the forehead. Why did it seem so blasphemous and so profound? It was many years before I understood that we must not demand even the welfare of the human race, nor traffic with divinity in our prayers. It moves outside our antimonies, it may be our lot to worship in terror: "Did He who made the lamb make thee?"[127]

Gonne continued to seek the welfare of the human race through violent means, and together they trafficked with Theosophist divinities. Yet Yeats's terrified worship would always include the woman, and his poems address the same questions of radical or murderous innocence first asked by Blake. Although later, in "The Circus Animal's Desertion," Yeats had had enough of the lion, he uses its image again in the refrain of "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers." There love and hatred, male and female, are equally evil, equally divine (p. 260):

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[126] See Praz, pp. 256-258, 310; Huysmans, pp. 101-102.

[127] "Prometheus Unbound," Essays and Introductions, p. 425.

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Did he die or did she die?
Seemed to die or died they both?
God be with the times when I
Cared not a thraneen for what chanced
So that I had the limbs to try
Such a dance as there was danced--
Love is like the lion's tooth.

Yeats remembers Gonne's beauty in "Fallen Majesty" of 1912 (pp. 123-124). Still Homerically oblique, he catalogues effects and abstractions, capping the suggestions with an image again evocative of the eidolon: "a thing once walked that seemed a burning cloud." The old men's eyes that grew dim at her face are a Helen topos in Yeats, fetched from Irish peasants as much as from Homer. He must have conflated the old storytellers' dimmed eyes with the blind poet himself. The "last courtier . . . babbling of fallen majesty" is both troubadour and Irish gleeman.[128] Apotheosized in memory, Gonne has become a thing--a word Yeats often uses of people who have become myths and symbols! Yet the burning cloud is not convincingly to be preferred to what's left of the woman--"a heart that laughter has made sweet." The poem again is insistent upon Yeats's subjective vision, as "the Eye altering alters all." It is his prerogative to "record what's gone" even if that were visible only to himself. For crowds still gathered for Gonne even when her face was aged, upon her return to public life after 1917; nor had they gathered originally solely for the sake of her face, but to hear her speak, as prelude to political action. Yeats knew this, yet her beauty inhibits his realization, or his own desires

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[128] As in "The Last Gleeman," published with The Celtic Twilight, Mythologies, pp. 47-53; and "The Crucifixion of the Outcast," in The Secret Rose (1897), Mythologies, pp. 147-156. The poet as aristocrat of the spirit, whose image is that of a beautiful woman, underlies these stories of beggars and outcasts.

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force him to repress the truth. His idea of her beauty's power is quite remarkable, in fact; he recalls in his Autobiography (p. 218) when

> her power over crowds was at its height, and some portion of the power came because she could still, even where pushing an abstract principle to what seemed to me an absurdity, keep her own mind free, and so when men and women did her bidding they did it not only because she was beautiful, but because that beauty suggested joy and freedom.

The Eidolon: Dancer and Muse

"When Helen Lived" of 1913-14 concentrates on a facet of Helen's symbolic meaning only implicit in Yeats's earlier poems (p. 111):

> We have cried in our despair
> That men desert
> For some trivial affair
> Or noisy, insolent sport
> Beauty that we have won
> From bitterest hours;
> Yet we, had we walked within
> Those topless towers
> Where Helen walked with her boy,
> Had given but as the rest
> Of the men and the women of Troy,
> A word and a jest.

While "Fallen Majesty" and "Against Unworthy Praise" were inspired by the public's despising the woman Gonne, "When Helen Lived" deals with the public's neglect and rejection of the poet who creates a Helen, an imperishable beauty, through his skill and sufferings. As at the heart of the Iliad, where Helen weaves events and predicts immortality, the beautiful woman represents the poem itself. The poem was composed following a journal entry of July 8, 1909, shortly after Synge's death:

> I dreamed this thought two nights ago: "Why should we complain if men ill-treat our Muses, when all that they gave

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to Helen while she still lived was a song and a jest?[129]

The dream associated Helen and the Muse; the poem takes the comparison one step further. Helen is that perfection toward which the poet aspires; her beauty is that for which the auditor should long.

Synge may not have been the only oppressed artist on Yeats's mind. The phrase "Where Helen walked with her boy" recalls Oscar Wilde's Helen in "The Burden of Itys," and with it Wilde's tragedy: "Queen Helen lying in the ivory room,/ And at her side an amorous red-lipped boy."[130] The entry in Yeats's diary following the dream records a vision of the artist's bisexuality, and a masculine relation to the Muse:

> An idle man has no thought, a man's work thinks through him. On the other hand a woman gets her thought through the influence of a man. A man is to her what work is to a man. Man is a woman to his work and it begets his thoughts.[131]

The Muse begets a Helen upon the poet; Helen as Muse begets herself, in the ancient pattern of Demeter and Persephone, Nemesis and Kore. Such mythic intercourse might also place the poet in the role of Zeus-swan-soul.

The political fires of Donne and Helen of Troy are absent from "When Helen Lived," but Marlowe's "topless towers" provide a special sense. The phrase invokes the solitude and wisdom of the artist, his literal stance above the populace, and the infinite, aristocratic

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[129] Memoirs, p. 225.

[130] The Poems of Oscar Wilde, p. 87.

[131] Memoirs, p. 232; Autobiography, p. 317.

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aspirations of his art. Recalled are the towers of Athanase and Manfred, as well as Faust. In Shelley's poem, the tower is the place of marriage to Wisdom, to Sophia or Helen-Ennoia:

> His soul had wedded Wisdom, and her dower
> Is love and justice, clothed in which he sate
> Apart from men, as in a lonely tower.[132]

But Yeats will not hear the armed man speaking in a tower, as Robartes declares in "The Phases of the Moon";[133] only in the marriage bed will wisdom and beauty wed.

In 1919, "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" presented a new and important idea of Helen, a synthesis of his earlier symbolism with the new perspective provided by George Yeats's automatic writing. The Helen at the locus of perfect beauty, Phase Fifteen, dances between two images that had long haunted the poet's imagination (p. 171):

> On the grey rock of Cashel I suddenly saw
> A Sphinx with woman breast and lion paw,
> A Buddha, hand at rest,
> Hand lifted up that blest;
>
> And right between these two a girl at play
> That, it may be, had danced her life away,
> For now being dead it seemed
> That she of dancing dreamed.

The sphinx combines lion and woman as of Yeats's "Vision of Evil," but she represents intellect. Her head is motionless "in triumph of intellect," as her eyes gaze on all things known and unknown, lit by

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[132] Bornstein, pp. 71-72.

[133] "'He has found, after the manner of his kind,/ Mere images; chosen this place to live in/ Because, it may be, of the candle-light/ From the far tower where Milton's Platonist/ Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince: . . . And now he seeks in book or manuscript/ What he shall never find." From "The Phases of the Moon," ll. 12-20, p. 163, Poems.

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the moon beneath which all is change. The Buddha, his unmoving eyes fixed on things loved and unloved, is a statue without peace, full of the sorrow of love. He recalls the perfect beauty of the Greek statue so often invoked in descriptions of beautiful women.

The dancer's life is wasted or lost, yet it is also still ongoing in her dreams. In this she resembles the eidolon, misleading men and wasting their lives, neither dead nor alive herself except as imagined. She is positioned between the lion-woman Helen of Troy and the suffering but blessing Buddha, a type of Helen of Tyre. Of the three, only she is mobile. Her mobility permits her to outdistance thought as the body outdances the mind:

> O little did they care who danced between,
> And little did she by whom her dance was seen
> So she had outdanced thought.
> Body perfection brought,
>
> For what but eye and ear silence the mind
> With the minute particulars of mankind?

She dances like the world's sensory delights before the mind, which stops dead before her, spinning as if entranced. The dancer is flesh as the condition of art, as Helen is flesh as condition of beauty: both gynecomorphizing the perfections desired by the poet. A vision of her fills Yeats with excitement that he can only express in terms of Helen:

> I knew that I had seen, had seen at last
> That girl my unremembering nights hold fast
> Or else my dreams that fly
> If I should rub an eye,
>
> And yet in flying fling into my meat
> A crazy juice that makes the pulses beat
> As though I had been undone
> By Homer's Paragon
>
> Who never gave the burning town a thought.

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The sexual transformation is complete here, as the dancing girl's image flings juice into the poet, who is "undone" by her. Eidolon and Muse have both subsumed the Helen of Troy figure, whose "burning town" is also the undone poet. Her thoughtlessness is a special invulnerable irresponsibility attributed to Iseult Gonne who need not "dread/The monstrous crying of the wind,"[134] and to the Helen inhabiting Phase Fourteen.

Murderous Innocence: Helen's Birth

In "A Prayer for my Daughter," written at the birth of Anne Butler Yeats in 1919. Yeats opposes Helen, Aphrodite, and the past image of Maud Gonne to his idealized desires for his newborn daughter's future. He symbolizes feminine perfection as "a flourishing hidden tree" with thoughts like linnets (pp. 188-190):

> O may she live like some green laurel
> Rooted in one dear perpetual place!

The tree is an ancient dwelling of vegetation and fertility goddesses, virginal great mothers, Grails, and all-givers, as opposed to both withholding and sexually aggressive goddesses. The tree-deities are often sacrificial victims, Helen Dendritis, Attis, and Christ among them. By contrast, more mobile goddesses are not to be trusted, since they lack courtesy, charm, "natural kindness and maybe/ The heart-revealing intimacy/That chooses right." The overly beautiful are likely to chose badly or to be chosen:

> Helen being chosen found life flat and dull
> And later had much trouble from a fool,

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[134] "To a Child dancing in the Wind," p. 122, Poems.

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> While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,
> Being fatherless could have her way
> Yet chose a bandy-legged smith for man.
> It's certain that fine women eat
> A crazy salad with their meat,
> Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.

Helen now seems much more an Iseult Gonne, whose husband Yeats elsewhere called a dunce,[135] than a Maud. Rather, the elder Gonne parallels the "great Queen" Aphrodite. Both were fatherless; both chose (or traditionally, the goddess of love was given to) an unlikely mate. Even more significant is the pun of "that rose" out of the spray--Gonne is still the rose of the world for Yeats. In the eighth stanza she is "the loveliest woman born/out of the mouth of Plenty's horn," a Kore to Demeter, but one lost through intellectual hatred.

Yeats figures the wind as rapist here as in "To a Child dancing in the Wind." In addition to the misalliance of beauty with "an old bellows full of angry wind," the poem states:

> If there's no hatred in a mind
> Assault and battery of the wind
> Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.
> . . .
>
> Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
> The soul recovers radical innocence
> And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
> Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
> And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will,
> She can, though every face should scowl
> And every windy quarter howl
> Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

It is perhaps unintentional irony that such "radical innocence" as Yeats describes seems, to one familiar with Gonne's life, to be her portrait. Her fearless unconcern with the malice of others is here, as

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[135] "Why should not Old Men be Mad," p. 581, Poems.

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well as her trust in the power of will. The soul, linked through syntax to the linnet, is also the image of Helen as Psyche, a fulfilled Helen who has learned radical innocence rather than the murderous innocence of the dancer, of the sea, of Helen of Troy. Yeats's concern for his daughter's fate implies that he fears her development into the stage of Helen of Troy, into a murderous innocence.

Yeats has altered the mythological sources of his material in some uneasy and telling ways. The bandy-legged smith Hephaestus is traditionally a master craftsman, a crippled genius paralleling the blind Homer, not a warrior like Ares or Ajax, who would better imply MacBride. Gonne chose her husband over many, even supernatural, protests,[136] but the smith as well as the fool seem more appropriate to Yeats himself than to the hero of the Boer Wars and the Easter Rebellion. Yeats figures himself as a fool in several poems.[137] In addition, a smith-magician who pursues a shape-changing lady is a familiar figure from ancient ballads.[138]

In "Leda and the Swan" of 1923 (pp. 214-215), Yeats answers the question with which he concluded "A Prayer for my Daughter":

> How but in custom and in ceremony
> Are innocence and beauty born?

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[136] On the eve of her marriage, she heard her father's voice telling her not to marry MacBride (MacBride, p. 348); more substantial protests were voiced by the major's mother and brother, and by Arthur Griffith, close mutal friend (Cardozo, p. 229).

[137] Poems: "Two Songs of a Fool," p. 169; "Another Song of a Fool," p. 170; "The Fool by the Roadside," pp. 219-220. See also "The Cap and Bells," pp. 64-65.

[138] "The Two Magicians," Child no. 44.

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"Leda" gives a terrifying account of beauty's birth. It contains a question about the loss of innocence at conception, as if original sin had been caused not by the disobedience of a biblical Eve, but by an act of rape. Like her daughter Helen, Yeats's Leda is at once an innocent victim of this attacking deity and a passive agent of destruction unless she has indeed, like an Athena, "put on his knowledge with his power," so that she becomes responsible for "being so caught up." This is the stance of prophet-poet, Helen again becoming the spoken word, the prophecy. This theme of rape, that of Leda-Nemesis by the swan-Zeus, engages many elements of Yeats's systems of art, philosophy, and mysticism. If the swan retains its Shelleyan symbolic meaning as the poet's soul in an unattainable freedom,[139] then one could read Yeats himself as swan-Zeus, Gonne as Leda.[140] Helen becomes their mystic child, as destructive of cities as the politics shared once by Yeats and Gonne, yet as beautiful as the poetry Yeats created for her. The rape, however, returns us to the fact that only through a forcible imposition of Yeats's will on Gonne's could such effects have been obtained. Yeats projected his own anima, his Helen-spirit, onto Gonne in order to write his love-lyrics.[141] The idea of poet as rapist

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[139] Also in "The Wild Swans at Coole," pp. 131-132, and elsewhere.

[140] As in "Among School Children" and "His Phoenix," pp. 151, 216, Poems.

[141] See Kline, p. 10: Yeats "fell in love, now with Maud, whom he scarcely knew, but with his own projected anima"; p. 125: "The pose of the courtly lover is a double denial. First, the Lover denies the femininity of his own psyche to project those qualities onto his lady and then to possess them again through possession of her. Second, the Lover denies his Lady the wholeness of her nature, rejecting in her

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parallels Yeats's earlier dream of Gonne's death, as well as the victimized Helen of Morris's "Scenes from the Fall of Troy." That he can make such material so attractive is Yeats's genius, perhaps learned by putting the raw and violent Celtic tales into romantic prose forms. One need only compare Kinsella's version of the Táin, for example, with one of Yeats's or Lady Gregory's redactions.

In "The Tower," a poem of 1925 (pp. 194-200), an "image and memory/From ruin or from ancient trees" brings back the figure of Mary Hynes:

> Some few remembered still when I was young
> A peasant girl commended by a song,
> Who'd lived somewhere upon that rocky place,
> And praised the colour of her face,
> And had the greater joy in praising her,
> Remembering that, if walked she there,
> Farmers jostled at the fair
> So great a glory did the song confer.
>
> And certain men, being maddened by those rhymes,
> Or else by toasting her a score of times,
> Rose from the table and declared it right
> To test their fancy by their sight;
> But they mistook the brightness of the moon
> For the prosaic light of day--
> Music had driven their wits astray--
> And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.
>
> Strange, but the man who made the song was blind;
> Yet, now I have considered it, I find
> That nothing strange; the tragedy began
> With Homer that was a blind man,
> And Helen has all human hearts betrayed.
> O may the moon and sunlight seem
> One inextricable beam,
> For if I triumph I must make men mad.

Both Helen and the song about her create the eidolon, the moon-deceiver who leads men astray. The combination of sun and moon for which the

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those things which he would . . . not want to make part of himself." See also Memoirs, p. 165.

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poet prays is the condition of perfect beauty at Phase Fifteen. But madness and death, it seems, are gateways to the realm of imagination, the ability to see light with an otherworldly eye although the poet seems blind:

> Does the imagination dwell the most
> Upon a woman won or woman lost?
> If on the lost, admit you turned aside
> From a great labyrinth out of pride,
> Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
> Or anything called conscience once;
> And if that memory recur, the sun's
> Under eclipse and the day blotted out.

While solar eclipse has been associated with the blinded Stesichorus, here Yeats feels himself blinded by regret for abandoning "the labyrinth of another's being." Yeats blames himself in "The Tower" for undoing the gift of difficulty, for abandoning the sources of imagination. Yet pride is at the heart of his own poetic power, despite its antipathy for that field where the power must be exercised. From pride he is able to spin the song, a skein of love that permits egress to the labyrinth of his own being. The labyrinth image has ancient associations with the meandering water-rhythm patterns of great mother deities;[142] its link with Helen here suggests her connection with Ariadne. More importantly, the Helen myth and the poet's self-conceptions draw closer together. In the last section, other symbols of Helen join the list Yeats creates to signify his soul, to justify his decisions in life. With his pride he equates images of morning light, cornucopia, water, and swan:

> It is time that I wrote my will;
> I chose upstanding men . . .

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[142] See Gimbutas, p. 132.

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They shall inherit my pride . . .
Pride, like that of the morn,
When the headlong light is loose,
Or that of the fabulous horn,
Or that of the sudden shower
When all streams are dry,
Or that of the hour
When the swan must fix his eye
Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song.

The sudden shower image, in particular, suggests the milk from the mother's breast, the song from the singer's mouth, and the thread spun between birth and death. Yeats declares his faith that man has the power to create these three things--"Life and death were not/Till man made up the whole"; as well as the eternal unchanging perfection of "Translunar Paradise."

Many of these images and equations figure in "A Man Young and Old" (pp. 221-224), but the lyrics are more bitter, the sexuality less hidden, and the tragedy begins to veer into comedy. The Helen who appears in section six, "His Memories," is most likely the Maud Gonne of 1907-08:

My arms are like the twisted thorn
And yet there beauty lay;

The first of all the tribe lay there
And did such pleasure take--
She who had brought great Hector down
And pulled all Troy to wreck--
That she cried into this ear,
'Strike me if I shriek.'

The destructive power of this sexual Helen is at its apogee in Yeats's poetry. Hector is surely MacBride, the warrior matched with warrior at last. But perhaps Yeats can permit his rival an appropriate mythic counterpart only because the poet has at last held Helen in his arms.

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That coupling seems to transfer tremendous power from woman to poet, as if he had put on her power with the knowledge of her body. Helen invites such a transfer by asking him to strike her, as if in accepting the feminine role in intercourse she also requires the masochistic role. From the beginning of the poem, the woman is made to appear violent or distracted, and yet also responsible for the violence of others, or for their insanity and distraction:

> Though nurtured like the sailing moon
> In beauty's murderous brood,
> She walked awhile and blushed awhile
> And in my pathway stood
> Until I thought her body bore
> A heart of flesh and blood.
>
> But since I laid a hand thereon
> And found a heart of stone
> I have attempted many things
> And not a thing is done,
> For every hand is lunatic
> That travels on the moon.

Not until he composed his epitaph in "Under Ben Bulben" of 1938 did Yeats fully accepted the origins and responsibilities of violence. He couches the revelation in the same terms as the appearance of the sun-princess Helen, the attainment of the most desired object that is like sight returned to the blind (p. 326):

> You that Mitchel's prayer have heard
> 'Send war in our time, O Lord!'
> Know that when all words are said
> And a man is fighting mad,
> Something drops from eyes long blind
> He completes his partial mind,
> For an instant stands at ease,
> Laughs aloud, his heart at peace,
> Even the wisest man grows tense
> With some sort of violence
> Before he can accomplish fate
> Know his work or chose his mate.

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Anti-Helen

Another transference of sexual identity occurs in "A Man Young and Old," with an equivalent access of poetic power that will result for Yeats in the companion piece of this poem, "A Woman Young and Old," and in the figure of Crazy Jane. The section entitled "His Wildness" (p. 226) closely approachs the revelations of "Under Ben Bulben." The swan again informs an image of poetic flight, and the poet adopts the follies of both pride and love as "natural to a man/That lives in memory." "The Secrets of the Old" (p. 225) are mysteries of androgyny, as the swan-Zeus combined the water-bird of the mother goddess with the king of gods. Yeats writes:

> I have old women's secrets now,
> That had those of the young;
> Madge tells me what I dared not think
> When my blood was strong,
> And what had drowned a lover once
> Sounds like an old song.

The old man listens safely to the sirens. He too is mermaidlike in his ambiguous sexuality.

Helen appears here among old women whose names recall the lesser beauties of "His Phoenix." Her appearance is that of the Gonne-Pallas of "Beautiful Lofty Things": "Peg and Meg and Paris' love/That had so straight a back/Are gone away, and some that stay/Have changed their silk for sack." Gonne had done just that--put on mourning for MacBride or for the wreck of the Irish Republic in 1916, and not long afterwards she and Yeats became again estranged, first through his new involve-

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ments in married life, then through political mischances.[143] Yeats withdrew his idea of the beautiful woman from the aged Gonne; his new Muses are figured as earthly, aging, and decrepit, yet Helen remains an idealized memory. The once wild Madge who nurses a stone originates in his early ballads. Moll Magee at last meets the Rose, which has polarized into a mad beggar suffering with man on one hand, and on the other hand into an eidolon of memory.

In "Words for Music, Perhaps" of 1929-32, Crazy Jane enters. An ancient madwoman, she is based on a real person whom Yeats described as having "an amazing power of audacious speech."[144] Like Mary Hynes, "Cracked Mary" was a peasant living near Lady Gregory; she praised drunkenness with "epic magnificence" and despaired of the human race. Mythic parallels with such a character can be found in the Irish queen Maeve, whose name means "Drunken Woman." The "complete Celtic personification of the mother-warrior deity," she is Fergus's consort and has a sacred tree, in addition to animal familiars who perch like birds on her shoulder and an insatiable sexual capacity.[145] Gonne herself adopted the name Maeve as pseudonymn in the society Daughters of Erin.[146] The drunkenness or insanity of the old woman recalls the effect of Helen's eidolon, maddening and misleading her followers like

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[143] See Cardozo, pp. 357 ff.

[144] Jeffares, New Commentary, p. 307.

[145] Ross, p. 223.

[146] Cardozo, p. 193.

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the wine of Dionysus.

The old age of Crazy Jane suggests the disguise of Aphrodite in Homer as well as the Euripidean Hecuba, Helen's enemy. Helen old is usually pictured as regretful, delicate, and mournful; Yeats quotes from da Vinci's Ovid in The Secret Rose of 1897: "Helen, when she looked in her mirror, and saw there the wrinkles of old age, wept, and wondered that she had twice been carried away."[147] Crazy Jane, in contrast, remains as lusty and defiant as "the wild old wicked man." She counters the earlier courtly untouchable Helens with her sexual experience and romantic passion. In this, she joins the ranks of warriors and lovers destroyed by their desire for a beloved woman. Over her, Jack the Journeyman has such power that she sees his ghost walk, and she also will walk after him when dead. Similarly, Menelaus and Achilles see eidolons of their lost beloveds. Her heart is not the stone that Yeats found inside his Helen of "A Man Young and Old." She is human in desire and response, not perfect: "For nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent" (p. 260).

The former Helen created by Yeats stands thus in contrast to Crazy Jane, becoming closer to the enchantress Fand than to the wife Emer. The occult magic of Helen of Tyre, the exotic masochistic prostitute so attractive to the younger Yeats, is replaced by an old Irishwoman who curses the Bishop without Simon's mediation.[148] Her mystery is on the

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[147] Mythologies, p. 144.

[148] Kline sees Crazy Jane as an extension of the dying "prostitute" in "The Adoration of the Magi," hence as a parallel to Helen of Tyre; p. 47.

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level of popular superstition of the tales in The Celtic Twilight rather than a literary amalgamation; her decadence is only human age rather than the occult labyrinths wound from mummy-cloths. Nevertheless, Jane is sufficiently sacred to Yeats for him to show her in dialogue with the judge on Judgment Day, and to sanctify her life in terms ultimately drawn from the all-mother of the Gnostics (p. 259):

> I had wild Jack for a lover;
> Though like a road
> That men pass over
> My body makes no moan
> But sings on:
> All things remain in God.

She, too, is eternal in spirit and desire if not in beauty. The flesh that she keeps sings; like Helen, she is poet, Muse, and song.

Recapitulations: Helen's Transformations

Yeats did not remain disenchanted with the image of the beautiful woman, and he returns to a new vision of Helen in his latest works. The "Lullaby" of "Words for Music Perhaps" (p. 264-265) brings great mother and "good breast" imagery to bear on three apocalyptic women, linking the sleep of the full-fed child with that of satisfied lovers:

> Beloved, may your sleep be sound
> That have found it where you fed.
> What were all the world's alarms
> To mighty Paris when he found
> Sleep upon a golden bed
> That first dawn in Helen's arms?

The second stanza invokes Tristram, the third Leda and the swan, in which lover and mother conjoin (pp. 264-265):

> Such a sleep and sound as fell
> Upon Eurotas' grassy bank
> When the holy bird, that there
> Accomplished his predestined will,

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From the limbs of Leda sank
But not from her protecting care.

Yeats imagined the poem as sung by a mother to her child. The "protecting care" of Leda reveals a transferal of power from swan to woman, god to mortal, or child to mother: ultimately, however, from a masculine to a feminine divinity. To believe in such a supernatural woman is clearly to posit a superlative self capable of winning her; to frustrate that attempt, whether in an impossible initial choice or through conscious or unconscious manipulation of circumstances, is to excuse the self from the exercise of power and its potential destructiveness. The wildness of Tristram, under the influence of the potion that absolves him from all responsibility, is that of the wild deer in nature, not a human state. Again, the image of Helen is superlative because inhuman, inhuman because superlative. She is the remembered good of the nourishing mother, lost forever to lips except in song, which itself becomes the milk, the stream giving life.

"Beautiful Lofty Things" of 1936 (p. 303) is notable primarily because one form of Helen has achieved a full translation into another goddess of the classical Pantheon, as Gonne is remembered "at Howth station waiting a train,/Pallas Athena in that straight back and arrogant head." But the poem as a whole declaims action rather than illustrates appearance, as usual in Yeats; the word "beautiful" does much work, as do other abstract adjectives. In "A Crazed Girl," Margot Ruddock the dancer is also pronounced "a beautiful lofty thing." Clearly, the Helen-Salome symbol here is reversed from the decadent goddess of Huysmans into a woman truly pitiable and weak, sensitive and vulnerable as Gonne never was or would be. Ruddock was much closer

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psychologically to the young Yeats, who had worried about his nervous constitution. Old, Yeats at last abandoned the pursuit of an Athena whom he thought was Aphrodite, and recognized a kindred spirit in Ruddock. Unfortunately, there was little he could do to help her once he found her. The fatal man or sensualist Herod is replaced by a rather weary but still courtly older lover, who feels he has done what he could to rescue his distressed dancer. He becomes something of an Idomeneus, Helen's faithul suitor into old age.

But the fatherly and tender Idomeneus mask does not always fit Yeats's mood. A cynic appears in "Why should not Old Men be Mad?" of the same year. The "Helen of social welfare dream" who climbed "on a wagonette to scream" may refer to either Gonne or Con Markievicz. That wagonette plagued Yeats; Hone records how a patroness of the Abbey Theatre, Anne Horniman, once told him "the greatest poet is always helpless beside a beautiful woman screaming from a cart."[149] As we have seen in "Prayer for my Daughter," the Muse ought not to campaign on her own, and certainly ought not to upstage the poet.

The most significant of Yeats's later Helens is found dancing between Caesar and Michelangelo, between power and the artist, in "Long-Legged Fly" of 1936 (p. 339):

> That the topless towers be burnt
> And men recall that face,
> Move most gently if move you must
> In this lonely place.
> She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,
> That nobody looks; her feet
> Practice a tinker shuffle
> Picked up on the street.

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[149] Jeffares, New Commentary, p. 514.

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Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
Her mind moves upon silence.

We saw an earlier dancing girl between Sphinx and Buddha, active and passive, mind and heart. Again, topless towers are invoked, an image here of intellectual abstraction or bodiless thought, unattached to flesh. This Helen seduces the mind into the world, rather than destroying a city. But paradoxically, once the towers are burnt, the face becomes an eidolon of memory again. Helen's dance is a deliberate practice of the art of Aphrodite: the simple plait, the twisting of the rope, homely arts like that of the tinker shuffle. She remains opposed to Caesar and Michelangelo, the one preserving and destroying a civilization, the other creating both supreme artistic beauty and physical desire: "That girls at puberty may find/The first Adam in their thought." Yeats at puberty, too, had already a first Helen in his thought before encountering a mature love for real women. Helen here is barren of works, a Muse or Ate, neither father nor mother. Three parts child to one of adult is a heavy measure: does it imply innocence or irresponsibility? Does it refer to a vision of woman or to Yeats's own concept of the anima, the poet's soul?

This dancing girl is the last development of Helen in Yeats's poetry. The theme is more fully explored in his dramas, especially in At the Hawk's Well and in Four Plays for Dancers.

At last, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," the penultimate work in Last Poems (pp. 346-348), sounds out the abandonment of mythic character and symbol. The now-familiar lion and woman harkens back as far as the Gonne of "Against Unworthy Praise" but here the time-hallowed associations are mocked, reduced to sideshow and carnival. His recapi-

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tulation of Gonne as Countess Cathleen is preceded by an admission of the primacy of his own imagination in the Oisin legend. He had begun with "themes of the embittered heart" that did indeed "adorn old songs." When Gonne replaced the desire for "the bosom of his fairy bride," yet another dream succeeded in winning the poet's heart away from the world. The truth is not so pleasant; as "Love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement," so the "masterful images" of poetry began in

> A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
> Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
> Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
> Who keeps the till.

Yet the raving slut who stands "where all the ladders start/In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" does indeed "keep the till": she preserves the poet's account with eternity. An anti-Helen in the locus of Helen, she remains equally exciting to us. The ladders have a beginning, but are equivalent to the "topless towers:" of desire and love, ambition and poetic creation. Yeats cannot escape myth since myth inheres in his language. The lifelong heart of his poetic speech keeps a Helen as holy as a great mother, eternally changing her aspects of mother, beloved, wife, and witch.

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Chapter 3. Ezra Pound: Helen in Fragments

> And all that day
> Nicea moved before me . . .
> We alone having being.[1]
> Ezra Pound
> Canto 7

HELEN IN EZRA POUND'S WRITINGS assumes dimensions that follow the poet's own biography: an inescapably destructive and treacherous force, she also embodies the most elusive and delicate visions of paradisiacal beauty. Pound makes her, as he saw himself, the source of song, the one betrayed. Helen's name appears variously in his poetry to signify evanescent muses, traitorous women, great mothers of landscape, mouths of Hell. But he also sings of a perfect beauty, tò kalón, who even in his dreams sends only her handmaids.[2] With this sublime and inaccessible beauty, he identifies both himself and his poetry; she is lover, mother, muse, and self. But both she and her poet are threatened by destructive, cloacal, and corpselike powers, whose origins are at once worldly and deep within the poet's psyche.

Pound's kalón is a poetic and feminine principle, like a Helen of Tyre who has never fallen into matter, or who has been rescued from her prostitution by some supreme magician. Her manifestation in minor or secondary apparitions allegorizes Pound's struggle with discontinuity and incoherence in his poetry. In The Cantos in particular, the appar-

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[1] From Canto 7; Cantos, p. 26.

[2] "Tò Kalón," Personae, p. 96.

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itions of Helen and other feminine deities mimic the poetic text. As they flicker, appearing and vanishing, so does the actual poetry, lost amid prosy opacities: encoded historical references, untraceable allusions, multilingualisms, and the obscene, secondhand rhetorics of hatred. But Pound combines with this nonpoetic content a paradisiacal poetry, rescued from death and Lethe, pagan in origin and persisting through history in shining fragments hidden in art and literature.[3] The rescue of this hidden poetry is Pound's most chivalric and idealized goal; as reward for its rescue, he hoped to become immortal, reenacting a Simon Magus of poetry to the Helen of the text. By contrast, his assumption of failure and "fall into silence" at the end of his life enact a death-in-life, a final encounter with the abjection he had avoided throughout his career.[4]

Pound's sublime ambitions emerged from an extraordinary narcis-

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[3] "'Given the material means,' he wrote in reply to T. S. Eliot's query as to what he believed, 'I would replace the statue of Venus on the cliffs of Terracina. I would erect a temple to Artemis in Park Lane. I believe that a light from Eleusis persisted throughout the middle ages and set beauty in the song of Provence and of Italy.'" From "Credo," Front 1 (Dec. 1930), p. 11; quoted in Leon Surette, A Light from Eleusis: A Study of Ezra Pound's Cantos (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 37.

[4] For the concept of abjection as "recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded," see Kristeva, Powers of Horror, pp. 4-6: "if one imagines the experience of want itself as logically preliminary to being and object--to the being of the object--then one understands that abjection, and even more so abjection of self, is its only signified. Its signifier, then, is none but literature."

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sism,[5] a gargantuan egotism that did not hesitate to victimize others. This call to poetic greatness led him to behaviors both sophisticated and unsophisticated: on the one hand an international aestheticism too refined for America; on the other, a social maladroitness that inspired him, for example, to attempt a seduction of the lesbian Bryher.[6] Pound's self-image derives in part from that of Oscar Wilde: because he wrote poetry, he himself was an aesthetic object and a source of beauty: "Beauty is so rare a thing/ So few drink of my fountain."[7] Like the narrator of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," Pound felt out of place and out of date in his "half-savage country," and he was not about to tour the West in velvet knickers. In homage to that ideal, eidolic creator-self, he fled his home shores like a Helen of Troy. Like a Helen in Egypt, he exiled himself among ancient languages, historic cities, strange cultures--Venice, Paris, London, the aristocratic and rigid organization of the East. And, like Helen of Tyre, he beholds himself as a multitude of personae; he too is decanted from vessel to vessel, reincarnated as poet after poet. Even as <u>tò kalón</u> sends only her

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[5] Pound was diagnosed in 1953 by a senior psychiatrist at St. Elizabeths as having a personality disorder of the narcissistic type: "What is unquestionably the most outstanding feature of his personality is his profound, incredible, over-weaning narcissism." See E. Fuller Torrey, <u>The Roots of Treason: Ezra Pound and the Secret of St. Elizabeths</u> (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), pp. 248-249; Torrey's book is full of information although his attitude is implacably biased; nor is he at all capable of response to Pound's poetry.

[6] Bryher, <u>The Heart to Artemis</u>, p. 138.

[7] "Villanelle: The Psychological Hour," <u>Personae</u>, pp. 158-159. Although included in <u>Personae</u>, the identity of speaker and poet is made clear by the third section's note addressed "Dear Pound."

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handmaids, Pound receives a succession of secondary others from "his own face in a glass."[8] And yet he often appeared to others as awkward and blatantly American, a booming newcomer.

Pound's allusions to Helen touch upon most of the major forms of her myth. But for all his modernist rhetoric, Pound's Helens run a traditional gamut: from dangerous vamps, sisters of the Sirens and Circe, to Aphroditic ladies of the troubadours.[9] It is telling that Pound never refers to the Helen in Egypt theme, which seems appropriate not only to his own experience with hieroglyph and ideogram but also to the experiences of Rudge and Shakespear, both of whom remained doggedly faithful to him through his trials and imprisonment. But his Helens never walked abroad as the much-acclaimed Gonne did; they were not public visions but visible only to himself, or they became visible to others only through his song. The poet's power or powerlessness is Pound's true subject throughout his work, language rather than woman. At last he claims that his greatest desire had been felt toward the poetic artifice: as Canto 104 states, "The production IS the beloved."

Art and literature offered Pound his most enduring glimpses of an

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[8] "On His Own Face in a Glass": "O ye myriad/ That strive and play and pass,/ Jest, challenge, counterlie!/ I? I? I?/ And ye?" Personae, p. 35.

[9] See Surette, p. 64, who recognizes this Circe-Aphrodite duality in The Cantos as the antithetical aspects of a single goddess: "Both Circe and Aphrodite stand at the gateway to the Underworld, both hold the keys to revelation. They are in the Cantos a pair rather like Persephone and Koré in the Eleusinian rites. Circe is the fearsome aspect of the goddess (Kuthera deina) which must somehow be conquered (just as the Mysteries enable the initiate to conquer death, personified by Persephone . . .); Aphrodite is the radiant aspect . . . (as in the Mysteries, Koré is the daughter of Demeter, reborn into the light, and appears to the faithful in a blaze of light)."

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undebased tò kalón. He invented a pagan, romantic quasi-religion inspired in part by "the recognition of beauty . . . , the attempt to conquer beauty (in both an intellectual and a sexual manner), and finally the attainment of knowledge through this conquest, a knowledge which Pound calls a 'full Eidous.'"[10] Pound drew his idea of paradisiacal beauty from the works of Richard of St. Victor, a twelfth-century Scottish monk in Paris.[11] A mystic theologian contemporary of the troubadours, Richard derived his vision of the splendors of paradise from the Phaedrus. As Pound gives it:

> Richard of St. Victor has left us one very beautiful passage on the splendors of paradise.
> They are ineffable and innumerable and no man having beheld them can fittingly narrate them or even remember them exactly. Nevertheless by naming over all the most beautiful things we know we may draw back upon the mind some vestige of the heavenly splendor.[12]

Pound postulates elsewhere, "if we are not given to mystical devotions we may suspect that the function of poetry is, in part, to draw back upon our mind a paradise, if you like, or equally, one's less detes-

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[10] Surette, A Light from Eleusis, p. 65. The knowledge-through-beauty motif echoes the emblem at the close of Yeats's "The Gift of Harun Al-Raschid," but Yeats arms wisdom under beauty's banner; he does not, like Pound, talk of conquering it.

[11] See George Dekker, The Cantos of Ezra Pound: A Critical Study [Sailing after Knowledge] (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), p. 80, for Richard in Canto 90. For other aspects of Richard's influence on Pound, see Noel Stock, Poet in Exile: Ezra Pound (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964), pp. 18-20, 131-132; Clark Emery, Ideas into Action: A Study of Pound's Cantos (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1958), pp. 11, 118, 136.

[12] "Psychology and Troubadours," p. 96. Translations of Richard of St. Victor appear in Pound's Selected Prose 1909-1965, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1975), pp. 71-72.

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table hours and the outrageous hopes of one's youth."[13] The "beautiful thing" named by poetry is a personal nostalgia as well as a feminine principle, since it is the worshipped beloved of the troubadours who provided the model for this paradise. "The Lady contains the catalogue" of beautiful things; "she serves as a sort of mantram."[14]

However, instead of glimpsing paradise in a Platonic preterrestrial existence, or choosing any single Lady to contemplate, Pound places it at a distance, into history or far countries, finding it particularly in the texts and tableaux of more "aesthetic" cultures than his own.[15] His writing encompasses many texts, histories, and cultures, "giving blood to ghosts" by repeating their words or recreating their personae, in order to achieve a sublime poetry. He sees himself as a reincarnated troubadour, and records visions, dreams, and mythicized memories of many beautiful women.

Following this model, Pound tries to create tò kalón by annexation or compilation rather than by monumentalizing a single beloved woman, as Yeats did. He begins and ends with the technique of "Dompna Pois de Me No'us Cal," the troubadour's assembling of a perfect woman from the physiques of several ladies. In the same way, the Greek painter Zeuxis

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[13] Pound, "The Approach to Paris VI," The New Age, Oct. 13, 1913.

[14] "Psychology and Troubadours," p. 97.

[15] Christine Froula discusses Pound's creation of a paradise of mutually interpenetrating cultures in To Write Paradise: Style and Error in Pound's Cantos (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

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is said to have arrived at an image of Helen.[16] Other models of dissection and reassembly of beautiful women include Petrarch's "scattered rhyme" in praise of a Laura "always presented as a part or parts of a woman,"[17] and the "blazon," a kind of piece-by-piece advertising of the beauties of a woman.[18] Important unconscious attitudes determine this deliberate poetic dismemberment of the beautiful woman. Destructive powers, "volcanic and disordered," attracted Pound; as he once wrote of Wyndham Lewis: "A great energy is beyond price in such a suffocated nation; something might come of disorder created."[19] These adjectives, belonging to some hot, eruptive, and disorderly power, describe anger. They call to mind particularly Klein's description of a child's destructive anger toward the fantasized withholding mother. In suffocating terror of hunger and thirst, the child imagines that an evil

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[16] The story can be found in Cicero and Dionysios of Halicarnassus; see Lindsay, Helen of Troy, p. 162.

[17] Nancy J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," Writing and Sexual Difference, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 96; "Petrarch systematically avoids those structures that would mask fragmentation. . . . [Laura's] image is that of a collection of exquisitely beautiful disassociated objects. . . . hair, hand, foot and eyes . . . . specifically Petrarchan . . . is the obsessive insistence on the particular," the same requirement as Pound's Imagist doctrine.

[18] "Laudatory utterances, known as blazons, were abundant in France during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They come from a communicative discourse, shouted in public squares, and designed to give direct information to the crowd on wars . . . or on the marketplace. . . . The blazon later lost its univocity and became ambiguous; praise and blame at the same time" (Kristeva, "The Bounded Text," Desire in Language, p. 53).

[19] Pound, Guide to Kulchur (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 106.

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mother has intentionally detained relief. Thus the desire to tear and dismember this enemy so that "something might come": the "true" good mother.[20] Both the greedy child and the withholding mother are objects of wrath; both the fulfilled child and the good mother are objects of desire. But the expression of anger is also an expression of desire for life, nourishment, support. As an alternative to abjection, furthermore, anger could prevent the self from feeling the pain of being cut off, cast away, discarded, and meaningless: from being "not-mother," an other, signifying, but insignificant subject. Anger becomes, then, a narcissist's substitute for abjection.

Yet refusal of abjection undermines intuition of the sublime. Pound hoped, by appropriation of identities and texts, to find the power to reassemble a form he perceived as a feminine paradise lost. His poetry was supposed to recreate, resanctify, reclaim a holy mother, wholeness with the mother, a coherence or unity of being, by adapting the words and faces of his poetic fathers to his own rhythms.[21] Kristeva discusses the relation of poetic power to a persistent attempt to identify with the mother:

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[20] See, e. g., Klein, "On the Development of Mental Functioning," Envy and Gratitude, pp. 238, 240.

[21] The presence of this feminine principle as a great mother inspiring the poet's speech underlies Pound's ideas of "the universe of fluid force" and "the germinal universe of wood alive, of stone alive" as, in Hugh Kenner's words, "part of something larger" to which the poet belongs and which permits his poetry "its larger meaning": "the poet's role [is] making the dance, questing for the right and absolute rhythm to mime with his blood and breath some greater process: whether the speech of mothers with sick babies [after William Carlos Williams's "speech of Polish mothers"], or the energies locked in some alien ancient poem, or the fingers of recurrent dawn" (The Pound Era [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971], p. 544).

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> Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother. On the contrary, the unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language (for whom the word is never uniquely sign) maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed instinctual maternal element. If it is true that the prohibition of incest constitutes, at the same time, language as communicative code and women as exchange objects in order for a society to be established, poetic language would be for its questionable subject-in-process the equivalent of incest.[22]

Kristeva cites Sade ("Unless he becomes his mother's lover from the day she has brought him into the world, let him not bother to write"), Artaud, Joyce, Céline, and "innumerable identifications with women, or dancers, that waver between fetishization and homosexuality." Pound's identification with Helen thus naturally extends into language as well as into monetary theories--concern with woman as object of exchange--branching from these Oedipal-literary equivalences.

Kristeva names the mother's realm in language "the semiotic," and assigns it emotive functions rather than symbolic meaning: rhythm, rhyme, and the "musical" qualities of spoken sounds. Pound attached much weight to his rhythmic inventions. Kenner has posited that a spondaic terminal foot is Pound's "signature," an aggressive beating

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[22] Kristeva, "From One Identity to an Other," Desire in Language, p. 136: "The semiotic activity, which introduces wandering or fuzziness into language and, a fortiori, into poetic language is, from a synchronic point of view, a mark of the workings of drives (appropriation/rejection, orality/anality, love/hate, life/death) and, from a diachronic point of view, stems from the archaisms of the semiotic body. Before recognizing itself as identical in a mirror, and, consequently, as signifying, this body is dependent vis-à-vis the mother. . . . Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother. On the contrary, the unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language . . . maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed instinctual maternal element."

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intended to break the obsolete pentameter.[23] In fact, Pound often expressed angry emotions by such rhythms, as he demonstrated to H. D. She remembers two grave crises in her life, first when, "glowering and savage," he prevented her from traveling with the newlywed Frances Gregg; next when he visited her in St. Faith's Nursing Home the day before Perdita's birth: "There is a sense of his pounding, pounding (Pounding) with the stick against the wall."[24] In both cases, his anger is provoked by the wish to control the life of a desired woman whose choices or behavior he does not approve. This incident, like so much of his verse (e. g., "Sestina: Alteforte"), suggests that for Pound poetic language is a language of control, its music most effective as martial, commanding sounds.

But despite his consistent returns to a driving rhythm, in The Cantos the power of his fears and anger prevent Pound from creating a coherent poem. He enters instead a labyrinthine spinning of disintegrated discourse. Knowing at last that "a man's paradise is his own good nature,"[25] Pound nevertheless tries to sing a paradise of beautiful visions in a world whose uncontrollable imperfections kept him blinded with bitterness. The price of his visions of gods in azure air was exacted when Pound became obsessed by Usura and detained in the hell of the Pisan DTC, the purgatory of St. Elizabeths. His most memorable

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[23] Kenner, pp. 485-493.

[24] "My only real criticism," she reports that he told her, "is that this is not my child." H. D., End to Torment: A Memoir of Ezra Pound (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 8.

[25] Canto 93, Cantos, p. 623

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vision of tò kalón, in The Pisan Cantos, presents no more than disembodied pairs of eyes, image and essence of a de-structive desire.

Mythos

Inherited Helens

Sublime visions of Helen were the first to inhabit Pound's excited literary imagination. She reigned in Victorian neoclassicism, Poe's sublime vision, the decadent pantheon of the symbolists, and Pre-Raphaelite tableaus. Pound's responses to Swinburne's fatal women, Morris's heroics, Browning's dramatic histories, and Landor's imaginary conversations were enriched by his studies of classical, French, and Spanish literature. In addition, the European vision of Helen as a destructive political force is both opposed and heightened by the American romantic Poe, who saw Helen as a classical Psyche, but also invented many decadent, destructive beauties.

Like H. D., Pound endowed Greek themes and poetic texts with a supreme value, as his adoption of several classical deities and characters attests. Like Yeats, he retained the vision of Helen as a glorious avatar of classical civilization empedestaled by Poe and Goethe. He echoed the same romantic notions of the "Greekness" of beauty, with a Whitmanic note in his rhetoric:

> Beauty in art reminds one what is worthwhile. I am not now speaking of shams. I mean beauty, not slither, not sentimentalizing about beauty, not telling people that beauty is the proper and respectable thing. You don't argue about an April wind, you feel bucked up when you meet it. You feel bucked up when you come on a swift moving thought in Plato or on a fine line in a statue.[26]

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[26] "The Serious Artist," Literary Essays of Ezra Pound (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 45.

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Nevertheless, he found the ancient horror of the Agamemnon chorus particularly modern: "The cult of beauty and the delineation of ugliness are not in mutual opposition."[27]

Pound made a youthful foray into brotherhood in poetic abjection by way of Browning, whose highly personal epic and dramatic poems made a lasting impression. One early poem responds to "the question Fifine asks" in "Fifine at the Fair."[28] The question, set as an epigraph to "Fifine Answers," is "Why is it, that disgraced, they seem to relish life the more?" Fifine gives the response of Helen of Tyre, invoking Christ as a "sharer in his drink," both being of the company of Villon. Pound felt that he should belong to this company and invoked it in other early poems: "The Ballad of the Goodly Fere" and "A Villonaud: Ballad of the Gibbet" in particular.

But the overriding significance of Helen in Pound's work begins in the tragic moral vision of the Agamemnon, which Pound again may have approached first through Browning. In a 1919 essay,[29] he examines Browning's translation of the Aeschylus play. Three of Aeschylus' four choral odes characterize Helen minutely, as wife of many husbands, breaker of marriage vows, seducer of Paris, and bringer of destruc-

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[27] In an imaginary dialogue translated from Fontanelle, Pound shows Helen discussing with the Roman Fulvia the wars each has caused, one through her beauty, the other through her ugliness (Pavannes and Divagations [New York: New Directions, 1958], pp. 129-132).

[28] Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound, ed. Michael John King (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 18

[29] "Translators of Greek: Early Translators of Homer," Literary Essays, pp. 249-275.

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tions. This Helen assumes at once a full human responsibility and blame for her actions; there is no blackmailing Aphrodite as in Homer. Yet her power to destroy is inhuman, as an instrument of Zeus and Ate: she is called an Erinys punishing both armies. Thus the Trojan elders in the Iliad are answered by the Agamemnon chorus; Pound brings this antiphony into proximity in Canto 2 (p. 6):

> "Eleanor, elenaus and eleptolis!"
> And poor old Homer blind, blind as a bat,
> Ear, ear for the sea-surge, murmur of old men's voices:
> "Let her go back to the ships,
> Back among Grecian faces, lest evil come on our own,
> Evil and further evil, and a curse cursed on our children,
> Moves, yes she moves like a goddess
> And has the face of a god
> and the voice of Schoeney's daughters,
> And doom goes with her in walking,
> Let her go back to the ships,
> back among Grecian voices."

Helen's divinity is her danger, undermining the human justice Aeschylus demands. Pound's old men sound drunk with heavy repetitions of terror and desire, but Homer hears a prophetic rhythm of doom in their voices.

In his 1919 essay Pound claims that his purpose is to demonstrate the comparative values of translations; he declares Rossetti sounder than Browning "when he says that the only thing worth bringing over is the beauty of the original; . . . he meant by 'beauty' something fairly near what we mean by the 'emotional intensity' of his original."[30] Pound offers this definition of beauty in terms of Aeschylus' resonant denunciation of Helen's name. But the emotion of Browning's translation, exclamation points and all, is certainly sufficiently intense:

> Her with battle for a bridegroom, on all sides contention-
> wooed,

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[30] "Early Translators," p. 268.

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> Helena? Since--mark the suture!--
> Ship's-Hell, Man's-Hell, City's-Hell[31]

Pound attempts some imagistic translations that also fail to meet his own requirements: the Greek words alone appear in Canto 2. Yet the most emotional outburst in Pound's translation is absent from the Greek; he has added a Swinburnian vision of Helen: "Rank flower of love for Troy!"

The move shows just how much Swinburnian sensibility underlies Imagism's "pure detail." Swinburne's immortality was more firmly established for Pound and H. D. than for Yeats, nearly his contemporary. His tragedy Rosamond may have lent a precedent for Pound's idea of Eleanor of Aquitaine. The victimizer-victimized heroine of this verse drama says of herself, echoing the Helen of Tyre theme:

> Yea, I am found the woman in all tales,
> The face caught always in the story's face;
> I Helen, holding Paris by the lips,
> Smote Hector through the head

She uses the same words of her rival Eleanor, Henry's queen:

> Ay, you might catch me here
> Saying his French wife smites my love across
> With soft strange lips[32]

Both wife and lover are types of destructive Helens in Swinburne's play, although at last Rosamond is sacrificed to Eleanor's jealousy. Swinburne's murderous French queen is almost a Clytemnestra, his prophetic adulteress almost a Cassandra.

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[31] The Complete Poetical Works of Browning (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), p. 838.

[32] The Tragedies of Algernon Charles Swinburne, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1904), pp. 240-241.

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Although Pound initially celebrates a Helen of Tyre, the woman of pleasure, he finds her distasteful and dangerous at the same time, a "rank flower of love." The ruined city or state is constantly in his vision and the subject of great efforts of reform. The destroying Helens responsible for its fall are basic to Pound's mythologies of women. Yet he sought Helens, knowing only that they were fuel for poetry. The adulterous triangles of Agamemnon and Rosamond foreshadow the actual pattern of his life. A Swinburnian masochistic dedication to poetic martyrdom was matched by the self-exaltation of such a calling; few flesh-and-blood women would be able to compete with so desirable and despicable a muse.

Yeats and Pound: The Monument and Fragments

One poet, of course, did find a woman who matched his vision of Helen. W. B. Yeats received the greatest respect from Pound, who considered him foremost among living poets and sought his company with eager ambition. As we have seen, Yeats's Helens reflect feminized elements of his own psyche; monumental and prophetic, these muses mirror their poet and the grandness of the myth he created for himself. Pound's Helens, likewise, in their elusive-allusive nature and lack of coherent fleshly presence, cast an image of his poetics. But the great myth of the beautiful woman that Yeats recreated in Maud Gonne, and to which he subsequently devoted his poetry and many years of his youth, was inaccessible to Pound. Pound's Helen is a far more literary and imaginary creation than Yeats's, who invoked her primarily as a mask for Gonne. Perhaps Yeats's unicorn, drawn from a general poetic concept

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rather than from a particularly marvelous horse, provides a closer parallel to Pound's Helens. She appears in Pound's work as one among many allusions to deific visions from antiquity, the deified presences of modernity. Yeats's poems often address Helen with the voice of lover or father. Pound's Helens, by contrast, remain allusions to which his experiences of women are assimilated.

Pound mocked the elder poet's obsession with one woman, and a political creature at that. In "Au Jardin," he replies to Yeats's "The Cap and Bells":

> Well, there's no use your loving me
> That way, Lady;
> For I've nothing but songs to give you.[33]

Yeats made poetry of their differences in "His Phoenix," listing the succession of Pound's girlfriends.[34] Pound's love life was radically unlike Yeats's: his many adolescent proposals of marriage and engagements reveal a restlessness of heart that would culminate in his liaison with Olga Rudge, resulting in two families, one in Italy, one in England. For Yeats, the beautiful woman was singular, primal, eternal; for Pound, she was multiple, a secondary function--a means to poetic ends--and various.

The image of the beloved woman is never inaccessible to Yeats's

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[33] Section 12, "Und Drang," Canzoni of Ezra Pound, 1911, in Early Poems, p. 174. Pound practices the Yeatsian epideictic in the 1909 Exultations (as in "'Fair Helena' by Rackham" and "Laudantes Decem Pulchritudinis Johannae Templi," Early Poems, pp. 116-120).

[34] "There's Margaret and Marjorie and Dorothy and Nan,/A Daphne and a Mary who live in privacy . . . ," Yeats, "His Phoenix," Poems, pp. 151-152; see also Richard Ellman, Eminent Domain (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 65. For Pound on Gonne, see Letters, pp. 189-190, 201.

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imagination, but it flickers and vanishes from Pound's, even when he attempts to concentrate on it; his goddess's presence is fragile and painfully brief. An early "Aria" reveals how evanescent the appearance of the object of desire--or desire itself--was for Pound:

> My love is a deep flame
> that hides beneath the waters.
>
> --My love is gay and kind,
> My love is hard to find
> . . .
> As the flame beneath the waters
> hard of meeting.[35]

"My love" may signify either the object loved or the subject's activity. Pound found the emotional as well as the feminine of difficult access, both early and late (Cantos, p. 802):

> M'amour, m'amour
> what do I love and
> where are you?

The effort to love is not always so full of pathos in Pound's work; he could not or would not recognize how his bitterness prevented his imagination from locating or incorporating a paradisal femininity.[36]

When she does appear, Pound's goddess is marked by visual metaphor or image: clad with light or golden ornament, white, or shining like fire or the sun. Visions of light are central in his Eleusinian-

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[35] Early Poems, p. 162.

[36] See letter to William Carlos Williams, 21 October 1908, The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), pp. 3-7: "Bitter personal note??? 'Grace Before Song'--certainly not. 'La Fraisne'--the man is half- or whole-mad. Pathos, certainly, but bitterness? I can't see it. . . .'Famam Librosque'--self-criticism, but I don't see it as bitter." He ends by referring Williams to the last line of A Lume Spento: "For I know that the wailing and bitterness are a folly."

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troubadourian religion, as also in the neoplatonic image of paradise found in Richard's mystic writings. But light is a phenomenon that may also be known by its absence or partiality. Not unlike the mermaid of Pre-Raphaelite paintings,[37] Pound's flickering and threatened flame under water is dangerous in part because the distance between her poet and herself is untraversable. Pound's poet-personae, consequently, is often heard to measure and deplore these distances between self and beloved, whether of time, space, class, wealth, or power. As T. E. Hulme wrote, in a poem appended to Pound's collection Ripostes (Personae, p. 252):

> Beauty is the marking time, the stationary vibration, the feigned ecstasy of an arrested impulse unable to reach its natural end.

The insight is a Freudian one, ironically enough, given Pound's opinion of the psychoanalyst.[38]

Pound's influence brought Yeats at last to somewhat roughen the edges of his myth of the poet. Yet Yeats never demythified the goddess. He only changed her aspect from beauty to hag, an equally magical and holy incarnation, and in doing so, extended poetic power to his own aging self. Pound had no hags--he writes of beauties, good or evil, powerful or wretched. He himself is the one pulled out of shape, out

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[37] See Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[38] See Chapter 5. See H. D., Tribute to Freud, introduction, p. x: Pound wrote H. D. in 1954, having spent some time already in St. Elizabeths, "Have read yr/ vile Freud all bunk/but the silly Xristers bury all their good authors/ ...instead of sticking to the reading list left by Dante/ ...you got into the wrong pig stye, ma chère. But not too late to climb out."

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of voice, out of beauty by the modern world.

Pound was interested, as so many poets of the Yeats circle were, in occult theories and explorations. He encountered the recondite figure of Helen of Tyre through the Theosophists, in particular G. R. S. Mead, whose listing of the many names of Sophia recalls the Kabbalists' search for the names of God.[39] Helen of Tyre's perversions and permutations, after falling into the hands of material spirits, fill The Cantos. The metamorphic quality of this Helen matches Pound's extensive associations of Helen with war, death and corpses, gold, mountains, and the moon-boat of the muse.

Helen's attribute in Pound's work is not primarily the sign of burning towers, as it is in Yeats, who watched the politics Gonne espoused destroy his homeland. For Pound she is far less active, whether her guise is terrestrial, arboreal, or radiant. He stresses her celestial Aphroditic nature as well as her sisterhood with marine and terrestrial temptresses. Her most appropriate attribute is finally the "cup of white gold," that moon-maston-mazon, a muse's barge. Nevertheless, she represents for Pound the most desired, most desirable, most dangerous, least attainable beauty. Her chthonic relations to Persephone are apparent in The Cantos, through such allusions as that to the corpse-queen Ignez da Castro and through the recurrent theme of gold, a debased heavenly element like Helen of Tyre. Yeats seldom expressed a similar fear of Helen's danger; rather, admiration for her wholeness and even excuses for her bloodthirsty courage usually charac-

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[39] P. L. Surrette, "Helen of Tyre," Paideuma 2, no. 3 (Winter 1973), pp. 419-421. For Mead, see Chapter 2, n. 64.

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terizes his view of Helen-Gonne.

Many poems from Personae reveal reluctance or inability to visualize the woman's body or behavior; Pound is more concerned with the effect of beauty on the self. For example, many poems contain allusions to dryads or analogues to Daphne,[40] inspired very likely by H. D.'s identifications with trees. But it is typical that in "La Fraisne," "the ash tree," Pound's speaker is more clearly portrayed than the nymph. The dryad or naiad whom the old councilor espouses is vague throughout the poem--she is not its subject. By contrast, Yeats's early poems list imperatives for their female subjects, dramatizing the women in action; and in his later works, he fully enters the voice of Crazy Jane.

But as I have mentioned, Pound had no hags. His anti-Helens, who reflect various contemporary, historical, and literary women, are not old but degraded women, bought and sold, or who sell themselves in any marketplace. These corrupt beauties, women wrecked by their use as objects of exchange, equate with Usura. The fear that Helen provokes, futhermore, is most fully seen in her association with Usura.[41] Usura

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[40] In "The Tree," the poet himself enacts Daphne. See also "A Girl," "A Virginal," and the wry allusion to Daphne in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," section 12.

[41] The pun on Usura/Ezra that reveals an identity between Pound's worst demon and an unconscious sense of himself has been noticed by Marcelin Pleynet ("La compromission poétique," Tel Quel 70 (1977), 11-26, and commented upon by Alan Durant, Ezra Pound: Identity in Crisis: A Fundamental Reassessment of the Poet and his Work (Sussex: Harvester, 1981), pp. 116-117.

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is caused by greed ("Avarice," as Pound's late palinode recognized[42]): an unseen corruption, an excremental evil that inhibits the creation of beauty, destroys the power of beauty to bring about a paradise, turns warriors and women into corpses and gold into feces.[43]

Pound's anal language, manifest throughout The Cantos, is in strong contrast to Yeats's images of genital sexuality. Although Yeats could have his mad old woman declare that "Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement," love's mansion is his topic. Few of Pound's sexual images are so extreme or precise in metaphor; he may mention the nipple of a swimming nymph but genitals are usually metaphorized as flora or landscape.[44] He distances the female body by mythologizing it just as he distances the women he encountered. The

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[42] Foreword, Selected Prose, p. 3: "re USURY: I was out of focus, taking a symptom for a cause. The cause is AVARICE."

[43] Pound's associations of woman, corpse, and gold, a vortex including the mother, can be mapped through psychological syllogisms that relate feces to gold, death, and corpses, as well as to childbirth and renewal. The desired object may be either mother or phallus; both phallus and child may be identified with feces and gold; so mother or desired woman may be identified with gold, gift-gifting, creation and loving reception of beautiful things; or with feces, hatred, destruction, death: see Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, SE 5, p. 439, Introduction Lectures on Psychoanalysis, SE 16, p. 319; and elsewhere (Index, SE 24, p. 282). Pound's metaphors of violent spoilation suggest the anger of the frustrated infant, expressed through anal behavior by withholding or explosive smearing of feces, which represent a primal gift to the mother, but are also related to poisons, since they equate with a primal sadistic weapon for the child: see Klein, "The Importance of Symbol Formation in the Development of the Ego," Love, Guilt, and Reparation, p. 219. See also Durant, for Pound's Dantean alignment of hell, sodomy, and usury, and his equation of sex and defecation, pp. 141-142.

[44] Caves and hills for women, for example, in the "fertility canto," and the unforgettable "gilded phaloi of the crocuses" in "Coitus," Personae, p. 110.

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excretory for Pound is filthy and abject rather than fleshly and subjective: he cannot share Crazy Jane's revelation that "Nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent."

Obsessed with monetary theories, Pound never fathoms the full significance of the relation of women and gold in The Cantos.[45] Pound calls gold a great evil, a "common sepulcher" along with usury (see Canto 46, pp. 234-235, "Aurum est commune sepulchrum. Usura, commune sepulchrum"--with its pun on "pulchrum!"), but "golden" is an epithet of Aphrodite, and Pound declares its true purpose her adornment. Gold as a medium of exchange preoccupies Pound--he interrupts his poetic language to rant against its abuses and to offer solutions--but he never grapples with the problem of women as objects of exchange beyond advocating that they and their lovers be freed from the miser-y of marital fidelity.

In this limited system Helen appears as a golden woman, a valuable object misused because of greed and lust, but always unremittingly responsible for both effects in the male, as in the second choral ode of the Agamemnon: "For war's a banker, flesh his gold."[46] Her weaving in the Iliad is recalled in the Usura Canto 45 (pp. 229-230): the "weaver is kept from his loom," and "None learn to weave gold into her

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[45] Some critics follow him into this blind spot. For example, James Wilhelm, The Later Cantos of Ezra Pound (New York: Walker, 1977), ch. 2, "The Three Changing Phases of Women and Gold," pp. 20-34, recognizes that the relation between women and gold goes deeper than the surface, but believes that "Pound's obsession with money crimes as the worst sins against man and nature spares him from any suspicion of antifeminism."

[46] As translated by Philip Vellacott, The Oresteian Trilogy (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), p. 58.

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pattern," through Usura. These two abuses relate directly to loss of poetic power, as weaving is anciently a metaphor for singing. Usura becomes an anti-Helen, the revealed Erinys behind her paradisiacal form.

Despite the inescapable frustration of attempts to create perfect beauty because of the excretory spoilations of Usura, the Eidolon's pure form remains desirable for Pound as for the heroes of myth and tragedy. In Aeschylus' Agamemnon, the chorus describes how Menelaus longs for his fickle wife, sees her image as a vision, and cannot bear the sight of statues of beautiful women. Euripides' misled warriors have continued to engage in war, immorally, in error, on her behalf. Pound does not discover the identity of the Eidolon and the excessively desired Helen, of Usura and his sublime poetic goddess. While he cannot forgive the human woman her cultural and biological femininity (Canto 29, p. 144, "the female/ is a chaos/ An octopus/ A biological process"), he cannot forget his vision of a Helenic form, an immortal beauty that the poet could create if he had the power, winning thus his own immortality, as Helen's husband and lovers found eternal life on Leuke. Pound's own poetic ambition is ultimately an illusive Eidolon, always before him but manifest only in fragments, in texts that one by one fail to fulfil his desire to live forever.

Symbolists and Moderns

The frustration of his search for a solid Eidolon led Pound to express disappointment in actual women, few of whom were convincingly Swinburnian, neither great mothers nor destroyers. The women who inhabit

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Pound's social monde are flawed in either beauty or manners. They fail to inspire or to be faithful to the poet. They betray themselves by their too obvious efforts and too shallow desires for beauty and power; they betray the poet who is unwary enough to make love to them. Such treacherous and shallow women find an archetypal model in Helen of Troy, and later in Cressida. Pound approaches them as a cynical, endangered Troilus, for whom there is always a Helen more perfect than his lover, more worthy of his love.

Pound discovered ancient models for his modern Helens in the Latin poets, in particular. He adapted Helens from Sextus Propertius as well as Catullus and Ovid in order to illustrate the worldly society woman, a creature of whims and wiles, a compromise for the poet, his "much praised but-not-altogether-satisfactory lady."[47] One poem after Catullus describes an unbeautiful beauty, listing litotes that dare to permit comparisons to his Lesbia.[48] "Ladies," portions of which are also after Catullus, presents visions of women flawed in other ways--by age, vanity, stupid cruelty, or unlucky marriage.[49] Pound's poems bestow the poetic immortality that is their gift upon these less-than-perfect lovers with incredible condescension.

Pound's distaste did not stop at modern women, however. His homeland's imperfections concerned him; and, as we have seen locale related to the beautiful woman by Yeats, so also Pound made the

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[47] "The Bath Tub," Personae, p. 100.

[48] "To Formianus' Young Lady Friend," Personae, p. 113.

[49] Personae, pp. 102-103.

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connection, with noteworthy differences. New York itself receives a humorous, if backhanded, poetic benediction: "My City, my beloved, my white! Ah, slender,/. . . Listen to me, attend me!/And I will breathe into thee a soul,/And thou shalt live forever" (Personae, p. 62). In this little poem, "N. Y." is a reed-slender white maid with no breasts, contradicting today's conception of New York as "Big Apple," Edenic and ripe. He calls his own archaizing mad: "This is no maid." But once Pound had considered New York more seriously:

> And New York is the most beautiful of cities?
> It is not far from it. No urban night is like the nights there. I have looked down across the city from high windows. It is then that the great buildings lose reality and take on their magical powers. They are immaterial; that is to say one sees but the lighted windows.
> Squares after squares of flame, set and cut into the aether. Here is our poetry, for we have pulled down the stars to our will.[50]

The lighted windows, like disembodied eyes, swim before the poet, becoming poetic only as they lose reality. For Pound, order in the midst of "a million people surly with traffic" requires such destructive vision. This urban vision will be repeated with the image of Ecbatan, a "triumph of authority,"[51] "the city of Dioce whose terraces

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[50] New Age, Sept. 19, 1912, p. 492, quoted in K. K. Ruthven, A Guide to Ezra Pound's Personae (1926) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 185-186.

[51] The story of Ecbatan and its king originates in Herodotus and is retold by Guy Davenport, Cities on Hills: A Study of I-XXX of Ezra Pound's Cantos (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1983), pp. 134-135. The city's structure is that of the breast or penis, with obsessive demarcations of targetlike concentric rings: "The city now known as Ecbatana was built, a place of great size and strength fortified by concentic walls, these so planned that each successive circle was higher than the one below it by the height of the battlments. The fact that it was built on a hill helped to bring about this effect, but still more was done by deliberate contrivance. The circles are seven in number, and the

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are the colour of stars" in The Pisan Cantos.

Although in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" Pound assesses his efforts as failures, his exile into antiquity permitted him to envision varied exotic Aphrodites born from art, literature, foreign cultures. But he reserved Helen's name for human women, beautiful or noble but dangerous, fallible, or treacherous: one form of Helen resides, for Pound, between these poles of divine form and moral formlessness.

De Gourmont and Lewis. The position of Pound's Helen between sublime and degraded was based on literary influences anchored at either side of the century. Two of Pound's contemporaries, in particular, anticipated and encouraged his attitudes. The first, Remy de Gourmont, had died in 1915, just after Pound became acquainted with his work.[52] Pound would translate his Natural Philosophy of Love (1903), adding a translator's postscript, while in Paris after the first war. The second, Wyndham Lewis, Pound first met in 1909, during his London years.[53] Pound was caught between these two mentors, whose erotics-- whether sublimative or rejective--led so directly to their aesthetic practices.

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innermost contains the royal palace and treasury. . . . The battlements of the five outer rings are painted in different colors, the first white, the second black, the third crimson, the fourth blue, the fifth orange. The battlements of the two inner rings are plated with silver and gold respectively."

[52] Richard Sieburth has devoted a book to this literary relationship: Instigations: Ezra Pound and Remy de Gourmont (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[53] For an analysis of the Pound-Lewis relationship, see Wendy Stallard Flory, Ezra Pound and The Cantos: A Record of Struggle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 62-83.

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As Huysmans, Swinburne, and Wilde underlie the preciosity of Pound's earlier faces, it seems that a mixture of primitive and technological modernism--the Lewisian masks of Blast and the pseudo-scientificism of de Gourmont--underlie the classical purity of Pound's Imagism. Although the pre-war rhetoric of Vorticism, with its machismo violence, seems especially foreign to Pound's earlier sensibilities, he was deeply impressed by such bluster. His phallocentrism[54] manifested itself not only in second-hand misogyny, but also in ductility towards the views and assertions of such forceful speakers as Lewis, even while his narcissism drove him to assume his superiority in poetry over all competitors.

De Gourmont, a poet and critic, was an early defender of the symbolists and author of such symbolistic works as Litanies de la Rose, a long poem in which multicolored roses take on the attributes of various fickle and beautiful women. Lewis, in contrast, founder of Vorticism and Blast, was a painter, novelist, philosopher, and critic; where de Gourmont was a recluse for much of his adult life, suffering a disfiguring disease, Lewis was an antic and violent extrovert.

Despite their differences, both viewed women in ways that were strictly utilitarian at best, ridiculous or contemptuous at worst. The Natural Philosophy of Love lists zoological sexual behaviors with a decadent delight in so much natural perversity. De Gourmont concentrates on feminine superiority, especially as expressed in arachnid cannibalism, like a kind of biologist-Swinburne. These observations

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[54] For the importance of phallic speech and authority in Pound, see Durant, pp. 27-31, 90-91, 130-131, ff.

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lead Pound to postulate that the seat of human intelligence is in seminal fluid, thus explaining the "enormous content of the brain as a maker or presenter of images,"[55] and incidentally appropriating for this masculinized brain the power of giving birth. Of singular importance for the genesis of Pound's pagan religion, this notion recalls the Gnostic concept of Helen of Tyre, whose name "Ennoia" means "thought," although for Pound as for de Gourmont the mind is male. Thus the mind holds the sublime thought of beauty as a superlative feminine, which is always changing its face and form--as does Helen of Tyre in her incarnations, as does the vortex.

In his postscript to Natural Philosophy, Pound blends Lewisian rhetoric with de Gourmont's philosophy, although they are not at all closely matched. De Gourmont's attitude toward love was borrowed from the troubadours; like them, he saw himself as a "servant of Amor."[56] The sexual mysticism of de Gourmont returned Pound to the object of chivalric passion, a Pre-Raphaelite or Provencal maiden-mother-muse, although the Natural Philosophy suggested the image of the female as octopus or biological function that turns up in The Cantos. By contrast, Lewis had little use for love or its forms. Despite his "abnormal addiction to sex," he seems never to have felt first-hand the kind of overriding passionate emotion from which de Gourmont claimed that

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[55] Remy de Gourmont, The Natural Philosophy of Love, trans. Ezra Pound (New York: Collier, 1972), p. 149.

[56] Sieburth, p. 41: "Love, to Gourmont, was the seed of all beauty, indeed of all art: . . . 'One loves a woman because she is beautiful; and one thinks her beautiful because one loves her . . . Take love away and there is no more art. Take art away and love is scarcely anything but a physiological need.'"

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poetry was born. For Lewis, women are enemies of the great absolute, Art: "if you cannot do without them, use them; you have to cheat nature if you intend to act creatively and individually. Surrender to a woman, proclaims Tarr, is 'a kind of suicide for an Artist.'"[57] In Tarr, Lewis's superlative female figure Anastasya is consequently "not a woman" at all; she has "crossed the line" because of her intellect, independence, and devotion to art. The hero Tarr marries the bovine Bertha instead--although he leaves her soon to live openly with Anastasya.

Clearly no aesthetics could be more diametrically opposed than these two views, one insisting that love of woman is the highest artistic motivation, the other that such love is art's greatest enemy. The crux of this aesthetic divergence is sexual: for Pound following de Gourmont, sexual energy, "Amor," is the root of poetry; for Pound following Lewis, sex is something "to be got out of the way before he can begin his art." I believe the main difference between these equally unbalanced visions lies in Lewis's preference for the sadist's role, de Gourmont's for the masochist's. Pound's rejection of Yeatsian woman worship is in keeping with his appropriation of both sets of ideas, alike only in that the other is assumed to exist for the sake of the self.

Fulfilled sexuality exhausts or debases the artist's desire: it is the old myth of Circe. Lewis redefined sexuality accordingly in The Art

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[57] Valerie Parker, "Enemies of the Absolute: Lewis, Art, and Women," Wyndham Lewis: An Evaluation, New Essays, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (London: Athlone, 1980), pp. 211-212. Pound echoes these sentiments in an antique mask in an unpleasant but brief redaction of Quintus Septimus (Personae, p. 165).

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of Being Ruled: just as the moly changed Circe from enemy to helper, so art changes woman from biological process to prophet. The woman artist is Tiresian; a perfect woman is a man. For de Gourmont, woman is more Aphroditic, embodying the unchanging reproductive goal of the sexual-intellectual instinct. She is the great mover of life and thought, but a goalpost nonetheless. Between the two extremes, Pound would fall into a strange situation, straddling the troubadour's plight and Tarr's "solution," marrying a most conformist wife but living with a musician, meanwhile decrying the female as a chaos.

Provence: Helen as Goddess

But Pound was a troubadour before he was a modern. He directed as much attention toward these poets as toward their ladies or Lady. Nearly legendary themselves, the troubadours--an inventive, energetic, various, heretical band--were irresistible poetic personae for Pound. Their life-stories provided as much poetic matter for Pound, or more, as the content of their songs. Pound also included the queens and ladies of the troubadours in his collection of beauties, matching Helen of Tyre with Cunizza, Helen of Troy with Eleanor. The Cantos feature the troubadour Piere de Maensac, hero of what Pound called "Troy in Auvergnat," along with Eleanor of Aquitaine and her courtly poets, Bernart de Ventadorn and Bertran de Born; as well as such couples as Sordello and Cunizza, Cabestan and Itys, Piere Vidal and La Loba. Especially as these histories concern war, love, and adulteries, they provide Pound with analogues for the myths of Helen, as Yeats placed Celtic mythologies side by side with Greek.

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Although they knew Helen's name, the troubadours had little business with her story, despite its remarkable parallels with many of their beliefs and behaviors. Helen is alluded to in their songs, alone as a paragon of beauty, or with Paris as a paradigm of the loving couple.[58] This sheer allusiveness is also used by Pound, of course, although with much greater resonance, throughout The Cantos. He gives his Helens no dramatic instructions or incarnations, no lines to speak, and only the barest active presence. The effect of this sparceness is to cast an image of Helen, as a spirit of purely literary or antique beauty, over whatever women or objects, queens or mountains, he places in proximity to her name.

Pound identified strongly with the troubadours' ideas of women, as evidenced throughout his essays, translations, and annexations of their images. According to Denis de Rougemont, "often the same poet is found to have been both an enthusiastic adorer of the Lady whom he extols and exalts and a scorner of woman whom he disparages."[59] De Rougemont attributes this twelfth-century dichotomy to the conflict between Roman Catholic orthodoxy, actual social practices, and the pervasive heresy of Catharism. The Cathars, a sect split from Catholicism about the time of the troubadours, inherited several Gnostic and Manichaean

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[58] For example, Arnaut Daniel's "Can chai la fueilla" contains lines rendered by Pound as "till Paris had ne'er joy/ In such degree/ from Helena in Troy" in Ezra Pound: Translations (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 147, and Sigismondo Malatesta's "O Tu Paris Hellena per cuy geme/ Troya disfacta el re Priamo e morto," telescoped with other examples in Canto 8 (Cantos, p. 30) into "who hath not Helen for peer/ Yseut nor Batsabe."

[59] De Rougemont, pp. 113-114.

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ideas, including a scenario drawn from the myth of Simon Magus and Helen of Tyre:

> The better to seduce souls, Lucifer showed them 'a woman of dazzling beauty, who inflamed them with desire.' Then he left heaven with her, in order to descend into matter. . . . In return . . . a feminine principle, held to have preexisted material creation, occupied in Catharism an analogous part to that of Sophia-Pistis of Gnosticism. To the woman who was instrumental in the perdition of souls there corresponded Maria, symbol of the pure saving light.[60]

As demonstrated by Mead, among the many names of Sophia-Pistis is Helen-Ennoia. All that glitters is not gold: the dazzling beauty of the evil Helen mocks the light of the savior Maria-Sophia. But the shining of beauty is in both cases an ancient topos.

Pound recognized a link between the troubadours' beliefs and the occultism of the Theosophists and Gnostics.[61] He names Helen of Tyre in a footnote to "Psychology and Troubadours," published in Mead's journal Quest about 1916; the note refers to a lecture on the subject by Mead. Although scholars disagree on whether or not Pound accepted Mead's views of the myth's purport,[62] he was inspired by the idea. "There would seem to be," he writes, "in the legend of Simon Magus and Helen of Tyre a clearer prototype of 'chivalric love' than in anything here-

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[60] De Rougemont, pp. 80-81.

[61] The connection was in fact a debated subject, whether or not Pound ever read the works of E. Aroux, Joséphin Péladan or others. See Leon Surette, p. 270, n. 12.

[62] Kevin M. Oderman, "The Servants of Amor in Pound's Early Poems," Paideuma 8, no. 3 (Winter 1979), pp. 389-403, n. 37; P. L. Surrette, op. cit.

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inafter discussed."[63] Although the feminine counterpart of Simon was hellish for the Cathars, who reserved the divine for Mary and their ladies, she was both infernal and heavenly for Pound. He identified the troubadour's lady with the mysterious light of the Eleusinian mysteries, with the golden Aphrodite, Demeter, and Kore: "if paganism survived anywhere it would have been, unofficially, in the Langue d'Oc. . . . They have, in some way, lost the names of gods and remembered the names of lovers."[64]

Pound wondered if a "close ring" of Provencal poets, an "aristocracy of emotion," had evolved a cult "for the purgation of the soul by a refinement of, and lordship over, the senses." He may have perceived the beginnings of his own imagist-poetic religion, an exclusive religion of art "vital only so long as it is interpretive, so long, that is, as it manifests something which the artist perceives at greater intensity, and more intimately, than his public." Pound extended to this religion a sexual freedom permitting the creative man to engage in whatever liaisons would strengthen and renew artistic powers. However, the practices of the Cathars, what little is known of them, clearly included a chastity so strict as to prohibit even marital intercourse to initiates. Consequently, the adultery of most troubadours and their ladies was probably purely verbal lovemaking, "a

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[63] "Psychology and Troubadours," p. 91, n. 3. The passage quoted follows a discussion of Arnaut's "E quel remir" line, from the troubadour's song "Doutz brais e critz," in which a woman appears naked by lamplight: an especially paradisiacal vision for Pound as for Arnaut.

[64] "Psychology and Troubadours," p. 87; "the cult of Eleusis will explain not only general phenomena but particular beauties in Arnaut Daniel or Guido Cavalcanti." See Leon Surette, p. 36.

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literary religion of 'chaste' Love."[65] Nevertheless, "refinement," "lordship," and "aristocracy of emotion" would have attracted Pound, suggesting that his poetry might initiate him into a secret and elite society, to which he would call the troubadours as witnesses and forebears.

Like the trobar clus, Pound's poetry seems to conceal a "dark" or occult content. While Provencal is often opaque with its heavily conventional praise of ladies and landscape, some of its darkness derives from a mysterious Albigensian speech. Pound's obscurity is rooted in a state established in art, in the European past, in a lost paganism, in Oriental literature, in an ambitious egotism. The troubadours had to hide their beliefs from inquisitors; Pound hides from those whom he had come to believe were his enemies. And he courted enemies, both real and imagined. Boys threw him in the lily pond because of the color of his socks; old women in Wyncote had him fired from his teaching post. His English publishers would not handle his work after he joined Lewis in Blast. Later, he blamed extraneous forces--Roosevelt, the Jews--for economic disasters and for the failure of the classics to find wide circulation in the United States. Using a language too erudite, abrupt, multilingual, personal, and aggressive for those whom he considered fools and knaves, Pound hid his privileged paradise, the revealed form of Helen's Eidolon. He hid it so well that he himself failed to find it at last.

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[65] De Rougemont, pp. 112-115.

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Helen as Woman

Where were Pound's first paradises?

> And the infant Gargantua lay in his perambulator or baby-carriage (anglicè: pram) in the back-yard (anglicè: garden) of 24 E. 47th Street, by the cellar doorway, and above the cellar was the basement, and above the basement was the first floor. And at the window of the back Parlour Amos Easton bulged from a small stubby comfortable red plush easy-chair; and he tied the end of his wife's 20 sewing cotton to the stem of large crimson strawberry and lowered it toward Gargantua.
>
> And this was to teach the infant Gargantua to look about; to look "up" and to be ready for the benefits of the gods whether so whither they might come upon him. And when he had devoured the strawberry, the No. 20 best sewing cotton was drawn up, and another berry descended.[66]

This passage from the idiosyncratic autobiographical essay "Indiscretions" might be read at several points as a blueprint for the action of desire in the poet's life: from the obsessively multilingual specifications of place; to the feminized-masculine mover of desire ("Amos Easton" apparently equating with great-uncle Weston), whose plump red perch echoes the form of the dangling berry; to the nonspecific lingual pun, erasing place, of "whether so whither"; and the all-too-appropriate appellation "Gargantua" of the infant Pound. The poet fixed whatever inspired him, women or buildings, firmly in history and place, and ascribed their beauty or its effects to the functions of the men who moved behind and above the scenes. These tactics are necessitated by his refusal of abjection: place and authority are antidotes to the non-place of the abject, the non-meaning of an

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66 Pavannes and Divagations, p. 42.

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unfulfillable want.[67]

Pound's mother is called Hermione in this essay. Little conjecture has been offered as to why he calls Isabel Weston Pound by the name of Helen's daughter. Since his father Homer receives the name Euripides, his mother's alias recalls the less-than-pleasant character of the Andromache, a hysterical Hermione condemned for pride and selfishness, who deserts her husband.[68] Isabel's personality was like her son's especially insofar as language: as H. D., almost her daughter-in-law, describes her,

> Mrs. Pound was a beautiful woman, well-bred, somewhat affected in manner. One was inclined to be embarrassed and baffled by her little witticisms, her epigrams, as one so often was by Ezra's.[69]

However, Isabel's appellation also honors the memory of Pound's grandmother, who first involved him in his life of poetry. Ma Weston

read Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, and colonial history

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[67] See Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 8: "The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. . . . Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. . . . Instead of sounding himself as to his "being," he does so concerning his place: "Where am I?" instead of "Who am I?" . . . A deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines--for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject--constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh."

[68] This Hermione is more likely than the minor figure of the Orestes, a pawn rather than a full-fledged character.

[69] H. D., End to Torment, p. 22. Did Pound realize that H. D. had chosen the name Hermione for herself in her autobiographical novel about their youth? See Pound's anecdote in "Indiscretions," p. 49, for his mother's "effect on the boys"; see Torrey, pp. 20-21.

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> to her grandson, wrote him verse and prose, and generally left a "deep impression" on him. . . . Grandmother and mother were true Brahmin matrons.[70]

Scott's historical romances inspired many readers to escape into literary history. Pound called her "a confirmed romantic; . . . she conserved more illusions--if, indeed, romanticism be an illusion!"[71] By naming Ma Weston's daughter "Hermione" Pound associates Helen with a maternal muse-grandmother, however ironic the connection to a timid urban woman who missed locks on the Idaho doors and hung petticoats over the curtainless window of her son-in-law's frontier home.[72]

An Adolescent Helen in Pennsylvania. Pound subjected other women to this distancing process of mythification. He dubbed the artist Sheri Martinelli "Undine." Dorothy Shakespear Pound and Olga Rudge were assigned not so much classical as Provencal roles, as wife and lady, although the triangles of Greek tragedy were much on Pound's mind.[73] He had first called H. D. "Dryad" in respect to trysts in forests and treehouses, but later mocked her as the querulous Dryad who stands in

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[70] Torrey, p. 22.

[71] "Indiscretions," p. 19.

[72] Ibid., pp. 19, 40.

[73] As suggested by Irvin Ehrenpreis, "Love, Hate and Ezra Pound," introduction, Sophocles, Women of Trachis," A Version by Ezra Pound (New York: New Directions, 1953), p. 25, in particular when Heracles asks wife and mistress to coinhabit--the same uncomfortable situation prevailing in Italy after the war (Torrey, pp. 242, 325, n. 105).

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the courtyard crying, "May my poems be printed this week?"[74] She, too, found herself involved in a triangle with Pound and her friend Frances Gregg, as she relates in the novel HERmione.[75]

H. D. served Pound as a sacred mythological figure better than as mortal fiancée. As the juvenilia in Hilda's Book shows, she supplied a prototype for all of Pound's mythologized loves. She is St. Hilda; Ys-hilda, punning on "Ysolde"; "La Donzella Beata," as of Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel" and Dante's Beatrice. Along with "Dryad," she is called "child of the grass," and inspires the treelike or tree-dwelling spirit of such poems as "The Tree" and "A Girl." Pound declaimed flower-maiden lines from William Morris to Hilda in their teens ("Gold on her head, and gold on her feet,/And gold where the hems of her kirtle meet,/And a golden girdle round my sweet;/Ah! qu'elle est belle, La Marguerite").[76] The story of Pound's wooing of H. D. is by now well known; she refers to their courtship in End to Torment as well as in HERmione. Although in Pennsylvania an engagement was announced and a ring presented, she was not even then his only interest. Professor Doolittle and her mother discouraged the alliance, and she portrays herself as none too sure of her desire to marry him; although his beauty impressed her, his behavior did not.

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[74] "Tempora," Personae, p. 110.

[75] In H. D.'s HERmione (New York: New Directions, 1981), George Lowndes (Pound) causes Hermione (H. D.) to break their engagement by kissing Fayne Rabb (Frances Gregg). At the time of their engagement, Pound may have already become attached to "Mary Moore of Trenton," to whom the 1909 Personae is dedicated. See Torrey, p. 35.

[76] H. D., End to Torment, pp. 22-23.

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She followed him to London in 1911, but he was soon engaged to wed Dorothy Shakespear.[77] He prevented H. D. from accompanying Frances Gregg on her honeymoon, and presided at her wedding to Richard Aldington. Much later, H. D. began a correspondence with Sheri Martinelli, "Undine." Pound's lover for six years while he was at St. Elizabeths, she was replaced in 1957 by an English professor, Marcella Spann. Probably the inspiration for Cantos 90 and 91, Martinelli was heartbroken at Pound's fickleness. She wrote H. D., "The male just can't go about like that, ditching a spirit love."[78] H. D. also identifies herself as Undine in her novel HERmione--notably, the character representing Pound's mother gives her the name.

Marriage and Adultery. Martinelli was not the only ditched spirit love of Pound's life. His wife had the same complaint. The marriage of Pound and Shakespear in 1914 was a move more political and economic than poetic on Pound's part. The daughter of Yeats's lover, and a close friend of George Hyde-Lees who would become the elder poet's wife, Shakespear came into the marriage not only with these spectacular connections but with an income.[79] She was deeply impressed by Pound's beauty at the time of their meeting, as her journal reveals:

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[77] See Barbara Guest, Herself Defined: The Poet H. D. and her World (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 63-64.

[78] End to Torment, p. 57. Like Tyro and Leucothea, Martinelli is one of Pound's Odyssean persona's helper spirits, but did he hear the pun on "undone" in the mythological nickname he gave her? H. D. notices that the start of their liaison was simultaneous with her beginning the Helen in Egypt sequence.

[79] Torrey, p. 66.

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> He has a wonderful, beautiful face, a high forehead, prominent over the eyes; a long, delicate nose, with little, red, nostrils; a strange mouth, never still, & quite elusive; a square chin, slightly cleft in the middle--the whole face pale; the eyes gray-blue; the hair golden-brown, and curling in soft wavy crinkles. Large hands, with long, well-shaped, fingers, and beautiful nails.
>
> Some people have complained of untidy boots--how could they look at his boots, when there is his moving, beautiful face to watch? . . . I do not think he knows he is beautiful. . . .
>
> How can people look at his boots, instead of his face--It is they who are impossible, not he--not the beautiful Ezra.[80]

He, in turn, called her "Little Brother."

But Shakespear was not without her own Helenic aspects, by any means. She was beautiful, as her photographs show; she moved "delicately with the air, always, of a young Victorian lady out skating." Friends describe her as usually "just sitting there like a beautiful ornament, silent most of the time." Pound reportedly said of her, "Dorothy was the only woman he had ever met who could say anything, and it 'would be all right, she was such a lady.'" Yet he would later call her "a beautiful picture that never came alive."[81] Although she was a painter, illustrating issues of Blast and her husband's poetry in a Vorticist style, Lewis described her as "hieratically rigid";[82] his word choice reflects the title of Gaudier-Brzeska's bust of Pound, the "Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound." Formally, their marriage survived geographical distance and emotional disturbances. But the two aged people

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[80] Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear: Their Letters: 1909-1914, ed. Omar Pound and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 3.

[81] Torrey collects these quotations, p. 65.

[82] "Early London Environment," 1948, quoted by Guest, p. 64, n. 5.

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in Rapallo were estranged for years before Pound's death.

Never respectful of the institution,[83] Pound found many mistresses after his marriage. The women tended to be artists, writers, musicians: as if he were seeking not only a muse but another self yet again, a new persona. One married writer, Bride Scratton, he had known since 1910; when she was divorced in 1923, Pound was named correspondent.[84] Tone-deaf as he was, Pound had always been attracted to music. His liaison with Olga Rudge, an American raised in Italy and England, reflects his respect for her métier. Her life was in music; her mother, who raised her, was a professional singer; she was a concert violinist. Pound reviewed her concerts in the New Age and wrote concertos for her as well.[85] When Pound and his wife moved permanently to Italy in 1924, the liaison with Rudge became an institution, and their daughter Mary was born. During the later years of the second war the two women actually cohabited, despite their enmity.[86] Pound paid Rudge one particularly high compliment, given his opinion of his superiority in most fields: he told their daughter Mary, "the real artist in

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[83] His friends were surprised when he chose to wed; see Torrey, p. 65.

[84] Noel Stock, The Life of Ezra Pound, exp. ed. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), pp. 243-244. Scratton remained in touch with Pound through the thirties and later during the St. Elizabeths years. They shared a feeling for Catharism, the "true religion" of the troubadours, and spoke of a temple, which Pound at last related to the city of Ecbatan.

[85] Torrey, pp. 112-113.

[86] Stock, p. 399.

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the family is your mother."[87]

What remains remarkable to me is the patience and willingness to love of the women involved with Pound. For them it seems that no loss of self-respect attended their husband's or lover's faithlessness. Rudge pursued her musical career despite the emotional and political turmoil in which Pound involved her; Shakespear continued to paint and remained a wife. As narrow as Pound's expressed opinions of womankind were, these women impressed him enough that he extended the privileges of his poetic powers--the deification of the poet, immortality--to them. He writes of Rudge, at least, as "a great goddess."[88] Perhaps H. D.'s tribute may stand as partial explanation:

> I suffered, indeed I suppose we all did. He himself, in a certain sense, made no mistakes. He gave, he took. He gave extravagantly. Most of the tributes to his genius, his daemon or demon, have come so far from men. But at least three women, whether involved in the emotional content or not, stand apart; he wanted to make them, he did not want to break them; in a sense, he identified himself with them and their art.[89]

For Pound the superior woman was, like the superior persona, an artist,

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[87] Mary de Rachewiltz, Discretions (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 120.

[88] De Rachewiltz, p. 130.

[89] The three women are H. D., Rudge, and presumably Sheri Martinelli (End to Torment, p. 49). When, on the other hand, Pound did not approve of a woman's art, he was capable of such statements as this, in a letter to Harriet Monroe of 21 January 1916: "F-- W-- is muck of the last variety, maudlin, philanthropistic, sloppy sentimentality. . . . I once knew a fine upstanding woman who had faced strikers, lived her own life in vigorous probity, and had what we can call by no other name than a 'fine character,' rather the old 'spartan sort,' her language was also normal. But in contemplating the kind of female who writes 'Blanche''s she said: 'Matter with 'em? Matter with 'em!!! They ought to be caught once and raped'" (Letters, p. 67).

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although not a "man" as Lewis required. Instead Pound apotheosizes her into a goddess in the same way that he hoped his art would make him into a god, as Helen could grant immortality to her husbands.

Poesis

Introduction

Like his own personae, Pound's Helen rapidly assumes many forms, with the frightening simultaneity that typified modernist experience. The ancient identification of beautiful woman as dawn, sun, or light appears in the earliest of Pound's poems: in Hilda's Book, A Lume Spento, and A Quinzaine for this Yule. Also very early is the tree-maiden motif that relates Helen to the various hanging goddesses and Dionysus. The troubadour's assemblage of perfect beauty from other women's bodies is reflected early in Pound's attempt to assemble poetic speech from the works of others. In the poems of Personae and Exultations, other dark troubadourian motifs, including especially the werewolf, balance the softer Pre-Raphaelite elements. In Canzoni, Ripostes, and Lustra of the next decade, new motifs appear, although the relation of gold and woman to sun, weaving, and song remains. Modern Lewisian anti-Helens announce the era of Blast, and the "Helen old" motif is used with a twist unlike that of Yeats. Other motifs of Helen include beauty and paradise in relation to the mystic figure of Helen of Tyre.

The Cantos deepen the troubadour-Helen motifs by adding epic history, and darken them with economic considerations. A chthonic Persephone-Helen replaces the lost maiden Kore-Helen. The link of woman and gold is strengthened. Eidolons and visions abound, although

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attempts are made to address them and give them images that tie them to landscape or hard objects. The physical body of woman as landscape or flesh is invoked imagistically but, as ever, in fragments. In the later cantos, earth spirits, aerial muses, water nymphs, and a sun princess join Helen as good mothers, saviors, providers of life and poetry.

While Yeats addressed his lady with the lyric poet's voice, with a lover's dedication, Pound included the lady far more indirectly, as exemplar or illustration, in his digressive personal epic. Unlike Homeric epic, in which any character might speak at length, from Thersites to Penelope, Pound's cantos seldom make full way for other voices. Many documents are quoted, engraved stones are read, lines of others' speech captured, but the multitudinous personae of Pound's earlier work are replaced in The Cantos by a gargantuan but fragmented ego. If Helen's voice sounds, it is only an echo through the myth and history to which Pound's ear was tuned.

Pound expresses the fragmentation of beauty by means of these echoing voices. A strange fracturing of Helen's name occurs throughout The Cantos. The "el" syllable puns with "Hell" and takes on many endings--not only those suggested by Aeschylus, but also Eleanor, Elizabeth Tudor, Madame Hyle. These echoes imply the shadowlike decantations of Helen of Tyre's image as she falls into matter, as well as the fragmentation of self, a sparagmos that punishes Actaeon, Pentheus, and those lovers who stray into the terrible vision of divine beauty.

Other obsessive murmurs throughout the long poem repeat the terrible fear felt toward Helen. These fears are expressed first by "Helen on the wall of Troy with the old men fed up with the whole show

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and suggesting she be sent back to Greece"[90] in Canto 2. A subject-rhyme in Canto 20 alludes to Lope de Vega's Las Almenas de Toro, when Elvira's brother falls in love with her; on discovering her identity, he says "Neestho," which Pound gives as a slurring "le'er go back" (Cantos, p. 91).[91] The incestuous content again points to Pound's identification with the beautiful woman, both as other self and mother. His personae's repudiations and rejections of Helen reflect the fear that caused Pound such difficulty of access to beauty and to feminine nature.

Woman and Sun

In Pound's early work, however, woman's beauty is still available, primarily in terms of the ancient woman-sun motif. A group of poems among Pound's first publications are remarkable for this association, recalling Surya the sun princess, an ur-Helen of the Rig Vedas.[92] In the very early "Ballad of the Sun's Hunting," as in "Aube of the West Dawn," the sun weds the poet. In the first, however, the sun is masculine, the poet's soul a feminine anima who hunts like an Artemis "with the star dogs": "The sun hath kissed her lips out-right/ And hath

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[90] Letter to Homer Pound of 11 April 1927, Letters, p. 210.

[91] See also "The Quality of Lope de Vega," The Spirit of Romance, pp. 179-213: in Pound's translation, the king says after seeing Elvira, "On the battlements of Toro/ There passed a damozel, or/ . . . T'was the sun's self passed us"; when the Cid tells him it is the king's own sister, he changes the praise to a curse: "An ill flame be kindled in her!" (p. 192).

[92] These poems include "Octave," "Erat Hora," "The House of Splendour," the sapphic verses of "Apparuit," the gold and white dancer of "Dance Figure."

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my soul to bride" (Early Poems, p. 264).[93]

The association appears again in "Cino," a poem giving voice to the troubadour upbraided by Dante for his fickleness. Pretending to boredom with singing the women in three cities, he instead will "sing of the sun" (Early Poems, p. 10). As Rossetti translated Cino's reply to Dante:

> One pleasure ever binds and looses me;
> That so, by one same Beauty lured, I still
> Delight in many women here and there.[94]

Pound's dramatic monologue equates the "one same Beauty" with that of the sun, in contrast to the human women whom the poet sings.

In "Praise of Ysolt," a moon woman and a flame woman inspire then desert the poet, "Till my soul sent a woman as the sun" who "holdeth the wonder words within her eyes." This sun woman not only dwells in his heart, but supports the poet's pride: "In vain have I striven with my soul/to teach my soul to bow./What soul boweth/while in his heart art thou?" (Early Poems, p. 80). Instead of a marriage with the sun, incorporation of sun within soul defeats the false seductive moon and flame.

In "Und Drang," "The House of Splendour" presents a vision of Evanoe, beloved of Apollo, dwelling in a house like the palace of Menelaus in the Odyssey, and clothed like Helen in pale gold. This

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[93] Pound's "Compleynt of Artemis" in Canto 30 clearly originates in this image, of soul so pure only the sun may wed her; the sun does not let things rot, a moist destruction, but burns them. The masculine/feminine ambisexuality of the sun as a sign is later reflected in The Cantos' invented deity "Ra-Set."

[94] Quoted by Ruthven, Guide, p. 50.

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vision is followed by "The Flame," a secret that the poets and courtiers of Provence knew: that immortality resides in poetry. The flame is related to song as well as to the shining lady: "There is the subtler music, the clear light/ Where time burns back about th'eternal embers" (Early Poems, p. 172). When a beautiful woman inspires the poet's song, a sublime "light from Eleusis" has been reincarnated in feminine form. The later poem "Ortus" returns to the interiorized sun woman but now despairs of naming her, revealing how, in Kristeva's words, "the abject is edged with the sublime"[95]:

> How have I not laboured
> To bring her soul to birth,
> To give these elements a name and a centre!
> She is beautiful as the sunlight, and as fluid.
> She has no name, and no place. (Personae, p. 84)

Pound fails to follow this lady of his song into the dark: she vanishes when she is not of the sunlight. His blindness to her--and his own--negative or unconscious realities is responsible for the flickering appearance of her images, for the frustrating elusiveness of his own poetic beauty. She cannot be born through his labors in language, and Pound will never find the words to reach her.

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[95] Powers of Horror, p. 11; Kristeva employs imagery of remembered radiance to present her concept of sublimity: "Sublimation is nothing other than the possibility of naming the prenominal, the pre-objectal . . . The sublime has no object either. . . . The "sublime" object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory. It is such a memory, which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be. . . . Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a something added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here, as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling" (p. 12).

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Derogations. The first appearance of Helen in Pound's work, however, voices just that hope: that the poet's voice will reach a listening beauty. Helen's invocations in the early poems are relatively rare, due perhaps to the adoption of a certain Renaissance complancency toward her figure on Pound's part. Instead, as we have seen, he usually addresses the muse-lady of the troubadours. Pound's Yeatsian verse "Fair Helena" follows a troubadourian pattern. It carries an epigraph reminiscent of Sappho: "What I love best in all the world?" But the response to the question is not a radiant face. Instead, the poet answers that the best-loved is to "to think my voice/can reach to her/As but the rumour of some tree-bound stream . . ./Until she all forgets I am,/And knows of me/Naught but my dream's felicity" (Early Poems, p. 116).[96] Again, not the woman but the poet and his action are important; as in Scriptor Ignotus, the desired self-effacement is disguised self-aggrandizement.

In contrast to this Helen, but published in the same collection, is the lady of "Piere Vidal Old," (Early Poems, pp. 109-111), called La Loba. Pound attempts here to envision a darker inspiration, but instead the poem itself is somewhat murky. Exactly what goes on in its lines, full of sexual double-entendre, is difficult to say; both the woman and the man seem phallic. Pound claims that the poem is about sexual

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[96] The poem may have been inspired by a painting or illustration by the popular artist Rackham.

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passion, linking it to insanity and dipsomania.[97] The woman is white, and Pound ties the statue motif to a death image: "God! she was white then, splendid as some tomb/High wrought of marble." Notably, sexual intercourse is seen as the woman conquering the poet: "Speech? Words? Faugh! Who talks of words and love?!/Hot is such love and silent." Pound recalls Lewis's Tarr here, as if agreeing that sex was the enemy of art, but he uses the ancient troubadour rather than the contemporary artist to make the point. A woman as powerful as La Loba, who silences the poet to the point of transforming him into a wolf, a speechless animal, has obvious mythic parallels to Circe and the even older wolf-aspect of Aphrodite.[98]

As the Lady of the Poem became more distant, the sexual woman more dangerous, Pound's eye for females grew more jaundiced. At this time, with the poems collected in Ripostes of 1912, derogatory images of women begin to appear as Pound attempts to handle darker themes. The much-anthologized "Portrait d'une Femme" and the brief latinate "Quies" present women who are lacking, marginal, derivative: inferior souls.[99] Typically, the collection includes the perfect vision of del Sellaio's

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[97] "It would be most immoral of me . . . to present Piere Vidal's ravings as a spiritual extacy. What the poem says is simply this: 'Animal passion is very near--in its extreme form, that is--to insanity, or dipsomania!'" (Ruthven, Guide, p. 194).

[98] See Chapter 1. For a vision of Pound as wolf, see H. D., HERmione, p. 174. H. D.'s commentary in End to Torment (pp. 27-28, 43) names Italy as La Loba, Pound as the lycanthropic poet; she relates him as wolf to the legendary wolf of Rome, seeking to explain his divided loyalties.

[99] The "Portrait" is that of Florence Farr; see Pound and Shakespear Letters, pp. 131-133.

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Venus Reclining and "A Virginal." But the perfect women remain antiques or displacements.

The poems of 1914, published in Blast or collected in Lustra, are harsher, in keeping with Vorticist rhetoric. But the speaker is nevertheless too delicate for the woman in such poems as "Pastoral" and "Another Man's Wife": in the former, a beautiful girl is flawed by her laugh; in the latter, presumably, by her morals. Other portraits following this trend in Lustra are gathered in "Ladies." Pound's highest praise for a living beauty addresses a woman with no other qualities. The odor of sour grapes clings to the lines:

> Flawless as Aphrodite,
> Thoroughly beautiful,
> Brainless,
> The faint odor of your patchouli,
> Faint, almost, as the lines of cruelty about your chin
> Assails me, and concerns me almost as little.

This Helen's beauty is one with her cruelty and ignorance; she meets a match, however, in the poet, who mimics her attitude from the depths of his armored sensitivity.

Troy in Auvergnat. Pound is even less concerned with the Helen of Troy in Auvergnat. "Provincia Deserta" introduces this "second Troy" of the troubadours, an important precedent for The Cantos. A tour of the region of Provence with his new bride inspired Pound, who was visiting for the first time the territories of his troubadours.[100] The theme is not like Yeats's Irish "second Troy," nor Vergil's, whose "new Troy" refers to the Rome founded by Aeneas. Instead, Pound is devising one of his "cultural rhymes":

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[100] Ruthven, Guide, pp. 200-201.

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I have thought of the second Troy,
Some little prized place in Auvergnat:
Two men tossing a coin, one keeping a castle,
One set on the highway to sing.
He sang a woman.
Auvergne rose to the song;
The Dauphin backed him.
"The castle to Austors!"
"Pieire kept the singing--
"A fair man and a pleasant."
He won the lady,
Stole her away for himself, kept her against armed force:
So ends that story.
That age is gone;
Pieire de Maensac is gone. (Personae, pp. 122-123)

Pound retells the story after Miquel de la Tour, the troubadours' biographer.[101] This episode is repeated in Canto 5 (p. 18):

. . . with the war they made:
Troy in Auvergnat
While Menelaus piled up the church at port
He kept Tyndaria. Dauphin stood with de Maensac.

With "Tyndaria" Pound calls the lady by Helen's mortal father's name; the name of De Tierci's wife is unknown. The poet may be offering an acceptably human name as analogue for Zeus's daughter, or he may be commenting on the essential humanity of the adulterous lady. The story appears again in Canto 23, amidst tales and memories of Granada, the Este family of Ferrara, and the sound of women mourning for Adonis; the

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[101] See "Troubadours--Their Sorts and Conditions," Literary Essays, pp. 96-97: "'Piere de Maensac was of Alverne (Auvergne) a poor knight, and he had a brother named Austors de Maensac, and they both were troubadours and they both were in concord that one should take the castle and the other the trobar.' And presumably they tossed up a marabotin or some such obsolete coin, for we read, 'And the castle went to Austors and the poetry to Piere, and he sang of the wife of Bernart de Tierci. So much he sang of her and so much he honoured her that it befell that the lady let herself go gay (furar a del). And he took her to the castle of the Dalfin of Auvergne, and the husband, in the manner of the golden Menelaus, demanded her much, with the church to back him and with the great war that they made. But the Dalfin maintained him (Piere) so that he never gave her up.'"

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troubadour-Paris' brother speaks, making Pierre sound like a Lochinvar and linking the tale of Troy in Auvergnat with the Catharist heresy.

I believe this Provencal tale attracted Pound not only for its similarity to the background of the Iliad, but also because of the choice of de Maensac, which parallels the judgment of Paris. Although the singing was won by luck rather than through decision, these troubadours valued a castle equally with their poetic profession. Both were wagered on the toss of a coin, furthermore: so that a feminine power, money, usually so balefully misused, is here handled with significant flippancy. Hera is opposed to a muse, who rewards her follower as Aphrodite awarded Paris--with the love of another man's wife. The Helen of this tale is not so much the muse, however, as the song itself, won by theft as the castle was lost by chance. As such, she is the poet's immortality and his potency, his artifact and most valuable created object.

Propertius. The sun as well as the lady become objects of cynical regard in "Homage to Sextus Propertius" (Personae, pp. 210-228). This well-known redaction of the Latin classic, published in 1917, is at the sharpest point of Pound's conflict between mortal woman and immortal poetry. Again the sun serves as inspiration: Phoebus addresses Propertius in the second section, commanding him to forgo epic material for love poetry. A complicity between Phoebus and Eros is implied: the sun promises that his poems will be thrown often "into a chair/Where a girl waits alone for her beloved." Throughout the Homage, love is expressed in terms of light and vision: the tenderest appelation is "my light, light of my eyes." The beloved woman remains a radiant body taken in

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like a text, through the poet's eyesight.

It is strange, therefore, that Pound makes Calliope upbraid the poet as if he were a Leda, "Content to move ever with white swans!," as if consorting with beautiful women makes one effeminate. Pound has learned from Lewis to associate love with a "feminine" emotion. For Propertius, Phoebus' command excused a distaste for the epic material preferred by his patron Maecenas. For Pound, pulled toward love poetry by Yeats, epic by Joyce, diatribes by Lewis, and elsewhere by others (he once tried sculpture after Gaudier-Brzeska, as well as musical compositions) the command rather limits than frees. His stupendous reversal of the import of Calliope's appearance changes her favorable blessing into a curse. The reversal persists throughout Pound's adaptation, as evident in the strange complaint of the narrator:

> Neither Calliope nor Apollo sung these things into
> my ear,
> My genius is no more than a girl. . . .
> If she goes in a gleam of Cos, in a slither of dyed
> stuff,
> There is a volume in the matter; if her eyelids sink
> into sleep,
> There are new jobs for the author;
> And if she plays with me with her shirt off,
> We shall construct many Iliads.
> And whatever she does or says
> We shall spin long yarns out of nothing.

Pound's genius, his poetry, like that of Propertius and the troubadours, is "no more than a girl," but here he sounds unhappy about it. The "girl" is indeed a great mother or muse as well as text: "There is a volume in the matter," in the mother. But unlike his

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precedents, Pound finds the lover's role demeaning rather than sublime.[102] For the girl, in her ignorance and costume, her behavior and sexuality, is in reality "nothing" to Pound; he sees nothing from which to spin his poetry in her. Women are not enough for him to sing, and yet he wants to sing only beautiful women.

Derogation rather than praise of the beloved follows naturally in the wake of the poet's sense of the inferiority of his métier. Pound mocks Cynthia's standards of literary taste as well as of morality:

> It is noble to die of love, and honourable to remain
> uncuckolded for a season,
> And she speaks ill of light women,
> and will not praise Homer,
> Because Helen's conduct is "unsuitable."

Nevertheless, Pound can find praise for love among his favorite literary topoi. He always recalls poetic immortality, the deifying of the poet by some means, whether love or the text. Young women will preserve his name in the future: "There will be a crowd of young women doing homage to my palaver." The sexual act also creates gods:

> In how many varied embraces, our changing arms,
> Her kisses, how many, lingering on my lips.
> "Turn not Venus into a blinded motion,
> Eyes are the guides of love,
> Paris took Helen naked coming from the bed of Menelaus,
> Endymion's naked body, bright bait for Diana,"
> --such at least is the story. . . .
> If she confer such nights upon me,
> long is my life, long in years,
> If she give me many,
> God am I for the time.

The Helen in this passage and elsewhere in Homage is not only sexual

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[102] For other examples of this Lewisian distaste, see the 1920 "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," notably the portrait of Lady Valentine, Personae, p. 196. For other points of difference between Pound and Propertius, see J. P. Sullivan, Ezra Pound and Sextus Propertius: A Study in Creative Translation (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964).

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but flagrantly adulterous; Propertius writes only that Paris saw Helen rising naked from her husband's side.

Cynthia, like Catullus' Lesbia, was a real woman beloved by the poet; not until Petrarch was the convention introduced of addressing an entirely fictional Laura, an idealized woman as muse. Pound may have seen real women as models for Cynthia, or may have created her from earlier texts. So many women had already moved through his life and readings, leaving the same dissatisfactions and distastes. However, the fourth section, "Difference of Opinion with Lygdamus" outlines the familiar triangle of one man with two women: Cynthia accuses the poet of infidelity, claiming that the other woman has bewitched him. Squabbles between women over their men are as expectable as fights between poets over their importance. The poetic realm, like the feminine, is that of the body, sexuality the sole concern:

> And still a girl scorns the gods,
> Of all these young women
> not one has enquired the cause of the world,
> Nor the modus of lunar eclipses
> Nor whether there be any patch left of us
> After we cross the infernal ripples,
> nor if the thunder fall from predestination;
> Nor anything else of importance.

Later in Canto 47, the "fertility canto," which includes Circe's advice, Odysseus' journey to hell, and Adonis' death, Pound writes: "Two span, two span to a woman,/ beyond that she believes not. Nothing is of any importance" (p. 237). Fleshly being has absorbed or canceled her chance of intellectual or spiritual selfhood, which Pound equates with knowledge of his sacred texts, respect for his gods. These flawed texts, flawed muses, and flawed women seem to vanish in The Cantos, but they remain at the heart of Pound's failures to establish a functional

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poetic beauty, a stable sublimity, and a durable love.

The Cantos: Flesh, Vision, History

Not content to sing mere girls, Pound turned to epic. In The Cantos Pound's feminine figures are drawn after mythical and historical women of exceptional influence and power. Although some images of Helen in the epic are paradisiacal, imaginary beauties, several are human, historical queens subject to the evils of lust or ill fortune, political enemies or personal vanity. A few of these queens, whom Pound both fears and admires, triumph over singers, kings, and perils.

The Cantos fall, in relation to invocations of Helen, into two halves, divided by the eight years that represent publication of Cantos 52-71, the China and Jefferson cantos, in 1940, and the appearance of The Pisan Cantos in 1948. The initial thirty cantos, published together first in 1930,[103] and the next twenty-one, which appeared between 1934 and 1937, contain several visions of Helen and the beautiful woman as hellish or heavenly powers in history and poetry. Pound joins the words of Homer and Aeschylus to invoke the destructive, seductive Eleanor. Cunizza brings a little light from Dante's Paradiso, but inferno is better represented: by the wife of Poicebot; Orsini's Pernella; Parisina Malatesta; the corpse of Ignez da Castro; and Madame Hyle, who

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[103] A Draft of XXX Cantos, Paris; published in New York and London, 1933; Eleven New Cantos, XXXI-XLI, New York, 1934. Earlier publications were of the first three cantos in Poetry, 1917; three cantos in Quia Pauper Amavi, London, 1919; The Fourth Canto, London, 1919; A Draft of XVI Cantos for the Beginning of a Poem of Some Length, Paris, 1925; A Draft of the Cantos XVII-XXVII, London, 1928. (Christine Brooke-Rose, A ZBC of Ezra Pound [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971], chronology, pp. 269-271).

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is an amalgam of Lucretia Borgia and Helen of Tyre. In the later cantos, imaginary beings and ancient deities have largely replaced Renaissance aristocrats. These poems are more mystic, combining the earlier visions with increasingly abstruse allusions and references, as Pound attempts to create his most sublime goddess.

Hell and Helen. The Cantos would claim that poetry is paradise, but from the beginning they show life for the poet as hell. Canto 1's redaction of Odyssey 11 brings the wanderer to the mouth of Hades by order of Circe, the "trim-coifed goddess" associated by de Rachewiltz with Olga Rudge.[104] A blood-sacrifice to Tiresias' ghost brings Elpenor requesting burial. This lost comrade has been cheated of immortality by drunkenness in Circe's home; like Gaudier-Brzeska, whose career was blighted by World War I, he is forever "a man of no fortune and with a name to come." The seductive woman is matched with the nearly certain death of war; Elpenor's drugged drunkenness recalls paralysis by poison gas. In this place of forgetfulness and failure, Odysseus beats away his mother's ghost until the blind prophet can speak; then he allows Anticlea to come forward. The language of a father still able to signify even in abjection (returning in Canto 47, "Who even dead, yet hath his mind entire"[105]) must be heard before that of the mother; meaning in hell is more necessary than emotion. Never-

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[104] Discretions, p. 10; the original epithet in Odyssey 11.6 is "lovely-haired."

[105] Canto 47, p. 236: "First you must go the road/ to hell/ . . . to see Tiresias,/ Eyeless that was, a shade, that is in hell/ So full of knowing that the beefy men know less than he,/ Ere thou come to thy road's end./ Knowledge the shade of a shade,/ Yet thou must sail after knowledge/ Knowing less than drugged beasts."

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theless, Tiresias is blind, dead, and bisexual: three feminine counters that permit him access to a secret knowledge, "the shade of a shade," that he may impart to the wanderer.[106] So armed, the son may safely sail "by Sirens and thence outward and away/And unto Circe."

Canto 1 ends with the appearance of of a sublime Aphrodite (p. 5):

> Venerandam,
> In the Cretan's phrase, with the golden crown, Aphrodite,
> Cypri munimenta sortita est, mirthful, orichalchi, with golden
> Girdles and breast bands, thou with dark eyelids
> Bearing the golden bough of Argicida.

The epithet orichalchi, "of copper," from a Latin translation of the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, is contiguous with the golden ornaments of the goddess, and refers to what Pound had called the only proper use of gold, a primal fallen beauty that will create hell despite its original heavenly significance. The golden bough, of course, signifies both immortality and survival of abjection, of a journey to hell.

After Aphrodite's appearance, Canto 2 invokes a Helen who "moves like a goddess/And has the face of a god." Pound surrounds Helen's name with images of ocean nymphs, first combining Anglo-Saxon, modernistic, and eastern elements, then following the Trojan's voices with another Odyssean apparition, that of the mortal Tyro and her water-god lover.[107] The ideogrammatic juxtapositions suggest the water-bird origins

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[106] Blindness as metaphor for castration is a familiar Freudian equation. The femininity of death is expressed, for example, by Pound's references to Persephone in preference to Hades or Pluto; even the prayer to Hades translated from Propertius populates the underworld with women.

[107] Tyro appears to Odysseus after Anticlea, among the ghosts of women in the underworld. After her, Leda and other mortal lovers and beloveds of gods are named; significantly, the last to appear is Eriphyle, who sold her husband's life for gold.

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of Aphrodite.[108] The bisexual note in this description of Helen has not to my knowledge been discussed, but it is in keeping with the knowledge and power of Tiresias, as well as with descriptions of earlier beauties, that Pound's Helen moves like a female and looks like a male. The first description rings of Yeats's Vergilian vision of Maud Gonne, the second of Lewis's concept of the superior woman as man. Motion here is feminized, countenance masculinized--one fluid and placeless, the other fixed, individual, as recognizable as a sign. The face of a god on the body of a woman also suggests the phallic mother, that fantasized image of an impossible wholeness. That she has "the voice of Schoeney's daughters" recalls the Odyssean tale of Helen's mimicking the voices of Achaean wives. Schoeneus had only one daughter, however: Atalanta, whose superiority was compromised when she stooped to gather golden balls:[109] a very feminine thing to do, bespeaking distractability as well as unfilled want. A stooping to gold compromises, spoils, or destroys other Helens in The Cantos and ironically undermines Pound's poetic itself.

Eleanor. Atalanta, Helen, and the queen of troubadours meet in Eleanor, the most striking queenly figure in The Cantos. Born in 1122 (d. 1204), she was the granddaughter of the first of the troubadours, Duke William IX of Aquitaine. Her husbands were the kings of France and England, her sons crusaders and monarchs. Her first husband, Louis VII (1137-

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[108] Lir's children were turned into swans by Aiofe, his granddaughter is the seal-goddess Eidothea who rescues Menelaus; see Davenport, p. 116-117.

[109] Ovid, Metamorphosis X, 560-707.

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1152), divorced her for lack of male issue (she had given him two daughters),

> divorcing thus Aquitaine.
> And that year Plantagenet married her
> (that had dodged past 17 suitors)
> Et quand lo reis Lois lo entendit
> mout er fasché. (Canto 6, p. 21)

She had eight children with Henry II, two of whom became kings: Richard the Lion Hearted, her favorite; and the treacherous John. Estranged from Henry because of his adulteries with Rosamond, she left England to establish her own court in Poitiers. "Eleanor followed, more closely than a woman could be expected to, the style of her grandfather's life; she composed and sang; she led armies on crusade; she maintained a court of love."[110] Pound would have especially appreciated her hospitality to the troubadour Bernart de Ventadour after he was banished for making love to his patron's wife. She also supported Chrétien de Troyes, Wace, and Andreas Capellanus, who adapted Ovid's arts of love to courtly ideals.

For Pound, she is the ultimate troubadourian lady, as well as the ultimate destructive female. Her character in English literature is determined in age (Shakespeare's King John) and in youth (Swinburne's Rosamond), as rapacious, jealous, scheming, treacherous, French. Despite his admiration for her literary activities Pound does not ignore these politically charged portraits: as he says in Canto 7, "she spoiled in a British climate." The canto includes some vivid rumors with its history. She may never have behaved as Arnaut's bawdy poem suggests, playing a young Helen to her uncle Raymond's Theseus in

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[110] Davenport, p. 146.

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Antioch or cuckolding Louis with Saladin while on crusade; nor in fact is there any evidence that she murdered Rosamond.[111] Nevertheless, Pound credited her with causing enough turbulence to put her name as the first term in the Aeschylean vilification of Helen echoed in Canto 2: "Eleanor, elenaus and eleptolis!" Canto 6 shows her bargaining for territory through her sons' marriages. While Pound is sensitive to the interference of scheming and avaricious elders in their juniors' lives, this incident is only one in the career of a particularly dangerous queen, a Helen independent of martial or marital control.

The Cantos include several Renaissance women whose lives and fates might be seen as facets of the personality of Eleanor. A more positive human Helen is Cunizza da Romana, a beauty whose virtue is generosity with money and flesh.[112] She is literally heavenly: Dante places her in Paradiso 9.33 among those in whom love was abundant but ill employed.[113] Pound introduces her in Canto 6 and recalls her in many other

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[111] Arnaut Daniel's lo ferm voler qu'el cor m'intra, "The fierce desire that comes into my heart"; Peter Makin reads the canto as suggesting "that Arnaut seduced Eleanor under her uncle's nose," Provence and Pound (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 76; as Davenport sees it, "it hints that the material . . . has left fact and become fiction," but "entanglement itself is meaning enough," p. 147. One can at least untangle this allusion enough to recognize its Oedipal overtones

[112] Davenport suggests that both Cunizza and Eleanor embody largesse; but since Eleanor was only a patron of singers, not a lover, I believe Cunizza is the more sympathetic to Pound. Further, she aged better: she was sixty-seven when she freed her slaves.

[113] Dante, La Divina Commedia, ed. C. H. Grandison, rev. Charles Singleton (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 9.31-33, pp. 701: "D'una radice nacqui e io ed ella:/ Cunizza fui chiamata, e qui refulgo/ perché mi vinse il lume d'esta stella."

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cantos. Married to Richard Saint Boniface, she intrigued with the troubadour Sordello, Browning's hero (called "Palma" in his "Sordello"), who abducted her from her husband for reasons more political than romantic. She not only freed her slaves when she was old, but lived an open-handed and profligate life. Canto 29 offers this biography:

> And sixth the Lady Cunizza
> That was first given Richard St Boniface
> And Sordello subtracted her from that husband
> And lay with her in Tarviso
> Till he was driven out of Tarviso
> And she left with a soldier named Bonius
> nimium amorata in eum ["too much enamoured of him"]
> And went from one place to another
> "The light of this star o'ercame me"
> Greatly enjoying herself
> And running up the most awful bills.
> And this Bonius was killed on a sunday
> and she had them a Lord from Braganza
> and later a house in Verona.

The influence of Aphrodite upon Cunizza is signified by the reference to the "light of this star" from the Paradiso.

Pernella ("the sleeve green and shot gold over her hand"), was under a far different influence. Mistress of Count Aldobrand Orsini in the 1440s, "she attempted to murder and have murdered, in a war she touched off, Orsini's legitimate sons. She failed, but did not lose the Count's affections."[114] Another infernal Helen is the wife of Niccolò d'Este, Parisina Malatesta, mentioned in Cantos 8, 20, and 24: discovering her affair with his natural son Ugo, her husband beheaded them both. That Pound takes the husband's side despite his wife's

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[114] Davenport, p. 244.

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patronage of poets and artists[115] is suggested by his adding Niccolò to the ideogram of the wanderer, sailing "in the wake of Odysseus/To Cithera (a. d. 1413) 'dove fu Elena rapta da Paris,'" (Cantos, p. 111) "where Helen was kidnapped by Paris."

The most telling example of a wife lost and found in troubadourian times is the story of Poicebot. His wife recalls the miserable Helen of Tyre rather than the queenly Helen of Troy, but her downfall is caused by the absence of a huband's controlling hand as well as by desire. A monk who became a singer, Gaubertz Poicebot was knighted at the request of the woman he loved so that they could marry. But he left her to wander in Spain, and she succumbed to the seductions of an English knight, who

> kept her long time his mistress and then let her go to the dogs . . . . And En Gaubertz returned from Spain, and lodged himself one night in the city where she was. And he went out for desire of woman, and he entered the alberc of a poor woman; for they told him there was a fine woman within. And he found his wife. And when he saw her, and she him, great was the grief between them and great shame. And he stopped the night with her, and on the morrow he went forth with her to a nunnery where he had her enter. And for this grief he ceased to sing and to compose.[116]

The abjection of this woman disables the singer; wed to her, he shares in her fall and cannot be inspired by her, as Helen of Tyre's magician companions are. But the tale is somewhat different in Canto 5 (p. 18):

> And from Mauleon, fresh with a new earned grade,
> In maze of approaching rain-steps, Poicebot--
> The air was full of women,
> And Savairic Mauleon

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[115] She pays for the binding of "un libro franxese che si chiama Tristano," Cantos, p. 110.

[116] "Troubadours--Their Sorts and Conditions," Literary Essays, p. 96.

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Gave him his land and knight's fee, and he wed the woman.
Came lust of travel on him, of romerya;
And out of England a knight with slow-lifting eyelids
Lei fassa furar a del, put glamour upon her . . .
And left her an eight months gone.
"Came lust of woman upon him,"
Poicebot, now on North road from Spain
(Sea-change, a grey in the water)
And in small house by town's edge
Found a woman, changed and familiar face;
Hard night, and parting at morning.

Crystallizing out of an "air full of women," Poicebot's wife falls literally into matter with her adulterous pregnancy. The "changed and familiar face" invokes Helen of Tyre as surely as the brothel. There are subtle differences between the biography and the canto. In the first, the troubadour acts on behalf of his wife and suffers death as a poet; in the second, the wife's fate is uncertain, the husband's unchanged. The "parting at morning" seems only an alba, rather than eternal separation. Pound leaves the outcome unstated in an ellipsis clearly borrowed from the Chinese: she is not rescued but he is not destroyed.

These women relate to Helen of Troy with radical changes in perspectives and character. Pound attempts to resolve for himself, through historical examples of different behaviors and characters, the contradictions between his conceptions of women and the actuality, active and passive women. Thus, Cunizza and the Aphroditic Helen, ready to leave a husband to follow love and lovers, are contrasted with Sirens: an uncontrollable Eleanor; treacherous Pernella; incestuous Parisina. The guilty Helen who bares her breast to Menelaus at the fall of Troy is forgiven and continues to reign in Sparta, but Poicebot's wife is abandoned to a nunnery or brothel. Despite his gatherings of

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examples, however, Pound fails to move from his preconceptions: even when active and mobile, women are biologically dangerous to men because their basic nature is passive, "submarine"--pearls, whereas a man's intellect requires crystal. Furthermore, they are mercurial; even Cunizza's affections change, so Pound quotes Sordello's Ailas e que'm fau miey huelh, "my eyes avail me not, for they see not what I wish." Women are nuvoletta, "cloudlets," chaos, octopus,[117] and biological process, a "drift of weed in the bay." This plethora of nature imagery follows de Gourmont, positing that woman lacks the phallic intellect's ability to create (thus Pound's "Nel ventre tuo, o nella mente mia," "in your belly or in my mind").

Nicea and Hyle. A singularly imaginary beauty is born in Pound's mind in Canto 7. In addition to underlying the figure of Eleanor, Helen echoes throughout this canto in the old men's voices, the sea in the beach groove, the repetition of "Helénaus, hélandros, heléptolis," the nude by lamplight of Arnaut Daniel. These echoes condense into a visionary shape at the center of the poem (p. 26):

> And all that day
> Nicea moved before me
> And the cold grey air troubled her not
> For all her naked beauty, bit not the tropic skin
> And the long slender feet lit on the curb's marge
> And her moving height went before me,
> We alone having being.

The vision is contrasted with references to dead women beloved by poets, images of the anima: Landor's Ione, Liu Ch'e's dead lady, both used by Pound in earlier poems. Pound refers to other deaths in

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[117] Davenport traces the octopus back to Remy de Gourmont's Natural Philosophy of Love; see pp. 243, 247.

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spirit, as well: the "husks I had known as men," as of Odysseus's experience in Hades. The canto continues with a wasteland motif joining memories and cadences of Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Homer, Swinburne. A dead husband, Dido's Sicheus, and a drowned Eros are added to this ideogram, illustrating the fertile and eternal beauties of literary imagination versus a sterile contemporaneity.

The name "Nicea" derives from Poe's "To Helen," which contains a reference to "Nicean barks of yore"; later, Pound will picture his muse in a series of floating vessels, from dinghys to the hieroglyphic barge of Ra. Nicea has a boatlike quality: she "moves before" the poet, floating in air like a vessel or a song. The persona of Odysseus, too, of course, travels by boat.

The nudity of Nicea insures that her physical portrait will be of scattered images only: a few "imagistic" details of skin, feet, and stature. Feet appear often in both Pound and H. D.; there are precedents in Greek as well as Petrarchan poetry for this detail in the blazon of a beautiful woman or goddess. "Skin" in Homer refers to appearance, being, or the entire physical body of a person.[118] The reference to stature again recalls the classical model of beauty that Yeats used for Gonne.

Nicea is a pure image, a type of the Venus Reclining painted by del Sellaio; she has, for once, left the canvas to move before the poet, more real than anything in his world except himself. Like the idiolectic and ideogrammatic obscurity of The Cantos, the exclusivity of her appearance causes Pound much of his difficulty in achieving a

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[118] See Snell, The Discovery of the Mind, p. 6.

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paradisiacal vision. Both are symptomatic of an isolation in which the mother--enfigured as beauty of speech and radiance of inspiration--is appropriated and hoarded or hidden by the son. The poet believes himself set against a society of others who can neither appreciate nor preserve such beauty. Avarice is indeed a model for Pound's inferno: despite feats of generosity, Pound failed to tell "the tale of the tribe" whose taste he found so unenlightened. Unwilling to share his visions in common language, refusing to coin beauty from inferior metal, his poetry becomes a hoard of fragments of complex song.

An infernal antithesis to the airy spirit of Nicea, Madame Hyle appears in Cantos 30 and 35. She is entirely Pound's invention: the Greek word means "woodland," "forest trees," "firewood," "stuff" (as of the word-group giving us "matter," "madiera," "material," with its puns on "mater"). In Aristotle, the word means "matter"; in the Idylls, "subject matter."[119] The word can extend to nature or even "ordure,"[120] recalling Lewis's dictum of Nature as the artist's enemy. Pound uses the word, feminized, in both cantos in connection with money crimes, an early type of Usura. As matter itself, Hyle is a type of the fallen Helen of Tyre. As corpse-money-woman, she provides analogues with both Ignez da Castro and Lucretia Borgia. She also gives distorted echoes of the myths of Kore, sacrificed nature-maidens and hanging goddesses, and Pound's many tree-nymphs.

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[119] Liddell and Scott Lexicon.

[120] In Canto 77, Pound writes "the army vocabulary contains almost 48 words/one verb and participle one substantive hýle," Cantos, p. 471; see Davenport, p. 249.

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Hyle first follows the "compleynt against Pity" spoken by an Artemis whom Lewis might have fathered upon Chaucer; a voice from Paphos criticizing Venus for loving a doddering fool rather than young Mars; then the story of Ignez, "dead eyes,/ Dead hair under the crown,/ The king still young there beside her." Then Hyle's voice is heard, obscene and emphatic, telling someone to swallow money, to swallow pride (Cantos, p. 148):

> Came Madame Hyle
> Clothed with the light of the altar
> And with the price of the candles.
> "Honour? Balls for yr. honour!
> Take two million and swallow it."

Hyle burlesques Lucretia Borgia, a bride who bought her own altar-candles as well as her third and last husband, Alfonso d'Este, third duke of Ferrara. His honor survived the marriage to make Ferrara a center for the arts and to keep Lucretia pregnant most of the time. Her association with Hyle represents the sterile luxury and greed of the Borgias, rescued by some miracle of marriage, as the dead Ignez could not be rescued.[121]

Song and Gold

In the following cantos, luxury and greed combine with the corpse to produce Usura, a figure far more hellish than Hyle. In addition, the more terrestial luxuriating of Circe is given its fullest illustration. Helen's name does not appear in Eleven New Cantos or The Fifth Decad, but these two major figures are closely related to her. In Cantos 39

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[121] No evidence connects Lucretia with the bad behavior of her family, but a myth of her viciousness inspired Victor Hugo's drama. She found a haven from Borgia politics at Ferrara and died wearing a hair-shirt.

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and 47, the witch Circe appears; Usura, a thoroughly destructive force, is blazoned in Cantos 45 and 51.

Circe. The Circe cantos place song beside sexuality at every point. The sounds of the loom and of singing remind the speaker of Circe's ingle. The "bad drugs," kaka pharmak edoken, of the enchantress have dulled women and beasts. The girls are equated with beasts, but Circe is at the opposite extreme: "'He theos, hee gyne," ask the men at her threshold, echoing the description of Helen in Troy: "is she goddess or woman?" Both food and sex are her poisons (p. 193):

> Fat panther lay by me
> Girls talked there of fucking, beasts talked there of eating,
> All heavy with sleep, fucked girls and fat leopards,
> Lions loggy with Circe's tisane,
> Girls leery with Circe's tisane.

But the drugs take on a positive aspect at the end of this canto, as Circe becomes a goddess "that hath the gift of healing,/ that hath the power over wild beasts." Helen, too, in the Odyssey, has power over healing drugs.

As her sister Pasiphae gave birth to the bull-man minotaur, so Circe changes men to beasts, mastering passion through physical, hence animal, knowledge, different from the mental powers of Tiresias. Despite her dangers, Circe also has poetic aspects: she works the loom, a metaphor for song; she sings beautifully; and the men who approach her raise voices to speak to her. This goddess-woman brings voice and song, and her beauty is springlike, her body treelike, the song fitting Pound's strict standards: "Song sharp at the edge, her crotch like a young sapling." Made safe by the moly, Odysseus' hermetic and phallic charm, Circe is sexually available and sexually prophetic--"Discuss

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this in bed," she says--once her dangerous feminine nature has been changed.[122] Her voice hushed with grief borrowed from a line of Ovid, she tells Odysseus that he must journey to Hades to consult Tiresias. Two examples of sexual conflation are here: the woman as tree, a metamorphosis that both erases her own sexual characteristics and provides her with a phallic form; and the blind, dead prophet who had taken on both sexes in his life.

Although it gives superhuman powers, sexual love is seen by Pound as dangerous, and equated with death or underworld journeys; Canto 47 is explicit, including images of copulation as spelunking among allusions to Adonis' death and Odysseus' nekyia (p. 238):

> The light has entered the cave. Io! Io!
> The light has gone down into the cave,
> Splendour on splendour!
> By prong have I entered these hills:
> That the grass grow from my body,
> That I hear the roots speaking together.

The light is that of the phallus as well as of the sun and the radiant anima-Athena-Ennoia with which the poet's intellect is pregnant; the cave and hills are, of course, a terrestial great mother.

Circe is able to help the wandering hero because of her metamorphosis, from witch into anima, but he must still go "to hell in a boat," and he will not get through in a hurry. The hell that is traveled by boat suggests poetic creation itself, since the ideogram of

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[122] An allusion to Pound's double marriage may appear in this canto: if Circe is indeed inspired by Rudge, then the moly might be read as Pound's phallic poetry, or his poetic phallus, by which he has "respite for a little," and is "freed from the one bed/that [he] may'st return to another."

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boats often signifies song or the Muse for Pound.[123] Helen's ambivalent nautical meanings are recalled: she is either a starry guide for mariners or a destructive electrical "fire" of lightening.

Helen, hell, and song interact in this canto by virtue of Pound's interrelating beauty, the sexual danger of the feminine, and the difficulty of singing. As the troubadour's lady did, women must protect the poet, give him permission to sing, and provide his subjects. But in Circe's ingle, the poet conceives only inferno. There is no clue as to where sublime song, a paradise of meaning, can be found.

Usura. Once in hell, however, the poet finds a special perversion of the beautiful woman: Usura, a kind of Hecate, the dark aspect of a beneficent Persephone. He suggests that hell could be blamed on a single warp of vision, which he equates with Helen, the most desired and highest beauty. The equation or ideogram is strengthened by reference to gold, that liminal element, a Helen of Tyre fallen into matter: "Aurum est commune sepulchrum. Usura, commune sepulchrum./ helandros kai heleptolis kai helarxe" (pp. 234-235). Instead of destroying ships, gold destroys governments. The element is chthonic, belonging like Persephone, to the god of death. A portrait of Usura

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[123] Many of these motifs come together when Canto 39 introduces Hathor, an Egyptian Aphrodite identified with Isis. The mother of the sun-god Horus (a sun-god confounded from earliest times with the child of Isis and Osiris, the hawk Horus, who in turn is identified with the even older hawk-headed sun-god Ra), Hathor has a bovine head like the minotaur; in the Book of the Dead she provides meat and drink for the dead (E. A. Wallis Budge, The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani in the British Museum [1895; repr. New York: Dover, 1967], pp. cxi, cxiv-cxvi). Hathor is bound in a floating box on the water, as Danaë was after impregnation by Zeus' golden rain. A feminine analogue of the poet-Odysseus who gives blood to the ghosts of literature and history and wanders the seas in a ship, she is a muse full of the light of Eleusis, a golden poetic semen.

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appears in Cantos 45 and 51 (p. 350):

> With usury has no man a good house
> made of stone, no paradise on his church wall
> With usury the stone cutter is kept from his stone
> the weaver is kept from his loom by usura
> Wool does not come into market
> the peasant does not eat his own grain
> the girl's needle goes blunt in her hand
> The looms are hushed one after another
> ten thousand after ten thousand . . .
> Usury rusts the man and his chisel
> It destroys the craftsman, destroying craft; . . .
> Usury kills the child in the womb
> And breaks short the young man's courting
> Usury brings age into youth; it lies between the bride
> and the bridegroom.
> Usury is against Nature's increase.
> Whores for Eleusis

and "corpses are set to banquet/at behest of usura." Usura blocks paradise and the artist's attempt to create a paradise. It perverts the use of beautiful materials for art: "Emerald findeth no Memling" and "None learneth to weave gold in her pattern."

The feminization of usury is signified by the "a" ending on the word; the word's origins are in Latin, but it entered English through French, acquiring a final "-y" instead of the medieval Latin "-ia." The vision of so particularly destructive a goddess is as ancient as Demeter's blighting the fields in mourning for Kore, or Inanna's destruction of those who failed to love her; Usura is perhaps unique in destroying unborn works and lives. She represents a failure of love as caritas, charity, on the part of those who hold power, who should therefore be responsible to the creators of beauty. Her spreading blights recall the Artemis canto's misalliance of Venus and a doddering fool, as well as a Vorticist equation of art's violent effectiveness with murder.

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In light of these mythologies, Pound's making Usura feminine is comprehensible. Nevertheless, she is not simply Pound's Circean female who can be charmed, nor the "octopus and chaos," which are passive and ductile, "seeking a guide, a mentor." Her power is greater than that, actively perverse and perverting. She is an abstract asexual evil, draining artistic and intellectual value. Usura has the strength of a vortex, where the image of whirlpool, a Charybdis, replaces that of Lewis's cones or Yeats's gyres. She absorbs energies from all surroundings but returns only a cheapened material rather than radiating light, life, or the inspiration for art.

Usura is an anti-Helen not at all like Yeats's Crazy Jane, who opposes a fleshly reality against a dream. Instead, she presents a type of eidolon, a seducer and misleader, standing in opposition to human Helens and humane women of history and of literature, and to their poets. Pound becomes her most pitiable victim, unable to free his imagination from the anger he has conceived by her, unable to send his language past the horror of her countenance into a human poetry neither obscene nor sublime.

"The Production IS the Beloved"

Usura's power persists in The Pisan Cantos, Rock-Drill, and Thrones.[124] The paradiso's light, sought increasingly in Pound's memories rather than in history, seems if anything to have receded, despite strange ritualistic visions of invented celestial deities. The earth itself,

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[124] The Pisan Cantos, LXXIV-LXXXIV, New York, 1948; Section: Rock Drill, 85-95 de los cantares, Milan, 1955; Thrones: 96-109 de los cantares, Milan, 1959.

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however, becomes dearer: Madame Hyle's darkness is mitigated by the beauty of Tellus-Helena. Muses are again drawn from myths of Helen and Egyptian hieroglyphs, American vernacular and Renaissance images, notably Elizabeth Tudor. In Canto 91 several feminine namings toward paradise occur: allusions to the stone eyes at Circeo; Helen of Tyre and Apollonius; the "Undine," Sheri Martinelli; Elizabeth "Reina," another version of helenaus;[125] and a just-minted Egyptian goddess: Ra-Set. The reference to Helen of Tyre is not only recondite but vague (p. 610): "Thus Apollonius/ (if it was Apollonius)/ & Helen of Tyre/ by Pithagoras/ by Ocellus/ (pilot-fish, et libidinis expers, of Tyre."[126]

"Tellus-Helena". An earthly return to the sublime aspect of Helen is achieved with the poet's own difficult redemptive vision in The Pisan Cantos. Pound's incarceration at Pisa within the most terrifying surroundings nevertheless permitted him to imagine a great mother of landscape. Helen's return to the epic is effected through this landscape, visible from Pound's cage in the Disciplinary Training Center. Mountains become the breasts of an earth goddess: "the clouds over Pisa, over the two teats of Tellus, géa." The Latin tellus, "earth," names the only prospect that contained any beauty from Pound's prison cage, and quite naturally joins the earlier sexual imagery of

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[125] For a discussion of Elizabeth's relation to Helen, see Dekker, The Cantos, pp. 98-107.

[126] The second parenthesis does not close. Massimo Bacigalupo relates the stone goddess to Helen of Tyre, Cunizza, and Martinelli-Undine: "Helen is his undine or pilot fish (see C. 80), guiding him to the secrets of Venus and of Gnosticism," The Formed Trace: The Later Poetry of Ezra Pound (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 282-283

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cave and hill with sublime, if still immobile and distant, feminine beauty: "Mist covers the breasts of Tellus-Helena and drifts up the Arno" (pp. 468, 473).

From this suggestion of the landscape, Pound remembers the mythologem of Helen's breasts in Canto 79, "as from the breasts of Helen, a cup of white gold/ 2 cups for three altars. Tellus gêa feconda" (p. 487).[127] The second reference to this tale of Pliny's[128] is much later, in Canto 106 (p. 752):

> How to govern is from the time of Kuan Chung
> but the cup of white gold at Patera
> Helen's breasts gave that.

This contrast of the order of good government with the breast-cup, the gift of a paradisiacal beauty, implies that inspiration is from the giving feminine rather than from even the most respected authorities. The combination of gold, breast, and "measure" that implies both poetic rhythm and systems of order, excited Pound to heights like those inspired by the dream of tò kalón, but the breast-cup constitutes a material, tangible object, albeit fleshless and consecrated to Athene:

> When I read that from the breast of the Princess Hellene there was cast a cup of "white gold," the sculptor finding no better model; and that this cup was long shown in the temple at Lyndos . . . there comes upon me a discontent with human imperfection. I am no longer left in the "slough of the senses," but am full of heroic life, for the instant. . . . I have seen many women in dreams, surpassing most mortal women, but I doubt if I have on their account been stirred to more

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[127] Flory suggests that the three altars "which are to be paid as a fine (multa) in C. 79 are exacted as restitution for the suffering which their love [Rudge, Shakespear, and Scratton] for Pound has brought to all three," p. 206.

[128] For the provenance of this passage, see Eva Hesse, "Helen's Nostos: The Cup of White Gold," Paideuma 10, no. 3 (Winter 1981), pp. 585-586.

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> thoughts of beauty, than I have had meditating upon that passage in latin, concerning the temple of Pallas at Lyndos and its memorial cup of white gold.[129]

A Voyeur's Galatea. Eyes and vision have been signs of the erotic and aesthetic divine in Pound's work from the beginning; one credo repeated in The Cantos is the "Ubi amour ibi oculus est" of Canto 90. In Pisa, Pound again sees the goddess whose many forms inhabit The Cantos. A voyeuristic desire originating in distaste or fear of fleshy femininity sublimizes this deity by limiting her entire manifestation to pairs of eyes. Her appearance is called forth by the murmured lines of Chaucer, "Your eyen two woi sleye me sodenly/ I may the beauté of hem nat susteyne"--a liebestod motif (p. 520):

> Ed ascoltando al leggier mormorio
> there came a new subtlety of eyes into my tent,
> whether of spirit or hypostasis,
> but what the blindfold hides
> or at carneval
> nor any pair showed anger
> Saw but the eyes and stance between the eyes,
> colour, diastasis,
> careless or unware it had not the
> whole tent's room
> nor was place for the full Eidôs
> interpass, penetrate
> casting but shade beyond the other lights
> sky's clear
> night's sea
> green of the mountain pool
> shone from the unmasked eyes in half-mask's space.

This vision is composed of more than one woman, more than one pair of eyes; the differing colors suggest several women whom Pound had loved. The absence of anger is not the presence of compassion or

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[129] The pun on Helen/Hellene is in keeping with the topos of Greek beauty. Pound, "Poggio Bracciolini, 'Aux étuves de Wiesbaden,'" Little Review, July 1917, in Pavannes and Divagations, p. 102.

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kindness: he does not call the look in the eyes that appear to him communicative in any way. But the three natural color images are chosen from eternal or infinite phenomenons; the women's eyes are without anger because they have been appropriated by that sublime and interiorized goddess to whom alone Pound has always been devoted.

Ra-Set is one of the latest manifestations of this goddess, whose successive appearances are scattered through the later cantos. Her name is an amalgamation of two very ancient Egyptian deities, the sun Ra and the chthonic Set. Ra is the name of the sun, a visible emblem of God; he has a morning and an evening boat, and embodies the moral concepts of the victory of right and truth as of light over darkness. As Ra, she can be identified with the poet, whose childhood name was Ray. Set is an analogue of Hades, a chthonic king of the dead. In earlier dynasties he was beneficial; later his name was connected with evil,[130] an evolution like that of Lucifer and Dionysos. The name implies the welding of inferno and paradiso, literature and scholasticism, muse and anima, into a vision that no longer seeks to resolve ambivalences but to master paradox by illustration. Pound's linking the two names is in keeping with his Eleusinian religion, a blend of chthonic and celestial, sexual and sublime. But the feminization of the deities reaches to the oldest goddesses paralleling Aphrodite, at the same time as it rhymes with later goddesses, Persephone as well as Aphrodite, who are central in the later cantos.

Ra-Set moves through crystal as Nicea did through air. An immortal

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[130] These details about Ra and Set from Budge, The Book of the Dead, pp. cxi, cxvi.

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material, rock with the clarity of light or water, crystal is a metaphor for the content and the subject of immortal poetry, as were the roses in amber of the "Mauberley" Envoi. The "protection" of crystal is that of a Zeuslike authority, a triumphant apotheosis of the text (p. 611):

> The Princess Ra-Set has climbed
> to the great knees of stone,
> She enters protection,
> the great cloud is about her,
> She has entered the protection of crystal

Ra-Set rides a hieroglyph barge over crystal in Canto 91, "over deep sapphire" in Canto 92 (pp. 610, 618). Canto 98 begins with that muse's-boat-cum-Apollo's chariot (p. 684):

> The boat of Ra-Set moves with the sun
> "but our job to build light" said Ocellus: . . .
> Make it new
> Tà ex Aigýptou phármaka
> Leucothea gave her veil to Odysseus
> Chrónos
> pneûma theôn
> kaì éros sophías
> The Temple (hieron) is not for sale.
> Getting the feel of it, of his soul,
> While they were making a fuss about Helen.

Like Helen, Ra-Set is golden and Aphroditic. But here Helen's invocation again implies war and worldliness, buying and selling, opposed to the Temple, the soul, the god's breath. Helen's Egyptian drug, nepenthe, is perhaps also suspect, since it brings forgetfulness as well as healing. "To build light" and "make it new" equate with a secret feminine knowledge, like that borne by the blind and bisexual Tiresias in Hades. Again, a muse-rescuer is waterborne and gives the wanderer aid in his ocean voyage: the veil of the sea-nymph Leucothea, which permits Odysseus to bear up instead of drowning in that fluid feminine

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element she so comfortably inhabits. Leucothea's veil, like Ra-Set's crystal, is a metaphor for the poetic text.[131] Ra-Set is the spirit of that knowledge, a radiant feminine spirit moving through the crystal of the text.

The relation of the visual to the aesthetic and holy is expressed in the form of a goddess's statue that stares seaward, which appears in Cantos 17, 39, and 74 (p. 195):

> Flank by flank on the headland
> with the Goddess' eyes to seaward
> By Circeo, by Terracina, with the stone eyes
> white toward the sea
> With one measure, unceasing:
> "Fac deum!" "Est factus."

This statue is imagined by Pound to have been that of Venus.[132] The implications of the goddess' eyes deserve attention. She turns away from worshippers and looks toward endless water; her eyes are similarly not flesh but stone. Although she represents an ultimate incarnation of the immortal Galatea who immortalizes her Pygmalion, her position and her material reveal a double inability of the beloved to respond to the lover: the Eidolon and the idol are equally unloving.[133]

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[131] The equation of fabric and the written word is ancient: as Helen weaves the text/textile of the Iliad. Veils in particular signify a writing that hides feminine mystery, as illustrated especially well in the glyph-inscribed seventh veil that covers Moreau's Salomé.

[132] However, originally, a temple at Terracina was dedicated to a pre-Roman goddess, Feronia, identified as a prototype of Circe and assimilated to Koré. Slaves were brought to her temple for a rite of manumission: did Pound know this when bringing in the story of Cunizza?

[133] The theme of the creation of beauty and divinity by the poet is particularly well explicated by Leon Surette, who gathers these facts and conjectures concerning the statue of Feronia, p. 48. See also Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 46: "Elusive, fleeting, and baffling as

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At last the statue and the poem are equated. The most significant revelation of the later cantos is contained in Canto 104's declaration that "The Production IS the beloved" (p. 742). Pound has come to recognize the work of art itself as his Helen, a beloved object, a beautiful thing, mortal but with a chance to become immortal.[134] Pound has always despaired that tò kalón sent him only her handmaids; but he at last admits that those handmaids are themselves the best loved of the poet, his own imagination, the white Galateas of the text that he alone inscribes.

Still he continues to complain that "les hommes on je ne sais quelle peur étrange . . . de la beauté." The reason for that fear is linked with death: beauty is so difficult that an artist may die before conveying "his hit." In The Pisan Cantos and later cantos, he invokes the company of artists who filled his youth, with the refrain "Beauty is difficult," a statement of Aubrey Beardsley to W. B. Yeats, who asks in Canto 80 (p. 511) "why he drew horrors"

> or at least not Burne-Jones
> and Beardsley knew he was dying and had to
> make his hit quickly

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it is, that non-object [the rejected "bad object," the abject] can be grasped only as a sign. It is through the intermediary of a representation, hence a seeing, that it holds together. A visual hallucination that . . . represents the subject's desire. For the absent object, there is a sign. For the desire of that want, there is a visual hallucination. . . . Voyeurism accompanies the writing of abjection." Unusually resistent to self-abjection, Pound at Pisa, forced into abjection and in the most abject surroundings, sees the most divine hallucination of the desired object.

[134] See Susan Gubar, "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," Writing and Sexual Difference, pp. 73-93, for a list of other writers who read text as woman, woman as text.

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hence no more B-J in his product.

So very difficult, Yeats, beauty so difficult.

I believe the difficulty of creating beauty was, for Pound, inherently the hell of the artist; for Pound, especially, who could not control his anxiety at the thought of an eternal death and the Lethe to which Sappho doomed those ignorant of Pierian roses. Pound expressed his need to win immortality by hardening the text into crystal, trading Helen's fleshly breast for a golden measure, expounding methods for the control of gold so that it returns to the creation of beauty instead of causing destruction. But the beauty of paradise, he seems at last to realize, is not the artist's creation, although the function of poetry remains to draw that paradise around earthly existence. As another refrain from Pisa suggests: "Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel"[135]; and in Canto 74, he adds, "but spezzato [broken] apparently/ it exists only in fragments . . ." (p. 438). Not artificial, paradise cannot be created but only perceived, in sporadic flashes like the scattered body of the goddess, the echoing names of Helen; hence the overwhelming visuality of Pound's goddess <u>tò kalón</u>, and his final relegation of the task of creating paradise to the voice of the natural wind.

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[135] <u>Cantos</u>, p. 468. The line tropes Baudelaire's <u>Les Paradis Artificiels</u>.

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Chapter 4. H. D.: Helen as the Self

All Greece hates
the still eyes in the white face[1]
H. D.
"Helen"

H. D.'S HELEN STANDS as a major figure of modern revisionary myth-making, far more than simply a contrast to the Helens of Yeats and Pound. H. D. gave voices to many familiar mythic figures with an insight and authority of experience accessible to few earlier writers. At the same time, her poems also responded, continually and deeply, to the many contemporary renewals of ancient myth. From these personal and interactive sensitivities, she produced fresh versions that both preserved ancient traditions and initiated new meanings. Of the many figures her revising vision touched--Eurydice, Penelope, Calypso, and others--the myths of Helen reflect H. D.'s deepest concerns.

Yeats created a monumental, ageless, heroic Helen. She is a form of Eidolon, a Muse who mothers heroes, but who also demands vast sacrifice of lives: the great statue with a glowing flame inside of his mystic vision with Maud Gonne. Pound, well aware that Gonne was the model for Yeats, created a more distant Helen out of literary texts, from art and poetry, a patchwork creation as frustratingly difficult of access as a flame under water. H. D. could not accept these precedent

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[1] H. D., "Helen," Collected Poems 1912-1944, ed. Louis L. Martz (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 154. Hereafter abbreviated CP.

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Helens. Where Yeats saw an imperious queen, H. D. saw a soul struggling in desperation for her own sovereignty; where Pound saw a flickering goddess, she saw a priestess of a lost or newly-born religion. While Yeats himself was shattered by Helen, and Pound perceived Helen in fragments, she attempted to restore both self and Helen to wholeness.

H. D.'s output was enormous and of exceptional interest: from her semi-autobiographical fiction, with its fascinating portraits of Pound, Lawrence, Bryher, and other artists and writers, to the memoir of analysis with Freud; from the perfection of the early Imagist poems to the passionate long sequences of her last years. Because of the strength of her vision and the perfections of her style, she has influenced many contemporary poets, from Adrienne Rich and Judy Grahn to Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan. In addition, H. D.'s poetry and prose has received much critical attention in the last ten years, largely from feminist critics. Their effort has been largely responsible for reviving H. D. from what Susan Stanford Friedman calls "burial" by critics.[2] Two biographies tell her story, drawing from her novels, memoirs, romans á clef, and letters; several books and articles examine

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[2] Susan Stanford Friedman, "Who Buried H. D.? A Poet, Her Critics, and Her Place in the 'Literary Tradition,'" College English 36, no. 7 (March 1975), pp. 801-814. For example, Douglas Bush, in Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry (New York: Norton, 1963), pp. 497-506, seems to have prejudiced his perception of her work by misunderstanding her versions of Euripidean choruses. His expectation of accurate translation rather than poetic imitation now seems as far astray as his inability to retain line or image from her work. "What is one to say of a kind of beauty which vanishes the moment one's eye leaves the page?" he writes; it is the same problem of which he complains in Swinburne.

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her writings.[3]

Helen appears in various guises throughout H. D.'s work, as the poet searches within herself and her past for a lost or elusive identity, for humanity and immortality. In this personal and spiritual quest, H. D. reevaluates in particular the myths of women and their processes of psychic growth and survival. In her chief classical sources--Homer, Sappho, and Euripides--Helen's figure bears as much unresolved conflict as H. D.'s life did. H. D.'s versions of Helen's myths are among the most detailed and responsive in modern poetry because of her attempt to integrate and understand the details of her own history. H. D.'s difficult search for this interiorized muse or exteriorized self is documented in Tribute to Freud and End to Torment, where the poet associates her mother with an inspirational Helen. Again, the theories of Kristeva offer ideas explaining H. D.'s identi-

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[3] Friedman's critical monograph, Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H. D. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), is superior to the two biographies but primarily offers readings of the poetry in terms of psychoanalytic influences. Barbara Guest's Herself Defined: The Poet H. D. and her World (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1984) is full of fascinating detail, but the effort of biography seems to have caused the author to lose taste for her subject. Janice S. Robinson's H. D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982) erroneously argues a sensationalistic case, assigning Lawrence the paternity of Perdita; the truth, which seems to have been sufficiently well documented, is that her father was Cecil Gray. Other errors have accompanied this flourishing of critical reevaluation; as, for example, when Friedman and Rachel Blau du Plessis try to take H. D. for a Lesbian or feminist version of Ezra Pound; see "'I Had Two Loves Separate': The Sexualities of H. D.'s Her," Montemora 8 (1981), pp. 7-30. Earlier studies by Thomas Swann (The Classical World of H. D. [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962]) and Vincent Quinn (Hilda Doolittle [New York: Twayne, 1967]) are still useful.

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fication of mother and Muse.[4] Although Kristeva cites only male writers, H. D.'s Swinburnian model places her firmly in the list of mother-focused poets.

The emotional powers of language--Kristeva's maternal, semiotic realm--are rhythm, rhyme, and the "musical" qualities of the sound of its signifiers. It is in this function that the Muse assists the poet: daughter of memory, she makes available the multitudinous possibilities of meter, assonance, vocabulary, epithet, which permit a steady flow of song. The music of poetry is the Muse's voice, the mother's voice, interiorized, transformed, expanded. So the poet Stesichorus was blinded when he accused Helen of evil, and his sight returned when he absolved her of wrong by splitting her myth in two: the true, faithful wife Helen never went to Troy, but hid in Egypt; the evil Helen who "caused the war" was a phantom, an Eidolon, created by vengeful gods. Sappho alone among the ancients both accepts Helen's elopement for love and justifies, even condones, her choices and actions.

True to the Sapphic model, H. D. required a feminine muse. However, as a daughter she found it necessary to complete for this muse-mother with brothers and with male poets: "Thinking of Ezra's work, I recall my long Helen sequence. Perhaps, there was always a challenge in his creative power. Perhaps even . . . there was unconscious--really unconscious--rivalry."[5] Bisexual attractions added to the confusion of her search: the autobiographical novel HERmione

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[4] See Chapter 3, pp. 8-9; Kristeva, "From One Identity to an Other," Desire in Language, p. 136.

[5] End to Torment, p. 41.

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relates the young poet's struggles with family, sexuality, and art, as she chooses between becoming the muse of her fiancé or adopting a young woman as her own muse.

Vulnerable and intense, H. D. moved in a world of disconcertingly powerful and influential men and women. Biographers and critics have identified the various lovers of her Egyptian Helen--Achilles, Paris, Theseus, heroes who challenge, advise, console, and defy her--with Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Richard Aldington, Sigmund Freud, and others. Many men became her mentors or "initiators," but they also inspired the poet to imagine an héro fatal figure parallel to the femme fatale of the decadents. Like those fatal women, these men were dangerous to both themselves and the poet. Their advice was qualified by sexist preconceptions and the need to control; their initiations included assumptions and demands that left her at last more hindered than inspired.

Often, she found that women alone would fulfill basic needs and permit her a full freedom for her writing. Her friend in adolescence, Frances Gregg remained important to her for decades. More important still was Bryher, a novelist active in the Lesbian artistic communities that flourished in Paris between the wars. Bryher's lifelong love for H. D. not only led to dramatic rescues from death and despair but provided the daily resources for a life in poetry. At last, H. D. decided that the poet must become her own Muse, both in order to rescue the héro fatal from self-destruction and to reclaim her identity from his imposed conceptions, from making her his victim, from being victimized by his desire.

Through her many years of active poetic activity, H. D. evolved

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the figure of Helen from a sacrificial maiden, to a symbol of threatened but indestructible beauty, to an adult woman armed with knowledge and occult powers, to a rejuvenated Virgo. A freedom transcending the limitations of sexual roles, family positions, and personal isolation is created by the psychic metamorphoses and journeys of H. D.'s Helen, as myth blends with myth, child with lover, muse with poet, self with beloved. Helen achieves her most moving human form as well as a renewed and deepened divinity by the strength of H. D.'s identification with her figure.

Mythos

Conceiving Helen

The extent of H. D.'s identity with Helen is all but unprecedented in the fortunes of the myth. It required the poet not only to defend Helen's adultery but to relive and acknowledge the heady excitement of war as an expression and liberation of woman's power; not only to condemn her rape but to understand its place in a power scheme that included Iphigenia's self-sacrifice and Clytemnestra's vengeful murder. These are not easy revelations: Sappho accepted Helen's full human significance and defended her, but Stesichorus and Euripides found it necessary to "split off" the good from the evil image of the beautiful woman. Only Homer's texts demonstrate her humanity as clearly as her divinity. H. D., for the first time in modern poetry, attempts to heal Helen's split between good and evil, to balance human and divine, and so to create a unified psyche for both the mythic character and herself.

Euripides and Sappho. The Greek classics provided H. D. with far more

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than inspiration for her clean Imagist lines. Both the poets and the myths of antiquity became an extension of her aesthetic world. They were proof of poetic immortality and rebirth. She read them as palimpsests underlying her life in the difficult present. Foremost of those writers from the classical tradition with whom she identified was Sappho; foremost of those whose works she read as subtexts for her experience was Euripides. H. D.'s poems centered in Sapphic fragments[6] were published in the early 1920s, in the collections Hymen and Heliodora; her translations of Euripides[7] appeared in 1915-20. Both are, of course, primary revisionists of Homer's Helen. H. D. would incorporate both the Sapphic and Euripidean elements into Helen in Egypt, as if the classical texts were versions of psychic experience for her heroine.

H. D. found Euripides especially close to her own imagination. It may be that she recognized his "concern with eros and with women, with

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[6] In CP, "Fragment 113" ("Neither honey nor bee for me"), p. 131; "Fragment Thirty-six" ("I know not what to do:/ My mind is divided"), pp. 165-168; "Fragment Forty" ("Love . . . bitter-sweet"), pp. 173-175; "Fragment Forty-one" (". . . thou flittest to Andromeda"), pp. 181-184; "Fragment Sixty-eight" (". . . even in the house of Hades"), pp. 187-189.

[7] As Swann summarizes (pp. 4-5): "Among ancient writers from whom H. D. drew her inspiration, Euripides deserves first place. In addition to choruses from his Iphigenia in Aulis, Bacchae, and Hecuba, she translated an entire play, his Ion, in the introduction to which she classed him with Aeschylus and Sophocles as one of the world's three greatest dramatists. She wrote an original verse play, Hippolytus Temporizes, on the subject he had treated in his Hippolytus, and four of her short poems, 'Phaedra,' 'Hippolytus Temporizes,' 'She Rebukes Hippolytus,' and 'She Contrasts Herself with Hippolyta,' describe characters who appear in the Euripidean drama." Selections from "Iphigenia in Aulis" and "Hippolytus" appear in CP, pp. 71-93; from "Ion," pp. 206-208.

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female sexuality and with female psyche."[8] Many of her male and female voices are drawn from his plays, Ion, Iphigenia in Aulis, Hippolyta, and of course Helen. Although the lines she quotes at the inception of Helen in Egypt are those of Stesichorus' Palinode, Euripides' play is central to her revision of the myth. Hidden Eleusinian mysteries at the heart of the play as much as the wisdom and virtue of its Helen make it in every way a precedent for her heroine. Helen's uncanny "rebirth" to her husband as well as the choral hymn to Demeter reveal a link between Helen and Kore that, to H. D., would appear as a link between Helen and Christ. Moreover, the heroine's rescue of her warrior-husband touches deeply on H. D.'s personality. She never ceased to romanticize beloved men into heroes, whom her love could not save from themselves, yet whom she was accused of victimizing.

In the twentieth century as in Sappho's time, men thought a line of ships and warriors the most beautiful things on earth. Sappho's work would lend her strength to accept the consequences of her actions for and against men's love, though leading to death, loss, or suffering as of "Phainetai Moi." H. D. finds no rebirth for her Helens or herself without a Sapphic Aphrodite's power. Sappho set a precedent for this mythologizing:

> The name of muse and goddess and of human woman merge, interspersed among these verses. . . . She imagined, for a moment, . . . that Atthis was a goddess. Because the sun made a momentary circlet of strange rust-coloured hair, she saw in all her fragrance, Aphrodite, violet-crowned, or better still a sister, a muse, one of the violet wreathing. . . . She constructed perfect and flawless the whole, the perfection, the undying spirit of goddess, muse or sacred being from the

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[8] See Zeitlin, "Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes' Thesmophoriazousae," p. 303.

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simple grace of some tall, half-developed girl.[9]

Notably, H. D. envisions sunlight as creating this vision, an apparition of deity in the girl perceived by Sappho. Light--from stars, fire, sun, or moon--always informs H. D.'s ideas of beauty and the spirit, whether she envisions the hard-edged sun of Greece or the children's candles in Moravian Christmas. Flashes from fires, metal, and the glance of an eye serve as signals throughout Helen in Egypt: it was Sappho who first weighed such things against one another in the poem to Anactoria.

Whether or not this imagination of Sappho's poesis has any basis in history, it is clearly a description of the process of mythopoesis familiar from the works of Yeats, Pound, and H. D. Ultimately, this transformed and transforming Sappho is a late romantic inheritance from the Pre-Raphaelites. The Sappho first received by H. D. was not that of the Alexandrine poet Meleager, with whose assessment "Little, but all roses" she debates in "The Wise Sappho." Rather, it was Swinburne who invented the figure of Sappho as muse and martyr for H. D. Swinburne and Poetic Identity. Swinburne has at times seemed the figure in the carpet in this study of Helen's meanings in modern poetry. His effect on Yeats, Pound, and H. D. has been striking, early and far-reaching. Yeats's relation to Swinburne was that of new king to old, as his comment on Swinburne's death reveals ("Now I'm king of the cats!"). Although Yeats began his career by echoing Swinburne's Pre-Raphaelite diction, he always veered toward overcoming tragic pain with emotional

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[9] H. D., "The Wise Sappho," Notes on Thought and Vision and The Wise Sappho (San Francisco: City Lights, 1982), pp. 64-65.

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aggrandizement.[10] From Moll Magee to Crazy Jane, Yeats offers no character like Swinburne's Witch Mother, a ballad Medea whose jealous suffering is unrelieved by imagination or voyeurism.[11] Similarly, the young Pound's ambitions, as much as his physical appearance, led him to adopt Swinburnian manners, dress, and, often, diction. Easily swayed by his artistic peers, as Swinburne was, Pound was disadvantaged by the angry temper of the times and his own temperament. He fell under the spell of angry misogynists who soured his vision of femininity and distanced his muses. At last, his fear of disorder undermined his sense of structure, and the "female" chaos he condemned came to inhabit his poetic discourse.

But the case is different with H. D. She was deeply and lastingly responsive to the themes and ideas as well as to the fame and technical brilliance of Swinburne. However, his influence on her has been disguised by the intense effort of the modernists to break with Victorian verse. It is true that, following Pound's lead, she joined in general condemnation of the lush language that was Swinburne's special excellence. Working with Aldington on classical texts, she pared and

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[10] See Jerome J. McGann, Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 106: "Swinburne expresses his sense of human impermanence without ever allowing the mood of pathos to slip away beneath the simultaneous perception of man's nobility and grandeur. Yeats is different. . . . Yeats concludes that these sorrowful eyes [of the sages in "Lapis Lazuli"] 'are gay.' But Swinburne would not put gaiety into man's tragic eyes any more than he would associate joy with a Lear . . . . this does not make Swinburne's image of man any less triumphant in his fate. . . . [But] you might reasonably be tempted to a certain dissatisfaction with Yeats's notion of 'tragic joy.'"

[11] From Poems and Ballads, Third Series. On Medea myth in this poem, see McGann, p. 85.

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purified her lines to approximate more closely the currently fashionable notions of Greekness. "'A rhymed, languidly Swinburnian verse form is an insult and a barbarism,' she wrote in the introduction to their translation of the choruses from Euripides' Iphigenia in Aulis."[12]

But once the technical progressions of Imagism were demanded and achieved, there remained more similarities in spirit and content between H. D. and Swinburne than we have been led to expect. Like H. D., he idolized Sappho and reinvented her verses; like H. D., he invokes Aphrodite, Artemis, and other powerful feminine deities. Swinburne's overwrought emotionalism, expressed by physical extremes, is deeply typical of H. D.'s poetry both early and late. Many of the poems in her first collection, Sea Garden, are inspired by a Swinburnian taste for violent imagery and passionate feelings. Further, H. D. inherited Swinburne's "comprehensive myth of poetry as salvation," toward which his "Sapphics" and "Anactoria" move and which he realizes fully in "Ave atque Vale."[13] Finally, both H. D. and Pound owed to Swinburne the passionate and morbid rebelliousness against Victorian morality that would assist their escape from Pennsylvanian provincialism into a new Old World of art and aestheticism. She would consider him, with Poe, among the greatest of poets, and came to decry the fashion of

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[12] Swann, p. 11; he is here refuting Douglas Bush's grouping H. D. with earlier aesthetics; Swann concentrates on her distance from the poetics of predecessors: "Far from echoing Swinburne and Wilde, H. D. reacts against them." Swinburne was no fan of Euripides, who for him represented an antiromantic, Socratic spirit; see David G. Riede, Swinburne: A Study in Romantic Mythmaking (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), p. 12.

[13] Riede, p. 74.

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neglecting his work.

Swinburne's pervasive role in H. D.'s initiation into poetry appears at every point in HERmione. Lines from his poems haunt its pages like subtexts for the unpleasant romance with George Lowndes (Pound) and the unfulfilled obsession with Fayne Rabb (Frances Gregg). George recites "The hounds of spring are on winter's traces" through heavy Swinburnian kisses, which "smudge out her clear geometric thought but his words had given her something" (pp. 72-73). They give her a new name: Itylus, son of Procne, killed by his mother to avenge her sister's rape by Tereus. Procne is turned into a swallow; her sister Philomela, whose tongue Tereus had cut off, becomes a nightingale. Itylus is a strange name for the heroine to assume at this point. But it matches the bisexual feelings of Hermione, who memorizes Swinburne's "Itylus" with Fayne: "O sister my sister O fleet sweet swallow, the world's division divideth us . . . Thou has forgotten, O summer swallow, but the world will end when I forget" (pp. 158-160). In her attraction to Hermione, Fayne has both the look of a Greek boy hunter and the "Curled lips long since half kissed away" of Swinburne's demonic empress Faustine (pp. 162-163). When Fayne betrays her by turning to the fickle George, Hermione feels herself at once as both the sacrificed son and the mutilated nightingale sister.

H. D.'s appropriation of the nightingale is significant at this early stage of her search for poetic identity. For Swinburne, the nightingale represents Sappho, as in his tribute "On the Cliffs."[14] H. D.'s identification with Sappho is clearly based upon a myth of that

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[14] See McGann, pp. 107-113, for Swinburne's nightingale-Sappho.

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singer that appears in Swinburne, and its effect went beyond using haunting quotations in her prose. As in "Itylus," the nightingale's death-loving and night-dwelling voice is in truth immortal and life-preserving since it represents memory, opposing the spontaneous natural Lethe of the swallow. Sappho's death by drowning in "the subtle tender sea" is a symbolic return to the immortalizing death-mother beloved of Swinburne. H. D. all but enacted that death in her troubled adolescence, as Williams's Autobiography records: she wandered into a stormy surf and was pounded senseless by the waves; friends "dragged her out unconscious and resuscitated her."[15] This incident reveals a conscious or unconscious participation in Swinburne's late-romantic myths of the suffering poet-muse, an acceptance on H. D.'s part far deeper than the play-acting of Pound. In "The Wise Sappho," she would write

> Sappho has become for us a name, an abstraction as well as a pseudonym for poignant human feeling, she is indeed rocks set in a blue sea, she is the sea itself, breaking and tortured and torturing, but never broken. She is the island of artistic perfection where the lover of ancient beauty (shipwrecked in the modern world) may yet find foothold and take breath and gain courage for new adventures."[16]

This image of the poet shipwrecked on an island-as-ancient-text prefigures the first setting of Helen in Egypt.

H. D. was confused and inspired--literally "bemused"--by the spiritualized bisexual temperament of Swinburne, his ability to create some of the most fully imagined great goddesses of his time, and his devotion to his vision of Greek poetics. "Isn't Swinburne decadent?"

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[15] William Carlos Williams, Autobiography (New York: New Directions, 1967), pp. 69-70.

[16] "The Wise Sappho," p. 67.

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Fayne asks Hermione (p. 164):

> "In what sense exactly decadent, Fayne?" "Oh innocence, holy and untouched and most immoral. Innocence like thine is totally indecent."

H. D. would engage the great contraries of human decency and divine indecency, innocence and experience, self-destruction and self-immortalizations for the rest of her life. Her inheritance of the late-romantic legend would not be cancelled wholly by a new allegiance to modernist poetics. She would need to enter and reform the fabric of that mythology in order to rescue herself from its decadent strength. H. D.'s myth of Helen is rooted in these Swinburnian elements: they are the point from which her search for humanity begins.

Poe's "To Helen". Much of this rescue effort required H. D. to reach into her past and traditions for new visions. She turned to the first great American Helen created earlier by Edgar Allen Poe. Ironically, his Helen's bright purity is unusual among the morbid and hypnotic lyrics that inspired the Symbolists and decadents.[17] H. D. had spoken and written appreciatively of Poe in relation to her conception of Helen.[18] His sublime romantic Helen-Psyche helped her to reconceive the decadent myth.

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[17] Although neither Pound nor H. D. claim affinities with the French poets following Baudelaire, from whom Swinburne derived so much of his sensibility, H. D.'s sisterhood with the Symbolists has been demonstrated by Heather Rosario Sievert, "H. D.: A Symbolist Perspective," Comparative Literature Studies 16, no. 1 (Winter 1979), pp. 48-57. See also Sievert's "H. D.: A Symbolist Perspective," dissertation 1985, New York University.

[18] Guest, p. 148; Swann, p. 10.

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Poe's image of Helen may have occurred first in a dream.[19] Her appearance reflects a number of mother figures, not only his friend's mother, Jane Stith Stanard (whom he called Helen Stanard), but also his mother, a young English actress who died when he was three, Elizabeth Arnold Poe. In addition, we recall the Gnostic double vision of Yeats and Gonne, and the figure of Liberty Enlightening the World:

> Helen, thy beauty is to me
> Like those Nicean barks of yore,
> That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
> The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
> To his own native shore.
>
> On desperate seas long wont to roam,
> Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
> Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
> To the glory that was Greece
> And the grandeur that was Rome.
>
> Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
> How statue-like I see thee stand!
> The agate lamp within thy hand,
> Ah! Psyche, from the regions which
> Are Holy Land!

Many of Poe's details are typical of H. D.'s beautiful women: the hyacinthine hair, derived from Homeric epithet; the statuelike presence, unmoving as if a tableau; the subjective description of a beauty in terms of literary memory. But Poe's feminized classical antiquity becomes for H. D. a locus of rebirth. The atavism of Poe's return "home" to classical perfection by means of the vision of a beautiful woman takes on conscious psychological depth in H. D. Her Helen figures become more recognizably the mother, then the self with a restored mother image.

The ship motif has been related to mother, muse, and Helen by

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[19] Poe, Collected Works, pp. 163-171.

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Homer, Sappho, Yeats, and Pound; it may signify departure or return, the body of the woman, the vehicle of song or of the soul. In Poe it is, exceptionally, offered as metaphor of an archaic beauty, suggesting of all things Dickinson's line "there is no frigate like a book." This ship is primarily textual, literary, and capable of transporting one "to lands far away" in a Romantic past. H. D.'s Helen in Egypt will encounter a mystic caravel, a ship leading from Troy to Egypt, from life to life, from text to text. While Poe's ship suggests, pathetically, a cradle or the cradling arms that hold a weary child, H. D.'s ship is at once of the lost mother and the wandering self.

H. D. dedicated to Poe the poem "Egypt" of 1921, as if recognizing that both had lost and sought to reclaim a Helen. Egypt, the source of Helen's drug of forgetfulness as well as of her hidden innocent reality, is a land of exile and experience, rescue and rebirth (CP, pp. 140-141):

> Egypt had maimed us,
> offered dream for life,
> an opiate for a kiss,
> and death for both. . . .
>
> Egypt had given us knowledge,
> and we took, blindly, . . .
>
> We pray you, Egypt,
> by what perverse fate,
> has poison brought with knowledge,
> given us this--
> not days of trance, . . .
> but passionate grave thought,
> belief enhanced,
> ritual returned and magic; . . .
>
> wisdom's glance,
> the grey eyes following
> in the mid-most desert--
> great shaft of rose,
> fire shed across our path,

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upon the face grown grey, a light,
Hellas re-born from death.

The reborn Helen-Hellas becomes a gray-eyed Athena. In an image recalling the mystical Shekinah of Exodus, she leads the lost children through a desert like a shaft of fire. The combination of Judeo-Christian and Greek elements repeats Poe's transformation of Helen into a Gnostic Psyche. H. D., too, identifies Helen and Psyche in Helen in Egypt. The wanderings of Helen, the labors of Psyche, for H. D. as for Poe, begin in the childhood of the poet.

Gods and Fairy Tales

H. D. has left several guides to her childhood and youth, in The Gift and End to Torment, in her novels, and in the special reminiscences of Tribute to Freud. The memoirs often reflect her poetry and confirm her mythologizing. Her brief analysis with Freud helped her to recover and interpret much material. These early memories figure, in classical disguises, in her later poetry. In addition, since her education and expectations were not those of a young man with a "calling," she retained powerful literary suggestions from childhood events. Among H. D.'s major poetic influences are her family and the religious beliefs of her ancestors. Where Yeats and Pound, who directly inherited neither religious or poetic ideas from their forebears, had to adopt traditions from folk or academic literatures, H. D. was born into the classical and occult traditions that she followed all her life.

Family structure was of primary importance in her fiction and poetry. Her family in childhood included, beside mother and father, three brothers, two older half-brothers, and her maternal grandparents,

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who were dedicated Moravians. In addition, there were several female ghosts: her father's first wife and infant daughter, and a full sister who had died in infancy. All were buried nearby; H. D. found the frequently-visited graves mysterious and disturbing. She also found the overbalance of brothers problematic.

As an exile in literature, H. D. would transmute family, friends, and lovers into figures of mythology, heroes, angels, saints. This mythologizing was not intended only to distance people because she feared them, although it certainly had that effect. But it also enabled H. D. in some measure to reinvest her life with the intensity of a lost family constellation, to eternalize the escaping and prosaic present.

> Adapting Freud's ideas to her own life, H. D. regarded her father, mother, brothers, and even the sister who died as personal prototypes for the men and women for whom she cared most deeply during her adult life. She fused Freud's theory of the family with her own notion of palimpsest, the 'superposition' of the present on the past.[20]

The palimpsest of the present, moreover, overlies a layer of mythic truth, an occult reality that provided H. D. with archetypes as surely as her own past gave her personal prototypes.

Ancient myth still lived directly overhead even in turn-of-the-century Pennsylvania. The names and figures of classical mythology were always present in some form in H. D.'s youth, from the children's games to the adults' livelihood, although she was not yet aware of their antiquity and depth. Her grandfather owned two alligators named Castor and Pollux, one stuffed, one alive. Her father was a noted professor of

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[20] Friedman, Psyche Reborn, p. 143.

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astronomy who went out every night "like a thief or an astronomer"[21] to watch the stars. Although the children heard Grimm's fairy tales at home, at school later they encountered The Tanglewood Tales, as well as "the usual school routine" of Romantic poets. "Perhaps," she has written, "as my father and half brother were astronomers the names, Venus, Mercury, and so on, were subconsciously potent, though consciously the fairytales were nearer."[22]

As her mother's given name, Helen is foremost among the mythic names H. D. heard in her childhood. H. D. chose for herself the name of Helen's daughter, Hermione, in her novel dealing with her early family life. Helen Wolle had been an artist in her youth: in the frontispiece of The Gift, she stands before an easel holding paintbrushes, above a dedication drawn from Poe: "To HELEN/ who has/ brought me home." The multitalented Helen was not given a chance to develop her "gift," although her brother Francis became a dedicated musician. She became instead the wife of a gifted professor.[23] Several anecdotes illustrate her life, which she spent running the Doolittle household and smoothing

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[21] H. D., The Gift (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 8.

[22] From H. D.'s letter to Thomas Swann (The Classical World of H. D., p. 10): "There was the usual school routine, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Swinburne out of school--and some of the Greek (derivative) of Oscar Wilde. . . . I read and re-read as a school-girl, The Last Days of Pompeii of Bulwer-Lytton--read Landor later in England. . . . I read a very little Greek and what possible translations there were." Swann reports that she had also read, although certainly not as a child, Pierre Louys' Aphrodite.

[23] See Friedman, Psyche Reborn, p. 140; Tribute to Freud, pp. 164, 176; The Gift, p. 21.

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her husband's path.[24] She favored H. D.'s brother Gilbert above the other children, and H. D. relives in Tribute to Freud her despair at this maternal separation and inaccessibility:

> If I stay with my brother, become part almost of my brother, perhaps I can get nearer to her.
>
> But one can never get near enough, or if one gets near, it is because one has measles or scarlet fever. If one could stay near her always, there would be no break in consciousness.[25]

Many word-games surround Helen as the name of the mother in H. D.'s poetry and prose. The associations are both positive and negative, exacting and contradictory: "Helen? Helen, Hellas, Helle, Helios, you are too bright, too fair, you are sitting in the darkened parlor, because you 'feel the heat,' you who are rival to Helios, to Helle, to Phoebus the sun. You are the sun and the sun is too hot for Mama . . . We must go further than Helen, than Helle, than Helios, than light, we must go to the darkness."[26] Not bright enough a flame for her poet-daughter, Helen Wolle Doolittle would nevertheless remain at

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[24] See, e.g., Williams, Autobiography, p. 67.

[25] Tribute to Freud, p. 33.

[26] The Gift, p. 58. Helle's name in this context provides another facet to the myth of the inadequate or injured mother that H. D. is sketching. Daughter of Nephele, a cloud-goddess, Helle and her brother Phrixos escape an evil stepmother's plan to sacrifice them by fleeing on a magical golden-fleeced ram sent by their true mother. But Helle is lost despite her mother's aid; she falls into the Hellespont and Phrixos continues alone. The ram's fleece becomes, of course, the object of the Argonaut's quest.

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the center of H. D.'s search to resurrect a lost beloved woman.[27]

The darkness of the dream was the realm, the laboratory, of H. D.'s father, who for his daughter was a learned and powerful star-master, a sky-father quite literally, and yet also a mysterious and suspicious character, associated in the child's imagination with thieves and murderers.[28] Although he favored his only surviving daughter, who took after him in various ways, at dinnertimes he usually focused, as Pound once observed, on "nothing nearer than the moon."[29] In The Gift she wonders if as a child she had related the fairy-tale figure of Bluebeard to her father, to whom so many female ghosts belonged;[30] as an adult, she may well have related her family patterns to the paternalistic domination of an Agamemnon and the sacrificed

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[27] Although Friedman believes that Helen-as-Helen Wolle did "undergo considerable transformation" and become her daughter's muse (p. 140), the image of Helen at the heart of Helen in Egypt suggests that the mythic figure continued to develop in H. D.'s thought until it became a persona as much of the daughter as the mother. While daughter and mother are one in Eleusinian mystery and other spiritual systems, including Gnosticism, H. D.'s most remarkable twist of the myth involves the identity of the poet with her own muse, both under the name of Helen.

[28] See Friedman, p. 144: "If the mother-archetype in a patriarchy always contains the potential of victimization, the father-archetype correspondingly incorporates the possibility of oppressive power, even violence. H. D.'s dream of her mother being raped by a father-figure and her nightmare of being strangled as a child by her brother are both psychological archetypes inevitable in a patriarchy."

[29] Guest, p. 17, quoting a letter from Williams to Pearson.

[30] The Gift, p. 7: "I can not say that a story called Bluebeard . . . actually linked up in thought--how could it?--with our kind father. There was a man called Bluebeard, and he murdered his wives. How was it that Edith and Alice and the Lady (the mother of Alfred and Eric) all belonged to Papa and were there in the graveyard?"

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maidens who underlie the tragedies of Troy and its aftermath. And yet this all-powerful figure was vulnerable: as Tribute to Freud records, he was once nearly lost in a mysterious accident, coming home dazed and almost helpless from a fall, depending on the children to lead him inside and nurse him. In analysis, H. D. remembered standing before him cleaning blood from his head.

It seems incredibly simple, and yet is not simple at all, to say that the daughter feels herself to be at once an extension and a rival of the mother.[31] A "break in consciousness" between the two is both impossible and inevitable, necessary in order to live and to continue writing, and destructive of both potentials. To fulfil her gift, H. D. had to turn from the mother's radiant visage, to face instead a nightmare. As The Gift relates, this nightmare once manifested to H. D. as an ugly python-Pythoness, a female snake-poet who could only be slain

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[31] The "extension" of daughter as mother is preoedipal, the rivalry an oedipal emotion, according to Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). "Preoedipal Mother-Daughter Relationships: The Clinical Picture," pp. 99-104, describes cases in which "the mother does not recognize or denies the existence of the daughter as a separate person, and the daughter herself then comes not to recognize, or to have difficulty recognizing, herself as a separate person"; and cases in which girls "seem to become and experience themselves as the self of the mother's fantasy, whereas boys become the other." The following chapter, "Object-Relations and the Female Oedipal Configuration," examines the daughter's rivalry with the mother: "A girl does 'turn' to her father, and experiences her mother as a rival. This change of object, however, is founded on a lack of change. It is based on a girl's relation to her mother, both as this has become part of her internal object-world and ego defenses and as this relationship continues to be important and to change externally as much as, or maybe more than, her relationship to her father. Moreover, this 'turn' cannot be absolute because of the depth of her maternal attachment and because of the emotional and physical distance of her father (now and previously). An oedipal girl, according to psychoanalysts, oscillates between attachment to her mother and to her father" (p. 129).

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by the sun, Apollo. The snake fixed her teeth in the side of H. D.'s cheek, thus mimicking her father's head injury. Could the poet have felt herself responsible for the injury to her distant father? Was she a dangerous, secretly ugly woman to those whom her beauty attracted?

Beauty was indeed difficult, as Yeats and Pound had discovered. But H. D. was forced to consider why it was so, not by drawing horrors as Beardsley did, but by becoming the horror to herself so that she could remain a beauty, could continue to create beauty, for others.[32] By confronting such fears and gifts, H. D. discovered the simplistic paradigm of Helen as beautiful woman to be full of hidden dangers and contradictions.

The Moravian Deity. The names of daughters also shifted from woman to woman in H. D.'s childhood. A long passage in The Gift recalls how her maternal grandmother, late at night, would be unable to identify the young Hilda, calling her by the names of her daughters or long-dead sister. During one of these spells, the child listened entranced while her grandmother spoke of secret rites and documents of the Moravian Church, lost or burned as witchcraft by the elder Brethren.

The Moravian Church, or Unitas Fratrum, whose services H. D. attended as a child, was established in the mid-fifteenth century. The followers of this deeply subjective Protestant sect believe in conduct rather than doctrine, hold love feasts, and sing many hymns in their services. Notable is their attempt to symbolize and practice sexual equality. The symbolic language of the hymns and liturgies must be

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[32] See Auerbach, Woman and the Demon, Chapter 3: "Angels and Demons: Woman's Marriage of Heaven and Hell," pp. 63-108, for related snake-woman, beauty-beast motifs in Victorian literature.

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taught to both men and women, "so that it could not be used against them."[33]

That H. D. preserved and developed elements of Moravian tradition is clear from her memoirs as well as from her interest in mysticism. Her unpublished novel about Moravian themes and characters, "The Mystery,"[34] brings Goethe to the old Moravian libraries in Bohemia to gather arcana when writing Faust. Denis de Rougemont lists the Moravians among Renaissance sects that inherited the Catharist heresies' "doctrine of 'radiant joy.'"[35] H. D. believed the sect was even older; she "repeatedly claimed that Moravianism had Greek origins."[36] She records that her grandmother told her

> that our church-beginning went back to the ninth century . . . and that there was a branch of the church that was called Calixines that had something to do with a Greek word . . . for cup, like calix is a word for part of a flower that is like a cup.[37]

The Calixines, according to "The Mystery," were an older, more aristocratic and scholarly group than the Hussites; "they were the cupbearers and upholders of the old Communion."[38] H. D. relates the cup motif to

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[33] Robinson, p. 83.

[34] Eric W. White and H. D., Images of H. D./ From The Mystery (London: Enitharmon, 1976).

[35] De Rougemont, p. 175.

[36] Robinson, p. 85.

[37] The Gift, p. 94.

[38] The Mystery, p. 49.

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the Grail, which caught the blood that flowed from the side wound of Christ and also gave magical food. Elusive subject of a sacred quest, the Grail can be equated to Helen of Troy and Helen of Tyre.

The sexual equalizing of the Moravians is reflected in their idea of Christ. "In Moravian tradition, Christ is one body, male and female";[39] he is husband of the human soul, which is female in both men and women. But the bisexual spiritual husbandry of Christ and the feminization of the Holy Spirit, as well as the use of the Virgin and Mary Magdelene to represent aspects of love, are only the surface appearances of the Moravian consciousness of a feminine deity. The sect had once focused worship upon the side wound of Christ, using female imagery and symbols. The "Side-hole" was hailed as both breast and vagina, from which worshipers suckled and were born. Believers who sheltered in the Side-hole were birds in a nest or bees in a great hive, both images recalling the most ancient great maternal goddesses of Old Europe.[40] Litanies of paradoxes resonate in certain hymns, recalling the epiphany of the Gnostic Helen-Barbelo in "Thunder, Perfect Mind." Children were placed in a red-draped niche in the side wall of the chapel, then lifted out, in a ritual rebirth from the Side-hole.

These maternal images are not the only feminine aspects of Christ and his wound used in Moravian worship. In one hymn, God the Father's

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[39] Robinson, p. 83. Her chapter "Imagism and Moravianism," pp. 81-90, compares the imagery and diction of H. D.'s early work with the lyrics of the church's hymns, which she would have known in childhood.

[40] Gimbutas, Chapter 7, "Mistresses of Waters: the Bird and Snake Goddess," pp. 112-151.

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daughter-in-law appears within the wound. True to the Aphroditic type, she wears "clothing of wrought gold." The Side-Hole was celebrated with a violent erotic intensity: "I see still, how the soldier fierce/ Did thy most lovely Pleura pierce,/ That dearest Side-hole!"[41] The figure of Flaubert's Helen of Tyre, the goddesses of torture that Swinburne sang, are foreshadowed in the language of this eighteenth-century translation. "It is as if," writes Robinson, "the sacrifice of the Son of God has been replaced by the sacrifice of the daughter."[42]

A sacrificed holy daughter appears as Helen in H. D.'s poem "Helen," which could be called an "Ecce Mulier" scene. Although Helen of Tyre, that sacred masochist of heretics, is not named explicitly in H. D.'s writings, her knowledge of this and related figures was determined in part by models from Moravian symbolism. Such gory religious eroticism may also explain H. D.'s early and persisting fascination with Swinburne. But the themes in H. D.'s poetry work toward not a decadent longing for death so much as an ecstatic mysticism of renewal and rebirth. Her late poem "Esperance" blends the Sapphic and Swinburnian to present a Helen as sacrifice who bids her child "take life afresh and if you must/ so slay me."[43] And she writes in "The Mystery," her hero addressing Count Zinzendorf:

> Your Mysticism is naturally repulsive to men, who would at all costs elevate the Father above all, and above all, above the Mother. . . . You worshipped the Wounds of Our Lord--the

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[41] Robinson, p. 88; from a 1749 tranlation of Moravian hymns.

[42] Robinson, p. 89.

[43] Hermetic Definition, p. 117.

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> Wound *in excelsis* in Our Lord's side, as the *rosa mystica*.
> This, my friend, is gross and scandalous mysticism, as the
> Protestant Court decided.
> But Louis, your proscribed Aves reached Heaven,
> They have heard you and they sent Our Lady to us.[44]

As naturally as the first-century Gnostics, H. D. would combine Greek, Christian, and Oriental myth to create a new and deeper Helen. Her Moravian Helen suffers and demands bisexual sacrifice, but offers a spiritual rebirth.

Hamadryad and Hermaphrodite

The theme of sacrifice is inextricably linked to poetry in H. D.'s life. Loss was inevitable for the young woman. To have remained within the family and its expectations would have entailed joining her mother in renunciation of her gifts. She decided instead to leave mother and motherland, but would spend most of her adult life following a lost primal music. In addition, she would continue to need passionate heterosexual attractions to stimulate her, to renew the quest. The lost beloved became for her an ecstatic and hermaphroditic figure, like the Moravian Christ. But her love for men often entailed losses of self-definition or assurance, which she would then seek to restore by her intense song. By this repeated pattern, her writing provided a way to survive both losses, of self and other, losses that were at the same time the subject of her verse.

A poem inspired by Sappho illustrates these cruxes of desire most clearly. In Fragment Thirty-six, "I know not what to do:/ My mind is divided," H. D. finds a choice between poetry and sexual activity:

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[44] *The Mystery*, p. 57.

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I know not what to do,
my mind is reft:
is song's gift best?
is love's gift loveliest?
I know not what to do,
now sleep has pressed
weight on your eyelids.[45]

The passion of her dedication to song is expressed in terms of an oceanic rhythm and dawn imagery: "sound surging upon sound/ makes my brain blind"; "will the sound break,/ rending the night/ with rift on rift of rose/ and scattered light?" The two desires are pictured as "white wrestlers/ standing for a match,/ ready to turn and clutch/ yet never shake muscle nor nerve nor tendon." Similarly, the poet lies quiet, seeming at rest but deeply agitated. These metaphors recall a primal scene,[46] in which mother and father have been translated into song and sexuality, and the observing child identifies with both, desires both.

Dryad and Witch. This double desire manifested early in H. D.'s poetic career. Her life in the art, like that of many other writers, began as the muse of other poets--primarily Ezra Pound, but also William Carlos Williams. Yet she and another young woman, Frances Gregg, would also play at bewitching one another with words. Their homosexual attraction gave them both prophetic and poetic powers more strengthening if not more exciting than the inspirations of her male admirers. Nevertheless,

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[45] "Fragment Thirty-six," CP, pp. 165-168. This exquisite poem, incidentally, resolves the difficulty of employing Sapphic meter in English by offering it in resonant fragments, such as the last line of its first stanza, quoted here.

[46] The classic parallel in Freudian analysis is the Wolf-man, whose dream of white, immobile wolves represented a primal scene. "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1918), SE 17, p. 33.

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if not for Pound, H. D. might never have entered upon the long exile in poetry that paralleled his own. Pound brought her books that she readily took to her heart, although she had failed to respond to the academic offerings of Bryn Mawr. William Morris, Swinburne, the classical poets, troubadours, modern writers--all of those early preoccupations so familiarly Pound's were shared with H. D.

But Pound brought Hilda into the world of the text in less inspiring ways as well. He romanticized her as we have seen, calling her by classical and romantic names, Dryad and Is-Hilda. Not until the end of her life neared did H. D. view the young Pound with a reciprocally intense romanticization.[47] Pound was at the same time suspicious of her attachment to Gregg, telling her that a hundred years ago both girls would have been burned as witches. But the young Hilda felt herself less a feminine nature spirit than the very tree itself; "Tree" is one of her secret names in HERmione. Hermione Gart's fear and distaste continually gain ascendance over her enchantment with George Lowndes. Although beautiful and exotic, "almost Orlando" when he kisses her, he is at other times "a hideous harlequin being funny on a woodpath." She wishes she could love him, but tells him "You're nothing, George. I mean precisely nothing." "George could never love a Tree properly"; and he "wanted a Her he called decorative."[48]

Hermione's mother has come between these two and also interferes between Hermione and Fayne Rabb. "Something crept, always crept between

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[47] See her description of their courtship in End to Torment.

[48] HERmione, pp. 66, 69, 74, 172.

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her and everybody . . . everybody?" (p. 69). Beautiful but distant, Eugenia Gart disapproves of the match between George and her daughter, and only her dislike provokes Hermione to express warm emotion for her lover. In comparison with the strength of ambivalent emotions that Hermione feels toward her mother and Fayne, George is indeed almost nothing to her. But his sexual and poetic demands, her mysterious and prophetic female friend, and her barely comprehended new desires are enough to change her life. Betrayed by both George and Fayne, Hermione undergoes a deathly illness. Her recovery is a symbolic rebirth that frees her from her mother's side. The web of these relationships forms a pattern of passionate friendship and erotic desire, betrayal and rejection, death and rebirth. The pattern recurred throughout H. D.'s life. When she began to reinvent the myths of Helen, these constellations of family and lovers provided new and deeply personal meanings for the familiar figures of the myth.

Enacting Helen. H. D. followed Pound to England despite their thwarted engagement and Pound's secretive lovemaking with other women. She ostensibly left home to tour Europe with Gregg but did not return with her. Pound took her briefly under his wing, but he had already arranged his engagement to Dorothy Shakespear. Shortly after Pound wed Shakespear, H. D. married Richard Aldington, a translator and poet younger than herself. Aldington would work with her on Euripides, fragments of Sappho, and pieces from the Greek Anthology. With Pound, the three would form the kernel of the Imagist school, that extended publicity campaign by which Pound launched several careers: Aldington's, Lawrence's, Amy Lowell's, and especially H. D.'s.

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H. D. arrived in an England prepared to adore the particular beauty of her face and figure. "Greekness," as Barbara Guest declares, was in style in the 1910s.[49] Of course, it had never gone out of style to praise the Greekness of artwork or woman, but "Greek" could describe different fashions simultaneously or successively: just as both Landor and Swinburne could be called "Greek," so both Hiram Powers' swellingly plump sculpture The Greek Slave and the tall, athletic Lily Langtry received the appellation.[50] It was at this time, probably, that the figure of Helen first reflected H. D. to herself. Not only was Yeats's presence a constant reminder of his Helen, a major poetic creation as well as an actual woman. But since life continued to imitate art, there was always a social demand for other Helens. H. D. found many admirers eager to offer her the crown so often pushed aside by Maud Gonne. Combining Pound's offerings of "Dryad" and "H. D.," Olivia Shakespear would christen her "Hamadryad"; the initials of Helen Dendritis are also present. The girl who called herself "Tree" in a Pennsylvanian forest had irrevocably entered Greek myth.

She would for a while enact the roles of Helen, poet, and muse of the Imagists successfully, until success and ambition began to curdle

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[49] Guest, p. 33: "She was also in fashion. Greekness was everywhere. People, not only those just down from university, were quoting . . . Homer. Sculpture by contemporaries was made with Greek curls. Sandaled or bare feet marked a complete break from buttoned boots. . . . Poiret . . . introduced dresses cut to resemble the maidens on Greek vases . . . . Hair was also loosely knotted and word with a band across the forehead à la greque. The body should be long, lean and willowy--very Hildaish."

[50] Lois W. Banner, American Beauty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 59-60.

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these mythic identities. H. D. found professional recognition as problematic as neglect. What limits of achievement and personality are proper to a muse? Was she less effective an inspiration when her own work surpassed the poetry she inspired? Was her physical beauty lessened for her lovers because of the beauty of her songs? The question is not empty: the memory of Sappho's beauty, too, suffered jealous denigration in the writings of lesser poets.

Professional rivalry between poets was not the only danger that H. D. encountered among the Imagists. Powerful men would influence her already complex sexual identity as well as minimize her poetic powers by appropriation and criticism. Most notable in her later Helen myths is D. H. Lawrence. Speculation still surrounds their relationship, which H. D. recalls with an intensity so great as to suggest that it was necessarily more of the imagination than the flesh, whether or not carnal contact was involved. He has been called her "male muse,"[51] and he provided an intense but restrictive inspiration. It is clear that his own Imagist work, like that of Aldington, was inspired by hers.

Always the sexual moralist, Lawrence criticized her work for attempting to portray masculine emotions. In Bid Me to Live, the Lawrence figure inspires but limits the heroine's production, rejecting an Orpheus poem but praising highly its pendant Eurydice.[52] Lawrence

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[51] Sandra M. Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 8, no. 3 (Spring 1983), p. 447.

[52] H. D., Bid Me to Live (A Madrigal) (New York: Dial, 1960), p. 51; a letter from Rico (Lawrence) to Julia (H. D.) reads: "I don't like the second half of the Orpheus sequence as well as the first. Stick to the woman speaking. How can you know what Orpheus feels? It's

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represented impassioned dedication to art, "the gloire," but could not permit H. D. to exercise ambisexual freedom within that passion. She recognized, however, that he himself practiced that freedom:

> Perhaps I caught the gloire from you. . . .
>
> Perhaps you would say I was trespassing, couldn't see both sides, as you said of my Orpheus. I could be Eurydice in character, you said, but woman-is-woman and I couldn't be both. The gloire is both.
>
> No, that spoils it. It is both and neither. It is simply myself sitting here, this time propped up in bed, scribbling in a notebook, with a candle at my elbow.[53]

The gloire, a word Lawrence takes from the name and golden light of yellow roses, is not Lawrence, but the power H. D. believed that Lawrence followed, manifesting as the self working in the most quotidian gloire of a candle. Each element of this simple description was important to H. D. In HERmione, Eugenia Gart is described as working in the dark so that her husband could enjoy a concentrated light on his studies. H. D. would finally outgrow Lawrence's influence and continue to search for that inspirational imagined other who would permit her to work. With her abandonment of masculine prescriptions, she might also abandon the old prewar Helen, a dependent seductress, for a new Helen rooted in that self-creating solitude beside a notebook and a candle. But she herself would be abandoned first.

The First War. The First World War, which left the London literary circles impoverished and soon widely scattered its artists, destroyed H. D.'s marriage as well, in a drama whose aftermath very nearly ended

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your part to be woman, the woman vibration, Eurydice should be enough. You can't deal with both."

[53] Bid Me to Live, p. 176.

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her life. Aldington had enlisted, becoming one of those battle-scarred officers who sought distraction from the realities of war at any cost. But his militarism as much as his adulteries estranged H. D. After she lost their child at birth, the marriage collapsed, although the two were not divorced until 1938. Its slow decline is detailed in Bid Me to Live, a roman á clef that took her many years to complete.[54]

The idea of Helen of Troy became increasingly powerful and unsavory during and after these years, to women as well as men involved in the war effort. Pound would mourn the loss of artistic compatriots for the rest of his life, sacrificed to "an old bitch gone in the teeth"; Yeats became increasingly estranged from Gonne's political activity, as she and her allies saw a chance to free Ireland while Britain's back was turned. However, one effect of the absence and loss of so many men from the workplace was a revolution "granting women access to both the votes and the professions that they had never before possessed."[55] In addition, the war dealt a final blow to Victorian styles of feminine restraint and passivity. But the darker side of this new freedom soon appeared:

> Because male artists believed even more strongly than their sisters did that soldiers had been sacrificed so that some gigantic female could sleep surrounded by, in Wilfred Owen's words, a "wall of boys on boys and dooms on dooms"; because they believed, with Hemingway, that a Lady Brett was a sort of monstrous antifertility goddess to whose powers the impotent bodies of men had ceaselessly to be offered up; and finally, with Lawrence they 'feared' the talents of liberated

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[54] She completed a first draft of Bid Me to Live, called then "Madrigal," in 1939; it was not completed until 1949. Its publication was delayed until 1960, a year before her death.

[55] Gilbert, p. 425.

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> 'poetesses' like H. D. at least as much as they admired them, the literature of the postwar years was marked by an 'anti-feminism'"[56]

which we have seen so markedly in Pound's postwar work.

This spirit of distaste and distrust was not lost on H. D., newly freed from a painful marriage. But she was not to be freed from the guilt of having lost child and husband, of having been self- rather than other-absorbed. Attracted first by Lawrence, then escaping his intensities as well as Aldington's miseries, she fled with the musician Cecil Gray for an affair which left her pregnant with a daughter, Perdita. Again, the old problem of who would become muse, who artist, arose, and she parted with Gray. Assured at first by Aldington that he would support her and the new child, she was stunned when a sudden reversal of his feelings made him retract his promises. To cap these losses, her mother's favorite son and her closest brother, Gilbert, died in France; he was soon followed by H. D.'s heartbroken father.

These betrayals, losses, and desertions by beloved men brought H. D. to a second, most dangerous crisis. She was left alone in her eighth month, ill with the epidemic pneumonia of 1919, in a London boarding house. As if in atonement for both her failures and her achievements, H. D. seemed about to be sacrificed to many of the oldest

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[56] Gilbert, pp. 447-448. She considers H. D.'s relation to war: "She revised and reversed the imagery Lawrence had used in his 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabacthani.' 'Am I bridegroom of War, war's paramour?' Lawrence's speaker had asked, and H. D. seems almost to have wanted to answer him directly. Tracing her own growth in an unpublished memoir called 'Thorn Thicket,' she declares mystically that 'the war was my husband.' And at the very least, if the war was not her husband, it was her muse--as it was Woolf's, Mansfield's, Wharton's, and many other women's." Yet again, however, if war was her muse, it was a limited and limiting one indeed.

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definitions of woman's role, of woman's limits.

Helen in Aulis

Rescue by Bryher. Toward the end of the war, H. D. met a young woman who so admired the poet that she had memorized all of Sea Garden, H. D.'s first collection of Imagist poems. Bryher, the pseudonym of Winifred Ellerman, was to become the most capable and faithful companion of H. D.'s life. On her part, at least, it was love at first sight; H. D. charmed, advised, consoled, and inspired her. In turn, Bryher appeared when H. D. was near death from pneumonia, moved her to a nursing home, and engaged a nurse. Like Artemis in Aulis, she seems to have saved the dying poet from sacrifice at an ambiguous altar of love, guilt, neglect, and anger.

Furthermore, the wealthy Bryher would permit H. D. access to enchanted landscapes, societies, and intellects. Bryher would enable her to live, write, and publish her work. A writer herself, author of many memoirs and novels, Bryher patronized other writers and the early art of cinema. She took H. D. to Greek islands, Egyptian tombs, and the Paris of Gertrude Stein and Sylvia Beach. She joined H. D. in exploring the possibilities of psychoanalysis with Havelock Ellis, and arranged for her sessions with Freud. Firmly Lesbian, she nevertheless married men whose company would free her from the strict control of her parents, and who would in turn be able to put the Ellerman resources to good use in the arts. The first of her husbands, Robert McAlmon, started the Contact Publishing Company in Paris, and published both women as well as Stein, Pound, Williams, and others. H. D. was an

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accepted part of this arrangement and of later households; Bryher even undertook the tutelage of her daughter Perdita.

The relationship was by no means idyllic. Both women were exceptionally difficult and demanding, manipulative or hysterical, selfish or maddeningly controlling.[57] Bryher was "Fido," H. D. "Kat." However, the balances worked well in terms of tender affection and loyalty, which both renewed constantly; the strain of poverty was absent; and freedom to work was available, abundantly. Writing was the overriding activity in their lives. When apart, they sent daily letters to one another. As Guest summarizes their lives together,

> [Bryher's] extravagance would be in centering her life around H. D. Next would be literature and traveling. . . .
>
> In return H. D. gave Bryher the gift of her genius, of her creativity, her temperament, her instability, her sorcery. If she found it necessary to escape from the domination of Bryher, she would always return. She relied on Bryher during her numerous breakdowns. Most of all H. D. helped establish for Bryher the atmosphere she so yearned for, that of the creative life. She wrapped Bryher in an aura of "sharing" the most important--to them--act in the world, far more than the sexual one, the creation of literature.[58]

In "Let Zeus Record," H. D. describes her companion, so different from her in psyche and physique (CP, p. 282):

> Sometimes I chide the manner of your dress;
> I want all men to see the grace of you;
> I mock your pace, your body's insolence,
> thinking that all should praise, while obstinate
> you still insist your beauty's gold is clay:
>
> I chide you that you stand not forth entire,
> set on bright plinth, intolerably desired;
> yet I in turn will cheat, will thwart your whim,

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[57] Many memoirs and romans à clef attest to the fireworks of this "marriage" and its various menages. See Guest, pp. 152-154, 183, ff.

[58] Guest, pp. 114-115.

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> I'll break my thought, weld it to fit your measure
> as one who sets a statue on a height
> to show where Hyacinth or Pan have been.

Beginning with familiar Helenic motifs--grace, beauty, gold, the statue on a plinth--H. D. turns to myths more suited to Bryher: the sexually ambiguous image of an adolescent flower deity, or the more masculine rustic god Pan. Yet later in the same long poem, H. D. dedicates to Bryher the image of a "star, steel-set," that "keeps lone and frigid tryst/ to freighted ships, baffled in wind and blast" (CP, p. 284). The star aiding mariners returns to an aspect of Helen far removed from epic beauty and tragedy. It best expresses the loyalty that remained Bryher's ineradicable beauty. There would be husbands and lovers, but no one would come between the women; Bryher would remain in spirit by the side of her beloved H. D. until death.

Pound had been a primary power motivating H. D.; Aldington, a fine critic of H. D.'s first poems and translations; Lawrence, an impassioned reviser of her life. But Bryher, for all her difficult, intellectual, childish character, became H. D.'s most effective mother substitute, a woman who believed that women's work was to be supported, preserved, and admired. She has been called Napoleonic;[59] H. D. came to feel and behave with her like an "old cat, it wants its mat, its dish, its owners";[60] and yet she found her difficult freedom to write, a freedom compromised by Pound and Aldington.

Cinema. One of the arts avidly supported by Bryher and H. D. was the

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[59] The observation is Thorton Wilder's; Guest, pp. 115, 195.

[60] From a letter to Bryher; Guest, p. 195.

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newly developing world of moving pictures. They were introduced to cinema by Kenneth MacPherson, a young man briefly involved with Frances Gregg. MacPherson and H. D. became lovers, whereupon Bryher divorced McAlmon and married Kenneth in 1927. They started Close-Up, "the first magazine devoted to film," "an altogether opinionated, brilliant, amateurish, eager, entertaining, noncommercial venture."[61] It was an instant success and ran from 1927 to 1933. At the same time, MacPherson began making films, in which H. D. often appeared. The most important of these, Borderline, featured H. D. playing opposite the respected actor Paul Robeson.

The medium of cinema was poetic and magical; it turned women into goddesses, silver and fleshless eidolons, vast hieroglyphics inscribed upon a wall. Inevitably H. D. was compared to Garbo by the filmmaking and filmgoing group involved with the magazine. "She was too intense to move freely, with the same intensity as Garbo, whose body betrays an inner conflict."[62] H. D. identified Garbo with Helen in her column in Close-Up, "The Cinema and the Classics."[63]

> Greta Garbo, as I first saw her [in the film Joyless Street], gave me a clue, a new angle, and a new sense of elation. This is beauty, and this is a beautiful and young woman not exag-

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[61] Guest, p. 190.

[62] Guest, p. 200.

[63] This essay is the subject of the study by Mandel, "Garbo/Helen: The Self-projection of Beauty by H. D." She points out that "H. D.'s first impression of Garbo directly evokes the images of three beautiful women of her own creation: Helen in an early poem published in January, 1923, . . .; Hipparchia in the novel Palimpsest, published in 1926 . . .; and Hedyle, the Athenian mother of the boy Hedylus, whose name gives title to the novel published in 1927."

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> gerated in any particular, stepping, frail yet secure across a wasted city. . . . like some modernized epic of Troy Town is down. . . . [Joyless Street] seems perilously close to swallowing our Beauty. Helen walking scatheless among execrating warriors, the plague, distress, and famine is in this child's icy, mermaidlike integrity.[64]

She finds a purity of beauty in Joyless Street, Garbo's first film, that was lost in later pictures:

> The flagrant, Parisian, commercial "buyers" must disdain it. London could not . . . allow this performance to be broadcast. War and war and war. Helen who ruined Troy seems to have taken shape, but this time it is Troy by some fantastic readjustment who is about to ruin Helen.

This ruin is specific to Hollywood: H. D. was horrified to see her star turning into the old decadent, destructive woman. "A beauty, it is evident . . . must be a vamp, an evil woman . . . must be black-eyed, must be dark even if it is a nordic ice-flower." But beauty "to the Greek meant one thing. To Kalon, the beautiful, the good." Although she echoes Pound's Greek, H. D. finds distinctions in a subject that remained a confusing paradox to him:

> Beauty brings a curse, a blessing, a responsibility. Is that why your Ogre, the Censor, is so intent on disguising it, on dishing it up as vamp charm, as stale, Nice-carnival beauty-as-we-get-it-in-a-beauty-contest?

Despite the fate of tò kalón in the marketplace, H. D. proclaims beauty immortal and irrepressible. "Beauty was made to endure, in men, in flowers, in hearts, in spirits, in minds. That flame, in spite of the highbrow detractors, exists at the very centre, the very heart of the multitude." Furthermore, she is able to condone whatever destruction a repression of that flame may cause:

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[64] H. D., "The Cinema and the Classics: Beauty," Close-Up 1 (July, 1927), pp. 23-33.

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> Beauty, among other things, is reality, and beauty once in so many hundred years, raises a wan head, suddenly decides to avenge itself for all the slights that it has negligently accepted, sometimes through weariness, sometimes through sheer omnipotence, sometimes through cynicism or through boredom. . . . One and one and one, all stand as witnesses that once in so often beauty herself, Helen above Troy, rises triumphant and denounces the world for a season and then retires, spins a little web of illusion and shuffles off to forget men and their stale formulas of existence.

As these extracts show, the images of Helen in H. D.'s essay move from chained virgin, pathetic and victimized, in need of chivalric rescue; to triumphant, immortal dynamo; to a retired but undefeated spirit-spinner who shuffles away like an old woman or the third of the spinning Fates. H. D. is beginning to rethink Helen's myth, aligning its formerly monolithic but paradoxical dimensions with myths of multiple feminine deities, gods that manifested variously and yet remained whole.

The Professor. Before H. D. would be able to create her new Helen, however, she needed to deal with haunting memories and fears from her past, for her future. For several years after the First War and the breakup of the Imagist circle, H. D. was unable to come to terms with the structure of her life. She suffered visions or waking dreams, hallucinations that Freud would think rather dangerous. Her tie with Bryher, neither comfortably familial nor familiarly romantic, made her feel too secure and insecure at once. She had begun prose narratives but could not finish them; although she published much work and revised some novels, her slow and hindered output troubled her. To overcome this block, she sought the help of a number of psychoanalysts, includ-

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ing Havelock Ellis,[65] but failed to achieve an adequate transference. At last it was suggested that she consult Freud.

Her analysis, arranged by Bryher, began in 1933, was interrupted and resumed in 1934, and was over that year. She was one of the few analysands accepted by the aging Freud, then seventy-seven years old. As her memoirs show, she considered herself a special student rather than a patient. Tribute to Freud, which contains her record of their sessions, was begun in 1944 and published in 1956. A major monograph, Susan Stanford Friedman's Psyche Reborn, is dedicated to the influence of Freud and Freudian theory on H. D.'s work.

Although H. D. was to conclude that "the Professor was not always right,"[66] she learned a great deal from Freud. She came to call the unconscious "the Delphi of the mind,"[67] the source of oracular, poetic insight and inspiration, although one violent in its images and unintelligible in its pronouncements. In her sessions, she related childhood memories, personal myths, and dreams aloud to the old doctor, who helped her to integrate frightening and overwhelming imaginative content into her artistic life. She found acceptance rather than criticism for her bisexuality and for her poetic intuition; she was

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[65] Ellis, whom she had met in London, consulted with her in the 1920s; his notorious memoirs show that he, too, however perversely, fell under H. D.'s charm (Guest, pp. 120-125). She had access, also, to Bryher's sizeable psychoanalytic library. In the thirties she began sessions with her friend Mary Chadwick and later Hans Sachs. After her sessions with Freud, she worked with Walter Schmideberg and Erich Heydt (see Friedman, pp. 17-20).

[66] Tribute to Freud, p. 18.

[67] Friedman, p. 70.

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delighted that Freud asked her to interpret her dreams to him, rather than appropriating the role of prophet. Her return to childhood experiences revealed, above all, the role of her mother's love and prejudices in her need to write. A central insight in Tribute to Freud is the search for mother as for muse: "The Professor had said in the very beginning that I had come to Vienna hoping to find my mother."[68] In End to Torment, she makes the identification explicit: "But the mother is the Muse, and Creator, and in my case especially, as my mother's name was Helen."[69]

Freud is the prototype in Helen in Egypt for Helen's oldest lover, Theseus, a kind of god-father. Like Freud, Theseus bids her to be reborn, to return to the chrysalis; he is nurturing and tender in re-mothering Helen. But he sympathizes with the Trojans, with the walled city of bourgeois marriage, against the Greeks, who represent artistic, passionate bohemians. As Friedman elaborates H. D.'s conflict with the doctor, Freud represented "man against woman, science versus religion, fact versus faith, objective versus subjective reality, reason versus intuition, the rational versus the irrational."[70]

And yet Freud himself was not motivated entirely by rational powers. Nina Auerbach's brilliant Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth argues that he held to a particular late Victorian myth, in which a learned man affects profound changes upon a troubled woman.

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[68] Tribute to Freud, p. 17.

[69] End to Torment, p. 41.

[70] Friedman, p. 13.

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Auerbach identifies the myth in Bram Stoker's Dracula, as of the old doctor Van Helsing and his patients Lucy and Mina, and especially in George du Maurier's Trilby, in which Svengali hypnotizes the street waif Trilby into becoming an enchantingly powerful singer. Trilby has many of the aspects of Helen of Tyre. Her singing voice and her mutable essence recall the powers of the Gnostic goddess. She is often described as a sort of Eidolon.[71]

Freud envisioned himself, especially in his early analyses of Frau Emmy von N. and of the woman he calls "Dora," as striving to create new metamorphoses in his patients. His science is a potentially hypnotic and magical power, permitting him to invade and appropriate the woman's psychic state.

> From the beginning of [Freud's] life to the end, his clinical work with women was intensely affected by an essentially literary mythology. As a young man studying with Charcot he was so profoundly moved by a lithograph of the master in his clinic that he kept a copy all his life. The lithography depicts a rigidly upright Charcot explicating the bosom of a seductively sublime patient; the woman is supported by a bearded assistant, peering solicitously into her dress, who looks suspiciously like the young Freud. This prone, pliable woman psychically disrobed and recreated by the piercing eyes of men is the focus of a tableau closer in spirit to the popular image of Svengali and Trilby than du Maurier's actual illustrations are.[72]

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[71] "As simultaneous siren and angel, she haunts Little Billee as an image of infinite change: 'And little innocent, pathetic, ineffable, well-remembered sweetnesses of her changing face kept painting themselves on his retina; and incomparable tones of this new thing, her voice, her infinite voice, went ringing in his head, till he all but shrieked aloud in his agony' (p. 264)" (Auerbach, p. 18). Like Helen, Trilby has double selves: one an infinite and seductive goddess of song when under Svengali's power; the other the sexless sweetheart of brotherly heroes.

[72] Auerbach, pp. 31-32.

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Freud found in H. D. a nearly perfect subject for his mythic imagination. As Auerbach recognizes, "H. D. was not a desperate young girl, but a successful poet in lifelong pursuit of her transfigured self," so that "she approached Freud in the right occult spirit. . . . they seem to have been at one in their central aim: to metamorphose the woman's selfhood into an infinitely shifting myth."[73] The Gnostic image of Helen-Luna as an infinitely varied face shining from the windows of a tower prefigure this Victorian imagination of the power of woman to change unceasingly without losing essential selfhood.

An obvious source of this mythic intuition in Freud, and one that Auerbach overlooks, is the doctor's love of Goethe's Faust, which he quotes throughout his writings. H. D. herself calls Freud Faust.[74] The story of Faust and his Helen, especially as drawn by Goethe, were brought to H. D.'s attention in 1949 by E. M. Butler, just before the poet began her Helen in Egypt sequences, and while she was still composing Tribute to Freud. Butler's seminal study The Fortunes of Faust inspired her vision of a confused post-war Helen whose identity as spirit or woman is in question. Like H. D. in her own psychological crisis, Helen is "distressingly uncertain herself as to which of the two she is: the virtuous wife . . . hidden in Egypt during the Trojan episode, or the fatal beauty."[75] The archetypal myth of sage and

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[73] Auerbach, p. 32.

[74] Tribute to Freud, p. 145.

[75] Butler, The Fortunes of Faust, p. 234; see Guest, pp. 290-293. Guest records that Butler's novel Silver Wings was also influential in the composition of Helen in Egypt.

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maiden, of course, from which Faust and the innocent Margaret as well as the mystical Helen are drawn, is that of Simon Magus and Helen of Tyre.

And in fact, in her poem dedicated to Freud, "The Master," he becomes a Faustian mage in several aspects, including youth-within-age and wisdom in touch with God's own, while the poet is a student or disciple as well as a woman aligned with a feminine Natura. The patriarchal God still commands mother goddesses, whose turmoils he tames even as "the master" tames his disciple's ambivalent passions:

> I do not know what to say to God,
> for the hills
> answer his nod,
> and the sea
> when he tells his daughter,
> white Mother
> . . . to still
> tempest
> or send peace
> and surcease of peril
> when a mountain has spit fire:
>
> I did not know how to differentiate
> between volcanic desire,
> anemones like embers
> and purple fire
> of violets
> like red heat,
> and the cold
> silver
> of her feet:

"I had two loves separate;" the poet writes, but God "told the old man to explain/ the impossible,/ which he did." Yet the old man finally teaches her, despite himself, that "woman is perfect" by his refusal to argue mystic points: "'we won't argue about that'/ (he said)/ 'you are a poet.'" The poem ends with an apotheosis of this poetic and perfect womanhood that recalls both the Gnostics' and the Moravian's object of

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worship (CP, pp. 451-461):

> Rhodocleia,
> near to the sun,
> we did not say
> "pity us,"
> we did not say, "look at us,"
> we cried,
> "O heart of the sun . . .
> we are unworthy your beauty,
>
> you are near beauty the sun,
> you are that Lord become woman."[76]

For H. D., Freud was a magus who could transform her into a magically powerful being without destroying her spirit through his own greed for magical powers. Simon Magus was still needed to rescue and restore the fallen Helen, but H. D. subscribed to that late Victorian mythology of the incredible powers of the rescued goddess. "In Freud's imagination as in the fiction written during his life, the power of the magus is less that the self-creations of his prey."[77] Precisely because he viewed himself as a man of science, knowledge, and the rational spirit rather than of poetic imagination, H. D. could safely accept from him permission to exercise poetic power, to draw from the well where she had permitted others so nearly to drown her.

The Second War and After. And yet the drownings, repetitions of fear and horror, would continue to haunt her until nearly the end of her

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[76] The Rhodocleia character appears from another poem of this time, "The Dancer," which again uses the theme of "the sun/ born in a woman" (pp. 440-450).

[77] Auerbach, p. 33. Woman and the Demon draws upon researches into Freud's "responsiveness to the mythologies latent in his own culture," works by Lee Sterrenburg ("Psychoanalysis and the Iconography of Revolution," Victorian Studies 19 [December 1975], pp. 241-264) and Frank Sulloway (Freud: Biologist of the Mind [New York: Basic Books, 1979]) as listed by Auerbach, p. 234, n. 23.

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life. The advent of World War II shattered her nerves, as it had interrupted her sessions with Freud.[78] H. D. had remained in London throughout the bombings, a period in her life recalled in Bryher's memoir The Days of Mars and in her own war poems, published together as Trilogy. In postwar London she met another of her héroes fatals, Lord Hugh Dowding. Dowding had been chief air marshal and commander of the Royal Air Force fighter pilots during the Battle of Britain. A hero to the public, he was nevertheless stripped of his command, due in part to his personality, described as "remote, difficult, and self-opinionated."[79] Not surprisingly, he reminded H. D. of both her sky-focused father and her old love Ezra Pound.

Dowding served as her mentor for a new interest in spiritualism. Such mysticism was widely popular with those who had lost loved ones in the war. Dowding's son, a pilot, was killed in combat. In 1943, the bereaved father wrote a book declaring that airmen so lost could be contacted by mediums. Many Mansions "lists example after example of these happy dead-only-to-the-world airmen who were living out their

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[78] As Guest (p. 218) explains this continued psychic disturbance that psychoanalysis did not remove: "What did Freud do for her? He restored a dignity to her she had somewhere mislaid. Freud gave her confidence, not only in her work but in her dedication to her work. From this time on dates a freedom in H. D.'s writing that had not been there before. She is free to be the kind of writer she wants to be. Not that she will be free of her need of Bryher's encouragement, but she appears to have escaped a yoke. The yoke of Imagism. The yoke of perfectionism. The Bryher work yoke. She certainly was not freed of her phobias. She was not 'healed' as a person. She would need to have a psychiatrist in attendance all her life. And she would suffer a complete breakdown. It was her creative, more than her psychic, world that Freud helped."

[79] Guest, p. 261.

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lives on another stratum."[80] After attending one of his lectures, H. D. began corresponding with him, and the two met after she informed him that she had received "messages" during the war, presentiments of where bombs were to fall, as well as the voices of lost airmen. Dowding did not support her ventures into the spirit realm, and advised her to "give up her work" of seances and trances. She ignored his suggestion, and remained interested and inspired by occult versions of the after-life. She worked mystic themes into her poetry until the end of her life. Dowding and his spirit-magic became a touchstone, inspiring the unpublished novel "The Sword Went Out to Sea" as well as figures in later poems, notably the Achilles of Helen in Egypt.

The falling bombs and buildings described in The Gift, as well as the stress of war shortages and rejection by Dowding, led at last to another breakdown. In 1946, H. D. was hospitalized in a sanatorium in Lugano. Bryher described her symptoms to her when she was recovering:

> It is no question of sanity or otherwise, it is just that you, like hundreds of other English people, have suffered a terrible strain through the war and lost temporarily your memory.[81]

H. D.'s last years were spent between hotels and sanitoriums in Switzerland, recovering from a number of serious operations and the dangerous accidents of old age. She was comfortably provided for by Bryher and remained hard at work on new poems, long-unfinished novels, and memoirs of her youth and early life. The most important of these works was Helen in Egypt, but there were others to follow, long poems

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[80] Guest, p. 261.

[81] Letter of September 29, 1946; quoted by Guest, pp. 278-279.

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now collected in Hermetic Definition. Publication and recognition were slowly won with the help of friends, especially Norman Holmes Pearson, a professor at Yale. Pearson became her executor, and her papers and letters now reside at the Yale Beinecke Library. In 1960, she returned to the United States, to accept a Gold Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City. The day before her death in 1961, Bryher placed a publisher's copy of Helen in Egypt in her hands.

Knowing her so well, Bryher had sent her this advice before her American trip: "Don't repeat, you are too good a Freudian now not to examine yourself very closely for the reasons for repetition."[82] Yet H. D.'s constant examinations of her reasons were themselves an ecstatic repetition for the poet. She lived by these reenactments of the past, rekindling the flame that was Helen in herself. She continually imaged a great goddess in natural or classical terms, a mother whose presence both suffered with and saved her. She continually found men who wore "the usual star on the usual forehead"--heroes and beauties whom she loved hopelessly. Her last poem, addressed to one of these beloved and unattainable younger men, might have been written by a revenant Helen of Tyre:

> Why did you come
> to trouble my decline?
> I am old (I was old til you came);
>
> the reddest rose unfolds,
> (which is ridiculous
> in this time, this place,
>
> unseemly, impossible,
> even slightly scandalous),
> the reddest rose unfolds;

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[82] Guest, p. 324.

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(nobody can stop that,
no immanent threat from the air,
not even the weather,

blighting our summer fruit),
the reddest rose unfolds,
(they've got to take that into account).[83]

Neither the chances of war nor most inclement weather prevented H. D.'s reflowering in erotic desire. Without forsaking humility--the poem is titled "Red Rose and a Beggar"--she remained insistent not on her rights of possession, but on the beauty of passion.

Poesis

The themes of beauty and divinity, love and death, war and sexuality, filled H. D.'s poems long before she overtly began to use the myths of Helen. In "Adonis" of 1917 (CP, p. 47) she joins ideas of Greek and Moravian deities with the Helenic themes of beauty and gold:

Not the gold on the temple-front
where you stand,
is as gold as this,
not the gold that fastens your sandal,
nor the gold reft
through your chiselled locks
is as gold as this last year's leaf,
not all the gold hammered and wrought
and beaten
on your lover's face,
brow and bare breast
is as golden as this:
each of us like you
has died once,
each of us like you
stands apart, like you
fit to be worshipped.

The divine within a dead leaf, gold immortalized by its common ability

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[83] "Hermetic Definition," Part One, "Red Rose and a Beggar" (August 17-September 24, 1960), p. 3.

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to die, presents H. D.'s intuition of human-as-god.

Her belief in such mystical realities is more thorough than any of Yeats's or Pound's poetic deifications of self and others. She spends little time attempting to rationalize or intellectualize her insights. Precisely because she accepts her own espousal of an irrational mysticism, she is able to humanize the mythic figure of Helen. Yeats continually excused his occultism by appealing to poetry as its higher purpose; yet his great mystical system in A Vision is not poetry, nor was Gonne ever a goddess. Pound could not see real women for his habit of reading myths over their lives, but his work reveals an inability to focus and sustain even divine visions. H. D., by contrast, envisions the myth as human first, with the strength of a pious Moravian contemplating Christ, and so enriches myth, poetry, and self with a new and deeper sense of the divine.

Helen's name first occurred in H. D.'s work among her versions from Euripides. There, the allusions were the familiar condemnations, rumors of shame and blame for the cause of the war. After H. D.'s own frightening war experiences, she began to reconsider classical myths of women, in poems that give a voice to Eurydice, Kalypso, Demeter, Evadne, Penelope, Circe, and others. Inevitably, she returned to Helen as analogue for both herself and her muse, becoming a rescuing Demeter for a lost beauty that belonged to herself, the text, the world.

Further, she dramatized classical poets as well, extending the skeletal fragments of Sappho and others. She had always used shorter lyrics, or short lyrics linked into sequences. She preferred the metrical perfections and passionate emotions of Sappho for her classical

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mythic masks. But later, inspired by Pound and others' efforts at epic, she too attempted the longer poem. Yet even there, her voice remains essentially private. She writes a kind of personal epic in linked lyric, providing its own community of commentators and critics even as it populates a world with the mythic shadows of H. D.'s personal history.

Beauty and Poetry

Mystic and bisexual, H. D. unhesitatingly attributed beauty to both men and women; almost as often it is a quality independent of the human form. The word "beautiful" appears in her work more frequently than in Yeats or Pound; it may be that only Wallace Stevens among her contemporaries uses the word more often.[84] However, she uses the word in a different sense, redolent of decadent identifications, yet unique to her vision. "Orchard" in Sea Garden (CP, p. 28) reflects the Swinburnian sensibility that H. D. preserved despite the revolutions of Imagist poetics:

> I saw the first pear
> as it fell--
> the honey-seeking, golden-banded,
> the yellow swarm
> was not more fleet than I,
> (spare us from loveliness)
> and I fell prostrate
> crying:
> you have flayed us
> with your blossoms,
> spare us the beauty
> of fruit-trees.

The poet enacts Marsyas, torn from herself not by hearing Apollo's

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[84] See Thomas F. Walsh, Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963), pp. 27-28. There is as yet no corcordance to H. D.'s work.

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music but by seeing trees in flowers: her painful sublime attaches to a vision of Helen Dendritis. It is an imagist's idea of the beautiful rather than the semiotic beauty of Swinburne's lushly resounding verses; yet Marsyas, suffering for beauty, is common between them.

Following both ancient Greek and Petrachan convention, H. D., like Pound, at first used only certain elements of a woman's body in descriptions: feet and sandals, white breast, eyes--not so much color as motion--and garments. One of the early erotic images of woman in her work appears in "Hippolytus Temporizes" CP, p. 121) a chaste imagined vision of a woman's body as landscape--a paysage érotisé:

> (. . . her bones
> under the sand are white
> as sand which along a beach
> covers but keeps the print
> of the crescent shapes beneath:
> I thought:
> beneath cloth and fleece
> so her body lies.)

The description here is typical of H. D.'s sense of beauty: hieratic, clear, cinematic, its passionate intensity heightened by the restraint of diction and by an elegant memento mori. She usually invokes nature imagery--flower names, beaches, mountains, gardens and their fruits--to decorate, describe, or depict the human spirit and form. But a Swinburnian sensibility keeps the imagery from becoming simple realism while the clean poetic line and diction prevents the language from cloying.

Such intense and unusual contrasts embody for H. D. the paradoxes of beauty and emotional ambivalence. She longs to escape a "sheltered

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garden" for "a new beauty/ in some terrible/ wind-tortured place."[85] Even the hideous modern cities are capable of lifting a new people "through slow growth/ to a beauty unrivalled yet--," since in earlier cities "men could not grasp beauty,/ beauty was over them,/ through them, about them,/ no crevice unpacked with the honey."[86] This vision of beauty is certainly divine, but also powerfully ahedonic, austere, and ascetic.

Given H. D.'s exceptional vision of beauty, we can expect a most unusual approach to the figure of Helen. For this poet, Helen represented at once an aspect of the self, a power to be created and preserved, and an uncontrollable phenomenon outside the self, discovered and exploited by others. H. D. opposes the popular idea of beauty as pleasure frozen into an object,[87] making instead a beauty beyond both sensory pleasure and objective form. Yeats could achieve empathy with feminine nature only in the abject form of Crazy Jane. Pound remained at a fear-fraught distance from the undifferentiating feminine chaos, which nevertheless returned to claim his poetry. H. D. attempted the most difficult accession of a self-conscious spiritual beauty which, although modeled upon the expectations of the men whom she never ceased to need and adore, was at the same time set against their attempts to appropriate and control the women who fulfilled those expectations. Her Helen is a seeker and wanderer like Odysseus, but the landscape of her

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[85] "Sheltered Garden," CP, p. 21.

[86] "Cities," CP, p. 40.

[87] As of George Santayana; see Chapter 5.

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quest lies behind her own problematically beautiful face, within the mirrors of psychoanalysis and the mysteries of occultism.

Lovers and Murderers

"Iphigenia in Aulis". H. D.'s first references to Helen are drawn after the classical poet most sympathetic to her character. The choruses from Euripides' "Iphigenia" (CP, pp. 75-78*), translated by H. D. at the beginning of the First War, are studded with references to Helen. Many are negative comments like those that Pound had embroidered from Aeschylus' Agamemnon, yet her name is never as fully empowered with evil as it is in Pound's redactions. She is either a passive object, "Aphrodite's gift," or her choices, as reported by abandoned husband or outsiders to her drama, are deeply qualified by the speakers. A notable example is the "barbaric finery" of Paris, rich golden ornaments that Agamemnon claims were used to seduce Helen to elope. The same seduction, however, seems to have inspired the Greeks to sack so rich a city. Helen is not present to explain herself. In H. D.'s versions, the real action is taken by the goddess's appointed seducer or by the aroused warriors:

> Helen, possessed,
> Followed a stranger
> From the Greek courtyard,
> They would avenge this.

And

> Paris came to Ida.
> He grew to slim height
> Among the silver-hoofed beasts. . . .
> While his great beasts
> Cropped the grass,
> The goddesses held the contest
> Which sent him among the Greeks.

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He came before Helen's house.
He stood on the ivory steps.
He looked upon Helen and brought
Desire to the eyes
That looked back--
The Greeks have snatched up their spears.
They have pointed the helms of their ships
Toward the bulwarks of Troy.

A single dash causes the tale to jump from Helen's glance to the violent retaliation of the Greeks. H. D.'s slant on the story makes us forever uncomfortable with such long-repeated questions as "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?"

Yet Helen's blame is unavoidable, as H. D. revises Euripides' chorus to predict not only the outcome of the war, but the creation of the myth itself. Although "Helen, child of Zeus,/ Will cry aloud for the mate/ She has left in that Phrygian town," she will be held responsible for the actions of avaricious and vengeful men throughout the ages:

"Helen has brought this.
They will tarnish our bright hair.
They will take us as captives
For Helen--born of Zeus
When he sought Leda with bird-wing
And touched her with bird-throat--
If men speak truth."

The chorus of Chalkian women, in H. D.'s version, wish not that their children may be spared the pain of singing songs of exile and slavery, but that they might never "fashion such a tale" blaming Helen as the Phrygians will do.

In Euripides' play, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and the prophet Calchas are revealed as ambitious men, motivated by the power they fear and desire, in one another and the men they lead. However, when Agamemnon attempts to justify his sacrifice of Iphigenia to her and her mother,

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he calls upon a still greater mother--Hellas, who will be rescued and glorified by the deeds of war. Iphigenia goes to her death believing she will save her country. Helen and Hellas meet in the play as victims of political rhetoric. They are only excuses, masks for a patriarchal power system concerned only with its own balances and easily ready to sacrifice men, women, and children to achieve its ends.

"Helen". From this image of Helen's innocence, H. D. moved to a still more dramatic depiction of her victimization, in "Helen" (CP, p. 154). One of the best known of H. D.'s Imagist pieces, the poem appears in her collection Heliodora of 1924. Within the unusually still and precise images of the lyric are suggestions of Helen Dendritis and of the myth of Helen's death by hanging at the hands of the vengeful war widow Polyxo:

> All Greece hates
> the still eyes in the white face,
> the lustre as of olives
> where she stands,
> and the white hands.
>
> All Greece reviles
> the wan face when she smiles,
> hating it deeper still
> when it grows wan and white
> remembering past enchantments
> and past ills.
>
> Greece sees unmoved,
> God's daughter, born of love,
> the beauty of cool feet
> and slenderest knees,
> could love indeed the maid,
> only if she were laid,
> white ash amid funeral cypresses.

This Helen is a Kore, a sacrificial victim, treelike in her silence and appearance. The intense hatred directed toward her can only become love

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once the sacrifice is accomplished. There can be no rescue, as of Iphigenia by Artemis, since rescue would leave Helen unjustified.

Like the death of Balder the beautiful, Helen's sacrifice is inevitable, brought on by the very beauty of the victim. But beauty is not to be destroyed this way. As in the myth of Helen of Tyre, an eternal rebirth, a decanting from vessel to vessel, will preserve beauty on earth. H. D. had dealt with this theme in earlier poems; in particular, "The Tribute," from her second collection, The God of 1913-1917 (CP, pp. 67-68), describes the sacrifice of beauty in terms familiar from her review of Garbo:

> Could beauty be done to death,
> they had struck her dead
> in ages and ages past,
> could beauty be withered from earth,
> they had cast her forth,
> root and stalk
> scattered and flailed--
>
> . . . . . .
> Could beauty be caught and hurt,
> could beauty be rent with a thought,
> could beauty be beaten out,
> O gold, stray but alive
> on the dead ash of our hearth--
>
> Could beauty be caught and hurt
> they had done her to death with their sneers,
> in ages and ages past
> for a thrust of a sword,
> for a piece of thin money
> tossed up to fall half alloy--
> then beauty were dead
> long, long before we saw her face.

The images for beauty in "Tribute" are of wheat, the grain of Demeter and Kore, and of gold. "Stray but alive on the dead ash of our hearth" invokes at once the mysteries of Demeter's placing Demophoön in the fire, of the rituals of Eleusis, of the sacrifice of Iphigenia and her

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replacement by Artemis' deer. The thrust sword and the piece of money, of course, also invoke the crucifixion. Yet the victim remains feminine in "Tribute," and so keeps the image of Helen of Tyre above all, as late myth embodying all of these themes of sacrifice and rebirth.

In the later "Adonis," H. D. assigned the immortal gold of mortality to "each of us," extending her search for sovereign selfhood to a beloved and beautiful community. By this extension, she begins to envision a role that Helen in Egypt will enact. The poet becomes a priestess, intermediary between divine and human, an instrument of rescue and rebirth for herself and others.

Helen Armed

The Mother's Hand. For H. D., the divine rescue of a sacrificed Helen, a scattered self, could be effected--so long as the heroine is human--by determined speech, by a goddess-mother, by a priestess enacting the role of Isis or Demeter. H. D.'s search for rescue and rebirth resulted in poems giving voice to otherwise silent or shadowly feminine mythic figures. In dramatic interior monologues, dialogues with an unseen interlocutor, or disassociated debates with absent lovers, they review or revise their fates. These new voices speak in such poems as "Eurydice" of 1917, "Demeter" of 1921, and "At Eleusis" of 1923.

The rescue of self by a determined voice is powerfully imagined in "Eurydice," the poem that Lawrence praised while warning H. D. away from Orpheus. As if in response, H. D. creates a ghost who has saved herself, without aid from the lover who has failed her. In this remarkable poem, the beauty retained by Eurydice in Hades is stark and

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intense, a spiritual fervor in the underworld, that place where the sun goes when it sets. The songs sung by those who mourn and celebrate the lost Adonis have long been familiar; in "Eurydice" (CP, p. 55), H. D. attempts to hear the song of the Lost One herself:

> At least I have the flowers of myself,
> and my thoughts, no god
> can take that;
> I have the fervour of myself for a presence
> and my own spirit for light;
>
> and my spirit with its loss
> knows this;
> though small against the black,
> small against the formless rocks,
> hell must break before I am lost;
> before I am lost,
> hell must open like a red rose
> for the dead to pass.

The rose image combines Side-hole, Virgin, womb, and hellmouth, into a scene of resurrection, the Lost One rising like the sun into new life. H. D. stands firmly on the far shore, not of death but of rebirth, insisting that beauty is immortal not in thought or flesh alone, but in the ultimately subjective spirit. From this early point, H. D. has placed the rescue of Helen in the hands of the victim herself.

In "Demeter" (CP, pp. 111-115), the lost daughter is identified with Aphrodite and Persephone, while the mother claims that she herself is "the greatest and least," not to be forgotten or confined within the heavy marble of her statues. She rescues the abandoned son of Persephone and Hades, the Dionysian wine god Iacchus. She celebrates her own power, which has recalled her daughter, "mistress of Death," from his side. Her fingers, "wrought of iron," "strong to protect,/ . . . to break dead things," are stronger than Hades, an hêro fatal indeed; and his kiss is less passionate than the mother's kiss.

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In "At Eleusis" (CP, pp. 179-180), the priestess of the mysteries commands initiates to "think of the moment you count/ most foul in your life;/ conjure it,/ supplicate,/ pray to it." The worshipper of Dionysus must confront abjection or suffer the sparagmos of the god in his first incarnation as Zagreus, the death of Pentheus at the hands of his mother. In Helen in Egypt, the heroine will enact these mysteries of memory and reintegration as if her own identity were an ecstatic cult, she its initiate.

The Héro Fatal. In contrast to images of the irrepressible mother, H. D. explores her own attraction to the powerful héro fatal. A poem as early as "The Contest" in Sea Garden presents a masculine version of the beauty contest judged by Paris. Three men typify H. D.'s persisting motifs of masculine beauty. Their images are invoked in terms of rocks and landscape, flowers and trees, and metals: one brass, one gold, one silver. There is no reference to Greece or Greek myth, but flower names and details of costume identify the three heroes as classical beings.

In ensuing poems, the fatal hero often appears as Odysseus or Achilles. He leads the heroine to grief by both his exploits and exploitations. "Circe" of 1916 (CP, p. 120) describes the dangerous effect of this hero on even the greatest of seductresses:

> But I would give up
> rock-fringes of coral
> and the inmost chamber
> of my island palace
> and my own gifts
> and the whole region
> of my power and my magic
> for your glance.

The witch declares herself willing to sacrifice her quintessentially feminine gifts: but in a poem written just before her analysis

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with Freud, H. D. considers the results of such a sacrifice. "Calypso" (CP, pp. 393-394), found in typescript among her papers but published in part in 1938, imagines a dialogue between the nymph on her island and the invading hero. The scenario is clearly a first trial of the sexual encounter of Helen and Achilles on the beach in Helen in Egypt. Both poems are cinematic in their use of a rapid cut from the scene and a return consisting only of a brief, spoken passage, with the seduction or rape already accomplished. In both, the woman is initially threatened by the hero, then expresses desire for her ravisher:

ODYSSEUS: You will do as I say--
why did you wear sandals like a woman,
if you are not human?

CALYPSO: I am half of the air--
the rocks hurt my feet--

ODYSSEUS: Beware--
you will moan soon
that you are not all woman.

CALYPSO: What did he say?
(her hair spread on his chest, He sleeps.) O you gods-- O you gods--
he shall never get away.

Other poems express other types of love for the violent-erotic figure. "Thetis" of 1921 speaks of the longing of the mother for the heroic son: "Who dreams, who sings of a son?/ I, Thetis, alone" (CP, pp. 161 ff.). In "Toward the Pireaus" of 1922 (CP, pp. 176-179), a woman speaks who has survived somehow the destructions risked in loving such a poet-hero. She still feels gratitude:

You would have broken my wings,
but the very fact that you knew
I had wings, set some seal
on my bitter heart . . .

yours, yours forever--

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if I escape your bitter heart.

The voice goes on to imagine the kind of cold and chaste love she could have given the hero if she had been a boy. This fantasy leads her to confess her fear of him:

> It was not chastity that made me wild, but fear
> that my weapon, tempered in different heat,
> was over-matched by yours, and your hand
> skilled to yield death-blows, might break
> with the slightest turn--no ill will meant--
> my own lesser, yet still somewhat fine-wrought,
> fiery-tempered, delicate, over-passionate steel.

A Homeric precedent for this armed woman who engages in a romantic death-struggle with the hero is the Amazon Penthesileia, struck down by Achilles who then regrets his action. With Polyxena and Briseis, she is one of the female figures in the epics who attract the attention of the sea nymph's son. It has been suggested that this poem addresses Pound;[88] but the Achilles of Helen in Egypt has been identified with Lawrence and Lord Dowding as well,[89] and he also suggests H. D.'s brother Gilbert, another hero lost in the wars of the century. The Space in Athena's Hand. H. D. would find a way to supply an image of that androgynous lover who would be both safe from the dangers and worthy of the love of her héro fatal. An armed female figure crystallizes in her personal mythologies as a type of the triumphant poet, standing with Nike and Athena. These mythic figures played a most important role in her analysis with Freud. A Nike appeared in her fascinating hallucinatory vision experienced with Bryher in Corfu in

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[88] Guest, p. 169.

[89] See Guest, p. 261; Robinson, pp. 364 ff.

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1920. As she describes in Tribute to Freud, a series of figures and a ladder were projected, like a cinematic light, onto the wall of their hotel room:

> The last figure to form does so, quickly . . . There she is, I call her she; I call her Niké, Victory. She is facing the wall or moving as against the wall up from the last rung of the ladder and she moves or floats swiftly enough. . . . She is a common-or-garden angel, like any angel you may find on an Easter or Christmas card. . . . She is a moving-picture and fortunately she moves swiftly. . . . It seemed to me that this Victory was not now, it was another Victory; in which case there would be another war. When that war had completed itself, rung by rung or year by year, I, personally (I felt), would be free, I would go on in another, a winged dimension. . . . Victory seemed to be the clue, seemed to be my own especial sign or part of my hieroglyph. . . . I thought, 'Niké, Victory.' I thought, 'Helios, the sun.'[90]

And the vision ends. Freud thought this hallucination her most dangerous symptom; she reports that he "translated the pictures . . . as a desire for union with my mother. I was physically in Greece, in Hellas (Helen)."

This memory of a vision was not the only appearance of Nike in her analysis, however. Surrounded by his collection of antiquities like "a curator in a museum," Freud naturally noticed H. D.'s attraction to the small bronze images of Greek deities. Among them was a Nike which Freud called his favorite figure. As she relates, "It was a little bronze statue, helmeted, clothed to the foot in carved robe with the upper incised chiton or peplum. One hand was extended as if holding a staff or rod. 'She is perfect,' he said, 'only she has lost her spear.' I did not say anything."[91] Freud clearly saw the figure as an embodiment of

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[90] Tribute to Freud, pp. 55-56.

[91] Tribute to Freud, pp. 68-69.

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his own ideas of feminine psychology; the reference to a missing penis is unmistakable. H. D., however, plays with his statement: "we cannot be sure that it was a spear . . . It might have been a rod or staff."[92] Rejecting Freud's choice of a weapon, she substitutes the shepherd's attributes of the God addressed in Psalm 23; but she does not stop there.

Through the rest of Tribute to Freud, she entertains various ideas of that missing object. She recalls the image of Nike Apteros, the wingless Victory, whose missing wings insure the city's victory. At last she transforms the invisible attribute into a blossoming branch from the Tree of Life, from a lyric sung by the girl Mignon in Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, with whom H. D. identified her childhood self: "Do you know the land/ Where the orange-tree blossoms?" For H. D., Mignon is transformed into a type of Helen, with her two brothers, and is at the same time an "ugly duckling" like the child whom Helen made beautiful:

> One of these souls was called Mignon, though its body did not fit it very well. It was small, mignonne, though it was not pretty, they said. It was a girl between two boys; but, ironically, it was wispy and mousy, while the boys were glowing and gold. It was not pretty, they said. Then they said it was pretty--but suddenly, it shot up like a weed. They said, surprised, 'She is really very pretty, but isn't it a pity she's so tall?' The soul was called Mignon, but, clearly, it did not fit its body.
>
> But it found itself in a song. Only the tune is missing.[93]

Like the heroine of Helen in Egypt, Mignon finds herself in a song: the phrase is ambiguous, suggesting both that she discovers herself caught within a text, a story, an ancient pattern, in which she cannot hear

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[92] Tribute to Freud, p. 89.

[93] See Tribute to Freud, pp. 106-107.

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the tune that will permit her to fit her body, her fate; and that her lost self may be reclaimed by means of song or poetry if she can only discover or hear the tune. But the tune, that realm of language which belongs to the mother, is missing, like Athena's attribute.

In her letters of that time, which detail her analysis for Bryher's information, she makes a still deeper association of this invisible or missing power of the Nike with the power of héroes fatals:

> I keep dreaming of literary men . . . . It is important as book means penis evidently and as a 'writer,' only, am I equal in uc-n [unconscious], in the right way with men. Most odd.[94]

This association of book and penis lends resonance to H. D.'s great vision in the late poem "Tribute to the Angels." She sees a Helenic goddess, "a symbol of beauty," dressed in white veils, with "none of her usual attributes;/ the Child was not with her." Her names include Santa Sophia, a new Eve with the Book of Life, the Holy Ghost as an apple-tree "burgeoning with flowers":

> she carries a book but it is not
> the tome of the ancient wisdom,
>
> the pages, I imagine, are the blank pages
> of the unwritten volume of the new . . .
>
> she is Psyche, the butterfly,
> out of the cocoon.[95]

For H. D., the missing attribute, like the blank book of the future borne by the goddess, represents the mother's continuing omnipotence. Instead of sign of feminine lack, the space left in Athena's

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[94] Letter to Bryher of May 15, 1933; quoted by Friedman, p. 37.

[95] H. D., Trilogy (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 97, 101.

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hand becomes a message from a hidden mother. It signifies the existence of a paradise where the Lost One is found, where Mignon, singing "Kennst du das Land" to her father, may find the tune to her song.

Helen in Egypt

After the discoveries and decisions reflected in these and other works, H. D. began her most ambitious and extended poem. The epic-length Helen in Egypt, written from 1952 to 1956, was not published until 1961. It reflects many contemporary poetic extensions of classical myth and heroes. But its terrain is unusual, since H. D. makes no attempt to situate Helen in modern time; instead the modern woman enters the character's timelessness. Helen in Egypt is a complex poem, intimately related to H. D.'s lifelong concerns: the woman as poet; love and loss; the self reclaimed through love and poetry. H. D.'s characterization of her heroine is truly revolutionary: she becomes simultaneously a symbol or archetype, and a self-conscious, verbal, active, and often solitary woman. At the same time, H. D. preserves and develops resonant ancient aspects of Helen's myths: like the Egyptian Helen and the eidolon, "She is both phantom and reality" (p. 3) at once; she is metatextual, weaving her own story like the Iliad's Helen; like Helen of Tyre, she is lover, mother, and daughter of the men she loves.

Helen's activity in Helen in Egypt reflects H. D.'s continuous self-evaluations through psychological and occult disciplines. Like H. D., Helen is the poet creating a poem, creating herself. The identification of mother and daughter extends into many of the classical associations: Helen becomes Thetis, mother of Achilles; with

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Achilles she becomes the mother of her own lover Paris; she becomes Aphrodite, the daimonic spirit she chastens yet obeys. And Helen also, continually, at every turn and with each new encounter, becomes H. D., her author. H. D. felt that the composition of Helen in Egypt was all that kept her alive in the difficult years after World War II. As she slowly regained her psychic strength and balance in Lugano, so she wrote this epic of a self becoming its own mother, in order to heal a shattering past and to be restored to the eternal yet escaping present.

Helen in Egypt invites its reader to move with the decorous step of a measured dance; or, to come closer to H. D.'s vision, to enter an ancient temple, a precinct set out with fragmented but regular patterns, in which voices and ancient signs still resonate. Discovering the immortality of her story, Helen examines mystic hieroglyphs on the temple's walls (p. 66):

> So the pictures will never fade,
> while one neophyte is left
> to wonder again at the boat,
>
> to relate the graven line
> to a fact, graven in memory.

H. D. preserves the memory of her youthful beauty and power, assures herself of her own immortality, and conquers her threatened mortal self, by creating a Helen whose voice and history are her own, a twentieth-century woman in war and love.

Composition. Complex interplay of imagined and real selves accounts for the unique composition of Helen in Egypt among modern poetic sequences. The individual poems were written before the prose, in the years 1952 to 1954. H. D. carefully arranged the lyrics into books of eight poems each, and divided the books into three main sections: seven make up

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the first movement, Pallinode; seven make up Leuké; and six, with a final italicized lyric, comprise Eidolon. The 161 lyrics are composed of three-line stanzas that pay homage to the three-lined fragment of Stesichorus' Palinode. The number of stanzas in each poem differs, nor are they regular in meter, line-length, or rhyme, but occasionally they fall into more familiar poetic patterns, and they also build by repetition into recognizable forms.

The lyrics are spoken by one or more voices, with Helen's voice predominant. Speakers repeat or paraphrase themselves and one another, returning to haunting themes and images--a burning star or brazier, a wheel of stars, a ghost-ship or caravel, the figurehead or idol of a goddess, Helen's veil glimpsed from the ramparts of Troy. Such recurrence itself is a larger theme of the work, as if the echoes were a promise of immortality, or the voices of mother and daughter mothering new daughter echoing through time.

Each lyric is introduced by an italicized passage of prose, in a voice presumably the poet's own. H. D. wrote the prose sections of Helen in Egypt in 1955, after the lyrics were completed; one may fill an entire page before a poem, or consist of a single sentence. As H. D. relates in a letter of 1955, she had intended these passages, or "captions," to "hold the poem together, explain the at-times difficult philosophy, and put some of the mythological matter on the map."[96] She visualized them at one stage as notes similar to those in her Viking

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[96] H. D., letter to Norman Holmes Pearson, 26 November 1955. This and the following letters quoted are in the collections of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

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Portable Dante--an actual scholarly exegesis of poetic text.[97]

But her captions as finally composed link poem to poem without ever explaining fully; they look very much like information but are not, or are more than that.[98] A reflector precedes each bead on this chain of lyrics; an individual mediator, meditator, or mirror, whose voice anticipates, prevents, inhibits, slows, affirms, or directs our responses to the chain. As the book concludes, this interpolated discourse increasingly resembles the speech of a fortune-teller or reader of Tarot. The effect of prose and poem together is that of a priestess interpreting her own dark oracular speech; or, again, of mother considering daughter, daughter contemplating mother.

The Name of the Mother. H. D. begins Helen in Egypt with her own Pallinode, a series of deep mysteries. The heroine is in Egypt, the realm of life-in-death, in a temple dedicated to Ammon-Zeus, alpha-

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[97] H. D., letters to Pearson, 24 July 1954 and 3 February 1955.

[98] They are in fact the result of a translation of mediums: from written text to oral telling. The immediate motivation for the addition of the captions was not visual but aural presentation. Although her letters show that H. D. had wanted to provide some explication of her lyrics from their inception, she wrote nothing of the sort, nor did she conceive of quite what she wanted, until 1955, when Pearson asked her to record a selection from Helen in Egypt. While writing the lyrics, she had felt a need for what she called "notes"; but not until tape-recording the poems did she begin to formulate the captions. She wrote: "It is difficult editing the sections but it has given me the idea of making some captions or short descriptive paragraphs, as introductions to cantos . . . they should be printed not as notes at the end or beginning but along with the poems" (letter to Pearson, February 3, 1955). She would later read the entire sequence of poems aloud to herself while writing out the captions for the published version. This independent and subsequent composition may have helped the captions achieve a life of their own.

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omega, beginning and end. "Here there is peace/ for Helena, Helen hated of all Greece" (p. 2). It is pictured as a dreamlike otherworld, an afterlife that is also another chance to live. Helen's first speech equates the armies of Troy and Greece with the ghostly Eidolon, and both with her presumably fleshly self. The "Fall" of Troy acquires a biblical overtone (pp. 1-2):

> Do not despair, the hosts
> surging beneath the Walls,
> (no more than I) are ghosts;
>
> do not bewail the Fall,
> the scene is empty and I am alone,
> yet in this Amen-temple,
>
> I hear their voices,
> there is no veil between us, . . .
>
> Amen (or Zeus we call him)
> brought me here;
>
> fear nothing of the future or the past.

The <u>héro fatal</u> Achilles arrives on her shore. He is limping, his epic glory dead, but his mortal life just beginning. When she speaks the name of his mother, Thetis, he identifies her as Helen and almost kills her in vengeful anger. But she names Thetis again and saves herself, as his murderous attack turns into lovemaking. Praying at first to die under "his fingers' remorseless steel," Helen's voice fades out, to return with a prayer to "remember,/ forever, this Star in the night." H. D. comments, "Thetis--Isis--Aphrodite--it was not her fault. . . . We must blame someone" (p. 17).

This is Helen's first clue of the mother goddess whose mysteries underlie so much of the war and of Helen's own fate and identity. But in his anger, Achilles has called her "Hecate, a vulture, a hiero-

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glyph."[99] To understand this, she must read the writing on the walls: writing that is her story, that is herself. She must recognize her identity with this powerful hidden goddess as well as with the sacrificed daughters Iphigenia and Polyxena, with abandoned and furious women--Clytemnestra, Nemesis, Electra, Hermione. She must learn the extent and limitation of her power in order to break the cycle of male as well as female sacrifice. Although she can claim all the fallen soldiers at Troy as her own, "the thousand-and-one, mine," if like Achilles she will "shed her glory," she will find mortality, duality, multiplicity, and so a magical humanity. The song of Thetis at the end of Pallinode celebrates her own complexities of endless rebirth and timeless mystery (pp. 93-94):

> A woman's wiles are a net;
> they would take the stars
> or a grasshopper in its mesh;
>
> they would sweep the sea
> for a bubble's iridescence
> or a flying-fish;
>
> they would plunge beneath the surface,
> without fear of the treacherous deep
> or a monstrous octopus;
>
> what unexpected treasure,
> what talisman or magic ring
> may the net find?
>
> frailer than the spider spins,
> or a worm for its bier,
> deep as a lion or a fox
>
> or a panther's lair,
> leaf upon leaf, hair upon hair

---

[99] The vulture, sign of Isis, plays a spectacular part in Freud's well-known essay on Leonardo da Vinci, where he sees its image in the haunting canvas of Mary on the lap of her mother, Saint Anne ("Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood" [1910], SE 11: 59).

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as a bird's nest,

Phoenix
has vanquished
that ancient enemy, Sphinx.

Thetis calls Helen to "come home" to these secrets of power and identity. To do so, she must relive her history: "The dream is over. Remembrance is taking its place." So she is transported to the eternal "white island," Leuké. H. D. revises classical myth by situating a resurrected Paris on Leuké, where precedent had placed Helen and Achilles, immortal and wed, with their child Euphorion. But that marriage was in after-time, and Helen is reliving a previous life (p. 112):

> Helen had lived here before. . . . She would re-assess that first experience. It is true that Love 'let fly the dart' that had sent Achilles to her, but it was Paris who was the agent, medium or intermediary of Love and of Troy's great patron, Apollo, the god of Song.

Helen's return to Paris is simultaneously a return to the memory of Troy's destruction. Although he admits that "the harpers/ never touch their strings/ to name Helena and death," he insists that she did indeed die in Troy, at Achilles' hand and by her own wish:

I am the first in all history
to say, she died, died, died
when the Walls fell . . . (p. 130)

you drew Achilles to Egypt;
I watched you upon the ramparts,

I saw your scarf flutter
out toward the tents;
the wind? the will of Helena?

the will of Aphrodite?
no matter--there was no pulse in the air,
yet your scarf flew,

a visible sign,

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to enchant him,
to draw him nearer; . . . (p. 131)

he was father, brother,
he was deserted husband,
he was never your lover;

do not answer me, Helen;
you fell on his spear,
like a bird out of the air. . . . (pp. 138-139)

Or he was lightening
out of a clear sky,
or hovering eagle

to fall, to tear, to devour;
you courted annihilation,
but he could not vanquish you,

nor could Helen destroy Helen. . . . (p. 140)

you say you did not die on the stairs,
that the love of Achilles sustained you;
I say he never loved you. (p. 146)

Unwilling to believe Paris, Helen leaves him and finds her oldest lover Theseus, the "god-father" based on Freud. Freud-Theseus becomes both mother and father to Helen; he provides a haven which is yet full of sexual power.[100] Theseus the magician is a twin of the fatal hero Achilles; he assists Helen by giving her a balance in the paradoxes of love and death that permits her to accept ambivalence and contradiction as natural. "As day, night,/ as wrong, right,/ as dark, light,/ as

---

[100] As Auerbach (pp. 31-34) analyzes his role, Theseus "enables the fleeing Helen to embrace her own grandeur. At first she shuns her transfigured self, asserting 'I am not nor mean to be/ the Daemon they made of me.' Finally Helen is soothed into embracing her demon by Theseus' 'solution': 'All myth, the one reality dwells here.' H. D.'s narrative gloss makes it plain that the postanalytic Helen is reborn into magic, not mere adjusted humanity: 'Was Helen stronger than Achilles even 'as the arrows fell'? That could not be, but he recognised in her some power other than her legendary beauty.' Like du Maurier's Trilby, like Stoker's Lucy and Mina, H. D. in her mythic awakening as Helen accepts possession by the magus as the crucible for her mighty self-apotheosis."

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water, fire/ as earth, air/as storm, calm,/ as fruit, flower,/ as life, death,/ as death, life;/ the rose deflowered,/ the rose re-born;/ Helen in Egypt,/ Helen at home,/ Helen in Hellas forever." "It is all very simple" (pp. 90-91).

Theseus returns her to Achilles' side, and the book concludes with Eidolon, dedicated to the mysteries of Thetis. The father's power has served to reconcile her with her mother Hellas, and by extension with the goddess manifesting as Thetis-Isis-Aphrodite and Demeter-Persephone. A knowledge of signs enables her to read the writing in the temple, which equates with the star-script, the father's constellations. Furthermore, she is enabled to read through Achilles' eyes, in yet another system of elaborate identifications.

Apollo, god of sun and song, has granted Helen the gift of poetry and song as well as of eternal recurrence. But the gift is a dangerous and disturbing one:

> was Troy lost for a subtle chord,
>
> a rhythm as yet un-heard,
> was it Apollo's snare?
> was Apollo passing there? . . . (p. 229)
>
> Was it Apollo's snare
> so that poets forever,
> should be caught in the maze of the Walls
>
> of a Troy that never fell? (p. 232)

Helen's power is that of the Muse, the power of music and birth. But the same power proved fatal to Achilles, who unconsciously identified his mother Thetis in Helen, as a power other than Helen's legendary beauty: "there were others,/ in spite of the legend,/ as gracious, as tall" (pp. 251-252). It was at the instant of this recognition that

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both Achilles, Paris, and Helen met doom in Troy. The mystery is identified as "La Mort, L'Amour." "She realizes the 'death' of Achilles and his 'ecstasy of desolation, a desire to return to the old thunder and roar of the sea'" (p. 255).

The Protean Thetis is a fetish, a mermaid, the figurehead on her son's ship, "his childhood's secret idol" (p. 284), a repressed memory. She had promised her son immortality and a kingdom, but failed him in both ways (pp. 253-254):

> Did her eyes slant in the old way?
> was she Greek or Egyptian?
> it was not his own ship
>
> but a foreign keel
> that had brought him here;
> the Old Man who ferried him out,
>
> called it a caravel;
> a caravel--what is that?
> Phoenician? so she cheated at last,
>
> she, Empress and lure of the sea,
> Queen of the Myrmidons.
> Regent of heaven and the star-zone;
>
> she had promised him immortality
> but she had forgotten to dip the heel
> of the infant Achilles
>
> into the bitter water,
> Styx, was it?
> O careless, unspeakable mother,
>
> O Thetis . . .
> So she failed at last,
> and worse than failure,
>
> the mockery, after-death,
> to stumble across a stretch
> of shell and the scattered weed,
>
> to encounter another
> whose eyes slant in the old way;
> is she Greek or Egyptian?

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H. D.'s Achilles recalls, here, Pound and Lawrence. Helen sees, at last, the image of a betraying mother behind the poets' need to sing, and, at the same time, realizes that she represents this lost mother even as she too is betrayed.

H. D.'s prose voice asks repeatedly at the close of the epic, "How did she know the name" of Thetis, the repressed mother whom the hero could not name, "the one word that would turn and bind him/ and blind him to any other?" Only her name could turn hate into love, death into life, time into eternity. And yet "the world knows her name,/ the richer for poorer worshippers,/ for meaner offerings,/ a filigree ring of no worth,/ a broken oar,/ a snapped anchor-chain" (p. 281)--abject offerings contrasted with the riches placed on Aphrodite's altar.

And yet the mother's gift is paradisiacal. Her name is a magic that "can only be defined by the most abstruse hieroglyphs or the most simple memories" (p. 297), a secret treasure which "could only be judged or assessed if 'God would let me lie here forever'" (p. 282). H. D. defines her Protean nature with the Edenic image of a living tree, the "fragrant bough" of the childhood of Helen Dendritis; then with the greater image of the artist's creation, which changes an absent mother into song (p. 292):

> only a child could follow
> the living grain of the tree,
> as if sap were rising within her,
>
> only a child or a master-hand
> could fit a crown or a cap
> from the rose-vein of the wood;
>
> he set her on a plinth
> like the curved prow of a ship,
> and perhaps the tree is a ship

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and he sails away, but he forgot her,
the charm, the eidolon,
when his own mother came,

and he forgot his mother
when the heroes mocked
at the half-god hidden in Scyros.

The poem ends with a tribute to the poet and his fate (p. 304):

only Achilles could break his heart
and the world for a token,
a memory forgotten.

H. D.'s Helen is as rich as Thetis in her ability to alter and discard identities. She changes from transcendental dreamer, to intellectually inspired prophet, to a woman "numb with a memory," "thoughts too deep to remember,/ that break through the legend,/ the fame of Achilles,/the beauty of Helen" (p. 258). Yet H. D. never resolves her many conflicts: between "La Mort, L'Amour"; between Troy and Greece as holy spirit and profane flesh, and conversely as marriage and artistic freedom; between woman as goddess or human; or the riddle of herself, the poet, as mortal or immortal. The conflicts are ultimately as unreconcilable as Freud's Eros and Thanatos. At the conclusion of her epic they remain open questions addressed to a power beyond the human or mythologized self: "One greater than Helen must answer" (p. 303).

"Winter Love" and Last Poems

A final return to the Helen theme, and the very last of H. D.'s poems, was inspired her writing End to Torment, the diary entries and memoirs celebrating Pound's release from St. Elizabeths. In "Winter Love," dated January 3-April 15, 1959, H. D.'s Helen is heard again, in a long

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soliloquy recreating lost innocence, reliving first desires: "There was a Helen before there was a War,/ Odysseus remembered her." The Odysseus/Pound of "Winter Love" appears to have been imagined in a scenario following Kazantzakis.[101] As in Helen in Egypt, a mystic ship awaits the hero's final journey; this ship is based on that one which returned Pound to Rapallo.[102] Helen, a grandmother, is reborn in her memories of this ancient love whose touch had conceived the legendary Helen of Troy ("Winter Love," Hermetic Definition, p. 92):

> I was to meet you, I was to meet you
> under the oleanders,
> I was to meet you again;
>
> "a special Ship, for festival," they said,
> so Helen stared, a Maiden, still a Maiden,
> though last night, escaped the grandam,
>
> Helen was conceived under the oleanders,
> that is, Helen, the future Helen,
> that wrecked citadels, was born.

H. D./Helen follows the revenant Odysseus, but remains as always deeply ambivalent about her attraction to a hero, and still seeks her own holy mother. She wishes to "wander in the Elysian-fields/ and find the Tree for myself--for myself--/ with a special low down-sweeping burdened

---

[101] The theme of a last voyage of Odysseus, in which he at last becomes the lover of Helen, had long been familiar: in 1890, H. Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang based their nearly-Gnostic fantasy The World's Desire on the theme, and Nikos Kazantzakis included Helen among the companions of Odysseus in his 1938 turn of the epic cycle. H. D. had read some Kazantzakis, and spent time in the late 1940s researching Pre-Raphaelite works. H. D.'s unpublished novel "The Sword Went Out to Sea" recalls Morris's combinations of mythological tales and beings in "The Earthly Paradise," as well as Haggard and Lang's high-adventure pastiche.

[102] H. D. concludes End to Torment with a romantic scene on shipboard: Pearson brought a yellow rose to Pound, saying "H. D. wanted me to give you this" (p. 62).

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bough." Though her "small breast swells/ ripening under the kiss/ of the ravening Hero," she proclaims herself still "Virgo, unravished," although "knowing the thirst/ of the moment un-mated."

The theme of "Helen's breasts,/ and the wine-cup that they wrought,/ called Helen's breast," links Helen to the multi-breasted Diana of Ephesus. The poem, subtitled "Espérance," ends with the magical child Espérance/Euphorion, hope, a "golden bee," taking life from Helen's breast. Euphorion's image also appears in End to Torment as the might-have-been offspring of Pound and H. D. In "Winter Love," the poet enacts the birth that is only imagined in End to Torment. Addressing a Grande Dame or Sage-Femme, a goddess-midwife-mother, Helen reenacts her ravishment by Odysseus as the painful but ecstatic act of suckling an infant (pp. 116-117):

> take Espérance away;
>
> cruel, cruel Sage-Femme,
> to place him in my arms,
> cruel, cruel Grande Dame,
>
> to pull my tunic down,
> so Odysseus sought my breast
> with savage kiss;
>
> cruel, cruel midwife,
> so secretly to steal my phantom self,
> my invisibility, my hopelessness, my fate, . . .
>
> cruel, cruel is Hope,
> terrible the weight of honey and of milk, . . .
>
> while Helen's breasts swell, painful
> with the ambrosial sap, Amrita
>
> that must be given;
> I die in agony whether I give or do not give; . . .
>
> come, come, O Espérance,
>
> Espérance, O golden bee,

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take life afresh and if you must,
so slay me.

At last Helen has found the mother, the Tree of Life, for herself, by becoming her. Her phantom-being, unresolved at the end of Helen of Egypt, has been transformed into the realities of Hope and milk, of poetic speech, by her own body. The figure of a Great Lady, a Wise Woman, a midwife and grandmother, as imagined by the seventy-five-year-old poet, might be the image of her own Moravian grandmother long ago. Her mysteries free Helen/H. D. to participate in what is and what is not, to trust imagination. The Sage-Femme replaces a former mentor, the wise and beautiful old man Theseus-Freud, who gave H. D. title to her gifts by refusing to argue poetic points, and who permitted her to return to a womb of memories. But that womb itself is now figured as a midwife-mother, who forces the heroine to give birth to other new lives of hope, imagination, and poetry.

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Chapter 5. Helen in America

YEATS, POUND, AND H. D., all transatlantic voices, were aware of their participation in a great modern reenvisionment of classical myth, and of Helen in particular. My study of Helen's appearances in modern literature might extend to many other poets, as they move from deeply subjective particulars to the communality of myth. In the pages above, I have mentioned other modern myths of Helen: poems by Greek poets Nikos Kazantzakis and George Seferis, dramatic works by Jean Giraudoux and André Suarès writing in French. She has appeared in other notable works of philosophical prose and political drama: for example, both Camus and Sartre have dealt with her figure, the first in an essay entitled "Helen's Exile," the second in a version of Euripides' "Trojan Women." Of special importance here, however, are modern American versions of her myth.

From the time of Poe's sublime Eidolon and Longfellow's pathetic, victimized Helen of Tyre,[1] several American authors have been attracted by Helen. Her figure has been used by such near contemporaries of Yeats and Pound as Sara Teasdale, Steven Vincent Benét, and George Santayana, Robinson Jeffers, William Carlos Williams, and Hart Crane. Among contemporary poets, the myth has attracted John Ashbery, whose unpublished text "The Egyptian Helen" appears in the Appendix of this study.

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[1] "Helen of Tyre," The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), p. 450.

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Most recently, Judy Grahn has celebrated Helen's name and divine significance as a great goddess in her collection The Queen of Wands. A brief look at the Helens of Teasdale, Benét, Santayana, and Jeffers will serve to review old motifs and reassess new locales before turning in more detail to Crane, Williams, Ashbery, and Grahn.

Santayana's fragmentary dramatic verses, "The Flight of Helen"[2] of about 1902, suggest a particularly American Helen, as much an amazon as Todhunter's Irish warrior-queen, but with a desperate angry hatred and a desire for freedom later reflected in the Helens of H. D. The self-loathing of Santayana's heroine, expressed before she ever embarks for Troy, is unique in the tradition. Drawing a dagger on herself, she cries to Polydeuces:

> My heart is dark with blood.
> Listen. This house, these hills, these scented trees,
> My husband, full of empty boasts and saws,
> Castor, whose scorn and silent glances freeze
> My very soul, our gods, our antique laws,
> Yes, and myself, whom all these baubles please,
> I loathe, I loathe you all, I hate your ways.

In another of Santayana's unfinished dramas, a stunningly superior young woman dresses as a boy to attend Harvard College. The Helen-Athena image was growing strong in American consciousness. Drawn from suffragettes and Gibson girls, these Helens protested much and eloped for reasons not necessarily romantic. Some twenty years later, John Erskine's widely popular novel The Private Life of Helen of Troy would embody a similarly daimonic Helen, at odds with the conventions of a bourgeois, puritan Sparta.

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[2] Santayana, The Complete Poems, ed. William G. Holzberger (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1970), p. 346.

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Not all American Helens won such audiences, however. The work of contemporaries of Pound and H. D. can tell us much concerning the expatriate poets. Teasdale and Benét reveal what the two Pennsylvanians might have shunned, might have become, in the United States. Involved in a friendship strikingly similar to the infatuation of H. D. and Frances Gregg, Sara Teasdale wrote her 1911 "Helen"[3] as a pendant to a Helen poem of her best friend Marion Cummings Stanley. Speaking in dramatic monologue, Teasdale's Helen is one among several feminine voices concerned with more or less traditional themes of love and betrayal. The diction and tone are those of high heroic romance:

> For never woman born of man and maid
> Had wrought such havoc on the earth as I,
> Or troubled heaven with a sea of flame.

Although she calls for death as her due, the thought lasts only half a line. Then she turns to life for the sake of her own radiance. A heroic narcissism marks this Helen, who predicts her own immortality with lines recalling Landor's drama of Helen and Achilles and the influential "World's Desire" theme:

> Men's lives shall waste with longing after me,
> For I shall be the sum of their desire,
> The whole of beauty, never seen again.
> And they shall stretch their arms and starting, wake
> With "Helen!" on their lips, and in their eyes
> The vision of me. Always I shall be
> Limned on the darkness like a shaft of light
> That glimmers and is gone.

We have seen such Eidolon-Shekinah themes often in the preceding chapters, but Teasdale's creation is unique: this magnificently heartless Helen among the ruins of Troy proclaims "Lo, I shall live to

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[3] Teasdale, Helen of Troy and Other Poems (New York: Putnam, 1912), pp. 3-5.

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conquer Greece again!"

Another femme fatal is the spoiled princess of Stephen Vincent Benét's 1920 "The First of Helen,"[4] whose very kiss is death. In this set of pastoral ballads, Helen appears as an Artemis, her lover as an Acteon destroyed by the Dioscuri. Her song is the most remarkable part of the poem, giving her the attributes of Blake's "A Poison Tree." She is the dangerous garden in which grows "the Tree, Deliciousness," with "the tall lords dead at its root." A pendant to this poem, "The Last of Helen," is more mystical, using Gnostic themes and images again recalling Haggard and Lang's popular adventure story. Benét gathers a shining vision from these traditions: "Helen of anguish, Helen of the song,/ Helen the victory on the lips of Zeus,/ Helen the princely word, the proud despair,/ The voiceless cry of the ecstatic dream,/ Shone with the radiance of a consuming wish" (p. 49). This lingual Helen then moves "like light toward the dark secret heart" of the Sphinx, and the two become "one forever, stone and ghost and dream." The sight of the Sphinx freezes men like Medusa's gaze. Sphinx as beautiful woman was a popular decadent motif, but the identification was finally overturned by Yeats's "Double Vision of Michael Robartes." In that poem, Yeats drew distinctions between the feminine, the human, and the monstrous that Benét never envisioned.

More unusual is the hanged-goddess motif in Robinson Jeffers's verse tragedy At the Fall of an Age. This drama, published in 1933, is based on Polyxo's vengeance, which Pausanius cites as ontology for the Rhodian worship of Helen Dendritis. Polyxo is drawn after Euripides'

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[4] Benét, Heaven and Earth (New York: Holt, 1920), p. 39.

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Hecuba; her lust for Helen's death is here fulfilled. New to the myth are a troop of zombielike Myrmidons charged with escorting Helen to Achilles on Leuke, who has risen from death to rape Helen at Therapne. Menelaus dies of this ghostly visitation; Helen is driven from Sparta and seeks sanctuary at Rhodes. Here she engages in another Euripidean debate for her life; seeming to consent at last, Polyxo seizes her when she enters the house. She is led out again naked and bound, proud but pleading for life. The weird Myrmidons counsel her to die--"We also were sacrificed"--and proceed to sing and dance throughout her hanging. Images of an earth mother are superimposed on a new-millennium theme:

> Oh perfectly beautiful, pain is brief, endure to be sacrificed.
> This great age falls like water and a new
> Age is at birth, but without your pain it could never be beautiful.
> The golden fleece of your hair, the straining
> Shoulders, the dove-throat, the breasts thrust forward by the strain of bonds,
> Shall yield their beauty to the earth and sky,
> The wonderful breasts their soul to all the flushed hills of earth,
> The long white thighs to the marble mountains.[5]

At her death, they hail her: "Wild swan, splendid-bodied,/ Silent at last, silent and proud." Yeats old saw himself, too, as a proud swan, but he never gave his Helen over to death. Nor does H. D. But Jeffers's Myrmidons say, as if she were the center of a new cult, "It is not to be whispered in Argos that Helen died like a woman." Nor is Jeffers's Helen meant to be a woman; she is far too heavily conceptual. Yet the play, in its lingeringly unpleasant details, subscribes to the worst of misogynist traditions, celebrating a sublimated sparagmos of the mother

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[5] Jeffers, Give Your Heart to the Hawks (New York: Random House, 1933), p. 195.

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as epiphany of the child's revolutionary anger.

In his other oedipal visions of idealized but ravished mothers as well as in his disillusionment with democracies, Jeffers matches Pound's sensibilities. They agree on many points except the crucial ones of modernist hermeticism and conservation of European tradition. A California Nietzschean, Jeffers was more in sympathy with the mood of Yeats's late refrain, "Let all things pass away." "At the Fall of an Age" symbolizes the end of archaic and beginning of classical times. In the midst of the Second War, he would restate the themes of the play in the context of a modernity he had no desire to preserve:

> It is not bad. Let them play.
> Let the guns bark and the bombing-plane
> Speak his prodigious blasphemies.
> It is not bad, it is high time,
> Stark violence is still the sire of all the world's values.
>
> . . . Who would remember Helen's face
> Lacking the terrible halo of spears?[6]

Frustration, rebirth and apocalypse, the immortality of desire--all of these nuances of motif in Jeffers, Benet, Teasdale, and Santayana anticipate the directions of Helen's myth in contemporary versions.

New World Helens

The Helens of Crane and Williams, Ashbery and Grahn, reveal these new directions for the myth's development in American poetry. Like Jeffers, Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams championed an American and accessible poetry foreign to the styles of Pound. However, being committed neither to the "inhumanism" of Jeffers's philosophy nor to

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[6] Jeffers, "The Bloody Sire," Be Angry at the Sun (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 151.

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Pound's passionately antiquated humanisms, they found instead a greater sensitivity to the feminine within themselves and the female in society. Rejecting the narrowly narcissistic romanticism of Teasdale, they were able to begin seeing the poetic self as less heroic, more vulnerable, although no less mythic, than the beloved feminine. The Helens of Ashbery and Grahn go even farther, into new intellectual mysteries of self as Helen, and into the most ancient mysteries of Helen as divinity. A remarkable degree of persistence and depth of divergence is revealed in these contemporary imaginations of Helen's figure.

Crane's Helen of Traffic. Hart Crane offers a divine Helen both physical and imaginary, abject and sublime. In "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" a Gnostic and Romantic vision recalling Pound's Nicea inhabits the streets of New York. Crane composed this sequence of three poems in 1922; it was published in the 1926 White Buildings. Beginning with a passage from The Alchemist--"And so we may arrive by Talmud skill/ And profane Greek to raise the building up/ Of Helen's house"--it seems that the poem will copy Pound's technique of collage and intertextual echo, his mood of anger against Philistines, and his impassioned preservation of the past. Furthermore, the Helen of Crane's poem is so abstract that she closely approaches Pound's "tò kalón." But the mythic voices of Hart Crane's poetry arise from urban American landscapes rather than from Pound's European ruins, from railway and factory rather than palace and cloister. Crane's ruins were more subjective, metaphors for familial and emotional turmoil. Born 1899 in Ohio of bourgeois New England stock, he spent a brief, explosive life

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in poetry. In New York his companions were artists, socialites, and what one biographer calls "degenerates." Swinburnian in his excesses, he never encountered that British tolerance of aristocratic decadence that eventually preserved Swinburne from self-destruction. Nor did he cultivate an egotism like Pound's that might have helped him survive extremes of critical neglect and social censure.

Pound and Crane shared a horror of the modern "wasteland" and both believed poetry's purpose was to reveal the divine. Both saw beauty as a feminine principle, a Helen of Tyre-Eidolon whose appearance was mystic, private, essentially of the imagination. However, instead of reaching a divine plane by means of Pound's "bust thru the quotidien [sic] into eternal realm," Crane transformed the quotidian. As he describes his intention in the poem,

> Part I starts out from the quotidian, rises to evocation, ecstasy and statement. The whole poem is a kind of fusion of our own time with the past. Almost every symbol of current significance is matched by a correlative, suggested or actually stated, "of ancient days." . . . The streetcar device is the most concrete symbol I could find for the transition of the imagination from quotidian details to the universal consideration of beauty,--the body still "centered in traffic," the imagination eluding its daily nets and self consciousness.[7]

Marriage between sense and spirit is carried as theme throughout Crane's poem. "There is the world dimensional for/ those untwisted by the love of things/ irreconcilable . . . " Not yet defeated by disappointment, Crane sought an abstract beauty through the senses, finding

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[7] Letter to Waldo Frank, February 7, 1923; The Letters of Hart Crane 1916-1932, ed. Brom Weber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 120.

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"the holy not in transcendence but in the world."[8] His voice is that of Faustus since his own senses provide the magic permitting that transformation: "Helen, the symbol of this abstract 'sense of beauty,' Faustus the symbol of myself, the poetic or imaginative man of all times."[9]

Like Williams, Crane was determined to commune with his Kora even in the Hell of urban traffic, in "metallic paradises" of jazz gardens:

> So I found "Helen" sitting in a street car; the Dionysian revels of her court and her seduction were transferred to a Metropolitan roof garden with a jazz orchestra; and the katharsis of the fall of Troy I saw approximated in the recent World War.[10]

Crane's title appropriately echoes Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." Part II illustrates this paradoxical fusion: there, Helen as jazz singer is "the siren of the springs of guilty song," a member of the "divine grotesque."

Abject/sublime eidola and grails had inhabited Crane's poetry from the beginning: in "Legend," the first poem of White Buildings, an image of moth and flame evolves into "the smoking souvenir,/ Bleeding eidolon!" as of Troy and Helen. The last two words invoke Haggard and Lang's mystic Helen, who wore a star from which blood dripped and vanished. "Chaplinesque" contains a vision of an abject World's Desire:

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[8] Alfred Hanley, Hart Crane's Holy Vision: White Buildings (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), p. 146.

[9] Crane, Letters, p. 120.

[10] Crane, "General Aims and Theories," The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose, ed. Brom Weber (Garden City, N. J.: Doubleday), p. 217.

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"We have seen/ the moon in lonely alleys make/ a grail of laughter of an empty ash can." And in "Garden Abstract," a Helen Dendritis appears:

> The apple on its bough is her desire,--
> Shining suspension, mimic of the sun.
> The bough has caught her breath up, and her voice
> Dumbly articulate in the slant and rise
> Of branch on branch above her, blurs her eyes
> She is prisoner of the tree and its green fingers.
>
> And so she comes to dream herself the tree,
> The wind possessing her, weaving her young veins,
> Holding her to the sky and its quick blue,
> Drowning the fever of her hands in sunlight.
> She has no memory, nor fear, nor hope
> Beyond the grass and shadows at her feet.[11]

Crane has captured the same willful-unwilling identification with a nature-mother experienced by H. D. as Dryad-Hermione-Tree. We are in Sappho's apple orchard once again, but the goddess who is called and who appears is a dangerous one, too powerful for the girl to desire, invoke, and yet retain identity with the human. How different Pound's early Daphne-self in "The Tree," declaring an already accomplished separation and achieved enlightenment: "Natheless I have been a tree amid the wood/ And many new things understood/ That were rank folly to my head before." And yet, of course, Pound's new things are the hoariest classical myths. Crane's vision is much newer, fresh with fear at the strength of his need to vanish into an enveloping feminine spirit.

Crane's poet is no match for his muse; no Achilles, but an unknown soldier. In "Faustus and Helen," Crane, like Pound, perceives divine beauty as if flickering. But Crane identifies the flickering as his own perception, rather than as the nature of his goddess. The experience of

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[11] Crane, Complete Poems, p. 9.

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beauty comes to a mind "Too much the baked and labeled dough/ divided by accepted multitudes," and the day is in "stacked partitions." Yet evening offers "graduate opacities" that transport all to "somewhere/ Virginal perhaps, less fragmentary, cool." Crane, too, has a vision of Helen's eyes, but her smile, like the Sapphic Aphrodite's, also appears (p. 28):

> And yet, suppose some evening I forgot
> The fare and transfer, yet got by that way
> Without recall,--lost yet poised in traffic.
> Then I might find your eyes across an aisle,
> Still flickering with those prefigurations--
> Prodigal, yet uncontested now,
> Half-riant before the jerky window frame.

In fact, her entire body figures in Crane's verses, and her sexuality is celebrated as a radiance capable of changing the world: "reflective conversion of all things/ At your deep blush, when ecstasies thread/ The limbs and belly, when rainbows spread/ Impinging on the throat and sides . . . ." Pound, too, refers to a paradisal image of woman naked and ruddy, in troubadourian lamplight, but "all things" are not privy to the mystic conversion offered by that vision.

As Crane's goddess is fully tangible in possibility--"There is some way, I think, to touch/ Those hands of yours that count the nights"--so he sees his poem as unfragmented: it is instead "One inconspicuous, glowing orb of praise." The voice of Faustus as he prays to Helen is made up of musical pentameter lines that roll each into the next, however jerky with Americanisms. His poetry recreates the sphere of divinity, the breast that is language, and offers it to his Helen-goddess as Rossetti's Helen offered her breast to Aphrodite.

Anticipating the themes of H. D.'s Helen in Egypt, Crane has his

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Faustus declare that he will meet Helen in an "eventual flame" of eternity, beyond the warriors and their deaths, in cities with the color of Leuké (p. 29):

> The earth may glide diaphanous to death;
> But if I lift my arms it is to bend
> To you who turned away once, Helen, knowing
> The press of troubled hands, too alternate
> With steel and soil to hold you endlessly.
> I meet you, therefore, in that eventual flame
> You found in final chains, no captive then--
> Beyond their million brittle, bloodshot eyes;
> White, through white cities passed on to assume
> That world which comes to each of us alone.

The goddess who "turned away once" is imagined as regained in "that world which comes to each of us alone"--a locus suggesting eternity, impassioned imagination, and the "hourless days" of death. Crane makes the ancient connection of this sublime spiritual love and death: Helen's breasts contain a "bluet" that is also a "hiatus that winks" above the body of the world. The flower in this paradisal locus is again a sign of absence and of promise.

In Part III these suggestions darken, as Crane addresses a "religious gunman," air pilot and warrior, the "Capped arbiter of beauty" (pp. 32-33):

> That saddled sky that shook down vertical
> Repeated play of fire--no hypogeum
> of wave or rock was good gainst one hour.
> We did not ask for that, but have survived,
> And will persist to speak again before
> All stubble streets that have not curved
> To memory, or known the ominous lifted arm
> That lowers down the arc of Helen's brow
> To saturate with blessing and dismay.

This image of Helen once again suggests the Statue of Liberty, with the line of lifted arm leading down her brow, even as Crane's language simultaneously evokes the sword arm of Menelaus. In this context of an

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American fighter pilot of the First War, the identification of Crane's Helen and the great statue is all the more likely. She is the abstract beauty of which the surviving warrior will speak, with death's voice, in streets that have not known her. Since "Faustus and Helen" was the immediate precursor of "The Bridge," it is not surprising that the moving beauty at its heart is the other monumental divinity in New York's harbor.

In "To Liberty" of 1948, her image appears again, and is linked with Helen's. Dismay, however, has won out over blessing (p. 180):

> Out of the seagull cries and wind
> On this strange shore I build
> The virgin. They laugh to hear
> How I endow her, standing
> Hair mocked by the sea, her lover
> A dead sailor that knew
> Not even Helen's fame.
>
> Light the last torch in the wall,
> The sea wall. Bring her no robes yet.
> They have not seen her in this harbor;
> Eyes widely planted, clear, yet small.
> And must they overcome the fog,
> Or must we rend our dream?

The building of Helen's house, with which Crane began "Faustus and Helen," has become funereal, apocalyptic, a ceremony of defeat. A mortal lover of this Helen is so far from heroic that he does not even know the name of that eternal beauty, the feminine toward which Faustus strove. Crane's final question is ambiguous: whether his art will ever appear to the fog-bound viewers of the harbor, who cannot see even the monument in their midst; or whether the statue's own eyes, which seem to retreat like distant lights, will overcome the fog and save his dream. Rescue depends on the statue's power or on others' vision; the poet has, like Faustus at his end, lost the ability to save himself.

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Williams's "Beautiful Thing". The themes of war, art, and woman were also to attract William Carlos Williams, who found his way more slowly toward Helen's name, although always implying some intuition of her figure. As in the oxymoronic "All That Is Perfect in Woman,"[12] he tends to see woman in nature and as nature, and feels both admiration and horror. In this poem, an Aphrodite of sun and sea, "the symbol of war, a war/ fast accomplished/ flares in all our faces/ an alcoholic flame--." Toward this mixture of tortured flesh and seductive gestures the poet-obstetrician expresses quasi-religious emotion:

> Let us praise! praise
> the dreadful symbol of
> carnivorous sex--
>
> The gods live!
> severally among us--
> This is their familiar!

In other late poems, however, Williams blames the horrors of murderous sexuality on masculine desire; he does not always present epiphanies of Kali-like goddesses. Still, he often projects a distaste for desire from men to women, from himself to his wife or lovers.

An example of this projection is A Dream of Love, which contains one of the rare references to Helen in his work. Although, as the hint of pagan worship above suggests, Williams was as deeply concerned with a continuity between modern and ancient traditions as any poet of his time, his involvement with classical myth is usually hidden. He seldom alludes at length to the literature of Greek myth; however, the epigraph of his play A Dream of Love is an exception, a passage from the

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[12] Williams, Collected Later Poems, pp. 139-141.

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Agamemnon that concerns "Menelaus abandoned in his home by Helen."[13] The quotation focuses on a deserted and longing husband, but Williams enacted rather the part of Helen in his marriage, seducing and letting himself be seduced by "many loves," time and again. In "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," "Helen's public fault" parallels the public disgrace of Doc in A Dream of Love, who is found dead of a heart attack in the bed of another man's wife. But, as Doc's ghost explains to his grieving, scandalized, outraged widow, only adulterous sex gave him his poetry. So Helen's fault, too, gave us the great epics of Homer.[14]

Yet when Helen is again named in "Asphodel," the late love poem for his wife, the poet projects his own behavior onto Flossie (Pictures from Breughel, p. 159):

> All women are not Helen,
> I know that
> but have Helen in their hearts.
> My sweet,
> you have it also, therefore
> I love you
> and could not love you otherwise.

That unexpected "it," whose referent syntactically could only be Helen, has grown from a long-studied system of contrasts centering on marriage and adultery, articulated in "Asphodel," Paterson, and numerous earlier poems concerning beautiful women. Williams never overtly recognizes

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[13] Williams, "A Dream of Love," Many Loves (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 107.

[14] "Were it not for that/ there would have been/ no poem": Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 158. See Joseph N. Riddel, The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), pp. 4-8, 260-261.

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himself in his whored virgins, in the Beautiful Thing whose "vulgarity of beauty"[15] surpasses the perfections of art and literature. Yet his emotion toward them is always tender and concerned; he manages to show the violence done to these figures without sharing a vicarious sadistic pleasure in their debasement. In ways not quite conscious, then, he does indeed identify with the sufferings and trials of his Helens.

In contrast to Pound's literary and bodiless visions, Williams's conception of beauty is very much in the present, the world, and the flesh. This immediacy answers to his allegiances to marriage, to the American language, and to "no ideas but in things." Williams, unlike Yeats and his courtly devotion to one woman, was polygamous in nature: his Helens are everywhere, too many to attain. "Innumerable women, each like a flower./ But only one man--like a city" introduce Paterson (p. 7). Helen, wife of many men, is matched by Williams's desire to marry many women. Yet as the Helens of Yeats, Pound, and Crane are extraordinarily powerful, so the Helens of Williams are unusually powerless. Their rape, desecrations, murders, seductions, and decrepitudes fill his work. Just this vision of their victimization permits Williams to approach them with compassion rather than with violence.

Three main schemes for presenting feminine principles appear in Williams's poetry. First is a great muse-mother, "in whom age in age is united--/ Indifferent, out of sequence, marvelously!/ Saving alone that

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[15] Williams, Paterson (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 119.

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one sequence/ Which is the beauty of all the world."[16] This mythic figure appears in his early poem "The Wanderer" and recurs in various guises throughout his work as far as Paterson. She is an ancient, wrecked beauty, along the lines of a Helen of Tyre, Yeats's Crazy Jane, or "La Belle Hëaumiere" of Villon (p. 4):

> She is attiring herself before me--
> Taking shape before me for worship,
> A red leaf that falls upon a stone!
> It is she of whom I told you, old
> Forgiveless, unreconcilable;
> That high wanderer of by-ways
> Walking imperious in beggary!
> At her throat is loose gold, a single chain
> From among many, on her bent fingers
> Are rings from which the stones are fallen,
> Her wrists wear a diminished state, her ankles
> Are bare!

In "The Wanderer," she appears as a seagull while the poet crosses Brooklyn ferry, proclaiming kinship with Whitman's and Crane's American muses. In other scenes she represents a femininized nature as Other, while the modern urban scene is a masculine principle, also equally and deliberately larger than life. If she extends into architecture, it is as "The Pink Church," the breasts of a holy female. As is typical of muses, she is the body of beauty as fuel for poetry. Furthermore, she is fragmented: Williams multiplies and divides her, while the male persona remains unified.

Protean, permissive, protective, and earthy, this grandmother-muse underlies the motherly "Kathleen McB.," the wretched "Elsie," and the Garret Mountain Woman in Paterson, counterpart to Dr. Paterson the city-man. Her image there recalls, as Williams admitted, Joyce's

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[16] Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 4.

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landscape-giant, H. C. E., in Finnegan's Wake (p. 8):

> And there, against him, stretches the low mountain.
> The Park's her head, carved, above the Falls, by the quiet
> river; Colored crystals the secret of those rocks;
> farms and ponds, laurel and the temperate wild cactus,
> yellow flowered . . facing him, his
> arm supporting her, by the Valley of the Rocks, asleep.
> Pearls at her ankles, her monstrous hair
> spangled by apple-blossoms is scattered about into
> the back country, waking their dreams--where the deer run
> and the wood-duck nests protecting his gallant plumage.

The flower image is a central element of Williams's second scheme, which he applies to feminine beings from flowering trees to fecund cats. Flowers convey aspects of eternal beauty within the individual woman, as in "Portrait of a Lady," "Queen Anne's Lace," "Mujer," and "The Flower." The efforts and failures of speech to describe the beautiful are emphasized by flowers, along with the "blamelessness" of feminine libido. Yet Williams can also extend beauty to the energies of work and the inaesthetic power of the inhabitants of Paterson. "The Flower," an exceptionally direct poem, exemplifies Williams's vision of beauty in the given world:

> A flower, at its heart (the stamens, pistil,
> etc.) is a naked woman, about 38, just
>
> out of bed, worth looking at both for
> her body and her mind and what she has seen
>
> and done. . . .[17]

Williams's metaphor contains only one adjective: "naked."

Williams's third scheme derives from his poetic dictum "no ideas but in things," and involves the least rhetorical romanticizing, the greatest realism of description. Nevertheless, the vision is deeply

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[17] Collected Earlier Poems, pp. 236-237.

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romantic. The women of "Proletarian Portrait," "Young Love," "The Girl," and other late poems attempt to embrace the individual woman without betraying her to generalizations, assumptions, stereotypes. Central to these real women who embody the Beautiful Thing is the raped black woman in a white lace dress of Paterson 3. The "woman in our town" of Paterson 5, II, is one of the most mysterious and individual of these portraits. If she is Sappho, an incarnation of the old-woman muse, or an extension of the Pink Church of poetry, her stature and intelligence are both distinctly human, retaining subjectivity due to the exact detail of her appearance. She is that eternal female only in the poet's response to her being there: "have you read anything that I have written?/ It is all for you" (p. 220).

These three related schemes serve to tie Williams's "Beautiful Thing" to the myths of Helen. Although Williams links her most often with Kore/Persephone,[18] the "Beautiful Thing" has many mythic overtones, including Demeter, Hera, Aphrodite, Artemis, and the Muses, as well as Helen. The Garret Mountain Woman, like Pound's Tellus-Helena, is both spirit of place and of poetry, natural beauty opposing a modern wasteland.[19] We have seen the flowering tree in both Yeats and H. D.

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[18] See esp. Jerome Mazzaro, William Carlos Williams: The Later Poems (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), ch. 4, "Sex and the Williams Poem," pp. 111 ff. David Jauss ("The Descent, the Dance, and the Wheel: The Aesthetic Theory of William Carlos Williams's Kora in Hell," Boston University Journal 25 [1977], pp. 37-42) argues that the two should not be equated, since Kore is the spirit creating the Beautiful Thing.

[19] See Williams's semiautobiographical novel A Voyage to Pagany (New York: New Directions, 1970) for a virginal alpine Venus, pp. 231, 259-267.

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representing their various paradises, visions of Helenic daughters or mothers.[20] In Book 3 of Paterson, "The Library" (pp. 95-145), the locust tree appears as as an eidolon of beauty to the reader of books: "a wind or ghost of a wind/ in all books echoing the life/ there." A beautiful thing, the perfume of the tree seems "to lead the mind away" in a seduction from the world that is also an initiation into poetic speech.

In the second section of "The Library," Helenic themes are brought into play by means of a network of images recalling Homeric epic and by means of Homeric language. Flames, as of the great Paterson fire and the burning library, bring Troy's burning towers into the narrative, with a clever reversal of image that suggests Troy (p. 116): "Beautiful thing/ --the whole city doomed! And/ the flames towering." Like Helen in Dante's Inferno, the Beautiful Thing is also windborne or windblown (p. 96):

> Beautiful Thing,
> my dove, unable and all who are windblown,
> touched by the fire.
> and unable

Homeric epic is brought into his pattern by references to the "wine-dark sea" and by the word "thalassa," both part of the water-roar of the library's book-voices (p. 101). The eidolon again is evoked by Williams's linking the Beautiful Thing with dreams, with the cost of dreams, with the dreams of dead men.

Finally, at the center of Paterson Williams describes an Iliadic battle over territory in which a young black woman, dressed as if a

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[20] Williams's exotic Cuban-born mother was named Elena.

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bride in white lace, is assaulted. H. D.'s Helen may have suffered psychic scars and a mystic death, but Williams's Helen has a broken nose (pp. 126-127):

> And the guys from Paterson
> beat up
> the guys from Newark and told
> them to stay the hell out
> of their territory and then
> socked you one
> across the nose
> Beautiful Thing
> for good luck and emphasis
> cracking it
> till I must believe that all
> desired women have had each
> in the end
> a busted nose
> and live afterward marked up
> Beautiful Thing
> for memory's sake
> to be credible in their deeds

A war as of Greeks and Trojans, bad neighbors, is underway, using the most antiheroic language. In fact, a pun on Helen's name is audible in the "hell out" of their threats. The violence done to the Beautiful Thing is almost ritualistic in this battle, recalling the sacrifices of Iphigenia and Polyxena.

Much of the terror of this beauty for Williams lay in its victimization rather than in its effect on those who would die for its sake. The brutal objectifying of women became a special cross of conscience, as he found himself and society exploiting them for sexual, economic, or poetic purposes:

> Then back to the party!
> and they maled
> and femaled you jealously
> Beautiful Thing
> as if to discover whence and
> by what miracle
> there should escape, what?

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still to be possessed, out of
what part
Beautiful Thing
should it look?
or be extinguished--
Three days in the same dress
up and down .

Throughout Paterson wives and women's bodies are lost, abused, and found; voices and the language are married, mangled, divorced. Appropriately, Williams's Helens are the most physically manifest, although the most abject: the raped Beautiful Thing shows her "legs, scarred (as a child)/ by the whip." Concern with Helen as wife, with wife as Helen, his doctor-husband's tenderness to the Beautiful Thing, distinguishes Williams's participation in the myth. The wife is a subject of mythic imagination for her husband, at once sacred and profane (p. 234):

--every married man carries in his head
the beloved and sacred image
of a virgin
whom he has whored

Like a wife, the manifestations of the Beautiful Thing are real but her comprehensiveness and effect are of the imagination: "a dark flame,/ a wind, a flood--counter to all staleness" (p. 100).

When Dr. Paterson finds the raped Beautiful Thing, again "a dark flame," in the cellar where she lies, he is shaken by her beauty. His symptoms recall those of the lover in Sappho's Phainetai Moi, who is also physically shaken by the nearness of the beloved. But Sappho tells of her own deprivation, not of the depradations of others upon the body of her beloved. For Williams, the presence of this abject but triumphant woman's flesh is so moving as to turn the narrative into a song containing despite itself the name of the Lost One, Kore, the stolen bride. Her radiance overtakes the words of a revivalist hymn (p. 128):

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"BRIGHTen/ the cor/ ner/ where you are!" As the fire of the poem destroys the water of the library, so the voice kindling into song destroys the book with all its precedent texts.

The role of a Menelaus is hardly popular among modern poets, but the son-of-law of Zeus was assured of immortality through his immortal, immoral wife. Unlike Yeats and Pound, who repeat addresses to posterity and take soundings of their own immortality, Williams seldom considers the question of whether or not his work will live forever. For, like Helen, the Beautiful Thing is both a destructive and a renewing force in the world and the library. As an apostrophic refrain within the poem to which the whole poem, the whole poet, is addressed, she is not the stale artifact but the living song.

New Gods and Fairy Tales

In contemporary poetry, this revision of Helen's image continues. Poets have just begun to digest the great efforts of re-signification undertaken in the first half of the century. Although the idea of myth has been forever changed by the activities of Freudian analysis and linguistic exploration, the modalities of myth remain primary to poetic imagination. As Wittgenstein has written, "In a way having oneself psychoanalysed is like eating from the tree of knowledge. The knowledge acquired sets us (new) ethical problems; but contributes nothing to their solution."[21] Instead, the mythic fruit acquires new complexities of signification: apple tree, flowering bough, and beautiful women

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[21] Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, ed. G. H. von Wright with Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 34e.

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merge with the song that at once calls, mourns, and replaces the lost one.

Wallace Stevens never mentions Helen herself, but his vision of the Aphroditic woman is persistent and deeply aware of her mythic traditions. He offers a ritual for this Helen of song in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

> On her trip around the world, Nanzia Nunzio
> Confronted Ozymandias. She went
> Alone and like a vestal long-prepared.
>
> I am the spouse. She took her necklace off
> And laid it on the sand. As I am, I am
> The spouse. She opened her stone-studded belt.
>
> I am the spouse, divested of bright gold,
> The spouse beyond emerald or amethyst,
> Beyond the burning body that I bear.
>
> I am the woman stripped more nakedly
> Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
> Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.
>
> Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
> In its own only precious ornament.
> Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.
>
> Clothe me entire in the final filament,
> So that I tremble with such love so known
> And myself is precious for your perfecting.
>
> Then Oxymandias said the spouse, the bride
> Is never naked. A fictive covering
> Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.[22]

Even when Helen has stripped her nature of ancient mystery, has located the origins of her good and evil within the self, and begins to free the feminine realm from abjection and sublimity, her image is covered by mind and language, by desire and loss. These themes govern Helen's

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[22] Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" VIII, The Collected Poems (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 395-396.

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deeply dissimilar appearances in the poems of John Ashbery and Judy Grahn, writers whose languages are rooted in divergences as wide as American culture can offer. Yet both poets have responded to the mysteries of precedent and persistence, each in their own way clothing and unclothing the bride.

Ashbery's Helen in Egypt. As W. H. Auden early recognized, in his introduction to Some Trees,[23] John Ashbery has always been deeply drawn to mythological material. From the play The Heroes, in which the labyrinth is a decrepit fun-house in a deserted amusement park and the minotaur a painted dummy,[24] to A Wave's "more theatrical and more human" Mercury on a park bench in "Description of a Masque,"[25] he continually revises assumptions and received ideas about mythic characters and quests.

His persisting yet elusive perception of something--a sublimity? a self?--is often a hint of some emotional affect, as of a friend or a feminine principle. In "The Mythological Poet,"[26] he locates a persevering eidolon at the heart of music and mythopoesis: "The music brought us what it seemed/ We had long desired, but in a form/ So rarified there was no emptiness/ Of sensation, as if pleasure/ Might

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[23] In Ashbery, Some Trees (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956). See also Marjorie Perloff, "Transparent Selves: The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara," Yearbook of English Studies 8 (1978), pp. 171-196.

[24] Ashbery, Three Plays (Calais, Vermont: Z Press, 1978).

[25] In A Wave (New York: Viking, 1984), p. 29.

[26] Some Trees (New York: Corinth, 1970), pp. 34-35.

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persist, like a dear friend/ Walking toward one in a dream." Yet at the same time, another beauty threatens to overwhelm this sensual perfection:

> But there is beside us, they said,
> Whom we do not sustain, the world
> Of things, that rages like a virgin
> Next to our silken thoughts. It can
> Be touched, they said. It cannot harm.
>
> But suddenly their green sides
> Foundered, as if the virgin beat
> Their airy trellis from within. . . .
> . . . We
> are sick, they said. It is a warning
> we were not meant to understand.

Facing imagined and real beauty, the poet himself is Nephele and Ixion, eidolon and centaur. Ashbery's scene almost describes Yeats's first vision of Helen in the reluctant Maud Gonne. But the poet now becomes the burning cloud:

> The mythological poet, his face
> Fabulous and fastidious, accepts
> Beauty before it arrives. The heavenly
> Moment in the heaviness of arrival
> Deplores him. He is merely
> An ornament, a kind of lewd
> Cloud placed on the horizon.

Ashbery's lines touch themes of beauty, imagination, loss, and myth-making also found in Crane and H. D. He describes mysterious processes with great simplicity, yet they retain essential mystery. An example is the last poem of Some Trees, "Le livre est sur la table" (pp. 74-75), which contains many motifs associated with Helen:

I

> All beauty, resonance, integrity,
> Exist by deprivation or logic
> Of strange position. This being so,
>
> We can only imagine a world in which a woman

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Walks and wears her hair and knows
All that she does not know. Yet we know

What her breasts are. And we give fullness
To the dream. The table supports the book,
The plume leaps in the hand. But what

Dismal scene is this? the old man pouting
At a black cloud, the woman gone
Into the house, from which the wailing starts?

II

The young man places a bird-house
Against the blue sea. He walks away
And it remains. Now other
Men appear, but they live in boxes.
The sea protects them like a wall.
The gods worship a line-drawing

Of a woman, in the shadow of the sea
Which goes on writing. Are there
Collisions, communications on the shore

Or did all secrets vanish when
The woman left? Is the bird mentioned
In the waves' minutes, or did the land advance?

Ashbery often views poet and inspiration as interdependent creators of emotion. In later poems, he considers the poet's responsibility for calling the beautiful thing into his world, for demanding the sublime:

I prefer "you" in the plural, I want "you,"
You must come to me, all golden and pale
Like the dew and the air,
And then I start getting this feeling of exaltation.[27]

A sestina entitled "Faust" manages a convergence of the phantom of the opera, a missing heroine, sunlight, a blonde Marguerita, a starving tenor, and Faust "drifting through the tunnels of the opera." The poem

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[27] Ashbery, "A Blessing in Disguise," Rivers and Mountains (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 26.

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suggests that the magus and Helen of Tyre are one and the same.[28]

"The Egyptian Helen"[29] represents Ashbery's longest meditation on Helen's figure. The text of this early piece is prose, as of the later "Three Poems." But here the surface is simple and direct in narration and exposition, shy of learned allusions: "Then there is the 'tree of Helen.' What is it?" The narrator is one of Ashbery's faux naïfs, unlike those voices who have retreated into more sophisticated realms of rhetorical display and linguistic doubt. Yet erudite materials from classical myth and popular fairy tales convene in this version of Helen in Egypt. The tale is not less effective for being so aware of its own artificiality.

The heroine, too, seems utterly familiar to both herself and us, without any loss of complexity:

> A beautiful girl, a wild impish girl. A girl with a weak will and pronounced characteristics, with strange hoarse mannerisms that are revolting at times. Do not get too close. A girl to inspire the heart and mind of an academician.

It comes by now as no surprise at all that she is "exactly like a tree." Her beauty is not human, yet she is confused as to whether or not she is divine. But she approaches biological questions with divine concern--"Does what we eat affect our personality?"--and ethical questions with divine nonchalance--"What is right?"

> She wrestled all her life with the first question, so that as a wrinkled and white-haired old lady she approached every morsel in an agony of indecision, though knowing that the question cannot be answered. She was constantly finding new

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[28] Ashbery, The Tennis Court Oath (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), pp.47-48.

[29] Appendix.

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> answers to the second question, like an unscrupulous pioneering goddess, like a very beautiful one.

This mental confusion makes her "two-thirds dead to begin with," not heartless but always watching herself "to see what her next move would be." When she discovers her own confusion, she becomes irresistible to men, who discover their similar confusion through her. She acts, then, as a scapegoat for men's intuition of their own sublimity, of the divine within abject humanity. When she at last claims "My face was valuable only because it could be reproduced an infinite number of times. . . . Those artists did not care so long as I reflected their own sorrowful emptiness," she seems to speak for the Marilyn Monroe of Andy Warhol's gaudy, multiply-replicated images.[30]

Ashbery's title suggests affinity with Richard Strauss's 1928

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[30] Compare the characteristics of Ashbery's Helen with the speaker of "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" (Houseboat Days [New York: Penguin, 1977], p. 31), whom Douglas Crase calls "a character getting choked to the point of silence" ("The Prophetic Ashbery," Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery, ed. David Lehman [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980], p. 58). Crase argues convincingly that "the chaotic and impulse-ridden personality recurringly described in Ashbery," of which his Helen is a prime example, "has its near lookalike in the personality being described in the literature on pathological narcissism." Crase reduces that personality to two parts, which I believe correspond to the abject and sublime emotions inherent in language use: "On the one hand we see in this personality a grandiose . . . conception of the self. And on the other we see an experiencing of reality as fragmented, chaotic, and inauthentic." Ashbery's Helen, like many of the poets attracted to the mythic figure, suffers from this psychic affliction: "One's feelings are no longer associable in any accurate way with action: the very sense of society has petered out. . . . The paradigmatic complaint of the narcissist on the couch [is]: he cannot feel, he is a blank, there is no 'other' of sufficient salience to rouse him from himself."

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opera Die ägyptische Helena, with libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal.[31] The opera presents Helen of Troy and Helen in Egypt as conflicting aspects of one woman, as does Ashbery:

> As she stood on the deck of Paris's ship . . . she thought about her newly discovered self, about the effect she had had on Paris, but most of all about her forthcoming decision in the game of what is right. "I shall discover the rule of right and proper conduct," she exclaimed to no one. "But it won't apply to everyone--just to some people." But this is an even more difficult part of her confusion, because according to this legend it was a phantom of her which Paris carried off to Troy, and the true Helen spent the war years in Egypt, living quietly at the court of King Proteus. Yet it is certain that, just as she was in a way the cause of the phantom's existence, so the phantom was somehow a part of her, through she would have sincerely denied, if she had been questioned, ever making the remark or laying eyes on the man the world supposed her to have eloped with.
>
> And yet she might have admitted these things, as she would have admitted, on finding herself in Egypt, that she was at a loss.

Ashbery continues to bend the myth, including characters never seen before in Helen's company. Hofmannsthal, too, bent the myth in several fantastic and post-Freudian directions--for example, by accompanying Aithra with a giant Omniscient Mussel recalling the shell on which Botticelli's Venus floats, from which soprano prophecies emerge. Ashbery's Helen is not befriended by a helpful enchantress, but attended by a silent maid, a "sad, impudent negress" named Lois,

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[31] Writing of the project in 1923, Hofmannsthal described his intention as "a graceful but slightly irreverent comedy set in the late classical era with much parlando and some light-hearted and pretty ceremony, a feast or something similar," and as "light and rich, like bunches of flowers tossed out by fireworks"; Strauss found the result "subtly and psychologically worked out" but could not use it as it stood: "if it were not supposed to be pure prose it would result in a long trail of boring music" (album notes, Die Aegyptische Helene, London Records). Whether or not Ashbery's "The Egyptian Helen" admits of all these descriptions, it depends similarly on a prose medium rather than on a musical poetry.

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faithful but responsible, someone Helen prefers to avoid. In Ashbery's version, a dog bites Helen's cheek, strangely recalling H. D.'s dream of the python-Pythoness described in the previous chapter. Such magical or dreamed stigmata are a familiar popular motif: Bram Stoker gives his heroine Mina a mark on the forehead to signify her unholy possession by the powers of vampirism, which nevertheless also gives her a prophetic ability to trace the hunted fiend. The mark of Ashbery's Helen is less dramatic but no less mysterious: to test a magic dog entrusted to her by an old pedlar woman like the witch-queen of "Snow White," she demands it to "Go and bring me my husband." The dog rebukes her, nips her cheek, and vanishes. But when the old woman returns it is with a letter announcing Menelaus' arrival. Her wish, its punishment, and its fulfilment are all contained in the scar, which remains but seems "to make her more beautiful than all the illicit kisses of Paris."

"Since there is room for an infinite number of legends," Ashbery does not conclude his tale in any familiar way. Instead, Helen remains in her palace apartment in Egypt, attended by Lois. Refusing nourishment, she wanes like the moon, anorexic and shy to the point of autism. Yet she sees the past and future blend into a vision of herself as a new lover, a new Paris:

> all seemed like beautiful friends on the deck of a ship which was tugging excitedly at its moorings, who now approached to introduce her to the charming young stranger, the lady so much like herself, even more beautiful, though without a scar, who extended her hand as the sailors shot the silvery sail up into the blue night sky.

This ship that carries this sublime eidolon-self represents an "otherness" like the ship appearing near the close of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror":

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> . . . Is there anything
> To be serious about beyond this otherness
> That gets included in the most ordinary
> Forms of daily activity, changing everything
> Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter
> Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
> Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near
> Peak, too close to ignore, too far
> For one to intervene? This otherness, this
> "Not-being-us" is all there is to look at
> In the mirror, though no one can say
> How it came to be that way. A ship
> Flying unknown colors has entered the harbor.[32]

Ashbery's myth reveals more than woman as human or human as feminine. Instead of restating Helen as a figure embodying others' desires and losses, he presents a fable of the other as persisting mystery within the self. The ship--so often representative of mother, muse, song--is not ours, not familiar; it is as much a mystery as we are to ourselves. Helen and eidolon, Helen and Paris, Helen and not-Helen are simultaneously identified and made unrecognizable. Only the scar, indented by desire, distinguishes Ashbery's Egyptian Helen from the phantom of her self-regard. Such abject stigmata of desire permit us to recognize ourselves among the mysterious forms of our imagination.

Grahn's Great Goddess. I now turn from Ashbery's lost-in-space Helen to the Helens rescued from time by Judy Grahn. The two poets differ widely in personal background and poetic practice: the first East-coast and urbane, denizen of New York and Paris, an art critic writing a complex and musical poetry within the milieu of an almost "terminally sophisti-

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[32] Ashbery, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 81.

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cated" society[33]; the second an outspoken west-coast Lesbian hailing from the smallest of Texan towns, concerned with esoteric traditions of magic, native American lore, and global mythologies. Grahn has gathered occult lore and private histories into a revisionary Lesbian folk tradition. She writes a propagandistic, chantlike verse perhaps most effective in oral presentation. Her etymologies and mythologies are loosely drawn, freely reinterpretive, and intended to make strong points. This emotive poetry, in what Marianne Moore would call "plain American that dogs and cats can read," reaches primarily a grassroots feminist audience.[34]

Grahn has generated many poems to reclothe the body of her Lesbian muse. As in the feminist work of Judy Chicago, sheer quantity matters when a poet perceives so much need for propaganda. The power of Grahn's earlier book, The Work of a Common Woman, lay in the strength of its portraits, coupled with revelations of unexpected, totemlike powers within the "common woman." In The Queen of Wands Grahn focuses on

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[33] As Ashbery describes the Fire Islanders of Edmund White's novel Forgetting Elena (New York: Random House, 1973), quoted by Crase, p. 35; White's elusive and victimized heroine of a complex love affair is a notable modern prose version of Helen.

[34] An anecdote from Grahn's Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds (Boston: Beacon, 1985), p. 154, which scans history for Lesbian "herstory," suggests how and why the figure of Helen became important to Grahn. She tells of spending some years far from her women lovers. Inspired by absence, she painted an image: a short-haired, broad-shouldered woman with delicate features with fisted hands on hips, her gaze direct and challenging. Grahn's roommate became upset and declared that she had no idea what women really looked like; Grahn could not tell this straight woman that the painting was called "The Butch." We understand again, with Stevens, that the bride is never naked: for Grahn, the issue is who will clothe her.

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divine rather than human myths, but the potential for this new theosophy was always present in her poetry.[35]

Dedicated to Marilyn Monroe, "who tried, I believe, to help us see that beauty has a mind of its own," The Queen of Wands combines American history and speech with an evangelical feminist mythopoesis. Grahn's topics in the book range from ancient mother goddesses to the Triangle factory fire to the eruption of Mount St. Helens. She found in Helen's story "an astonishingly worldwide myth of a female god of beauty, fire, love, light, thought and weaving. She is a figure in many forms and names and countries, and she is the Queen of Wands."

The Queen of Wands has four sections. It opens with an ancient Babylonian text, "A Tablet of Lamentations," in which a queen, prototype of the lamenting Helen of the Iliad, mourns having been stolen by ship and imprisoned in a foreign city. Grahn moves immediately to a metatextual level by invoking an ancient spirit as familiar: a weaving spider, whose name "Webster" evolved from "she-who-weaves." Grahn declares her realm that of words as well as webs: "For language is a form of weaving too, a clothing our ideas wear, a glowing flesh they are made of, a heart that beats in them."

In addition to the "Lamentations" text, Part One contains "A dream of Helen," in which the Edenic tree and the egg of being speak. In "Paris and Helen," the two exchange archetypal epithets that recur in other contexts as Helen and her lover are reborn through history. "One

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[35] Judy Chicago has followed a similar progression, from her celebration of individual women in "The Dinner Party" to the new image of a great birth goddess in whose being women giving birth participate, an image stated and restated in "The Birth Project."

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for Helen," "Helen's lover," and "Queen Helen" retrace and revise her story according to a fundamentalist feminism: women were originally the rulers of the tribe; men their adjuncts, then their enemies.[36] Part Two, "Magicians," identifies the Queen of Wands with familiar Gnostic motifs: tree of life, flame, immortal cosmic power of rebirth. The myth is modernized in "Helen in Hollywood," naming Harlowe, Holliday, Monroe. Part Three returns to Babylonian tablets and back to modern times, renovating the story of Sleeping Beauty.

For the concluding prose notes, Grahn draws from eclectic sources including ethnographic research, Bulfinch's mythology, and the stories of friends. A cosmic political spirit informs these concluding notes. Grahn identifies "Helen as a Goddess, El-Ana, Keeper of the Flame, House of Fire." She discusses Simon Magus, Sleeping Beauty, Frigga, Japanese and Amerindian spider mothers, an African Helen-Aphrodite, the economic history of weaving. Her universal Helens testify to the influence of Frazer on modern poetry as much as H. D.'s Helen in Egypt exemplifies the influence of Freud.

Many of Grahn's pieces respond to Helenic themes addressed by earlier poets. Naturally, she has been strongly influenced by H. D., whose current reputation owes much to feminist criticism. Like H. D., Grahn is a feminist mythmaker. This commitment explains, for her, both past and present. She changes Pound's dangerous singing Circe into her own loom and its web of light (p. 2); she replaces Crane's Faustus who sees Helen in a streetcar with Spider Webster's dark eyes in traffic,

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[36] For a more fully realized version of such feminist revisionary classics, I recommend Nancy Bogen's Klytaimnestra Who Stayed At Home (New York: Twickenham, 1979).

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"searching the faces of the secretaries/ for a trace/ of her face, her flare" (p. 64). The poem "Like a woman in childbirth wailing" is informed by the historical insights of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born, and recalls the guilty admiration of Williams for his bleeding but beautiful thing.

The most striking new versions of Helen created by Grahn appear in the book's finale, a sequence entitled "Helen you always were/ the factory." The poem presents a series of women's voices, interleaved with the comments of Spider Webster. Among these quintessentially American figures are Helen as the producer, her wand-spindle the giant looms of mills, whether cloth or steel; Helen as worker in the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire of 1911, a sacrifice whose death empowered labor unions; Helen as black woman kidnapped from home, source of a fire whose revolutionary power changed the land of her enslavement.

Grahn's vision of Helen is vast. She updates the litanies of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" in the title poem (pp. 38-39):

> I am the Queen of Wands.
> The people honor me.
> I am the torch they hold over their own heads . . .
> a flame in the hand of the statue,
> a bundle of coals
> in their inflammatory doctrines, calling me
> a chalice of fire,
> essential light,
> the Flama
> and the stuff of which their new world will be made.
> Sophia (Helen) they call me, enlightenment,
> "God's light," wisdom, romance, beauty, being saved,
> "Freedom" and the age of reason.
> Progress they call me, industrial revolution,
> "People's rule," the future, the age of
> electronics, of Aquarius, of the common man and woman,
> evolution
> solar energy and self-reliance. Sexual self-expression.
> Atomic fission, they call me, physics, relativity,
> "science," they call me and also emotion, the aura of

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consciousness, "health," and love
they call me, bloom of Helen.
Blush upon her face, and grace.

While this list is gargantuan, the essence of the goddess is in the spinning mind that uses language and makes codes:

And here I am a simple golden shower.
and here I am only a spider
webbing their minds
with pictures, words, impulses
feelings translated into moral imperatives
and rules for living, like leaves
upon a tree, spread to catch the sun's attention.

The phrase "rules for living" recalls the two questions that puzzled Ashbery's Egyptian Helen, who has no such assurance of power as Grahn's gigantic female. Grahn's Helen epitomizes how "what we eat affects our personality," as well as where we work, who we sleep with, how we live, what we exchange. But "what is right?" remains unanswerable, and Grahn, the propagandist, begs the question. "Helen your beauty: a chorus" recalls the unanswered question of Blake's "Tyger" (p. 43):

Helen your beauty--
is it your blush,
is it innocence?
what is untouched--
or is it what touches?

Helen your beauty--
is it what gives, or
what is blamed,
is it what lives, or
what is enflamed--
or what flames?

Grahn calls for an awakening to political consciousness, as Blake did to the spiritual light of his English Jerusalem (p. 76):

Who shall wake us
if we don't wake ourselves
shake loose the sleep
of ages, animate the doll
at last and bid her

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rise, and move and rule.

Grahn answers herself with a figure recalling the héroes fatal who haunted H. D.: "the Foe if no one else/ knows how . . ./ to shake us/ from our sleepy lives/ with fear. But I don't mean/ the Foe, I mean another/ and ourselves." Paris, Sleeping Beauty's prince, may be a man with "a golden net around him," Bear God or computer programmer, or "a dyke in a man's costume." Yet what place does Grahn assume he will take when the doll awakens? The animated doll as image of power only sets another monument in place of mysterious life, as Yeats believed Maud Gonne had done with Irish politics.

The Foe who steals the power of the Queen of Wands baffles the Spider: "When I went looking for the Foe/ I could not find him." He is invisible because he has replaced "the Queen,/ the mother, source." Grahn recognizes that Helen's veiled invisibility is a function of the viewer's own mystification ("They say she is veiled," p. 12). But the Foe's invisibility never suggests to Grahn that he might wear Helen's face as well as enact her roles. In a society, however, where woman is one among objects of exchange, Helen's faces are multiple like the faces of Luna, multiplied like the faces stamped on coins. "Helen you always were the factory" returns woman to her central absence in patriarchal symbol systems: she remains the producer of desire rather than desiring subject. Grahn's Queen claims to understand and hate what power the Foe has won from that "unknown mind" who gives all women wombs. She calls such invasive but life-saving techniques of modern obstetrics as the Caesarian section "the hook/ he has me on" (p. 71). Physical life is no less puzzling at last than that of moral behavior.

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Grahn's Helen claims a reappropriation of the father's linguistic realm of the symbolic by her spider's network of moral imperatives, by the semen-semantic golden shower, by the loom of light that "has all the meaning/ we can make of it." Grahn would have her goddess and her tribe of women escape abjection by subsuming all that is sublime: they are all to become powerful goddesses. In the final lyric appears a "Grand Grand Mother" whose time of worship, Grahn claims, is returning, one among the woman spirits rising. But the contradictions of patriarchal religions remain to corrupt power seekers, to undermine language, the old aggrandizement having merely been translated into a feminine form. Seeking to sublimate Helen with names, Grahn catalogues another fall into abjection, through the interstices of language; Ashbery, by contrast, provides his ever-diminishing Helen with an irreducible, mysterious sublimity through subtraction of meaning.

Helen Reconsidered

As the preceding poems reveal, Helen's myth retains recognizable dimensions, recurrent outlines that determine both interpretation and development. At the same time, her figure accumulates nuances from extensions into and analogues with other myths. As is surely evident, the archetypal primary dimensions and later added features of Helen were shaped in the earliest times down to the early Christian era, and nearly one hundred years of modern poetic history have appropriated her forms and stories in a great renewal. The discussions that follow attempt to define, at least partially, a structure of those dimensions

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and nuances. I offer these definitions with reference to the classical texts, as well as to the works of Yeats, Pound, and H. D., and the poems of their contempories and ours.

I consider below the following dimensions of Helen: beauty and rape; the divine or human Helen; subjective or objective treatment of Helen; light and blindness; sexuality and sacrifice; weaving and poetry. Helen is marked primarily by a contradictory set of dimensions that branch from the two main themes of beauty and rape. Her superlative beauty extends to the sublime, realm of the sacred, enrichment of self and spirit, fertility and perfection of artifice. In opposition, her tendency to rape or rapaciousness and its meanings and consequences include the profane uses of the world: conquest, greed, and slavery; lust, sterility, and destruction. As I have shown repeatedly, Helen's beauty and rape are mutually interdependent, one giving rise to the other's necessity. In this way, she is never far from an idea of language and the purposes of language, from that communicative power gained only through the loss of contiguity.

A secondary purpose in this section is to review some of the definitions of beauty that have arisen in the chapters above, as they pertain to the meanings of Helen. These issues include in what ways "the most beautiful woman in the world" provides an aesthetic object or experience. Can Helen ever properly be imagined solely as a human woman? What does "most" beautiful imply? As woman, what does Helen's beauty mean in terms of her being a self? What is the beautiful--a perception rooted in the eye, flesh, action, effects?

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Objectified Pleasure

Helen's predominant dimension is superlative or supernatural beauty. So it is especially strange that her actual features appear less often in literature than the effect she has on those who see her. In other words, her beauty tends to be expressed as an affective quality in the beholder rather than as an innate quality in her fictive flesh or character. Perhaps the best-known modern philosophical definition of beauty as an affective quality is that of George Santayana, in the 1896 work The Sense of Beauty.[37] There he defines beauty as the aesthetically pleasurable effect of an object on a beholder, "pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing":

> Beauty is a value, that is, it is not a perception of a matter of fact or of a relation: it is an emotion, an affection of our volitional and appreciative nature.

If beauty is a value and an emotion, we are left with some familiar questions on the relativity of good, the ambivalence of emotions: Hamlet's "There's nothing either good nor bad but thinking makes it so"; Troilus's "What's aught but as 'tis valued?" Such "thinking" is not intellectual process but the stuff opinions are made of--liking and desire, appreciation and volition. In other words, the object is beautiful because it arouses desire, the nature and intensity of which create its value.

But, since desires can arise from life or death instincts, and can either be held in moderation or can swing out of rational control, the object valued as beautiful will vary widely in its attractions and

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[37] Santayana, The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory (New York: Modern Library, 1955), pp. 51-53.

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attributes. Objectified pleasure is highly subjective, as we have seen in Sappho's preference of a radiant face to a battle line. Consequently, as image of the "most beautiful," most desired, Helen is visualized in forms ranging from shining ascetic queens to dark spider-women, depending on a poet's tastes and times. The Gnostic gospels describe Helen of Tyre as Luna, a beautiful shining face visible from all the windows of a tower at once; this multiplication of similar images--like Warhol's Monroe, Ashbery's Helen--reflects both the multiplicity and persistence of the most desirable beauty.

Santayana next calls beauty a positive value:

> In the second place, this value is positive, it is the sense of the presence of something good, or (in the case of ugliness) of its absence. It is never the perception of a positive evil, it is never a negative value. . . . In aesthetics that saying is true--often so disingenuous in ethics--that evil is nothing but the absence of good.

Certainly, any representation of Helen can be counted on to include at least the positive value of aesthetic appeal, despite other more or less negative features. Helen is hardly likely to be physically unlovely, even if she should, like a Siren, eat human flesh. (Notably, Vergil avoids in the Aeneid all mention of Helen's beauty, using instead, for example, the deeply ironical adjective egregia, "peerless," to describe her perfidy under the guise of beauty.)

The negative value in Helen's myths is not her beauty but her rape and/or rapaciousness, her adultery or her betrayal. She represents loss to the lover bereaved of her presence, danger to the lover who achieves her. If her absence must entail insupportable evil, her presence unforeseeable insecurity, of what nature is this superlative beauty she possesses?

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Traditionally, Helen has been seen as passive because all of her power lies in her beauty, which is perceived and desired, then carried off or seduced. Young men are often rapt away by the Diòs Thugáter goddesses in Homer and elsewhere, kálleos héineka hoîo, "on account of their beauty," to dwell among the gods. But Helen's rape is unusual in Greek myth because the agency of Paris is clearly secondary to that of Aphrodite. In other words, she is one of the few women in mythology rapt away for love by a female goddess; in fact, the only classical parallels readily recalled are Sappho and her reluctant beloved in Hymn to Aphrodite.[38] The goddess's exceptionally active role lends to the interpretation that Helen as epic figure was the aggressor, a seductive and lustful woman. This approach is especially attractive to cynics and misogynists: in such versions, Helen's beauty is often mitigated or qualified by portrayals of unattractive behavior or inappropriate sexuality. A similar denigration occurs in the legends of Sappho's ugliness. Feminine sexuality is often a phenomenon too painful and powerful for men to condone or recognize.

The dark theme of rape is the converse of the bright one of beauty: they are in the thesis/antithesis relationship of a dialectic. Each attribute heightens the other: the greater the beauty, the greater the desire it must arouse; the greater its loss, the dearer sacrifices are required to regain it; the greater the sacrifices, the more sacred and beautiful their object will seem to be. A synthesis might propose that the beloved beautiful thing itself be sacrificed to its own loss--

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[38] While Artemis also carries off Iphigenia, her purpose is not by any means sexual.

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the effect in fact described as typical of the child long disappointed in its hungers or greed, who refuses food when at last it is offered; the fate of Ashbery's Helen who can never decide whether or not what one eats affects one's personality.

But a vision of beauty can be as dark as rape. The anxious child believes that the good mother has been destroyed by fantasized rage and resentments. But this anger simultaneously destroys the child's introjected goodness; a good self must be reassembled from the reassurance of the mother's return. Since the greatly desired object, the beautiful thing, is imagined as being responsible for these self-destructive angers, it is not surprising that beauty is considered dangerous and painful. Such was the mystery of Marsyas, as preserved in Renaissance paintings: the artist is flayed by the beauty of the world. The cry of Marsyas, "Why do you tear me from myself?" expresses this agonized ecstasy.[39] So Sappho's Phainetai Moi describes love and suffering for an unattainable beloved, and so H. D. writes to her rough orchard god, "You have flayed me with your blossoms; spare us the beauty of fruit-trees."

Neverthless, beauty in the flesh inevitably arouses the expectation, desire for, or idea of bright virtues: the concept of nobility connoted by the Greek kalokagathia; and of the highest forms of truth: Plato's reality. Yet the attempt to make the two converge in Helen's figure finds paradoxes of sacred and profane, good and evil. Again, the cause of Helen's duality originates elsewhere than in the aesthetic

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[39] See Edgar Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 173.

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pleasure her beauty implies.

Santayana, however, attempts to distinguish beauty's place among the true and good:

> This pleasure must not be in the consequence of the utility of the object or event, but in its immediate perception; in other words, beauty is an ultimate good, something that gives satisfaction to a natural function, to some fundamental need or capacity of our minds. Beauty is therefore a positive value that is intrinsic: it is a pleasure. These two circumstances sufficiently separate the sphere of aesthetics from that of ethics. Moral values are generally negative, and always remote. Morality has to do with the avoidance of evil and the pursuit of good; aesthetics only with enjoyment.

Santayana's distinction holds only so long as pleasure and pain can be distinguished, and only if one believes that enjoyment has nothing to do with the moral quality of life. But ethics seem to be required in order to define values such as the utility or uselessness even of aesthetic objects.

Santayana's last point deals with the difference between sensual pleasure and the perception of beauty. He emphasizes the psychological experience of beauty, as it appears projected into the world, as opposed to a "pure" sensation of the things themselves, but remains far from such definitions of beauty as Freud's, in Civilization and its Discontents, that of sexual attraction deflected from its goal. The philosopher's eye is a goal that belongs to the mind as much as sexuality does:

> Finally, the pleasures of sense are distinguished from the perceptions of beauty, as sensation in general is distinguished from perception: by the objectification of the elements and their appearance as qualities rather of things than of consciousness. . . . It depends upon the degree of objectivity my feeling has attained at the moment whether I say "It pleases me" or "It is beautiful." . . . The more remote, interwoven, and inextricable the pleasure is, the more objective it will appear; and the union of the two

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pleasures often makes one beauty.

But what beauty is perceived that is not first sensed? The child's first good objects are other than visual stimulae. Santayana quotes Shakespeare's fifty-fourth sonnet to illustrate how "one added ornament . . . turns the deep dye . . . into an element of beauty and reality; and as truth is here a co-operation of perceptions, so beauty is the co-operation of pleasures":

> O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
> By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!
> The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
> For that sweet odour which doth in it live.
> The canker-blooms have full as deep a dye
> As the perfumed tincture of the roses,
> Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly
> When summer's breath their masked bids discloses.
> But, for their beauty is their only show,
> They live unwooed and unrespected fade;
> Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so:
> Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odours made.

The perception of beauty must include the memory of things beloved and desired. An irrational input, the extrasensory projection of memory is an added ornament not available through the five senses. Its presence is symbolized by the sweetness of the rose here, like the odor and flavor of the madeleine, since an odor persists long after full sensory experience.

The sweet odor of these roses may also signify ethical and moral goodness. As one Sapphic fragment runs:

> He who is beautiful to see is beautiful,
> But he who is good shall soon be beautiful also.[40]

Shakespeare's sonnet doubles on just this point: the duplicity of human motivation, the difference between inward and outward seeming. The

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[40] Frag. 58, Edmonds.

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pleasure of beauty found in the form of a woman seems to be most remote, as one organism and self is remote from another; most interwoven, as the body of another both expresses and responds to all the sensations in the beholder's body (so Donne's "The Ecstasy"); and most inextricable, as nothing except a text, a garment, a photograph--a perfume--can remain for the senses to hold once the body has vanished. But pleasure does not always cooperate to create the sense of beauty, any more than the perceptions cooperate to create the sense of truth. Truth is more than perfume: like beauty, it is a bridge between self and other, the communication promised but never fully delivered by language. Like the good, it both initiates and persists within our ideas of beauty. Whether or not Helen's beauty partakes of truth in any of its varieties, and if so, what the nature of that truth must be, has remained a subject of poetic indeterminacy for centuries.

God's Daughter: Divine or Human?

This indeterminacy appears at least as early as Homer's epic, most obviously in the status of her character as neither fully human nor divine. Since Helen's goodness, truth, or faith, and even her reality are called into question by adultery, her superlative beauty alone seems insufficient to earn her the Homeric epithet Diòs thugáter, title of divine daughters of Zeus. She has so little real power. Unlike Athena, who defies her father, Homer's Helen is not Olympian but human, subject to Zeus' unknowable ethos and unimpeachable will, as well as to Aphrodite's less sublime influence. She expresses her own abject humanity in the Iliad with terms of extreme guilt and shame. Further,

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she is also the daughter of the fallible mortal Tyndareus; one story blames the faithlessness of his daughters on his failure to sacrifice to Aphrodite.[41] Why is her beauty divine, if it is not only ambivalent but imperfect, neither good nor true, not ethical or moral, not even heroic?

But when is Helen called Diòs thugáter? The epithet is given to her in the Odyssey when she is mixing nepenthe into wine. It is her most aesthetic, magical, and poetic moment in the epics: she is about to entertain the company with a story, enchanting them from sorrow by means of both words and drugs. Moreover, the story will create perhaps the maximum ambivalence about her character, since she will tell how she helped the Greeks but Menelaus will immediately offer a countertale of how dangerous she proved to be to them. Again, Helen's Diòs thugáter epithet derives from the Vedic Dawn and Aphrodite. As Gregory Nagy has shown, that epithet may be applied by Homer to ambivalent goddesses, benevolent one moment and malign the next.[42] So Helen's beauty had

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[41] Pausanius 3.15.11.

[42] Nagy, p. 166: "The Rig-Vedic Usas is a beneficent goddess, well known for her function of dispelling the darkness. Yet her epithet divá(s) duhitár- is ambivalent. In a hymn which is part of the Vedic liturgical canon for animal sacrifice, Usas combined with the Night are together called divó duhitárā. In other words, both Dawn and Night are daughters of the Sky, Dyaus (cognate of Zeus). When Dawn drives away the Night, the latter is actually called her sister. There is a parallel ambivalence in the cognate epithet diòs thugáter. In one instance, it can describe a beneficent Athena who has just rescued Menelaos and who is compared to a mother fostering her child (D 128). This function of the diòs thugáter as patroness of the Hero is typical. In another instance, however, the epithet describes a maleficent Persephone, goddess of the dead (l 217). In still another instance, it describes Artemis when Penelope wants to be shot and killed by her (u 61). Although the epithet diòs thugáter does not survive in combination with Eos, the goddess herself is likewise ambivalent. Homeric diction

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nothing to do originally with descent from Zeus, with terms of high spiritual truth and justice. In fact, her forebears are often rapacious, chthonic, and murderous goddesses, as well as rescuers. However, this background remained dark to many mythographers, who inherited from early epic Helen's beauty and humanity as main dimensions, and were hard pressed to regularized her negative divine aspects.

Helen's beauty is divine to Homer even if her personality is not. Her appearance inspires the same emotions as sight of a divinity. It is well known that Homer never presents Helen by a blazon of features. He never uses the adjective kálliste, "most beautiful," for her, although it is given to others including Dawn and Athena. Instead, Helen's appearance gives rise to the mixture of wonder and terror described by the elders in Iliad 3. Their response implies that her beauty must appear to be superlative to all beholders because it is supernatural. Such beauty justifies both rape and retaliation: neither Trojans nor Greeks should be blamed for the long-drawn-out war. Ironically, these sentiments supported the argument of Isocrates' Encomium on Helen, extolling beauty as sacred--"of all things the most venerated, the most precious, the most divine"--in order to justify the Persian War.

Of course, this argument may be reversed. If such superlatives are not human, and if Helen is human, then the rationale for the war must be other than her beauty: it must be the same rationale that provokes her rape or permits her adultery. Greed for plunder and lust for war are motivations attributed to the Greeks in texts from Aeschylus to

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features her snatching up youths as if she were some Harpy, and yet she gives them immortality."

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Giraudoux; just as the Asians' abductions of women are given as rationale for the Persian War in Herodotus. That no human beauty, no Aphroditic woman, is worth such war is implied by the disgusted remarks of Euripides' Hecuba as well as of Shakespeare's Troilus: "Helen must needs be fair, when with your blood you daily paint her thus."

The heroine of Euripides' Helen is the first wholly human version of the queen, but such a character was made possible mostly because the playwright let the eidolon bear all his distaste for the figure of Helen of Troy. And in fact the eidolon has persisted more strongly in memory and myth than the noble Spartan wife. Not only is her beauty more readily explained as the god's invention, but the folly of humans who fought for an illusion twenty years is also better blamed on gods. This supernatural eidolon, like the Diòs thugáter epithet, is associated strongly with rape as well as divine beauty. In an early tale, Hera has an eidolon of herself made, in order to deceive the hubristic Ixion who had boasted that he would rape her. But Nephele, an image of cloud, deceived him, although his pride in the deed kept him boasting until Zeus chained him to a wheel of fire in Tartarus. The wheel may be interpreted as equivalent to the insatiability of desire as well as to the cycle of years during which Troy was ringed by the Achaian armies. That image appears in several forms in H. D.'s Helen in Egypt.

If the rape of Helen, like that of Kore, implies a loss of the beloved one to death, then the labors of the Achaians at Ilium are tantamount to Hercules' wrestling with death in order to achieve the impossible restoration of Alcestes to life. So the eidolon's vanishing after such labors parallels the loss of Eurydice's shade by Orpheus.

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Helen's humanization in epic entailed at the same time a transformation of something destructive into something redemptive--her symbolic weight moves from a devouring feminine principle into a renewable soul.

Finally, I suggest that a mortal may well exhibit the most terrifying beauty; that because the war is fought over human issues by mortal men, her beauty can be called superlative. If the given world contains all that is known of the sacred, and all passes absolutely with death, then the profane inheres in the failure to value life enough. Perhaps, in ancient usages, the absolute is a primitive version of a statistic: the number of lives lost for Helen was a record, the Iliad implies; so her beauty, too, must have set a record.

The poignancy of Helen's humanity becomes supernatural in Menelaus' tale. When she mimics the voices of Greek warriors' wives, her beauty is not like that of goddesses. Instead, her presence is like that of the dearest absent mortal companions of men. She is a composite of mortalities, Everywoman long desired, with an intensity that puts the lover into immediate physical danger. Her interchangeability with the most desired woman of any man becomes, through the Gnostics and symbolist poets, one of the most important modern themes.

Like Diotima's Eros in the Symposium, Helen "spans the chasm which divides the gods and men." The beauty that she owes to the concept of divinity-in-mortals would naturally conflate with the fate of Christ. But she does not die; rather, those who follow her beauty perish, whether for love or folly, for greed or lust; yet she can also give immortality, as to Menelaus or Achilles. In fact, it is startling how often and how completely she escapes death, in the crises of epic and

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in the hesitation of poets to "name Helena and death". Only the memory of the cult of a hanging goddess gives her myths a tale of death, but in terms entirely derived from divine stories, notably that of Hera hanging in golden chains between heaven and earth. The half-mortal sons of Zeus seldom fare so well: Sarpedon dies, and even Hercules inhabits Hades in some form; nor does the son of Thetis escape death until later tales resurrect him to live forever on Leuke with Helen. Is Helen undying because her prototype and protector Aphrodite preserves her as she preserves Aeneas and Paris, because nothing is lost of Love?

Helen's immortality does imply that her great labor is not physical but emotional. Like Sappho in the Phainetai Moi, she and her lovers suffer the feeling of death without dying. Traditionally the woman has been considered more "immortal" than the man, because she alone seems to have the power to produce new flesh. Further, as in the myth of Demeter and Kore, only woman labors to produce and nurture life, and hers too is the business of mourning its loss; she has the responsibilities of love and separation. As Rachel Bespaloff defines the Iliad's Helen:

> Beauty is not a promise of happiness here; it is a burden and a curse. At the same time, it isolates and elevates; it has something preservative in it that wards off outrage and shame. Hence its sacred character--to use the word in its original, ambiguous sense--on the one hand, life-giving, exalting; on the other, accursed and dread.[43]

The Body's Life

Woman's beauty has, obviously, one major difference from the aesthetic

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[43] Rachel Bespaloff, On the Iliad, trans. Mary McCarthy (Princeton: Bollingen, 1947), p. 66.

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beauty defined by Santayana: it is utilitarian. The rose must seem more aesthetic, since its beauty is not meant for any human's exclusive and immediate use, as woman's beauty seems to some to be. Sexuality, like beauty, offers both positive and negative gifts to human beings: it gives pleasure, renews and regenerates on one hand; on the other, it creates suffering, entails risks, and produces illusion.

In Civilization and its Discontents, Freud defined beauty in terms of sexuality:

> There is to my mind no doubt that the concept of "beautiful" has its roots in sexual excitation and that its original meaning was "sexually satisfying."

His editor Strachey adds:

> There is an allusion in the original to the fact that the German word "Reiz" is commonly used both as the technical term for "stimulus" and, in ordinary language, as an equivalent to the English "charm" or "attraction."

Strachey's apologia does not excuse the peculiarity of Freud's etymology here. The idea is elaborated:

> The science of aesthetics . . . has been unable to give any explanation of the origin of beauty. . . . Psychoanalysis, unfortunately, has scarcely anything to say about beauty either. All that seems certain is its derivation from the field of sexual feeling. The love of beauty seems a perfect example of an impulse inhibited in its aim. "Beauty" and "attraction" are originally attributes of the sexual object. It is worth remarking that the genitals themselves, the sight of which is always exciting, are nevertheless hardly ever judged to be beautiful; the quality of beauty seems, instead, to attach to certain secondary sexual characters.[44]

Perhaps the archetypal example of the judgement of sexual beauty as supreme over beauties of mind and character is the contest Paris judged. Freud alludes to this contest in "The Theme of the Three

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[44] Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, SE 21, pp. 82-83, p. 83 n. 1.

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Caskets," relating Aphrodite to Cordelia, Cinderella, Psyche, and ultimately--through a lyric from Offenbach's La Belle Hélène!--to Atropos, third of the Moerae sisters. Her name means the "inevitable one," and her duty is to cut the thread the others spin and measure: she is death. Freud remarks the surprising contradiction, that the superlative woman should be "behind the scenes" the least welcome; but he proposes a dark-toned resolution of his paradox:

> We know that man makes use of his imaginative faculty (phantasy) to satisfy those wishes that reality does not satisfy. So his imagination rebelled against the recognition of the truth embodied in the myth of the Moerae, and constructed instead the myth derived from it, in which the Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love and by that which most resembles her in human shape. The third of the sisters is no longer Death, she is the fairest, best, most desirable, and the most lovable among women.[45]

I question Freud's assumption of the priority of the death instinct over love in the psyche. His avoidance of the superlative "most sexual" in the list above seems strange to me, except that clearly all his adjectives apply to the mother. Although great goddesses are often death-related, none of the four main sources for Aphrodite, as isolated by Friedrich, are primarily death goddesses.[46] Instead, the most ancient precursors of Aphrodite are fertility goddesses, whose earliest stories tell of human love--of woman for daughter, of woman for male lovers. Even the violent Inanna retains positive dimensions in her relations with her female general and her friends, although not toward

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[45] Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets," SE 12, p. 291 ff.

[46] See Friedrich, chapter 2, "The Origins of Aphrodite," pp. 9-54.

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her usurping mate.[47] A life-oriented sexual dimension of love and beauty seems to be, if not prior, at least not secondary to the negative meanings.[48]

The evolution of a sense of beauty as an attraction for purposes of procreation must have preceded its use to mask knowledge of death. Mediating between these two poles of beauty and death is instead the theme of rape, a profaning of sexuality that nevertheless results, like sacred sexuality, in the possibilities of rebirth, while risking death and danger for both sexes. Classical mythology does not always distinguish between willing and unwilling copulations; while wrongs are clearly marked in some cases, such as the rape of Nemesis or Kore, there are many instances less obvious, notably the rape of Leda. Significantly, one of the few mortal-divine romances distinctly in the light is Aphrodite's daytime seduction of Anchises; even the rapacious Eos takes her lovers in the half-light of dawn. But no darkness is deeper than that surrounding the rape of Helen; her part in that repercussive act has lent itself to every conjecture and nuance of motivation. As I have noted, the more an active sexuality is accorded primacy in her motivation, the more resistible a beauty tends to be attributed to her.

Another Freudian concept, sexual overvaluation, throws some light on the Diòs thugáter theme:

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[47] See "The Descent of Inanna," Wolkstein and Kramer, Inanna, pp. 51-90.

[48] As Klein states, the destructive childhood fantasy does not have primacy in origin over the impulses to love and nurture ("Envy and Gratitude," pp. 57, 190-191).

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> It is only in the rarest instances that the psychical valuation that is set on the sexual object, as being the goal of the sexual instinct, stop short at its genitals. The appreciation extends to the whole body of the sexual object and tends to involve every sensation derived from it. The same overvaluation spreads over into the psychological sphere: the subject becomes, as it were, intellectually infatuated (that is, his powers of judgement are weakened) by the mental achievements and perfection of the sexual object and he submits to the latter's judgments with credulity.[49]

The intensity with which characters in the Iliad react to Helen's appearance illustrates an instance of such sexual overvaluation. One interpretation of the Gorgon, that death's-head grimace surrounded by snakes, might involve the freezing of a beholder's critical powers when facing the "hardly ever beautiful" female genitals. Circe's drugs are comparatively milder magic, turning men into weak-minded beasts. But Helen's power is above all inherent in "the human form divine." Even so, she is frightening to the elders on the wall, whose age frees them from interest in sexual usages; they alone can clearly judge that she is not safe to keep. But Priam, Paris, and the armies continue to overvalue her or something like her: if not Helen, like the only queen in a beehive, then the sexual pleasures of war or the male companionship of conquest.

The blind infatuation of sexual obsession is best expressed in the image of the eidolon, which has presumably neither genitals, body, nor psyche, but only the perfect image of physical beauty. The eidolon, insubstantial as it was, fooled Paris for twenty years. Eidola are especially connected with sexual illusion, as the cloud-form of Hera was created to foil a rape. Embracing a cloud, Ixion fathered the

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[49] Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," SE 7, p. 150.

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centaurs, those particularly violent and lustful beings. By analogy Paris fathers the Trojan war upon the eidolon of Helen. The monstrosity is the child of his unlawful sexuality, the rape of his host's wife.

Helen's sexuality is evident even in the Iliad, despite her austere, bitter speeches; she is the only mortal woman engaging in a sexual scene of any length, in bed with Paris while Menelaus seeks his lost opponent. Helen's maternal aspects are reflected throughout this study, as in the early story of how the first cup was modeled on her breast--a positive image of maternal sexuality, if not a prefiguration of the Grail itself.

However, the most visibly sexual being in the Iliad is not Helen but Aphrodite. She is given those particulars unnamed in connection with Helen, and it is Helen who sees her:

> She, as she recognized the round, sweet throat of the goddess
> and her desirable breasts and eyes that were full of shining,
> she wondered . . . (3.396-398)

One effect of this transference is to shift desire away from Helen, onto the shameless and radiant goddess, so that the audience is relieved of both sexual curiosity toward and moral judgement of Helen, and instead can sympathize with the desperate human beset by a powerful deity. The passage may also imply that Helen seduces herself by projecting her own sexual beauty onto the goddess, in immortal and inhuman perfection. She may be acting from the same vanity that characterizes Hercules and other heroes. The self-projection of beauty into poetry, the heroic and romantic stance of the poet, is a hidden theme of Helen's myths in Yeats and Pound, a subject of concern and contemplation in H. D. and Ashbery.

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As the obverse of this sublime self-projection, Helen is also self-consciously abject. The epithet "dog-eyed" that Helen directs at herself carries connotations of sexual shame. Although the insult is thrown between warriors in both camps, Helen is the only character to apply it to herself. Hector regularly badgers Paris for his sexual irresponsibility, but Helen must weave her own hair-shirt. "Dog-eyed" implies lust and wantonness; Freud speculates that "dog" became an insult because of the shamelessness of the animal in excretory and sexual functions.[50] Even less attractive is the dog's role on the battlefield, as tearer and devourer of corpses. The precipitator of the war, Helen links herself to Inanna and Kali as well as Ares and his dogs through the epithet. "In Greek culture," says Friedrich, "sexuality in violation of the code of honor was as polluting as filth or death."[51] Aphrodite, too, as we have seen, has canine dimensions; she is symbolized as a she-wolf in Orphic hymns, and her Old European foremothers appeared with dogs as familiars. She avoids pollution by remaining sublime with a radiant shamelessness; some authors--notably Sappho and occasionally Yeats--extend this divine privilege to Helen. But Helen in Homer does not excuse herself. She feels personal shame more strongly than any other character in the Iliad.

The early Helens of Euripides are wanton by comparison. Attracted by a Paris as golden and sexual as his goddess herself, Helen is accused of lust by the wretched Hecuba--no overvaluation there. It is

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[50] Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, SE 21, pp. 99-100 n. 1.

[51] Friedrich, p. 134.

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clear how such a seducible Helen would later provide a "cultural rhyme" with Eve and the fall from Eden. The problem of women's desire, as subject, for man as sexual object, lies behind much of the derogation of Helen. Aphrodite's active sexuality, as in the Homeric Hymn and Odyssey 8.266-369, may provide divine parallels for Helen's possible motivations, which are so deeply compromised by her adjacent humanity. Restraint in sexual expression was the only proper behavior for women, as Hephaestus himself complains after catching his wife and Ares en flagrante:

> ". . . my snare will contain them
> until her father pays back in full all my gifts of courtship
> I paid out into his hand for the sake of his bitch-eyed daughter.
> The girl is beautiful indeed, but she is intemperate."
> (8.317-320)

The sexual dimension of Helen reaches its greatest excess in the Gnostic Helen of Tyre, a prostitute and outcast, the fallen female principle. Helen is particularly well-suited to embody this principle because she is both superlative beauty and ultimate victim of rape, suffering the guilt and shame of a human being in society but rescued from death by her supernatural, immortal beauty. Eve cannot do so much to comfort Adam or herself for the loss of Eden, but Helen as Pistis-Sophia is compared to the tree of knowledge itself: life is outside the garden. Helen of Tyre is both the force and the forced. The divine intelligence, the Shekinah or glory of God, is the beauty of the flesh when it descends into the world.

Beauty and Autonomy

Flesh and spirit are more easily reconciled than self and other. One

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who seeks a pure "objectified pleasure" in a beautiful woman must inevitably confront the subjectivity of such an aesthetic object. Helen's subjective consciousness need have nothing to do with the pleasure of another in beholding her body or hearing her voice. Her divinely superlative beauty, however, has often permitted her creators or beholders--poets or mythical lovers, or both in one--to ignore to an equally absolute degree the possible subjectivity of the character as heroine rather than as goddess. This one-dimensionality occurs because of a mytholiterary tendency to use her figure alone as a symbol of earthly beauty, a usage based in a long-pervading social system that values a woman's physical beauty more highly than her human self or psyche. Such a vision of Helen's beauty sours the equation of moral and aesthetic goods by erasing the ethical possibility of choice or responsibility from Helen's functions. She is then portrayed as a semidivine mysterious "other," unknowable and tricky, an eidolon; or as a vain and shallow woman trading on the inexplicable attraction of sex; or as an object among objects, a golden statue, an idol.

The eidolon in fact embodies the error of this view of woman. I find that she represents the woman who does not inhabit her own life, a ghost or sleepwalker, unresponsive sexually, irresponsible emotionally. The active heroism and positive morality of Euripides' Helen in Egypt would then represent a woman's mature effort to preserve both her autonomy and the lives of those she loves. Such is the Helen created by H. D.; Ashbery's Egyptian Helen achieves a far more qualified victory.

"Beauty is the glory of woman; that of man is strength." So wrote Bion in the second century B.C., assigning the attribute perceived to

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woman, the action achieved to man. Helen embodies the superlative quality of femininity to perfection, even as Hercules embodies the masculine perfection of strength. But whereas the labors of Hercules proved his fame, Helen's was given to her by Zeus, by divine fate. Whether she is portrayed as passive victim of rape or as adulteress, her beauty is seldom in her active control. She does not earn it through action; she acquires it through appraisal.

The description of Helen's superlative beauty presents special technical problems to a poet, and at the same time unmasks deeper conflicts of meaning and motivation. She may be poignant, tragic, austere and sincere, as Bespaloff describes the Iliad's Helen; she may be cruel, vain, and flippant, or frivolous and empty, as Giraudoux suggests; she may be both heroine and villain for the same author, as in Euripides' dramas. Formulaic allusions to hair and arms, or the itemization of jewels, garments, or cosmetics fail to convince precisely because of their novelistic particulars, or because they follow some symbolic code--blond hair, blue eyes for the heroine type of Helen; dark features for the seductress. For contrast, consider the portrait of Odysseus in Iliad 3, or the labors of Psyche, which determine her happiness.

Helen's human nature is continually betrayed by the function of her divine beauty, like the idea of woman decried by Simone de Beauvoir:

> If it is so difficult to say anything specific about her, that is because man seeks the whole of himself in her and because she is All. She is All, that is, on the plane of the inessential; she is all the Other. And, as the other, she is other than herself, other than what is expected of her. Being all, she is never quite this which she should be; she is

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> everlasting deception; the very deception of that existence which is never successfully attained nor fully reconciled with the totality of existents.[52]

The objectified pleasure of beauty, when the overriding quality of a woman rather than divine, must make the woman something less than human, both in terms of moral responsibility and in terms of social freedom.

> The ideal of feminine beauty is variable, but certain demands remain constant: for one thing, since woman is destined to be possessed, her body must present the inert and passive qualities of an object. . . . Her body is not perceived as the radiation of a subjective personality, but as a thing sunk deep in its own immanence.[53]

(Obviously, to value only physical beauty in a man must cause the same dehumanizing and deification of the objectified person.)

The need to believe in the flesh as deathless, athanatos, changeless and absolute, may be responsible in part for the persistence of Helen as both divine and human, subject and object. "Beauty is momentary in the mind," wrote Wallace Stevens; "the fitful framing of a portal; /But in the flesh it is immortal./ The body dies; the body's beauty lives."[54] "Ambiguous idol!" cries de Beauvoir; "man wishes her to be carnal, her beauty like that of fruits and flowers; but he would also have her smooth, hard, changeless as a pebble."[55] The statue--half

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[52] De Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 223.

[53] De Beauvoir, p. 177.

[54] Stevens, "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Collected Poems, pp. 91-92.

[55] De Beauvoir, p. 179.

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divine image, half dead stone--symbolizes this paradox: Galatea, the Venus de Milo, with her arms lost like the handless queen of fairy tales; Pound's quattrocento lady whose painted eyes speak. One Byzantine scholar even assumed that the eidolon of Helen was a painting; the Greek words are identical.[56]

Opposed to this divine but petrified Helen is the Artemisian maiden who dances with her companions, as in Theocritus. But the fate of dancing girls and maidens is often victimization: Kore raped, the sweet-natured Iphigenia and Polyxena of Euripides sacrificing themselves in heroic tableaux. These selfless maidens constitute tragic losses in bad causes; Helen is anomalous among this company. Her sacrifice, whether chosen or coerced, is at Aphrodite's command. Selflessness at that altar is often read as selfishness. If any readers could be cold enough to criticize such idealism and nobility as Polyxena's and Iphigenia's, they must also admit Helen's actions to be no error but a form of necessity. In her adultery she attains a status similar to that of the maenad: she is to Aphrodite as Agave of the Bacchae is to Dionysus.

Since she is accorded no autonomy, she may actually become semihuman rather than semidivine, and yet remain personally beyond blame. Like goods or cattle, she is destined to be possessed: by a family or by a husband, so why not by a god? As Agave tore live animals and her own son with her hands, so Helen in the Iliad expresses her shame in terms of dogs, eaters of human carrion, subordinates to humans. Helen's self-pronounced epithet kynôpsis, "bitch-eyed," is her

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[56] Eidolon/eikon: see Prost, p. 455.

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answer to the elders' vision of her likeness to the goddess. But the Homeric Helen is exceptional, still, in her powers of self-expression; by contrast, even the faithful Penelope is less developed, formulaically unable to answer her son, retiring upstairs to her quarters to weep until Athena sends slumber. In this transcendence of silence, Helen is again truly divine, a member of the Muses' company. An object of exchange, a captive soul, she nevertheless can raise her voice against her own objectification, against those who would turn her flesh to gold.

Helen and Gold

Helen's relation to gold is remarkable and complex. Again her Aphroditic descent is evident, since the color gold is intrinsic to the goddess of love more than to all other queens of Olympus. "She is the most golden, and 'golden' is her most frequent epithet."[57] Helen shares the epithet, as in Hesiod's Catalogue of Women, where she is "the girl with the form of golden Aphrodite" for whom the suitors compete. In the Odyssey she carries a golden distaff, and the palace she shares with Menelaus is full of golden objects. Her daughter, says Homer, is also "like golden Aphrodite." "By what seems to be an ancient pattern," states Paul Friedrich, "'golden' is associated with 'beautiful'. . . The Greek gold/beauty association is strongly paralleled in Russian, where the word for 'beautiful' consists of the word for 'red' plus an

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[57] Friedrich, p. 78.

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intensifying prefix (pre-krasnyi)."[58]

The attraction of gold bridges the distance between aesthetic values and economic ones, even as it widens the abyss between moral and sensual notions of the good. Imperishable and radiant, the element gold in earliest times was associated with the sun, immortality, and earthly riches. As Friedrich elaborates, the centrality of gold in Homer

> reflects strong feelings about the actual metal and the objects of goldsmithing; these are reflected too in Pindar's famous "but gold, like a gleaming fire/by night, outshines all pride of wealth beside" (First Olympian). Such feelings about gold go back to the gold-oriented Mycenaeans and were certainly shared in the contemporary imperial centers of Egypt, Babylon, and Anatolia and by the . . . Phoenicians.[59]

Deep appreciation of gold survives, of course, in modern cultures. A possessable earthly beauty, gold has more real economic value than fire or sun, which may be harnessed but not hoarded. The fact of woman as flesh implies an analogous possessability, just as gold can be touched, counted, traded, stolen.

The Iliad directly correlates gold and women as prizes of war when Thersites upbraids Agamemnon's greed:

> Son of Atreus, what thing further do you want, or find fault with
> now? Your shelters are filled with bronze, there are plenty of the best
> women for you within your shelter, whom we Achaians
> give to you first of all whenever we capture some stronghold.
> Or is it still more gold you will be wanting, that some son
> of the Trojans, breakers of horses, brings as ransom out of Ilion,
> one that I, or some Achaian, capture and bring in?
> Is it some young woman to lie with in love and keep her
> all to yourself apart from the others? [Iliad 2.225-231]

Another correlation occurs when Paris calls his luck in holding Helen

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[58] Friedrich, pp. 78-79. See Grahn's notes to The Queen of Wands for other golden goddesses and heroines.

[59] Friedrich, p. 78.

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"the lovely gift of golden Aphrodite" (3.64). Helen is a bribe, a prize given to win a prize, to win a golden apple. The Greeks demanded the return of Helen and all her possessions as if they were equivalents. In fact, there are suggestions that Helen's value to the Achaians consisted of the title-deed to Sparta; as daughter of its king, she alone conferred the kingship upon Agamemnon's brother.[60]

The shining of an earthly beauty creates not only awe and fear, but also desire and the striving to achieve, possess, control. To the extent that objects have the greatest real value, aesthetically or economically, a woman will be considered an object. To the extent that she behaves under these conditions as a subject, capable of autonomous decision and desire, however much her freedom of action is limited, her beauty will be dangerous, even though she may be considered as blameless as a god or animal. The human stance between these extremes is also often fatal, as the woman becomes scapegoat or victim. Again, the lacuna involves an awareness of, an attempt to show, the responsible moral sense of a woman apart from her aesthetic exterior form.

Light

Helen's most sublime aspect carries connotations at once deeply moral and essentially visual. Despite poetic avoidance of her features, Helen's beauty is not ineffable, but most often expressed in terms of light, whether the gleam of gold or fire or the radiance of the Holy Spirit. Of all visual phenomena, light is the primal sign, mediating by its presence between earth and sky, sleep and waking, life and death.

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[60] Lindsay, p. 57.

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Its qualities belong both to the sacred and profane, and it may symbolize both emotions and intellect. The Phaedrus describes the high ethical beauty of the gods' sphere, true Reality, as "shining clear." Helen's shining underscores her starry divinity, but it also suggests human tragedy, the flames of desire and the conflagrations of cities. A god appearing in full beauty--as they presumably do in Plato's myth--can kill or injure a mortal: so Anchises' fear of impotence before Aphrodite; so Semele's cremation by Zeus.

A closer look at the etymologies of "beauty" and words connoting beauty shows how deeply the concept is linked to the perception of light as well as to the sense of the good. The basic conflicts of appearance and perception outlined above inhere in the earliest forms of the words themselves. The English "beauty" derives from French beaute, which in turn descends from Latin bellus, a diminutive of bonus, "good," used primarily for women and children as a term of endearment, and later ironically for men.[61] The Greek kalos, too, designated both beauty and goodness; thus the oxymoron implied in Hesiod's epithet for Pandora, kalòn kakón, "beautiful evil." In contrast, the German schön, related to English "sheen" and "shine," derives from words connoting brilliance, brightness, things striking or impressive, or the very appearances themselves.

Helen's shining takes many forms in classical and later texts. Her solar, astral, lunar, and electrical aspects; her epithets and garments; fire and gold--all express the dimension of radiance. Through

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[61] See Banner, p. 10; Encylopedia of the History of Ideas, p. 195.

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Aphrodite Helen is closely related to the Vedic Uṣas, "the shining one"; to the sun through the Vedic solar princess Sūryā; and to the moon through late etymologies deriving her name from Selene, as well as through the Gnostic identification of Helen with Luna. Helen and the Dioscuri are sometimes called stars, beneficent to sailors. They are also imagined as St. Elmo's Fire, ball lightening, the luminous electricity that plays about the masts of ships. We have also seen Helen's garments and her home described as shining, starlike.

Helen's epithets in Homer are even more striking in their references to her radiance. Aside from the standard dîa gynaikôn, "shining among women," which also accompanies Penelope, the term "Argive," 'Argeíē, may connote brightness, as Linda Lee Clader argues.[62] "Argive" is one of the few Homeric epithets that Milman Parry calls distinctively Helen's; she shares it only once, with Hera.[63] Usually translated as referring to the Argive Plain, since it is clear that Helen is not from the city of Argos but from Lakedaimon, the epithet may not refer to a place at all. Clader believes that since "the adjectival derivative of the root involved, árgós (<*árgrós),means 'bright,'" the epithet Argive "may very well designate her as a 'bright Helen,' firmly associated with the land of life and light, and it might also substan-

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[62] Clader, pp. 56-58.

[63] Parry, The Making of Homeric Verse (Oxford, 1971), p. 42. Helen has several aspects linking her to Hera; in Sparta, as Pausanius tells, an ancient wooden idol of Aphrodite-Hera received sacrifices from mothers of marrying daughters (3.13.9).

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tiate the notion that she is one of the immortals."[64]

Some late classical etymologies derive Helen's name from the word for torch; accurate or not, the derivation becomes meaningful especially in Vergil, where Helen dances with a torch to signal the Greek army. Destructive fire symbolizes, too, the errors of Paris, who appears as a firebrand himself and who in Ovid's Heroides interprets his mother's dream and his sister's prophecies as referring only to the irresistible flames of his love. The Gnostics saw fire as "of a twofold nature, hidden and apparent," typical of the dichotomies surrounding Helen. As we have seen, the Gnostic myth claimed that Helen caused Homer to remove the torch episode from the Iliad, since it implicated her with the fall of Troy before Simon's preaching could justify her treachery; presumable, Vergil's use of the episode was more timely. A fire-goddess was at the heart of ancient Zoroastrian worship; her identity with Helen is celebrated particularly by Judy Grahn.

Shining light has long been a symbol for intellect or spirit, a connection still felt today in the use of "brilliant" or "bright" as compliments for intelligence. Helen's intelligence in Euripides' Helen, her prophetic powers in the Odyssey, are notable despite their converses--the foolishly vain Helen in Orestes, the obfuscating sophistry of Helen in The Trojan Women. Mental powers are also suggested by her epithet Diòs thugáter, shared with Athena as well as Aphrodite. Through Athena, the Gnostics related Helen to the figure of wisdom, Sophia. Helen of Tyre embodied the divine intelligence, called Ennoia, from noia, feminine of noos, "mind." Helen's brightness is here tied even

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[64] Clader, p. 57.

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more strongly to the ancient theme of a "return to light and life," escaping death through mental endurance and agility, as Frame proposes of Odysseus in his study of the term nostos.[65]

Frame reconstructs the Greek root *nes- to mean "return to light and life," which he relates to the Nekyia episode of the Odyssey, as well as to the hero's encounters with the Cyclops, Helios' cattle, the Lestrygonians, and the Phaecians. All these adventures have to do with encountering darkness and returning to light, whether the darkness is that of death, Hades, a cave, stupidity and error, drugs, or of beneficial sleep. Clader, discussing the epithet Argive, calls Argos the ultimate goal of the Greek heroes' nostoi, the place to which they all hope to return. Further, Argos can take on metaphysical dimensions as a locale: when Priam encounters death by night to claim his dead son from Achilles, he is guided by Hermes, who promises not to desert him "even til I came to glorious Argos in a fast ship or following on foot" (24.437-439)."Clearly," says Clader, "there is no way to get from Troy to any geographical Argos on foot, but Hermes does accompany Priam to a metaphorical death and back to the light of day." Hermes leaves his side just as the dawn breaks. "So Argos appears, perhaps, to be the 'bright place,' the epic Land of the Living."[66]

Dawn's light is recalled again as the figure of Usas, who "reveals

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[65] Frame, The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

[66] Clader, op. cit.

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paths and makes them easier to traverse."[67] "The immortality of Ushas is made up of the twin processes of dying (implied) and of being born again at dawn."[68] As the Vedic "Hymn to Dawn" praises her:

> Stir yourselves! A life-giving breath has come upon us--
> The darkness has gone, light is coming;
>
> She has left the way so the sun can travel it--
> We have come to the place where men extend their lives.[69]

Helen's associations with the light of spirit and intellect developed through the Gnostic figure into the Faust legends and into such works as André Suarés's Helène chez Archimede. Grahn identifies her Queen of Wands with the Enlightenment itself.

But as the power of dawn rests on its following night, so the particular spiritual sublimity of Helen's beauty rests on her tendency to prolonged and painful absences. Kristeva describes a certain emotion of sublimity that seems related to this desired but absent beloved, whose image is remembered in terms of light and whose return is envisioned as a union with the cosmos. "The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them together. . . . For the sublime has no object either. . . . The sublime object dissolves in the raptures of a bottom-

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[67] Friedrich, p. 38.

[68] Friedrich, p. 39.

[69] Friedrich, pp. 194-195.

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less memory."[70] This is the place "where men extend their lives," but it is fleeting. Since the abject is "a precondition of narcissism," by which the self rejects the contiguous other in order to be able to use language, the need to speak alone will cloud the brilliance of the mirror. "The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed." Yet from that relaxation the bottomless memory of sublimity is also freed. Helen reflects the experience of these psychological and linguistic processes; she is both here and there, human and divine, in Troy and in Egypt. She restores to us the wordless memory of infancy, a nameless name like that of Kore. Yet poets from the author of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" to Judy Grahn have thrown name after name before her, never able to define her form.

Blindness

As light signifies knowledge, prescience, prophecy, so blindness points to a mental error or spiritual death. The concept of ăte attributed to both Paris and Helen in the Iliad implies a blind action, "bewilderment, infatuation, reckless impulse, caused by judicial blindness

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[70] "As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers--it has always already triggered--a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where 'I' am--delight and loss. Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a something added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here, as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy--fascination" (Powers of Horror, p. 12).

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sent by the gods."[71] Helen in the Odyssey speaks a recantation of her blindness toward Menelaus' virtues, the ăte Aphrodite bestowed on her. Conversely, a vision beyond the eyes may be symbolized by such blindnesses as that of Oedipus at Colonus or of Homer.

A metaphysical blindness seems to be an occupational hazard for poets as well as critics, even though physical blindness may be an advantage. "Bards had often been blind, as smiths had been lame; the vocation was conditioned by physical disability. The linking of blindness with second sight, prophecy, and poetic power is typical of most primitive cultures."[72] Although blinded by ăte, Helen has these prophetic powers in the Odyssey. Thus, too, the facial wounds of H. D.'s dream and Ashbery's Egyptian Helen signify the accession of psychic power. The legend of Stesichorus transfers these sight and blindness themes from Helen to her poet.[73] The eclipse of the sun, another theme that engaged Stesichorus, again links Helen to solar goddesses.[74]

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[71] Liddell and Scott.

[72] Lindsay, pp. 123-124.

[73] A journey into the rising sun's rays healed Orion after he was blinded for Merope's rape. The tale of Daphnis, who is blinded for spurning a nymph or for being unfaithful to her, provides another parallel. Theocritus makes him a figure analogous to Narcissus (Rose, p. 169). Also see Thamyres (Rose, p. 174).

[74] As Lindsay speculates (p. 125): "We seem to touch in [Stesichorus] a complex of images and ideas centered on a fear of some general disaster, a blacking-out of the universe with a breakdown of its normal laws. He is asking: What has gone wrong? Where have we sinned or erred? What can we do to avert doom? It is a tribute to the key role played by Homer in Greek culture, and by Helen in

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The tenth-century A. D. commentary called the Suda proposes a pun on palinode: palinodía: a return journey; but palinedía: a return or opposite song. As the nostos is a journey from death to light and life, so the Palinode is a turning from darkness and censure to vision and praise. Further, according to tradition, the Palinode first introduced the image of the eidolon, that will-o'-the-wisp misleading both the armies. The error of thinking an immaterial and immoral appearance to be that of the true Helen--tantamount to worshipping an idol--adds to the horrors of the Iliad and the struggles of the Nostoi.

The legend implies that those who can only condemn Helen cannot see the true light of her beauty, cannot understand what she means; they are blind in spirit and mind. To praise her is to regain spiritual consciousness as well as mental acuity. And yet those writers who started out their assessments of Helen with nothing but praise are the slippery and mistrusted sophists--Gorgias and Isocrates. Plato by contrast makes Socrates cover his head and speak disparagingly of love, then unblind himself and deliver a palinode, returning to the light of higher truth.

Text and Textile

I return to the questions of what beauty consists of, what it means. We have heard the aesthetician define beauty as a positive good, useless for moral and ethical purposes, an objectified pleasure. We have

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the Homeric world-picture, that the moral question comes to a head in the attempt to revalue the heroine. Did Zeus use her to set off forces leading to the destruction of mankind? . . . If only Helen can be cleared of guilt, then there is no such divine scheme of world end. The spiriting away of the sun ceases to be so frightening."

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opposed to these definitions the ambivalence of beauty and its loss, a positive evil; the long tradition expressed in etymologies linking beauty and the highest good, the true reality; the subjective pleasure of sexual stimulus as defined by psychoanalysis. Yet the German etymology that Freud missed provides the best clue: the schön is what shines, what appears in the world most brightly. Beauty is a sign of life, making us feel ásmenos[75], "happy," delivered from death and darkness.

The beautiful makes us live, tells us we are alive, but does not necessarily imply Goethe's romantic "order of life in its highest activity": whether vision of light or burst of sexual hormones, or emergence from night and error into day and knowledge; whether danger, risk, or loss brings us back to life by way of desire for renewal, or the dark necessity of revenge. The idea of the beautiful is bound inextricably to the eye, and, since "the eye altering alters all," to memory. So praise leads to insight and censure to blindness, since we remember what we love and can only truly know what we love; the rejections or betrayals that hatred both causes and censures lead only to Lethe, to repressions of memory. For the poet they lead to silence.

The aesthetic object, as the eye leads to the mind, thus becomes the noetic object: Helen of Troy becomes Helen of Tyre, if one can see that the eidolon is not the true Helen in Egypt:

> The three manifestations of sublime elevation are truth, beauty, and goodness. Truthful thought and active goodness are the clearest expressions of the meaning of life, stripped of the swarming multiplicity of desires. On the other hand, beauty, the domain of art, is the meaning, the essence, of

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[75] See Frame on ásmenos, pp. 15-18.

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> life seen through the turmoil of passion, through multiform and multicolored appearance. . . . Thus even the perverse manifestations of life (seductions and ensuing disastrous consequences) are presented so that the pure form and the beauty of their concealed lawfulness may be elucidated.[76]

Helen, with her ambrosial garments and robes that shine like stars, beset by love and desire, ringed by shame and war, weaves a figured tapestry on a background "the color of death" at the center of the Iliad because she is the Muse invoked at the very start. We have seen that she can make her own tale, at first or second hand, by speaking at banquets or by forcing a bard to praise her or forgo light. As a weaver she is at once a type of the Fates or the goddess Eileithyia whose loom is the world, and of the oral poet, whose ruling metaphor for song was the weaving of textiles:

> Weaving was closely linked in the Greek mind to singing, and this link led naturally to the Greek lyric poets' use of metaphors from weaving to describe their own art as a "web of song." . . . The association . . . is attributable to three specific factors: (1) the Homeric background for using terms derived from weaving as metaphors for intellectual activity, as well as Homer's own association of literal weaving with song; (2) certain linguistic associations in the Greek language between terms related to weaving and terms related to music; (3) and a phenomenon that has been largely overlooked, . . . namely the mechanical parallels between the weaver's loom and the poet's lyre, that is, between striking the "strings" of the loom with the shuttle and striking the strings of the lyre with the plektron.[77]

Weaving is a symbol of poetic composition; Homer's Helen is the cause of the composition. As Clader observes, all of her appearances in the Iliad are associated with poetry. "The vision of Helen at her loom,

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[76] Paul Diel, Symbolism in Greek Mythology: Human Desire and its Transformations, p. 77.

[77] Snyder, "The Web of Song," p. 193.

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then, seems to be a profoundly self-conscious statement by the singer. Within the context of the action, Helen is both author and subject of her work."[78] The Muse like Ate is another Diòs thugáter; the daughter of Zeus and memory, of the spirit and desire.

What is the meaning of Helen's beauty? Many other women in the Iliad are called kalliste, "most beautiful"; as noted, Helen herself is not. In that primal text, she is the much-contended, the prize of Aphrodite, the woman as heart of conflict. Is the idea of the most beautiful woman in the world necessarily limited to the object of greatest desire, or does her beauty express a spiritual superlative as well? To read the tale of Helen with its contradictory variants in this manner is revealing. As kalos and agathos sometimes interrelated, the "most beautiful" Helen can even be considered--as in Euripides' Helen or H. D.'s Helen in Egypt--also most moral, most noble, most responsible in her actions. Thus, as Sappho implies, her elopement--to take that variant--was most correct despite the slaughter and destruction that ensued; the action she took was right, although the armies and their generals were wrong. Are we contemplating, here, adultery celebrated or love triumphant?

Helen of Troy may certainly be justified from the viewpoint of Paris, who won something, winning her. Helen of Egypt is more recognizably heroic, of course, a faithful wife, as well as a successful rescuer. But there are deeper questions concerning what Paris won with Helen. It is easy to answer "the liebestod," as Denis de Rougemont would do, matching these two archetypal adulterers with Tristram and

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[78] Clader, p. 8.

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Isolde. But what is the beauty of the liebestod? What is the high morality of adultery?

Did Paris gain access to language or to silence through the acquisition of Helen? Pound's intangible Helen granted him first song, then abject quiet; on the other hand, Yeats gained access to poetic speech first through his unattainable Helen, then through his wife's sudden access to magical speech. Williams gains access through celebration of himself disguised to himself in the black flesh of a fallen Helen, a Helen of Tyre in matter. We have seen H. D. equating Paris with the beloved, the husband, the poet, in her attempt to hear Helen's own voice, raised first to her héroes fatals, then to a mother who is also herself.

Does the myth also signify that Helen possesses this superlative beauty as a power within herself rather than as a value exclusively for others? It is rare in myth that the "beautiful one" is of any help to himself or herself; beauty continues to be a detriment. But I suggest that Helen's beauty is power, and that it functions for her own good; that her superlative beauty has come to signify superlative ability to pursue and achieve her desires and goals. Her beauty suggests the infinite possibilities and limits of language. Her unimaginable image bridges the gap between self and other, to overcome the loss of unity inherent in the acquisition of language, the only tool capable of proposing unity. Helen has this poetic power in common with the Muse. The Muse gives the poet permission to move; Helen gives the space in which to dance.

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Appendix. "The Egyptian Helen" by John Ashbery

A beautiful girl, a wild impish girl. A girl with a weak will and pronounced characteristics, with strange hoarse mannerisms that are revolting at times. Do not get too close. A girl to inspire the heart and mind of an academician. We read that she was associated with trees, and this is not hard to believe as we see her in Sparta with the other girls, her sisters, on a Saturday night in summer as they emerge from their house to watch the bright lights and the boys showing off, just before bedtime. A shrinking but unforgettable figure, genuinely attractive, minus a few bedbug bites, and exactly like a tree. Then there is the "tree of Helen." What is it? Perhaps someone will tell me, for I do not know what it is.

We read that she may have been a goddess, but that men forgot this at some point and made her an aristocrat. She behaved like an aristocrat, but also very much like a goddess. For instance, her childhood was largely taken up with questions like, Does what we eat affect our personality? and, What is right? She wrestled all her life with the first question, so that as a wrinkled and white-haired old lady she approached every morsel in an agony of indecision, though knowing that the question cannot be answered. She was constantly finding new answers to the second question, like an unscrupulous pioneering goddess, like a

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very beautiful one. It is fun to consider what is right and to make up new names for it. Unlike most games it grows more amusing the longer one plays, since one always feels on the point of a move which will recoup all one's losses. One does not grow cross and ugly in old age. One imagines one's death as a magnificent though costly move, which might win the game if one could stay to see that justice were administered. It is not the removal of oneself that does the trick, but the fact that one has finally succeeded in becoming emotional. This was difficult for a girl like Helen, who was two-thirds dead to begin with, owing to the confusion about her mortal or immortal status, which stemmed from a confusion in her own mind.

"The dear girl," people in Sparta used to say, "but of course she has no heart." Of course she had a heart; she was very sensitive; but she was always watching to see what her next move would be. People who have their attention fixed on the events of the next five minutes cannot be called spiritual, but they do have that attitude of peaceful expectancy which, among other things, lends inspiration and fury to the academicians' flailing chisels. What about the academicians? They were an ugly lot, with even baser natures than the true bohemian artists. But even the lowest of them had the knack of selecting one characteristic from the subject at hand and making it seem all-important. Helen was always very patient with them. It was through deep contemplation of their work that she noticed her own unspirituality, and after that it was as if all doors opened before her. She saw that it was her characteristic of waiting that gave her significance, and she was able to make it, not spiritual of course, but all-important. A

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slight improvement, but the most that could be expected of her. She knew it and was glad.

How often we hear it said of someone, "She changed my life," and much less often, "It was through her that I found out who I really am." Of Helen the first could not be said; in spite of her violent beauty she made very little impression, and she did not make so little that one though about her afterwards. It was strange, but she seemed to have the beauty of a very beautiful cat or tree which one admires but very soon forgets. But it was she who made men know what they were. After she found out about herself (just before she left Sparta), that waiting was her great characteristic, but before she had begun seriously to consider it, she began having this effect on the men who met her. Not that she had found out who she was--the old confusion hadn't vanished, because she continued to think about her next move--but she now knew about her confusion, and men saw it and discovered theirs. As she stood on the deck of Paris's ship, with the men making ready, as quietly as possible, to set sail from Sparta, she thought about her newly discovered self, about the effect she had had on Paris, but most of all about her forthcoming decision in the game of what is right. "I shall discover the rule of right and proper conduct," she exclaimed to no one. "But it won't apply to everyone--just to some people." But this is an even more difficult part of her confusion, because according to this legend it was a phantom of her which Paris carried off to Troy, and the true Helen spent the war years in Egypt, living quietly at the court of King Proteus. Yet it is certain that, just as she was in a way the cause of the phantom's existence, as the phantom was somehow a part of

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her, though she would have sincerely denied, if she had been questioned, ever making the remark or laying eyes on the man the world supposed her to have eloped with.

And yet she might have admitted these things, as she would have admitted, on finding herself in Egypt, that she was at a loss. Perhaps deciding to discover a law was the same as discovering it, and subsequent attempts to apply it the same as losing it, as imagining more of an improvement for herself than was possible. She was unhappy; she did not know how to eat. She did not know there was a phantom of herself far away having her old effect on men to the extent we know about, but somehow she felt downhearted. But she was happy that she had not abandoned her quest for right because she had discovered it accidentally; she knew that she would not be lost for long, even though she found a new place instead of the old one, or remained exactly where she was. She felt that she had made her last move and that it was now up to others to make what they would of the game. She was given a sumptuous apartment in the palace and a maid named Lois, who did not speak at all. She was a sad, impudent negress. It was impossible to escape for long from her responsible gaze, though Helen tried it at first. She used to go for walks around the city, hoping for some adventure which might make her feel at home, for her feeling of pleasant victorious uncertainty was beginning to be replaced by the ordinary old one, the kind she had felt at Sparta before she found out she could affect what went on around her. No doubt it was the phantom, which was now causing events of a more and more terrible importance, and thus encroaching more and more on people's thoughts, though they did not mistake it for

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the real Helen. She felt a little light, a little silly. But she knew she was the true Helen, even though the phantom (of whom she was not aware) might end by being more lifelike than herself. How did she know this? Because she did not mistake people for their thoughts, as they were letting a thought of her gradually replace her in their minds. Of course no thought of her, however clearly defined, could have any importance for them. And though there was less and less of her, the less there was the more it seemed to be she.

Nevertheless she felt uncertain. So she decided to take Lois along on her expeditions for a little weight, a little color until she should be feeling sufficiently lost to begin contemplating another move. It was impossible to make an adventure of these sly Egyptians, of their flat sky and buildings and the evil smells that escaped from their sewers. Lois introduced her to a number of people; there was a young man whom she liked well enough to try to test her old powers on him; but none of this was really any use, and she could not seem to do whatever it was these people had in mind for her, though she realized how important it was to try. Every day they went to an outdoor cafe on a big square where all these people used to come. They seemed to take little interest in life, sitting or moving about much as the phantom Helen might move about Troy, caring little for any advantage it might or might not have over those about her. Helen was afraid of becoming like this herself, and decided to do her best to attract their attention.

"I have heard that far, far away," she said, "a terrible war is being waged in my name. Every morning men set forth full of the hope of

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gaining me, and every evening they return, crushed and hopeless without me. And this has been going on for years." But Lois and the young man only pretended to look astonished, or perhaps they had not heard. Perhaps they were not there at all. Still, Helen felt better. She got up from the table and began walking away. Neither Lois nor the young man made any move to follow her.

She walked on through the half empty squares. Occasionally a sentry or a slave would stiffen as she passed and clear his throat as though wishing she would speak to him. But she did not notice her surroundings, or that night had begun to fall. She felt angry with herself for her long idleness. She had been drawn away from her interests by an absurd double who was menacing the world, which was no concern of hers, and now she had returned to find herself in a place that was not at all like home, among people who were merely shadows, who expected her to tell them what to do. In the absence of anyone to play her game with she had been playing with the phantom Helen. She was a goddess who had played with a mortal, which was forgetfulness. What was there to do? In her despair she did not notice that she had become again the old watchful Helen, full of anxiety but doing neither more nor less than what was expected of her.

As she neared the palace she noticed a little old man seated at an easel in the shadow of an archway, painting from a tiny paintbox. It was King Proteus! "Why do you paint at night?" she asked. But he seemed not to hear. Boldly she stepped up to him and took the picture from the easel. It was a portrait of herself, done in the pale academic manner she had known so well in days gone by. There was in fact nothing to

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distinguish it from the dozens of portraits of her that the Spartan painters had made. The central quality was once again elusiveness, a lack of decision which had been so common a characteristic in their work that for a time it had seemed a trademark of artistic excellence.

"Why have you done this?" she demanded sternly.

Tears flowed from the old king's eyes. "Because I missed you," he answered simply. "I knew you were dwelling in my palace. At the same time, it seemed your thoughts were always far away, goodness knows where, so I decided to paint your picture to remind myself that you were here, that you still loved me, and that I loved you. Now, if you don't mind, I should like to continue."

Helen returned to her apartment and went to bed. She did not think about the king's words, for they were only a reflection of her own thoughts, but about the portrait of herself. "I am the Helen of all those pictures and plays and poems," she thought. "It was not my face that launched a thousand ships, or received the kisses of Paris, or did anything wonderful. My face was valuable only because it could be reproduced an infinite number of times. I might have been the watchful Helen, or the impatient Helen, or the gay Helen; those artists did not care so long as I reflected their own sorrowful emptiness, which I now am." She looked in the mirror and discovered she had grown old and tired, though not cross or ugly. "It is just as well," she sighed. "At least I discovered the rule of right and proper conduct."

After that time passed very quickly. She would lie in bed wishing it was Thursday, and almost before she had formed the wish it would be the Thursday after next, or the next year. One day an old woman came to

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the palace selling things, and she bought this, that and the other. The old woman asked her as a favor to keep her dog for a year and a day, for she had to go on a long journey. Helen asked her why she was so fond of the dog. "Because it is a magic dog," she replied. "It does what I tell it to." Helen promised to cherish it as though it were herself, and the old woman departed.

Helen gazed for a long time at the dog as it lay on a comfortable rug before the fire. She decided to test its obedience. "Go and bring me my husband," she commanded. "Why do you disobey my mistress?" the dog asked, and putting its paws on Helen's breasts, it nipped her lightly on the cheek and vanished.

The year and a day passed quickly enough. On the appointed day Helen lay in bed clad in her most beautiful robes, and wearing her costliest jewels. The scar where the dog had nipped her had not gone away, but it seemed to make her more beautiful than ever. Lois ushered the old lady into the bedchamber. Helen noticed that she looked strangely like old King Proteus, but she was too tired to look at her very closely.

The old crone did not seem surprised or displeased to learn that the dog had vanished. "It was not a dog anyway," she said. "It was only a phantom. Look, here is a letter I have brought you as a reward for your pains." And so saying, she too vanished.

"No doubt this is a letter from my husband, Menelaus," Helen said to herself. "He has discovered my identity, and wants to claim me. Well, let him do as he wishes. In any case I am too tired to open this letter." But Lois opened it for her and placed it on the bed. Sure

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enough, it was from Menelaus announcing his immediate arrival in Egypt, and full of regrets over their long separation and the unhappy struggle at Troy, "all over a lost cause," as he said.

Euripides tells us that Menelaus discovered his true wife in Egypt and managed to escape with her back to Sparta despite the efforts of King Proteus's son, who had fallen in love with her. Since there is room for an infinite number of legends, I shall suppose that she remained in her apartment, attended by the faithful Lois, and refusing all nourishment because she knew there was no answer to the question of whether what we eat affects our personality. So she grew always less and less, and so (she felt) more like herself, except for the scar on her cheek, which seemed to make her more beautiful than all the illicit kisses of Paris. She would now have seemed a very likeable little girl, just as she had seemed in Sparta so very long ago, if there had been anyone to see her, except that she had entered the country of shyness, and was as far from everyone as they were from her.

Being shy, it seemed, was not the same as being correct. But anything was like waking from a beautiful daylight sleep, more certain of what was to come than of what had already happened. Lois and the young man, the old king, the old lady and the dog, all seemed like beautiful friends on the deck of a ship which was tugging excitedly at its moorings, who now approached to introduce her to the charming young stranger, the lady so much like herself, even more beautiful, though without a scar, who extended her hand as the sailors shot the silvery sail up into the blue night sky.

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A Selected Chronology

1808	Goethe, Faust I
1831	Poe, "To Helen"
1832	Goethe, Faust II
1864	Offenbach, "La Belle Hélène"
1871-72	Rossetti, "Troy Town"
1874	Flaubert, La Tentation de Saint Antoine
1881	Wilde, "The New Helen"
1886	Todhunter, Helena in Troas
1890	Haggard and Lang, The World's Desire
1893	Yeats, "The Rose of the World" (rev. 1922)
ca. 1902	Santayana, "The Flight of Helen: A Fragment"
1908	Yeats, "No Second Troy"
1911	Teasdale, "Helen of Troy"
1914	Pound, "Τὸ Καλόν"
1917	Pound, "Homage to Sextus Propertius"
1919	Yeats, "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes"
1920	Williams, Kora in Hell
1920	Benét, "The First of Helen," "The Last of Helen"
1922-26	Crane, "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen"
1924	H. D., "Helen"
1930	Pound, A Draft of XXX Cantos
1933	Jeffers, "At the Fall of an Age"

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1935 Giraudoux, "La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu"

1936 Yeats, "Long-Legged Fly"

1938 Kazantzakis, The Odyssey

1948 Pound, The Pisan Cantos

1952-61 H. D., Helen in Egypt

1957 Williams, Paterson

1959 H. D., "Winter Love"

1960s Ashbery, "The Egyptian Helen"

1982 Grahn, The Queen of Wands

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William Carlos Williams

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