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SYMPTOM OR INSPIRATION? H. D., FREUD,
AND THE QUESTION OF VISION

In 1934, the same year he concluded H.D.'s training analysis, Sigmund Freud began work on his final major study, *Moses and Monotheism*, a speculative reconstruction of ancient Near Eastern history.¹ Begun in a Vienna that Hitler would soon overtake and completed in Freud's final London exile, *Moses and Monotheism* attempts to fathom the darkest recesses of the Jewish past, as a means of responding to the current international crisis and of interpreting the widespread desire for absolute political authority. Freud hypothesizes that the Jewish religion derives from a "monotheistic episode in Egyptian history":² thus, "Moses was an Egyptian,"³ who ushered in the revisionist religion and established the Jews as his people. Just as psychotherapy aims to help the patient to recognize, and to set up a critical distance from, long-repressed wishes, thus concomitantly accepting the self's dividedness, so the uncovering of what Freud calls the "primeval history" of the Jews is supposed to lead us to recognize our deep-seated longing for an unequivocal leader who will somehow make us whole again.⁴ In presenting a Moses who is neither Jewish, nor even a single historical personage, but rather the condensation of a first and a second Moses, Freud withholds the means by which we can identify with the patriarch and consolidate our egos under his authority.⁵ He instead opens a disjunctive space in which to analyze how patriarchy establishes and maintains its power over us. Although Freud's narrative is marked by multiple hesitations, redundancies, and what he twice terms "misgivings"⁶ about the selective use of evidence, he expresses confidence in a basic methodological assumption: "religious

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, n.d.).

² *Ibid.*, 35.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵ Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1938), trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1965). "If in the course of a single day," Freud writes, "we have two or more experiences suitable for provoking a dream, the dream will make a combined reference to them as a single whole; it is under a necessity to combine them into a unity." (211). This operation he terms "condensation" (313).

⁶ *Moses and Monotheism*, 17, 69.

phenomena," he writes, "are to be understood only on the model of the neurotic symptoms of the individual [. . .] as a return of long-forgotten important happenings in the primeval history of the human family".⁷ Freud employs the same hermeneutic on the Hebrew Bible that 40 years before in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he advised for a dream's manifest content: In *Moses and Monotheism*, he writes, "The Biblical record before us contains valuable—nay, invaluable—historical evidence. It has, however, been distorted by tendentious influences and elaborated by the products of poetic invention".⁸ Just as the dreamwork misrepresents unconscious wishes in order to render them unrecognizable to consciousness—especially, he maintains, the Oedipal desire to kill the father—so the Biblical text clumsily garbles the murder of father Moses by the Jewish people, yet leaving telltale traces for the astute analyst to pursue. Even so, Freud worries about detaching himself from historical fact, that he might "be classed with the scholastics and the Talmudists who are satisfied to exercise their ingenuity, unconcerned with how far removed their conclusions may be from the truth."⁹

Moses and Monotheism makes universalizing claims about human history, but at the same time calls itself a "work of hypothesis,"¹⁰ admittedly based on the weak argumentative strategy Freud terms "analogy."¹¹ Because his strange amalgamation of science and more or less "poetic invention" seeks to upend some of the West's foundational myths, we could justly term it "revisionary mythopoesis," to borrow a critical concept from Rachel Blau DuPlessis's study of H. D., without, however, attributing the same feminist implications to Freud (105).¹² And while *Moses and Monotheism* can be read as the demystification both of Biblical history and patriarchal authority, it is also something quite other than a scientific or scholarly text. Reading Freud and H.D. together reveals psychoanalysis and poetic vision to be far closer than they might seem.¹³ Both

⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 73.

¹¹ Ibid., 91.

¹² Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Woman Writers* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1985). Cf. also John Milfull, "Freud, Moses and Jewish Identity." *European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 7:1 (February 2002), 29-30: "It is not obvious to me that Freud's wildly speculative anthropological narratives have anything to do with science, they seem more an imaginative attempt to legitimise his psychoanalytical theories by anchoring them in an invented childhood history of humanity. . . . It is fiction, however intriguing or persuasive, with a purpose."

¹³ There is indeed considerable resistance to this idea. Cf. Leo Strauss, "Freud sur Moïse et le monothéisme," (1958), intro. Olivier Sedeyn. *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 4 (2000): 535-62. In his preface to Leo Strauss' presentation, Olivier Sedeyn claims, "[l]a philosophie et la révélation sont radicalement opposées parce que l'une et l'autre prétendent posséder la seule chose essentielle pour la bonne conduite de la vie, et que ce que la philosophie tient pour la seule chose essentielle, à savoir la recherche de la sagesse par la raison laissée à ses seules forces, s'oppose à ce que la révélation tient pour la seule chose essentielle, à savoir une obéissance pleine d'amour aux commandements

Freud and H.D. actively refashion the past as an agent of change. They use the past to defamiliarize the present, dislocating its ever-sameness, so as to allow us to envision the world and our places in it differently.

H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud*, completed during and after the Second World War, makes lyrical reflection on her sessions with Freud in 1933 and 1934, as well as on the life issues she hoped with his help to resolve.¹⁴ Perhaps it is no coincidence to the composition of *Moses and Monotheism* that H. D.'s own Moses dream plays a significant role in her contemporaneous training analysis.¹⁵ In the dream, "a dark lady," "an Egyptian [. . .] appears at the top of a long staircase":¹⁶

I, the dreamer, wait at the foot of the steps. I have no idea who I am or how I got there. There is no before or after, it is a perfect moment in time or out of time. I am concerned about something however. I wait below the lowest step. There, in the water beside me, is a shallow basket or ark or box or boat. There is, of course, a baby nested in it. The Princess must find the baby. I know that she will find this child.¹⁷

H.D. recognizes that the image, *Moses in the Bullrushes*, derives from what she had seen long before in her family's gilded Doré Bible. Freud suggests that H.D. might be the baby Moses, also considering a possible identification with "the child Miriam," the older sister of Moses in the Biblical story, "half concealed in the rushes."¹⁸ Interpreting the dream to signify a truth from her early childhood—H.D.'s desire to take pride of place with her mother—he stops short of considering that it might register what he calls, in *Moses and Monotheism*, "fragments of phylogenetic origin, an archaic heritage."¹⁹ This heritage, he avers, "extends far beyond individual psychology" because "religious phenomena must [. . .] be regarded as a part of mass psychology."²⁰ H.D. agrees that the woman in the dream "is [an] obvious mother-symbol" (39);²¹ but she also asks,

de Dieu" (535-36) ["Philosophy and revelation are radically opposed because both claim to possess the one essential thing for proper conduct in life, and that which philosophy takes for the one essential thing, to know how to study wisdom through reason alone, opposes that which revelation takes for the one essential thing, to know how to maintain an obedience full of love for the commandments of God"]. Sedeyn's bipolar dichotomy breaks down with both Freud and H. D. It should come as no surprise that both Strauss and his introducer claim that Freud was seriously mistaken in *Moses and Monotheism*. Strauss suggests that Freud is compromised by "haine ou d'ingratitude envers sa propre origine" (551) ["hate or ingratitude towards his own origin" (*my translations*)].

¹⁴ H. D., *Tribute to Freud* (1956) (New York: New Directions, 1984).

¹⁵ A training analysis differs from an ordinary analysis in that an important part of its purpose is to train the analysand (or patient) to become a psychoanalyst herself.

¹⁶ *Tribute to Freud*, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Moses and Monotheism*, 135.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

²¹ *Tribute to Freud*, 39.

"Do I wish myself, in the deepest unconscious or subconscious layers of my being, to be the founder of a new religion?"²² The further question, raised both in *Tribute to Freud* and in H. D.'s later poetry, is whether the idealized mother-daughter reunion augurs something beyond a personal, idiosyncratic past. Is the poet's production completely circumscribed by what she has experienced and how she understands that experience, or might poetry offer access to a futurity, all those powers that have been subsumed under the name, "vision"?

To understand how Freud could be so attractive to a modernist poet, it is crucial to reference *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the foundational text of psychoanalysis, which H.D. studied before her sessions began.²³ Here, Freud writes, "[d]reams" – and I would add, like poems – "frequently seem to have more than one meaning. Not only [. . .] may they include several wish-fulfillments one alongside the other; but a succession of meanings or wish-fulfillments may be superimposed on one another."²⁴ In this palimpsestic model, a manifest dream image will not likely correlate with a pre-established latent significance, a singular dream thought: "these symbols do not occur with a permanently fixed meaning."²⁵ Freud's insistence on the impossibility of finding a singular meaning to the dream finds an echo in the New Critical dictum concerning the reductiveness of paraphrasing poetry.²⁶ Although the modernist New Critics also insist on the poem's integrity and cohesiveness, Freud suspects falsification in the pleasing teleological closure involved in such celebrations of unity; and he repeatedly argues against easy recourse to teleological explanation in his discussion of dreams and sexuality. In leaving the dream unclosed, Freud again offers a model for the production of meaning attractive to H. D., for whom open-endedness was already important in the early imagist poems and in the then unpublished narratives, such as *Paint It Today*²⁷ and *HERmione*.²⁸

If Freud did not draw out the full implications of the dreamwork's psycholinguistic character, as his follower, Jacques Lacan, was to do, he explicitly compares the dreamwork to creative writing. In Chapter 6 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in the course of elaborating considerations of representability in dreams, he writes,

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

²³ It is also worth pointing out that ageing Freud searched for ways of perpetuating his legacy and the institution of psychoanalysis that were not limited to clinical practice. H. D. perhaps offered an audience for psychoanalysis well beyond the couch.

²⁴ *Interpretation of Dreams*, 253.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 386. Cf. Diana Collecott, "'She Too Is My Poet': H. D.'s Sapphic Fragments," in *H. D.'s Poetry: The Meanings that Words Hide*, ed. Marina Camboni (New York: AMS P, 2003), 9. Collecott usefully defines the palimpsest as an "over-written text, consisting of erasures as well as fresh inscriptions, of previous as well as subsequent writings, becomes a metaphor for the collective process of reading and rereading."

²⁶ Cf. Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase" in *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harvest, 1956), 192-214.

²⁷ H. D., *Paint It Today* (1921), ed. Cassandra Laity (New York: NYU P, 1992).

²⁸ H. D., *HERmione* (1927) (New York: New Directions, 1981).

Any one thought, whose form of expression may happen to be fixed for other reasons, will operate in a determinant and selective manner on the possible forms of expression allotted to the other thoughts, and it may do so, perhaps, from the very start—as is the case in writing a poem. If a poem is to be written in rhymes, the second line of a couplet is limited by two conditions: it must express an appropriate meaning, and the expression of that meaning must rhyme with the first line.²⁹

As with poetry, “the whole domain of verbal wit is put at the disposal of the dream-work.”³⁰ As the (in this case, traditional) poem is composed, so the dream. Whatever Freud’s pretensions to science, he places poetics prominently in the dream’s constitution, as well as in its interpretation. Poetry, so often considered inescapably subjective, appears at the heart of the whole putatively scientific endeavor.

As Lacan stipulates, four psycholinguistic mechanisms serve to distort the dream. *Condensation* operates much like metaphor, so that, Freud discovers, “each of the elements of the dream’s content turns out to have been ‘overdetermined’—to have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over.”³¹ This corresponds to how metaphor combines two or more separate signifiers into an identity. Through *displacement*, with its metonymic substitution of one thing for another, “[t]he dream is, as it were, differently centered from the dream-thoughts.”³² Whereas metaphor operates through the finding of similarity, metonymy relies on contiguity, displacing the signifier by a nearby signifier. The dreamwork must also take into account “*considerations of representability*,” whereby abstract dream thoughts are recast into “visual images,” as might happen in an imagist poem, or any poetry in which imagery is important.³³ Finally, with *secondary revision*, in effect a final editing, the “censoring agency,” charged with holding back unacceptable wishes, brings in its own “interpolations and additions.”³⁴ The dreamwork is thus a writerly process. Due to its complexities, Freud disputes the possibility of ever attaining an unequivocal and complete dream interpretation: every dream, in his evocative expression, has a “navel,” a “spot where it reaches down into the unknown,” a passage “which has to be left obscure.”³⁵

As Susan Stanford Friedman asserts in her groundbreaking 1981 study, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.*, Freud’s “theory of unconscious language as a visual disguise” comes to play a crucial role in the poet’s work.³⁶ In *Tribute to*

²⁹ *Interpretation of Dreams*, 375-76.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 376.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 318.

³² *Ibid.*, 340.

³³ *Ibid.*, 379.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 527.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 564.

³⁶ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981), 55.

Freud, H.D. carefully aligns her project with psychoanalysis. "I was a student," she writes, "working under the direction of the greatest mind of this and of perhaps many succeeding generations."³⁷ She credits Freud with bringing "the past into the present," working, that is, more or less toward the modernist goal she pursues.³⁸ In a gesture that links Freud to the empty palimpsest, to "the unwritten volume"³⁹ so important to her later poetry and to transformative possibility, H.D. distinguishes the crucial difference that analytic treatment offers to intellectual inquiry: "The question must be propounded by the protagonist himself, he must dig it out from its buried hiding-place, he himself must find the question before it could be answered."⁴⁰ That is to say, no one serves as the empty receptacle of psychoanalytic wisdom, transcribing notes, like an uninspired undergraduate at a lecture: the topic of discussion itself is the student's responsibility.

H.D. avers to the reader in the much earlier *Notes on Thought and Vision* that "my line of approach, my sign-posts, are not your sign-posts" – and certainly, her sign-posts are not Freud's.⁴¹ In *Tribute to Freud*, this becomes most explicit not with the Moses dream, but in a polite disagreement over "the-writing-on-the-wall," her vision at Corfu.⁴² When H.D. refers to the vision as "this 'symptom' or this inspiration," with "symptom" in scare-quotes, she indicates an ironic departure from Freud.⁴³ While he interprets the vision as a singular "danger-signal"⁴⁴ of psychosis, for H.D., it remains a sign of what she calls, in *The Walls Do Not Fall*, the coalescence of "the distant future / with the most distant antiquity."⁴⁵ Freud would reduce her mythopoetic mental picturing to an indicator of mental disorder, and thus to a visual sign bluntly signifying its latent meaning.⁴⁶ But for H.D., who perhaps in this instance shows herself to be more Freudian than Freud, the vision questions, rather than answers:

³⁷ *Tribute to Freud*, 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12. Cf. Ezra Pound, *Make It New* (New York: Yale UP, 1935).

³⁹ H. D., *Tribute to the Angels*, in *Collected Poems: 1912-1944* (New York: New Directions, 1983), 38, 1. 12.

⁴⁰ *Tribute to Freud*, 84.

⁴¹ H. D., *Notes on Thought and Vision* (1919) (San Francisco: City Lights, 1982), 24.

⁴² *Tribute to Freud*, 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁵ H. D., *The Walls Do Not Fall*, in *Collected Poems*, 20, ll. 11-12. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud advances a different possibility for vision: "it is not only in dreams that such transformations of ideas into sensory images occur: they are also found in hallucinations and visions [. . .] in health or as symptoms" (574). Freud also mentions "visions in mentally normal subjects" (583) in the same discussion about how ideas become sensory images.

⁴⁶ Cf. Norman Holland, "H.D.'s Analysis with Freud," *PsyArt: A Hyperlink Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts*, article 020101. Available HTTP: <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipisa/journal/2002_holland05.shtml> (accessed Jan. 27, 2008). Holland has seconded Freud's view of the vision as pathological, even seeing Freud as helping H. D. overcome her vision in order to write.

The S or half-S faces the angel; that is, the series of the S-pattern opens out in the direction of the angel; they are like question marks without the dot beneath them. I do not know what this scrollwork indicated; I thought at the time that it was a mere wave-like decorative detail. But now I think this inverted S-pattern may have represented a series of question marks, the questions that have been asked through the ages, that the ages will go on asking.⁴⁷

Acknowledging that the vision serves as a wish-fulfillment, as Freud claims all dreams and hallucinations do, H. D. renders desire as a repeated questioning: “*is this it?*”⁴⁸ Unlike the archetypal vision of writing-on-the-wall deciphered by the Old Testament’s Daniel—“[t]hou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting”⁴⁹—H.D.’s revelation announces no final verdict, no sentence of death. The final answer—if there were one—if the dream had no navel—is less interesting than the possibilities opened in the asking.⁵⁰

While recognizing that Freud’s “theories and her experience [with] him were a tremendous catalyst in [H.D.’s] poetic development,”⁵¹ Friedman, pointing to Freud’s “Creative Writing and Day-Dreaming,” questions how H.D. could have found inspiration in him: “given their fundamental differences, it [. . .] seems remarkable that [. . .] H.D. praised and mythologized someone with whom she so basically disagreed.”⁵² In the 1908 essay, Freud maintains that “[t]he creative writer does the same as the child at play. He [*sic*] creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously—that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion—while separating it sharply from reality.”⁵³ “The motive forces of phantasies,” he argues, “are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the

⁴⁷ *Tribute to Freud*, 55.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁹ *Daniel. The Bible, King James Version*. 1611. The Electronic Text Center. University of Virginia Library. 1995. 21 June 2006 <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/Toccer-new2?id=KjvDani.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>>, 5:27 (accessed Jan. 27, 2008).

⁵⁰ Here is Freud’s famous paragraph on the dream-navel, from *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium. (564)

⁵¹ Friedman, 49.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵³ Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1908) (Vol. 9 of SE), 144.

fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality."⁵⁴ This equation of creative writing with escapism belittles not only the poet, but also the future author of *Moses and Monotheism*.⁵⁵ Friedman emphasizes the Freud of ego-psychology, the Freud who would consolidate the self against irrational impulses, who, as she claims, "condemned" "the very qualities of the unconscious" that "were the source of its special value for H.D."⁵⁶

But this is only the dull side of a productively divided and self-contradictory thinker. In *The Freudian Body*, Leo Bersani, considering Freud's "remarkably dense—even remarkably 'troubled'—textuality,"⁵⁷ argues that it seems "very naïve to take what might be called official Freud literally."⁵⁸ Bersani stipulates that Freud's interest today resides in his writing's precisely literary propensity to undo itself: "Psychoanalysis," Bersani writes, "is an unprecedented attempt to give a theoretical account of precisely those forces which obstruct, undermine, play havoc with theoretical accounts themselves."⁵⁹ *Moses and Monotheism* stylistically rehearses the divided past of the Jewish religion in an unresolved alternation between theoretical certainty and a nagging self-doubt, which leads the narrative repeatedly to stop and restart abruptly. Freud protests, "it will be better to suppress any interferences,"⁶⁰ "this reconstruction has its weak places,"⁶¹ and "I hardly trust my powers any further,"⁶² all in the first half of the study. If "Creative Writing and Day-Dreaming" is not so interestingly conflicted, and if, in it, Freud condescends to the literary artist, he behaves rather differently in clinical practice. In a 1933 letter to H.D., written between their two series of sessions, he confides, "I am deeply satisfied to hear that you are writing, creating; that is why we dived into the depths of your unconscious mind I remember."⁶³ The main purpose of H.D.'s analysis is neither to strengthen her ego, nor to disarm her unconscious phantasms, but to mobilize her creativity and to restart her artistic production. In *Tribute to Freud*, she writes, "[h]e himself—at least to me personally—deplored the tendency to *fix* ideas too firmly to set symbols, or to wield them inexorably."⁶⁴ Thus there is in Freud a tension

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵⁵ Cf. Mark Edmundson, *The Death of Sigmund Freud: The Legacy of His Last Days* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 170: "One of the early working titles for the Moses book, he points out, "had been 'Moses, a Historical Novel.'"

⁵⁶ Friedman, 115. The suggestion I would make here is that those arch-rival schools of psychoanalysis, American ego psychology and Lacanian psychoanalysis, both derive from the Freudian text. It is not a question of following Freud, but of which Freud one follows.

⁵⁷ Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰ *Moses and Monotheism*, 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶³ *Analyzing Freud: Letters of H.D., Bryher, and Their Circle*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman (New York: New Directions, 2002), 387.

⁶⁴ *Tribute to Freud*, 93.

between the dogmatic public figure who gives a rock-steady face to psychoanalysis and the agile practitioner who easily replaces dogma with finesse.

At the beginning of her analysis, Freud insists that H.D.'s ultimate purpose in coming to Vienna is not to find her father, but her mother; and if resistant at first, she comes to concede the truth in Freud's contention. The figure of the mother, important in *Tribute to Freud*, becomes pivotal to *Tribute to the Angels*, the second of the three books of *Trilogy*, the long poem she composed during the Second World War. In *Tribute to the Angels*, H. D. traces a revisionary etymology: "mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary, / Star of the Sea, / Mother."⁶⁵ Perhaps, however, the truly astonishing revelation of *Tribute to Freud* is not the dewy reemergence of the pre-Oedipal mother, but H.D.'s naked profession of poetic vision, which most critics (Adelaide Morris being an important exception) must wrap in theoretical skirts, the advent that Freud first of all demurred from embracing.⁶⁶ In the writing-on-the-wall, the poet does not mutter, Sybil-like, the unintelligible syllables of a consonance we can only pretend to remember. Sybil, as we may recall in the epigraph to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the prophetess who has lost her body and is reduced to no more than a handful of dust, only wishes to die.⁶⁷ With H. D., there is no reactionary, Eliotic nostalgia for what should have been, for what is lost. Without blenching, she conjugates the grotesque with the divine, symptom with inspiration, megalomania with prophecy.

Perhaps the most unsettling jouissance is the one that embarrasses us with its preposterous brilliance. In a 1933 letter to Bryher, H.D. writes that Freud finds the "peculiar clarity" of her unconscious "findings" most interesting.⁶⁸ Aware, she says, of Freud's "accurate and accumulated data of scientific observation," also evidently able to practice analysis herself, H.D. has the audacity to reach for the impossible "*this is it*," which we can perhaps formulate in Lacanian terms, acknowledging, if not thereby comprehending, it.⁶⁹ Theorizing the Freudian thing—*das Ding*—in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan asserts that it is "the strange feature around which the whole movement of" representation "turns"⁷⁰ and that the pleasure principle "imposes the detours which maintain [its] distance."⁷¹ In a series of gnomic pronouncements, Lacan asserts that "there is no Sovereign good—the Sovereign Good, which is *das Ding*, which is the mother, is also the object of incest, is a forbidden good," concluding, "there is no other

⁶⁵ *Tribute to the Angels*, 8, ll. 12-14.

⁶⁶ Adelaide Morris, "The Concept of Projection: H.D.'s Visionary Powers" in *Signets: Reading H.D.*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1990): 273-96.

⁶⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harvost, 1974).

⁶⁸ *Analyzing Freud*, 194.

⁶⁹ *Tribute to Freud*, 77.

⁷⁰ Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 57.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

good."⁷² While we can raise an object, he claims, such as "the mythic body of the mother,"⁷³ "to the dignity of the Thing,"⁷⁴ the thing itself "is characterized by the fact that it is impossible for us to imagine it."⁷⁵ Innermost to human being, the thing is also completely outside of us, in what Lacan calls "intimate exteriority," or "extimacy."⁷⁶

H.D.'s vision, I want to argue, is an embrace of the extimate, or *jouissance*—a dangerous endeavor, in Lacan's terms, because it involves "the approach to a center of incandescence or an absolute zero that is physically unbearable."⁷⁷ "*Jouissance*" is not in Lacan a synonym for joy or orgasm, but an ecstasy or extimacy too intense to please or bring pleasure, a joy pushed past subjective supportability, shot through with pain. Lacanian psychoanalysis trains the observer to look for the emergence of *jouissance* in failures of signification, in places where language cracks, slips, stutters, or sutures. These failures manifest the interruption of the ego's coherence: the sense of identity lapses; the hard armor of self-containment shatters.

H.D.'s pellucid turns of phrase, however, show us that *language does not have to break for the self to come undone*. In the midst of her vision, H.D. finds her head "splitting with the ache of concentration."⁷⁸ "[I]t is no easy matter to sustain," she tells us, frightened of what the vision portends; but her lover who stands by her, Bryher, "says without hesitation, 'Go on.'"⁷⁹ Through a psychic operation of metonymic displacement, H.D. finds the ordinary objects in their hotel bedroom on the Greek island transform into the facets of vision, "the stand for [a] small spirit-lamp"⁸⁰ becoming, "the tripod of classic Delphi,"⁸¹ the instrument of feminine prophecy. Here, she registers the eruption of what Freud calls, in "The Uncanny," "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."⁸² Mladen Dolar asserts that "ideology basically consists of a social attempt to integrate the uncanny, to make it bearable, to assign it a place."⁸³ H.D. fails repeatedly in the years after the vision to find a way to situate it; as she writes in *Tribute to Freud*, "I can decide that my experiences were the logical outcome of illness, separation from my husband, the loss of friendship with [D. H.] Lawrence; but even so I have no technique with which to deal with the vision."⁸⁴ Just as, to follow Bersani, Freud's theoretical texts are most

⁷² *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁷⁸ *Tribute to Freud*, 49.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸² Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919) (Vol. 17 of SE), 220.

⁸³ Mladen Dolar, "'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night': Lacan and the Uncanny." *October* 58 (Fall 1991), 19.

⁸⁴ *Tribute to Freud*, 153.

interesting because they fail to settle into an ideological unity, so too is H.D.'s vision compelling in its refusal of any comfortable final answer.

While some critics have tended to disparage what they see as H.D.'s poetics of transcendence, uneasy with the "eternal, changeless ideas"⁸⁵ that she extols in *Notes on Thought and Vision*, apprehending these ideas in a psychoanalytic register allows us to read otherwise what we can mistake as unsophisticated flights from history. In *Tribute to Freud*, she asserts, "there is no clock-time, though we are fastidiously concerned with time and with a formal handling of a subject which has no racial and no time-barriers. Here is this hieroglyph of the unconscious."⁸⁶ As Dianne Chisholm points out in *H.D.'s Freudian Poetics*,⁸⁷ the poet rewords what Freud says in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "Indeed," he writes, "it is a prominent feature of unconscious processes that they are indestructible. In the unconscious nothing can be brought to an end, nothing is past or forgotten."⁸⁸ For H.D., the relation of poetry and the unconscious can be in the best instance an identity or near-identity: "a memory or a fragment of a dream-picture is actual, is real, is like a work of art or is a work of art."⁸⁹ Constellating the out-of-time epiphany through the unconscious, H.D. reveals that history is extimate to itself, unable to master the trauma that propels it. The extimate is, according to Mladen Dolar, that which "points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening."⁹⁰ The "light-pictures,"⁹¹ the psychic projections at Corfu, are one woman's ordeal—or really two, considering that Bryher closes the vision, seeing "a circle like the sun-disk and a figure within the disk; a man she thought . . . reaching out to draw the image of a woman (my Niké) into the sun beside him."⁹² H.D., though, is careful throughout *Tribute to Freud* to connect a seemingly intimate, even hermetic, drama to the wider historical situation, thus making "a very carefully constructed self-analysis whose ultimate object is a critique of culture," as Katherine Arens asserts.⁹³ Beyond concern for her own well-being or her future as a poet, even outside of concern for Freud, the subject of her tribute, H. D. is determined to read the signs that a Vienna in crisis presents with the interpretive skills that Freud has helped her learn how to use.

"I do not want," H.D. writes, "to become involved in the strictly historical sequence. I wish to recall the impressions, or rather I wish the impressions to

⁸⁵ *Notes on Thought and Vision*, 23.

⁸⁶ *Tribute to Freud*, 47.

⁸⁷ Dianne Chisholm, *H.D.'s Freudian Poetics: Psychoanalysis in Translation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1992).

⁸⁸ *Interpretation of Dreams*, 617.

⁸⁹ *Tribute to Freud*, 35.

⁹⁰ Dolar, 6.

⁹¹ *Tribute to Freud*, 41.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹³ Katherine Arens, "H.D.'s Post-Freudian Cultural Analysis: Niké versus Oedipus." *American Imago* 52.4 (1995), 362.

recall me."⁹⁴ Implicitly, she refuses to impose a logical order on experience that might falsify its meaning, or censor parts failing to fit. H.D. rejects what Freud calls our "habit of looking for teleological explanations" in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.⁹⁵ In Vienna in the early thirties, not having recovered from the previous war, she attends to the tinsel promises of another war to come. Her London friends, she finds, fall into two groups: those denying the obvious, who say, "everybody was so hospitable and so very charming" in Germany's Black Forest; and those giving "not chapter and verse so much as the whole outpouring of predigested voluminous theories" about the future. "*Where is this taking you, I wanted to shout at both parties,*" she writes.⁹⁶ For H. D. neither denial, the repression of the obvious, nor intellectual defensiveness, the use of theory to master uncomfortable facts, can make adequate response to the world-historical situation.

Not all signs of coming war advertise themselves in enigmatic "light-pictures." "Already in Vienna," H.D. observes,

the shadows were lengthening, or the tide was rising. The signs of grim coming events, however, manifested in a curious fashion. There were, for instance, occasional coquettish, confetti-like showers from the air, gilded paper swastikas and narrow strips of printed paper like the ones we pulled out of Christmas bon-bons. [. . .] Those mottoes were short and bright and to the point. One read in clear primer-book German, 'Hitler gives bread,' 'Hitler gives work.'⁹⁷

Though the fascist messages could hardly be more bluntly phrased, they are lies; and H.D. deliberately misreads them: "There were other swastikas. These were chalk ones now; I followed them down the Berggasse as if they had been chalked on the pavement *especially for my benefit*. They led to the Professor's door—maybe, they passed on down another street to another door but I did not look any further."⁹⁸ In any case, it is not through words that H.D. makes a political statement. "The Professor said, 'But why did you come? No one else has come here today, no one. What is it like outside? Why did you come out?'" Attempting to spare, perhaps, Freud's feelings, she says, "[i]t's very quiet" and "much the same as usual." What she wants him to understand, however, is "*I am here because no one else has come.*"⁹⁹ She tells us, "I had made a unique gesture," but it is a Janus-faced expression, meant to be read two ways. Most obviously, this is megalomania, the strident insistence that the messages are meant only for her; but it is also the courage to witness, the same courage she displayed at Corfu.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ *Tribute to Freud*, 14.

⁹⁵ *Interpretation of Dreams*, 107.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 59, *italics mine*.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

The insistence on multiple meanings that Freud and H. D. share stands in marked contrast to the Nazi model of signification. As Mark Edmundson explains in *The Death of Sigmund Freud: The Legacy of His Last Days*, “double meanings (and triple meanings and proliferating, complex meanings of all sorts) were precisely what Nazis were allergic to, what they had, in effect, constructed their world to shut out. To the Nazis, there always had to be one: one people, one nation, one leader, and one meaning, the truth.”¹⁰¹ As deconstructive and French feminist theorists have pointed out repeatedly, such insistence on the singular and univocal meaning is the hallmark of phallogocentrism, of ideologies that center on masculine power and control of language.

The writing-on-the-wall points in multiple directions: backwards to the mythical past on Freud’s desk, “Niké A-pteros, “the Wingless Victory, for Victory could never, would never fly away from Athens”;¹⁰² within the vision, “[t]here she is, I call her she; I call her Niké”¹⁰³ and forward, toward a victory not yet representable.¹⁰⁴ In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud speculates,

We can guess how much to the point is Nietzsche’s assertion that in dreams “some primaeval relic of humanity is at work which we can now scarcely reach any longer by a direct path”; and we may expect that the analysis of dreams will lead us to a knowledge of man’s archaic heritage, of what is psychically innate in him. Dreams and neuroses seem to have preserved more mental antiquities than we could have imagined possible.¹⁰⁵

We need not, however, resort to “fragments of phylogenetic origin,” to a genetic inheritance, in order to acknowledge the disparate pieces of the far past circulating around and through us, however oblivious we may be.

Freud notes the “character of indestructibility” of all that is unconscious in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.¹⁰⁶ When nothing can be lost, there is little use for nostalgia, with the self-consolidation that it entails. Rather, by putting time out of joint, by exercising the outside-of-time quality of the unconscious, its extimacy, H.D. works to bring forth the new. The mother figure of *Tribute to the Angels* carries “a book but it is not / the tome of ancient wisdom.”¹⁰⁷ Rather, the woman carries “the blank pages / of the unwritten volume of the new.”¹⁰⁸ (ll. 13-14). H.D. discards unhelpful myths, Classic or Christian, for the metaphor of her choosing:

¹⁰¹ Edmundson, 122.

¹⁰² *Tribute to Freud*, 69.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁰⁵ *Interpretation of Dreams*, 588.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 591, n. 1.

¹⁰⁷ *Tribute to the Angels*, 38, ll. 11-12.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 13-14.

but she is not shut up in a cave
like a Sibyl; she is not

imprisoned in leaden bars
in a coloured window;

she is Psyche, the butterfly,
out of the cocoon.¹⁰⁹

This passage rejects both the Classical trope of the confined woman as inspired prophet (the Pythia, as much as Sibyl), which has also been deployed to characterize poets like Emily Dickinson, as well as the Christian iconography that would immobilize femininity in the form of the hallowed virgin. Through the rhetorical gesture of *recusatio*, spelling out the poem she refuses to write, H.D. would interrupt the patriarchal sequence of poetic transmission. For change to occur, the sequence and its icons have to break. At the same time that *Tribute to the Angels* attempts to transcribe important messages from the past, it also works to transform them, and to incite the reader's own creativity, the reader presented with appropriately "blank pages."

To follow Edmundson's argument, it is productive to read Freud as an anti-patriarchal patriarch; that is to say, although his self-presentation was traditionally fatherly and he found a patriarchal style suitable to the establishment and maintenance of psychoanalysis as an institution, Freud's writings, at the same time, undermine patriarchy. In Edmundson's words, "the aim of therapy was to demystify absolute authority."¹¹⁰ If Freud's revisionary myth of Egypt insists on placing patriarchy at the origin of a culture, at the same time, it inscribes those origins as self-divided, multiple, and incomplete. It is no coincidence that Freud's myth is atheistic, God the Father being the ultimate imaginary patriarch. H.D.'s Egyptian myth—evidenced best in *Helen in Egypt*—would utterly rework the place of the feminine and the mystical in history.¹¹¹ While H. D. and Freud's divergent gender politics are crucial and have been treated at length throughout H. D. criticism, they should not obscure a congruity of purpose: in rewriting the past, both H. D. and Freud disturb what Edward Said terms the "settled geographies and genealogies" of the modern and, indeed, the postmodern situation.¹¹² The experience of vision left H. D.'s own expatriate identity radically unsutured, at the same time helping to open the way for a distinctive poetry to emerge. In *Freud and the Non-European*, Said writes that Freud, in mobilizing Jewish history's "non-European past,"¹¹³ reveals the "inherent limits" to any unified identity.¹¹⁴ In Lacanian terms, Freud exposes an Egyptian extimacy at the core of Jewish history. While Said refers to his

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., ll. 15-20.

¹¹⁰ Edmundson, 212.

¹¹¹ H. D., *Helen in Egypt* (1954) (New York: New Directions, 1974).

¹¹² Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (New York: Verso, 2003), 27.

¹¹³ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 54.

postcolonial contemporaries and to Freud in speaking of “the diasporic, wandering, unresolved, cosmopolitan consciousness of someone who is both inside and outside his or her community,” this consciousness, so relevant to our world today, is also H. D.’s.¹¹⁵

Freud’s myth is not without an elitist dynamic. As John Milfull points out, in speaking of the Enlightenment tradition, which arguably includes Freud, “there is . . . no escape from the paradox that the pursuit of liberty, equality and fraternity requires and demands the services of the unequally gifted.”¹¹⁶ It is precisely the exceptional capability of Freud’s Moses that enables him to succeed in founding the Jewish nation; and in the Romantic tradition, the visionary poet positions himself as just such an exception. We need only reference the hyperboles of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “A Defense of Poetry,” which makes poets “the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration,” “the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present,” and “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” to see how easily poetry can presume the prerogatives of prophecy.¹¹⁷ In H. D., however, humility and undecidedness mitigate against elitist exceptionalism.¹¹⁸ As early as *Notes on Thought and Vision*, she qualifies, “if I blaze my own trail, it may help to give you confidence and urge you to get out of the murky, dead, old, thousand-times explored old world, the dead world of overworked emotions and thoughts.”¹¹⁹ However strongly she condemns habit and convention, H. D. does not urge that we follow down her path, but that we lead our own.

After the death of Freud’s analysand, Dr. van der Leeuw, the public intellectual promising to carry psychoanalysis into new fields, but whose death wish of crashing his airplane sadly comes true, H.D. returns in 1934 to tell Freud “how

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 53. Cf. “H. D.’s Identity.” *Women’s Studies* 10 (1984), 322. H. D. disrupts that “any simplistic conception of authentic identity.”

¹¹⁶ Milfull, 27.

¹¹⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defense of Poetry” (1821), in *Critical Theory Since Plato. Revised Edition*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 529.

¹¹⁸ See also the poem, “Epitaph” in *Collected Poems*, which became the poet’s literal epitaph. Equivocating over the meaning of H. D.’s poetry, the poem is framed by the statements, “[s]o I may say” (1), “so they may say” (4), and “so you may say” (7). The emphasis falls on the final statement, which receives double the elaboration of the other two:

so you may say
“Greek flower; Greek ecstasy
reclaims for ever
one who died
following
intricate songs’ lost measure.” (ll. 7-12)

The poet’s triumph in timelessness is posed hypothetically. Cf. Eileen Gregory, “H. D.’s Heterodoxy: The Lyric as Site of Resistance,” in *H. D.’s Poetry: The Meanings that Words Hide*, ed. Maria Camboni (Brooklyn: AMS P, 2003), 26: “The poem disconcerts in its hypothetical, conditional mode—I *may* say—because epitaphs usually are terminal in utterance.”

¹¹⁹ *Notes on Thought and Vision*, 24.

sorry I am." He retorts, "You have come to take his place."¹²⁰ The obvious and Joycean, mythopoetic move would be to construe van der Leeuw as Icarus, with herself as Dedalus, the artist who makes the voyage safely. H.D. decides instead to metaphorize him as "Mercury," in whom she condenses the Egyptian Thoth and the Greek Hermes, "the Messenger of the Gods and the Leader of the Dead."¹²¹ In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. herself would be this messenger. Alluding to "the famous Delphic utterances which it was said could be read two ways," she states,

We can read my writing, the fact that there was writing, in two ways or in more than two ways. We can read or translate it as a suppressed desire for forbidden 'signs and wonders,' breaking bounds, a suppressed desire to be a prophetess, to be important anyway, megalomania they call it—a hidden desire to 'found a new religion' which the Professor ferreted out in the later Moses picture. Or this writing-on-the-wall is merely an extension of the artist's mind, a *picture* or an illustrated poem, taken out of the actual dream or daydream content and projected from within (though apparently from outside), a really high-powered *idea*, simply over-stressed, *over-thought*, you might say, an echo of an idea, a reflection of a reflection, a 'freak' thought that had got out of hand, gone too far, a 'dangerous symptom.'¹²²

As Chisholm recognizes, this proposition is "deceptive," "really not a choice at all." H.D., she asserts, is "at once symptomatic and poetic"; but perhaps more than that.¹²³ Dream logic, Freud tells us, has "no means of expressing the relation of a contradiction, a contrary or a 'no.'"¹²⁴ Vision, like history, has always yet to be decided. We are left to find our own signposts in what H.D. witnesses at Corfu and in a world returning to war. As *The Walls Do Not Fall* would have it, "the way of inspiration / is always open, // and open to everyone."¹²⁵

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¹²⁰ *Tribute to Freud*, 6.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 51.

¹²³ Chisholm, 10.

¹²⁴ *Interpretation of Dreams*, 361.

¹²⁵ *The Walls Do Not Fall*, 20, ll. 5-7.