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“Steal then, O orator, / plunder, O poet”: Tradition and H.D.’s Re-Visionary *Trilogy*

Isabel Rae McKenzie

English 450

Robert Archambeau

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H.D.'s 1944 work *Trilogy*, a modernist epic, is a palimpsest, a synthesis of texts and traditions. Throughout the work H.D. references her own narrative process, her desire to “search for historical parallels,” to resurrect and reshape “inherited tendencies, / the intellectual effort / of a whole race” (*WDNF* 38.1, 38.15-7). She writes:

I see what is beneath me, what is above me,

What men say is-not—I remember,

I remember, I remember—you have forgot:

(*FR* 6.14-6)

The work is endlessly referential, absorbing and revising the pre-biblical, Judeo-Christian, Egyptian and Greek traditions, illustrating that their holy figures “always face two-ways,” being of “present and future equally.” They are “the same—different—the same attributes, / different yet the same as before,” she writes (*WDNF* 2.13, 16.5; *TA* 39). Her work is not solely of spiritual tradition and myth, however; a patient and daughter-like mentee of Sigmund Freud, she also reconciles her visionary mysticism with Freudian psychology, particularly his studies of the subconscious. With this, she writes her prophetic call-to-action while the Blitz rages above her London home, choosing not to flee as the *walls do not fall* around her, producing a work with a pragmatic urgency, a temporality from the opening lines:

An incident here and there,
and rails gone (for guns)
from your (and my) old town square:

mist and mist-grey, no colour,

(*WDNF* 1.1-4)

Thus *Trilogy* is a natural read alongside a handful of modernist epics such as T.S. Eliot's 1922 work *The Waste Land*, but also Eliot's theoretical work of a year earlier, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Guided by H.D. into the Corinthian capitals, coptic naves, and the depths of the Freudian subconscious, I will illustrate how H.D.'s work is an attempt to manifest the “living

whole of all the poetry that has ever been written” (Eliot 809). The work, given its endless referentiality and its metanarratives, is an exemplar of Eliot’s theory, though where Eliot and H.D. differ is that H.D.’s motivation for absorbing and revising the past is explicitly feminist and existential, rather than a matter of aesthetic criticism. Alik Barnstone writes:

The poet wishes to “re-light the flame” of womanly vision and of the goddesses. Like Janus, “Gods always face two ways,” toward the past and the future. So in *Trilogy* the Virgin Mary faces the past, becoming Isis, Astarte, Aphrodite, Venus, and she faces the future, immortalized as *the Lady* of H.D.’s vision. (Barnstone XIV)

With this, the work is an imperative ode to the redemptive power of verse. H.D.’s conviction is that by “[re-dedicating] our gifts / to spiritual realism” and “[merging] the distant future / with most distant antiquity,” a world veering toward self-destruction can be saved (*FR* 35.4-5; 20.10-4). “We fight for life,” she writes in book one:

... 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.

(*WDFN* 10)

Eliot’s concern with tradition is less overtly political, being more about how literary value is to be determined:

[A poet's] significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.... He can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period. (Eliot 808)¹

This paper will excavate *Trilogy* chronologically, using the first book to illustrate how Eliot's theory is enacted at a metanarrative level; that is, the *The Walls do not Fall* particularly explicates H.D.'s desire to synthesize and revise tradition, while performing such Eliotic techniques in the process. The second part of the paper will focus on book two, *Tribute to the Angels*, and on H.D.'s cross-traditional synthesis of holy women, and the third on the final book of H.D.'s work, *The Flowering of the Rod*, wherein she writes a revisionary tale of "A tale of a jar or jars," or the exchanges between the three biblical Marys and the Three Kings. The final book particularly illustrates Eliot's theory of how past art is affected by the new, as well as his theorizing about "impersonal" art, as the emotion of the third book "has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet" (Eliot 810).

1: "I remember, / I remember, I remember—"

In his theoretical essay, Eliot writes that tradition is acquired through labor. The poet must have a "historical sense [which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence... a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together." This sense is what makes a writer traditional, "and it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity," Eliot

¹ Of course, to want to absorb and revise tradition is an inherently political stance to take, but the politics of Eliot's stance are not foregrounded in his essay.

writes (807-8). Indeed, by the mere act of synthesizing stories and traditions H.D. illustrates her understanding of the past's presence, but *Trilogy*'s narrative also echoes Eliot's sentiments numerous times, illustrating H.D.'s possession of the consciousness Eliot describes. "So I would rather drown, remembering—," she writes (*TFTR* 6.1). In a particularly lucid moment, H.D. speaks of poetry's place in the modern day in the first book of her work. "You now tell us," she writes:

poets are useless,
 more than that,
 we, authentic relic,

 are not only 'non-utilitarian',
 we are 'pathetic' :

 this is the new heresy ;

 yet the ancient rubrics reveal that
 we are back at the beginning : (*WDNF* 8.4-20)

Goddesses having been demeaned as "harlots" and "old flesh-pots," part of H.D.'s desire to "[redeem] the feminine aspect of the soul and Eve," is likely also about the redemption of women writers (Barnstone XIV). In response to these women being called "retrogressive" and to styluses "dipped in corrosive sublimate," H.D. calls to "Let us, however, recover the Sceptre, / the rod of power:" which, "evoking the dead, / it brings life to the living." While a sceptre is typically phallic, here it is feminized; "it is crowned with lily-head or the lily-bud," seeming a call for women writers to resurrect and revise past tradition as a means of reinvigorating their past, present, and future state (*FR* 2.19-25; 3). In the following excerpt from book one, H.D. invokes the Egyptian and Greek scribes of the Gods—arguably "written over" in her secular age—alongside the horrors of immediate war above and around her, wherein tradition is physically being destroyed:

Thoth, Hermes, the stylus,
the palette, the pen, the quill endure,

though our books are a floor
of smoldering ash under our feet ;

though the burning of the books remains
the most perverse gesture

and the meanest
of man's mean nature,

yet give us, they still cry,
give us books,

folio, manuscript, old parchment,
will do for cartridge cases;

(FR 9)

Throughout this first book of *Trilogy*, H.D. consistently reckons in part with this more severe, violent implication of the problem Eliot opens his essay with—the struggle to preserve aesthetic tradition in an era at best obsessed with innovation and at worst determined to destroy the past. In the second book of her work, H.D. further manifests Eliot's theory by synthesizing the holy women of numerous traditions, the past, and her own vision.

2: "I am Mary—O, there are Marys a-plenty"

H.D. opens *Tribute to the Angels* with a familiar revisionary call: "steal then, O orator, / plunder, O poet, / take what the old-church found in Mithra's tomb / ... / take what the new-church spat upon / ... / melt down and integrate / re-invoke, re-create" (*TA* 1). She pulls text directly from the Bible, speaking of the visionary John and Christian angels Raphael, Gabriel, Azrael, and Uriel. She then begins to synthesize her holy women from Christian, Roman, Greek, and Phoenician mythology, writing of Venus, Aphrodite, and Astarte, and building up the desecrated feminine aspect in her many forms and associations, earthly and mythic:

a word most bitter, *marah*,
a word bitterer still, *mar*,

sea, brine, breaker, seducer,
giver of life, giver of tears ;

.....
mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary,

Star of the Sea,
Mother.

(TA 8)

H.D. begins to describe her dream: “my eyes saw, / it was not a dream / yet it was a vision” (TA 23.7-9). *The Lady knocked*, she writes, and “We have seen her / the world over,” for the Lady is all holy women (TA 25.6; 29):

Our Lady of the Goldfinch,
Our Lady of the Candelabra,

Our Lady of the Pomegranate,
Our Lady of the Chair ;

we have seen her, an empress,
magnificent in pomp and grace,

.....
we have seen her snood
drawn over her hair,

or her face set in profile
with the blue hood and stars ;

we have seen her head bowed down
with the weight of a domed crown,

or we have seen her, a wisp of a girl
trapped in a golden halo ;

“You find her everywhere (or did find),” H.D. writes, “in cathedral, museum, cloister, / at the turn of the palace stair” (TA 29). Barnstone untangles HD.’s cross-traditional allusions, arguing that the goldfinch is associated with “the passion of Christ”; the candelabra with “the candlesticks in the Revelation surrounding Christ (and which were probably a Menorah)”; the

pomegranate with “the fertility of the Great Goddess and of the Virgin Mary,” as well as with Hera and Persephone, who are both depicted holding the fruit; and the chair perhaps with “the chair of justice or to a throne” (189). H.D. then references depictions of various holy women in iconoclastic art, particularly the Virgin Mary, the woman of “the blue hood and stars,” the “domed crown,” and “golden halo.” She calls the Lady *Santa Maria dei Miracoli* and *Maria von dem Schnee*, “Our Lady of the Snow,” pulling again directly from the Bible (from Mark and Revelation, respectively) to describe her “*white as snow*” garments (*TA* 31.8-12). The Lady is also “Vestal / from the days of Numa” and “Bona Dea,” goddess of the hearth and fertility (*TA* 103.5-6; 103.8). She is the “new Eve who comes clearly to return, to retrieve what she lost,” carrying a book, “an unwritten volume of the new” (*TA* 36.8-10; 38.12). While this fact may seem to contradict H.D.’s desire to maintain tradition, Barnstone argues that the Lady’s book contrasts the book of John’s Revelation, which is “eternal and unchangeable; H.D.’s version has “blank pages for new writers,” making it rather Eliotic (192).

One of the last poems of *The Tribute to the Angels* foreshadows the third book of the work, alluding to the synthesis of the three biblical Marys with the Lady:

her book is our book; written
or unwritten, its pages will reveal

a tale of Fisherman,
a tale of jars or jars,

the same—different—the same attributes,
different yet the same as before.

(*TA* 39.19-24)

3: “*this has happened before somewhere else, / or this will happen again—where? when?*”

In *The Flowering of the Rod*, H.D. performs a feminist revision of the stories involving Jesus, the Three Kings, and the biblical Marys, which makes pertinent Eliot’s writing on the

interaction between past and present art:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (808)

H.D. makes explicit that she will be revising old patriarchal narratives; “it is written,” that:

the first to actually witness His life-after-death,
was an unbalanced, neurotic woman,

who was naturally reviled for having left
and not caring for house-work ... or was that
Mary of Bethany?

in any case—as to this other Mary
and what she did, everyone knows,

but it is not on record
exactly where and how she found the alabaster jar ; (FR 12)

H.D.'s ironic pretense here—“or was that / Mary of Bethany? / in any case—” —seems an intentional parallel to the disparagement of these women, but also an indication that she will be synthesizing Mary, mother of Jesus, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene in her rewriting. *Altering the existing order*, H.D. arranges the narrative in a convoluted fashion, “[reversing] the chronology of [Kaspar’s] life, moving backward from his confrontation with [Mary Magdalene] over the jars of myrrh to his delivery of the gift of myrrh to the Virgin Mary” (Gubar 213). In H.D.'s narrative, Kaspar is “a bit of a prig and something of a misogynist,” as Gubar writes, repeatedly snubbing the “un-maidenly,” unbothered and unimpressed Magdalene who appears before him, a woman who knows “how to detach herself / another unforgivable sin” (Gubar 213; FR 13). She refuses to leave, however, back against the door, and is empowered (and consequently redeemed) by her knowledge of her unification with the other Marys: “I am Mary,

she said, of Magdala, / I am Mary, a great tower ; / ... / Mary shall be myrrh ; / I am Mary—O,
there are Marys a-plenty, / (though I am Mara, bitter) I shall be Mary-myrrh” (*FR* 16.5-10).

Moved, Kaspar sends the gift of myrrh after Magdalene, for he has an epiphany that dominates the midsection of the book. Gubar explicates:

When Kaspar thinks in the ox stall that "there were always two jars" (*FR* 41) and that "someday [he] will bring the other" (*FR* 42), we know that his prophecy has been or will be fulfilled: as he gives the myrrh to the Virgin, we know that he is destined to give the other jar to Mary Magdala, thereby authenticating his vision of the female trinity—his knowledge that the whore is the mother and that Isis, who has been labeled a retrogressive harlot, is actually the regenerative goddess of life. (213)

And so H.D. moves further backward to the birth of Jesus, to Melchior bringing rings of gold, Balthasar the spikenard, and Kaspar his jar of myrrh. In this earlier instance in his life, Kaspar, like Magdalene, finds himself an outcast: “they were both somewhat older than Kaspar / so he stood a little apart, / as if his gift were an after-thought, / not to be compared with theirs ; / ... / and Kaspar stood a little to one side / like an unimportant altar-servant” (*FR* 42). The Virgin Mary is on the ground to receive the gifts, and she speaks, and Kaspar assesses her:

she was shy and simple and young;

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

but Kasper 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.

(*FR* 43)

The final scene is a disappointment to some critics. Sarah H. S. Graham writes that the scene “suggests to [her] that the poem remains dominated by the male gaze represented by

Kaspar” and that *Trilogy* “is not, in short, as revolutionary as it might appear, and thus [she is] not convinced about its pro- or proto-feminist status” (202). This cannot be. The Virgin Mary is, according to H.D., a synthesis of all three redeemed biblical women, but also the redeemed holy women and goddesses. This means she must be playing coy—she must know the fragrance is coming from the jar in her arms, and know that this she is be/holding so much more—*all things flowering together*, a reference to the flowering of the cross of roods in the New Testament, to birth and resurrection: “resurrection is a bee-line, / straight to the horde and plunder / the treasure, the store-room, / the honeycomb ; / resurrection is remuneration, / food, shelter, fragrance / of myrrh and balm” (*FR* 7). Barnstone’s endnotes on the work support this theory, and help link together the why it was so important to H.D. to revise these narratives—why absorbing and revising tradition in her poetry was inextricable from the resurrection of a war-torn world around her: “Myrrh was used in embalming and as an aphrodisiac, and is associated with immortality. H.D. sees myrrh as poetry because of its association with immortality, sacredness, and resurrection” (189).

4: “We are back at the beginning”

“To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim,” Eliot writes, “for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad.” He meditates, though, at length on the poet and her creative process. Eliot writes of “impersonality” in art—of the poet who “learns in time [that] the mind of Europe—the mind of *her* own country... [is] much more important than *her* own private mind.” What is necessary to the production of the work Eliot describes is the “continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable.... continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (808-10). The

degree to which H.D. “surrendered herself wholly to the work to be done” must not be understated. At numerous points in the work she chronicles her descent into her subconscious, an act inextricable from her creative process, an act tiresome, fearful, courageous. She describes, in one of her most lyrical moments, how it is to be “hewn from within by that craftsman”—the “master-mason planning / the stone marvel”—to be “lost in sea-depth, / sub-conscious ocean”:

Depth of the sub-conscious spews forth
too many incongruent monsters

and fixed indigestible matter
such as shell, pearl ; imagery

done to death, perilous ascent,
ridiculous descent ; rhyme, jingle,

overworked assonance, nonsense,
juxtaposition of words for words' sake,

without meaning, undefined ; imposition,
deception, indecisive weather-vane ;

disagreeable, inconsequential syllables,
too malleable, too brittle,

over-sensitive, under-definitive,
clash of opposites, fight of emotion

“But,” she closes the poem, perceiving order in unconscious chaos, “we noted that even the erratic burnt-out comet / has its peculiar orbit” *WDFN* 32). I am reminded, then, of what Eliot states toward the end of the essay: “for it is not the ‘greatness,’ the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts” (810).

Finally, I wish to note what follows the final stanzas of *The Flowering of the Rod*:

London
December 18-31, 1944.

(*FR* 43)

Trilogy can appear consistently removed from the temporal, solely concerning the mystical, mystifying, and mythical. An attentive reading, though, reveals that H.D. is never too far beyond the earthly, and her final note solidifies this fact. Despite the work weaving past, psyche, and vision, it is embedded in the immediate moment of H.D.'s war-torn day, its metanarrative moments earthly, concerning *not only the pastness of the past, but its presence*—concerning her dire call to save the past and present from literal destruction. The work manifests H.D.'s conviction that the written word must be examined, absorbed, and revised and that with this the redemption of women will occur. For H.D., this is *what is to be done*—“and she is not likely to know what is to be done unless she lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless she is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living” (Eliot 810).

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