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Palimpsest of Origins in H.D.'s Career

"It was the struggle not to be reduced, to be neither muse nor poetess.
It is the struggle. The career of the woman poet
is the career of that struggle."
Rachel Blau DuPlessis

"Writing. Love is writing."
H.D.¹

How did Hilda Doolittle become "H.D.?" Certainly not by attending Bryn Mawr College. Not even by sitting in the bun-shop of the British Museum where Ezra Pound's slashing pen reshaped her poems and signed the name "H.D., Imagiste"—though the story she tells of that scene now carries the weight of legendary truth. H.D.'s origins as an adult writer are linked to a series of disappointments and failures—her withdrawal from Bryn Mawr College to the distress of her parents in 1906, her impatient rejection of the conventionalities of her family during the troubled period she lived at home until she left in 1910 at age twenty-four, the gradual collapse of her engagement to Pound over the years of a rocky courtship from 1905 to 1910, her flight from the bohemianism of Greenwich Village after a few months residence in 1910, her love for Frances Gregg betrayed by the liaison between Pound and Gregg, and her lifelong exile from her American roots beginning in 1911. These were ominous beginnings for a poetess: failure, rejection, alienation, flight, diaspora. For a poet who was a woman, they were perhaps spiritual essentials, a kind of deconstructive stance toward her self and cultural environment—the negation that is fertile ground for new beginnings.

I have been asked today to provide an overview of H.D.'s career. I will attempt to do so not by charting a linear development, but rather by addressing this question of origins—that is, by exploring the process of becoming, of coming into being, of self-creation, of how, in the words of the poet in Trilogy, "you beget, self-out-of-self" (9). H.D.'s career can be read as a palimpsest, as a series of texts superimposed on each other—each layer a distinct self-portrait, yet recognizable a version of all the others. The making of "H.D." was not a single act of creation. Rather, in each work H.D. reconstituted the self anew and newly through the agency of the potent word: she was "Psyche, the butterfly, out of the cocoon" each time a new text emerged in a life-long and unending process (Triology 103). No one poem, novel, or memoir contains the whole, but each repeats the process of beginning. Each explores in its own dazzling specificity the problematics of origin—perhaps most dramat-}

ally in her final poem, her self-definition as H.D.'s 'Hermetic Definition' written on the threshold of her death in 1961, but structured as a pregnancy resulting in the multiple births of a fecund desire. However, I would like today to explore the beginnings of that ever-repeating process of self-creation by returning to that early time of failure for the clues it can provide about the later flowering of her career.

It is surely one of the delightful and sobering paradoxes of literary history to celebrate H.D.'s centennial at Bryn Mawr. Not at all the point of origins for her intellectual and artistic awakenings, Bryn Mawr remained for H.D. a scene and sign of her failure. "It makes cold shivers run down by spine to hear of Bryn Mawr," H.D. wrote to Bryher in 1936 when Bryher was in Philadelphia visiting H.D.'s old college friends (15 December 1936), "It's I who fear anyone from there...Remember I was sort of throw-out." H.D. withdrew from Bryn Mawr in the middle of her sophomore year, having passed twenty-nine of her thirty credit hours. Existing transcripts at Bryn Mawr do not specify exactly what the nature of her failure was, especially because there are no grades recorded for the fall semester of her sophomore year. In her roman a clef of these years, HER, H.D. has her persona Hermione Gart fail math, specifically a test on conic sections. Elsewhere, H.D. described the math anxiety that had plagued her in elementary and high school, a blockage with numbers that deeply disappointed her mathematical father, who had hoped that his favorite child would become the new Marie Curie. In Herself Defined, Barbara Guest writes that H.D. failed English (5). According to Emily Wallace's reading of the transcripts, H.D. failed Elucion, but passed it with high scores when she retook the course.² From what H.D. wrote to Richard Aldington many years later, it seems likely that she had been deeply hurt by the response to her writing: "My essays were held up, as samples of the very worst description—and Marianne Moore crept through the years like a mouse. I don't know of anyone who emerged there" (11 December 1940's or 1950's).

Wherever the specific failure lay, H.D.'s generalized sense of failure and absent identity was overwhelming. As Hermione, nicknamed Her, says at the opening of the novel while she wanders in the woods trying to come to terms with her failure:

Her Gart went round in circles. "I am Her," she said to herself; she repeated, "Her, Her, Her." Her Gart tried to hold on to something; drowning she grasped, she caught at a smooth surface, her fingers slipped, she cried in her dementia, "I am Her, Her, Her,...She wasn't now good for anything...She was drowned now. She could no longer struggle. Clutching out toward some definition of herself, she found that "I am Her Gart" didn't let her hold on. Her fingers slipped off; she was no longer anything...She was not Gart, she was not Hermione, she was not any more Her Gart, what was she?...I am Hermione Gart, a failure." (3-3)

What H.D. really failed at was her attempt to become the "new woman." With the impact of feminism and related historical changes, the "new woman" of the twentieth century was supposed to be intellectually and sexually freer than her Victorian mother, an image of the future that became especially focused in elite women's colleges and in pockets of urban culture like Greenwich Village. It was un-
thinkable to H.D. that she would become like her mother, who like Virginia Woolf’s mother was a powerfully creative woman who devoted herself to her intellectual husband and large brood of children. But while Woolf was not encouraged to follow her brothers to Cambridge, H.D. was sent to Bryn Mawr, which held out the promise of intellectual and financial independence. H.D. could have escaped her mother’s destiny by joining the swelling ranks of women professionals, so substantial on the historical scene that women today have yet to reach those proportionate numbers in the professions. H.D.’s description to Bryher of the particular stamp President M. Carey Thomas gave to Bryn Mawr is telling: “You remember Professor Schelling’s remark of that period, ‘Miss Thomas makes English gentlemen of her girls.’ Anyone who ever got into that dive, no matter how superficially frivolous, had to have a certain all-roundness, math, pretty steep, history, of sorts, Fr[ench] and Gr[eeke], and a pretty stiff dose of Latin” (24 November 1936).

H.D. was not cut out to become an English gentleman. If she had stayed at Bryn Mawr, she wouldn’t have become “H.D.” “Well should I or not have left, become H.D.?“ she asked Bryher (24 November 1936). But while the benefit of hindsight made it “right” for her to have failed, H.D. was as ambivalent as Woolf about her exclusion from institutionalized education. Hermione laments the loss of what a degree might have meant:

Her mathematics and her biology hadn’t given her what she dreamed of. Only now she knew that failing at the end meant fresh barriers, fast chains, a mesh here. The degree almost gained would have been redemption, something she hardly realized, tutoring or something, teaching...something she had an inkling would bring her in, would have brought her in a “salary.” (12)

When Bryn Mawr invited H.D. to lecture on poetry at the college for six months in 1946, H.D. was thrilled, feeling both vindicated for her earlier failure and now accepted where she had been rejected. As she wrote to George Plank, “I am now in a dither as I have had a letter, believe it or not, from the inner sanctum of the innermost sanctuaries of Bryn Mawwrrrr, asking me, ME (N.B.) to hold conference or lecture once a week for a period of six months, beginning this here coming spring, Feb., to be exact, WITH a salary. My—my—such a swell head as I have got. I can not yet believe it and don’t know if I can, will or want to do it!” (6 November 1945). When a severe physical and mental breakdown prevented her from going to Bryn Mawr, she was deeply disappointed; the patterns of earlier failure were devastatingly reset.

If Bryn Mawr represented for H.D. a kind of masculine professionalism from which she was excluded, Vassar College signified a kind of sexual freedom that was also initially enticing. In warning Bryher of the Bryn Mawr types she would meet in 1936, H.D. told her they were “not Ed[na] Millay Vassar stuff, not sleeping round even when it was ‘done,’ I imagine” (24 November 1936). Leaving Bryn Mawr had its compensations in her attraction for and engagement to Pound. As DuPlessis has written, “H.D. seems to have used Pound as an already open door. He was so sensual, so attractive, so bohemian” (140). H.D. withdrew from Bryn Mawr in part for the enticements of being with Pound. Perhaps, she reflected to Bryher after conversations with her analyst, if she had lived on campus “with the girls” she would have finished her degree: “Apparently one of my great grievances was that I did not get sent away to a girls schools, with all the ‘semiinary’ in my UNK, and lived so near B.M. that I went in daily, always a mistake. If I had gone through WITH the girls, I would never have got ’engaged’ to Ezra in my Sophomore year and left” (24 November 1936).

However, H.D. wasn’t any more suited to the model of the sexually free modern woman than she was to the mold of the Bryn Mawr “gentleman.” For one thing, her trials with Pound were constantly interrupted by her father. More fundamentally, however, she found his eroticism suffocating,” as I will discuss later. The sexual libertinism of “sleeping round” that she associated with Vassar and Millay was even more repugnant to her. Her failure to forge a new identity in Greenwich Village was probably related to her distaste of the new “free love”; “I have unpleasant experience of sordid conditions of Patchin Place; the Dollar brothers (Dolland?),” she noted cryptically in her Autobiographical Notes (1). H.D. returned home to occupy her time with leading tours of schoolchildren at her father’s Flower Observatory. Perhaps she was too inhibited to chart the sexual pathways of an Edna St. Vincent Millay or a Mina Loy. Or perhaps she sensed intuitively that sexual liberation without fundamental transformations of heterosexual relations becomes a new form of entrapment for women.

Although H.D. failed at making herself the professional “new woman” or the celebrant of “free love,” she was determined to be “modern,” “different” from her mother’s generation and the younger women who could not break free. It wasn’t till much later that she was able to see her early failures to step into more established pathways of difference as “perhaps some subtle form of courage,” as a “failure to conform to expectations” that would ultimately lead to genuine breakthroughs (HER 4). Buried in her failures were the seeds of future self-creations. Her refusal to conform was in part a denial of the traditional separations between intellect and desire, between mind and body, between language and being. The underlying project beneath a lifetime of her self-creations was to explore the connections between words and desire as the foundation of identity.

Throughout this period, her writing was probably her lifeline to difference. William Carlos Williams, whom she met before she went to Bryn Mawr, recalled her telling him that she liked to splash ink all over her dress before she began to write—to herself a sense of freedom (Williams 69). Perhaps as early as 1907 or 1908, she began placing stories in religious newspapers. By 1910, she had probably shown Pound drafts of poems, for Hermoine watches him read what she has written: “Pages fluttered in the hands of George Loynes. His hands fluttered white pages. What George holds in his hands is my life’s beginning” (148). “Who helped you do this thing, Hermoine?” he asked. “Well I’m ballyho damed if I’m going to help you with your bally writing,” he sputtered (148). These pages may well have been the “few lyrics for music, and Heine” that H.D. referred to in Autobiographical Notes, or they may have been “my first poems to Frances, modelled on Theocritus translation that E[fra] brought me” (1). George, at any rate, says “It’s like—like—Theocritus. . . . Not Titurus tu titulae . . . It’s like the
choriambics of a forgotten Melic’’ (149). Not, in other words, like Theocritus’ third Idyll in which the songs of the shepherds Tityrus are scorned by his beloved Amphilillis; more like the fragments of a forgotten lyric. Like Sappho’s?

Words are the building blocks of identity. To write is to master the potency of the magic word to bring things into being—to create an identity whose tangibility is textual, that is, it lies paradoxically in the intangibility of words. “Names are in people, people are in names,” Hermoine thinks, anticipating later structuralist and post-structuralist constructions of language and identity (HER 5). H.D.’s life-long preoccupation with names—signatures, signs, pseudonyms, nom de plume, nom de guerre, nom de paix—signifies her self-conscious play on the relationship between language and the self, on the inseparable entanglement of the two.3 But words, for H.D., were also entangled with the enigmas and problematicalss of desire. “Love doesn’t make good art, Hermoine,” George pronounces to Hermoine. But she thinks, “Writing. Love is writing” (149). Inscriptions of the self are rooted in the questions of desire. This returns us to the question of origins, to the making of “H.D.” out of the two most important failures in her life between 1906 and 1911: the related collapses of her erotic relationships with Pound and Frances Gregg. The story of origins she tells in End to Torment scarcely addresses the connection between these relationships and her emergence as a writer:

“But Dryad,” (in the Museum tea room), “this is poetry.” He slashed with a pencil. “Cut this out, shorten this line. ‘Hermes of the Ways’ is a good title. I’ll send this to Harriet Monroe of Poetry. Have you a copy? Yes? Then we can send this, or I’ll type it when I get back. Will this do?” and he scrawled “H.D. Imagiste” at the bottom of the page. (18)

As he was to do for Eliot, Pound cut and shaped her lines. He transformed her mocking last name—Do-little—into what she was later to call a ‘royal signature’ (Tribute to Freud 69). With the signature “Imagiste,” he named her a serious poet with a poetics. By serving as her conduit to the world of publishing, Pound gave her a public identity, for which she was always grateful, as she wrote in her memoir: “The strange thing is that Ezra was so inexpressibly kind to anyone who he felt had the faintest spark of submerged talent.” (End 10). DuPlessis has already explored how a sub-text of ambivalence towards Pound pervades this story of her beginnings, this tribute to Pound’s significance that tries as well to explain why, as she writes, “Ezra would have destroyed me and the center they call ‘Air and Crystal’ of my poetry” if they had married (End 35).4

However, a more directly revealing story of origins exists in the hidden and forbidden narratives of HER, one that points to the overlapping erotic and poetic triangle in the complicated relationship of H.D., Pound, and Gregg. In the tea room of the British Museum, after all, H.D. showed Pound “poetry”: “But Dryad, this is poetry.” The making of “H.D.” preceeds the naming of “H.D.” I would like to build on DuPlessis’ analysis of the erotic dyad in End to Torment—Pound and H.D.—by examining the erotic triad in HER. We know from sources outside the novel that while H.D. and Pound were the official “couple,” H.D. and Gregg loved each other, which made Pound jealous. It could not have helped that the first of H.D.’s poems that “satisfy” her were written “for Frances,” modelled on the idylls of Theocritus Pound had brought her. Pound’s subsequent liaison with Gregg completes the erotic triangle, deeply hurting H.D. with a sense of double betrayal. As Gregg wrote in her diary: “Two girls in love with each other, and each in love with the same man. Hilda, Ezra, Frances” (Guest 26). Inseparable from the erotic triangle was the poetic one. Pound was the official “poet” of the group, but both H.D. and Gregg were writing and to some extent competing for his approval. As H.D. recalled in Autobiographical Notes, “Ezra [had hurt me, the previous autumn of 1911], by picking on some rather Celtic conventional poems of Frances and ignoring mine” (2). Pound, it seems, attempted to launch Gregg’s career before H.D.’s. He continued to help place her poems in little magazines such as Poetry throughout the teens.

Completed in 1927, HER helps us untangle the story of origins hidden in the triangular relationships of these poet-lovers. H.D.’s choice of genre is significant. A roman a clef is a genre of disguise, often associated in the eighteenth century with exposure of literary and sexual scandal for the initiate. Perhaps because the code was too easy to break in this novel, H.D. made no move to make this story of her origins public in her lifetime, the reasons for which DuPlessis and I have explored at length elsewhere.5 Suppressing the text allowed H.D. to reveal a “scandalous” lesbian narrative, one in which lesbian love ultimately replaces heterosexuality as a form of desire compatible with women’s creativity. H.D. condensed the events of her life from 1906 to 1911 into the nine-month gestation of Hermoine. At the beginning of the novel, Hermoine is only a nascent writer, to whom it had scarcely occurred “to try to put the thing in writing” (13). By the end of the novel, her body itself has become the artist’s pen, walking across the virginal text of fresh snow: “Her feet were pencils tracing a path through a forest... It was virginal for one purpose, for one Creator. Last summer the Creator had been white lightning brandished against blackness. Now the creator was Her feet, narrow black crayon across the winter whiteness” (223). This transformation is made possible by the narratives of desire as they intersect with the development of the artist. Hermoine’s engagement to George becomes a gradual disengagement as she realizes her entrapment as a muse for his text, an object for her sexual desire. Love for the fey Fayme, the unconventional “sister” and twin-soul for whom she has always longed, frees her to become the poet instead of the poet’s muse. In HER, the scene of self-creation is not the British Museum, but the forbidden landscapes of desire in which H.D. deconstructs the conventions of the muse and reconstitutes the self within the concentric circles of female intimacy.

Superimposed on this scandalous narrative of origins is another level of disguise, a specifically textual disguise. The “keys” we need to unlock the roman a clef are not simply the correct cast of characters, but additionally a cast of pre-existing poems—namely, Pound’s early poems written for and about her and her own early Imagist poems, launched in the public world of letters so brilliantly by his efforts. H.D. writes these poems into a kind of poetic “meta-text” in which the “"keys"” are purely textual. As Hermoine repeatedly thinks, “Names are in people, people are in names.” People are in texts, texts are in people, we might add.6 HER spins poetic webs of words of textual entrapment—first,
H.D.'s sense of having been caught in Pound's poems about her, as if she existed only as the product of his creative pen; second, her sense of being caged within her own Imagist texts, the very poems that made her reputation, as if she existed only in the identity of the sign "H.D." The meta-narrative of the novel recasts these poems to break their hold over her. By re-situating these poems in the narrative context of the women's Kunstlerroman, H.D. transforms linguistic entrapment into a process of liberation, self-creation—a new legend of origins. "Words are my plague and my redemption," Hermione realizes (67). Having been caught in the fixity of these early poems, H.D. re-places these poetic words into a fictional context in order to speak herself into a new, fluid existence. The identity created in the poetic fictions of the text is one in which erotics and poetics are not mutually exclusive: "Writing. Love is writing" (149).

Pound's early poems about H.D. appear in the novel in code, decipherable only to initiates familiar with the poems he hand-bound for her as part of their early courtship, recently published by Michael King as "Hilda's Book" along with End to Torment. In these poems, Pound adapted both the pastoral idylls of Theocritus and the Troubadour conventions of medieval Provence to sing songs of love to the Lady who inspired him. The setting is the woodlands, meadows, and streams of the pasture, the world of "nature" imaginatively reconstituted as temporally outside culture. As in the poetic tradition of the muse, Pound's Lady says not a word, but rather stands impassive and elusive as the gentle winds of poetic imagination circulate about her and through the poems. The scene of desire is the male poet's text; his gaze and speech fix her as his creation—like Pygmalion and his statue Galataea. In HER, H.D. appropriates lines and images from these poems, deconstructs these words as sources of her own objectification, and reconstitutes them as expressions of a forbidden female identity as speaking subject—

not the object of desire, but desirous; not a cultural product in man's text, but a cultural producer through the agency of the poetic word. In short, Pound's love poems for her are transposed into her own love poems for Gregg.

One of Pound's names for H.D. was "Dryad," after the tree nymphs of both Greek and Druidic resonance. Their trysts in the fruit trees of her yard, their walks in the nearby forests, her animistic identification with the natural world, and her unusual height—nearly six feet—probably all contributed to his choice of a name, which was partly mystic, partly mock-heroic. A number of early poems in Hilda's Book and Lustra play on his association of H.D. with tree-spirits. In "Domina," for example, the poet's worship of his Lady is the wind that blows about the tree. Like both muses and trees, she inspires without a voice of her own:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Lady is tall and fair to see</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>She swayeth as a poplar tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the wind bloweth merrily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her eyes are grey as the grey of the sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not clouded much to trouble me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the wind bloweth merrily</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

... Her lips part, tho no words come When the wind bloweth merrily (Hilda's Book 73-74)

In "Rendez-vous," the Dryad's dreams inspire the songs of the poet, while she herself still maintains the "dumb semblance" of a tree:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>She hath some tree-born spirit of the wood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About her, and the wind is in her hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The moss-grown kindly trees, meseems, she could</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As kindred claim, for tho to some they wear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A harsh dumb semblance, unto us that care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They guard a marvelous sweet brotherhood ... (Hilda's Book 84)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the only poem in Hilda's Book in which the Lady herself speaks, she presents herself as a tree, ominously like the tree Daphne became in order to escape Apollo's assault:

I stood still and was a tree amid the wood Knowing the truth of things unseen before Of Daphne and the laurel bow... 

Nathless I have been a tree amid the wood And many things understood That were felly to my head before. (Hilda's Book 81)

Pound's tree-lady appears as a poet only within a satiric context, in which her questions about her poems sound falsely like the frenzied cries of the maenads. In the sexual economy of his own poems, his yearning for the silent Dryad led to a poem, but in "Tempora," the Dryad's cries are the butt of his humor:

Io! Io! Tamuz: 
the Dryad stands in my court-yard 
With plaintive, querulous crying. (Tamuz. Io! Tamuz!) 
Oh, no, she is not crying: "Tamuz." She says, "May my poems be printed this week?" 
The god Pan is afraid to ask you, 
May my poems be printed this week?" (Lustra 110)

In HER, H.D. makes this identification of herself with a tree into a central and evolving motif, one that is frankly somewhat bizarre unless the intertextual reference is known. When Hermione first reaches out to George as a possible solution to her sense of failure, H.D. directly echoes Pound's poems: "She wanted George to define and to make definable a mirage, a reflection of some lost incarna-
tion, a wood maniac, a tree demon, a neuropathic dendrophil” (63). But as she discovers that George’s definitions of her are a trap, the trees become a kind of prison: “Trees swung and fell and rose. Trees barricaded her into herself, Her into Her. . . . Her was received into trees that swung and billowed and swung” (64). On one level, the trees are the woods in which they walk; but on the meta-level, the trees are the imprisoning words of Pound’s poems in which he has worshipfully named her “Tree” or “Dryad,” his silent muse. When George’s approach becomes openly sexual, Pound’s poem “Tree,” with its subtle suggestion of Apollo’s assault on Daphne, is recast into H.D.’s narrative: “George turned facing Her, rubbed cheek against a tree trunk. ‘Don’t talk,’ he now said, ‘don’t talk.’ . . . She now braced herself decisively against her own tree. She rubbed her shoulder blades against that small tree. Small hard tree trunk . . . swayed a little, upright swaying little tree swayed. She was stronger than the upright little tree” (68). The refrain of Pound’s “Domina” resonates through H.D.’s text: “She swayed in a poplar tree.” But in HER the narrative context makes the poem ominous. The gentle moss of his poem “Rendez-vous” becomes in H.D.’s text an image of suffocation: “Kisses forced her into soft moss. Her head lay marble weight in cushion of forest moss. Kisses obliterated trees” (73).

Pound’s words are literally—literarily—H.D.’s “plague.” Her own words, rescripting his text, are her “redemption.” Trapped as a “tree” in Pound’s text, she trysts herself by reclaiming “treeless” for herself in her own text. Ultimately Hermione’s identification with trees represents her creation of an inner core of identity, as impervious to Pound’s words as Daphne was to Apollo: “Tree on tree on tree. TREE. I am the Tree of Life. Tree. I am a tree planted by the river of water. I am...I am...HER exactly....I am in the word TREE. I am TREE” (70, 73). George, she comes to see, “doesn’t know what trees are” (84). By the end of the novel, Hermione thinks: “I am Tree exactly. George never would love a tree, she had known from the beginning. . . . I knew George could never love a tree properly” (197). H.D., in other words, uses a disguised meta-narrative to encode her entrapment in male texts as the object of desire and to write herself out of those texts as a speaking subject.

Displacing the speaking subject from male to female also changes the significance of naming, the power of language. As the object of the poet’s speech, woman is trapped in the word, just as she is fixed by man’s gaze. But displacing the speaking subject from male to female can change woman’s relationship to language. It can also change the scene of desire. This transformation underlies the complicated name-play in the novel based in the disruptions of syntax surrounding Hermione’s nickname “Her.” Like H.D., Hermione is the daughter of Helen. H.D.’s choice of a name for her persona has an important maternal resonance based in Greek mythology as well as in Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale. But the awkward nickname “Her” is an intertextual play on Pound’s poem “Shadow.” In this poem, the poet flirts with deserting his Lady for the attractions of a golden-haired woman, but each time his thoughts wander, he is recalled to his true love by the recollection of “HER.” Without “HER,” he is in darkness, stifled:

“Where,” he had asked in the poem immediately precedeing, “have I seen the eyes of my desire bear/Hearts crimson unto my heart’s heart?” (75).

In HER, H.D. picks up on Pound’s repetition and capitalization of “HER” to establish the same pattern to textual entrapment and liberation evident in the evolution of the tree motif. In the novel, Hermione is literally the “HER” of Pound’s text. The opening lines of the novel suggest this intertextual reference and her related distress: “Her Gart went round in circles. ‘I am Her,’ she said to herself; she repeated, ‘Her, Her, Her’” (3). Hermione is the “HER” of Pound’s poem, an object in his text and of his gaze. The disturbing disruption of grammar ostensibly justified by Hermione’s nickname points to her object status. “I am Her” is correct from the standpoint of naming, but incorrect in relationship to pronouns. Hermione should say: “I am she.” This ambiguity emphasizes that linguistic objectification embodies a corresponding cultural objectification of which Hermione gradually becomes aware: “There was that about George, he wanted to incarnate Her, knew enough to know that this was not Her. There was just a chance that George might manage to draw her out half-drowned, a coal scuttle, or push HER back, drowned, a goddess” (64). “Suffocating” and “smudged out” by his desire, she later realizes that “He wanted Her, but he wanted a her that he called decorative. George wanted a Her out of the volumes on the floor” (73, 83, 172). “You are a poem, though your poem’s nught,” George tells her; “Your melic choros aren’t half so bad as simply rather rotten” (212, 167). As George’s Lady, she is his text. HER is text, that is, a word without its own voice, the object of its male speaker.

Having deconstructed Pound’s “I saw HER,” H.D. reconstructs Hermione’s identity through a forbidden love of doubled “Hers,” which changes the scene of desire from heterosexual to lesbian. When Hermione tells George that she can
never marry him, she says: “Anyhow I love—I love Her, only Her, Her, Her” (170). “Her” is simultaneously Hermione and Fayne, the two women who sit mutually gazing into each other’s eyes: “Eyes met eyes and the storm heid, storm of ice, some storm in an ice crater” (161). This narcissistic love transforms the object status of “I am Her, Her, Her” in the opening lines of the novel into an image of birth: “I know her, I know her, Her. I am Her. She is Her. Knowing her, I know Her. She is some amplification of myself like amoeba giving birth, by breaking off, to amoeba” (158). This birth of twin-selves is expressed in the radical alteration of syntax, when the object “her” appears in both subject and object position as Hermione watches the sleeping Fayne: “I will not have her hurt. I will not have Her hurt. She is Her. I am Her. She is Her. Fayne is Her. I will not let them hurt Her. . . . Her is asleep. Her must stay there sleeping” (181-82).7

To emphasize the transposition of desirous gazes from heterosexual to lesbian desire, H.D. recapitulates Pound’s poem “Sancta Patrona Domina Caeciae.” He wrote of her:

Out of thy purity
Saint Hilda pray for me.
Lay on my forehead
The hands of thy blessing.
Saint Hilda pray for me
Lay on my forehead
Cool hands of thy blessing.
Out of thy purity
Lay on my forehead
White hands of thy blessing.

*Virgo caelicola*
*Ora pro nobis. (Hilda’s Book 83-84)*

In the novel, Hermione lays cool white hands not on George’s forehead, but on Fayne’s. “Your hands are healing,” Fayne tells Hermione. “They have dynamic white power….Your hands are white stars. Your hands are snowdrops” (180). Hilda’s virginal innocence in Pound’s poem becomes the “indecent” innocence of lesbian love in HER. “Isn’t Swinburne decadent?” Fayne asks Hermione. “In what sense exactly decadent, Fayne?” “O innocence, holy and untouched and most immoral. Innocence like thine is totally indecent.” (164). In the reversals that characterize the novel, what is conventionally moral—such as her engagement to George—becomes immoral. What is conventionally indecent—such as lesbian love—becomes the sacred center of innocence. The poems of Swinburne that Pound brought to H.D. in their courtship become in the novel the code for the lesbian love through which Hermione creates both her self and her sense of artistic vocation.8

The novel’s transposition of the erotic from heterosexual passion to lesbian love is connected with Hermione’s development as an artist. Hermione shows her poems to Fayne, as she did to George. Instead of his scorn, based partially in jealousy, Fayne tells Her that she is not threatened by her writing: “Your writing is the thin flute holding you to eternity. Take away your flute and you remain, lost in a world of unreality” (162). Even though the love between Fayne and Hermione is broken across by deceptions, the image of the love which created a matrix of desire and creativity remains to inspire Her in the final pages of the novel. Walking across the white snow, with her body as the poet’s pen, Hermione repeats Fayne’s name: “When she said Fayne a white hand took Her. Her was held like a star invisible in daylight that suddenly by some shift adjustment of phosphorescent values comes quite clear. Her saw Her as a star shining white against winter daylight” (225). Hermione has found her muse and like the ruler Pheidippides, she will “run, run, run” with her “message” (220).

The birth of Hermione’s identity, desire, and poetic calling in HER rewrites Pound’s own poem about the origins of the poet H.D. Cyrena Pondrom has suggested that Pound’s poem “Ortus” might describe not only the creation of a poem, but more specifically his transformation of Hilda Doolittle into “H.D. Imagiste.” As Pondrom notes, Pound originally published “Ortus” in April of 1913, in the same issue of *Poetry* in which he and Flint laid out Imagism’s doctrine for the first time and just one issue after H.D.’s first three Imagist poems had appeared. In both readings of “Ortus,” the text is female, while the creator is male. The labor reproduces the creation of the universe by the potent Word. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” the gospel of John reads. The linguistic authority of the poet to name a thing into existence resonates with a corresponding religious and sexual authority as well:

*How have I laboured?*
*How have I not laboured*
*To bring her soul to birth,*
*To give these elements a name and a centre!*
*She is beautiful as the sunlight, and as fluid,*
*She has no name, and no place.*

*How have I laboured to bring her soul into separation;*
*To give her a name and her being!*

*Surely you are bound and entwined,*
*You are mingled with the elements unborn;*
*I have loved a stream and a shadow,*
*I beseech you enter your life,*
*I beseech you learn to say “I,”*
*When I question you;*
*For you are no part, but a whole,*
*No portion, but a being. (Lustra 84)*

For H.D., the poem may have represented the problematic nature of the artistic, sexual, and religious authority Pound and later men repeatedly assumed in relationships to her. The significance of words and naming in HER can be read as H.D.’s rewrite of Pound’s poem celebrating his role in the origins of her identity. The butterfly and birth imagery pervasive throughout HER may well be an intertextual
echo of the birth of imagery of “Ortus.” Just as likely, the refrain in the novel about identity—names, places, and things—may answer Pound’s lament: “she had no name, and no place.” Hermoine variously thinks: “Names are in people, people are in names” (5); “she could put no name to the things she apprehended” (13); “Things make people, people make things” (25); “People are in things, things were in people. Names were in things, things were in names” (74); “I don’t know what her name is...she was nameless” (81); “I am Hermoine Lowndes...it wasn’t right. People are in things, things are in people” (131); “Things are in people, people are in things” (134); “People are in things.” Things are in people and people should think before they call a place Sylvia” (198). HER is all about how Hermoine finds her own center, place, and name. But the agent of creation is not the potent male poet who brings her into existence. Instead, her self-creation emerges out of her disengagement from George and engagement with Fayne. This redefinition of the role of desire in the making of identity co-exists with Hermoine’s reclamation of the word, the power to name which she appropriates in acts of self-conscious blasphemy: “God is in a word. God is in HER. She said, ‘HER, HER, HER, HER, I am HER...I am the word...the word with God...I am the word...HER’” (32). Through opposition to George rather than obedience to his command, Hermoine transforms her very body into the poet’s pen; she writes herself into the role of Creator as she walks across the virginal text of snow at the end of the novel.

As a modernist, however, H.D. was, in the words of Norman Holmes Pearson, “never after the permanent poem but rather the acts of the imagination, the process of ‘imagination, the constancy of search’” (446). If HER is about the making of H.D., it is also about the unmaking of H.D. She not only recasts Pound’s poems about her to break their power to name her identity, but she also scripts her own early Imagist poems into the narrative of HER to write herself out of an identity that had become too confining. The questions of origins had to be reposed and re-solved endlessly. The meta-narrative of textual entrapment and liberation in HER also tells the story of H.D. in 1927. As I have written elsewhere, H.D. had come to feel by the twenties that her identity as the “perfect Imagist” in which Pound had played such an important role was a new kind of cage that held her prisoner. To grow as a writer, she had to move beyond the perfect, crystalline gems for which she was famous. Specifically, she needed to develop a narrative discourse that could explore the experience of the self-in-the-world, the traditional subject of the novel and one she had eschewed in creating the lyric voice of “H.D. Imagiste.” As she later wrote to Norman Holmes Pearson about the novels she wrote as HER, “I have written them as HD” (31 July 1948). The “early H.D.” was “not narrative,” she reflected in Notes on Recent Writing (38). Anticipating Eliot’s ideal of the “impersonal poet,” the early imagist “H.D.” was a disembodied figure, taken out of time, out of history, out of gender. The anguish of a poem like “Mid-day,” the prostration and ambivalence of “Orchard” were all un-doubtably emotions anchored in an historical self, in events with a place, time, and circumstance (Collected Poems 10, 21, 28). But H.D.’s presentations of these emotions in the imagist lyric deliberately removed them from any historical reference. Time, place, and speaker are either indeterminate or mythic, demonstrating the ahistorical nature of the pure lyric as Sharon Cameron has defined it (23, 56-57, 70-71). In part, H.D.’s impersonal lyric supremely reflected and defined the early modernist aesthetic. But it also represents her initial strategy for escaping the constriction of conventional femininity and the expectations her readers might have brought to a reading of verses from a “poetess.” The poems themselves deeply encode issues of sexuality and gender. But their impersonalism projects a self that has transcended the particularities of the historical moment.

The Great War shattered the impersonal self of the “early H.D.” precisely because the lyric discourse was unsuitable for exploring the impact of history. During the war, H.D. began to write autobiographical narratives as a way of gaining mastery over a series of traumatic events in which historical disasters were woven into the personal threads of her own life. Prose became the medium in which she could attempt to “get rid of the experience by writing about it,” as she wrote in Tribute to Freud (40). To create a new voice to deal with the self-in-history, H.D. created a series of pseudonyms, all of which she carefully distinguished from “H.D.”—such as Helga Dart, who wrote Paint It Today and Ashes and Helga Dorn, who wrote HER. Names are in people, people are in names. Her different prose names signify different identities, each of which represented an escape from “H.D. Imagiste.” As she wrote to Richard Johns, the editor of Pagany about her prose sketch “Mouse Island,” “It is rather important to me that the HD & the Rhoda Peter are not confused as I find it increasingly difficult to remain MYSELF when writing; the two manners and personalities are quite distinct. However, as I am anxious NOT to have Rhoda Peter incriminated with HD, will you please if you want this...Keep Rhoda apart from HD” (14 March 1932).

Johns complied with her request, but other publishers were reluctant to give up the well-known name of H.D. Even more disturbing to her, the reviewers lamented the narrative direction of her myth poems of the twenties and particularly attacked her prose—so much so that she wrote to her friend Viola Jordon about Pulversi (1926): “I am bringing out a volume of prose, semi-private in Paris. No one really much likes my prose but I can’t be held up by what the critics think H.D. ought to be like...I have a purple sex story (though highly spiritualized) about a Greek girl in Rome which I like but people don’t think ‘worthy’ quite of H.D. I say WHO is H.D.? They all think they know more about what and why she should or should not or do or don’t!” (29 March 1927).

The meta-narrative of HER, which she was already writing at the time of her explosion to Jordon, presents a disguised fictional account of her confinement in 1927 as “H.D. Imagiste.” Many of her most famous poems previously appear in the novel recast into Hermoine’s troubled and trapped stream of consciousness. This intertextual resonance in turn suggests that we re-read the early poems in the light of their prose context. “Oread,” for example, reappears in Hermoine’s confused search for identity as she wanders in the “primeval” forest of pine and tulip near her home. “Whirl up, sea—/whirl your pointed pines.../hurl your green over us,/ cover us with your pools of fire,” the wood-nymph cried in “Oread” (Collected Poems 55). The fusion of opposites in the image of tree-waves signals a dualism transcended through the agency of the poetic word. In HER, the opposites of land
and sea, pine trees and pools reappear, but only to reflect back an empty identity: "Her Gart looked up into liriodendron branches and flat tree leaf came, to her, lily pad on green pool. She was drowned now... Her eyes peered up into the branches...[She tried to concentrate on one frayed disc of green pool, pool or mirror shape recalls the class in conic sections she has just failed, she thinks: "Another country called her, the only thing that would heal, that would blot out the concentration gelatious substance that was her perception of trees grown closer, grown near and near, grown translucent like celluloid. The circles of the trees were tree-green; she wanted the inner lining of an Atlantic breaker" (6-7).

At first, seeing the sea-breakers in George's gray eyes, Hermione thinks that these "poors" will reflect back an identity for her. As she tests out their relationship, land and sea, pines and pools begin to fuse, as they earlier did in "Oread." Walking in the forest with him, she "sees" his hair as watery leaves, much like the Oread tree: "It's under water" she wanted to say; "it's under deep sea water," she didn't say. Her eyes half-closing saw George got "tawny, leafless" trees (65). The erotic undertones of the imagery in HER help support a reading of "Oread" as a poem fundamentally about sexual passion.

However, as the images of their eroticism continue, the union of land and sea shades into images of stagnation: "Heat seeped up, swept down, swirled about them, with the green of branches that was torrid tropic water. Green torrid tropic water where no snow fell, where no hint of cold running streams from high mountains swept down, was swept into and under branches that made curious circle and half circle and whole circle...concentric circle of trees above her head" (70). Her allusions to H.D.'s poem "Garden," part of which was frequently anthologized as the heat/cut apart the heat,--Fruit cannot drop/through this thick air--" (Collected Poems 25). In the novel, the oppressively hot summer weather becomes an objective correlate for the heterosexual passion that stiffles and suffocates. "He must have been hot, wanted her because it was hot. It was hot," Hermione thinks (43). As George chases her through the woods, she focuses on the heat and her odd tawny leaf gone (in small rings) hot on his damp forehead" (65). Later, larches making a circle where moss spread in a circle for Hermione to lie on. Hermione tried to visualize moss under her hot flanks. It was too hot (85). In the poem, the heat thickens the fruit, rounds the grape—encoded allusions to opening sexuality that lead to the poem's conclusion: "Cut the heat—/plough through it, turning it on either side/of your path." Even without HER as intertextual referent, H.D.'s play on the cliche for sexual intercourse (man ploughing earth) is clear. But the ambivalence Hermione feels the "heat" in HER clarifies even further how much her early poetry embodied questions of sexuality and gender.

Giving the images of her lyric poems a narrative context breaks their hold over by setting the poems in prose, in a fiction that tells the story of the female self in the world. "Hermes of the Ways," "Sea-Rose," "Sea-Iris," "The Pool," "Storm," "Moonrise," "Epigram," "Sheltered Garden," "Pear Tree," "Orion Dead," "Pygmalion," "Helen," "Huntress" and "White World" also reappear in the novel's imagery. As a poem celebrating the revel of the hunt in Artemis' band of free women, "Huntress" is a particularly important poem in HER, pointing as it does to "another country" outside heterosexual convention. "Can you come/can you come/can you follow the hound trail/ can you trample the hot flanks," the poet asks in the double entendres of "Huntress" (Collected Poems 24). In HER, Hermione yearns for that "great hound" of Artemis and a mountain "sister" who "would run, would leap, would be concealed under the autumn sumac or lie shaken with hail and wind, lost on some Lacedaemonian foothill" (10). She finds this Spartan "sister" in Fayne. "You might have been a huntress," Hermione tells Fayne just before they kiss (163). The images of circles, pine trees, and water negatively associated with her relationship with George reappear with Fayne in a fully positive context: "Her Gart saw rings and circles, the rings and circle that were the eyes of Fayne Rabb. Rings and circles made concentric curve toward a ceiling that was, as it were, the bottom of a deep pool. Her and Fayne Rabb were flung into a concentric intimacy, rings on rings that made a geometric circle toward a ceiling, that curved over them like ripples on a pond surface" (164). The pools of fr in "Oread" cover the Oread in calm after the orgastic climax of the crashing wave. Similarly, the pools in HER follow the passion of their kiss. "He said you and I ought to be burnt for witchcraft," Hermione tells Fayne (165). This witchery, this taboo sexuality, reverses the conventional sacred and profane. Cold is hot; evil is good; indecency is innocence. Altering the scene of desire from heterosexual to lesbian not only releases Her from her engagement with George in which she was his decorative object, but it also represents H.D.'s effort to free herself from the Imagist cage which Pound had helped her build.

As a doubly disguised narrative, HER embodies the entanglement of textuality and sexuality, confinement and delivery, concealment and revelation, poetic and fictional discourses. H.D.'s recounting of Pound's and her own early poems into the narrative of the novel explores another dimension of self-creation—the interplay between language and identity, particularly between poetic words and narrative process. "Names are in people, people are in names": identity is a construct of language, language has its reference in real people. Desire is the wellspring of both. H.D.'s textual explorations of origins attempt to confront what Woolf said she could not yet do: "telling the truth about my own experiences as a body" (62). Women writers, Woolf said in "Professions for Women," are like the young girl who fishes in the streams of the unconscious, only to come up against some thoughts she did not dare to express: "she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more" (61-62). H.D. did fish at those streams. Many of her poems and novels return in variously coded forms to the questions of her origins in the matrices of desire and language. Sometimes, the price of speech was silence. The most scandalous of her romans a clef she did not
publish. Sometimes, the conditions of speech intensified the modernist fascination for allusive and elusive codes of poetic indirection. As a layer in the palimpsest of origins, each of H.D.'s works in her long career is its own unique arrangement—composition, construction, patterning—of the elements of the creative self. No one text is the Ur text of origins—how Hilda Doolittle became "H." She made and remade herself. Like Helen in Helen in Egypt, H.D. knew that "she herself is the writing" (22).

Yet, there is continuity in these myths of origin, these layers of the palimpsest. I will close by quoting once again from DuPlessis, who has, I think, captured a central aspect of that underlying continuity: "She refused to be muse, refused to be poetess...She feared being poetess...and at the same time, locked in conflict, feared the exile demanded of the woman poet...She knew the degree to which she was impeded. She knew the battle. It was her career" (146-48).

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Notes

1The epigraphs come from H.D., HER, published under the title HERmione by New Directions, 1981 (148) and DuPlessis, "Family, Sexes, Psyche" (145). I would like to thank Perdita Schaffner, H.D.'s literary executor, David Schoonover, Curator at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, and the Morris Library at Southern Illinois University for permission to quote from H.D.'s papers. Additionally, I owe a great and indebted debt to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, especially for her part in our collaborative essays on H.D.
2For discussions of tension between H.D. and her father, Professor Charles Doolittle, about math, see H.D., Hirslanden Notebooks, II, 26-27; H.D., Magic Mirror, 49; H.D. at Bryn Mawr, see Emily Wallace in this issue.
3See Friedman, "Theories of Autorobiography."
4See also Robinson, Smith, and Gilbert and Gubar.
5See Friedman and DuPlessis, "I Had Two Loves Separate"; DuPlessis and Friedman, "Woman Is Perfect."
6HER is rich in other intertextual allusions to such authors, works or traditions as Shakespeare's As You Like It and The Winter's Tale; Swinburne's lesbian poem "Ilyus"; Longfellow's Hiawatha; Hans Christian Anderson, "The Little Mermaid"; and Hoffman's opera Undine.
7For extended discussion of the connection between H.D.'s lesbian imagery and her revision of Freud's theory of narcissism, see Friedman and DuPlessis, "I Had Two Loves Separate.
8Another important narrative transposition in HER is H.D.'s transformation of seeing Iphigenia in Tauris. In HER, Heloëne is entranced with Faye, dressed in a boy's tunic, playing the part of Pygmalion.
9Cyrena Pondrom, conversations with the author. See Pondrom for a groundbreaking discussion of H.D.'s influence on Pound's Imagist in 1912, before he wrote "In the Station of the Metro."
10See Friedman, Psyche, 143, and "Theories of Autorobiography."

Works Cited


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Stura, in Pound, Personae, 81-126.


