

Introduction

Marc PORÉE

The ambition of this volume is at least twofold. Following the *H.D. and Modernity* conference, which took place at the École normale supérieure in December 2013, it aims at bringing together academic work that evidences shared interests in literature, theory, poetry, coming from a wide range of countries, and a vast spectrum of disciplines, and which addresses the needs of Agrégation students while reminding them that the works on their syllabus are objects of research and theoretical reflection world wide.

So the interest in H.D. and, more specifically in *Trilogy* is, at the same time, of a somewhat self-seeking and disciplinarian nature, but the articles gathered in this volume demonstrate that the impact of H.D.'s potent poetry is much further reaching and does resonate with current issues in critical and theoretical thinking. May all fall for "the spell, for instance, in every sea-shell," (8) and pocket the non-utilitarian "pearl-of-great-price." (9)

As the head of the LILA (département Littérature et langages), I feel as the third Mage must have felt, or rather, I would like to refer to the closing lines of "The Flowering of the Rod", which features the least obtrusive and conspicuous of the three Magi, Kaspar, the last to enter the oxstall and push the door, so as to attend "Calvary's turbulence" and witness "The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor" (Yeats).

and Kaspar stood a little to one side
like an unimportant altar-servant,
and placed his gift,
a little part from the rest,
to show by inference
its unimportance in comparison;
and Kaspar stood
he inclined his head only slightly
as if to show,
out of respect to the others,

these older, exceedingly honoured ones,
 that his part in this ritual
 was almost negligible,
 for the others had bowed low. (170-171)

The gift of LILA (*lilas*, lilac) is negligible indeed. For all its symbolic properties that have a lot to do with the season of Spring and the time of Easter in which it breeds “out the dead land,” lilac, be it that of Whitman (“When *Lilacs* Last in the Door-yard Bloom’d,”) or of Eliot (“mixing memory and desire”), won’t and can’t compare to myrrh, the supreme Christmas gift, along with frankincense and gold. Myrrh is, so to speak, the last word of the poem: “he did not know whether she knew/ the fragrance came from the bundle of myrrh/ She held in her arms.” Such carefully drafted and artfully sifted *ultima verba* sound like an invitation to go for *more*, by way of an implicit half-rhyme, and according to the thousand and one resources of paronomasia, a figure of speech which H.D. exploits to the full. And never more fully, albeit obliquely, than when she runs the whole gamut of semantic derivations, not all of which are as bitter as the acrid *marah*, the briny *mar*, à la beauté amère: “mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary / Star of the Sea, Mother.” (71) Myrrh, most fittingly therefore, completes and further fuels the cycle, by providing the last touch but one. Poetry is never merely poetry, there’s always more/ myrrh to this inexhaustible Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics.

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A few last words of introduction will be directed towards H.D. whom I will venture to refer to, for the sake of expediency, as the Lady’s not for Burning. The phrase reads as the title of a play by Christopher Fry, written in 1948, a romantic comedy in three acts and in verse, set in the Middle Ages, but reflecting the world’s exhaustion and despair following World War II, with a war-weary soldier who wants to die and an accused witch who wants to live. I suppose the last time that play made the news was in October 1980, at the Conservative Party Conference, when Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister, delivered that great line: “To those waiting with bated breath for that favourite media catchphrase, the U-turn, I have only one thing to say: You turn if you want to. The lady’s not for turning.” Whether Mrs Thatcher knew about the play or not, is of course irrelevant to our present concerns—needless to say, she did not, since it was her speech-writer who inspired that clever paraphrase—; but what does matter, and crucially so, is the fate that befalls and attends upon women who write, and who invariably stand accused of witchcraft. H.D. was exposed to public ridicule, scorn and abuse, and short of being literally burnt at the stake she, the would-be offender, was repeatedly put in the stocks.

Hence a possible reading of *Trilogy* as a deconstruction of the Pillory, as well as a rewriting of the Calvary, in which she enacts a process by which the young girl—not a “hyacinth girl,” it will be noted—supplants Jesus Christ, at the time of his wondrous birth. Which translates as a defiant countering or refutation of those infamous charges laid at her door. A process which I see as following a twofold metamorphic pattern. The first takes the form of a *caduceus*, entwined with snakes, noted for its healing powers, a symbol possibly stolen or plundered from De Quincey—“steal then, O orator, / plunder, O poet.” (63) From De Quincey’s *Suspiria De Profundis*, and from his own scholarly use of the hermetic symbol whereby the Rod—the Roode—is made for Flowering. The second insists on stoically undergoing exposure to the singeing lava of Pompei or the cleansing flames of “Apocryphal fire,” while remaining immune to fire, like so many legendary creatures. The result of such a defiant poetic alchemy is that, “Unintimidated by multiplicity,” Our Lady of the Goldfinch, Our Lady of the Candelabra, Our Lady of the Pomegranate, Our Lady of the Chair (93) —note the contrastive echo, again with De Quincey’s *Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow* (1821)—is more impregnable than ever, “yet the frame held” (4). Her passing the flames thus proves her neither a Lady for Burning nor for Mourning. But a Lady for myrrhing.

H.D.'s *Trilogy*: How to Connect

Hélène AJI

From Ezra Pound's essay "How to Read," to Gertrude Stein's "How to Write," how-to's abound in the history of modernism, to the extent that its prescriptive, possibly dogmatic, tendencies cannot be overseen. Many of the major, and minor agents of the first half of the 20th century's "revolution of the word" are indeed in desperate search of a two-folded method: how to read a world and texts that seem to have become barely legible or manageable; how to write "about" (and around) this world and "about" these texts while remaining faithful to the realities of individual experience as well as the ethical demands of collective history. It is no novelty that some works, among which H.D.'s, take this agenda more seriously than others, and, like Pound's, to further extremes than others, notably because of the contingencies of historical events, and their willing or unwilling participation in these events.

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As underlined by Hannah Arendt in her biographical essay on Walter Benjamin, some lives follow a trajectory which connects moments according to a teleology that eludes the individual living through them, so that decisions are made unawares and at odds with logic, choices are taken that instead of countering disaster put one on its most direct path, and one's existence appears to one "as a pile of rubble," from which making sense is, to say the least, a challenge¹. In a similar fashion to the Proust described by Benjamin, and in a similar fashion to the Benjamin described by Arendt, these individuals are "utterly unable to change the life conditions which destroy them." They die from "not knowing how to light a fire, or how to open a window."² It will not be our contention here that H.D. did not know how to light a fire or open a window, but we will take these simple gestures as allegorical representations of a general difficulty of dealing with events, texts and ideologies. This difficulty informs the

¹ H. Arendt, *Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)*, p. 18.

² *Ibid.*

connections, done or undone, in *Trilogy*, something which appears strikingly in Adalaide Morris's book *How to Live/What to Do, H.D.'s Cultural Poetics*.

Trilogy can indeed be seen as written at the crossroads of several modes of reading the world: imagism, psychoanalysis, modernism, feminism—consistently in reticence, and in resistance to monolithic representations and interpretations (on this see Gubar, “The Echoing Spell of H.D.’s *Trilogy*,” in Friedman and DuPlessis). But the poems also evidence the complex negotiation between history and vision, and the attempt by the poet to connect them, to connect with them, and to connect through them to a reader, in a movement committed to the certainty of both the atavistic nature of this effort, and its inherent newness. This duplicity of the work allows for Adalaide Morris’s following statement about the poems:

Each of TRILOGY’s three parts is doubly marked; by a date that places the poem inside the chronology of World War II and by a vision that lifts it up out of that chronology. Like her patrons, the messenger-gods Thoth, Hermes, Mercury, and St. Michael, the poet plies between the realms H.D. called “in time” and “out-of-time,” inscribing in this oscillation the poem’s many intuitions and ironies. Part I, written in 1942, a year of unremitting worldwide aggression, offers a vision of a slender and beardless “world-father”; Part II, composed in “a wonderful pause just before D-Day,” offers the dream of a Lady carrying “the blank pages / of the unwritten volume of the new”; and Part III, composed in 1944 during the cross-cut between Hitler’s Ardenne campaign and the ceremonies of Christmas, offers Kaspar’s vision of “the whole scope and plan // of our and his civilization on this, / his and our earth.” Like the nineteenth-century African-American women mystics who preceded her, H.D. uses the visions that lifted her out of history to claim a public power and presence within it. Their mystical force guaranteed her stature as a cultural spokesperson and authorized her transition from lyric to epic poetry.¹

Some years after this analysis could be made though, it might have become more complicated to assert that the finality of H.D.’s writing in *Trilogy* is indeed to “claim a public power,” and indeed the close reading of the poems helps outline less of an agenda and more of a series of poetic gestures aiming at circumscribing (in a somehow Dickinsonian fashion) the destruction spread by the unnerving discovery in war of the hollow core of humanity. To connect becomes then an imperative to counter the disconnection which the poet witnesses—a disconnection at work in every aspect and dimension of human existence. Consequently, and without any ambition of exhausting the topic and its many-faceted consequences, this paper briefly formulates a series

¹ A. Morris, “Signaling: Feminism, Politics, and Mysticism in H.D.’s War Trilogy”, p. 121-133. http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hd/trilogy.htm

of three hypotheses about the significance of *Trilogy* as a poet's refusal to persist in disconnectedness.

How to Connect (1): a-Chronological History

The very explicit use of the myth of Isis and Osiris in *Trilogy* stems from the allegorization of this refusal to persist in disconnectedness: Susan Gubar thus analyzes the end of "The Walls Do not Fall" as succeeding to establish a connection between the name of "Osiris" and the "zrr-hiss" of war bombing.

Although the walls still do not fall, continuing to testify to the divisions and barriers between people, between historical periods, within consciousness itself, they also preserve remnants of written messages—anagrams and cryptograms—which, by providing the link from the present back to the past, allow H.D. to evade the destructive definitions of reality provided by those who utilize the word for modern mastery.¹

Beyond this stake of modern ideological mastery, and also beyond this stake of the "search for historical parallels," which according to H.D. herself "has been done to death before" (38, 51), the inversions, or, more generally, the re-shuffle of chronological times perform a radical questioning of temporality and the workings of memory.

The re-remembering of Osiris's body is remembrance but remains a palliative, a remedy but not a cure to a dis-membering that cannot ever be fully mended. The metaphor of the "spiral upon spiral of the shell / of memory that yet connects us" ("The Flowering of the Rod," 33, 156) points at this revision of temporality according to the modes of memory, as well as according to an apocalyptic perception of all times, both past and future, as collapsing onto the present. The use of grammatical tenses in the poems, especially of the present perfect, seals this imprisonment of the subject in the present (the present of the Blitz and the Holocaust), and her consequent de-materialization, as evoked in section 14 of "Tribute to the Angels" (77): "till I shrink, / dematerialize." If pronouns, and the persistence of the poetic "I," seem to construct a stable poetic persona, they are also a way of underlining her struggle against what emerges as a general process of entropy. In section 40 of "The Walls Do not Fall," her action limits itself to "reveal[ing] the regrettable chasm," and "correlat[ing] faith to faith," linking minds in an attempt to transfigure the dividedness ("The Walls Do Not Fall," 40, 54).

¹ See S. Friedman and R. B. DuPlessis, *Signets: Reading H.D.*, p. 305-306.

How to Connect (2): the Self and Others

In this respect, the revision of the genealogy of humanity, and the insistence on cultural and mythical filiations, as in section 33 of "The Flowering of the Rod," (157) contribute to establish a highly ramified network of figures that are, however, shown as discrepant at the same time as they emerge as related. The instances of the messenger, from Thoth to Hermes and Mercury ("The Walls Do not Fall," 10, 17) thus combine into a reconfigured poetic instance, but they also, through their iterations and variations, become evidence of their inadequacy to perform the very task of transmission for which they were devised.

The difficulty to communicate, and the repeated references to revelations, the opening of secret boxes or sealed jars, reassert as they try to circumvent the irredeemable opaqueness of both self and others. Not only do the poems propose methods to connect with oneself, in self-knowledge, and with others, in expression, but they also take stock of their own shortcomings. The reflexiveness of many passages, as in the disarmingly simple question "what can we say?" in section 40 of "Tribute to the Angels," (106) or the tension between the poet and her addressee in the game between "I" and "you" testify to the uncomfortable alliance of the undying desire to say, and the quasi Wittgensteinian assessment of language's limitations and one's entrapment between its walls. These limitations add on to the idiosyncrasies of the individual to generate the paradoxical repetition of radical differences, the "Same-forever," identical and mutable of section 40 of "The Walls Do Not Fall" (55) or the snow-flake or leaf of section 38:

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but my mind (yours)
has its peculiar ego-centric
personal approach
to the eternal realities,
and differs from every other
in minute particulars,
as the vein-paths on any leaf
differ from those of every other leaf
in the forest, as every snow-flake
has its particular star, coral or prism shape. ("The Walls Do Not Fall," 38, 51-52)

The poems could be read as staging the fateful, if not fatal, process of mediation, remedy and relapse which generates the very dynamic of writing: this process is exploratory, albeit bounded, life-saving in the very fact that it

fails and forces the poet to endure. The archeology of words then becomes the endless task of a poet much akin to the Sibyl of Eliot's *Waste Land* (61), and of H.D.'s own section 38 in "Tribute to the Angels" (103).

How to Connect (3): Words

Indeed, the primary assumption for H.D. is that words hold secret meanings for the poet to uncover through various strategies (etymology, homophony, synonymy, analogy, association, etc.). Through lists, the poems record the dynamics of an intellectual and mental process, performing combinations that draw a new mapping of meaning, trajectories of thought that redefine the meanings of words through their cohabitation in a single line, in a couplet or over the blank space between two stanzas. Although reading the poems in a linear manner is part of the implicit mode of *Trilogy*, the strategy of taking inventory of words in the poem generates lexical series altering meaning progressively, and generating hesitation as well as order.

And an order that does not necessarily follow logic, as can be seen in many of her series that in fact use subtle permutation as in section 9 of "The Walls Do Not Fall" (16): there the pen occurs before the quill, building a counter-history of writing in the very play on lexical variation, and the way these words are connected—grammatically as well as semantically—or unconnected. Indeed, playing on the forms of coordination (or lack thereof) allows the poet to insist on the games of substitution and juxtaposition, and their consequences on the process of understanding and sense-making. Notions happen as much in succession as they do simultaneously: where one definition could replace (correct) the previous one, it could just as well coexist with it in what can be deemed a discourse of "and/or". The argumentative rhetoric of clarification, as in section 39 and 40 of "The Walls Do Not Fall," is undermined by the figure of a poet that covers "the cankerous growths" of reality with her words as much as she reveals them. The "resurrection myth", and "resurrection reality" can be "related" (linked/recounted) in "The Walls Do Not Fall" (40, 54), but they cannot be brought to their full completion. The poem offers a unified vision as a horizon, an ideal, an object of desire, but what it actually enforces is the dispersal of meaning metaphorized in the hatching of butterflies from the contained units of words.

What the analysis of words brings about, maybe, is the clarity of the "dim," when the poem's only clear revelation is a revelation of confusion.

Indeed when the only thing that can be “named” is the “un-named,” the poetic activity turns into one of “un-naming” (“Tribute to the Angels,” 41, 107). The possibility of no salvation hence (rather than the impossibility of salvation) returns (“*I saw no temple*,” “Tribute to the Angels,” 41, 107) in the debacle of a poetic enterprise undermined by the very material of its elaboration. The functioning of H.D.’s metaphorizations sustains the possibility of an empty “box” or “bowl”, as words might turn out to be “shells” without content. (“The Walls Do Not Fall,” 17, 26).

Conclusion

The strive for connection tempts the poet into devising some type of narrative that could transcend the limitations of one’s capability to fuse the fragmentary, the scattered, the dislocated into a single coherent “vision.” The ternary structure of *Trilogy*, however, does not cohere more than Ezra Pound’s gigantic *Cantos*, though H.D. seems less willing to admit that she “cannot make it cohere,” so that “The Flowering of the Rod” resorts to a transfigured version of one of the major Western master narratives. What this gesture achieves rather than the fantasized unity is to seal “forever” in the text the tragic discrepancy between the dream “to be one” and a poetic practice of plurality and dissemination. The poem reveals, if anything, the workings of nostalgia as it strives to “bridge” gaps and restore a fantasized past unity into the present and for the future. However the binary landscape of the last two lines of section 40 of “The Walls Do Not Fall” (“in the papyrus-swamp / in the Judean meadow,” 55) emphasizes the parallel workings of the imagination and its failure to actually fuse the diverse visions into the present of a fully coherent image.

The overall syntactic order, the fluidity in the use of run-on-lines, the appearance of harmonious typographic organization do not quite mask the “chasm” of the suspension marks that separate the axiom from the example, as if neither of the two could actually perfectly “correlate.” (“Tribute to the Angels,” 40, 54) The poem enforces the poetic strive to coherence, but reenacts at the same time the divorce between transcendent aspiration and immanent experience.

Rather than connection, then, the poems evidence a collection of objects, figures, textual fragments. As remnants of civilization after the disaster, they send the reader back to the palliative power of collecting exemplified in Walter

Benjamin's archival practice. A Benjaminian figure lost among the rubble of her life, the poet collects cultural artifacts, allowing for their "transfiguration," as they lose their conventional utilitarian functions, and become part of an alternate system.¹ Yet in Hannah Arendt's words about Benjamin, "the collector's passion is not systematic: it is in fact almost chaotic"² in the way it privileges "authenticity" and the mystery of the "origin" over tradition and normativity—in this case, the delusion of collection to survive the checkmate of connection.

¹ H. Arendt, *Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)*, p. 89.

² *Ibid.*, p. 93.