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Re-Membering the Mother: a Reading of H.D.’s Trilogy

Shortly before her death in 1925, Amy Lowell began a monologue about the melancholy situation of women poets with these lines:¹

Taking us by and large, we’re a queer lot
We women who write poetry. And when you think
How few of us there’ve been, it’s queerer still.
I wonder what it is that makes us do it,
Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,
The fragments of ourselves. Why are we
Already mother-creatures, double bearing,
With matrices in body and in brain?

Although the question is left hanging in the air, the suggestion is that the women poet ought ideally to be a double-mother “with matrices in body and in brain.” But if the challenge or the circumstances of patriarchy prove too daunting, can she be a mother in brain, if not in body? Can her poems become the parthenogenetic offspring of her “man-wise” powers which proclaim her at once mother and daughter and virgin? H.D.’s Trilogy offers an instance of such a parthenogenesis remarkable in the history of women’s poetry.

H.D.’s prematurely titled Collected Poems (1925) summed up her Imagist phase, in which Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, and D.H. Lawrence were powerful but threatening presences. Red Roses for Bronze (1931) gathered together the poems of the previous six years, but showed the poet in an agitated and uncertain state about herself and her work. Then no volumes of poems until The Walls Do Not Fall (1944), followed by Tribute to the Angels (1945) and The Flowering of the Rod (1946), the first written in 1942 and the other two in separate fortinights in May and December of 1944. The sequences were closely related to one another, but were first published together as Trilogy only posthumously in 1973.² Nonetheless, Trilogy marks the opening of the late, great phase of H.D.’s poetry and must be ranked

with Four Quartets and The Pisan Cantos as the major poems in English to come out of the war.

There had been less writing during the thirties than in previous and subsequent decades; the war-clouds that hung over H.D.’s sessions with Freud broke, as feared, and drove her and Freud separately to London for shelter. Freud died—fortunately, H.D. came to feel—before the blitz which at times rained daily terror but which she refused to escape through asylum in America. As with the First War, when she refused Aldington’s suggestion that she return to her family in Pennsylvania, she resolved to stick it out. The political upheaval of the twentieth century had again put her sense of self and cosmos to the incendiary test, and she knew instinctively that she had somehow to meet the test.

Robert Duncan charted H.D.’s development from her early Greek Imagism as a deepening engagement with the metaphysics of the Image, which connected the riddle of the psyche with the mystery of the universe:

...H.D. had come to be concerned...with finding out the gods in levels of many meanings, as personae of states of mind, but also as guides in reading the message of the universe. Here, the Image is also a Sign...Image and Fact are now Logos, revelations that we must receive. The Universe is a book of what we are and asks us to put it all together, to learn to read.

Early on “the Image was the nexus of the individual consciousness and the Presence,” and “the sense (awareness as feeling) of Presence was all.” But “now [in the forties] H.D. must search out the sense anew in the meaning sense has of import (awareness as knowledge of meaning); she must read the message the Presence presents.”³

H.D. saw the mystery cults which interpreted that message running from Greece to Provence, as Pound did, and then from “a branch of the dispersed or ‘lost’ church of Provence, the Church of Love that we touch on in By Avon River”⁴ to the Moravian Brotherhood which established her hometown of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. When in old age she revisited her mother’s family’s church, where as a girl she had attended the love feasts, she certified her continuing identification by signing the register “Baptized Moravian.”⁵

Simultaneously her growing interest in the Egyptian mysteries drew her by the 1940s to their formulation in Rosicrucianism. Again as with Pound, various elements—Greek and Egyptian, Jewish and Christian—intermingled in her mind as they had for centuries in the ancient world. In the process, as her close friend Norman Holmes Pearson put it, “like many Freudians, she became quasi-Jungian and could bring the cabala, astrology, magic, Christianity, classical and Egyptian mythology, and personal experience into a joint sense of Ancient Wisdom.” In World War II London she and Bryher held seances at H.D.’s insistence regularly, often daily, with Arthur Chaduri, a Eurasian medium, and his mother. They soon found a tripod in H.D.’s possession which had once belonged to William Morris more effective than a table for receiving the messages tapped out from the other world. An unpublished manuscript entitled Majic Ring gives an account of the messages she received from slain RAF pilots. When she heard Lord Hugh Dowding, the
retired Air Marshal of Britain, who had been responsible for the heroic defence of the homeland, lecture in October, 1943, about his own spirit-messages from some of his dead airmen, H.D. took the coincidence of their initials as a sign of their deep personal affinity. To Hugh Dowding's bafflement she sought him out as her soulmate and fictionalized him as Lord Howell in Majic Ring. By the time of the writing of Trilogy, therefore, H.D. was thoroughly steeped in the occult: a fact which made for the eclectic theology, but also for the compelling religious and imaginative vision of the poems.

Like each of the other two poems in Trilogy, The Walls Do Not Fall consists of 43 sections of varying length, written in pairs of free-verse lines which accommodate language ranging from the colloquially discursive to the intricately rhythmic and densely associative. Walls is dedicated to Bnyer, who spent the war years with H.D. in London. The opening section overlays the bombed-out city with the ruined temple at Karnak where the two women had visited in 1923; now night fires lit the sky outside their windows, and day broke on ruins which seemed to announce apocalypse. Bnyer’s memoirs of these years would come later in The Days of Mars (1972), but H.D.’s were recorded on the spot in Trilogy, in the unpublished autobiographical fictions, and in Tribute to Freud.

H.D.’s initial reaction to the explosion of war is to withdraw into the psyche as protective shell. In a poem early in The Walls she becomes a shell-fish, not now a rare murex but a lowly oyster or clam or mollusc, whose cunning contrives survival in the jaws of Leviathan:

I sense my own limit, my shell-jaws snap shut
so I in my own way know that the whale
cannot digest me:
be firm in your own small, static, limited
orbit and the shark-jaws
of outer circumstance
will spit your forth:
be indigestible, hard, unyielding. (p. 9)

It was a strategy she first learned during the first war, yet learned too that “there is a spell...in every sea-shell” which allows “that flabby, amorphous hermit” to quicken and flourish (p. 8). So the shell-fish becomes an “egg in egg-shell” (p. 9), and the imagery of female gestation in The Walls Do Not Fall goes on to include the cocoon (anticipating Tribute to the Angels) and the myrrh-jar (anticipating The Flowering of the Rod). The enclosure is hermetic in a double sense: sealed and magical. The shell becomes an alchemical crucible within which “you beget, self-out-of-self, selfless, / that pearl-of-great-price” (p. 9). So in the course of the poem the hermetic crucible splits in birth, as “my heart-shell/breaks open” (p. 35) to deliver the pearl, the precious oils, the bird, the butterfly—all images of the parthenogenetic self.

Trilogy enacts the phases of that parthenogenesis: in The Walls Do Not Fall, through H.D.’s “man-wise” identification with the male scribes of antiquity; in Tribute to the Angels, through her self-identification as Virgin Scribe (her astrological sign was Virgo); in The Flowering of the Rod, through her self-identification as Virgin Mother. So this account of self-mothering begins—not so paradoxically—with her masculine initiators, paternal and sibling, autobiographical and mythical. In the paternal line Professor Freud, the “blameless physician,” had succeeded Professor Doolittle; among her siblings, Pound and Aldington and Lawrence would give way to Lord Dowding. But collectively they served to define for H.D. her “man-wise” powers, personified in her animus. His sceptre, the flowering “rod of power” (cf. “A sceptre/and a flower-shaft” in “The Mysteries” p. 141) is the Caduceus of Hermes the Greek healer, of his Egyptian counterpart Thoth, and of the Roman Aesculapius. She had told Freud of a girlhood dream wherein she saw a stone divided into halves into which were incised a coiled, erect serpent and a thistle; in Tribute to Freud she associated the glyphs with Moses’s staff, Aaron’s rod, and Aesculapius’s caduceus, and associated the serpent’s S with Sigmund and with the tau-cross of Thoth. Years later she found that precise image on a Greco-Roman signet ring in the Louvre and, still later, in writing the Freud book, finally associated it with “H.D.” Those male symbols and hieroglyphs inscribed her own hermetic signet.

There were many reasons why Hermes came to stand with Helios in H.D.’s pantheon. In addition to healing, Hermes was a heroic explorer—again like Freud and like her father, whom she also acclaimed as “a pathfinder, an explorer.” The key to Hermes’ multiple powers is that he acts as an agent of change. True to his Roman avatar, his nature is mercurial, and H.D. was struck by the astrological fact that her sun-sign Virgo was ruled by Mercury. Moreover, Hermes was a messenger of the other gods, and the Greek root of “angel” as “messenger” allowed H.D. to link Hermes with the archangel Michael, “Captain or Centurion of the hosts of heaven.” And finally the hermetic messenger becomes a word-mage in his communication with humans: in various guises, Thoth the inventor of hieroglyphs, Hermes Trismegistus the alchemical scribe, Amenhotep the pharaoh scribe. Chriostos the divine Logos, St. John the author of Revelations.

Healer, pathfinder, messenger, mystic, scribe: such were the male gods and demigods. But in her own life Doctors Doolittle and Freud, awesome as their power might be, restricted their area of exploration and refused to submit human reason to the realm of mystery. Her father was a professor of astronomy, not an astrologer; it was her mother who as Moravian, musician, and artist was the daughter’s covert link with the world of mystery. In the first “happiness of the quest” on which Freud was setting her, she wanted to believe that his psychology was a “philosophy” which could reconcile “my father’s science and my mother’s art” (TP, 145). Unlike Professor Doolittle, the surrogate father seemed to have an aesthetic sense and might admit the woman’s powers to the family group and encourage them. But further experience forced her to recognize that Freud’s aesthetic sense—unlike her mother’s—did not extend to the religious: “About the greater transcendental issues,
we never argued. But there was an argument implicit in our very bones” (TF, 13-14).

The difference never came to argument because Freud refused to theorize about such matters; he “shut the door on transcendental speculations” and limited his study to the “personal reactions, dreams, thought associations or thought ‘transferences’ of the individual human mind. It was the human individual that concerned him.” Freud’s denial of “this dream of heaven, this hope of eternal life,” H.D. came sadly to believe, doomed him to a “courageous pessimism,” and it pained her that his agnostic disbelief in personal immortality afforded him “little hope for the world” (TF, 102-103).

No more than her father, then, could Freud be hermetic; there were some messages that neither could deliver or decipher. One of the principal matters she had come to Freud to discuss was what she called “the writing on the wall”—not writing really, but an astonishing succession of images of light, which she had seen on the wall of a hotel-room on Corfu in spring, 1920, with Bryher. The series of archetypal images began with the head and shoulders of a soldier or airman, unrecognized but suggestive of Aldington and her brother (“dead brother?” H.D. mused; maybe, but also “lost friend”). He was followed on the wall by light-images of a goblet or mystic chalice, a tripos like the one used by Apollo’s priestess at Delphi (and later by H.D. in her seances), a ladder spanning heaven and earth, and a figure like Nike, Athene triumphant. The intensity of the experience overwhelmed H.D. at this point, and she averted her eyes. But Bryher, who though present had till then seen nothing, now began to see the double image which completed the vision: Helios in his sun-disc “reaching out to draw the image of a woman (my Nike) into the sun beside him.” She did not insist that it had been a supernatural revelation and entertained the possibility that the vision was “merely an extension of the artist’s mind, a picture or an illustrated poem.” But she knew that the apparition was in any case of enormous symbolic significance, and she was disappointed and dismayed when Freud warned that such an experience was a “dangerous” symptom, perhaps her only dangerous symptom (TF, 44-56).

So Freud could not heal her wholly. The antique figures on Freud’s desk and in his glass cases he loved not as gods but as artifacts. Though she did not argue with the Professor at the time, H.D. insisted that the art of healing went beyond the terms he set. After all, Hermes was called “Psychopomp,” mediator of the underworld, where psyche and spirit met, and where human shades mingled with deities. As psychopomp, Hermes was affiliated with the artist; by devising the lyre he made possible Apollo’s song. His Egyptian predecessor Thoth was also the god of learning who invented all the arts and sciences: not only doctor and healer, mathematician and astronomer, but musician and writer—in fact, specifically the creator of the hieroglyphs and the scribe of the gods. Long before her sessions with Freud, Pound and Aldington and Lawrence, sibling-poets, had introduced her to the hermetic world, but in breaking the parental bonds they had separated her from mother as well as father. The assimilation of the artist-scribe’s hermeticism in The Walls Do Not Fall permits the rediscovery of the scribe’s feminine and then maternal character in the other two sequences. Such is the subverting impulse and secret meaning of Trilogy.

But first physical survival requires the invocation of Hermes and Thoth against the fiery rain of the blitz:

Thoth, Hermes, the stylius,
the palette, the pen, the quill endure,
though our books are a floor
of smouldering ash under our feet.... (p. 16)

H.D. wrote to Norman Holmes Pearson that she had been stung into writing The Walls Do Not Fall as a “vindication of the writer, or the ‘scribe’” in response to letters from an acquaintance which doubted the efficacy of literature in crises of war and survival. H.D.’s response to the damning question was unequivocal:

so what good are your scribblings?
this—we take them with us
beyond death; Mercury, Hermes, Thoth
invented the script, letters, palette;

the indicated flute or lyre-notes
on papyrus or parchment
are magic, indelibly stamped
on the atmosphere somewhere,
forever.... (p. 17)

The “smouldering ash” of burned books requires the reinscription for which she assumes responsibility in the present crisis; she will stand among the remaining walls against the war. Her correspondent’s word “scribblings” demeans the power of the word, but the pun which makes the “word” mightier than the “sword” is meant to assert the power of language over physical force. For that reason the Egyptian scribe “takes precedence of the priest,/stands second only to the Pharaoh” (p. 15)—that is, she told Pearson, “stands second only to God”? (T, viii).

St. John and Christos the Word, the scribe and his God. The sections of The Walls Do Not Fall interweave the Christian references with invocations of ancient male scribes and deities, with the “Amen” of Amenhotep’s name as the punning link. In the remarkable dream of section 16, “Ra, Osiris, Amen appeared” in the “spacious, bare meeting-house” where as a girl H.D. worshipped with her mother’s Moravian family. The god is first identified as “the world-father,/,father of past ages/present and future equally,” but then is surprisingly described as “beardless, not at all like Jehovah,” “The unapproachable Father—Ra, Jehovah—manifests Himself as the Son, Christos, Osiris, Amen: ‘upright, slender, impressive as the Mento monolith’” (p. 25).

Moreover, in section 21 the transformation of the Father into the Son is effected through the connection of the masculine with the feminine:
Splintered the crystal of identity,  
shattered the vessel of integrity,  
till the Lord *Amen,*  
paw-er of the ground,  
bearer of the curled horns,  
bellow from the horizon:  
here am I, Amen-Ra,  
*Amen,* Aries, the Ram;  
time, time for you to begin a new spiral,  
see—I toss you into the star-whirlpool;  
till pitying, pitying,  
snuffing the ground,  
here am I, Amen-Ra whispers,  
*Amen,* Aries, the Ram  
be cocoon, smothered in wool,  
be Lamb, mothered again.  
(p. 30)

"Amen-Ra" is the archetypal father; the pun on "paw-er" as "father" links Ra with the Ram, the "bearer of curled horns." But "a new spiral" brings metamorphosis, summed up in the pun on "smothered/mothered": the Ram becomes mother ("cocoon, smothered in wool") and so Son ("Lamb, mothered again"). In the next section, the alchemical word play (worm/warm, fleece/grass, sun/son) runs through H.D.'s prayer that the father bear her as Hermes, Helios/Christos:

Now my right hand,  
now my left hand  
clutch your curled fleece;  
take me home, take me home,  
my voice wails from the ground;  
take me home, Father:  
pale as the worm in the grass,  
yet I am a spark  
struck by your hoof from a rock:  
*Amen,* you are so warm,  
hide me in your fleece,  
crop me up with the new-grass;  
let your teeth devour me,  
let me be warm in your belly,

the sun-disk,  
the re-born Sun.  
(p. 31)

The refrain "Take me home, Father" means "take me home to Mother." H.D. had hoped that her visits to Freud, whose office felt like "home," would effect reconciliation with her lost father and mother, so that she might come to a sense of her own identity. The late poetry voices the effort to return home as the place of rebirth; in her beginning would be her end. "Take me home, Father!" let me be smothered/mothered in the father's fleece, "let me be warm in your belly" and in the name of the Sun/Son let the daughter be born again to the mother who in life had favored her sons to the daughter. As sibling-poet Pound has rescued the daughter from that bruising domestic situation and initiated her into womanhood in the Sunship/Sonship of the scribes. But some essential connection had been obscured, and now the alchemy of the word seeks to restore her psychologically to the mother she missed in life.

As we can already see, the punning throughout *Trilogy* is no mere trick or game. It makes a language appropriate to a world in which there are meanings within meanings, meanings beyond meanings. In the concluding sections of *The Walls Do Not Fall* the personal and psychological synthesis is characteristically merged into the cosmic design. The play on "O-sir-is or O-Sire-is" fuses the names of Osiris and his sister-wife Isis in a cyclic pattern of death and rebirth which constitutes the recurrent manifestation of "the One in the beginning": "Fosterer, Begetter, the Same-forever/in the papyrus-swamp/in the Judean meadow" (p. 54-55). Perhaps intentionally H.D. indicated the American source of the Neoplatonism she shared with Pound in her use of Emerson's epithet "the over-soul" (p. 42), whose immanence confers on everyday objects a sacramental significance:

grape, knife, cup, wheat  
are symbols in eternity,  
and every concrete object  
has abstract value, is timeless  
in the dream parallel  
whose relative sigil has not changed  
since Nineveh and Babel.  
(p. 24)

Play on the names of Osiris and Isis points to their ultimate union: "O, Sire, is this the path?...drawn to the temple-gate, O, Sire,/is this union at last?" (p. 57). Since the ruins of London still stand like the remnants of the temple at Karnak, "*possibly we will reach haven, heaven.*" (p. 59). These last words of the poem conjure the maternal haven with the paternal heaven, but the prospect still lies in the future. In the second poem of *Trilogy* the question will recur for further resolution:

what is this mother-father  
to tear at our entrails?
what is this unsatisfied duality
which you can not satisfy? (p. 72)

_Tribute to the Angels_ was written in a fortnight during "a wonderful pause just before D-Day" as "a sort of premature peace poem." (T, ix) The unexpected epiphany which generated this spring poem occurred on a London bus when H.D. glimpsed a charred apple-tree flowering again amidst the rubble of a burned out square. Hermes Trismegistus (Thoth) and St. John are still present at the beginning of the sequence. However, Hermes leads to Aphrodite; Christos, to Mary. Their animus-inspiration directs the poem through the divination of the angels to an astonishing manifestation of the feminine.

The angels of St. John’s Revelation who attend the divine throne appear as emissaries, and four of the seven have been named and addressed—Raphael (Birth), Gabriel (Change), Azrael (Death), and Uriel (the fire of God’s judgment and will)—before the first premonition of the archetypal feminine, whose appearance is rendered as alchemical “Transubstantiation” (p. 87):

Now polish the crucible
and in the bowl distill
a word most bitter, _marah_,
a word bitterer still, _mar_,
sea, brine, breaker, seducer,
giver of life, giver of tears;
Now polish the crucible
and set the jet of flame
under, till _marah-mar_
are melted, fuse and join
and change and alter,
mer, mere, mere, mater, Maia, Mary,
Star of the Sea,
Mother. (p. 71)

The bitter and destructive sea, nature’s womb and tomb, becomes the virgin-mother goddess. "Star of the Sea," an epithet from the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, precipitates the association of Mary with "Venus, Aphrodite, Astarte" who appears in double aspect as a star, "Phosphorus/at sun-rise,/Hesperus at sun-set" (p. 73). This evocation of the feminine calls forth the fifth angel, Annael, the peace of God, designated by H.D. as the Mohammedan Venus, and linked in turn with the Hebrew Anna, Hannah or Grace (T, ix). Moreover, she appears in a syzygy with Uriel, the angel of God’s fiery breath; the pair intimates the Sancta Spiritus: "So we hail them together,/one to contrast the other" (p. 80). After this annunciation God’s bride blooms in war-torn London: "We see her visible and actual,/beauty incarnate" in the miraculous spring-flowering of the scorched tree in a garden-square behind a demolished house (pp. 82-83).

Then all unexpected, the vision of the Lady, first in a dream in which she appeared to H.D. and two women friends. Remembering perhaps the triune goddesses in "Triplex," the poet wonders whether "we three together" could summon the supernatural; "yet it was all natural enough, we agreed" (p. 90). For when the poet wakens from the dream the Presence is "there more than ever,/as if she had miraculously/related herself to time here" (p. 91). Who is this Lady? Earlier in the poem, when

my patron [Freud or Bryher or both] said, "name it";
I said, I can not name it,
there is no name;
he said,
"invent it." (p. 76)

So here, the patron’s voice in her head tells her that if she cannot define the Lady by name she can at least invent images. Though the Lady be a Presence and "no rune nor riddle" (p. 84), the scribe suggests her mysterious charisma in rich details from the Renaissance painters and their pre-Raphaelite imitators:

Our Lady of the Goldfinch,
Our Lady of the Candelabra,
Our Lady of the Pomegranate,
Our Lady of the Chair;
we have seen her, an empress,
magnificent in pomp and grace,
and we have seen her
with a single flower
or a cluster of garden-pinks
in a glass beside her;
we have seen her snoop
drawn over her hair,
or her face set in profile
with the blue hood and stars;
we have seen her head bowed down
with the weight of a domed crown,
or we have seen her, a wisp of a girl
trapped in a golden halo.... (p. 93)

H.D. goes on to designate the voice which delineates these images, gorgeous though they are, as "you"—not her true voice, but Bryher’s or Freud’s voice in her mind,
turning her to aesthetic inventions for the Lady. Without taking back any of the gorgeous images, the voice of “I,” H.D. speaking for herself, insists that the Lady, far from being “a hieratic figure, the veiled Goddess” (as “you would have her”) is more human and approachable: a Vestal, perhaps, of the Bona Dea, but in any case a living reality, no mere art-image. In fact, as it turns out, “she is Psyche, the butterfly/out of the cocoon” at last (p. 103).

The Lady is, then, the apotheosis of the Self. Her specific character, as she manifested herself in H.D.’s bedside that night in 1944, is disclosed when she is paired with the sixth angel, Michael, earlier linked to Thoth and Hermes and here “regent of the planet Mercury” (p. 99). H.D. suggested to Pearson that “she is the Troubador or Poet’s Lady,” (T, ix), but in fact she is something more than muse. She is H.D.’s archetype: the troubadour as woman, the woman as troubador, the woman-troubadour herself. In her arms the Lady bears no Son (“the Child was not with her,” p. 97, “the Lamb was not with her,” p. 104) but instead her writings: “she looked so kindly at us/under her drift of veils,/and she carried a book” (p. 100). The Madonna anticipated earlier (“Star of the Sea/Mother”) turns out to be the Virgin-Scribe. What’s more, the book that is “our book” (p. 105) is in fact H.D.’s poem in the reader’s hand:

She carried a book, either to imply she was one of us with us, or to suggest she was satisfied with our purpose, a tribute to the Angels.... (p. 107)

Just as the revelation of the masculine as scribe and psychopomp in The Waits Do Not Fall opened the way to the revelation of the Virgin-Scribe in Tribute to the Angels, so the Virgin-Scribe makes possible a fuller exfoliation of the feminine archetype in The Flowering of the Rod, and preparation for that further exfoliation summons the masculine once more. The seventh and last angel is Zadkiel:

regent of Jupiter, or Zeus-pater or Theus-pater,

Theus, God; God-the-father, father-god or the Angel god-father,

himself, heaven yet at home in a star.... (p. 108)

Such is the scribe’s witness: “I John saw. I testify” (p. 109). The final address to Zadkiel specifically foreshadows the third poem in the image of the Lady’s “face like a Christmas-rose” (p. 110). So the spring poem of the angels and the Lady grows into a Christmas poem, The Flowering of the Rod, dated December 18-31, 1944. It is the book the Lady holds. Though the Lady’s book is blank when she appears in Tribute to the Angels, it is announced as “a tale of a Fisherman/a tale of a jar or jars” (p. 105), the third sequence of Trilogy.

The tale of the Fisherman and the two jars of Kaspar—the jar the Wise Man presented to Mary and the Christ-child at His birth and the twin-jar Mary Magdalene later used to anoint Him for His death—is both traditional and heterodox. Jesus and the two Marys; but the episodes are here told in inverted chronological order. The poem first presents the anointing by Magdalene, the reformed courtesan, and ends with the stable at Bethlehem, and the narrative order corresponds to H.D.’s deepening engagement with the mother archetype. The alienation from the mother with whom she felt deep religious and artistic affinity had thwarted her psychological realization of herself as woman and mother. She brooded over her miscarriage of Aldington’s baby during the war; when she bore Cecil Gray’s child in 1919, she called her Peridia, the little one, and had difficulty in assuming and fulfilling the mothering role. On Corfu the year after Peridia’s birth she took Athene Nike, the motherless maiden-daughter of Zeus, as “my own especial sign or part of my hieroglyph” (T, 36).

In Hippolytus Temptates and Red Roses for Bronze the Artemis and Athene in H.D. had contended with the Aphrodite. The Lady in Tribute to the Angels is explicitly the Virgin but not the lover or mother; though she is “innocent and immaculate...like the Lamb’s Bride,” “the Lamb is not with her either as Bridegroom or Child” (p. 104). Now The Flowering of the Rod presents the two Marys as versions of Aphrodite and Artemis—but with paradoxical complications: Magdalene’s passion is purified, and the Virgin bears a child. Mary the courtesan, redeemed of sexual sin and preparing the Redeemer for His death, is succeeded by and assimilated into the Mary whose immaculate flesh incarnates God. Because the burgeoning of the blasted tree images not death from life but rebirth from death, in this telling crucifixion precedes nativity. The Old English “rood” links the Cross with the Tree of Life. The Easter mystery, alluded to in the references to Jesus’ transfiguration, crucifixion, and resurrection, is subsumed in the Christmas Mystery. The flowering of the rood is a Christmas rose: Deus manifest in Mater, material spirit.

H.D. recalled in the Freud memoir written in the same year as this poem that “the Professor translated the pictures on the wall, or the picture-writing on the wall....in Corfu...as a desire for union with my mother” (T, 44). The Mediterranean world H.D. sought was a substitute homeland; Hellas, she came to see, stood for Helen, and Helen had accompanied her to the Mediterranean in 1923. Now we can see why the surrogate father’s acknowledgement of the primacy of the mother seemed to H.D. a “coming home,” and why Freud’s office a “home” she associated with “father-mother” (T, 146). The plea “Take me home, Father” opened the way to the advent of the Lady, and the psychological breakthrough from her visitation carried H.D. past Greece all the way back to Bethlehem and Mother. For just as the Greek of Sea Garden was the lost America of her childhood memories, so now Bethlehem is as much in Pennsylvania as in Palestine. In one session when H.D. was reminiscing about her home town, Freud made the connection: “Bethlehem is the town of Mary” (T, 123)—yes, and the town where Helen bore Hilda.

The mystery of Mary, then, is the culmination of the poem, and her metamorphosis is reflected in the puns on her name. The playing upon “Marah” (bitter), “mar” (sea), and “mere” (mother) in Tribute to the Angels is extended by the linking of “myrrh” and “Mary,” as H.D. articulates her parthenogenesis: “through my will and my power, Mary shall be myrrh... (though I am Mara, bitter) I shall be Mary-
myrth," p. 135; "I am Mary, the incense-flower of the incense tree, myself worshipping, weeping, shall be changed to myrth" p. 138. The blasted tree blossoming amidst the blitz yields the woman-flower, "face like a Christmas rose," (p. 110). Her burgeoning, like that of Yeats' "great-rooted blossomer," enfolds the cycle of birth, death, and resurrection. Her precious oils are bitter to the tongue but incomparably sweet in the nostrils; the myrth-vessels are crucibles in an alchemic sublimation, for alchemy was, as Jung demonstrated, the science—or art—of psychological and spiritual transformation.

Kaspar with his two fabled jars of myrth provides H.D.'s fictional link between the two Marys; one he gives to Mary Magdalene, and the other he had presented years before in Bethlehem. In The Walls Do Not Fall Love was identified as a "Mage/bringing myrth" (p. 10). In H.D.'s version the Mage is the man with woman-wisdom, the woman-wise man who matches and mirrors the man-wise woman. Kaspar understands the old goddesses as "unalterably part" of Mary: "Isis, Astarte, Cyprus," "Ge-meter, De-Meter, earth-mother," "Venus/in a star" (p. 145). For him the "Star of the sea" is one with the star of Bethlehem. In his encounter with Mary Magdalene Kaspar is granted a vision of the three primordial mothers: Eve, and before her Lilith, and even before her a nameless mother from the lost paradise of Atlantis. The feminine is symbolized as a flower opening, petal on petal, circle on circle, both backward and forward through time to infinity (cf. pp. 153-157). Her full revelation includes origin and fall and redemption; Paradise, Paradise lost, Paradise regained.

Kaspar gives Magdalene the jar to anoint the Christ for His death because in her he recalls the other Mary, the second Eve at the nativity. For what he had knelt to in the stable at Bethlehem was not the Spirit-Father, the I-Am or Jehovah, God as Son of Mary: "the Holy-Presence Manifest," "the Great Word," (p. 170). Kaspar wordlessly offers Mary myrth, but she speaks:

she said, Sir, it is a most beautiful fragrance, as of all flowering things together; but Kaspar knew the seal of the jar was unbroken. He did not know whether she knew the fragrance came from the bundle of myrth she held in her arms. (p. 172)

In personal terms Hilda has found herself as Helen in Bethlehem, but that discovery has profound and far-reaching implications for herself and for her readers. The poems of Trilogy have led to the widening and cumulative revelation of the scribe, the Virgin with Book, and the Madonna with Child. In the sequence of things the Madonna with Child subsumes the Virgin with Book. Or rather the Virgin-scribe writes the book of the Virgin-mother. The "bundle of myrth/she held in her arms" is the Child and the poem, the Child in the poem, the poem as Child. The poet-mother cradles the bundled flowers and leaves of Trilogy, and as readers we kneel with Kaspar at the Epiphany: "her book is our book" (p. 105). In our patriarchal society this is perhaps the closest a woman poet has come to claiming the prophetic representativeness of Leaves of Grass.

Two contemporary poets—a man and a woman—offer separate glosses on the poet as mother. Robert Duncan described the irresistible pull of Poetry—backwards and forwards at once—as a need to re-member the Mother:10

Back of the Muses, so the old teaching goes, is Mnemosyne, Mother of the Muses. Freud, too, teaches that the Art has something to do with restoring, re-membering, the Mother. Poetry itself may then be the Mother of those who have destroyed their mothers. But no. The image Freud projects of dismembering and remembering is the image of his own creative process in Psychoanalysis which he reads into all Arts. Mnemosyne, the Mother-Memory of Poetry, is our made-up life, the matrix of fictions. Poetry is the Mother of those who have created their own mothers.

In Duncan's complications mother and child are almost indistinguishable; the poet and the poem are each both mother and child of the other. Marilyn Farwell has found the basis for an organic feminist criticism in Adrienne Rich's growing concern with motherhood and in her consequent emphasis on the "relational" aspect of art.11 Farwell argues that Rich has rejected the notion of art as a depersonalized "creation," projected by the "creative" artists (as male criticism tends to conceive it), because such an attitude regards the art-work as an object existing in and of itself, beyond change and outside the flux of experience. However, for Rich or Duncan or anyone who views art organically as inseparable from the flux of experience, the art-object, the text of the poem has no significance or meaning except in its "relational" function, as the artist or reader engages, and experiences it. "Creation" from this point of view is not a completed act but an ongoing process of gestation, which extends even to the reader Duncan's notion of the poet's being his or her own mother and child. Moreover, such a conception of art determines form as well as substance. Rich has observed of her own developments:

Today, I have to say that what I know I know through making poems. Like the novelist who finds that his characters begin to have a life of their own and to demand certain experiences, I find that I can no longer go to write a poem with a neat handful of materials and express those materials according to a prior plan: the poem itself engenders new sensations, new awareness in me as it progresses. Without for one moment turning my back on conscious choice and selection, I have been increasingly willing to let the unconscious offer its materials, to listen to more than the one voice of a single idea. Perhaps a simple way of putting it would be to say that instead of poems about experiences I am getting poems that are experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it. In my earlier poems I told you, as precisely and eloquently as I knew how, about something; in the more recent poems something is happening, something has happened to me and, if I have been a good parent to the poem, something will happen to you who read it.12

In the early 1960s, when Rich wrote this, she used the neutral term "parent," but
there is no question that today she would seek to be a good “mother” to the poem and in a certain sense expect the reader, male as well as female, to be so too.

Certainly for H.D. the re-membering of the Mother required a new kind of poetry. Those who prefer the Imagist poems find the long later sequences looser, more associative, more opaque. But Denise Levertov is correct in seeing the continuity of the work in its differences. For her, “the icily passionate precision of the earlier work, the ‘Greek’ vision, had not been an end, a closed statement, but a ‘preparation’ for the long works of the later years. As a matter of fact, a re-reading of Collected Poems convinced Levertov that even “the poems I had thought of as shadowless were full of shadows, planes, movement: correspondences of what was to come.”13 H.D. herself resented the critical view, reflected in anthology selections, that treated her as though she had ceased writing or developing in 1925. She pointedly and proudly proclaimed Trilogy “runic, divinatory”—“not the ‘crystalline’ poetry that my early critics would insist on.”14 For H.D. the stylistic differences beneath the thematic continuities running through her work were important because the difference in language and stance indicated a deepening of the psychological and spiritual comprehension of those thematic materials. The later work—not just the work centered around World War II (Trilogy, Tribute to Freud, Bid Me To Live, By Avon River), but the long poems of her last decade—are unashamedly more personal and religious, more autobiographical and mystical than the more Modernist manner of her Imagist phase.

To return to Duncan’s distinction which introduced this discussion of Trilogy, H.D.’s early Images which were “personae of states of mind” often appeared as male, but the Images which served as “guides in reading the message of the universe” tended more and more to constellate themselves around the figure of the mother. It was a long way from the lean, hard-torsoed athlete of Sea Garden to the Madonna of The Flowering of the Rod, but it was the way she was seeking from the beginning.

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Notes

2 Trilogy (New York: New Directions, 1973). Cited hereafter as T. Page references to direct quotations are given in the text.
5 Hermetic Definition, p. vi. The typescript of Majic Ring is at the Beinecke Library, Yale University. Cf. also the typescript of Compassionate Friendship there, pp. 47, 78, 79, 81, and Notes on Recent Writing, pp. 14, 18, 22-23.
10 Part I, Chapter 2, of The H.D. Book, Coyote’s Journal 8, p. 27.
14 Notes on Recent Writing, p. 22.