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VISION, PARANOIA, AND THE CREATIVE POWER OF OBSESSIVE INTERPRETATION

The concept of parataxis is a familiar one in the study of H. D.'s poetry.¹ H. D.'s immediate and stark juxtapositions of images and phrases, especially prominent in her early poetry, require her reader to attempt to discover the routes of connection between them; because they appear near each other, and because we assume that these juxtapositions have been made purposefully by the author, we look for hidden, subtle linkages to form a coherent whole. By the time of *Trilogy* and thereafter, however, her poetic technique shifts away from this heavily paratactic style and toward a more discursive approach. But just as we readers of H. D.'s early work find ourselves in highly paratactic reading environments, H. D.'s later characters and speakers, in works such as *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*, often find themselves in paratactic worlds which they must also interpret. A fundamental assumption of their interpretive methods is that if two things are near each other, they must be related in some way; proximity implies connection. This applies not only to spatial nearness, but particularly to linguistic similarities among sets of words or names, and to Poundian subject-rhyme as well. Since the names Paris and Eris resemble one another so closely, Helen seeks an arcane significance to a seeming linguistic coincidence in *Helen in Egypt*; since Delia Alton, the protagonist of *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, has been rejected by both Allen Flint and Lord Howell, she looks for other structural connections in their subject-rhyme with one another, their functional similarities in similar episodes from her past. The characters and poetic speakers of such works devote themselves to uncovering these connections, finding, as H. D. writes in *Trilogy*, "the meaning that words hide."²

This method of interpretation, in which the subject seeks to uncover the hidden connections that link various phenomena to one central source, is structurally quite similar to the central interpretive strategy of paranoia. David Trotter, in his study of paranoid fictions by Joseph Conrad, T.E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis, and

¹ I would like to thank Professor Cyrena Pondrom for her assistance and advice with this essay, particularly for her suggestion to examine the relationship between *Helen in Egypt* and *The Sword Went Out to Sea*.

² H. D., *H. D. Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louis Martz (New York: New Directions, 1986), 540.

D.H. Lawrence, describes paranoid interpretation in terms of its high degree of structure and systemization:

The paranoiac's delusions are from the very beginning "systematized," as Richard von-Krafft-Ebing put it, and thus constitute a formal "structure." The consistency of that system or structure depends on its ability to eliminate randomness: to convert the material trace an event leaves in the world into a sign which only ever has one meaning, one value.³

Like the speaker of *Trilogy*, Delia Alton, and Helen, the paranoid subject focuses on understanding the place of each phenomenon in a single overarching system. The paranoiac is unable to accept a vision of reality that is fractured or "messy"; therefore, she or he believes that there is a hidden, arcane meaning to be found, extracted, and understood, and "goes looking for secrets, for concealed motives and intentions."⁴ In developing this understanding of paranoia, Trotter focuses on Freud's emphasis on "the constructiveness of paranoid delusion" in his study of Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. He stresses Freud's contention that paranoid delusions are acts of *recovery* and *reconstruction*, in which the paranoiac "rebuilds the world which has been destroyed around him."⁵ This construction of a seamless, unified interpretation of reality around a single idea in response to trauma recalls the creative interpretive strategies of Helen, seeking truth following the horrors of Troy and Achilles's attack on the beach; *Sword*'s Delia Alton, attempting to understand Howell's rejection through its place in the patterns of her individual past and the historical past; and the speaker of *Trilogy*, seeking the "One" following the destruction of World War II. To be clear, this is not to say that *Trilogy*, *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, and *Helen in Egypt* are "paranoid" texts, that H. D. was herself paranoid, or that she intended to develop paranoid narratives in these poems. Instead, I wish to explore the structural correspondences between the interpretive methods of paranoia and the visionary interpretation of a paratactic reality used in much of H. D.'s work. We can view these methods as isomorphic, methods that share strikingly similar forms without necessarily sharing common cause or result. With this understanding, then, we can study these texts alongside theories of paranoia in art to reexamine their speakers' obsessive interpretive approaches as they work to fold all experience, and even all history, within a single obsessive idea. I find that examining these interpretive strategies in the light of paranoid interpretation—particularly, as I will examine below, Salvador Dalí's method of paranoia-criticism—helps us better understand the dramatically expansive scope of the attempts of H. D.'s speakers to reshape the world through their interpretive power.

³ David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

Susan Stanford Friedman has shown the extent to which H. D.'s work following her psychoanalytical sessions with Sigmund Freud in the 1930s is rooted in those sessions, arguing that this relationship, alongside H. D.'s esoteric religious studies, "provided her with an interrelated framework of quest that nourished the explosion of a new kind of poetry and prose."⁶ Friedman points to Freud's vision of the unconscious as a space of "associative thought" in contrast with "conscious logical thought."⁷ H. D. saw the exploration of memory as the reading of "a visual language, the 'hieroglyphics' of the unconscious mind,"⁸ what Friedman calls a "fourth-dimensional time element" in which "the thread of associations running through the unconscious wove her past, present, future, and fantasy into one out-of-time tapestry."⁹ Friedman convincingly demonstrates the Freudian roots of H. D.'s practice of creative association, in which H. D., following Freud's theory of the workings of the unconscious, uses the past to understand her own "family history," and uses that same personal history to "translate the hidden dynamics of historic event (Trojan War) and mythic struggle recorded in the Amen-temple (Osiris-Set-Isis-Horus)."¹⁰ Freud's system, she writes, "provided H. D. with the logic by which she could relate the Greeks to the Egyptians, the Egyptians to the Jews, the Jews to modern Christians, and all of these to herself."¹¹

This method of associative interpretation of elements of a paratactic reality, then, is one in which H. D., working from associative methods developed in Freudian analysis, seeks to discover the hidden ways in which seemingly disparate phenomena—all phenomena, potentially—are related to one central idea. In *Trilogy*, this takes the form of syncretically blending together various religious traditions to find the underlying truth; her desire, she writes in *The Walls Do Not Fall*, is to

correlate faith with faith,

recover the secret of Isis,
which is: there was One

in the beginning, Creator,
Fosterer, Begetter, the Same-forever.¹²

Delia Alton, in *Sword*, works to connect her relationship with Howell to other relationships with men in her life, and then to a larger, overarching pattern of

⁶ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H. D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), ix.

⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁸ As Friedman shows, this metaphor of hieroglyphics, so central to *Trilogy* and, particularly, *Helen in Egypt*, is heavily Freudian.

⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰ Ibid., 83.

¹¹ Ibid., 85.

¹² H. D., *Collected Poems*, 541.

war and violence. Helen similarly professes a faith in a fundamental unity, asserting strongly, "I say there is only one image, / one picture ... / I say there is one treasure, // one desire."¹³ Each of these works is in large part concerned with finding and explicating the ways in which people, places, actions, and concepts first blend into one another through structural or linguistic parallels, and finally arise from or return to an underlying unified source. Employing such interpretive methods, H. D.'s speakers, characters, and narrators interpret the world through the keys of their own lives, and, conversely, understand their lives as embodying larger patterns implicit in the world.

Trilogy, H. D.'s three-part poem written during and after World War II, has received, in recent years, the most attention of H. D.'s mid- and late career work. She uses the languages of alchemy and Kabbalistic mysticism in this poem, particularly in its second section, "Tribute to the Angels," to present hidden truth much like that sought by Helen. In one of the more well-known passages from "Tribute," the narrator instructs the reader to "polish the crucible / and in the bowl distill // a word most bitter, *marah*, / a word bitterer still, *mar*," and to continue the alchemical procedure "till *marah-mar* / are melted, fuse and join // and change and alter." Through this linguistic alchemy, the narrator produces first the sequence "mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary," and finally, simply, "Star of the Sea, / Mother."¹⁴ In this sequence, *marah*, Hebrew for "bitterness," and *mar*, meaning "sea" in both Spanish and Portuguese, are, by virtue of their linguistic nearness, melted together to produce a host of words relating to mothers and waters, culminating in one hidden truth, the essence of the sequence – the Mother as embodiment of the sea. The "meaning that [these] words hide," then, is a fundamental connection between women, motherhood, and the sea.

Helen, the central character of H. D.'s late epic *Helen in Egypt*, further develops this interpretive method, the exploration and elaboration of which is a primary focus of the poem. Helen employs it to develop a unified understanding of her relationships with the other characters in various accounts of the Trojan War and their significance in a larger mythological context. In "Leuké," for example, the second of the poem's three sections, Helen explores the "subtle genealogy"¹⁵ that connects Paris (her lover in Troy) with Achilles (her lover in H. D.'s depiction of Helen's existence after Troy). Earlier, Helen had theorized a relationship between Eros and Eris, who are "balanced in the mind of Helen" as relatives of Ares who personify the competing Freudian urges of love and death.¹⁶ Now, H. D. writes in a headnote, "Eris is this fire-brand, Paris, and Eros is again, the 'unconquerable child'."¹⁷ The relationships among Helen, Achilles, and Paris can be understood, the poem suggests, through study of the relationships among Eros, Ares, and Eris.

¹³ H. D., *Helen in Egypt* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 243.

¹⁴ H. D., *Collected Poems*, 552.

¹⁵ H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, 184.

¹⁶ Ibid., 183. Eris is Ares's sister, and Eros his son.

¹⁷ Ibid., 184.

Helen explores these relationships through verbal parallels (such as the rhyming names of Paris and Eris) and symbolic parallels (including Achilles as an embodiment of Ares and war, and Helen as an embodiment of Eros and love), producing an intricately woven tapestry of hidden, esoteric connections to rival any popular conspiracy thriller. Moreover, Helen develops a reading of her story in which Paris, "Troy's last king,"¹⁸ is her symbolic child with Achilles, an interpretation in which "he [Paris], my first lover, / was created by my last."¹⁹ This aspect of the "subtle genealogy" is based on the similarities Helen develops between the names of Paris and Pyrrhus, Achilles's son who slew Priam, Paris's father; based on the phonetic proximity of "Paris" and "Pyrrhus," Helen concludes, "it was not the legitimate / Pyrrhus who slew Priam, the father of Paris, // but Paris himself."²⁰ From Helen's interpretive perspective, then, since Pyrrhus, Achilles's son, killed Priam, Paris's father, and since Paris and Pyrrhus can be related through their similar names, Paris is, in a sense, Achilles's son.

Helen often expands upon the possible connections among characters through consideration of the characters' mythic and symbolic significances, further complicating her interpretive model of her experience. These tangled relationships among Paris, Pyrrhus, Priam, and Achilles might suggest, then, that the union of war (Ares/Achilles) with strife or death (Eris/Paris) can produce love (Eros/Helen), as Eris's apple caused a war (i.e., Ares) which led to Helen's encounter with Paris (Eros); or that a union between the principles of love and war (Helen's encounter with Achilles that opens the poem) can produce strife (the child Paris, an instigator of war via both his abduction of Helen and his hypothesized connection to Eris, and her apple). Neither of these will be Helen's final interpretation of the relationships, but both are representative of the kind of unitive hermeneutic interpretation that permeates the poem, as Helen seeks to discover hidden connections that link all things together into an underlying unity. Like the narrator of *Trilogy*, Helen obsessively searches for an interpretive frame through which each fact of existence, no matter how trivial, may be explained.

The 2007 publication of *The Sword Went Out to Sea*,²¹ an experimental autobiographical novel written by H. D. during and after her recovery from an emotional breakdown, provides us with a crucial link between the methods of H. D.'s wartime poem *Trilogy*, and the postwar *Helen*. In this novel, Delia Alton, H. D.'s fictionalized version of herself, repeatedly revisits a traumatic encounter with a Lord Howell, a British Royal Air Force war hero who rejects her attempts to give him what she believes to be messages from the spirits of some of his

¹⁸ Ibid., 215

¹⁹ Ibid., 185.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ H. D., *The Sword Went Out to Sea (Synthesis of a Dream)*, by Delia Alton, ed. Cynthia Hogue and Julie Vandivere (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2007).

downed pilots.²² As she attempts to recover from the devastation of Howell's rejection, she begins to redevelop a sense of personal power through her interpretive efforts—first with the pilots' messages, then by interpreting her relationship with Howell as part of a repeated pattern in her life experiences, and finally through an artistic imagining of a series of parallel relationships through history, creating a chain of women and men extending from ancient Greece to the present.

After Howell refuses to speak with her about the pilots' messages, Delia takes the responsibility of interpreting the content of the messages for herself, writing, "If Lord Howell wouldn't or couldn't tell the true tale, then I would have to do it."²³ For example, she examines one set of words—"c-o-r-n, g-a-l-e, o-a-r"—which she suspects of having particular significance due to the "heightened perceptions" of the spirits, lending them an "acute sense of coming events."²⁴ She first wonders whether the messages had a "purely practical nature," warning of something like "*atmospheric conditions due to atomic disturbance possibly about to cause unexpected cloud-bursts and erosions.*"²⁵ But while Delia does not discount the potential import of the public or societal implications of the messages, she increasingly finds, after Howell's rejection, that their greatest importance lies in their potential for helping her interpret the patterns and signs of her own personal history.

As Delia shifts her focus away from the messages' potential significance for postwar society and toward their possible meanings for her own life, H. D., through Delia, greatly intensifies her use of the visionary interpretive methods discussed above, forming webs of association well beyond those of *Trilogy* and developing a method she would continue to employ heavily in *Helen in Egypt*. Delia does not abandon her obsessive focus on spiritualism, Howell, and the pilots' messages; in fact, she returns to them throughout the novel, finding more and more resonances and associations in them. She goes to great lengths in the middle of *Sword*, for example, to establish that her spirit guide, known simply as "Z," was in fact the same Z who spoke to Howell and his circle. To do this, she traces out a set of associations from "nenufar," another name Z had given himself, a name through which Z taught her "this sort of divination":

He began it with nenufar, but the dictionary spells it nenuphar; in English it is a specialized word, though the French *nénufar* is the name for water-lily. But that was not enough. Z balanced, simplified or coded it, by spelling water-lis. That suggested *fleur-de-lis* and Z, I

²² Howell is the novel's version of Hugh Caswall Tremenheere Lord Dowding, the officer in command of the RAF during the Battle of Britain. Hogue and Vandivere provide biographical context of the relationship between H. D. and Dowding in their introduction to *Sword*.

²³ Ibid., 93.

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Ibid., 93. Note the telegraphic nature of her interpretation of the spirits' message, lending the warning a more reasonable, down-to-earth quality and avoiding the flowery language of other séance conversations she reads about in the Stanford House library later in the novel.

think, meant us to understand by water-lis that English-French was indicated. ... I looked at the word for a long time. Then I got out Garry's hieroglyphs. There was a little picture of Nenu, the Egyptian sky-god. His name is found in the zodiac. His picture or his name is [a pair of parallel zig-zag lines] which is the sign of the eleventh house of the Zodiac, Aquarius. And *far* was all right, too – *phar* would have spoiled it. So we had ancient Egypt and the present, and *far* spelt backwards, is RAF.²⁶

Delia is able to develop, out of a single word, an intricate series of connections between her Z and Howell, confirming her sense of connection to him despite his rejection of her. Further, in probing each detail of "nenufar," or "water-lis," she lends her "divination" a host of symbolic importances, including her fascination with Egyptian mythology and the hoped-for Aquarian Age. Delia's approach, like Helen's, is deftly able to, as Trotter writes of his paranoid subjects, "eliminate randomness"; any piece of information can seemingly be integrated into the pattern through which she comes to understand her experience.

Her guiding principle in this self-investigation will be a metaphor of a spiraled seashell: "We go round and round," she writes, as "we make the pattern or spiral of our life, as a shell-fish does."²⁷ Rather than proceeding directly forward in a straight line, our lives, she believes, spiral around themselves, and familiar patterns are repeated throughout. Delia experiences such a realization after contemplating one of the pilots' messages about a door being shut between themselves and Howell, which leads her to a memory of a moment with her former husband, Geoffrey, "when a door in a crowded room in a Flanders inn slammed shut."²⁸ She then continues to explore her past, realizing that she has experienced four parallel cycles, with four different men, "four extravagant and illuminating occasions that ended with a shut door."²⁹ Reexamining her past relationships with Peter van Eck, Jan Verstigen, Allen Flint, and Geoffrey Alton—identified by Hogue and Vandivere as corresponding to Peter Rodeck, J. J. Van der Leeuw, Ezra Pound, and Richard Aldington, respectively³⁰—along the lines of their structural similarities, she is then able to revisit her encounter with Howell (another "shut door," after his repudiation of her work) and analyze it according to these insights. As she fits her past into a personal pattern, she feels better able to grasp it, to find its hidden meanings.

Once Delia has "discovered" this pattern of her own life, the scope of the novel expands from her attempt to make sense of her own story, her own moment in history, to a much broader historical canvas. Just as one's own life proceeds in a spiraled shape, repeating familiar patterns, so too, she believes, does human history. She uses this perceived pattern of male rejection of female insight, based

²⁶ Ibid., 138-39.

²⁷ Ibid., 40.

²⁸ Ibid., 41.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hogue and Vandivere, introduction to *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, liv-lvi.

on her individual experience with Howell, to understand a series of crucial historical moments. The majority of the remainder of "Summerdream" employs this freely associative reasoning to blend together a set of stories from various historical periods, including ancient Greece, Rome in the time of Caesar, and Normandy at the time of the 1066 invasion of Britain, each of which focuses on a woman's relationship with an imperious male. The first-person narrative voice of Delia blends with the first-person narrators of these stories to explore the past in order to make sense of her relationship with Howell in the present, but also to gain insight into the larger forces and urges (such as love and war) that shaped these historical moments. Significantly, each of the male figures in these relationships—Pericles, Caesar, the Duke of Normandy—is a military figure, like Lord Howell, and each story is set in a time of violence or war. As Delia weaves these stories together, she attempts to understand the interplay of gender, power, and violence that affects each relationship, and the society in which each relationship is embedded.

Thus, in a representative example, Stella, a former lover of Caesar's, invites him to meet with her. As Delia, in the novel's opening pages, pondered why Howell responded to her initial request for a meeting—the first line of the book is, "I had no claim on him, whatever"³¹—Stella's first question to Caesar is, "'Why did you come?'"³² Stella's purpose is to warn Caesar of his impending assassination and remind him that Rome "needs [his] help" because "[t]here is so much to be done,"³³ recalling Delia's sense of the great importance of the "work" that she believed the pilots wished to undertake with Howell. But Caesar, with faith in his own power, ignores her warning, as Howell rejected Delia's messages, and abandons her.

In these chapters, as Delia uses the techniques of her art to reimagine history and her own story, her stated method is to follow "the Z or the bee-line in its zig-zag track or path across time," using an image from her sessions with the spirit guide Z, a method which allows her to view time as "conveniently pleated."³⁴ Through treating her waking experiences as Freudian dream-material, thereby transmuting them into art, she finds a sense of peace she was unable to find previously; as she writes earlier in "Summerdream," "I was not, in my heart of hearts, completely satisfied with my explanation of [Howell's] attitude to myself and the RAF messages, until I saw him as part of that world of poetry."³⁵

This understanding of Delia's visionary interpretation of experience, a way of seeing the place of phenomena in a "world of poetry," brings us to a fundamental question about such interpretive practice: Is such interpretation a process of discovery, meant to illuminate something that is already "there," or is it a creative action, playfully crafting webs of connection grounded in

³¹ H. D., *The Sword Went Out to Sea.*, 5.

³² Ibid., 225.

³³ Ibid., 227.

³⁴ Ibid., 214.

³⁵ Ibid., 155.

imagination, rather than reality? Helen Sword, examining the subtly gendered power dynamics of prophecy and vision in H. D.'s work, finds her work after *Trilogy* to represent a step back from her earlier explorations of gender, power, and prophecy. While acknowledging *Helen in Egypt* as an "important, epic" work, Sword nevertheless claims that it "lack[s] the prophetic resonances of *Trilogy*," relegating H. D.'s post-*Trilogy* career to a "postscript" at the end of her chapter.³⁶ Sword's postscript focuses on H. D.'s spiritualist interests, which peaked during and immediately after World War II, and primarily discusses the unpublished *Majic Ring*, H. D.'s first attempt to work into literary material her séance experiences with Arthur Bhaduri, and her resulting relationship with Dowding. Sword views H.D.'s wartime spiritualism, focused on attempts to communicate with spirits in séances, as representing a step back from her earlier experiences with inspiration. She contrasts H. D.'s wartime metaphors for such experience—receiving a telegram, or a telephone call, or a message over the wireless³⁷—with her earlier metaphor for divine inspiration of the film projector, a metaphor in which, while the god (in this case, Apollo) may still be "the patron... of prophetic insight, ... it is still H. D. who 'projects' and thereby controls the image."³⁸ For Sword, then, the "mechanical metaphors" of *Majic Ring* and *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, "unlike her earlier projection metaphor... effectively [resolve] the question of whether divine revelation comes from outside or from within the poet."³⁹ If H. D. writes, in other words, that the séance messages were like a telegraphic message, then, since such a message must come from somewhere else, the medium receiving them is simply that—a medium of transmission—and thus lacks the creative power, the control over the prophetic message, that Sword finds in *Trilogy*.

To the contrary, however, the text of *The Sword Went Out to Sea* is generally ambivalent about the source of these messages. While Delia usually seems to assume that they are actually messages from the spirits of dead pilots, she frequently provides her unconscious mind as an alternative source for the messages. In describing her first encounter with an RAF pilot, John, she writes that John "kept coming back or maybe, I made him up, contracting my arm and wrist muscles as Flammarion [an author skeptical of spiritualism] said one did. Or I just drew him back – or drew or spelt or spelled the name, John." She continues later, "I may have jogged the yes and the no-no from the table each time [in response to her questions to John], by contracting or expanding those

³⁶ Helen Sword, *Engendering Inspiration: Visionary Strategies in Rilke, Lawrence, and H. D.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 163.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 151. This leads into a reading of *Trilogy* in which Sword focuses on the speaker's interpretation of physical reality, as opposed to immediate, unmediated visionary moments. The importance of this, Sword argues, is that in *Trilogy*, the speaker herself chooses the content to be interpreted; inspiration comes when, and where, she chooses.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

arm and wrist muscles, at the prompting of the unconscious mind – or I may not have. The point was, I was happy.”⁴⁰

In her analysis, Sword does not examine, moreover, another telling comparison that H. D. employs to describe this relationship. Immediately prior to Delia’s describing herself as “like a wire, across which a voice was speaking” (precisely the kind of passively receptive image Sword focuses on to make her case), H. D. provides an alternative simile: “I felt like a battery, negative or positive, whichever you will, that had to be completed by another battery.”⁴¹ In this conception of her situation, Delia and Howell are batteries with opposing but complementary charges; while this image, suggesting that Delia requires a partner in order to be “completed,” certainly embodies the kind of “problematic relationships with... powerful male figures” that Sword identifies in *Helen in Egypt*,⁴² it provides an alternative way of understanding Delia’s role in this process. Here, rather than a wire, a passive medium of transmission, she is a battery—a source of power.

Further, in revisiting the messages after Howell’s rejection, Delia refuses to reduce them to either external communication from spirits or internally produced, subconscious material. Rather, she layers both interpretations together to increase the interpretive work she can do with the messages, treating them at times as cryptic, premonitory messages and at times as subconscious Freudian dream-material to be analyzed. As she considers whether she “spelt” or “spelled” the name John (she provides the emphasis on “spelled”), she suggests a magical power for language, the potential for “spelt” words to become “spells.” Whether she “spelt” a message from an external source, or “spelled” a magical incantation from her own mind, the end result is the same: “I was happy.” This, I believe, is how we should understand the importance of the messages, just as we understand the interwoven historical fictions of “Summerdream”; their importance has less to do with whether they are externally or internally produced, or whether they are real or imagined, and more to do with what Delia, and H. D., are able to *do* with them, through the logic of poetry and fiction. For this reason, Delia tells us, her associative method, following a jagged path from moment to moment across time, “is very easy to understand... if you like fairy-tales or *Märchen*.”⁴³ H. D.’s response to the crisis of agency engendered by the war, and by her break with Dowding, is this “Z or bee-line” as a method of exploration of “pleated” time through art, which would form the basis of her late-career epic *Helen in Egypt*.

⁴⁰ H. D., *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, 27. Further examples include, “If this was a fairy-tale, it was very real to me. It was true,” 32; “Nor can I say positively, that Lad and Larry, Ralph, John and the rest were disembodied spirits, or whether I made them up,” 46; “I suppose if we delved deep enough, we could rationalize the table, the messages and the whole of the psychic phenomena that Lord Howell and I came to blows about,” 53; and the description of her work as either “messages from the RAF” or “the submerged content of my own subconscious mind,” 113.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴² Sword, *Engendering Inspiration*, 119.

⁴³ H. D., *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, 214.

Helen in Egypt: "Hieroglyphic" reading and paranoia-criticism

Just as "Summerdream" traces "the trajectory of Delia's return to psychic and physical health"⁴⁴ through her process of repeatedly creatively reimagining her relationship with Howell, so too does *Helen in Egypt* feature a central character constantly reexamining and reevaluating past traumas to obtain peace. As Helen reflects on events before, during, and after the Trojan War, she interprets her history and surroundings in a manner similar to the method of "divination" that Delia claimed to have learned from her sessions with Z. H. D. uses *Helen in Egypt* to examine issues of interpretation and power that have deep roots in *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, and in the events that served as its raw material; the journeys of the central characters in both works spring from an encounter between a spiritually-inclined woman and a weakened war hero who violently rejects her attempt to give him a message of great importance. Throughout this poem, Helen attempts to comprehend the encounter through examination of prominent figures in her life (particularly Helen, Achilles, Theseus, and Paris), searching their personal histories, their symbolic importance, clues hidden in their names, and their relationships with the divine to understand why Achilles attacked her on the shore when she uttered the name of his mother, Thetis.

This endeavor proceeds via leaps of interpretive associations, bringing a wide range of people, deities, places, and concepts together into a complex web of connections. Salvador Dalí names a similar practice he employs in his art paranoia-criticism or Paranoiac-Critical Activity. In his essay "The Conquest of the Irrational," he glosses paranoia as a "delirium of interpretative association entailing a systematic structure," and then defines Paranoiac-Critical Activity as a "*spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the interpretative-critical association of delirious phenomena*."⁴⁵ He celebrates the creative possibility of paranoia and its interpretive abilities, viewing it as a legitimate path to knowledge. The power of paranoia-criticism, Dalí believes, is in its ability to destabilize what we commonly agree upon as reality; it is a process "aimed at discounting... all that, in some form or another, might seem familiar to us."⁴⁶ As Haim Finkelstein writes, for Dalí, "the paranoiac delirium associates different realities by exploring them irrationally, and forms a systematic structure which, in itself, is an interpretation of these elements in the context of the new relationships formed between them."⁴⁷

This interpretive technique proceeds along similar lines to the interpretation of paratactic phenomena in H. D.'s work discussed above. When faced with juxtaposed phenomena with no apparent connection other than their proximity

⁴⁴ Hogue and Vandivere, introduction to *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, xxxvii.

⁴⁵ Salvador Dalí, "The Conquest of the Irrational," in *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, ed. Haim Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 267.

⁴⁶ Salvador Dalí, "The Sanitary Goat," in *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, 231.

⁴⁷ Haim Finkelstein, "Dalí's Paranoiac-Criticism or The Exercise of Freedom," *Twentieth Century Literature* 21, no. 1 (February, 1975), 64.

(whether spatial, thematic, linguistic, or other), both Dalí's model paranoiac and H. D.'s speakers and characters will search for the hidden links to bring them together, resulting in a unified final product. We may read *Helen in Egypt* along these lines, I propose, as "the creation of a structure of interpretation that virtually exists independently of the interpreter," a structure formed through "an association of elements that would have been downright arbitrary were it not for the obsessive idea that relates them to each other."⁴⁸ The question of whether H. D. saw herself as finding hidden associations or creating new ones is therefore largely rendered moot; what is important is the creative power with which H. D., through her speakers, is able to bring her vision of reality into being, and what she, and her readers, are able to do with that vision. Like Dalí, H. D. is concerned with challenging shared cultural assumptions through her interpretive explorations: in H. D.'s case, assumptions about love; about the figure of Helen and her role in the Trojan War; about masculinity and femininity, and their relationship to power; about the meaning of motherhood; and so on. And, like Dalí's paranoia-criticism, H. D.'s interpretive method represents, as Finkelstein writes of Dalí, an "effort to project [her] own obsessions... on the world at large and thus endow them with a measure of universality,"⁴⁹ as she builds a new, general understanding of history and human relationships out of the highly specific, individualized experiences of her life.

H. D. opens *Helen in Egypt* with a clear statement of this revisionary nature, signaling that it will in many ways defamiliarize familiar ideas about Helen and her story. The poem's first book is simply titled "Pallinode," naming it as a poem of retraction. While H. D.'s earlier short poem "Helen" had treated the same character, it shares little thematic similarity to *Helen in Egypt*, which, I believe, is better read as a palinode not to any previous poem by the same author, but to the entire tradition of art treating the figure of Helen. The narrator,⁵⁰ in the introductory text to the first section of the poem, opens the entire work with this simple declaration: "We all know the story of Helen of Troy."⁵¹ This first phrase, "We all know," speaks to a community of knowledge, one which this opening suggests the poem will challenge; all of us know this story (or think that we know it), but it is a story that will require a retraction, a retelling, for a fuller understanding. The remainder of this introductory text reinforces this notion by placing this poem in the context of other palinodes, retractions of previous abuse of Helen, by Stesichorus of Sicily and Euripides. While "[w]e all know the story of Helen of Troy" (presumably through Homer's *Iliad*), *Helen in Egypt* tells us immediately that Helen's story is one that is only truly understood through the act of reinterpretation.

⁴⁸ Haim Finkelstein, "Dalí's Small Stage of Paranoiac Ceremonial," in *A Companion to Spanish Surrealism*, ed. Robert Havard (Woodbridge, England: Tamesis, 2004), 126.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁵⁰ Each of the individual poems that make up *Helen in Egypt* is preceded by a prose overview or summary, written by H. D. after the completion of the poems themselves. I will refer to this voice as the poem's narrator, to distinguish from the voice of Helen which narrates the vast majority of the poems themselves.

⁵¹ H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, 1.

H. D. subsequently ties the issue of interpretation, a form of vision, to the literal faculty of sight when she reminds us that Stesichorus "was said to have been struck blind" after abusing Helen in an earlier work, but was then "restored to sight" when he later retold her story, retracting his earlier abuses, in his own *Pallinode*. Euripides too, the introduction notes, followed a similar pattern of abuse and retraction, having been "restored to sight" after his abuses of Helen in *The Trojan Women*. H. D.'s poem will build upon these past revisions of Helen's story, which assume that she was "transposed or translated from Greece into Egypt"⁵² rather than ever having been in Troy. As Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas writes, H. D.'s choice of "translated," rather than a more obvious verb such as "transported," "hints that the poem will concern itself more with questions of writing and reading than with asserting the authority of one narrative over others."⁵³ The real purpose of the poem is *not* to find the one true story of Helen, then—in fact, the poem will explore many different possibilities about what "really happened" to Helen—but to retract and revise ideas of power, authority, and gender that the story "we all know" about Helen is based upon, ideas that the story has reinforced in its function as a piece of cultural knowledge. Like Delia's constant return to her break with Lord Howell in *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, *Helen in Egypt* will continually revisit a set of central questions about the nature of Helen and her relationship with Achilles that frame the poem. Ultimately, such interpretation is less concerned with discovering literal truth than it is focused on creatively constructing new modes of thinking and understanding.

In contrast with this strategy of rereading and reinterpretation, a strategy focused on multiplicity and possibility, on exploring an expanse of hidden signs and arcane meanings, Achilles and other characters in the poem tend to look for concrete, definitive answers to their driving questions. As Helen follows trails hidden in characters' names, or in their mythological or symbolic functions, or in their relationships to one another, she continually accretes new "data" into her interpretive model, but refuses to collapse this model into any easily stated truth. Her model is therefore always open for revision, resisting other characters' attempts to reduce it into mere fact or simple experience. Achilles, in contrast, is obsessed with literal truth, with learning which Helen was real, the Helen who was at Troy or the Helen who is here in Egypt, and asks her, "Helena, which was the dream, / which was the veil of Cytherea?"⁵⁴ For Achilles, this is a question with a single answer: either Helen of Troy was real, or Helen in Egypt is real. One or the other must have been a dream. This method of interpretation, focused on ideas of sole, authoritative truth, is tied in the poem to Achilles's role in the hierarchies of the Greek military, a form of destructive power reminiscent of the war that Delia attempts to comprehend in *Sword*. Achilles, as an embodiment of Ares and War, "the Achilles of legend, Lord of the Myrmidons,

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, "Seaward: H. D.'s Helen in Egypt as a Response to Pound's *Cantos*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 44, no. 4 (Winter, 1998), 476.

⁵⁴ H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, 36.

indisputable dictator," has control of an "iron-ring" of loyal followers who obey his "Command."⁵⁵ This "Command" is the name for "the adamant rule of the inner circle of the warrior caste," a power Achilles says is "bequest from the past, / from father to son," his "father," "brother," "lover," and "God."⁵⁶ While Achilles and his Myrmidons may share the rigid ontological certainty often associated with paranoia, it is only Helen who possesses its creative powers of interpretation and association.

The Command, as the embodiment of a stereotypically masculine form of power, is thus explicitly linked to his heritage of the power structures of patriarchy, passed down through his male lineage. It is a structure of power that Helen will attempt to understand in her attempts to redeem Achilles in the poem, mirroring Delia's attempts to understand the larger forces behind the violence of the war she has recently experienced, as well as the individual forces that led Howell (himself, like Achilles, an embodiment of military might in a recent war) to reject her. It is a kind of power that explains both the destruction of war and the violence of individual rejection.

Paris, whom Helen later encounters on the island of Leuké, embodies violence both in his role as the slayer of Achilles and through his insistence that Helen did not survive the war but rather died during it. He claims:

I am the first in all history
to say, she died, died, died
when the Walls fell;

what mystery is more subtle than this?
what spell is more potent?⁵⁷

He attempts to collapse the multiple possibilities of Helen's narrative into a single story; moreover, his version of the story insists upon her violent death during Troy's fall. No "mystery" or "spell," he believes, can possess more power, or potency, than his forceful declaration of her death. Delia's creative magic of "spelling" (the aforementioned "spelling" of words and names in séances), the "sea-enchantment"⁵⁸ of Thetis that Helen sees in Achilles's eyes, and the larger process of creative interpretation these examples embody, are thus rejected by Paris in favor of his flat declarative statements. He then jealously rejects Achilles as her lover, a possible vehicle of her rescue, when he asserts, in response to her claim that she "did not die on the stairs, / that the love of Achilles sustained [her]," "I say he never loved you."⁵⁹ This is Paris's tyranny, a kind of epistemological tyranny—the assertion of his narrative as final truth, to

⁵⁵ Ibid., 51. The similarities to Howell and his group of RAF pilots are clear.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 144.

the exclusion of any other possibilities, and the rejection of the associative possibilities of Helen's open-ended, interpretive approach to truth.

Helen, like Delia, will reject such power rooted in violence—both the violence of war and the interpretive violence of reductive, simplistic thinking, thinking which closes off alternative interpretations—as a means to genuine truth, however. “[Y]ou may ask forever, you may penetrate / every shrine, an initiate, / and remain unenlightened at last,”⁶⁰ she says, linking, through the choice of “penetrate,” this sort of interpretation to the kind of phallic force embodied in the militaristic “iron-ring.” What is needed, the poem suggests, is a gentler approach, an intuitive understanding of possibilities rather than a violent attempt to seize any single answer: an approach that can, like Dalí's paranoia-criticism, combine a wide range of phenomena into a vast conglomerate to challenge preconceived notions of reality. While Helen at first attempts to understand the question of her past, the question of “which was the dream, / which was the veil of Cytheraea?”, via Achilles's literal-minded approach, she soon comes to understand that the question of her “real” existence is one to be understood not literally, but instinctively and intuitively. Midway through “Pallinode,” she states that in answer to this question, “the heart accepts, // encompasses the whole / of the undecipherable script,” providing “the only answer”⁶¹ to the question, a picture of her meeting with Achilles on the beach. Both existences comprise an essential part of the powerful image of this meeting. Reality, the poem argues, like the question of Helen's true existence, is not to be understood literally, but is to be interpreted using hieroglyphic writing as a model, via an associative process of interpretation with great structural similarity to Dalí's paranoia-criticism. In Helen's meeting with Achilles, she tells him, “‘there is mystery in this place, / I am instructed, I know the script, / the shape of this bird is a letter, // they call it the hieroglyph.’”⁶² As she learns to read hieroglyphic writing, she gains a skill which she will later apply not only to actual hieroglyphs, but to people, places, and moments in memory. Helen's understanding of hieroglyphic writing, the narrator tells us, “is intuitive or emotional knowledge, rather than intellectual”;⁶³ but more than that, it is also incomplete. Helen's goal, she tells Achilles, is to “study and decipher / the indecipherable Amen-script,”⁶⁴ a learning process later described by the narrator as “arduous, preliminary training or instruction” that allows her, more importantly, to observe “the pattern shape”⁶⁵ in the events of her life. As Susan Stanford Friedman has argued, the primary examples of these so-called “hieroglyphs” in *Helen* “are essentially visual epiphanies rendered imagistically, hieroglyphs that must be returned to repeatedly for interpretation”⁶⁶ such as

⁶⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁶¹ Ibid., 86.

⁶² Ibid., 13-14. H. D.'s conception of hieroglyphic writing shares more than a passing similarity with Ezra Pound's heavily exoticized understanding of Chinese characters.

⁶³ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 262.

⁶⁶ Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 64.

Achilles glimpsing Helen in Troy, or Helen's memory of his attack on the beach. Through her obsessive focus on these hieroglyphic moments, she develops complex associative structures that, like those produced by Dalí's paranoiac-critical focus on his obsessive ideas, seem to spin out into the world beyond the individual. The patterns of her individual life, in other words, possess importance far beyond their individual relevance; they provide the obsessive idea that motivates Helen's approach to understanding gender, violence, war, love, and any number of other grand themes.

In these attempts by Helen to project her individual obsession onto the world around her, the "nenufar," water-lily, or lotus, a central symbol of *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, appears early and frequently as a symbol of her hieroglyphic reading, linking the interpretive methods of *Sword* to those of *Helen*. It was through her reading of this word, a word she believed was a sign from her spirit guide Z, that Delia learned the process of "divination" of signs, a process ultimately leading to the unifying vision of historical experience of "Summerdream." Here, Helen similarly learns to read not only hieroglyphs themselves in this fashion, but all of reality; "for her," the narrator writes, "the secret of the stone-writing is repeated in natural or human symbols. *She herself is the writing.*"⁶⁷ As she learns to understand reality as hieroglyphic, she comes to know her own place in its patterns, and, conversely, to "read" the general patterns of reality through her own specific, individual experiences as they take the role of obsessive ideas motivating her interpretive practices.

This method of hieroglyphic reading is Helen's alternative to the authoritarian power structures of the Command. The answers to Helen's questions are to be found not "in the oracles of Greece," or even in "the hieroglyphs of Egypt" (although, as noted above, this "arduous, preliminary training or instruction" was essential for Helen's development of this interpretive method), but in "simple remembrance"⁶⁸ of her meeting with Achilles. But calling this remembrance "simple" is misleading; while Helen strongly declares near the end of the poem, "I say there is only one image, / one picture," only "one treasure, // one desire,"⁶⁹ it is only through her highly complicated practice of hieroglyphic interpretation of the numerous embodiments of that "one image" that she is able to come to such a declaration. Book six of "Leuké" is a typical example of this process, employed in an attempt to bridge multiple mythological systems. The narrator summarizes Helen's integration of many mythic figures through similarities of name and narrative function, as a "lyric voice" which "seems to speak for Helen" and

takes us back to Egypt but in a Greek mode. Isis is Cypris (Cytherea) and Isis is Thetis. Amen-Zeus is the father of Isis-Thetis-Aphrodite (Cypris). We cannot altogether understand this evocation, the rhythms must speak for themselves and the alliterations, Cypris, Thetis,

⁶⁷ H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, 22.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 82.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 243.

Nephthys, Isis, Paris. Proteus, the legendary King of Egypt, as we have learned before, takes many shapes. Could he 'manifest as Achilles?' If so, (the question is not asked but implied), could he manifest as Paris? Then, could the two opposites (the slayer and the slain) merge into one, and that One, the Absolute?⁷⁰

The implied answer to the narrator's final question is, of course, yes. The idea of "that One, the Absolute" is the obsessive idea (itself largely built out of the particular experiences that Helen continually returns to) that motivates the poem's hermeneutic method, building a unique symbolic structure out of "the most diverse and apparently unrelated phenomena,"⁷¹ as Finkelstein writes of Dalí's parallel method, through the power of Helen's interpretive faculties.

As Achilles's Command was rooted in patriarchal authority, H. D. grounds Helen's interpretive method in her gender as well. Thetis appears near the end of "Pallinode," "in complete harmony with Helen," according to the narrator, to offer the seemingly misogynistic statement, "A woman's wiles are a net."⁷² She develops this stereotype, however, into a positive assertion of the power of the netlike associations Helen is learning how to use; women "would take the stars / or a grasshopper in its mesh," and would search the sea for treasures like "a bubble's iridescence / or a flying-fish."⁷³ She asks, "what unexpected treasure, / what talisman or magic ring / may the net find?"⁷⁴ In contrast with the "iron-ring" of Achilles's Command, this form of interpretive agency discovers overlooked, discarded treasures such as a "magic ring,"⁷⁵ ranging from the simple ("a bubble's iridescence" or "a grasshopper") to the transcendent ("the stars"). "God does not weave a loose web, // nor do his Daughters, the Fates,"⁷⁶ Helen has said earlier, and this web, as a net, is able to take all manner of things into itself because it overlooks nothing.

Helen in Egypt, like *Trilogy* and *The Sword Went Out to Sea* before it, through casting just such a wide net, displays H. D.'s seemingly endless capacity for associative interpretation. Paris, rejecting Helen's interpretive practices as activities of a "death cult," in which she would only "re-read [her] old script,"⁷⁷ fails to understand that this is a poem precisely about such rereading. Helen and Achilles are finally rejoined, in a sense; Achilles awaits her, at the beginning of the poem's final section, "Eidolon," "not as Lord of Legions, 'King of Myrmidons,' but as one dedicated to a new Command, that of the 'royal sacred High Priest of love-rites'."⁷⁸ Helen, too, has been recreated over the course of her

⁷⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁷¹ Finkelstein, "Dalí's Small Stage of Paranoiac Ceremonial," 117.

⁷² H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, 93.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ This "magic ring" recalls, of course, the title of H. D.'s other fictionalized account of her experiences with Dowding, *Majic Ring*.

⁷⁶ H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, 82.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 216.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 210.

experiences in Egypt and afterwards, and their encounter on the beach has produced "a miraculous birth," which "is not one child but two." The "child of Achilles" is not any of the children he has in various myths and stories, but rather "the child in Chiron's cave"⁷⁹—Achilles himself. A new Helen is likewise the second child of their union, as "the 'frail maiden,' stolen by Theseus from Sparta."⁸⁰ The process of trauma and recovery is seen as a cycle of death and rebirth, of "*La Mort, L' Amour*,"⁸¹ in which, through the power afforded by interpretation, Helen and Achilles are able to rebuild themselves. This process of self-revision, based on the obsessive accumulation and synthesis of ideas, experiences, and histories into a single, "hieroglyphic" totality, is simultaneously a process of world-revision; just as the self is newly understood through the world, the world can be read in a new light through the self. Whether one labels this interpretive process "paranoid," as Dalí does, or as "visionary," it is unquestionably a process of art.

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⁷⁹ Ibid., 289.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 288.

⁸¹ Ibid., 268.