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“TEAR US AN ALTAR”: EROTIC VIOLENCE,
AND THE SELF-UNMADE PROPHET

The correlation between dangerous passion, artistic inspiration, and religious gnosis has long been established in poetic tradition. The condition of poetry, according to Plato, is a form of divinely-instilled erotic frenzy. In *The Ion*, he describes with ironic disapproval the poet's love for his muse as a form of divine madness, and in *The Phaedrus*, he notes that the Greek words for madness and prophecy were originally the same. Poetry is a force the poet is helpless to withstand; he is nothing without it, and suffers from abnormal mental states when he has it. The poetic condition is traditionally figured as an erotic encounter with Otherness, instilling in the poet an intense longing that can never be fulfilled. Poetry functions as both representation and result of that encounter.

In the age of Freud-influenced fascination with the relationship between unconscious desires and erotic response, and amidst a revival of interest in mystical practices of all descriptions, many modernists sought to explore and to explain the artistic relationship with Otherness in terms that fused ancient mythological narratives with contemporary understandings of the psyche. They theorized the source of poetic speech as the unconscious mind resonating with external forces, beyond the full volition of the self—an aesthetic mode which they termed Impersonality.

Newly-revived mythologies and the nascent field of psychiatry provided modernists with two complementary models for the process of achieving poetic impersonality. The more mystically inclined, such as W.B. Yeats, believed that the poetic mind, when properly trained, took on the perceptions of the larger, older cultural mind that he called the *Anima Mundi*. The skeptical T.S. Eliot in “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism” also acknowledges a relationship between “mystical experience and some of the ways in which poetry is written,” but attributes such experiences to “some forms of ill-health, debility or anaemia.” The apparently spontaneous literary output “has obviously been incubating

within the poet," not received from any supernatural source.¹ Dubious as he may have been about otherworldly influences, Eliot was familiar with the sort of "ill-health" conducive to poetry; he famously drafted *The Waste Land* amidst of a series of emotional breakdowns, a fact reflected in the poem's fragmentary structure and multiple, disjointed narrative voice.

H.D., a lifelong student of Greek culture and artistic consciousness, as well as a student and analysand of Freud's, forged a poetics from the fusion of mythic consciousness and emotional conflict. Artistically, the results were mixed. Although her early short Imagist poems were justly celebrated, her later poetry suffered from uneven critical reception in her lifetime, and most of her prose until recently went unpublished. The prose, which includes autobiographical fiction, memoirs, notes toward poetic theory, conversations with Sigmund Freud along with subsequent psychological discoveries, and meditations on the common spiritual truths between Classic mythology and Christian belief, represents a complex, layered record of an elusive, shifting consciousness, a non-linear retrospective narrative that traces the evolution of artistic perception simultaneously rooted in gender and evasive of it. Like Yeats and Eliot, as well as other modernists such as Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence, H.D. regarded writing as a mode of prophecy, and the act of writing as attainment of privileged access to a cultural mind that originated in the mythical past. But H.D. was unique in explicitly arguing for crisis, trauma, erotic dissolution, and emotional breakdown as a path to higher artistic and spiritual truth.

Although the cycles of emotional crisis and psychological epiphany H.D. recorded in her prose are clearly essential to her art, the critical question remains as to how this chronicle should shape interpretation of her poetry. As a largely autobiographic record of the artistic and spiritual struggle of variously-named female protagonists to achieve deeper self-awareness against debilitating emotional obstacles, her prose invites both transparently biographical reading, and interpretation as a feminist redemption narrative. But redemptive and gendered readings have also become critical commonplaces in H.D.'s work because feminist scholars actually redeemed it from critical oblivion. Susan Stanford Friedman performed this resurrection with her publication in 1975 of an essay entitled "Who Buried H.D.?" Rachel Blau DuPlessis began her own study of H.D. shortly thereafter, and other feminist scholars followed. Because recovering unfairly marginalized women's art and defining female subjectivity were primary concerns of second-wave feminist scholarship of the period, pioneering H.D. scholars have generally read her recovered work through this lens, thus interpreting H.D.'s artistic progression in terms of struggle, specifically struggle to create a coherent female self against patriarchal forces that would negate or subsume it. In an early influential essay, for example, DuPlessis famously refers to H.D.'s tendency to "romantic thralldom" in her relationships:

1. Thomas Stearns Eliot, "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism," in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1975 ed.), 89.

In particular, H.D. was vulnerable to the power of what she termed the *héros fatal*, a man whom she saw as her spiritual similar, an artist, a healer, a psychic. Again and again this figure that she conspired to create betrayed her; again and again she was reduced to fragments from which her identity had once more to be painfully reconstructed.²

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar concurred with this analysis, arguing that H.D. phased throughout her life between destructive heterosexual encounters and lesbianism that “furnished her with a refuge from the pain of sexuality.”³ Friedman maintained that “H.D.’s ambivalence toward ‘literary men,’ [. . .] represented her own internalization of a masculine cultural tradition. But her identity as an artist was not the real center of her vulnerability. It was herself as a woman, particularly as a sexual being, that she questioned.”⁴ Shaped around the recovery of a lost woman artist whose previously unavailable work could be read as a consistent narrative of self-loss and recovery, a scholarly consensus developed that H.D.’s literary corpus represented a mythologized chronicle of the author’s emotional loss and recovery.

While not necessarily off the mark, reading any artist’s work as a transparent biographical reflection of her life is problematic, as is the gender polarization and essentialism implicit in this particular account. As feminist scholarship became more incorporated within the mainstream of academic thought, critical concerns have expanded. Most of these pioneering scholars have complicated, revisited, and refined their own founding assumptions. In a recent essay “H.D. and Revisionary Mythmaking,” for example, DuPlessis takes pains to draw a distinction between any particular poetic methods, which are gender-neutral, and “the gender materials of culture and society” that poets take up in various ways, and for different purposes.⁵ She continues, however, to argue for H.D.’s project as essentially redemptive, a “cultural intervention concerning ideological patterns of patriarchy,” and her poems as “acts of cultural resistance.”⁶ Similarly, Catherine Rogers, in a 2006 essay characterizes this work as “a text of female-authorized prophecy and redemptive voice.”⁷

A counter-movement emerged fairly early within H.D. scholarship, however, against a biographical reading of H.D.’s work and toward analysis of it within

2. Rachel Blau DuPlessis. “Romantic Thralldom in H.D.,” in *Signets: Reading H.D.*, eds. Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 407.

3. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 231.

4. Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 37.

5. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Revisionary Mythmaking,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Poetry*, eds. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 124.

6. “Mythmaking,” 124-5.

7. Catherine Rogers, “H.D.’s Erotic and Aesthetic Gospel in ‘Notes on Thought and Vision’,” *Paideuma* 35, 1-2 (March 1, 2006): 91-2.

the broader context of early 20th century intellectual history—specifically where that history concerns the characteristically modernist uses of Classical myth and esoteric Christian traditions as tools for both psychic exploration and artistic creation. This movement called for an examination of the unique fusion of the mythological, personal, and experimental that characterizes H.D.'s work within the broader context of modernism. Thus, Zara Bruzzi in 1988 suggested reading H.D.'s early poems as "Neoplatonic accounts of human experience rather than as commentaries on her own amours." At stake for Bruzzi was the more complete "map of modernism" to which H.D.'s newly-recovered work represented a crucial addition.⁸ But nobody has argued for H.D.'s place within a wider literary tradition more thoroughly or convincingly than Eileen Gregory, in her groundbreaking 1997 study *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines*, in which she calls for a serious examination of H.D.'s classicism as an intertextual exploration of the broader classicisms that underlie western intellectual history: "It is necessary to approach the question of H.D.'s classical intertextuality with the primary assumption that she is a knowledgeable and insightful reader, translator and interpreter, and not simply a projector of meanings, reconstituting symbolic texts according to personal urgencies."⁹ In this study, Gregory effectively demonstrates that H.D.'s lifelong interest in ancient Greek mythology and culture, generally dismissed by some of her earliest critics as evidence of her dabbling or lack of intellectual rigor, actually represents a highly intelligent, and insightful use of classical materials that was fully in keeping with the larger intellectual discourses of the time.

My own reading seeks synthesis between these two major strands of H.D. criticism, to return to a psychoanalytic and gendered reading that explores the delineations of the textual rather than the authorial selves that H.D.'s various works present, in order better to outline the anti-redemptive spiritual journey H.D. endeavors in her explorations of a deliberately and persistently fragmentary self. This essay suggests that rather than outlining a redemptive quest of gender recovery and emotional wholeness, H.D.'s work cumulatively chronicles the deliberate destabilization of a fixed and singular self. Rather than impeding her artistic process, emotional fragmentation is essential to it. Reading her early poetry and some of her prose reflections within the context of the Greek tradition on which H.D. modeled much of her work, and also the modernist aesthetic of impersonality that her poetry helped shape, I propose that rather than struggling *against* emotional violence, H.D.'s textual personae not only repeatedly invite it, but eroticize it, in order to fully access the mythic condition of otherness that for her is the source of poetry. The redefinition of the artistic self implicit in her endeavor also radically redefines the spiritual quest as we typically understand it. The end goal of that quest is not aesthetic or spiritual completion—not the well-wrought urn, but rather the broken vessel whose cracks allow the light of the gods to shine through.

8. Zara Bruzzi, "The Fiery Moment: H.D. and the Eleusinian Landscape of English Modernism," *Agenda* 25 3-4 (1988): 98.

9. Eileen Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1-2.

One of the basic tenets of psychoanalysis is that the self is constituted by desire. As applied to literary criticism, psychoanalytic theory offers a means of examining how the dynamics of desire shape textual selves. Of particular interest to H.D.'s pioneer critics, concerned as they were with the relationship between creativity and gender, is that H.D. maintained intimate relationships with both men and women throughout her career, and regarded those relationships—especially those that failed—as central to her creative process. As a student of Freud, furthermore, she articulates this process in terms that link writing, sexual identity and the workings of the unconscious in a style that replicates the associative process of analysis.

H.D. tended in her prose to represent individuals who affected her life as archetypes. Ezra Pound, in the famous editing scene in the British Museum tea room in which he signed her work “H.D. Imagiste,” simultaneously gave her the iconic signature which she was to use for the rest of her life and named the movement he founded on her work. Richard Aldington, who fought in WWI and returned shell-shocked, recurs in her meditations and some of her poetry as a Greek soldier. D.H. Lawrence, whose initials mirror hers, she set up as her twin, hero and betrayer. Typically in her prose, these figures abandon or betray the unstable female protagonist, causing emotional breakdown from which she partly recovers. The shards of shattered personality subsequently attempt to speak themselves back to coherence. It is this process, which apparently requires a dysfunctional relationship with a destructive or indifferent man to catalyze, DuPlessis impatiently designated as “romantic thralldom.” But it is important to note that, in H.D.'s work, it is the shattering that causes the visionary state from which writing comes, not the healing. Although they typically attain a measure of functionality, her protagonists rarely fully attain emotional stability. The narrative of breakdown serves to re-create the conditions of *instability* that in turn lead to greater spiritual awareness—to shed the limited perspective of a single gendered human for the multiple perspectives of the various gods her poetry regularly evokes. And her method of bringing this condition upon herself is deliberately creating the conditions of unbearably painful erotic loss.

Her biographical experiences undeniably helped determine her unusual artistic methodology. H.D.'s first serious breakdown, which occurred in 1919, became the subject of later memoirs, in which she retrospectively attributes her mental collapse to cumulative shock after a long series of personal crises magnified by the ambient stress of WWI. Her private crises became inseparable from the public disasters brought by the war. In her memoir *Tribute to Freud*, which weaves her sessions and conversations with Freud into a retrospective exploration of her own creative process, she associates the stillbirth of her first child in 1915 with the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Her brother was killed in the war and her father died shortly thereafter.¹⁰ The dissolution of her marriage to Richard Aldington she attributed partly to the shell-shock that he suffered in the war. Her own near-death of influenza while pregnant with her daughter Perdita,

10. Hilda Doolittle, *Tribute to Freud* (New York: New Directions, 1984), 31.

along with angry scenes that friend, mentor and former fiancé Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington both staged in her hospital room, finalized her collapse.

Later in *Tribute*, H.D. credits her lifelong companion Bryher with saving her life and that of her child when she took them on a rest holiday, first to the Scilly Islands off the coast of Cornwall in 1919. In the Scilly Islands, H.D. had the first of her intense visionary experiences, “what Bryher called the ‘jelly-fish’ experience of double ego; bell-jar or half-globe as of transparent glass spread over my head like a diving bell and another manifested from my feet [. . .].”¹¹ The result of this experience, with its imagery of invertebrate, aquatic, amorphous embodiment, was a notebook, finally published in 1982 under the title *Notes on Thought and Vision*. In it, she associates the experience of ego-doubling outside the body with the process of writing, and both to the visionary state sought by initiates into the Eleusinian mysteries. In Corfu in 1920, a year after the Scilly vision, she had another vision: a “series of shadow—or of light—pictures” that she “saw projected on the wall of a hotel bedroom.”¹² For her, these experiences, perceived as waking dreams or prophetic revelations, provided an externalized glimpse into the very source of her creative process. She refers to these shapes or images as “the writing on the wall,” and defines them, in the process of her analysis with Freud, along with certain visionary dreams, images, books and recollections of people, as comprising “*the hieroglyph of the unconscious.*”¹³

Decades later, in *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. weaves her recollection of the Scilly Island visions into a running debate she had with Freud as to whether these experiences, which always occur during periods of emotional collapse, represented “dangerous symptoms” or artistic inspiration: “But symptom or inspiration,” she concludes, “the writing continues to write itself or be written.”¹⁴ In order to accommodate the writing, she must experience a kind of death, from which there is little promise of resurrection: “I must drown completely and come out on the other side, or rise to the surface after the third time down, not dead to this life, but with a new set of values, my treasure dredged from the depth. I must be born again or break utterly.”¹⁵

But for H.D., breaking and rebirth are both essential phases in her creative process—a cycle through which she imagined encounters that mingled violence with erotic desire. The protagonists in her autobiographical fiction constantly express a terror of erotic annihilation for which they also consistently long. Her poetry, especially the early Imagist poetry for which she is best known, presents by seeming contrast a smooth, orderly, impersonal surface—devoid of human subjects or direct expressions of emotion. But the predominant emotion expressed in these poems is longing to be erotically overwhelmed by an ambient

11. *Tribute*, 116.

12. Doolittle, *Notes on Thought and Vision* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982), 41.

13. *Notes*, 93 (author’s italics).

14. *Tribute*, 51.

15 *Tribute*, 54.

force. Nearly every plant in her early *Sea Garden* is torn, rent or shattered—a condition which the speaker in these poems consistently celebrates or invites. In her poetry, H.D. creates and enters, by means of self-destructive ecstasy, a negative, silent space, created by violence and opened by desire. She accomplishes this by the systematic annihilation of the gendered speaker.

Early H.D. critics tend to read her early lyric poetry as abstract, coded expressions of the gender struggles her private prose chronicles in detail. Instead of a typical lyric, in which an “I” addresses a beloved but abstract female “you,” H.D.’s early Imagist lyrics involve genderless speakers addressing fragile plants that have been torn apart by elemental forces—who either celebrate the damage or long for it. In “Sea Lily” for instance, the speaker addresses herself to one such broken plant:

Reed
 slashed and torn
 but doubly rich—
 such great heads as yours
 drift upon temple-steps
 but you are shattered
 in the wind.¹⁶

H.D. the poet was called into creation, according to her memoir *End to Torment*, when Ezra Pound “slashed” at one of her poems with his pencil, cutting away with his editing stroke all but her initials—the barest essentials of her name.¹⁷ Similarly, the reed the poet celebrates is made “doubly rich” precisely because it has been “slashed and torn” and “shattered” by the wind. H.D.’s *Sea Garden* is a desolate field strewn with battered plants, and her speakers, amidst the damage, not only celebrate in it, but long to participate in it. Her “Sea Rose” is “flung on the sand,”¹⁸ the speaker in “Mid-day” is “scattered like/the hot shrivelled seeds” that are “split on the path.”¹⁹ In “Pursuit,” “a wild hyacinth stalk is snapped”²⁰ by the heel of someone chasing the speaker—a pursuit which she clearly invites. The speaker in “Sheltered Garden” longs for wholesale dismemberment of delicate plant life, longs for the wind to “break, /scatter these pink stalks, /snap off their spiced heads, /fling them about with dead leaves....”²¹

H.D. lyrics evince an almost perverse delight in reversing the gender codes on which the form traditionally depends. Rather than assembling the rose from the catalog of beautiful, schematic parts from which the lyric poet ordinarily assembles his beloved, she longs to tear apart the flower she admires:

16 Doolittle, *Collected Poems: 1912-1944*, Ed. Louis L. Martz (New York: New Directions, 1983), 14.

17. Doolittle, *End to Torment* (New York: New Directions, 1979), 18.

18. *Poems*, 5.

19. *Poems*, 10.

20. *Poems*, 11.

21. *Poems*, 20.

If I could break you
I could break a tree.
If I could stir
I could break a tree –
I could break you."²²

She is frustrated in her destructive desires, however. She finds herself unable to summon the necessary force to break a flower, much less a tree. Nor can she become an actor in the scene she describes. She, like the rose, is simultaneously immobile, delicate and hard. She therefore calls upon the wind to accomplish her desire for her:

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.²³

By shifting her address from the rose to the wind, she substitutes one object of desire for another. No longer interested in breaking the rose, she commands the wind to “rend open the heat,” which clearly is her own. Overwhelmed with heat, she longs to be the flower, to be broken open. Furthermore, she expresses her desire in regressively heterosexual terms, in which the speaker remains as passive as the battered flowers she admires. The fruit, helpless on its own, “cannot drop” or otherwise release its desire. For that, it needs the wind to “Cut the heat--/plough through it.”²⁴

In these poems, H.D.'s speaker repeatedly expresses intense longing for violent assault by an elemental force that, by tearing apart the pristine, delicate bodies of flowers, trees and other iconographic, natural, feminine objects, releases and fulfills the speaker's desire. The imagery is both implicitly erotic and explicitly violent. As the prospect of sexual violence is, in general, thoroughly non-pleasurable for any woman, the interpretation I am suggesting is, from a feminist standpoint, admittedly troublesome. Because the speaker clearly takes pleasure in the prospect, it might be more accurate to say that hers is not a rape fantasy, but rather that the core of her desire is a deeply transformative, positive sado-masochism. Sado-masochism in this sense does not mean a simple desire to inflict or receive pain or an expression of the self-destructive impulses H.D. had to overcome in order to stabilize her identity as a writer. Rather, by willing the ecstatic destruction of the objectified, feminized body, by identifying with both destroyer and destroyed, the poet transcends bodily limitations, including gender, and thereby gains the agency of the speaking subject unbound within any specific personal perspective.

22. *Poems*, 24-5.

23. *Poems*, 25.

24. *Ibid.*

For the *Sea Garden* speaker, erotic fulfillment through pain is not the ultimate goal. Rather, the painful/pleasurable ecstasy of physical dismemberment, textually experienced, represented a means of attaining spiritual transformation, and with it, an ecstatic metamorphosis into poetry. In order to accomplish this, the poet requires outside assistance, an inspiring force that tears open—the plant, the body, and thus language and desire.

Almost all the early *Sea Garden* poems involve a contest of power; in which the speakers constantly alternate between commanding an Other and submitting to it. That Other in this instance is a divine force: the wind, the waves, or a nameless deity. In “The Cliff Temple,” the speaker, “splintered and torn,” longing for union with the god she desperately pursues, offers suicide as a way to be near him:

Shall I hurl myself from here,
shall I leap and be nearer you?²⁵

What drives her is not so much a death wish, in the usual sense, as an impassioned desire similar to Shelley’s cry to the West Wind: for a force greater than herself to launch her into a poetic otherworld.

Thus, in “Hermes of the Ways,” the speaker wanders on the margins of earth, between wind, waves and water, to meet Hermes, god of pathways, communication, and transition between worlds. In this poem, the speaker braves the battering wind, in order to meet Hermes, who waits in the liminal space “where sea grass tangles with shore-grass.”²⁶ By meeting him in his own ground, she takes on his communicative powers.

For H.D., writing poetry represents the enactment of myth—and myth in turn writes the poet. Like Eliot, Pound and Lawrence, H.D. was fascinated with *The Golden Bough*, with its fertility cults, violent sacrifices, and theme of mystical initiation. She was also deeply interested in classical Greece, consistently setting her poems from the 1920s onward within that period or employing mythological images, and sometimes translating ancient texts. Through her writing, she immersed herself in the role of mystical initiate and sacrificial victim, in order to recover and continue ancient methods of attaining otherworldly knowledge, as represented in the Eleusinian Mysteries.

In *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines*, Eileen Gregory calls for consideration of H.D.’s Hellenic explorations within the broader context of Western intellectual history. Like many scholars in her time, H.D. associated the rites of Eleusis with the legend of Orpheus, as well as the orgiastic excesses of the cult of Dionysus. It is an academic commonplace, Gregory points out, to cite, along with James Frazer, Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* when considering the significance of dying god imagery and Dionysus to modernism. Both were certainly highly

25. *Poems*, 27.

26. *Poems*, 39.

influential. Nietzsche's description of Apollonian vs. Dionysian modes of prophecy serve as a larger metaphor for the contestation between classical and romantic aesthetic modes that for some characterize the central creative tension within modernism.²⁷ But, Gregory points out, for a literary artist such as H.D., whose work strives explicitly to transgress binary divisions—particularly the ideological binary of gender upon which both Frazer and Nietzsche's theories depend, which polarizes male and female as essential and inevitably hostile forces—this metaphor proves a particularly inadequate method of interpreting the uses to which H.D. puts her Hellenic material: "H.D. resists some of [the] basic terms" of Nietzsche's formulation, argues Gregory, especially "the Nietzschean worldview that sees male and female strife at the root of (male) creativity."²⁸

In order to more fully account for the complex intellectual currents H.D. drew from to construct her Hellenic mythopoetics, Eileen Gregory turns instead to the anthropologist Jane Ellison Harrison.

Harrison is in many ways a problematic figure. Subsequent generations of anthropological and classical scholarship have definitively disproven one of her central theories—that the differentiated pantheon of Olympian gods represented a patriarchal conquering and displacement of an earlier, matriarchal religion that worshiped a single Great Mother. This theory, which can be traced back to the nineteenth-century Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen, whose writings influenced Friedrich Engels and James Frazer, among others, was by Harrison's time considered suspect, primarily because anthropologists were then gathering evidence from actual fieldwork rather than the antiquarian literary sources used by Bachofen and Frazer. Subsequent generations of anthropological study have debunked it entirely. The lack of scientific veracity in this particular theory did not prevent certain important modernist figures—Robert Graves and Carl Jung among them, from finding it deeply resonant as a poetic and psychological metaphor.

Gregory's turn to Jane Harrison as a better model for H.D.'s mythopoeia than Frazer or Nietzsche is therefore not unproblematic. Her dismissal of the well-documented weaknesses in Harrison's work as "condescension in the pretentious climate of early modernism"²⁹ seems surprisingly hasty, given the care and originality with which she constructs her main arguments. Also, she is unable directly to cite evidence that H.D. ever read Harrison (although she certainly read and exchanged ideas with people who had). Nonetheless, Gregory convincingly demonstrates that it was Harrison's way of thinking and constructing evidence—synthetic, ecumenical, grounded in the scientific methods of archaeology as well as the literary romantic Hellenism of the nineteenth-century anthropological schools, as well as her descriptions and interpretations of archaic Greek religious practices, that made her an important

27. Gregory, 109.

28. Gregory, 110.

29. Gregory, 109.

and influential figure to early twentieth-century intellectual culture, which in turn offered an important model for H.D.

As Gregory demonstrates, Harrison's study of ancient Greek mythological tradition—especially with regard to the figure of Dionysus and his relationship to the Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries, emphasizes the archaic, chthonic, irrational and feminine substrata underlying the rationalistic and patriarchal Olympian pantheon. The realm of the old gods, repressed and buried beneath the new regime, in Harrison's terms represent a kind of a nightmarish underworld. Essentially, the Eleusinian rites according to Harrison afford the initiate a descent into this underworld, and thus direct access to the deepest sources of ancient wisdom. Given that the Eleusinian Mysteries were in Harrison's strain of scholarship generally assumed originally to be a harvest festival and thus in their thinking associated with ancient fertility rites, this coming together of seeker and source they figured as a *heiros gamos*.³⁰

Regardless of whether or not H.D. was influenced by Harrison, her interest in Eleusis was certainly this implied relationship between sex and gnosis. In *Notes on Thought and Vision*, her meditation upon the process of attaining "over-mind consciousness," H.D. discusses the Eleusinian Mysteries in specifically these terms. "The first step" in the mysteries, she states, "had to do with sex." In her account, candidates for admission would be walked through a room containing various pornographic images, where their reactions were judged by priests: "It would be easy enough to judge them by their attitude, whether it was one of crude animal enjoyment or hypocritical aloofness."³¹

In the *mythos* which formed the basis for H.D.'s poetics, the initiatory rites at Eleusis, the sexual frenzy of the Dionysian rites, and the legend of Orpheus were all closely associated. As many scholars have noted, the Orpheus legend, with its theme of dismemberment as poetic apotheosis, carried a particular resonance for many other modernist poets. For Anouilh, Valéry, Rilke, Lawrence, Ashbery and later theorists such as Blanchot, Walter Strauss suggests, the legend may have outlined "the possibility of reassembling the shattered fragments" of the broken, modern self.³²

In *The Long Schoolroom*, Allen Grossman argues that the poetic tradition is founded in suffering and atrocity, claiming that certain particularly violent legends persist as "paradigms of...poetic knowledge."³³ The tale of Orpheus is one such legend, but Grossman cites a gendered parallel in the legend of Philomela. Each with its specific account of suffering represents foundational tales of male and female modes of poetic production. Orpheus acquires his true

30. Gregory, 122.

31. *Notes*, 29.

32. Walter Strauss, *Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 18.

33. Allen Grossman, *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 18.

power as a poet only when he loses everything that has to do with manhood. He loses his wife, takes up with boys, and is consequently torn apart by angry maenads. In some versions of the legend, he is castrated. Philomela, on the other hand, acquires her communicative powers only after her rapist cuts her tongue out, when she weaves a plea for help to her sister in a piece of fabric: textile as text. Woman's poetry, according to Grossman, is driven into existence by physical pain, mutilation and rape—a process exemplified by the legend of Philomela.³⁴

Although the poet's voice in H.D.'s *Sea Garden* poems seem at first similarly to arise from the torn, figurative plant bodies, it is not the expressive, feminine, semiotic fragmentation of bird-speech that H.D. is after, but rather the mastery of the Orphic, the symbolic, the civilization-building Grossman describes,³⁵ and that her male, modernist counterparts sought to attain. In "*The God*," the series that follows her imagist *Sea Garden* poems, H.D. begins a sequence of narratives which feature various figures from Greek mythology, and concern self-destruction as a mode of artistic creation. The centerpiece of these is her impassioned, intensely moving "Eurydice."

In this poem, rather than demonstrating the negative agency of H.D.'s other speakers, who commandeer their own destruction in order to recreate themselves in words, Eurydice rages at Orpheus for consigning her to a fate not of her making, and to an eternity of subterranean darkness. This poem reverses convention: Eurydice, traditionally silent, does all the speaking. The object of her address, famed for his poetry, remains silent. In her continued interrogation, she supplies his side of the conversation, scathingly suggesting that the real cause of her damnation was his egocentrism:

what was it you saw in my face?
the light of your own face,
the fire of your own presence?

In a long series of incantations, words and images repeating, weaving together, Eurydice simultaneously invokes and mourns the flowers of the earth that she can no longer walk among.

Saffron from the fringe of the earth,
wild saffron that has bent
over the sharp edge of earth, [. . .]
Fringe upon fringe of blue crocuses,
crocuses, walled against blue of themselves
blue of that upper earth,
blue of the depth upon depth of flowers,
lost.³⁶

34. Grossman, 18-22.

35. Grossman, 22.

36. *Poems*, 52-3.

Unlike the flowers in *Sea Garden*, ecstatically shattered and freed by the annihilating force the speaker has invited, these flowers remain merely trapped underground. The annihilation Orpheus visited upon Eurydice, which in this case she specifically did not invite, has removed her entirely from the flowers. She is broken, while the flowers are merely injured, still vivid with the life she has lost. The saffron has been only "bent," but not broken. The crocuses are isolated, "walled," against themselves, in all the blueness of the earth she no longer walks.

Her generative invocation doubles into a curse. In the absence of the earth's colors, she claims the blackness of Hell for her own. In so doing, she lays claim to greater powers than his:

Against the black
I have more fervour
than you in all the splendour of that place,
against the blackness
and the stark grey
I have more light.³⁷

Deprived of the flowers, with which the *Sea Garden* speakers identified as willing victims and at the same time longed to victimize, Eurydice claims herself as a flower, beyond victimization: "At least I have the flowers of myself,/and my thoughts, no god/can take that."³⁸ Consequently, she owns herself, her own voice, and her own power of making within nothingness. Abandoned to a state of non-being, unmade by her lover the famous maker, she speaks herself, makes herself with a power more genuine than that of Orpheus, who had never been made to earn his right to poetry.

Eurydice not only claims verbal authority over the mute Orpheus, but also asserts mastery over the realm that his failure resulted in her damnation. Paradoxically, she accomplishes this by further reducing herself:

though small against the black,
small against the formless rocks,
hell must break open before I am lost;
before I am lost,
hell must open like a red rose
for the dead to pass.³⁹

Eurydice's claiming of herself as a flower, and subsequent reduction into near-nothingness, "small against the formless rocks," shifts into another, strangely eroticized flower image. All that remains of herself and her memory of the

37. *Poems*, 54.

38. *Poems*, 55.

39. *Ibid.*

flowers of earth is the “red rose” of hell, the center of which she occupies. Should the rose open, return to life, it will only be at her command: the dead passing through her rose-vulva into rebirth. With this imagistic shift, Eurydice, as mother of the dead, becomes Persephone, Demeter’s lost child, fertile, and reigning as queen in the underworld. With this declaration, Eurydice reverses the order of the Eleusinian rites. From the core of the mystery, she not only claims gnosis for herself, but also establishes herself as the mother through whom other candidates for the mystery must be reborn in order to acquire the knowledge death has granted her.

For H.D., the death of the self, and its subsequent isolation into a condition where there is no other to influence or shape it, is the beginning of poetry. Her mysteries promise no rebirth for the self, but only a scattering of a shattered self as seeding, like the dying God of Frazerian myth, into the fertile ground of imagination—encompassing the mythic principles of male and female within herself. Her work is both birth and breaking into pieces. She makes, from those shards of herself, poetry.

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McRae, Shannon. “‘Tear Us an Altar’: Erotic Violence, and the Self-Unmade Prophet,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 10 no. 2 (Spring 2010): 35-48.