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The Maternal Revelation in H.D.

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In 1933 H.D. began psychoanalysis with Freud in Vienna. In *Tribute to Freud* H.D. reports: "My mother had come here on her honeymoon, . . . Why had I come to Vienna? The Professor had said in the very beginning that I had come to Vienna hoping to find my mother." (16-17) Throughout their sessions together Freud focused on H.D.'s "desire for union with mother" (44). "The Professor said I had not made the conventional transference from mother to father, as is usual with a girl at adolescence." (136) And he diagnosed that H.D. had pathological mother-fixation.

In Freud's theory, to become adult for a little girl is to give up the mother and subsequently to transfer her affection to her father. But female revisionists argue: "this shift is not only hard to explain; it is also difficult to accomplish: it is even dubious, as Freud freely admits, whether most women really manage wholly to relinquish their pre-oedipal attachment".¹⁾ Writing only the son's story, he slights the asymmetrical development of male and female children, they indict; according to them the oedipal crisis for a girl is not so violent as for a boy. For a boy the intervention of the father (phallus) into the pre-oedipal dyad must be done more thoroughly than a girl because of the heterosexual incest taboo. So the daughter is privileged to access to the mother. But the voyage toward the mother involves the risk of her identity. The pre-oedipal mother is the formless figure who has not yet appeared as other. To access to this mother means to fall into the very situation that the boundary between subject and object is blurred. It is not only ecstatic but also 'abject'²⁾ experience. And it applies also to her language; to cross the oedipal moment is to confront with the linguistic destruction, the collapse of the symbolic. With the danger of being drowned in the maternal sea of rhythms, murmurings and rumblings, the poet attempts to create semiotical language.

The “way of access to the mother” is what H.D. struggles to find in her later poetry after her analysis with Freud. At first surprised at Freud’s stern diagnosis, mother-fixation she said: “Mother? Mamma. But my mother was dead. I was dead; that is, the child in me that had called her mamma was dead.”³⁾ But after the sessions with Freud she finds that the pre-oedipal mother was no dead than the daughter was: “In rehabilitating her maternal memory, H.D. challenges Freud’s diagnosis. . .disputes his prognosis of her inevitable (f)rigidity as the natural effect of her oppression by manmade, man-centered civilization.” And “In place of this untreatably depressive femininity, she offers a wholly affirmative vision of woman’s libidinal resources and her capacity for creative sublimation.”⁴⁾ The process H.D. frees herself from such tentions I will trace in *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*.

In “The Walls Do Not Fall,” H. D. invokes the images of the ancient deities such as “Amen” “Ra” “Jehova” “Christos” “Osiris” (2, 16, 18). These images, “the world-father” (16) she calls, become mixed up into “Ram” (21), one paternal image, the archetypal father. To this father-Ram H.D. gives her prayer: “take me home, take me home,/. . . take me home, Father” (22). The refrain “take me home”, the prayer to the father means “take me home to mother.”⁵⁾ Here H.D. uses the father as intermediary to the mother.

In “Tribute to the Angels” we can see H. D.’s struggle to articulate the mother by the language of the father. The poet visits “Hermes Trismegistus” (1), the “patron of alchemists” (1). From this father she tries to “steal” “his province” (1), the alchemical technique. This attempt is none other than H.D.’s early struggle to create the mother by the language of the father:

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, mère, mater, Maria, Mary,

 Star of the sea,
 Mother. (8)

Through this alchemical process, the poet gains the “bitter jewel/in the heart of the bowl” (9). This liquified jewel is the mother. The poet solicits the father to warm the mother once again: “O swiftly, re-light the flame/before the substance cool” (11). She wants to warm the mother-jewel because it is very fragile, vulnerable in the father-world: “for suddenly we saw your name/desecrated” (11). This fragility of the mother is sung again in the last poem: “. . . as I watch/the wave till its edge of foam/touches the hot sand and instantly/vanishes like snow on the equator/I would cry out, stay, stay” (4). To such solicit to reactivate the mother which “lives” and “breathes” “with a pulse uncooled that beats yet” (13), the father forces her to name it with the paternal language. But she resists: “my patron said, “name it”; /I said, I can not name it, / there is no name” (13). And her desire for the mother swells to the point she wants to be “drawn into it” (14).

Such desire opens the way to the story of Mary in “Flowering of the Rod.” The way back to Mary in Bethlehem (in Palestine) means the return to the mother in Bethlehem (in Pennsylvania), H.D.’s birthplace. As she confesses in *Tribute to Freud*, “If I stay with my brother, become part almost of my brother, perhaps I can get nearer to *her*” (33), she uses the male figure, Kasper as the intermediary to access the mother. In Kasper’s encounter with Mary Magdalene and his confront with the vision of mother-tryad, H.D. can experience the epiphany of memory of mother. A fleck of light on Mary’s hair, “a circulet of gems/which even he could not name” (28) is jewel in the crucible, the mother itself. The mother begins to “open like a flower” (29): “and the circle went on

widening/and would go on opening/he knew, to infinity. . . he saw the lands of the blest, /the promised lands, lost" (31). In such blight ecstasy Kasper hears the voice of the mother (30):

And he heard, as it were, the echo
of an echo in a shell,

words neither sung nor chanted
but stressed rhythmically; . . .

though the sound was other
than our ears are attuned to,

the tone was different
yet he understood it;

it translated itself
as it transmuted its message

through spiral upon spiral of the shell
of memory that yet connects us. . . (33)

And he heard its enigmatic message "Lilith born before Eve/and one born before Lilith,/and Eve" (33), the voice of prebiblical time. It implies that "a matriarchal genealogy had erased from recorded history when this ancient female trinity was exorcized as evil, cast out of human consciousness."⁶⁾ Through Kasper the daughter digs up the mother who has long buried.

As H.D. proclaims: "I have gone forward./I have gone backward" (8), "Flowering of the Rod" and *Helen in Egypt* share the backward movement because of the return to the pre-oedipal stage. But "Helen's quest is emphasized, but both[also Achilles] have found Thesis at the end"⁷⁾; Achilles unlike Kasper appears as a self, a convert. Now Helen as a converter forces him to confront "the too intence primary experience" (162). He confesses his half-awakened desire for the mother of the sea Thesis: "I . . . awake . . ./numb with a memory, /a sort of ecstasy of desolation, / a desire to return to the old/thunder and roar of the sea" (256) To convert him thoroughly Helen gains energy, "the flame of thoughts too deep to remember, /that break through the legend, . . . like fire/through the broken pictures/on a marblefloor" (258). By this fire,

not “fire of battle” in the masculine world but “fire of desire” (285), the “pattern” of “Achilles’ history” (262) begins to melt. Before Helen finally finds him “the New Mortal (263)”, Achilles resists:

It was only then,
when the pictures had melted away,

...

that I seemed to hear him say,
she fails me,

...

it was only, when I felt
with him, lying there,
the bitterness of his loss,

that I knew he loved,

...

the invincible armour
melted him quite away,
till he knew his mother;

but he challenged her, beat her back (260-261)

When Achilles was trained by “an Old Man” (260), “Chiron, the Centaur” (284) who was sent by his mother, he made “his childhood’s secret idol, the first Thesis-*eidolon*” (284). Helen forces him to confront the question at the heart of the semiotic: “Was not his own mother more desirable than the ‘wooden doll’ he had made to represent her?” (295) And she shows him what she gains from the mother: “a touch-so a hand/brushes the lyre-strings;/a whisper— a breath/to invite the rose; . . ./a rhythm as yet unheard,/to challenge the trumpet-note” (229). These are missing in the “halls” that “were built for man, alone;/no echo or soft whisper . . ./no sweep of strings,/no answering laughter,/but the trumpet’s call” (30-31). Helen managed “to melt the icy fortress of the soul, /and free the man” (10) not by Apollo’s “dart of Death” but “dart of Love” (303), her prayer “O child of Thesis” (16). H.D. accomplishes “his wholehearted conversion to the maternal mysteries, his and his civilization’s cure”.⁸⁾

Both poems end with the maternal charm, "the fragrance came from the bundle of myrrh/she[mother]held in her arms" and the sea-enchantment with "Its beat and long reverbration,/its booming and delicate echo,/its ripple . . ./the crash and spray of the foam". And both end with enigmatic or semiotic messages that avoid the closure of meaning. After the analysis with Freud, H.D. finally finds out the mother though Freud rejected her plea: "I do *not* like to be the mother".⁹⁾ And these poems must be her other tribute to Freud, desperate mother-seeker: "The trouble is—I am an old man—you *do not think it worth your while to love me.*"¹⁰⁾

NOTES

- 1) Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, Inc, 1985) 133.
- 2) This is the key term of Julia Kristeva's maternal theory.
- 3) H.D., *Tribute to Freud* (New York: New Directions, 1984) 17.
- 4) Dianne Chisholm, *H.D.'s Freudian Poetics: Psychoanalysis in Translation* (New York: Cornell U.P., 1992) 6.
- 5) Albert Gelpi, "Re-membering the Mother" *Signet: reading H.D.*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau Duplessis (London: U of Winconsin P, 1990) 326.
- 6) Susan Gubar, "The Echoing Spell of H. D.'s *Trilogy*" *Signet*, 310.
- 7) Rachel Blau Duplessis, "Romantic Thralldom in H. D." *Signet*, 417.
- 8) Chisholm, 188.
- 9) *Tribute to Freud*, 146-147.
- 10) *Ibid.*, 16.