

Indelible Ink of the Palimpsest: Language, Myth and Narrative in H.D.'s Trilogy

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As a modern poet, H.D. struggled to reconcile her art with her personal experiences and reconcile modern life with literary and mythological tradition. Trilogy rewrites myth as a means of recuperating images of Judeo-Christian, Egyptian and Greek patriarchy into a narrative of female resurrection that draws upon H. D.'s experience as writer, classicist, woman, and poet. H.D. remakes reality in the process of resolving the conflict between the myth that precedes her poem and her own experience by recognizing the continuing power of myth to influence, while revising it to suit her own ends.

your stylus is dipped in corrosive sublimate,
how can you scratch out

indelible ink of the palimpsest
of past misadventure?

H.D. The Walls Do Not Fall

How *can* a poet scratch out the indelible ink of the palimpsest?

For a poet like Hilda Doolittle in Trilogy, there is an underlying desire to understand the relationship of the poet to a past that is distanced and unavailable, yet always present and pressing. Sometimes the past evokes nostalgia and a longing to close the gap between then and now, while at other times, the gap protects the poet from the constraints of past literary production. Some other modernist poets sought to reconcile past and present by exploring the relationship between traditions and modern reality, producing texts like Marianne Moore's "To a Steam Roller" which attempts to make technology a subject of poetry, or Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" which seeks to articulate and understand the limits of language in the modern age. As a modern poet, H.D. struggled to reconcile her art with her personal experiences and to reconcile modern

life with literary and mythological tradition. Susan Friedman notes that H.D. “as one of the ‘keepers of the secret, / the carriers, the spinners,’ ... did not conceive of the poet as a passive receptacle for the images and symbols of tradition....Instead, the poet engages in an active, dialectical process of weaving traditional and personal revelations into new patterns of vision” (226). The shadows of her predecessors do indeed form a kind of indelible ink of the palimpsest that cannot be fully erased, and H. D. resolves the conflict between the myths that precede her poem and her own experience by recognizing the power of mythic influence while revising it to suit her own ends.

Trilogy rewrites myth in order to recuperate the images of Judeo-Christian, Egyptian and Greek patriarchy into a narrative of female resurrection that draws upon H. D.’s experience as writer, classicist, woman, and poet. H.D.’s poems treat narrative as many other modernist poets do, as a string of lyrical fragments that “shifts [narrative] to another level, becoming the invisible 'master-narrative' that, present nowhere *in* the text, nevertheless ensures the text's ideological (if not formal) coherence” (McHale 162). But unlike Eliot’s The Wasteland, in which narrativity produces meaning more or less consistently throughout, in Trilogy, there is a strategic shift in the text. The early stanzas of the poem exhibit the clear and crisp description of an Imagist poet, but as the images repeat, they build momentum, erupting into narrative. In early narrative eruptions, the reader does much of the work of narrative construction, seeking patterns in the repetition, however by the end of the poem narrative repetition is replaced by temporal narrative markers that impose linearity on the images, ordering the action in the final stanzas.

The disjunction between past and present that other poets might seek to mend, or at least understand, is less troubling for a poet like H.D. She does not wish to increase

the gap to the past, nor does she see myth as simple nostalgic longing. Her poetry celebrates the possibility myth holds for the individual's understanding of his or her own history: "H.D. made the poet's creative interaction with seemingly dead mythological traditions the framework of the poem and her existence within those traditions the core of her self-definition as an artist" (Friedman Psyche 209-10). In Trilogy, the nostalgia for the past is not for the values and ideals of that past, but for the coherent structure that mythology uses to explain why the world operates the way that it does. H.D. uses the stable structures of myth as support for what is more important in the poem, the quest for a resurrection myth that would merge individual experience with established narrative. Her effort to marry these two modes of understanding – the personal and the mythical – expresses a desire to open up the potential for interconnectedness, contingency and fluidity between the literature of the past and the experience of the present.

Hilda Dolittle's literary reputation rests solidly on her work as *H. D. Imagiste*, the name Ezra Pound suggested she use for her poetry. But her literary output far exceeds her participation in the Imagist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century; recent critical attention has turned to examining her prose and film work, as well as her later poetic output. The three poems of Trilogy: The Walls Do Not Fall, Tribute to the Angels, and The Flowering of the Rod, which will be discussed in the following pages, were composed between 1942 and 1944, during H. D.'s stay in London during the Blitz (Guest 268). Between her earliest work as an Imagist in 1913 and these later poems, H. D. produced several prose works, as well as performing in film and writing film criticism (Friedman Psyche 6). Her versatility as both a novelist and poet is evident in the structure of the poems of Trilogy, particularly in the final sequence of the poems, in

which the images and language introduced earlier are re-formulated as narrative. The story of Mary, Kaspar and the jar of myrrh recounted in the final poem of Trilogy brings together the fragments of myth and experience that have been presented in the earlier stanzas, providing a model for the integration of the mythic and the personal.

The critical reception of H.D.'s poetry has followed as varied and winding a path as her artistic output during her life. Identified as an Imagist early on, her sparse prose attracted and repelled critics through her "perfection," as well as "'exquisite' otherworldliness and 'true' Greekness" (Friedman Penelope's Web 60). Her reputation as an Imagist overshadowed her later work, and it was only in the 1980s that feminist critics recuperated her poetry as well as her prose, celebrating its fragmentation, authenticity, and self-alienation (Edmunds 3). Post-structuralists speak of the generativity of her poetry and the cultural work that her poems do, while Lawrence S. Rainey dismisses her as a pawn in the wars of identity politics. Frequently, H.D.'s poetry is associated with multiplicity, as when Susan Edmunds speaks of the "twisted body of history and narrative and the radiant body of epiphany" that characterize H.D.'s "two bodies," (Morris 2-8) or when Susan Friedman describes the symbiotic relationship between her prose and poetry, and the personal and the impersonal (Penelope's Web ix).

Rather than being forced to choose among these critical approaches, I would like to turn back to the time at which H.D. was writing to explore how she reconciles the mythic traditions of the past with her experience as a modern woman. H.D. wrote and published Trilogy during World War II, a time when archetypal criticism was emerging, with Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism published in the following decade. It is within this critical climate that H.D.'s mythic project was created and understood. Frye

identifies two possible methods of myth reference: original myth, what he calls “unadulterated myth” and stories that have altered those original myths by using them in realist or romantic modes which dilute or adulterate the original. This second reference, the kind found in H.D.’s poetry, he calls “displaced myth.”¹ H.D. directly references myth in Trilogy to merge stories of divinities such as those of the Greek pantheon with stories of humans, including not only figures like Mary and Kaspar, but also the female poet. The “displaced myth” in Trilogy emerges in a quest for a myth of resurrection. The trope of the quest narrative does not seek so much to reveal a pre-existing resurrection myth as to create it through the images and narrative of the poems.

Archetypal criticism insists on the isolation of literature from the context in which it is produced; the structure of literature will be surmised solely by a study of its archetypes (Frye 134), thus it fails to fully account for the myth in Trilogy, which would seem to require a critical approach that recognizes how “the poet engages in an active, dialectical process of weaving traditional and personal revelations into new patterns of vision” (Friedman Psyche 226). The storytelling that emerges in H.D.’s long poem clearly re-tells earlier stories, which implies a witness, a storyteller who can testify to

¹ Northrop Frye’s discussion of archetypal criticism and mythic modes is hierarchical and sequential; myth lies on a continuum that runs, teleologically, from the earliest forms of narrative, myth, through later forms such as tragedy, comedy, and realist fiction. The earliest form, at the top of the hierarchy, is “unadulterated myth”, the kind in which the hero of the story is superior in kind to both men and the environment, in other words, a god. This is the “archetype” of archetypal criticism; the characters of unadulterated myth are types, conventions of the form. When narrative refers back to this form, or mixes it with later forms such as tragedy or realist fiction, both of which employ a human hero, it is “displaced myth.” Direct use of myth consists of either apocalyptic mythic imagery, or demonic mythic imagery. Apocalyptic imagery is concerned with totemic symbolism, usually associated with quest literature, or literature that associates the human with the divine. Examples include Ovid’s transformation of the gods in Metamorphosis, or uses of “city” as emblem for the city of Jerusalem (144). Demonic imagery associates humans with the divine, but here the divine is personified in the menacing power of nature, such as the wilderness in Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland,” or a hell of man’s own making, such as George Orwell’s 1984. Any text may mix more than one of these modes, and the apocalyptic and demonic images of myth can be found in a wide range of combinations and permutations. H.D.’s quest aligns her poetry more frequently with apocalyptic imagery, though both kinds can be seen in Trilogy.

how the new revision might be an appropriate replacement for the old. In the absence of clues as to who this witness might be, this storyteller becomes associated with the poet, which invites autobiographical considerations regarding the poet into the poem while simultaneously destroying the master narrative of the myth because true myths do not have authors, they simply exist as they always have.

Another possible approach, that of the anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, uses the metaphor of the *bricoleur* as a way of explaining mythopoesis and revision over time and across cultures. The *bricoleur* works by using the bits and pieces left from earlier myths, thus in revision, “the possibilities always remain limited by the particular history of each piece and by those of its features which are already determined by the use for which it was originally intended, or the modifications it has undergone for other purposes” (19). In imagining the mythmaker as *bricoleur*, it might seem possible to account for the traces of earlier myths found in later revisions, those echoes of the palimpsest that cannot be erased, like the traces of the Egyptian, Greek and Biblical figures that abound in Trilogy. Susan Stanford Friedman identifies two opposing forces in H.D.’s mythic revision: a poetic vision that would transcend modernist nihilism, and a female quest for validation and self-awareness that could transcend tradition (212). Levi-Strauss’s description of the *bricoleur* as “someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman” (16) seems to match the kind of activity that a female poet’s revision of the primarily patriarchal texts of Greek gods and Biblical figures might also employ.

While the *bricoleur*, with his/her devious scouring of the metaphorical shop floor for materials with which to create new myth in many ways echoes the frustrations of

many female poets attempting to mark their own way through the doubly treacherous masculine provinces of literature and myth, it is also limited in its usefulness as a trope for understanding H.D.'s work because it presumes the suitability of the patriarchal myths used by the *bricoleur*. The theory does provide the flexibility needed to discuss the literary implications of H.D.'s use of myth in her work, but falls short of explaining the literariness of those myths themselves in the way that Frye's archetypal theory could accommodate the myth within literature. The anthropological roots of the metaphor limit its possibilities when it is transported to the complexities of literary production in a culture that not only has its myths, but also embraces (frequently gendered) literary and social conventions as well. The presence of the personal in H.D.'s poetry introduces an element not recognized by Levi-Strauss's *bricoleur*, since there is no way of accounting for personal experience in a theory that imagines the mythopoeic agent, the *bricoleur*, as simply an assembler, rather than a contributor of new material.

A final possibility for understanding H.D.'s new myth lies in a narratological explanation of the transmission of stories. In Palimpsests, Gerard Genette proposes five potential modes of interaction between texts, one of which is useful for our purposes. "Hypertextuality" is broadly defined as "any relationship uniting a text B...to an earlier text A...upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary." This relationship can be derivational, which includes commentary, but also moves beyond simple commentary to describe a relation in which the second text could not exist without the original, even though it does not perceptibly evoke that original, a process that Genette calls "transformation" (5). Thus Joyce's Ulysses and the the Aeneid are both transformations and expressions of hypertextuality (albeit different ones) in relation to

the Odyssey. H.D.'s explicit use of myth in the images and narrative of Trilogy, clearly owe something to those myths that preceded the poems of the collection and thus could be considered an example of what Genette calls "hypertextuality." The problem with Genette's "hypertextuality" is the difficulty in analyzing whether it might apply to a writer like H.D. In Genette's book of palimpsests, the lack of a female presence in the texts he examines is particularly striking. Of the hundreds of texts mentioned, only a handful have been written by women, and in analyzing the relationship between women's texts and others, Genette makes no apparent attempt to recognize of the role gender might play in the inheritance of literary forms and themes.

Archetypal criticism, the *bricoleur*, and Genette's hypertextuality all provide some means of understanding the relationship between the writer and the material used to create a new myth. While they have value in understanding potential relations between a writer and the texts that have come before him, they are limited as tools for approaching H.D. in two ways: they restrict their analysis for the most part to the influence of earlier text on a (male) writer who responds to it, and they focus their attention primarily on the sustained narratives of drama, the epic poem, and the novel.

In Trilogy, the poet's personal experience is integrated with the mythic, and this distinctly female personal experience sometimes conflicts with the mythic material it employs. H.D. also juxtaposes myth fragments from several mythic traditions, creating conflict between the meanings traditionally associated with those fragments or images, a conflict she uses fruitfully in the final narrative of the poems to destabilize the identity of the "Mary" of the poems. She was fascinated by her mother's Moravian beliefs, which, in its unique orthodoxy and rarity as a religion, frequently led her to feel separated from

others, even within the tight-knit Moravian community. This disconnectedness and her later move to England “would explain some of the tensions that shaped her life,” and thus by extension, her poetry (Guest 11). One way this tension expresses itself in Trilogy is through alchemy, a mystical science that seeks to blend science with magic.

In Walls, the alchemist is introduced as the keeper of secrets and a companion to the Mage in the desert, while in Tribute, science and art merge in the image of the Hermes, and finally, in Flowering, we return to the keeper of secrets, the Magus, who can interpret the “legend...contained in old signs and symbols” (151) and who acts as keeper of the jars of myrrh. The connection between the Magus and Hermes of the second poem is typical of many of the connections that run back and forth throughout these poems. Hermes, the “patron of alchemists; / his province is thought, / inventive, artful and curious” is also poet and orator, who must “collect the fragments of the splintered glass / and of your fire and breath, / melt down and integrate, / re-invoke, re-create” (63) in an action that is curiously like the restorative action of the mysterious, feminine Presence “spectrum-blue, / ultimate blue ray, / rare as radium, as healing” (20) earlier in the poem.

For Friedman, alchemy is an appropriate way to understand H.D.’s work because it “serves as metaphor for cultural purification as well as for linguistic restoration....The alchemy of a mythmaking poetic purifies tradition of its misogyny and releases the regenerative powers inherent in ‘Star of the Sea, / Mother’” (249). The alchemist and a healing blue light blend the mythical, mystical and personal so that this alchemical approach to mythic revision exceeds the possibilities of archetypal criticism, the *bricoleur*, and Genette’s hypertextuality. Trilogy has to work against the tendency of myth to exert a powerful hegemonic influence as antecedent to the poem. The more

prevalent and pervasive the myth within the culture in which the poet writes, the more strongly that influence is felt. The poet who can contain the power of previous meaning can reap rich rewards through revision. Therein lies the challenge for revisionist mythmakers. H.D. takes on some of the biggest myths in Trilogy when she invokes the muses of Hermes, Thoth, and the stories of Christ's anointing and birth, but she balances these myths in such a way that no single one is privileged as a source for her revised myth, and thus none are capable of exerting a stranglehold on the meaning of the images, symbols, and final narrative of the poem.

Another problem for the female poet who employs myth is surmounting its irrelevance in many cases to her own personal experience. Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes this problem as a need to balance the "domestic tasks of immanence with the spiritual and literary tasks of transcendence," (3) a description which succinctly summarizes the opposing tensions within the poetry of someone like H.D. who has been trained in classical translation. Susan Gubar describes the primary activity of feminist revision of myth as "the need for imagistic and lexical redefinition, an activity closely associated with the recovery of female myths," (199) though H.D. moves beyond simply recovering an already existing female myth.² H.D. situates each myth within the context of multiple mythic possibilities, so that the individual myth is no longer unique and its power as a homogenous and authoritative way of ordering the world is reduced.

² She merges the existing female myth of Isis with the patriarchy of Christian images and symbols; calling on Osiris to "recover the secret of Isis" back into a unity of one in "the papyrus-swamp" and "the Judean meadow" (section 40 Walls), she recovers the female myth but also incorporates it into the masculine province of the Egyptian and Judeo-Christian imagery. She later calls upon Aphrodite and Astarte to "re-light the flame" and to restore Venus to her name and its kinship with veneration, rather than the vengery that has been imposed upon her name by "knaves and fools" (section 11 and 12 Tribute).

These original stories or myths frequently must have their power reduced in order for them to be available for the female poet since when myth tends toward universalization, it not only does not allow for the personal, but the types and characters it employs as universals are often male. Recuperation of myth requires revisions that allow for universal types that *could* be female or male. Thus in revision, the female poet “simultaneously deconstructs a prior ‘myth’ or ‘story’ and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself” (Ostriker “Thieves” 72). The kind of activity, which Ostriker has identified and defined as “revisionist mythmaking,” is the female appropriation of the high culture of myth in order to integrate the personal and the domestic within its grand narratives. The shadows of the palimpsest allow for this kind of revision by neither entirely abandoning, nor reifying, any of myth’s narrative incarnations.

The dual revision of both form and content inherent in hypertextuality is demonstrated in the treatment of writing in the tenth section of The Walls Do Not Fall:

But we fight for life,
 we fight, they say, for breath,

 so what good are your scribblings?
 this – we take them with us

 beyond death; Mercury, Hermes, Thoth
 invented the script, letters, palette;

 the indicated flute or lyre-notes
 on papyrus or parchment

 are magic, indelibly stamped
 on the atmosphere somewhere,

 forever; remember, O Sword,
 you are the younger brother, the latter-born,

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

in the beginning
was the Word. (17)

Within these lines, we find reference to three predecessors H.D. draws upon: Thoth, the Egyptian scribe, Hermes, his Greek descendant, and Mercury, the Roman name for Hermes, all of whom are credited with inventing writing. However, the passage ends with the first part of John 1:1 of the Christian gospel, which reads in full: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In appropriating only the beginning of the verse, the identification of the Word with the trinity (it was both with God and God himself) is lost; the capitalization of “Word” in the poem can be read as merely that, a capitalization for emphasis, instead of reflecting the tradition of capitalizing the name of the divinity.

This passage also negates the importance of chronology since the progression, “Mercury, Hermes, Thoth” reverses the chronological emergence of the belief systems to which each of these figures belongs. The final tradition, the Christian one, is the most recent, but the placement of the biblical passage at the end, removed from its sacred setting, implies a temporal hierarchy that returns the Word to its position “in the beginning.” Additional temporal play emerges in the apostrophe to the Sword, which alludes to the description of the word of God in the New Testament as “sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing the soul and spirit” (Hebrews 4:12). It is not in the beginning, since it is the “latter-born” and must hence follow the older writing of the Egyptian, Greek and Roman deities named above it. The subject matter of the verse: eternal power of “scribblings,” the magic of music and the indelible stamp it

leaves on the atmosphere (a vague and amorphous space for inscription), and the ability of those scribblings to transcend death, all act to negate the importance of chronology, since the act of writing transcends the temporality of death. Hypertextuality as a theory accommodates the kind of source tracing that this sequence of the poem seems to invite, however, in H.D.'s hands, the tracing moves both forward and backward in time, confusing and making irrelevant the issue of which text came first.

Trilogy's prevailing mode follows H.D.'s imagist impulse, which produces poetry that eschews sentimentality for "hard, classical lines" that are "crisp, precise, and absolutely without excess" (Friedman Psyche 2). They draw much of their force from the weight of multiple meanings concentrated within them. Within as few as four or five lines, allusions to stories from multiple myths may accumulate, taking on new meaning through the concatenation, as in section 22 of Walls where the speaker says, "pale as the worm in the grass, / yet I am a spark / struck by your hoof from a rock: / *Amen*, you are so warm, / hide me in your fleece, / crop me up with the new grass" (31). The worm recalls the biblical serpent, the references to sheep recall Christ as shepherd, *Amen* refers both the end of prayer and the association with Ra that was built up in the previous section, the desire to be consumed with the grass invokes folk mythologies of vegetative gods being consumed and resurrected again³ and in the speaker's wish to be hidden in the fleece, echoes of Odysseus's escape from the Cyclops can be heard. The desire to hide, or to be hidden, expressed in this passage is also represented in the images of shells and cocoons found throughout the first poem (8-9, 12, 22, 30, 44). In The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard describes the shell as the "dominant form of life" that transgresses the boundaries of inside and out (108). Nests and shells are protective spaces that the

³ Adonis and Tammuz are two such gods, both of whom are mentioned later in the poem.

imagination seizes upon when looking to hide, cover or seek shelter and “the imagination sympathizes with the being that inhabits the protected space” (132). The shell is also a symbol of resurrection, the theme of the third poem in Trilogy, and is thus an image carried through the entire poetic sequence. Here, as elsewhere, the dense juxtaposition, repetitions, and weight of multiple mythologies, reduces the power of any single original story to dictate the form of the final palimpsest produced.

This proclivity for multiplicity emerges later in Trilogy's narrative where two mythic events seem to occur simultaneously. The Magus who provides the myrrh to Mary (who is herself the herb) to anoint Christ's feet before the last supper is the same Magus who brought myrrh to him as an infant, and the story of Mary's anointing and the subsequent betrayal of Christ are provided before the scene of the nativity, a reversal of the biblical chronology; this disrupts the linearity of the narrative to emphasize the importance of the final scene, the nativity, as a necessary precursor to the resurrection, as well as the relative unimportance of temporal sequencing to revisionist mythmaking.

Inventorying the fragments of myth and images used by the poet reveals a mix of the personal and the literary. The first image of The Walls Do Not Fall compares the bombed out landscape of London to the ruins at Karnak in Egypt, and then later to Pompeii. The poem then immediately links a third mythology, that of the Biblical story of Samuel to those ruins in terms of a “Spirit [that] announces the Presence” (H.D. Trilogy 3). Samuel is “a prototype for the modern poet” because the Spirit allows the poet to “name her own experience” and connect it to a mystical tradition (Friedman Psyche 213). The biblical story describes how the young Samuel, newly consecrated at the temple, hears a voice calling to him in the night. Having been told three times by his

teacher, Eli, that it was not he who had called, the young boy lies down again; the next time he heard his name called, he responds, “Speak Lord, for thy servant heareth” (I Samuel 3:9). In Flowering, the Presence causes Samuel to shiver, just as one might imagine the poet shivering in recognition of the shared Spirit of the Muse at Karnak, London, and the temple at Jerusalem. Here, the poet would seem to be calling to a Muse common to each of these three mythologies saying, “Speak, Muse, for I am listening.” The Muse H.D. is listening for is not the patriarchal father of the trinity who calls to Samuel, but rather a four-part Muse of Egypt, Greece, Christianity, and her own experience as a female poet. The pre-existing myths are internalized and their combination with the personal experience of the poet means that this Muse is not an external force to which the poet must yield, but arises from within, so that the poet exercises control over how this Muse inspires. To control the Muse might seem to be part of feminist revisionist mythmaking.

Inspiration juxtaposes words and images, redefining etymologies for many of the words the poet uses. H.D. reinvigorates language by tracing the common usage of words back to their origins as a way of re-investing those words with their original meanings; not to erase meaning, but to multiply the connotative weight those words can carry. The most sustained linguistic experiment occurs in the poet’s use of the name and image of Mary, first in Walls and then in Flowering. This naming passage includes a build-up of terms: alchemy, natural elements, appellations, translations, before the final name is revealed at the end of the section:

Now polish the crucible
and in the bowl distill

a word most bitter, *marah*,

a word bitterer still, *mar*,
sea, brine, breaker, seducer,
giver of life, giver of tears;

Now polish the crucible
and set the jet of flame

under, till *marah-mar*
are melted, fuse and join

and change and alter,
mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary,

Star of the Sea,
Mother. (71)

The cascade of accumulating words all meaning either sea, bitter or mother, are not only merged, but modified as a result of that merging; the movement through the m-words in this section of the poem is a microcosm of a similar movement throughout the poem in which images borrowed from various myths are “melted, fuse and join / and change and alter” because of their proximity to the other images surrounding them.

The juxtaposition of so many images provides a rich conglomeration of visual expressions of myth, but this melding together of so many disparate images could deteriorate into nonsense without some kind of order to control and shape the images. As the poem progresses, the possibility of unity emerges as the fragments of Egyptian, Classical and Christian stories gradually begin to coalesce around one figure, Mary, and in the narrative of Kaspar, Mary and the jar of myrrh in the last poem. Here too, there is a cataloguing of the linguistic elements integral to Mary’s and myrrh’s naming, but their location within a narrative, a discernable story that moves through time (even if it occasionally moves backward through time), starts to shape the random linguistic play

into some semblance of a new myth. The tension between fragmentation and the unity of narration is demonstrated in Mary's story of her naming:

I am Mary, she said, of a tower-town
or once it must have been towered

for Magdala is a tower;
Magdala stands on the shore;

I am Mary, she said, of Magdala,
I am Mary, a great tower;

through my will and my power,
Mary shall be myrrh;

I am Mary – O, there are Marys a-plenty,
(though I am Mara, bitter) I shall be Mary-myrrh;

I am that myrrh-tree of the gentiles,
the heathen; there are idolaters,

even in Phrygia and Cappadocia,
who kneel before mutilated images

and burn incense to the Mother of Mutilations,
to Attis-Adonis-Tammuz and his mother who was myrrh;

she was stricken woman,
having borne a son in unhallowed fashion;

she wept bitterly till some heathen god
changed her to a myrrh-tree;

I am Mary, I will weep bitterly,
bitterly...bitterly. (135)

Here, linguistic play is controlled by a conscious effort to locate the multiple meanings implied by that word play within a narrative. The Mary-myrrh is bitter, just as she was in the mer-mere-mater-Mary sequence earlier, but now her bitterness is explained by the imposed metamorphosis and “unhallowed fashion” in which she bore a child. Mary's identity, or her essence remains ambiguous; she appears both as agent of her own

transformation and victim of enforced metamorphosis. The speaker says “through my will and power, / Mary shall be myrrh” but also that the Mother of Mutilations “wept bitterly till some heathen god / changed her to a myrrh-tree” (135). The passage begins to shape the form that this new myth takes, where the Christian Mary Magdala of the tower town becomes indistinguishable from the classical Myrrha, mother of the beautiful but tragic god. Even while she is located within this story, the imprint of her previous incarnations remains and “Mary” becomes a compilation rather than an individual woman, a move that generalizes by means of the common name “Mary” without simplifying the woman signified into an archetypal “type.” For Susan Schweik, H.D.’s transposition and splitting of the Marys, which “emphasizes the inward variance and instability in any feminine identity” (260), is critical for a female poet seeking to revise myth to include personal female experience. The location of the multiple incarnations of Mary within one body in the poem allows a depth within the character that would not be possible if she were only a type, as she would be within an unaltered myth.

H.D.’s work in Trilogy relies on a tenuous link between images, experience, and the poem itself so that symbolism in these poems is frequently slippery, where an image used in one manner at one point is used in a different manner at a later point. For example, myrrh is associated with the name of the Mary who approaches Kaspar, it is the name of Adonis/Tammuz’s mother and thus represents a tradition of generative or vegetative myths, but it is also the ointment that is both presented to the infant Christ and used by Mary to anoint the sacrificial Christ before his crucifixion. Because myrrh occupies both a physical space in the poem as the ointment, and a referential space as the name of a woman and a goddess, it does not have a fixed meaning that can be traced from

one reference to the next, making it unsuitable to the *bricoleur* since that metaphor requires a pool of materials with relatively stable identities that can be identified and traced as they are rearranged. The transformative properties of myrrh are brought to the foreground in the last narrative, which also draws the reader's attention to the structure of that narrative. Myrrh is no longer solely a mythic symbol, but is now a commodity capable of being exchanged by those operating behind the scenes of the better known anointing scene recounted in the gospels.⁴

This stabilization of the symbol within narrative is characteristic of the way narrative makes sense of, and orders our lives. In Reading for the Plot, Peter Brooks describes the ubiquity of narrative and its ability "to summarize and retransmit narratives in other words and other languages, to transfer them into other media, while remaining recognizably faithful to the original narrative structure and message" (3). Trilogy's project is also a retransmission, merging the personal with the mythic to create a story that is relevant for the modern woman. Brooks goes on to note that Modernism became suspicious of plot and of master narratives, and one might say that as a Modernist woman poet, H.D. became doubly suspicious of them. Yet, her efforts in the poems to supercede the limitations of myth must employ myth to that end. H.D.'s unique approach to the problem is to fragment myth into a series of images that are introduced, revised, juxtaposed, altered, re-examined, and subjected to linguistic play in the early sections of the trilogy and then draw upon them, with the multiplicity of meaning that then inheres in

⁴ The story of the anointing is found in Luke chapter 7 and John chapter 12 with variations in Matthew chapter 26, and Mark chapter 14. During a feast at the house of a respected leader, Mary Magdalene arrives, pouring oil on Christ's feet and drying them with her hair, a ritual foot washing ceremony that the host had neglected to provide for his guest. When the host objects to the cost of the oil used in the ritual, stating it should have been sold and given to the poor, Christ rebukes him and praises Mary for her devotion.

those images, within the narrative of the anointing and nativity in The Flowering of the Rod. At the same time as these fragments of myth are woven into a narrative, they retain the shadows of their earlier manifestations, threatening to return to their origins, or even rearrange themselves in yet other narratives.

Genette's hypertextuality provides a potential model for this shifting multiplicity. In hypertextuality, the relationship between earlier and later text is "complex and indirect" with transformations that change either the elements or the style of narrative while retaining the "pattern of actions and relationships" (Genette 6). In differentiating between these possibilities, Genette identifies two potential responses of a writer to mythic material: it can be altered in detail but retained in style and form, in other words, something recognizable as myth, or, it can be altered in style while maintaining internal patterns.

In Trilogy, H.D. exploits the flexibility and multiplicity inherent in hypertextual relationships by refusing to employ only one method of approaching the mythic material from which she draws; at times, she changes details of the myth while maintaining an overall recognizable structure, and at other times, the details are retained through the structure has changed. But what is most fruitful in H.D.'s use of myth is her willingness to move between these two potential modes of mythic revision. This fluidity seems to arise less out of a desire to play with the possibilities of both approaches, and more from a need for vacillation in order to accomplish the kinds of revision she imagines for the female poet and reader in approaching the Egyptian, Classical and Christian mythological figures and stories in order to reduce their authority without undoing it entirely.

The story of Mary and the Magus begins as she enters his booth in the marketplace to inquire about myrrh. But he has none for sale, and she ignores his hints that she must leave. She introduces herself but her scarf slips from her head revealing her hair, and the image is visionary, prompting him to change his mind, sending her the myrrh she desires. The narrative then moves to the story familiar from the biblical account of Mary anointing Christ's feet before he dies. What follows is the explanation of the mystical vision provoked by Mary's hair and of how the wise Kaspar recognized her, how he recognized and venerated her in his gift of myrrh just as he did when he, Melchior, and Balthasar presented their gifts to the Christ child.

The storytelling is prefaced in the twelfth section of The Flowering of the Rod by a narrative technique of the flash forward which heightens reader interest while providing the background to the story that will follow. The lines "what she did, everyone knows, / but it is not on record / exactly where and how she found the alabaster jar;" (129) prepares us for the retelling of a story we've heard before. It also prepares us to be let in on a secret, something "not on the record;" the suspense engendered by the secret is reinforced by the repetition of phrases like "some say," "all we know," or "no one will ever know." These narrative phrases create suspense as they simultaneously undercut the authority of the original nativity story. But in employing such uncertainty in the construction of this revisionist narrative, H.D. also leaves room for those who might follow to employ the same kind of revision. After each "some say" or "no one will ever know," the narrative provides us with a possibility for subsequent revision, even as it negates in this present instance what others might say or never be able to know. The narrative strategy of introducing possibility into these narratives is precisely the same

kind of technique that H.D. is employing in her revision of the myths of Egyptian, Greek and Christian iconography. In these final sequences that rely more heavily on narrative than on the images of the earlier poems, those earlier images are not wholly abandoned however. The mysticism of Hermes and of the unidentified Magus are revealed in the vision that Kaspar sees in Mary's hair.

The images of the earlier verses undergo a transformation in this final sequence however. Narrative is active. In Trilogy, the narration of the stories relies on verbs that are missing from the earlier, imagist sections of the poem. When we arrive at the final story of the nativity, we find characters moving through a scene:

when Balthasar had pushed open the stable-door
or gate, a shepherd was standing there,

well – a sort of shepherd, an older man with a staff,
perhaps a sort of night-watchman;

as Balthasar hesitated, he said, Sir,
I am afraid there is no room at the Inn,

as if to save them the trouble of coming further,
inquiring perhaps as to bedding-down

their valuable beasts; but Balthasar
acknowledged the gentle courtesy of the man

and passed on; and Balthasar entered the ox-stall,
and Balthasar touched his forehead and his breast,

as he did at the High Priest's side
before the Holy-Presence-Manifest;

and Balthasar spoke the Great Word,
and Balthasar bowed, as if the weight of this honour

bent him down, as if over-come
by this overwhelming Grace,

and Balthasar stood aside

and Melchior took his place. (169-70)

The passage employs mimesis, rather than diegesis, to present its story. In some ways, it reads like the *mise en scène* of a movie, or a passage from one of H.D.'s novels. Unlike earlier segments of *Trilogy*, where action is infrequent and most often performed by unnamed beings: I, he, or she, in this final narrative, the characters are named active agents, driving the plot forward. Balthasar alone in this passage is said to have pushed, hesitated, said, acknowledged, passed, entered, touched, spoke, bowed, and stood during his arrival at the stable. The action of this passage reveals the underlying intersection of myth and storytelling that gathers the images of the poem into a narrative. The standard elements of the nativity, the stable, Inn, shepherd, and myrrh carry the weight of countless previous tellings of the tale, but the simple narrative structure keeps explanation of these symbols at a minimum, for "half the art of storytelling [is] to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it" (Benjamin 89). Even the visions that Kaspar experiences are not explained. It is left rather to the reader to create meaning from the images introduced early on in *Trilogy* and the narrative sequences in which it culminates.

In the final sequence, the nativity scene, the disparate elements of myth, etymological manipulation and linguistic play, personal experience, and narrative combine to reveal H.D.'s revisionist mythology.

But she spoke so he looked at her,
she was shy and simple and young;

she said, Sir, it is a most beautiful fragrance,
as of all flowering things together;

but Kaspar knew the seal of the jar was unbroken.
he did not know whether she knew

the fragrance came from the bundle of myrrh

she held in her arms. (172)

Here, the image built up over the course of the poems meets the archetype of the biblical account and the final lines of the poem resolve some of the tensions of earlier oppositions in the poem. The woman who Kaspar faces is the young Mary at the nativity, but the Mary who he has faced earlier in the poem, the one who will present the myrrh to Christ a second time, and whose gift will mark him as a condemned man (myrrh was only to be used for embalming), become one while integrating the Mary-myrrh of the earlier passage as well. The myrrh, though enclosed in a jar, escapes because Mary holds it in her arms, and the translation of the substance from enclosure to exposure replicates the kind of transformations inherent in the story of the resurrection of Christ, the transubstantiation of bread and wine into body and blood that is said to occur during the ritual of the Eucharist, as well as the transformation of the female myth of Isis, the goddess Venus, and Mary Magdalene with her offer of myrrh for Christ, into a female figure who transcends all of the elements from which she has been alchemically composed. This final Mary is the culmination of the mythopoeic efforts of the poem. The revisionist female poet has merged in the final narrative, the archetypes of Isis, the fertility goddess; Venus, the goddess of love and veneration; Myrrha, the transformed mother of Adonis; Mary Magdalene, the rebellious yet devout follower of Christ; and the virgin mother Mary of the nativity, into a woman who can hold the character of all these mythical women in balance with the poet's own experience to reconcile the heritage of that mythic past with the experience of H.D. as a modernist poet.

H.D.'s inscription of her text upon the palimpsest of the mythic narratives reflects her position as a woman writing in the mid-twentieth century and the difficulty in

employing any one critical approach to her work. The images developed throughout the poems provide a tracery that shows through in the final textual turn to the narrative of Kaspar and Mary at the end of the final poem, providing its own kind of mythic basis for the story of the precious gift of myrrh, a substance that is as precious as the woman who obtains it from the shopkeeper (who keeps not only the myrrh, but the secret of its production). The poet is in a similar position to Mary – she must attempt to wrestle the secrets of poetic production from the powerful patriarchal myths of Greek and Judeo-Christian belief in order to achieve her own, uniquely female goal of literary production, a goal that emerges in H.D.'s prose and film work as well as her poetry. Just as Mary's hair, an essential feature of her female body, dazzles Kaspar, convincing him to give her the myrrh she desires, the poet, through the revealing nature of the poem, uses her gifts to convince the reader that the poet deserves the veneration evoked by the power of her words.

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