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On Spiritual Homesickness *Mothering Peace in H.D.'s The Gift*

H.D.'s (Hilda Doolittle 1886–1961) autobiographical memoir, The Gift, navigates between the horrors of the London blitz during World War II and the childhood innocence of turn-of-the-century Bethlehem Pennsylvania. The adult narrator's struggle to maintain sanity amid the atrocities of war is paralleled by the young child Hilda's quest for knowledge of her Moravian religious and cultural heritage, schooled by her wise maternal grandmother. In this paper, I argue that through the recesses of memory and history, both the mature poet and the girl narrator are able to map together a spiritual geography of home. In her youthful passion for the purely secular forms of modernist poetry, H.D. had abandoned her sacred past and her religious heritage. The trauma of war and the disillusionment with the exclusionary culture of male modernism offer an impetus to seek refuge in a maternal spirituality, which is part fantasy and part family history. My argument is buttressed by an analysis of the semiotic strategies H.D. uses to refute the solidly secular and rationalist relationship between signifier and signified. In exploring the fleshy insides of language, the poet reveals the sacred spirit of the written word. In gathering the courage to weave together her own story with the partly historical and partly fictional version of a maternal and feminized Moravian spirituality, H.D. acts as both mother and midwife to a tiny window of peace in war-time London.

Mary, Maia, Miriam, Mut, Madre, Mère, Mother, pray for us.

—H.D. *The Gift* (1998: 113)

In her autobiographical memoir, *The Gift* (1941/1943), the American modernist poet H.D. (1886–1961) quarries her past for remnants of the primal Mother, the female Holy Spirit at the root of her Moravian heritage.¹ Written against the backdrop of the nightmare of history, the terrifying screams of the London

blitz, *The Gift* reaches deep into the recesses of memory and history to piece together a spiritual geography of home. Guided by her maternal grandmother, whose stories stitch a rich quilt through family legend and senile dementia, H.D. succeeds in healing her war-wounded psyche by revisiting maternal spirituality through childhood fantasy.

Hilda Doolittle was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania into the mystical Moravian brotherhood, a protestant sect which originates in the Czech reformation movement led by Jan Hus. Known as *Unitas Fratrum*, the Moravian brotherhood was founded in 1467 and revived in 1727 by Count Zinzendorf of Halle, whose doctrine advocated the continuous discipline of prayer in devotion to Christ. The Moravians spawned missionary settlements from the West Indies to Africa and Asia, and August Gottlieb Spangenberg founded the American Moravian community of Bethlehem in 1740.

The young Hilda grew up in this tight knit religious community, but she also received an excellent education in the liberal arts. During her studies in Classics at Bryn Mawr College she began writing seriously, encouraged by Ezra Pound, to whom she became secretly engaged in 1905. Her environment changed radically when she went to London in 1911 to join Pound and a group of other poets involved in a new movement called Imagism. Now immersed in a heady world of intellectual exchange, H.D. soon established herself as an accomplished and celebrated writer. Only too quickly, this world would come crashing down—first when she was rejected by Pound both as partner and poet, and second through the experience of traumatic loss resulting from World War I. H.D. underwent a spiritual and intellectual crisis as her world was ripped apart by the heinous crimes of war and personal tragedy (she lost her brother in the war, her father died of shock, and she fell ill with the Spanish flu, threatening her life and that of her unborn child). It was not until decades later that H.D. began to regain her voice and confidence as a writer.

This renewal has often been attributed to her intellectual engagement with psychoanalysis and her subsequent analysis with Freud in 1933-34.² There can be no doubt as to the importance of the associative method in the renewal of H.D.'s creative energy, but I would like to propose here that it was equally the result of her re-acquaintance with the feminine and maternal spirit within Moravian Protestantism.³ During her engagement with the strict modernist doctrines and chiselled poetic forms advocated by Pound, H.D. had bracketed out her Moravian beliefs. For those years, Imagism was her religion. But in her time of crisis following the Great War, H.D. found no solace in the unforgiving forms of modernist poetry that had fuelled her youthful spirit. It would take many years to fill this vacuum.

Motherhood functions in three ways in this search for newfound spiritual identity: first, H.D.'s own experience mothering her daughter Perdita (together with her lesbian partner Bryher) fostered a spiritual awakening; second, her return to her Moravian heritage is heralded by her maternal lineage, most especially by the memories of her childhood relationship with her maternal

grandmother, her Mamalie; third, H.D. resurrects the long-forgotten Spirit Mother or female Holy Ghost that was a part of the original doctrine of the eighteenth-century Moravian protestant sect. I will seek to illustrate this journey through spiritual maternity and maternal spirituality in the semiotic abysses of *The Gift*. My readings are influenced by Julia Kristeva's (1984) arguments for the revolutionary potential of poetic language (the semiotic), through which the pre-oedipal maternal body is recuperated in the polysemantic heterogeneity of language, with its pulsating rhythms, discontinuities, and its eruptions from within the symbolic order.⁴ In both her prose and her poetry, H.D. is elliptical and at times hermetic, but always playful in her engagements with the otherness of writing. It is through this subtle but sustained play that we glimpse the awakening spirit.

Combining the genres of *Bildungsroman*, autobiographical memoir, and mystical meditation, *The Gift* documents the quest of the young Hilda to understand the nature of the world from the warm community that surrounds her to the stars her father studies. Hilda has an innocent curiosity and fascination with her grandmother's fantastic tales, which become an allegorical salve, healing the wounded spirit of the mature poet H.D. Gone are the hard edges, crystalline purity and radically terse style of her early Imagist poetry produced under Pound's influence. By contrast, *The Gift* is rambling, incoherent and repetitive. But the seeming confusion of the richly associative, dense and complex narrative yields another story, one to be read in the margins and between the lines.

Possibly the most important motif that threads its way through the narrative is in fact the Gift, typographically elevated by its capital "G." There is secrecy surrounding the nature of this Gift, and early on we sense the urgency to unlock the mystery "motivated by the primitive curiosity of the proverbial tiresome child," who is of course the young Hilda. We learn that "there is a Gift waiting, *someone must inherit the Gift* which passed us by. Someone must reveal secrets of thought which combine a new element; science and art must beget a new creative medium" (1998: 50, my emphasis). This new creative medium sounds quite a bit like psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the science and art of thought. But the "someone" who must unleash its powers is not necessarily Freud, for we come to understand that the Gift is passed down through the matriarchal lineage in Hilda's family. Hilda's mother went to a fortune-teller, a gypsy named Madame Rinaldo, who told of a "*black rose growing in your garden* [...]. The gypsy still poised her finger, she said 'a star'" (76). Later on, her mother considers the sorcery or witchcraft that forged the connection between the black rose and the star, suggesting the fortune-teller followed her own train of thought: "And the star—it might be that I was thinking of the veils and how Laura's had the moon sewn on it, lots of little silver crescents, and my gold trimmings looked like *stars*" (76, my emphasis). The narrator remembers the rest of the story, but adds it as a mere corollary to this long first chapter: "The Gift would come to a child who would be born under a Star" (79). But this pearl

of wisdom is immediately called into question again by our child narrator:

A child born under a star? But that didn't mean anything. Why, every child was born under a star. Hadn't Bishop Leibert said at little Fred's christening—she could remember as if it were yesterday—that every child was born under the Star of our Redemption. (1998: 79)

Like the child, who struggles to make sense of the adult world of words and symbols, the reader is also left to wonder what to make of the many puzzling and often contradictory statements about the Gift. What is important for the narrative and for my reading is that a strong associative connection has been established between the *Gift*, *Mother* and *Star*.

There is doubt in the child's mind that the Gift would actually be inherited, and she expresses her fears that it "had passed us by" (1998: 50). The young Hilda's terror of being forgotten and having no access to the powers of the Gift parallels the interjections of the mature H.D., who has endured a Persephone-like descent through the hell of the London air raids and struggles just to keep her sanity. Hilda's faith in the powers of the Gift is renewed, however, through the stories of the Great Spirit of the Moravian Indians. The Native Americans tribes in the areas surrounding the settlement of Bethlehem developed a rapport with the Moravians, who sought to protect them against the massacres during the French and Indian wars of the 1750s. Though many were baptized into the Moravian protestant sect, they were not forced to abandon their own beliefs. The narrative suggests that there was mutual respect among the two groups and that the missionaries saw convergences between the Indian Great Spirit and the Christian Holy Ghost. H.D. was involved with the spiritualist tradition, which regarded Native Americans as a "psychic race with higher spiritual consciousness" (Augustine 1998: 17), and she transposed this belief in the symbiotic spirituality onto the child narrator's explanation of the relationship between Moravians and Indians as she understands it: "This is all in a book, there were books with old pictures and drawings and photographs of our town. The Indians said, 'it is the Voice of the Great Spirit,' so the Great Spirit who was the Indians' God, was part of our God too" (1998: 112).

The synchronicity of belief systems among the Indians and Moravians presented here is just one example of the fluidity of cultural and spiritual images throughout the narrative. Christian, Native American, Hellenic and Egyptian symbols are allowed to mingle freely and resonate in the child's mind, where there are no limits or barriers between traditions. We witness this phenomenon in its extreme when Hilda calls out to the mother spirit for help in response to her fear of being burned alive like the little girl, whose crinoline caught fire at the Christmas celebrations one year. She summons mother figures in every form:

Mary, Maia, Miriam, Mut, Madre, Mère, Mother, pray for us. Pray

for us, dark Mary, Mary, Mère, mer; this is the nightmare, this is the dark horse, this is Mary, Maia, Mut, Mutter. This is Gaia, this is the beginning. This is the end. Under every shrine to Zeus, to Jupiter, to Zeu-pater or Theus-pater or God-the-father, along the western coast of the Peloponnesus, there is an earlier altar. There is, beneath the carved super-structure of every temple to God-the-father, the dark cave or grotto or inner hall or cella to Mary, mere, Mut, Mutter, pray for us. (1998: 113-114)

While introduced through the fears of the child, we hear the clear voice of the poet H.D., who gathers her intellectual powers to fight her psychic demons. The list of mother-names initiates subtle semiotic shifts but also encourages a shift in the narrator's consciousness. The layers of mother images heaped upon each other without explanation provide a dense lexical shield from the horrors of being burned alive in a Christmas fire or in the fires from the German bombs H.D. calls "shooting stars."

The magic of these mother-names functions in two ways: first, the soothing alliteration and onomatopoeia of the rhythmic "m" concocts a sonic tonic, aurally massaging the weary soul; second, the semiotic slippages offer multiple messages of feminine inspiration. *Mary* is the central and driving force here, representing the cornerstone of the maternal spirit, but the sequence of non-ecclesiastic monikers that follows extends Mary's aura well beyond the realm of the Catholic faith. Next in line is *Maia*, the beautiful eldest of the Pleiades—Zeus seduces her in her cave and she gives birth to Hermes. *Miriam* is a prophetess who leads dancing women to freedom with her timbrel; she is known as a sea goddess too. *Mut* is a powerful Egyptian goddess but also, and perhaps not so coincidentally, the German word for courage.⁵ The interstices of culture are present in the conjunction of *Madre*, *Mère*, and *Mother*, uniting women of European nations, but later the German *Mutter* is also added in a gesture of solidarity, inviting mothers of the enemy's tongue into the fold. And last but not least is *mer*, the gushing, frothing, quenching embryonic waters of life.⁶ These primal maternal forces are conjured up to counter the apocalyptic experiences of war, but also to confirm feminine courage and capacity at the root of all male enterprises. The war is gendered masculine, but beneath it (as beneath Zeus's temple) is the unnameable matriarchal power of the womb cave.

The healing qualities of the poetic language in this passage (the semiotic in Kristeva's terms) also take the form of syntactic slippages. Directly following the many mother names is the first mention of the evil they seek to snuff: "this is the *nightmare*, this is the *dark horse*." But the inclusion of "this is *Mary*, *Maia*, *Mut*, *Mutter*" (1998: 113, my emphasis) forms an equation with but also a palimpsestic negation of the earlier threats. Mary and her mother sisters are called to displace the nightmare. A further subversion of syntax is found in the last sentence: "There is, beneath the carved super-structure of every temple to God-the-father, the dark cave or grotto or inner hall or cella to *Mary*, *mere*, *Mut*,

Mutter, pray for us" (114, my emphasis). Here, the mother words are both the *object* of the preposition "to" and the *subject* of the verb "pray," placing them in grammatical limbo. The conflation, if only in syntax, of subject and object, renders the mother symbols powerful in their fluid flexibility. The mother cannot be subjected to the dominance of the male (Zeus, Jupiter, theus, God) because she is object to herself. The very grammar of maternity here functions as a protective shield or cave.⁷

Names and naming occupy a special place in H.D.'s poetics. She plays incessantly with her own name, with her initials and the proliferation of extensions it invites.⁸ Directly following the above-mentioned passage richly dense with onomastic play, is a further link to the spiritual powers of mothers, this time connecting H.D.'s mother's name, Helen, to the bright light of ancient Greece. The following associations flow from the innocent mention of the name of the maid-servant doing laundry:

"Can I help you wash clothes, Ida?" This is Ida, this is that mountain, this is Greece, this is Greek, this is Ida; Helen? Helen, Hellas, Helle, Helios, you are too bright, too far, you are sitting in the darkened parlour, because you "feel the heat," you who are rival to Helios, to Helle, to Phoebus, the sun. You are the sun and the sun is too hot for Mama. (1998: 114)

Here again, it is impossible to saturate fully the meanings inherent in the word play. *Ida* is the mountain from which Apollo descends, but it is also a term in yoga meaning the awakened kundalini energy. The steadfast and true *Helen* of Troy and *Helle*, who courageously escaped sacrifice by fleeing on the back of a ram, are blanched in the white light of the sun god, Phoebus *Apollo*. They figuratively usurp his power and harness it for their own means. The narrator's voice now fluidly oscillates between Hilda and H.D., just as the solemnity and ethereal quality of Greek mythological characters is abruptly broken by the mention of Hilda's "Mama," whose mortality make her subject to the physical discomfort of heat. Once again, the mature narrator steps in and demands still more than Helen could give: "We must go further than Helen, than Helle, than Helios, than light, we must go to the darkness, out of which the monster has been born" (114). While it is possible to harness the masculine power of light, the real test of strength is to embrace the darkness of the womb with all its unknown dangers.

Freud was the first to make the connection between Helen and home. H.D. writes a letter to Bryher during her analysis with Freud, saying: "I got stuck at the earliest pre-OE [pre-oedipal] stage, and 'back to the womb' seems to be my only solution. Hence islands, sea, Greek primitives and so on" (qtd. in Augustine, 1998: 6). The Greek Helen is intent on getting home and H.D. uses her fascination with the Hellenic world as a medium to find her mother and her newfound spiritual home. As part of this quest, she must "go to the

darkness,” the darkness of blackout London and the figurative darkness of her fears, going on blind faith that in the visual obscurity she will nonetheless be nourished by the stillness of the womb.

In her notes on *The Gift*, H.D. is explicit about her intentions to allow the text to emerge with as little intervention as possible:

In assembling these chapters of *The Gift* during, before, and after the worst days of the 1941 London Blitz, *I let the story tell itself* for the child tell it for me [...]. I tried to keep “myself” out of this, and if the subconscious bubbled up with some unexpected findings from the depth, I accepted this finding as part of the texture of the narrative. (1998: 257, my emphasis)

Nevertheless, we find ourselves wondering to what extent the fluid notions of maternal spirituality are a recuperation of H.D.’s actual childhood experiences of Moravian Protestantism and to what extent the feminization of this spirituality is her invention. Although H.D. tries to stay out of the associative process of writing, she does attempt to document the veracity of the Moravian history related in her grandmother’s stories. In her notes, she acknowledges her sources, admitting: “Actually, I have been greatly indebted throughout to J.M. Levering’s *History of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1741-1892*” (1998: 257), which she had with her in London. H.D. goes on to say that she did not delve very deeply into the complicated history of the Moravian Brethren in the actual text but saved much of the explanations for her notes.

Within the body of the text it is impossible to distinguish any difference between the religious beliefs of the child and the spiritual quest of the mature poet. But Jane Augustine (1998) confirms from Levering’s history that “Count Zinzendorf advocated an unorthodox trinity that replaced the traditional creedal formulation ‘Father, Son, and Holy Ghost’ with an hierogamy” (9). As such, the “Mutter” (Mother) is the Holy Spirit, equal to the Father and the Bride of God, and the child of this union is Jesus Christ. Jesus unites with the soul as a husband with his wife, and the child of this union is the Christian soul. For Zinzendorf, the union between husband and wife was a sacred re-enactment of the original union of the Christ and the soul. Zinzendorf was highly criticised for his elevation of the feminine principle, and although this doctrine was abandoned after Zinzendorf’s death in 1760, it was precisely this point—that the Holy Spirit was a mother and all souls feminine—that inspired H.D.

Perhaps the most significant scene in the text, the one that begins to tie together the web of associations—North American and Moravian spirituality, femininity and the Holy Spirit, shooting stars with fiery bombs – involves a ceremonial exchange of names that takes place between Anna von Pahlen (the wife of John Christopher Friedrich Cammerhof, one of the advocates of the female Holy Ghost) and Morning Star (the wife of the Indian Chief Paxnous):

“There was something important about exchanging names because the inner band of Indians believed the name a person had, was somehow another part of him, like a ghost or shadow” (1998: 163). Anna gave Paxnoux’ wife her second name, Angelica, and she would in turn be called by the special inner-name, Morning Star. Exchanging names was a symbolic gesture for a much larger exchange, that of the Indians’ Great Spirit and the Moravian Holy Ghost, creating a spiritual pact between the two groups:

They were exchanging hostages, like in war but it was a different kind of war. It was a war of the Spirit or for the Spirit, the Spirit was the Indian’s Great Spirit and the Spirit was (for this inner band of United Brethren) a Spirit like the Holy Ghost, which nobody seemed really to understand but which they understood. (1998: 163)

Significantly, this exchange does not take place between two men, but between two women. The symbolism here reaches in many directions. First, we might surmise that H.D.’s highlighting of this ceremony places women as the natural transmitters of the sacred values and traditions of the community. The fact that war is mentioned serves to juxtapose the horrors of man-made world wars to this exchange as an act of peace making. The narrative function of this scene is to free the Gift and ensure its inheritance by the “child born under the star of Redemption,” whom we heard about much earlier, but whose fate was uncertain. The narrator tells us twice that the Gift will be restored when the promise is redeemed, and this exchange between Anna and Morning Star seems to do just that. It also affords a metatextual reconciliation, relieving the tensions created by the continuous layering of symbols and motifs without resolution.

The exchange of names unites cultures and beliefs, but the women themselves are also united, perhaps as an alternative, woman-centred love paralleling but also gently challenging Zinsendorf’s belief in the heterosexual union of Christ with the feminine Holy Ghost. If the child of the Christian union is the feminine soul, then this union of woman and woman gives birth to peace among all nations. Thus, this scene allows H.D. to insert the last piece of the puzzle in the many associative connections between *Gift* (something that can now be redeemed), *Mother* (who births peace) and *Star* (once the German bombs but now an Indian woman’s secret inner name).

We learn nothing of the nature of the relationship between Anna von Pahlen and Morning Star, but one cannot help wondering if the importance accorded this pivotal moment does not link it to the life-long connection between H.D. and her lesbian partner Bryher, whom she credits for saving her life and that of her unborn baby in the aftermath of World War I. At the time, H.D. saw Bryher as her saviour, literally and figuratively, and the bond between them was extraordinary. If this is the case, then H.D. will have succeeded in weaving her own autobiography into the feminized history of Moravian

spirituality with a two-fold result: First, H.D.'s vision of peace is cemented by the love of women and the love *between* women. Second, the love she shared with Bryher is elevated to a higher spiritual plane. H.D. rarely spoke openly of her lesbianism, but female same-sex love flows as an undercurrent in all of her work and is her political and gendered response to the androcentric version of modernity she encountered in her youth. To quote the inspiring words of Emily Jeremiah (2004), H.D. demonstrates in *The Gift* that "mothers can and should write literature [and] that mothering and literary production—both profoundly relational practices—can be linked and deployed as challenges to traditional western ideals of rationality and individuality, in subversive and ethically compelling ways" (231). In gathering together the courage to weave together her own story with the partly historical and partly fictional version of a maternal and feminized Moravian spirituality, H.D. acts as both mother and midwife to a tiny window of peace in the midst of the horrors of war-time London.

¹I am indebted to Jane Augustine's introductory essay (1998) to *The Gift*. She points to important new directions in H.D. scholarship that sparked my imagination as to the intersections of maternity and spirituality in *The Gift*.

²H.D. writes in "H.D. by Delia Alton" (1949-51): "I assembled *The Gift* during the early war-years, but without the analysis and the illuminating doctrine or philosophy of Sigmund Freud, I would hardly have found the clue or the bridge between the child-life, the memories of the peaceful Bethlehem, and the orgy of destruction, later to be witnessed and lived through in London" (192). Thanks to Freud, H.D. was able to tap into the resources of childhood, but the material content of that childhood and the inspiration came from the world of Moravian spirituality.

³Rachel Blau Du Plessis (1984) is among the critics who took an early lead in emphasizing the spiritual intentions of *The Gift*. She calls it a "redemptive drama [...] a conduit for this spiritual politics" (179). Similarly, Diana Collecott (1984) calls this work a "religious and prophetic text" (x). Echoing her predecessors, Susan Stanford Friedman (1990), who has been instrumental in shaping the critical discourse on H.D., writes that *The Gift* enacts "the poet's gyno-vision of (re)birth for a world caught in the death spiral of war" (354).

⁴Due to limitations of space, I will not explain in any detail Kristeva's (1984 [1974]) theory of poetic language. I merely mention it here because her thought seems almost to run like a leitmotif through H.D.'s writing with its seemingly infinite semiotic heterogeneity, and because my own reading practices are so permeated by Kristeva's work. I refer readers to *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) for an introduction to her matrocentric semiotics.

⁵It is likely that H.D. was aware of and perhaps even intended this particular polysemicity, since German was the language of the Moravian community and, although she did not speak German as a child, she could read well. The

linguistic and cultural link between her German heritage and the German enemy in *The Gift* is a source of conflict but in the end also proves paradoxically to be a source of healing for the narrator.

⁶*Mer* is also the first of three terms in “MER-KA-BA,” the star tetrahedron, a three dimensional representation of the heart chakra symbol, the place where spirit and matter meet. It is an ancient symbol of sacred geometry demonstrating the concept of the inverted energy field that surrounds all forms of life. H.D. may or may not have intended this extension, but what matters most is that this meaning of *mer* is in keeping with the kind of cosmic connectivity that she embraced.

⁷This “mother” passage is paralleled in poetic form in section 8 of *Tribute to Angels* in *Trilogy* (H.D., 1973). Here, we see a similar row of maternal figures: “mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary” (71). They are with the exception of the latin *mater* identical to the ones listed in *The Gift*. But this time they are linked to *marah* and *mar*, mentioned earlier in the poem: “a word most bitter, *marah*,/ a word bitterer still, *mar*” (71, her emphasis). *Marah* is a holy site in the Hebrew Bible, where the concept of the symbolic red heifer was introduced, the inspiration for the golden calf. *Mar* is associated with Mary and the symbol of water in the Greek/Hebrew tradition. Indeed, H.D. marries them in the context of the poem: “*marah-mar*/ are melted, fuse and join// and change and alter” (71). They are altered, but that “change or alter” also forms a semantic “*altar*” to the proliferation of mother goddesses.

⁸A glance at the titles of H.D.’s works are one indication of her name playing, which also signals the subversion of genres. She writes with consistency on the cusp between autobiography and fiction. *Hermetic Definition*, reads acronymically as *H.D.*, and many other works begin with her own initial, the letter H: *HER*, *Helen in Egypt*, *Heliadora*, *Hedgehog*, *Hedylus*, *Hymnen* and so on.

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