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## "AN UNUSUAL WAY TO THINK": TRILOGY'S ORACULAR POETICS

Written in the aftermath of the World War II bombing of London, the first book of what would become H.D.'s *Trilogy*<sup>1</sup> opens with an image that juxtaposes the ruins of her beloved city with those of ancient Egypt. The speaker draws the two together by pointing out that:

there, as here, ruin opens  
the tomb, the temple; enter,  
there as here, there are no doors:  
(3)

In these lines, destruction creates opportunity. The Egyptian tombs, sealed for thousands of years, are gradually made accessible by the slow process of erosion. The discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 received worldwide press coverage, rekindling public interest in ancient Egypt and prompting H.D. and Bryher to visit the tomb and other Egyptian sites in 1923<sup>2</sup>. The *New York Times* proclaimed on December 22, 1922 that "no finer human interest story, no more thrilling drama, no greater archaeological revelations could be summoned from history or the most vivid imagination than is told by the mute objects in this tomb . . . mute objects that speak with golden eloquence and whose message is now being revealed to the world."<sup>3</sup> The "artifacts" in H.D.'s London ruins are much more mundane; "sliced wall[s]" open on scenes "where poor utensils show / like rare objects in a museum" (4). But these humble ruins also tell a story, and disclose new possibilities:

ruins everywhere, yet as the fallen roof  
leaves the sealed room  
open to the air,  
  
so, through our desolation,  
thoughts stir, inspiration stalks us  
through gloom:  
(3)

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<sup>1</sup> All *Trilogy* citations are page numbers referring to the 1998 New Directions edition, annotated by Aliki Barnstone.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Guest, *Herself Defined: H.D. and Her World* (Tucson, AZ: Schaffner Press, 2003), 156-8.

<sup>3</sup> "Times Man Views Splendors of Tomb of Tutankhamen," *New York Times*, December 22, 1922.

Here, ruined buildings are compared to shell-shocked Londoners—but as above, these conditions are described as promising rather than devastating. The reward for having survived is that one is left “open to the air”: open to the stirring of new thoughts and new inspiration. The stanzas that follow invoke the Biblical prophet Samuel and the Pythia, priestess of the Delphic Oracle, revealing that this “inspiration” is divine. But what I hope to demonstrate in this essay is that the “thoughts” are at least as important as the “inspiration;” the coupling of the two in these lines is not an accident. What H.D. hopes is that the ruins of London, like those of Egypt, will spark her readers’ imaginations and inspire them to new and creative ways of thinking about what might count as holy.

The speaker of *Trilogy* adopts a subject position that I propose to describe as oracular, embodying simultaneously the concept of visionary experience and the work of interpretive synthesis. The historical Delphic oracle consisted of two people: a divinely-inspired priestess who spoke in tongues and a male interpreter who translated her prophesies into the cryptic hexameters on whose basis kingdoms rose and fell. It is my contention that H.D. elides these two positions into one female speaker, who elevates a traditionally feminized “conduit” subject position into one of authority resting both on her access to the divine and her expertise in language. But this is not naïve revisionism—the oracular speaker of *Trilogy* represents a complex synthesis of the three belief systems to which H.D. was most committed at the time of the poem’s composition: popular spiritualism, esoteric occultism, and Freudian psychoanalysis. These paradigms made an uneasy mix, differing widely on issues such as personal agency, political priorities, and the ontological status of supernatural phenomena. Furthermore, none of these belief systems was particularly empowering to women; all three were plagued by paradoxical attitudes toward gender which made navigating them treacherous for their female adherents. In order to claim a place beside Modernist poetry’s great mythmaking men (such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams), H.D. had to devise “an unusual way to think” (to borrow a phrase from her memoir of psychoanalysis<sup>4</sup>).

### I. Laying the Ghost: H.D.’s Struggle for Visionary Validation

The second two books of *Trilogy* were composed in May and December of 1944, during the relatively brief time in which H.D. regularly attended spiritualist séances. Despite a fascination with various forms of visionary experience that persisted throughout her adult life, spiritualism in particular does not seem to have been a sustainable pursuit for H.D.—the story of her involvement with it is one of obsession, insecurity, and eventual nervous collapse. But it is not an unfamiliar story—many other spirit mediums, H.D.’s contemporaries and foremothers, underwent similar trials and suffered similar fates. Mediumship, according to Jenny Hazelgrove, “was a fragile identity, constantly in the making

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<sup>4</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 47.

and easily undermined.”<sup>5</sup> It was not uncommon for a medium to end up discredited, destitute, or institutionalized; even Kate and Margaret Fox, the young girls whose apparent ability to communicate with the spirit world via mysterious “rapping” sounds inaugurated the spiritualist movement in 1848, succumbed to poverty and drink in their adult lives.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most fundamental problem that any spirit medium faced was the self-defeating logic whereby passivity equaled power. The world was prepared to accept spirit messages delivered through the agency of young girls because they were perceived as uncorrupted and guileless. At the time of its inception, the spiritualist movement represented a challenge to the reigning Christian orthodoxies, all of which refused to ordain women, and most of which had rules against their even speaking in church.<sup>7</sup> Through mediumship, women could gain spiritual authority in a way that circumvented these rules by relying on the traditionally feminine qualities of domesticity, religious purity, and above all, passivity. Mediums were variously described as “repositories,” “vessels,” and “channels”—the quality prized above all was the ability to empty one’s mind of thoughts and intentions so that the spirits could enter.<sup>8</sup> Not all mediums were female—predictably, some of the most financially successful ones were men—but as one spiritualist leader put it, “in either case, the characteristics will be *feminine*—negative and passive.”<sup>9</sup> For male mediums, this meant frequent allegations of homosexuality, and for female mediums, it meant that any power they gained was restricted to the séance room. The passivity that made them excellent “channels” was simultaneously perceived as undermining their ability to function in the outside world.<sup>10</sup>

Given the high value placed on passivity, it should not be surprising that women never consciously chose to become mediums—at least, not as a matter of public record.<sup>11</sup> Rather, they and other spiritualists believed that the spirits chose the medium, who then passively allowed them to communicate through her. Anne Braude points out that “even the process of becoming a medium was referred to in the passive form; one was said to be ‘being developed as a medium,’ the active role being attributed to the spirits. Thus, the advent of mediumship did not

<sup>5</sup> Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 247.

<sup>6</sup> Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late-Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 65.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> qtd. in Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 23. “Negative,” in this case, refers to the electrical charge associated with femininity. Men were associated with a “positive” charge. Since some explanations of spirit communications held that they were transmitted through the little-understood force of electricity, “negatives” and “positives” had to be carefully balanced around a séance table.

<sup>10</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 83.

require a decision to rebel against a domestic role.”<sup>12</sup> What it did require, however, was ratification from an outside source—even well into the twentieth century, when the decision to rebel against domesticity was no longer quite so unthinkable. Hazelgrove asserts that of all the mediums considered in her study of the interwar period, “not one identified as one until her powers were acknowledged or ‘discovered’ by an external authority.”<sup>13</sup> This recognition could come from a number of different sources: a spiritualist group or reputable individual within the movement, a psychical researcher, or it could simply be bestowed by reputation in the local community.<sup>14</sup>

In H.D.’s case, the struggle for validation was difficult. Like many mediums, she found her initial visionary experiences to be unsettling and inscrutable—among them were a “jellyfish-like” hallucination in Sicily in 1919, a hallucination of dolphins and a male friend on a boat to Greece in 1920, and a series of light-pictures projected on a hotel room wall in Corfu that same year. In *Tribute to Freud*, she cites these experiences as a major contributing factor in her decision to seek psychoanalysis:

For things had happened in my life, pictures, “real dreams,” actual psychic or occult experiences that were superficially, at least, outside the province of established psychoanalysis. But I am working with the old Professor himself; I want his opinion on a series of events. It is true, I had not discussed these experiences openly, but I had sought help from one or two (to my mind) extremely wise and gifted people in the past and they had not helped me. At least, they had not been able to lay, as it were, the ghost. If the Professor could not do this, I thought, nobody could. (40)

As Susan Stanford Friedman has argued at length, H.D. saw herself as Freud’s student rather than his patient, and “consciously translated his language into the terminology of religious and artistic quest.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, she willfully misread him in order to receive the confirmation in her visionary powers that she so ardently desired. She interpreted his theory of the unconscious in terms reminiscent of visionary occult doctrine, even as she acknowledged that he would never explicitly endorse this view: “even if not stated in so many words, he had dared to imply that this consciousness proclaimed all men one.”<sup>16</sup> But in fact, Freud was committed to scientific rationalism and persisted in classifying H.D.’s visions as her “most dangerous or only actually dangerous ‘symptom,’” echoing the pronouncements of so many medical professionals upon so many spirit mediums throughout history.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars*, 245.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 72.

<sup>16</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 41.

H.D. underwent analysis in the spring of 1933, but did not write her memoir about the experience until the autumn of 1944, between composing books two and three of *Trilogy*. Helen Sword has argued persuasively that during the period of writing *Trilogy*, H.D. was “both more optimistic about visionary revelation and more firmly convinced of its reality and the importance of otherworldly inspiration than at any other time in her life”<sup>18</sup>—and yet, it seems, she was still struggling for the kind of properly authoritative recognition of her own visionary capacities that was so essential to maintaining a stable identity as a medium. In 1943 H.D. and Bryher began to hold séances in their home with the help of a Eurasian medium named Arthur Bhaduri, and in October of that year H.D. became particularly interested in the spiritualist treatises of Lord Hugh Dowding, the chief air marshal of the Royal Air Force during the Battle of Britain who believed himself to be in contact with the spirits of a number of his dead pilots. H.D. asked to join his spiritualist circle and was denied, but they maintained a correspondence for the next several months. When Bhaduri’s marriage in 1945 put an end to their group séances, H.D. began to contact the spirits by herself, and received a series of messages from Dowding’s dead R.A.F. pilots concerning the environmental disasters that would result from the use of the atomic bomb. The pilots demanded that she bring her messages to Dowding, but he refused to accept them—a rebuff that she interpreted as a repudiation of her psychic gifts and which instigated a severe nervous breakdown in 1946, after which she never again attempted to contact the dead.<sup>19</sup>

It seems likely that H.D. composed *Tribute to Freud* during this period as an effort to convince herself of the reality of her visionary powers. But if Friedman is correct that H.D. consciously misappropriated his theories to suit her needs, this effort cannot have been fully successful. Recognition from Dowding, a respected spiritualist authority, would have been vastly more reassuring—and when it was finally denied her in no uncertain terms (Dowding called her messages from the R.A.F. pilots “both frivolous and uninspiring,” and recommended that she give up séance work)<sup>20</sup>, her tenuous hold on a coherent identity as a medium was shattered.

## II. The Trouble with Trances

In addition to being founded upon on a contradictory and disempowering notion of gender, a medium’s identity was further destabilized by a range of cultural anxieties about the dangers of the trance state. H.D.’s pleas for secrecy in her letters to her friend Viola Jordan in the early days of her study of the occult demonstrate an awareness that these pursuits would be viewed with not just skepticism, but hostility by the majority of their acquaintances. In one letter from 1929, she warns, “This is of course for YOU as I do not like my great ‘discovery’

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<sup>18</sup> Helen Sword, *Engendering Inspiration: Visionary Strategies in Rilke, Lawrence, and H.D.* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 170.

<sup>19</sup> Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 172-5; Sword, *Engendering Inspiration*, 165-6.

<sup>20</sup> qtd. in Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 175.

abused by the wrong people. You know how it is."<sup>21</sup> In another, encouraging Jordan to disclose details of her own psychic experiences, she assures her friend that "you can depend on my discretion. . . . I should go on just as per usual and not tell people too much. Anything like that makes people say 'mad.'"<sup>22</sup> Particularly in the late nineteenth century, the newly-emerging psychological profession—eager to dissociate itself from its own occult origins in phrenology and mesmerism—was quick to classify spiritualist belief as a symptom of a diseased mind. In addition to being closely related to femininity, which was perceived as a delicate condition to begin with, spiritualism's valorization of the trance state made it especially dangerous.<sup>23</sup> Alex Owen explains that,

[the trance state] was seen as a psychological abnormality whereby normal consciousness gave way to a lower and more automatic level of mental functioning. The mind became prey to delusions, and the will, the controlling mechanism of the imagination, desires, and instincts, became moribund. Medical psychologists increasingly subscribed to the view that such psychological states were degenerative, and that once conscious control had been lost the individual was in danger of regressing to ever lower levels of function and personality.<sup>24</sup>

H.D. herself gives voice to some of these fears in *Trilogy*'s first book, in a passage where her speaker, having "dared occult lore," finds herself "founder[ing]" in a "sub-conscious ocean" which results in "illusion, reversion of old values, / oneness lost, madness" (40-1). Though medical prejudices against femininity as such were no longer scientifically tenable in H.D.'s day, spiritualism remained tainted by its close resemblance to hysteria, and trance states were still viewed with great suspicion.

The reasons for this were numerous. One set of fears, particularly relevant to H.D.'s wartime séance work, linked supernatural powers with the invading, exotic Other. Spy literature in the years leading up to World War I credited Germans and other invaders of Britain with uncanny powers of infiltration, and once the war broke out and xenophobia reached new heights, Germans were frequently described as "devils," allegedly committing such unholy acts as cutting off the hands of children and crucifying Allied soldiers.<sup>25</sup> After the war, the British public's fear of a military invasion began to be replaced by anxiety about the more insidious threat of a secret enemy network that planned to achieve world domination by more covert means. This network was variously identified as communism, socialism, Masonry, and Judaism, in addition to spiritualism and occultism.<sup>26</sup> Both spiritualism and occultism had ties to the Far East—the British Theosophical Society, in particular, cultivated connections with

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 139-46.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>25</sup> Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars*, 116-7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 117-9.

colonial India, and in the 1930s actually had more lodges in India than in England<sup>27</sup> – which fueled public fears of hostile foreigners with mystical powers. When the second World War broke out, the tabloid press was rife with rumors of occult collaboration with the enemy, including a *Daily Sketch* article in 1940 which alleged that Nazis attended séances in England in order to obtain military secrets from dead naval men—accusations of the sort that would have been a substantial source of anxiety for H.D.<sup>28</sup>

Another factor motivating the general public's distrust of trance states was that they were suspiciously unproductive states of mind. As Jonathan Crary has demonstrated, modern subjectivity since at least the mid-nineteenth century has been crucially defined in terms of an individual's capacity for paying attention.<sup>29</sup> As the assembly line came to dominate production and consumption became increasingly characterized by the concept of spectacle, an individual's capacity for paying attention became increasingly important to her role in the modern marketplace. Furthermore, paradigm shifts in science, psychology, and philosophy provided a series of critiques of the idea of objectivity and perceptual presence, causing attention to emerge as a topic of discussion precisely because it was subjective and volitional, "both a simulation of presence and a makeshift, pragmatic substitute in the face of its impossibility."<sup>30</sup> But these same characteristics that made attention an interesting philosophical subject made it a site of danger to the productive capacity of modern subjects; attention was always threatened by distraction on the one hand and dangerously absorptive trance on the other.

H.D. takes up some of these concerns about productivity in the first book of *Trilogy*. A detractor asserts that "poets are useless," and that moreover, the speaker and her fellow magical initiates "are not only 'non-utilitarian', / [they] are 'pathetic'" (14). The speaker, by way of rebuttal, says:

this is the new heresy;  
but if you do not even understand what words say,

how can you expect to pass judgement  
on what words conceal?

(14)

Poets and occultists, condemned in the same breath by her detractor, are asserted by the speaker to have the same cultural function: the ability to closely examine language and ferret out its secrets. This sort of scholarly work is more properly

<sup>27</sup> Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 207. For more on Theosophy and India, see 206-225.

<sup>28</sup> Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars*, 119.

<sup>29</sup> See *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), and *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>30</sup> Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 4.

"occultist" than "spiritualist," in the sense that occultism concerns itself with the study of esoterica and ancient wisdom, whereas spirit mediums required comparatively little training—a point to which we shall return below. But the trance state was crucial to both traditions, and in this passage it is asserted as a source of culturally important knowledge.

### III. Trance Speakers: Mediums with a Message

Though spiritualism was a significant personal concern for H.D. while she was writing *Trilogy*, she needed a speaker for this poem who was qualified to speak from "your (and my) old town square" in order to accomplish her aim of healing a war-shattered nation (3).<sup>31</sup> The spirit medium in her traditional form was confined to the home, conducting séances in domestic spaces and delivering messages of merely personal significance to those who attended them—most commonly, assurances from dead relatives that all was well in the spirit realm. But another type of medium flourished in the late nineteenth century, one that H.D. might have heard about in the Quaker meeting house that her family attended after their move to Philadelphia in 1895: the trance speaker.

Rachel Connor has argued that H.D.'s *Majic Ring* (1943-4), a fictionalized account of her séances with Bhaduri, reveals "unconscious echoes" of the radical socialism that frequently accompanied popular spiritualism in England, despite the distance that she explicitly puts between herself and popular culture in, for example, her writings on film.<sup>32</sup> That H.D.'s upbringing in America contributed to her understanding of spiritualism's populist sympathies is suggested by her inclusion of a vivid dream of a Quaker meeting house in both *Majic Ring* and *Trilogy*. In the poem, it is the site of a vision of a palimpsestic male god-figure: "Ra, Osiris, Amen appeared / in a spacious, bare meeting-house" (25), while in the novel the main character struggles to put a finger on where exactly her dream has taken her, realizing slowly that it is "Philadelphia, it is 'home,' it is the American scene," and finally deciding:

This is a meeting-house, this is not a church, not an assembly room—but a meeting-house, it suggests in its simplicity and its elegance a Quaker meeting house—but no, this is not Quaker—but yes, this is Quaker—in this sense, yes, it is a Quaker meeting-house as it is the *House of Friends*.<sup>33</sup>

From the start, spiritualism in America was intertwined with radical Quakerism, abolitionism, and the women's rights movements, all of which shared similarly egalitarian principles. Kate and Margaret Fox—whose apparent ability to

<sup>31</sup> For more on *Trilogy* as a labor of healing, see Susan Gubar, "The Echoing Spell of H.D.'s *Trilogy*," *Contemporary Literature* 19.2 (Spring 1978), 196-218; Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 207-228; Adalaide Morris, "Signaling: Feminism, Politics, and Mysticism in H.D.'s War Trilogy," *Sagetrieb* 9.3 (Winter 1990), 121-133.

<sup>32</sup> Rachel Connor, *H.D. and the Image* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 116. For more of this argument, see 111-131.

<sup>33</sup> H.D., *Majic Ring* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2009), 24.

communicate with the spirit world via “rapping” sounds marked the inception of the spiritualist movement—were shepherded from the start of their careers in 1848 by radical Quakers who were more than happy to accept the spirits speaking through young girls as evidence for their belief that God’s light within each individual was the primary vehicle for religious truth, a doctrine that was being ignored by the increasingly rigid Quaker establishment.<sup>34</sup> As discussed above, spiritualism offered a way that women could circumvent the conventional restrictions against female religious authority, which made it especially attractive to women’s rights activists; indeed, the two movements began in the same year in upstate New York, and the table on which Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton penned the “Declaration of Sentiments” for the Seneca Falls women’s rights convention was reportedly used for one of the earliest séances.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1850s, this convergence of influences propelled the first women in America to the lectern, in defiance of social conventions that forbade them from speaking in public. A handful of early female abolitionists had preceded them, but by the end of this decade the majority of women to ascend the podium did so while apparently unconscious, presenting not their own views, but those of the spirits who spoke through them.<sup>36</sup> Trance speakers, like spirit mediums, were most frequently young women and teenage girls—but unlike spirit mediums, they addressed large audiences on a wide range of socially-relevant topics. Initially this was most often framed as a curiosity and a demonstration of the validity of spiritualist beliefs: a committee of audience members would choose a topic—frequently a “manly” scientific or political topic, something the uneducated female medium could not be expected to know about unless the spirits came to her aid—and after a pause for a hymn, she would speak on that topic frequently in excess of an hour.<sup>37</sup> Her very ability to do so was considered proof that the spirits were directing her tongue; audiences were rapt at the miracle of a woman’s eloquence. Trance speakers reached an audience far beyond the community of believers, attracting the curious and the skeptical as well as the faithful—and because newspapers which considered the lectures of fully-conscious women too improper to notice frequently did cover trance speakers, they became the primary proselytizing force for spiritualism as well as a major vehicle for the women’s rights movement.<sup>38</sup> Some women displayed conspicuous signs of being entranced while delivering their lectures, such as “gazing upwards, with . . . eyes intently fixed,” but others who claimed to be in trance gave little evidence of being in an abnormal state.<sup>39</sup> It was not unusual for the spirits to move trance speakers to discourse on the subjects of women’s rights or

<sup>34</sup> Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 10-13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 85, 90-1.

<sup>37</sup> Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 84-116; Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 210-2; R. Laurence Moore, “The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America,” *Women’s Experience in America: An Historical Anthology* (Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1980), 152.

<sup>38</sup> Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 94.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 89.

abolitionism, and by the end of the decade it is clear to historians that the claim of entrancement was in many cases being invoked as a mere convention to support a woman's right and ability to ascend the public platform.<sup>40</sup> The need for invoking this convention dropped off sharply after the Civil War—but as late as 1882, just four years before H.D.'s birth, the list of 198 lecturers in the *Banner of Light*, a popular spiritualist weekly, included nineteen trance speakers and an additional twenty-eight “inspirational” speakers, which frequently meant the same thing.<sup>41</sup> The periodical stopped distinguishing between “trance” and “normal” speakers in 1883, but it's likely that the practice continued for a few more years.<sup>42</sup>

#### IV. “My Second Self”: Oracular Twinning

Whether or not H.D. heard of this practice during her time in Philadelphia—still a major spiritualist center in the 1880s and 90s—the figure of the trance speaker is a helpful one in illuminating the curious position of the speaker of *Trilogy*. It is not until halfway through the fourth section of the first book that the speaker refers to herself as “I.” In the opening lines of the poem, she locates herself in “your (and my) old town square,” and then uses the first-person plural for the next few pages, even in lines such as “shivering overtakes us,” which would seem to refer to a bodily state specific to a single person (3). When she finally assumes the first-person singular, it is in terms evocative of mystical experience:

I sense my own limit,  
my shell-jaws snap shut  
  
at the invasion of the limitless,  
ocean-weight; infinite water  
(9)

It is as though the speaker has been maintaining equilibrium until this moment, successfully channeling a person or persons and speaking on their behalf. But such states were difficult to sustain, and fraught with danger—a medium had to maintain a state of consciousness balanced between passivity and alertness, ready to shut down the channel should evil spirits try to take advantage of it. In the above lines, the speaker who was once a “we” reaches the limit of her powers, and reverts to being an “I” in the very process of discovering this limit.

But finding one's way back to oneself was not always easy—mediums often suffered “distress and confusion” in the aftermath of séances, especially when something went wrong.<sup>43</sup> Emma Hardinge Britten, a medium well-known in both America and England in the latter half of the nineteenth century, reported a

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “List of Spiritualist Lecturers,” *Banner of Light* (Boston), August 12, 1882. Alex Owen uses the term “inspirational speakers” in *The Darkened Room* to refer to trance speakers (210-12).

<sup>42</sup> “List of Spiritualist Lecturers,” *Banner of Light*, April 7, 1883.

<sup>43</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 224.

form of dissociation in her trances: “my brain apparently [became] a sort of whispering gallery where the thoughts of other persons resolved themselves into an embodied form.”<sup>44</sup> In the following description of her first engagement as a trance speaker, she reports actually splitting into two individuals:

my last clear remembrance was of listening to a lovely quartette beautifully sung by the “Troy Harmonists,” and then I had a dim perception that I was standing outside myself, by the side of my dear father—dead—when I was only a little child—but whose noble form I could plainly see close by me, gesticulating to, and addressing somehow, my second self, which was imitating him, and repeating all the thrilling words he was uttering.<sup>45</sup>

In this passage, Britten performs a double displacement of the content of her lecture—not only is she merely repeating the words of her father’s ghost, but the self that is giving the speech is not one that she identifies with; it is merely her “second self,” a twin of sorts. In another account, she describes the self that she *does* inhabit as merely “an onlooker and occasional listener,” as though she is too modest, uninterested, or uneducated to bother paying attention to her own lecture.<sup>46</sup> The only function of this “onlooking” self seems to be to enable contact between the speaking double and the external source of inspiration, and then to stand aside.

Similarly, the historical Delphic oracle consisted of three entities: the god Apollo, whose wisdom was sought by supplicants; the Pythia (or “Pythoness”), the priestess who received these messages and delivered them by speaking in tongues; and the male priest who translated them for the supplicants into the cryptic hexameters for which the oracle was famous. In this triad, the Pythia’s only value was the ability to form a bridge between the two worlds; she could not own either the message or its articulation, in much the way that Britten and other trance speakers refused to take credit for either the wisdom or the eloquence of their lectures. But in the figure of the trance speaker, unlike that of the oracle, the one doing the speaking is at least a version of the self, a female twin-self rather than a male Other. This is a model that H.D. would have been much more amenable to, and it gives us a way to make sense of a particularly strange passage from *Tribute to Freud*. Concentrating on the light-pictures on the wall in Corfu is draining, and H.D. asks Bryher whether she should continue. With her assurance, H.D. rallies the strength to keep concentrating:

And yet, so oddly, I knew that this experience, this writing-on-the-wall before me, could not be shared with . . . anyone except the girl who stood so bravely there beside me. This girl had said without hesitation, “Go on.” It was she really who had the detachment and the integrity of the Pythoness of Delphi. But it was I, battered and disassociated from my

<sup>44</sup> qtd. in Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 224.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 224.

American family and my English friends, who was seeing the pictures, who was reading the writing or who was granted the inner vision. Or perhaps in some sense, we were "seeing" it together, for without her, admittedly, I could not have gone on. (48-9)

In this passage, H.D. appears as "battered," frazzled, and feminized, while Bryher possesses the "detachment" and "integrity" that we might expect from the male priest who stood apart from the rapture of the priestess and translated her incomprehensible speech into rational language. But this is not what H.D. says—she likens Bryher's rational qualities to those of the *Pythoness*, in a direct misrepresentation of history. The two women become twin Pythonesses in this scene, owning the roles of both priestess and priest and blurring the usual separation of powers: later, when H.D. gives up on the visions in exhaustion, Bryher sees the final one for her.

#### V. Not Given but Made: Occult Connections

As is demonstrated in some of her other writings about the oracle, H.D. knew full well that the historical Pythoness was "only" a conduit. By collapsing the priestess and priest's roles into one, she creates the figure of a spiritually authoritative woman who possesses an expertise in language and a claim to the public stage—exactly what she needs for *Trilogy*. Other critics have demonstrated the complexity and importance of the poem's linguistic gymnastics; Adalaide Morris, for example, has shown how clusters of words such as "purpose," "prophecy," and "papyrus" share consonantal structures that suggest etymological relation when in fact there is none, causing meaning in the poem to be "not given but made . . . a collaboration, a co-creation, in an ongoing community of 'rune-makers.'"<sup>47</sup> This is similar to how the Delphic oracle's pronouncements operated; they frequently functioned as both predictions and advice, and the way in which the advice was interpreted had a significant bearing on how, exactly, the prophecy was fulfilled. In one episode from Herodotus, the Athenians puzzle over a pronouncement concerning how best to protect their city from the impeding Persian attack; the oracle has recommended a "wall of wood," but opinions differ as to whether this means a wooden fence or, as some more creative readers suggest, the Athenian navy. Themistocles, a representative of the latter camp, finally wins the day by producing the most compelling reading of the prophecy's penultimate line: "Blessed Salamis, you will be the death of mother's sons." He argues that if the oracle really meant to say that the Athenians would be defeated off the coast of Salamis, these lines would have been phrased in harsher terms—instead of "blessed" Salamis, she might have said "cruel" Salamis. Therefore the mother's sons in question must be Persian, and the Athenians should prepare for a battle at sea—which they do, bringing them victory.<sup>48</sup> The oracle was well aware of how closely her words

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<sup>47</sup> Adalaide Morris, *How to Live / What to Do: H.D.'s Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 44-5.

<sup>48</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, tr. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 452-3.

were studied, and used this power to punish those who were not in her favor: in another episode, she promises to "give" the Lacedaemonians the "dance-floor of Tegea" on which to "caper," which they understandably interpret as favorable news about their planned invasion of this territory. When they are instead defeated and enslaved by the Tegeans, the oracle can still claim that her prediction that they would "measure out [Tegea's] beautiful plain with a rope" has come true—they do so as laborers on the land.<sup>49</sup>

This kind of subtlety with words requires a concept of *will* that the model of the spirit medium conspicuously lacks; the oracle as she appears in these stories is not merely a translator of divine messages, but is herself a purposeful agent. *Trilogy*, too, is not so much the product of rapture as it is of reflection and purpose. The second book, for example, revolves around a vision of "Our Lady" that is initially indescribable:

I was talking casually  
with friends in the other room,  
  
when we saw the outer hall  
grow lighter—then we saw where the door was,  
  
there was no door  
(this was a dream of course),  
  
and she was standing there,  
actually, at the turn of the stair.

(89)

Of the Lady herself, all the speaker can say is that she was "actually" standing there. This is a key word for H.D., one that she uses several times in *Tribute to Freud* to designate the felt significance of her mystical experiences: they have an "intensity," "clarity," and "authenticity" that leads her to declare them "actual" and "real."<sup>50</sup> But none of these words help H.D.'s readers see the vision; all they communicate is a vague sense of the intensity of the experience. The speaker seems to recognize that, more or less by definition, mystical experience cannot be communicated in words—this is perhaps why the Pythia could only speak in tongues.<sup>51</sup> But H.D.'s twinned oracular speaker, possessing both the power of vision and the power of language, knows how to translate this dream: to help her audience understand it, she uses the techniques of negative theology. Rather than try to explain what the vision was like, the speaker abandons the narrative mode for a more discursive one—first she gives a list of the familiar ways in

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>50</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 41, 35.

<sup>51</sup> William James listed "ineffability" as the first and foremost characteristic of mystical experience in 1902, noting, "the subject of it immediately says that it defies description, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words." *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 302.

which “we” have seen the Lady represented in the past, then she sweeps them all away, declaring “none of these, none of these / suggest her as I saw her” (96). Next she turns to quotations from Scripture, declaring these to also be inadequate: “she bore // none of her usual attributes; / the Child was not with her” (97). After finally letting slip a concrete detail (namely that the Lady carried a book), she begins to ventriloquize an interlocutor’s hypotheses about what this book might symbolize, and goes on to argue with this person in the manner of a classical philosophical dialogue for several pages.

*Trilogy* explicitly links poetry and magic, suggesting that H.D. is drawing on her knowledge of the occult in order to produce the hybrid figure of the eloquent visionary. Spiritualist history contains no such figure, depending crucially on a *suspension* of the will—but occultist magic required that the will be tutored and honed, regardless of an adept’s gender.<sup>52</sup> The term “occultism,” though sometimes used as a catch-all phrase for any pursuit that takes supernatural forces seriously, more properly refers to those which require a significant amount of study to uncover the “hidden” secrets of long-lost or exotic arcane teachings. Tarot, palmistry, alchemy, astrology, and sorcery are among the traditions that fall under this umbrella, and though some of these practices have long histories, they all came to renewed prominence in the “mystical revival” which began in the 1890s.<sup>53</sup> Though the popularity of this movement owed something to the spiritualist craze that preceded it (and continued to thrive), its membership and philosophy were markedly different. Spiritualism’s fundamental tenet was that anyone—man, woman, or child, from any social class and with any level of education—could become a medium if the spirits decided it, and though a period of apprenticeship was generally recommended for a medium to learn to control her powers, no particularly extensive knowledge of the spirit realms was required. Occultism, by contrast, emphasized esoteric study and positioned itself as distinctly middle-class. Initially, occultists were predominantly male—and even as the numbers of female adherents increased, it remained true that the magic they practiced was predicated on the “masculine” assertion and aggrandizement of the individual will, as opposed to the spiritualist surrender of it.<sup>54</sup> Drawing on occult philosophy allowed H.D. to conceive of a divinely-inspired speaker whose power, will, and expertise were nonetheless her own.

#### VI. “The First or the Last // of a Flock or a Swarm”

But H.D. takes her oracular poetics one step farther—in addition to laying claim to the speaking “second self” that Emma Hardinge Britten could not bring herself to identify with, H.D. also positions her poem’s speaker as *participating* in the divine forces to which she gives voice. This position would have been anathema to most spiritualists, who continually had to defend themselves

<sup>52</sup> Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 88.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 88.

against charges that spirit communication in fact originated in the mind of the medium, either as manifestations of her unconscious or as deliberate fraud. Spiritualists were suspicious of complex notions of the self in general—rather, they espoused the idea of a single, unified self who passed intact from the earthly realm to the spiritual afterlife.<sup>55</sup> Occultists, however, generally held that the self had several layers, often incorporating some notion of the unconscious as well as a mystical self with access to transpersonal and/or divine realms. This made their philosophy much more compatible with psychoanalysis, and in fact occultists were among some of the earliest supporters of Freud's work.<sup>56</sup> Aleister Crowley, for example, claimed that Freud was simply articulating what magicians had already known for centuries<sup>57</sup>—a comment that casts an ironic light on the moment in *Tribute to Freud* when the Professor tells H.D., “you discovered for yourself what I discovered for the race” (18). It was H.D.'s occult beliefs that allowed her to bridge the gap between naturalist Freudianism and supernaturalist spiritualism, but the idiosyncratic synthesis that she formed was more than the sum of its parts.

Ironically, occultism's theory of a complicated, multi-layered self may have been what made it a more stable mode of identification for H.D., whose interest in practices such as the Tarot and astrology both pre- and post-dated her involvement with spiritualism. Spiritualism's doctrine of a simple, unified self was no longer adequate to the perceived complexity of twentieth-century subjectivity; its insistence on the ontological reality of channeled spirits made it a poor model for the fragmented, contingent understanding of identity that was emerging from the psychological sciences. Or rather—it was, at best, a model and a metaphor for ideas of this sort; Helen Sword has traced the influence of the spirit medium as modernist literary trope in her recent study *Ghostwriting Modernism* (2002), showing that even such skeptics as James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf found spiritualism to be a helpful paradigm through which to narrate the dissonances of modern subjectivity. But for occultists, the co-existence of the supernatural and the scientific could be more than a metaphor. Their belief that consciousness represented just one aspect of subjectivity allowed them to embrace Freud's theory of the unconscious, and even to entertain the possibility that occult phenomena and magical ability represented a manifestation of the powers of the mind.<sup>58</sup> Many occultists shared H.D.'s view that there are at least three levels of mind, though different occult sects conceived them in a variety of ways. In *Notes on Thought and Vision*, H.D. designates them as the “sub-conscious,” associated with “sleeping dreams” and the physical; the “over-conscious” associated with “waking dreams” and the spiritual; and the conscious mind (characterized as “the intellect, the brain”), which forms a bridge between them.<sup>59</sup> But these states were not easily separable for H.D.; she comments that “the three seem to run together,” and moreover that

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>59</sup> H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982), 49.

"a sub-conscious dream may become an over-conscious dream at the moment of waking."<sup>60</sup> For H.D., a "sub-conscious" dream was merely personal, while an "over-conscious" dream (one that was "real" and "actual," like the one of the Lady from *Trilogy*) had the character of a mystical vision, offering access to a transpersonal and/or transhistorical truth. In the following passage, H.D. links mystical, oracular wisdom with psychoanalytic insight, and gives the advantage to the oracle:

*Know thyself*, said the ironic Delphic oracle, and the sage or priest who framed the utterance knew that to know yourself in the full sense of the words was to know everybody. *Know thyself*, said the Professor, and plunging time and again, he amassed that store of intimate revelation contained in his impressive volumes.<sup>61</sup>

Freud and the oracle are presented here as having essentially the same message—but unlike Freud the oracle understands that the unconscious can be a source of mystical, collective knowledge. Moreover, the oracle is presented as possessing the power of language in a way that Freud conspicuously is not: the oracle's speech is called "ironic," suggesting complex layers of purpose, and the interpreting sage is described as a "framer of utterances," indicating expertise with words—while Freud is painted as a manual laborer, "plunging" into the depths of his own psyche and "amassing a store" of revelation rather than eloquently giving it voice.

In *Trilogy*, H.D. shows her readers what it means to think as a person who is also all people. Her speaker moves back and forth fluidly between speaking as a "we" and speaking as an "I," claiming at one point to be "the first or the last // of a flock or a swarm" (124). She does position herself in opposition to a "you," but this group of doubters is not antagonized so much as pitied; these people "have a long way to go" before they can realize that they, too, are part of this flock (14). After establishing that "[g]ods, goddesses / wear the winged head-dress // of horns . . . or the erect king-cobra crest," the "we" for whom she speaks "reveal [their] status / with twin-horns, disk, erect serpent"—in other words, their status as gods (13-4). *Trilogy*'s eloquent visionary speaker combines the roles of suppliant, translator, priestess, and divinity into a single voice—a voice that empowers itself, but that also empowers the community from which it arises: a London in ruins, a world at war. Armed with questions and their answers, the speaker and her "companions / of the flame" hope to light the way to peace (21).

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 46, 49.

<sup>61</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 73.