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**Eschatology in a Time of War:  
The Poetry of  
H.D. and Robert Lowell**

By:

Abeer Othman Al-Mahdawi

A Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
to the  
Department of English Studies  
Durham University

2017

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## Abstract

The first half of the twentieth century was a fertile time for poetry with a new form and new content to match the sweeping changes of modernity. There is no doubt that the traumatic experience of two world wars had a profound effect on the art and culture of the time, urging writers to fathom the deep and disturbing ways in which war impacted upon the human spirit. This was a huge challenge, and an opportunity at the same time, for American poets to forge a new personal and authentic vision in response to political, cultural and intellectual changes, particularly within the context of religious belief. The thesis examines the work of H.D. and Robert Lowell, two American poets who were greatly preoccupied with war and its aftermath. Like many writers at that time, they were interested in the eschatologies of traditional religious beliefs and their role in changing people's perceptions in trying times. Both poets write from the perspective of a Christian upbringing, but in their poems they articulate non-conformist eschatological visions, the formation process of which varies between revising, inverting or even negating these old conventions. They seek to delineate a new understanding and a new interpretation of orthodox eschatological and apocalyptic models, so as to relate more intensely and effectively with the momentous upheavals of the modern era. The purpose of the study is to shed light, within a personal and artistic framework, on the differences and similarities in the ways that the two poets approach the theme of war, focusing primarily on the poems written during or immediately after the Second World War.

The thesis starts with an Introduction, which explores the significance of eschatology and the appeal of apocalypse in the modern age, especially in a time of war and catastrophe. The Introduction also touches upon the significance of bringing these two poets together in a single study. The first chapter presents H.D., a first-hand witness to the First World War, and her Imagist poems written during and after that war; while the second chapter discusses two of her most important collections of poems, *What Do I love?* and *Trilogy*. Written during the early 1940's, the two books respond to the Second World War through syncretizing a modern feminine faith from different traditional systems of beliefs. Similarly, Lowell is designated two chapters. Chapter Three explores the poet's presentation of an inverted version of the eschatological convention of Puritan Calvinism, his ancestors' faith. His first two volumes, *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle*, written also during the early 1940's, are discussed in this chapter. The last chapter of the thesis tackles Lowell's important and well-known volume, *Life Studies*, written in late 1950's, during the period of the Cold War. This work shows Lowell, the confessional and manic-depressive poet who, despite relinquishing his faith and (with it) his earlier poetic style of the 1940's, is still preoccupied with war. The thesis claims that his modern spiritual eschatology is hidden under the mask of secularism and sceptical faith. It concludes with a Coda that sums up its main findings.

## **Declaration**

This thesis is solely the work of the author, Abeer Al-Mahdawi, under the supervision of Professor Stephen Regan.

## **Statement of copyright**

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My special and immeasurable thanks and gratitude go to my parents for their relentless support and prayers, to my husband (without his love and never-faltering faith in me this dream would not have been possible), and finally to my sisters and brothers who kept on encouraging me to the end.

*To*  
*My Family*  
*and*  
*My Husband*

## Introduction

M.L. Rosenthal argues that the two world wars of the twentieth century have definitely wielded a great impact on modern poetry and poets, British or American, who tried to confront these recurrent waves of violence and disintegration. As a result,

much of our most impressive poetry of the earlier part of the century – *The Waste Land*, the *Cantos*, *The Bridge* – sought directly through art for means of redefining and reconstructing the exposed and blasted Self. . . . [I]t is in the triumph of a nonhumanist technology, of abstract, impersonal, mechanical force in the real world, that the *horror* lies whose fullest expression is the modern war and the nuclear bomb.<sup>1</sup>

In this respect, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Robert Lowell are, by no means, different from such renowned poets as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Hart Crane. This study endeavours to show that the poetry of H.D. and Lowell revolves around the momentous issues which attracted the attention of most modern poets, especially within the first half of the twentieth century. The harsh industrialism and utilitarian materialism that modernity brought was ruthlessly criticized by poets compelled by fear of how such ideologies would turn human beings into mechanized entities void of spiritual and emotional depth. Poetry was one of the effective means, the poet thought, of objection and of restoring spiritual attachment amongst people and with God, in a time when Nietzsche's phrase, "God is dead," was becoming more and more a common quote at the disposal of the modern individual who was baffled by the clash between the new scientific, psychological and philosophical ideologies and religious faith.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Modern Poetry* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), xxi.



The traditional and most common definition of eschatology is the study of, or speculation on, "last things." S. B. Frost takes "eschatological thought . . . to be a form of expectation which is characterized by finality. The *eschaton* is the goal of the time process, that after which nothing further can occur: it is the climax of teleological history."<sup>2</sup> The concept of the apocalypse, which gained popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century, is part of the general Christian eschatology; and the apocalyptic discourse that H.D. and Lowell refer to in their poems is that narrated in the Book of Revelation – it is the imminent end of the world with Second Coming of Christ. Susan Acheson adequately summarizes this apocalyptic plot:

As envisaged in Revelation and in much orthodox Christian teaching based on it, history is a process inaugurated by God, and moving towards a definite end. It is a linear univocal process in which the drama of redemption or damnation is played out. The apocalypse reveals the hidden meaning of this history in a series of violent catastrophes which emphasise God's absolute power and which destroy the kingdoms of the earth.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, the complete apocalyptic process is, simultaneously, destructive and revelatory. However, Kathryn Banks contends that, in modern times, the term 'apocalypse' is used to mainly indicate the end of civilization or even the world with no suggestion of a revelation; and this end is stimulated by man or nature, not God. In sum, the apocalypse is essentially "an unmitigated disaster, awaited with dread but not desire; *apocalypse* is employed to denote cataclysms from nuclear annihilation to economic

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<sup>2</sup> 'Eschatology and Myth', *Vetus Testamentum* 2, no. 1 (1952): 70, <http://www.jstor.org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/stable/1515697>.

<sup>3</sup> "'Conceived at the Grave's Edge': The Esoteric Eschatology of H.D.'s *Trilogy*", *Literature and Theology* 12, no. 2 (1 June 1998): 188, doi:10.1093/litthe/12.2.187.

meltdown to catastrophic climate change.”<sup>4</sup>

History shows that, in time of wars, epidemics and disasters, people become more preoccupied with exploring the meaning of life, fate and what is hidden for them in the beyond. Eschewing death, physically and emotionally, becomes a common preoccupation of the individual and collective consciousness. This fear of death, accompanied by a sense of the futility of life, becomes a catalyst for some people to be more religious, and for others to lose their faith. In modern times, there is no situation more representative of this turbulence than what happened during the first half of the twentieth century, with two catastrophic world wars. People started to wonder about the meaning of life and the randomness of death, and whether death is the absolute end or whether there is some prospect of an afterlife. In that century, consequentially, “the sense of an ending . . . is as endemic to what we call modernism as apocalyptic utopianism is to political revolution.”<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, Stephen D. O’Leary explains that “eschatological narratives” occupy a great part of

human speculation on the problems of evil, time, and authority and . . . that such narratives result from human attempts to explain and justify the phenomenal realities of evil, to locate humanity within a cycle or progression of cosmic time, and to legitimate or subvert the structures of existing power through the resources of sacred myth.<sup>6</sup>

Frank Kermode concurs with O’Leary and points out that “there is a powerful

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Apocalypse Now and Then: Fictive and Visual Revelations from Anglo-Saxon England to North-American Modernity’, *Literature and Theology* 26, no. 4 (2012): 361, <http://litthe.oxfordjournals.org/content/26/4/361>.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 98.

<sup>6</sup> *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 61.

eschatological element in modern thought and it is reflected in the arts.”<sup>7</sup> In a time when people are disoriented, their understanding of values is confused and hope in a higher religious authority is diminished, then literature is needed most. Apocalyptic literature thrived in response, optimistically or pessimistically, to the inner fear and apprehension of the writer and the reader. References to the prophecies mentioned in the Apocalypse permeate a vast amount of modern literature, Kermode contends, but modern writers do not necessarily take these prophecies literally;<sup>8</sup> they are usually allegorically associated with secular literary contexts. Similarly, Tony Trigilio states that modern poets who employ apocalyptic themes in their work usually do not “surrender to the traditional implication that apocalypse is the transcendent end to history, language, and the generation of meaning.”<sup>9</sup> O’Leary maintains his analysis by adding, “the narrative theodicies produced in this effort to understand evil and authority in a context of cosmic time are interpreted and applied by audiences to fit their historical situations.”<sup>10</sup> The diversity of the application is strongly present in the poetry discussed in this study. Both H.D. and Lowell present an apocalyptic vision that is based on familiar traditional models of apocalypse, yet revised in a way to suit the modern mentality of a society that is steeped in materialistic decay and spiritual oblivion. The apocalyptic visions in the poetry of these two poets are created in a fashion that make them representative models of the modern Western apocalyptic tradition that is more secular than religious, and thus rendering the eschatology in their poems timeless and universally applicable; it is specific to the twentieth century and all centuries, and it may go with the existence of any belief and

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<sup>7</sup> *The Sense of an Ending*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>9</sup> *‘Strange Prophecies Anew’: Rereading Apocalypse in Blake, H.D., and Ginsberg* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 61.

ideology because it is tailored to help in reconstructing earthly life after the mayhem of war. The work of H.D. and Lowell is a documented response towards their time and its events, which, in itself, is a reflection of all history: the history of the past, and that of what yet to happen.

They are both American poets, though H.D. spent most of her life abroad, mostly in Europe. She was in England most of the time during the two world wars. Yet, H.D. did not call herself an expatriate and did not specify for herself a particular nationality. For Christopher Beach, she “was to become truly international in her life and contacts.”<sup>11</sup> In the same way, she did not conform to one faith or one form of poetic construction; her syncretic approach is comprehensive and her belief in it is wholehearted. Lowell, on the other hand, lived most of his life in America; and though the tenor of his work seems to address humanity and the world as a whole, he was primarily preoccupied with the past and present of his country, speaking to his ancestors, as well as to his contemporary countrymen. This diversity between the two poets adds richness to the comparison of the two poets, as will be shown in the study.

The reception of these poets over time shows an inclination for critics and other readers to limit treatment of H.D.’s work to her achievements as Imagist<sup>12</sup> and to regard Lowell’s as primarily confessional. Until almost the end of the twentieth century, H.D. and Lowell were considered poets who emerged in the shadows of such iconic artists as Eliot, Yeats, Pound and Marianne Moore. Although his 1944 volume, *Lord Weary’s Castle*, won

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<sup>11</sup> *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 81.

<sup>12</sup> Most H.D. female critics (like Cassandra Laity, Eileen Gregory, Diana Collecott, and Cyrena A. Pondrom) have emphasized H.D.’s poetic contribution as an Imagist, focusing, within this general framework, on elements of feminism, sexuality and her poetic employment of the Classical mythology and Hellenism. They also brilliantly trace her development from an Imagist into a visionary poet-prophet, but with little reference to the theme of war and destruction in her early imagist poems.

the Pulitzer Prize in 1947, for many critics, Lowell was merely the apprentice of the strict New Criticism, led by Allan Tate and John Crow Ransom and advocated by Eliot. He became a distinguished poet in his own right after the publication of *Life Studies*, written with loose structure and rhythm, and a more personal voice that “challenged the decorum of an era marked by its containment of psychic needs and desires.”<sup>13</sup> H.D., the *female* apprentice of Imagism and Pound, was given hardly any credit in a male-dominated literary environment, as will be discussed in Chapter One. Not only was critical consideration of her early work limited her to Imagism, but discussion of the poetics and themes of these poems was generally detached from any serious interest in the events of the time, the First World War in particular. She has been accused of establishing an imaginary distant world based on the classical tradition and its mythical figures within a framework that focuses on the feminine identity. For instance, David Perkins says, “it was obvious that her art, like that of the aesthetes, had limited itself by retreating from the world of actual experience. Moreover, the feelings it expressed were often strained and unreal.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Glynn Hughes considers H.D. as “not of this world, but of one long past, and we must not look to her for an interpretation of modern life. All that she brings to the twentieth century is a vision of beauty which has not altered since the days of Homer, and which may be perceived only by those who have within themselves something likewise fixed and immutable.”<sup>15</sup> Such assessment of H.D.’s early poetry as escapist shows that her camouflaged treatment of war and its ramifications in her poetry can be easily overlooked when not properly scrutinized alongside her biographical

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<sup>13</sup> Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, 155.

<sup>14</sup> *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (Harvard University Press, 1976), 340.

<sup>15</sup> *Imagism & the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1972), 124.

details, letters and prose writing. At first glance, the theme of war does seem missing from those poems, and they appear to be simply about nature, love, art and the distant worlds of Greece and Rome, inhabited by gods and goddesses. Also, reading her triad of poems, "Amaranth," "Eros" and "Envy," at face value, makes H.D. look like a poet who has become even more self-involved, with a proclivity towards a confessional mood, as the triad discloses her personal feelings as a woman suffering from the pains of love and betrayal. In Louis Martz's introduction to *H.D.: Collected Poems*, Susan Stanford Friedman's *Penelope's Web* and Barbara Guest's *Herself Defined*, the emphasis in discussing the three poems mentioned above revolves basically around the personal details that they reveal and the subjective style with which they are written. Likewise, Elizabeth Dodd and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in *The Veiled Mirror* and *H.D.: The Career of that Struggle* respectively, draw on the overlap between biography and the mythology of the classical world, with special reference to the position of the female in culture. While the thesis concurs with these opinions in discussing the poems in Chapter One, it also shows another side to them: the personal trauma is connected to the cosmic dilemma of war; each highlights the other for the purpose of revealing the devastating effect of this war on life, human relations and the spirit of the artist; thus, refuting the general impression that H.D.'s early poems are the literary output of a lonely poet who is detached from her own reality, and showing that they are a significant step into writing more conspicuously about war during the forties.

The broader themes of these early poems written during and immediately after the Great War are not easy to define. Deep within them, there is a quest for understanding of the self and the universe, similar to that undertaken by most modern poets, who experienced first-hand the disorienting dissipation of old values, and embarked on an artistic mission of rescue and reconstruction. Her poems speak out against those unfair

critical judgements and bear witness to her deep involvement in the issues of her age, the most prominent of which is war and its effect on her personal and family life, as well as her psyche. Studying her biography, as well as her memoir, *Tribute to Freud*, reveals the traumatic impact of the Great War: “my actual personal war-shock (1914-1919) did not have a chance. . . . And the thing I primarily wanted to fight in the open, war, its cause and effect, with its inevitable aftermath of neurotic breakdown and related nerve disorders, was driven deeper.”<sup>16</sup>

Very little has been written about H.D.’s early poems as testimonial transcriptions of the personal and general traumatic impact of a ruthless war and of modern dehumanizing changes. A more sensitive comprehension of this early stage of her life will facilitate an understanding of the reasons behind some of the subsequent events in her life, such as her writer’s block and her need for psychoanalytic therapy, as well as the influence of Freud. All this constitute an important transitional phase that will result in a more personal poetry. In this early period of her career, she also developed an interest in psychic practices and esoteric sources. All this would eventually lead her to write prophetic poems highly pertinent to the outbreak of the Second World War. We need to consider H.D.’s art in the way that she considers the universe: that is, arranged in a palimpsestic pattern. The meaning of each layer is reinforced by the meaning of the previous one. She thought that any cultural system of myth and belief is not static or limited to its own time and place; it is pliant and manageable and, at the same time, ineffaceable. Her figurative image of it is that of a palimpsest; the ink with which the palimpsest of history is written is indelible, but the record can be overwritten with a new vision that can effect desirable and needed changes in a modern society for which old

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<sup>16</sup> *Tribute to Freud*, ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1974), 93–94.

traditions have become obsolete. In *Trilogy*, for example, H.D. “offers a vision of time as constantly open to the past but moving forward.”<sup>17</sup> In conclusion, H.D. fashions time and history in such a way that they are neither static nor repeating themselves immutably.

To gain credibility and legitimacy, the new proposed vision is actually a derivative version of older, familiar ones. For H.D., infusing new beliefs in a society can be achieved only through winning its collective allegiance and validation of her project. Through her poems, she works on recruiting initiates from her audience, whose minds and imaginations are open to receiving the mysteries of the universe and its encrypted symbols. Her agenda involves working with the community and for the community to induce a spiritual resurrection after the predicament of war. H.D. looks at past beliefs and traditions in a way that inspires new prospects for the present and the future.

H.D.’s work is a clear manifesto of her understanding and employment of the relevance of classically established doctrines and myths to our modern existential world. Through her early Imagist poems, she tried to study the female character and mind in a society that limited her role to that of a passive muse hiding behind the shadow of the male creator. In the process of understanding her identity as a woman and poet, she derived her poetic model-figures, males and females, mainly from Egyptian, Greek and Roman mythologies, emphasizing primarily the importance of female beauty and its original relation to nature without rejecting the masculine role of the creator and the lover. The eschatology she proposes in this period is derived from the Moravian church (in which she was raised believing in respect, love and grace towards all people, men and women, and in paying reverence to Mary and Christ equally), and her search for her female identity to create a faith of aestheticism: poetry, art and beauty will outlive

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<sup>17</sup> Acheson, “Conceived at the Grave’s Edge”, 192.



destruction and death, and such aesthetic values will eventually surpass materialistic market values and will restrict the hegemony of the masculine system. Embracing such a faith is a kind of redemption. In her two books, *What Do I Love?* and *Trilogy* (written during the Second World War), she mainly addresses the problem of war, accompanied by spiritual and physical disintegration, and all caused by patriarchal social and political administrations that promote human-mechanization and alienation of the self. As a result, her eschatology in this period comes from her new syncretic faith, the components of which are selectively accumulated from the discourses of the orthodox Apocalypse, esotericism and classical mythology, as well as from common aesthetic values. Trigilio likens H.D. to William Blake and Allan Ginsberg in terms of her treatment of the apocalypse motif in her poems, especially in *Trilogy*; he argues that she “attempts to conceive an apocalypse without fatalism, to proffer declamatory narratives of redemptive pilgrimage without recourse to foundationalism, and to construct a prophetic poem within Judeo-Christian eschato-teleology without succumbing to . . . [its] closure.”<sup>18</sup> Her new concocted faith prophetically introduces a possible resurrection in this life through the agency of a divine feminine authority that defies the long-established tradition of patriarchal predominance. Once, during her psychoanalytic session with Freud, she confessed to him her “suppressed desire to be a Prophetess.”<sup>19</sup> It seems that, in her significant war *Trilogy*, H.D. has proclaimed herself poet-prophet.

Despite his deep involvement with the eventful modern era of the mid-twentieth century, combining contemporaneity and antiquity is also one of the trenchant features of Lowell's poetics. It is part of his career from the beginning till the end. The early Lowell

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<sup>18</sup> *Strange Prophecies Anew*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Tribute to Freud*, 16.

is a poet who is interested in ancient traditions and cultures, following in the footsteps of many modern poets, especially T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, whose interest in Dante and Milton, for example, called Lowell's attention to themes of sin, damnation, remission, death and the afterlife. Nevertheless, Lowell does not deal with these themes in the orthodox way that Dante and Milton deal with them. He is, in this respect, a non-conformist. Being interested, at such a young age, in a poet like Dante and his sophisticated poems exhibits a developed intellectuality and seriousness: in some of his poems, and in imitation of Eliot, Lowell quotes Latin lines from Dante without explanation, thus making his poems more difficult to read, as he thought should be the case with serious poetry at that early stage of his career. Also, Lowell experimented many times with Dante's sonnet form, and sometimes he makes his own modifications to conventional forms, just as Eliot did on occasion. Although, in many ways, his poetry shows how influenced he was by these poets, it also vouches for its creator's maverick mind and art. Lowell is not a mere imitator, even as a young poet. He has definitely left his distinctive mark on the American poetic tradition of the first half of the twentieth century. At the same time, despite the influence of major figures in the canon of Western poetry, Lowell does not get absorbed in the past; he completely realizes that his writing needs to be part of the present, reflecting its incongruities and proposing solutions for its dilemmas. For Lowell, literary history was an enduring source of inspiration.

Lowell moves continually between the past and the present in an attempt to understand contemporary issues through the lens of history, an overarching term that covers his personal and family history, as well as the national one, in its social, religious and political paradigms. His general outlook on the past shows an ambivalence continually reflected in his treatment of war, and its causes and consequences, with war being a catastrophic event that twice took place in the twentieth century. This

ambivalence also manifests itself in the way Lowell feels towards his family, his Puritan ancestors and the early New Englanders in general. Occasionally, Lowell expresses a sense of pride in being a descendent of a family deeply rooted (on both sides) in the history of New England, being the early settlers who bravely endeavoured to establish a new world that has grown to be the most influential power on different levels. Nevertheless, this pride turns into shame and disappointment, knowing that the means his forefathers adopted to achieve that goal often involved violence and a disregard for authentic religious and moral values that once were the foundation on which their culture was established. Feeling guilty and partially responsible being their descendent, Lowell rebelliously forges a different eschatology.

The eschatology Lowell devises in *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle*, the early books he wrote around the time of the Second World War and when he was a Catholic convert, is an inverted version of his ancestors' Puritan Calvinist faith and its eschatologies of the Second Coming of Christ, the Armageddon, and the Kingdom of God, destined to take the place of New England's early colonies. In several of his poems, Lowell prophetically anticipates that cities like Boston, Salem and Concord will experience the same fate that befell Babylon: destroyed by Divine wrath for its sins; and, by implication, all America is doomed for pursuing the misdeeds of the forefathers. This prophetic eschatology articulated in the poems is a note of warning to modern America and an invitation for redemption, though mitigated and not pronounced. This is Lowell's way of rebelling against those settlers who broke their promise to God and relinquished their likeness to Him by adopting a violent and materialistic approach to life. The religious theme of the apocalypse and eschatology, intensely present in Lowell's first book, continues to permeate his second one, but in a less pronounced way and with less sharp tone and images. It is mitigated by Lowell's concentration on history – especially his

personal one – and on developing his subjective poetic voice. This made critics like Jerome Mazzaro (*The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*), Hugh B. Staples (*Robber Lowell: The First Twenty Years*) and Steven Gould Axelrod (*Robert Lowell: Life and Art*) argue that Lowell's interest in the apocalypse and its politics has almost disappeared from the poems of *Lord Weary's Castle*. Yet, Chapter Four of this thesis will argue that, in addition to Lowell's personal voice and his employment of historical elements, religious references and the motif of the apocalypse are sustained throughout the poems of this collection, and clear examples of which are "To Peter Taylor on the Feast of the Epiphany," "Napoleon Crosses the Berezina," and "Where the Rainbow Ends." The infusion of personal and universal history, and of the secular and the religious, asserts the connectedness of all elements in the universe, and also its cyclical nature, an understanding on the bases of which Lowell articulates his eschatological model

In his groundbreaking 1959 book, *Life Studies*, Lowell show the symptoms of being a sceptic, though the general critical verdict is that Lowell has completely freed himself from any religious shackles and his new poems are secular. Surely, Lowell does not make it easy for the reader to form a clear opinion about the matter. He himself neither seems to be certain about the manner with which he should designate or classify his poems, nor if he even needs to do that in the first place:

there is a question whether my poems are religious, or whether they just use religious imagery. I haven't really any idea. My last poems don't use religious imagery, they don't use symbolism. In many ways they seem to me more religious than my early ones, which are full of symbols and references to Christ and God, . . . [with] the same sort of struggle, light and darkness, the flux of experience. The morality seems much the same.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Frederick Seidel, 'The Art of Poetry: Robert Lowell', in *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 59–60.

In the first poem of the collection, "Beyond the Alps," he declares his abandonment of the Roman Catholic Faith, as well as his old poetic style. He now employs a more personal style and personal themes that opened the way to a new revolutionary genre of poetry, the "Confessional." Accordingly, his eschatology now, like his faith, is muffled or "masked." It is "tranquilized" and "lobotomized," like the general attitude of an era of cold war; but it has never disappeared. Places are still disintegrated and decayed, reflecting the decay of the mind and spirit of the modern man, of which Lowell himself is a version. Nevertheless, the reader can still detect a form of renewal in the emphasis on the cyclical nature of history. Historical and cultural references still pervade these poems to highlight the present, though the traditional notion of the apocalypse is replaced by a recurrent secular or man-made apocalypse inflicted on the universe and echoed within the psyche. With determination, spiritual and moral resurrection is possible but presented faintly in the poems.

During the first phase of his career, Lowell was aware, through the knowledge provided to him by his birth faith (Protestantism) and the faith to which he later converted (Catholicism), of the dangerous eschatological consequences awaiting his modern New England and the world, which had relinquished true spiritual faith and indulged in an entirely secular world adhering to violence and utilitarianism. In this war-stricken world, he felt the insecurity of living and the imminence of death, bearing in mind the traditional eschatologies and the idea of apocalypse, precipitated by man-made turmoils and a looming cataclysmic ending.

Lowell's perception of faith and its effect has changed in accordance with the new ideologies and ethos of the new era following the end of a military war, and the start of a new "cold" one, during which preparations are being set for a possible nuclear combat. Fear of the orthodox ending of the world is no longer a dynamic factor to touch upon in

his poems. He realized that the notion of an approaching ruinous ending with a secular context did not diminish in tandem with the increasing emaciation of modern man's religious faith, rather it was latent and concealed within a constant sense of revelatory apocalyptic incidents looming with every minute of a life run by power-pursuers and developers of annihilating science. Lowell thinks that man has, unknowingly, become his worst enemy, seeking self-annihilation with vehemence. The threatening danger zone now lies within a nation, and as a part of the earthly life; it is portentous, close and not mystical as it is in the narrative of the Bible. Frank Kermode argues that, during an age governed by cold war fought with a highly developed scientific arsenal, the eschatological threat of the nuclear bombs is as real as the eschatological threats of armies in the sky and a palpable Antichrist.<sup>21</sup> The threat is now present in different forms of secular apocalypse and causes of destruction, the most probable of which is war. Lowell, amongst others, could see that possibility clearly, especially after the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima.

The main focus of the dissertation is the eschatological poetic treatments forged by H.D. and Lowell in response to the Second World War. Connecting the biography of the two poets to their art is necessary to yield a fuller understanding of their interests and motives; such an approach is missing in most of the critical work written about H.D. and Lowell. This is especially true if we look at the transitional phase they went through, and how profoundly influential it was in shaping their subsequent work. H.D. – after the First World War – and Lowell – after the Second World War – experienced deep personal losses and shocks. These experiences were aligned with more universal changes within their age, on social, political and ideological levels. All this formed a vigorous catalyst for

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<sup>21</sup> *The Sense of an Ending*, 95.

transition and change, profoundly affecting their intellectual beliefs, values and attitudes. On the one hand, discussion of H.D.'s early poems from *Sea Garden*, *The God* and the "Amaranth" triad falls within the scope of her interaction with the Great War and the influence it had on her personality and later poetry focused on in this study (*What Do I Love?* and *Trilogy*). On the other hand, a discussion of Lowell's *Life Studies* written during the period of the Cold War is illuminating in demonstrating the effect of war (in this case, the Second World War) on the life and work of a poet. The thesis concentrates, however, on his first two volumes (*Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle*) written during and immediately after the Second World War, the conjoining point of the two poets' work in this thesis. Accordingly, the view this study provides spans most of the twentieth century, throughout which H.D. and Lowell together presented a vast and troubling account of the tragic amplitude of war and its seemingly unceasing presence. The world after the end of two major wars did not exactly accommodate itself to peace and harmony; tension and conflict were still experienced even after a formal declaration of peace. Another war seemed always to be looming, prompting a sense of disappointment in the work of the two poets, along with a shared feeling that their art had failed to act as a preventative warning in alerting people against another war. They felt helpless, and this led in both cases to a severe experience of "writer's block" that took them years to recover from. The outer anxiety had provoked an inner anxiety that developed into mental disturbance, which subsequently required psychological treatment. In the process, they both were advised to write prose as part of their psychotherapy; they did, and it helped. The outcome was a new outlook on the world and its events, with greater introspection and self-analysis, as well as a new writing style.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 'For Further Biographical Details, See Barbara Guest, *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World* (London: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1984), Janice S. Robinson, *H.D.: The Life and Work of*

H.D. decisively opened up her work to more current issues, including war and destruction. She took a step in confidently facing her memories of war, and in psychologically preparing herself for a new conflict. The poems of the subsequent phase offer an incisive account of war, death, rebirth and healing in a much more overt way than previously, revealing what is buried under the debris of London and under the subconscious mind of the poet. Lowell started to write with a much more intensely personal style, inaugurating what became known as “confessional poetry.” He also concentrated more on family issues and on more obviously secular themes; and though his old interests in war and religion were not abandoned, they were not so explicit and not so accentuated as they were in his early poems. Together, H.D. and Lowell, both non-combatant poets, deserve recognition for having created a liberating war poetry: a poetry that in the midst of our own global conflicts continues to advocate survival.

In writing about either of the poets considered in this study, critics tend to somehow separate their early and later work as being different in style and content; also taking into account the changes in the personalities of the two poets over time. Yet, the thesis demonstrates that the two phases each poet’s life and career went through are connected in a way that adds significance to the understanding of their artistic contribution. Their later work is a continuation of the early work; the themes are sustained but developed and matured over time, and always showing the effect of an age that embraced changes and new things even if they were on the expense of moral, spiritual and aesthetic values, and thus has cast a shadow over the mental, emotional and psychological states of the modern individual.

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*an American Poet* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), and Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).



We rarely find a study that conducts a comparison of their work and life (except those including their poetic contribution within the general framework of modern American poetry). This is probably due to gender and generation differences, as well as their residential locales being of disparate culture and history. For this reason, by bringing them together, this study offers a panoramic view of their work, their life and their age, the correlation of which clarifies more about the meaning of eschatology from a modern literary point of view in reaction to a universally devastating event like a world war.

# Chapter 1

## H.D. and WWI

### Life, Art and Freud

#### I

Whenever the initials 'H.D.' are mentioned, the word 'Imagism' immediately comes to mind. This American poet had been narrowly branded as 'Imagist' for a long time, a critical tendency responsible for disparaging her other innovative and experimental contributions to modern literature. Unlike other poets, she does not merely reflect the world around her with her words, rather she attempts to recreate it, by means of looking at reality from a spiritual perspective. Her art is her transcendent comprehension mirroring the impact of the tangible world and its experiences on her life, her consciousness and the way she visualizes it. Her significance as a poet is confidently described by Cerena N. Pondrom in her illuminating article "H.D. and the Origins of Imagism:" "H.D. appears to have been the catalyst and her poems the model which set modern poetry on its now familiar way."<sup>1</sup>

Hilda Doolittle was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1886. Her father, Charles Leander Doolittle, was of a Protestant family. In 1875, he was appointed as a professor of astronomy and a director of the Flower Observatory at the University of Pennsylvania. Hilda's mother, Helen (Wolle) Eugenie, was Moravian, originally from Germany. H.D. dropped out of college when she was in her second year due to poor health and grades. At home, she wrote a lot and read Greek and Latin literature that took her to a special and fascinating world of mythical stories that would later mark most of her oeuvre starting

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<sup>1</sup> 'H.D. and the Origins of Imagism', in *Signets: Reading H.D.*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 105.

with the titles, such as “Adonis,” “At Ithaca,” “Hermes of the Ways,” “Helios and Athene,” and “She Contrasted with Herself Hippolyta.” As an adolescent, she was acquainted with literary figures like Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington, whom she would marry in 1913. She met Pound, whose influence on her life and writing would prove to be great, when she was only fifteen. He was not only a friend but a tutor to her, although he was only one year her senior. He encouraged her interest in Greek and Latin literature and provided her with books to read about these two giant cultures. Despite the fact that he was welcomed by her family as a friend and not as a future husband, they were engaged, for a short time, in 1907. Their engagement ended and he travelled to Europe in 1908. Later, in 1911, Hilda followed him to London where they, in addition to Williams and Aldington, would constitute the axis of Imagism, one of the most important movements in modernist English poetry. For the rest of her life, she would become one of the great expatriate American poets in Europe.

Pound liked her first poems and saw them as the perfect application of the rules he established to define the poetry of Imagism, and the perfect representation of the modern era; and, in late 1912, he even signed them for her as “H. D. Imagist” and sent them to *Poetry* – run by Harriet Monroe – to be published in 1913. In her *End to Torment*, H.D. gives an account of the famous incident at the tea room near the British Museum in 1912, in which Pound signed her own poems under the pen name with which she would be, as a writer, permanently branded:

He slashed with a pencil. “Cut this out, shorten this line ... I’ll send this to Harriet Monroe of Poetry ... Will this do?” And he scrawled “H. D. Imagiste” at the bottom of the page.

I was hiding.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *End to Torment: A Memoir of Ezra Pound*, ed. Norman Holmes Pearson and Michael John King (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1979), 18.

Diana Collecott argues that the account “juxtaposes the public gesture of the male mentor with the private retreat of the female neophyte whose previous identity has been erased by that very gesture: ‘I was hiding.’”<sup>3</sup> For Susan Stanford Friedman, this naming process is “a condensation that ritualizes the act by evoking prior male inscriptions or figurations of women.”<sup>4</sup> Pound’s renaming her, and her own consent to that, would have their consequences on her writing: “her own poetic mask and a complicated double function of her literary career” evident through the fact that “she conceived of some of her work as not-H.D. and most of her work as not-imagist.”<sup>5</sup> But for Hughes and many other critics, she is the “Perfect Imagiste” through her very early poetry and, thus, she remained for a very long time confined to the label, “H.D. Imagiste.”<sup>6</sup> Pondrom agrees with Hughes, especially with regard to those early poems signed by Pound (“Hermes of the Ways,” “Priapus, Keeper-of-Orchards,” and “Epigram: After the Greek”) – while he himself had not yet started to write poems that conform to his theory of Imagism, polished only after he had read H.D.’s poems. But Pondrom refuses to draw a line here to limit H.D.’s contribution. Rather, she believes that the poems and the objectivity of their images must be viewed “as important not only to the founding but also to the development of the dynamic current of modernism which shaped the nature of a literary generation and beyond.”<sup>7</sup> Pondrom actually proposes a cogent argument based on composition dates of H.D.’s poems and letters. In this argument she says that H.D. wrote true imagist poems prior to Pound’s definitions of the image and the vortex were set, and even before he

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<sup>3</sup> *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism: 1910-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 140.

<sup>4</sup> *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H. D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *H.D.: The Career of That Struggle* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> *Imagism & the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1972), 111.

<sup>7</sup> ‘H.D. and the Origins of Imagism’, 99.

himself started to write poems that adhere to these definitions. Hence, he was the one who was inspired by H.D.'s imagist style.<sup>8</sup>

In "Orchard" (as the second poem would be entitled later in *Sea Garden*), H.D. presents a direct and condensed image of a perfect garden, full of fruitful trees and swarming bees in which the speaker (the poet), engulfed by the overwhelming beauty of the first ripe pear falling from the tree, falls prostrating and crying to the god-keeper of the orchard asking him to save her from "the beauty / of the fruit-trees."<sup>9</sup> The poet identifies herself with the falling ripened fruits and with the swiftly flying bees and asks for protection from Priapus – the orchard god – as if beauty is weakness and the "rough-hewn god" who is "alone unbeautiful" (p.29) is the source of strength and protection:

I saw the first pear  
as it fell---  
the honey-seeking, golden-banded,  
the yellow swarm  
was not more fleet than I,  
(spare us from loveliness)  
and I fell prostrate  
crying:  
you have flayed us  
with your blossoms,  
spare us the beauty  
of fruit-trees. (p. 28)

Then, the sheltered garden is not perfect, and beauty is not strength; that is why H.D. needs to find a new and unconventional principle of beauty. But creation requires sacrifice and, thus, the offering of the 'broken' fruits to Priapus:

These fallen hazel-nuts  
stripped late of their green sheathes,  
grapes, red-purple,  
their berries  
dripping with wine,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>9</sup> Louis L. Martz, ed., *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), 28. All further references to H.D.'s poems will be indicated by a page number in parentheses from this source.

pomegranates already broken,  
and shrunken figs  
and quinces untouched,  
I bring you as offering. (p. 29)

H.D.'s 1916 collection entitled *Sea Garden* is well-known as a prototype of the poetic 'image', as well as of vers libre, in modern poetry. For Vincent Quinn, these poems exemplify the rules set by Ezra Pound for Imagism: "precision, economy, concreteness, and stylistic innovation."<sup>10</sup> In this collection, "Oread," a frequently quoted poem, presents a simple condensed and direct image of nature as do most of the poems of this collection. Is Oread, the mountain nymph in Greek mythology, addressing the sea or the forest or "a stormy sea-forest"? It is a tricky image to figure out and to decide whether the sea is made up of trees or the forest of water. The self is identified with the elements of nature whose untamed forces are reflections of the chaos of the self and presentations of intense perceptions and emotions. If H.D. is the Oread, it is most probably that she is fearlessly asking to be drowned in the upheaval of her consciousness to breathe life again and to create her art; she has to taste the thrill of death in order to earn the gift of life and its sensation. This urge would accompany her for the rest of her life, and would frequently be manifested throughout her writing:

Whirl up, sea –  
whirl your pointed pines,  
splash your great pines  
on our rocks  
hurl your green over us,  
cover us  
with your pool of fire. (p. 55)

Her early poetry is generally considered by critics as the best of a minor poet. Quinn presents a comparison to show that "the limits of H. D.'s achievement" are due to

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<sup>10</sup> *Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), 23.

the lack of “the larger intellectual and social concerns of major poetry.”<sup>11</sup> Other critics, like Douglas Bush, E. B. Greenwood and Norman N. Holland, criticized her poems for their excessive references to classical Greece, disparaging her as an escapist from reality and her writing as limited, finite and narrow. Thomas Burnett Swan accuses the poet of shaping “the classical world to her own temperament.”<sup>12</sup> The poems, for Marcia Nardi, “lack those echoes of the heart’s depths or the mind’s that we always listen for in literature of any kind.”<sup>13</sup> But for Michael King, “the substance and breadth of the *Collected Poems*,” – after being published in 1983 – “should do away with that misconception of H.D.’s poetic *oeuvre* once and for all;” and he asserts that “we can begin to see H.D.’s achievement as an ordered and developing whole, culminating in the great long poems of the late years.”<sup>14</sup> And with a careful investigation of all her literary output, one can reach the conclusion that H.D., throughout all her life, wanted to find a synthesis between reality and spirituality by scrutinizing classical texts, rituals and cultures. She exploited mythical places, figures and concepts for her own purposes and created a new world – one that is a reflection neither of the modern realistic world nor of the mythical one – or “an island where Hellenic temples rise, where rarefied Greek figures move in frenetic heat . . . a country of her own spirit and imagination”<sup>15</sup> She created a platform for her female voice. Joseph Riddel analyses H.D.’s psychological impulses behind utilizing mythic references and figure in her poems:

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> *The Classical World of H.D.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 173.

<sup>13</sup> quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope’s Web: Gender, Modernity, H.D.’s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 54.

<sup>14</sup> *H.D.: Woman and Poet* (Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska, *A History of American Poetry: 1900-1940*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946), 192.

H.D.'s classical world does not transport one into ancient Greece. If anything, it transposes the objectivity of Greece in terms of H.D.'s 'peculiar ego-centric / personal approach.' Her private use of the classical past, of mythological analogues and allusions, can only be understood in the light of her attitude toward myth [...] formed by a deep affinity for the remote purity of a classical world, a world known and hence existing only in art and literature, formed while she was still a student. . . . From the beginning, she seems to have identified mythic figures with her own emotional states, by way of identifying and universalizing those states, rather than relating her moods to the currently accepted interpretation of the mythic figure.<sup>16</sup>

The affairs, conflicts, love, hate, entrapments and aspirations of her psyche and her whole being are mirrored in that distant world of gods and goddesses.

In addition to her infatuation with classical mythologies, the most obvious property of all H.D.'s writing is her engagement with old religions, their mysterious rituals and supernatural powers thought to be part of the existence of our world. She did not only read, study and write about them, but she even believed that she herself possessed certain mystifying powers, whether by inheritance or by acquisition. Being a Moravian Christian is an important part of the shaping of H.D.'s beliefs. The impact of H.D.'s religious roots on her writing can be seen clearly, especially in the first phase of her literary production. She was raised as a Moravian, attended the church and witnessed the Moravian rituals practised by her mother and relatives. Janice S. Robinson proposes that a scrutinizing reading of H.D.'s poetry gives the reader an insight into the poet's qualities passed to her through her family, especially on her mother's side. Of these qualities, related by the family's acquaintances, are "a keen wit, a strong will, a capacity for perseverance and hard work, creative ability, and inclination toward the mystical, a stern

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<sup>16</sup> 'H. D. and the Poetics of "Spiritual Realism"', *Contemporary Literature* 10, no. 4 (1 October 1969): 452–53, doi:10.2307/1207691.



sense of order, a love for nature, an independent spirit.”<sup>17</sup> The Moravian doctrine was one of respect, love and grace towards people within or outside of the sect. They were advocates of pacifism and so was H.D., through her art, in a culture hailing war as an expression of patriotism. “H.D. proposed,” say Friedman and Rachel Blau Duplessis, “her understanding of the Moravian ‘secret’ as a way out of catastrophe into peace.”<sup>18</sup> The Moravian mysticism she read about thoroughly and was interested in provided her with symbolic resources to understand and enhance the spiritual intimacy with the tangible world around her.<sup>19</sup>

As a Moravian, H.D. believed in the tone of tolerance of her creed: “the supernatural illumination from God . . . which is the recognition of the love of Christ saves who believes in it;”<sup>20</sup> but it did not fully satisfy all her bewilderment or answer her questions about herself and the world. She directed her attention to the esoteric and the psychic. The First World War had generated a sense of apprehension about ‘the end’ and the beyond, a sense that came to be familiar during the 1920s and 1930s, and thus led to the flourishing of the ideas of the esoteric and the uncanny, which were already established before the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> H.D. would follow any means to penetrate mystical realms and old religions. She wanted, as much as she could, to familiarize herself with different disciplines and branches of knowledge: Greek

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<sup>17</sup> Janice S. Robinson, *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 8–9.

<sup>18</sup> *Signets: Reading H.D.* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 70.

<sup>19</sup> Robinson, *H.D.*, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Guest, *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World*, 1st ed (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1984), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Acheson, “‘Conceived at the Grave’s Edge’: The Esoteric Eschatology of H.D.’s Trilogy”, *Literature and Theology* 12, no. 2 (1 June 1998): 188, <http://litthe.oxfordjournals.org/content/12/2/187>.

mythology and its fascinating world; astrological facts and stars to guide her on the dark road; psychoanalysis and dream interpretation, which she sought as a curious disciple as well as a patient; and not to forget numerology and even Tarot cards. The world of the dead and its spirits is another mystery she wanted to unravel later in her life when she believed she had a psychic 'gift', just like her uncle the musician whose psychic abilities she used to hear about from her family. Her belief was also encouraged by the stories her grandmother used to relate and H.D. later documented in her memoir, *The Gift*, written during the Second World War about her family and childhood. Jacob Korg states that H.D.'s family made it clear to her that "she had not inherited 'the Gift' of wisdom or psychic insight;" rather it was the link she found between the mystifying practices of her sect and those of the old traditional beliefs of the world. Yet her "lifelong interest in exploring her psyche through her autobiographical writing and psychoanalytic sessions with a number of analysts, including Freud, seemed to strengthen, rather than threaten, her confidence in the occult."<sup>22</sup> H.D. herself, according to Robinson, admits that "Moravianism has Greek origins, and it is likely that her affinity to Greek culture derived in part from her Moravian background."<sup>23</sup>

In order to appreciate her work, we have to study her as a woman in actual life first and then as an artist. Brought up in Egypt, Greece, psychoanalysis, astrology, numerology, séances, the supernatural and the esoteric are not just themes in her prose and verse writing, but constitute a huge part of our perception of her living as a woman and her feminist consciousness. Of these constituents, as varied as they are in place and history, Barbara Guest suggests that H.D. "used bits and pieces of each to arrange a

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<sup>22</sup> *Winter Love: Ezra Pound and H.D.* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 77.

<sup>23</sup> *H.D.*, 85.

working logic that was both mystical and confusing.”<sup>24</sup> Robinson reaches a similar reasoning that says: “In H.D.’s poetry the perfect fusion of physical and metaphysical reality in the single image creates a mystery. As readers, we wonder whether what ‘happened’ on the metaphysical level happened also on the physical level.”<sup>25</sup>

The time she spent in London before the First World War was both informative and productive. She was, often, with Pound and Aldington discussing poetry – theirs and others’ – and going to the British Museum to study Greek and Latin. With the approach of the war, they were also discussing politics and what war meant to them. H.D. did not believe in wars and violence. War, for her, was not necessarily synonymous with patriotism or heroism, but was surely an act of patriarchy; this is especially explicit in her works before and after the Second World War. She refused Pound’s position of enthusiasm and pride toward wars and their violence expressed through his supportive stance on Vorticism and Futurism, the two artistic movements which were advocates of war.

For H.D., war was a source of turbulence on a national and personal level. She suffered from many adversities, the least of which was her being alone after her husband had joined the army. Their life as husband and wife was now at stake after he started to have an affair with the American Dorothy Yorke. And the most emotionally devastating incident is the loss of her child at birth in 1915, which she took as a collateral damage of the war.<sup>26</sup> Her closest brother, Gilbert, was killed at the front in 1918, and, not long after that, her father died heart-broken at losing his son. She had embarked on a relationship with Cecil Gray and became pregnant with her only daughter, Perdita. Giving birth was

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<sup>24</sup> *Herself Defined*, 225.

<sup>25</sup> *H.D.*, 121.

<sup>26</sup> Guest, *Herself Defined*, 95, 103.

another calamity which H.D. and the child miraculously survived after being stricken with influenza. Neither her husband, who previously agreed to care for her and the child as his own, nor Gray were with her at the hospital. Only Bryher<sup>27</sup> was there to support her spiritually and financially. These two women met in Cornwall in July 1918, and started a steady relation of friendship and love that would last till the death of the poet in 1961.

Despite this hectic and disturbing period, H.D. did not stop writing, and she was still faithful to the principles of Imagism. She wrote *Sea Garden*, the best of her early work, in 1916 and *The God* in 1917. In many of these poems, one can trace, though not easily, the poet's touching on the war calamities currently befallen the nation and the human race in general, and bringing deterioration to the aesthetic values of the literature and art of a whole generation.

## II

As mentioned earlier, critics like Perkins and Hughes assert that H.D. did not show much concern as far as the turbulent period of the First World War was concerned or, more likely, was not able to deal with it. This is true if her poems written at that time were compared to the war poetry of her contemporaries, like Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon, in which they have a clear saying — supportive or critical — with regard to war and its politics, and who themselves were fighting at the front and writing in the trenches.

Another reason why many failed to realize her preoccupation with the concerns of her time including a catastrophe like the Great War is the “impersonal poetics of ‘the

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<sup>27</sup> Bryher is the pen name of Winifred Ellerman, an English writer and magazine editor. She was H.D.'s close friend, lover and lifelong companion. Bryher supported H.D. spiritually and financially, and she even officially adopted H.D.'s daughter.

early H.D.' for whom the historical was transmuted into the mythic, the gender-bound into the gender-free."<sup>28</sup> This objectivity and mythical orientation rendered her, in their eyes, a self-alienated poet writing from an ivory tower and hardly about her surrounding reality. The identity of the poet is unnamed and masked, the initials specify no gender, and the settings which indicate no time, place or history encompass universal reflections and emotions.

H.D. could not disengage herself completely from the confines of imagism and its objectivity. So, she started to experiment with prose and it was a convenient medium that made her take off the mask and gave her more freedom for the expression of the personal. Although her prose was not necessarily written during or immediately after the war, it depicts events that happened and feelings that were experienced during the war. Her largely autobiographical series, *Madrigal*, was written in the early twenties. This series which consists of four novels – *HERmione*, *Bid Me to Live*, *Paint it Today* and *Asphodel* – is the best version of H.D.'s story of the Great War. For H.D., writing subjectively via prose is a psychological need necessary to face her fearful and painful memories accumulated through the war years and after. For example, her autobiographical novel "*Bid Me to Live* invites us," says Norman Kelvin, "to recognize that the novel is meant to be a psychoanalytic reliving of the World War I years."<sup>29</sup> Friedman asserts that "prose did become the discourse that freed H.D. to narrate her experience of modernity."<sup>30</sup> Thus, reading her prose work can provide indisputable evidence that she was preoccupied with the war and its drastic effects, personal and general.

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<sup>28</sup> Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, 62.

<sup>29</sup> 'H.D. and the Years of World War I', *Victorian Poetry* 38, no. 1 (1 April 2000): 171, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004298>.

<sup>30</sup> *Penelope's Web*, 64.

Writing in verse or in prose, H.D. values writing as a sacred skill or “vocation, and she hopes to use her talent to create an austere beauty,”<sup>31</sup> Vincent Quinn says. In “Prayer,” she asks a goddess or muse to

Give back the glamour to our will,  
the thought; give back the tool,  
the chisel; once we wrought  
things not unworthy. (p. 142)

The tools she wishes for are the pen and the inspiration she needs to fashion, figuratively, the garb of an ancient soldier. From the beginning, when she started to write about the war, she had a message or even a compelling duty as a writer: to keep the flare of beauty and art lit. Burnett points out that “her notion of the ‘sacred’ in the arts gives her a position from which to oppose, as a poet, the destructiveness of the war.”<sup>32</sup> She despised the era of industrial discoveries in which she lived and was depressed by the fact that people were increasingly adopting materialistic values instead of the spiritual ones. Hers and her generation’s helpless stand in the face of this ‘modernist’ invasion was made clear in her, at that time, unpublished review<sup>33</sup> of W. B. Yeats’ *Responsibilities and other poems* when she wrote “it is the great overwhelming mechanical daemons, the devil of machinery of which we can hardly repeat too often, the war is the hideous offspring.”<sup>34</sup> For her, machinery and war are two sides of the same coin, both brought ugliness and evil.

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<sup>31</sup> *Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> ‘A Poetics Out of War: H.D. Responses to the 1st World-War’, *Agenda* 25, no. 3–4 (1988): 57.

<sup>33</sup> Gary Burnett thinks that this review was written in 1916, in addition to three other reviews, when H.D. was the editor of *The Egoist*. It has been posthumously printed in *Agenda* in the 1987-88 issue.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Responsibilities’, *Agenda* 25, no. 3–4 (1987-88): 52.

This review is “an indirect manifesto for her own poetic vision: in it she outlines her belief that art and the artist must stand against the forces of war and destruction, and struggle to find a transformative vision of a more humane and healing world.”<sup>35</sup> It is possible to detect these themes in some of her early poems. For Gary Burnett, H.D.’s writing was not only a condemnation of war but “a cogent, direct critique of her closest contemporaries” suggesting that she is “involved with the revisions of modernism which make her late writing so central to our experience of twentieth-century poetry.”<sup>36</sup> H.D.’s review article put a great responsibility on the poets, including herself; if they cannot stop the war, they can rebuild the nation out of the debris and help to “survive its lacerations.” And, despite the traumas she suffered during the war, “she positions herself not as a victim, but an artist with a ‘task’, as she puts it in ‘Cities’, that of ‘recall[ing] the old splendour’ and awaiting ‘the new beauty of cities’.”<sup>37</sup>

“Cities” is the last poem of *Sea Garden* which shifts the reader from the natural world of the early poems of this book to the urban world symbolized by its constructions of crowded cities where the poet can “find no honey of flowers in the waste.”<sup>38</sup> “The Shrine,” “Pursuit,” “The Contest,” “Loss,” “Prisoners” are other poems in this book whose “setting is mythic, the full narrative of violence is veiled, but the omnipresence of struggle is fundamental. Never directly about it, *Sea Garden* is nonetheless of the Great War.”<sup>39</sup>

H.D.’s quest for self-awareness as a woman and poet in a male-centred social, political and literary milieus that praise patriotism and heroism in the expense of peace

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<sup>35</sup> Helen Carr, *The Verse Revolutionaries: Ezra Pound, H.D. and the Imagists* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 847.

<sup>36</sup> ‘A Poetics Out of War: H.D. Responses to the 1st World-War’, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Carr, *The Verse Revolutionaries*, 848.

<sup>38</sup> Friedman, *Penelope’s Web*, 51.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

and life itself led her “to create,” Simon Featherstone believes, “a new kind of language that deviates from the established oppositions and meanings of male war poetry. She tried to integrate her experience of personal crisis with a vision that goes beyond the constraints of war and her war poetry is concerned with what she terms an ‘inner region of defence’<sup>40</sup> The war outside matches her inner war; “it is the elemental self-awareness that gives meaning to the rest, which allows her to see that the particulars of her life fulfil a universal situation.”<sup>41</sup> At that time, she was still struggling to gain this “self-awareness,” but it was not until the thirties that she could find a way to do that on a personal and professional level, when she was confident enough to deal with her own traumas, as well as the malaise around her, through proposing a prophetic healing process that requires feminine creativity and authority for its fulfilment.

In poems where the reader feels the devastating effect of war, like these mentioned above and “The Tribute” (1916) from her collection *The God*, H.D. aggravates the sense of disaster and the end of time. Her cities are apocalyptic and their cells, streets and houses are dark, filthy and scary:

And in these dark cells,  
packed street after street,  
souls live, hideous yet –  
O disfigured, defaced,  
with no trace of the beauty  
men once held so light. (p. 41)

People are lifeless, numbed and dehumanized. The disaster is brought unto them by their own hands and their own deeds; “as the ties of community break, beauty is banished, the old gods flee, and profit taking replacing poem making, bringing what . . . H.D. understood

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<sup>40</sup> Simon Featherstone, ed., *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 102.

<sup>41</sup> Riddel, ‘H. D. and the Poetics of “Spiritual Realism”’, 454.



to be the market's inevitable consequence: the worship of war."<sup>42</sup> It is retribution unless they repent by embracing beauty again. Death is harvesting people at the front as well as in the cities along with their creative voices, their poems, their 'songs'. It is a sad and hopeless atmosphere pervading most of these poems. In "The Tribute," H.D. displays an image of a war-stricken city where death resides in every corner. Although war is not mentioned bluntly, the reader cannot but deduce that the "squalor" is the war that "blights and makes hideous / our lives—it has smothered / the beat of our songs" (p.59), and the images of destruction are nothing but the remains of a once prosperous city where happy people used to dwell:

What god, what bright spirit for us,  
what daemon is left  
of the many that crowded the porches  
that haunted the streets,  
what fair god  
with bright sandal and belt? (p. 61)

The only god left in the city is "the one tall god with a spear-shaft, / one bright god with a lance" (p.61). It is a powerful eschatological image based on the apocalyptic images in Revelation where epidemics are sweeping earth followed by the battle of Armageddon between good and evil. She blames the people who have hailed the war and its violence and have abandoned grace and beauty, who "have chosen one [god of war], / to him only / they offer paeon and chant" after they

have turned from the god  
of the cross roads,  
the god of the hearth,  
the god of the sunken well  
and the fountain source. (p. 62)

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<sup>42</sup> Adalaide Kirby Morris, *How to Live / What to Do: H.D.'s Cultural Poetics* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), 134.

In war, civilians and soldiers are usually taken over by national pride and patriotism, and this, for H.D., is a worthless illusion “beside one young life that is lost” (p. 62). She, and very few other people like her who values the non-materialistic side of the world, are still searching for the gods of beauty, love and healing, invoking them to come back to the city, although the majority of the city people are still hailing the god of war. For a moment, the speaker feels it is useless because people have lost hope, they are dulled with pain and despair. So then comes a prayer: “may our spirits released, / forget this despair and torture, / this terror and doubt” (p. 64). Then, H.D. quits despair and adopts a tone of hope in the future, in herself as a poet and in the few people themselves when, though slowly with time, their

hearts will break from their bondage  
and spread as the poppy-leaf—  
leaf by leaf, radiant and perfect  
at last in the summer heat. (p. 64)

Feeling let down by the gods, she emphasizes the role of people themselves to bring about changes. In her plea to one of the gods, there is a tone of derision from which one gathers that she sees him as idle and careless about their predicament: “return from your brake, / your copse or your forest haunt” (p. 63). H.D. lived in an age of religious anxiety and uncertainty fed by the industrial explosion, new psychological theories, Nietzsche’s “Death of God” among other philosophical interpretations and, most importantly, war. For Acheson, “H.D.’s imagist poems are haunted by gods in the very act of disappearing. Empty temples, missed footfalls, crushed Blades of grass are signs of a presence that has dissolved into the signifiers once Alleged to proclaim it.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Conceived at the Grave’s Edge”, 187.

War brings an end to life as well as to cultural and ethical values, and that is what mostly scared H.D., that is when the world is like a market place where cheating and greed pervade:

and we haggle and cheat,  
praise fabric worn threadbare,  
ring false coin for silver,  
offer refuse for meat. (p. 59)

She is confident, nevertheless, that poetry, art and beauty will outlive destruction and death, and that aesthetic values will eventually beat the market values; it is a statement historically validated. For H.D., wars were events that had been recurring since the creation of this world and would continue to do so till its end. "In historical perspective," as Riddel puts it, "the war was only a repetition of the inevitable pattern of history:"<sup>44</sup>

could beauty be sacrificed  
for a thrust of a sword,  
for a piece of thin money  
tossed to fall half alloy—  
then beauty were dead  
long, long before we saw her face. (p. 68)

Featherstone points out that the poem's "speakers deliver not elegy or protest, but a vision of continuity and hope in the face of military and economic destruction."<sup>45</sup> In many of her poems — for example, "After Troy," "Cities," and "The Tribute" — H.D. concludes with this prophecy of hope: the emergence of life out of death. In "After Troy", the war is between the goddess Aphrodite or "the white enchantress" and the gods of war who "were nobler, / better taught in skill, / subtler with wit of thought" (p. 169). It symbolizes the war between feminist tenderness and masculine cruelty which brought war upon this world, between poetic inspiration and cold machinery, and between beauty and ugliness.

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<sup>44</sup> 'H. D. and the Poetics of "Spiritual Realism"', 457.

<sup>45</sup> *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader*, 02.

Although her army is defeated, Aphrodite herself is still alive and the speaker of the poem feels triumphant and even sorry for the foe that won the battle but lost the sense of beauty for materialistic values:

we lost yet as we pressed  
our spearmen on their best,  
we knew their line invincible  
because there fell  
on them no shivering  
of the white enchantress,  
radiant Aphrodite's spell. (p. 169)

Thus, H.D. prophetically "affirms the need for a female response to the destructiveness of a militarist ideology which does not accept the language or assumptions of that ideology."<sup>46</sup> For her, art and beauty will always be the protective shield against the effect of a deterioration of values and ideals, and will always prevail.

This theme is constant in H.D.'s writing from the beginning and is especially emphasized in her trilogy of World War II. "H.D. believed," Friedman points out, "that the power of history embodied in the war held love, poetry, and beauty in its death grip, and thus she showed in her poems a "struggle to resist the death spiral of modern history with a vision of beauty and love."<sup>47</sup> Her prophetic statement of optimism includes not only the living but the dead who were sacrificed for the war machine. They are in a better and more peaceful place now:

That the boys our city has lost  
and the gods still dwell apart  
in a city set fairer than this  
with column and porch. (p. 65)

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>47</sup> *Penelope's Web*, 138.

For H.D., what is beyond this world and this life is purity, grace, and sublimity, everything that is no longer present anymore in the cities of war:

for our world was too base  
for their youth,  
our city too dark,  
our thoughts were too dull for their thoughts,  
our hearts for their hearts. (p. 65)

### III

The mishaps H.D. went through during the war made “love and war, birth and death, betrayal and loss . . . inseparably woven together into her psyche,”<sup>48</sup> and thus facing them and writing about them were, in a way, her cure. The previous impersonal poetics of her imagist poems were not the right means for this end. Essentially a poet, H.D. needed to make changes to her poems to keep pace with the changes around her and, hence, to switch from the impersonal mode of the *Sea Garden* to poems spoken by a more personal voice, “she needed a personal, narrative, directly gendered and historical discourse.”<sup>49</sup> Before Friedman, this idea was clearly posited by Louis Martz in his 1984 *H.D.: Collected Poems* when he referred to her triad of poems, “Amaranth,” “Eros” and “Envy,” written during her stay at Corfe Castle in the summer of 1916.<sup>50</sup> She moved there to be close to her husband’s military training camp. But, she soon found out about her husband’s love affairs with other women, and the first of those was Flo Fallas, his friend and training companion’s wife. These poems are about H.D.’s deteriorated relationship with Aldington after the stillbirth of their child in 1915 which alienated them physically from each other.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944*, xviii–xix.

She was frightened by the idea of getting pregnant while the war was still on. The poems in the trio “enact the anguish of a deserted woman,”<sup>51</sup> who is still in love with her husband and seeks his understanding and his renewed love.

“Amaranth” starts with the dramatic monologue of the confused speaker (H.D., according to Martz and biographical facts) who is wondering in pain whether she has become devoid of love and passion and has been taking these feelings lightly because, like all lovers, she devotedly followed and obeyed the goddess of love in her relationship with her husband:

Am I blind alas,  
am I blind,  
I too have followed  
her path.  
I too have bent at her feet.  
I too have wakened to pluck  
amaranth in the straight shaft,  
amaranth purple in the cup,  
scorched at the edge of white. (p. 310)

Yet, out of pain, at the beginning she says “I give back to my goddess the gift / she tendered me in a moment / of great bounty. / I return it.” (p. 310) but then she declares that she does not regret having these feelings although they weaken and cause her to ache:

Ah no – though I stumble toward  
her altar-step,  
though my flesh is scorched and rent,  
shattered, cut apart,  
and slashed open;  
though my heels press my own wet life  
black, dark to purple,  
on the smooth rose-streaked  
threshold of her pavement. (p. 311)

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., xiv.

Aldington accused her of being cold and emotionally careless as a wife and as a lover, providing an excuse for his infidelities. She bitterly answers in defence:

I was not dull and dead when I fell  
back on our couch at night.  
I was not indifferent when I turned  
and lay quiet.  
I was not dead in my sleep.           (p. 312)

After this bitter tone of a betrayed woman, she offers herself as the most truthful follower of the goddess of love, of the “Lady, radiant and shameless” for the sacrifice she offers and that is understanding the affair between her husband and his mistress because it is also love, the gift of Aphrodite the “Lady of all beauty,” that brought them together:

I offer more than the lad,  
singing at your steps,  
praising himself mirrored in his friend’s face,  
more than any girl,  
I offer you this,  
(grant only strength  
that I withdraw not my gift)  
I give you my praise for this:  
the love of my lover for his mistress.           (p. 313)

H.D. believes a true poet appreciates love and beauty wherever they are, however painful they might be. This pain, for her, ignites the spark of poetic creativity, as when she says, “yet to sing love, / love must first shatter us” (p. 319), at the end of “Eros.” Despite all this, her feeling of being not appreciated overwhelms her when, in “Amaranth,” she angrily rebukes her lover for being unfaithful:

But I,  
how I hate you for this,  
how I despise and hate,  
was my beauty so slight a gift,  
so soon, so soon forgot?           (p. 314)

This type of personal writing was encouraged by D.H. Lawrence when he and H.D. used to exchange correspondence and read each other's work. "Amaranth," "Eros" and "Envy" were "as autobiographical and intimate as Lawrence's own *Look! We Have Come Through!*"<sup>52</sup> Had H.D. published them immediately after she wrote them, readers would have connected them, with no hesitation, to her marital problems. And, hence, most of the parts of "Amaranth," "Eros" and "Envy" – which Elizabeth Dodd considers as "quintessential in their melding of biography and myth"<sup>53</sup> – were published as "Fragment Forty-one," "Fragment Forty" and "Fragment Sixty-Eight" in *Heliodora* in 1924, and so they became "dispersed among other poems, and masked as expansions of fragments of Sappho,"<sup>54</sup> minimizing the possibility of being personal poems as the originals refer to lesbianism as well as heterosexual relations. They not only reveal facts about her relationship with Aldington, but also indicate her bisexual inclination. Sacvan Bercovitch and Cyrus Patell assert that these poems "deal with love, both heterosexual and lesbian, both carnal and spiritual, and they all speak, despairingly, [of] the impossibility of reconciling passion and permanence, eros and agape. Amaranth, the mythical purple flower that never fades, is mythical indeed."<sup>55</sup>

H.D. was still not confident enough to be the poet who displays her private life in her poems; also she was still under the influence of imagism which denied subjectivity in writing poetry; accordingly, it is understandable that the three 'Fragments' make extensive reference to classical mythology in order to distract the reader from the

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<sup>52</sup> Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, 64.

<sup>53</sup> *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Glück* (University of Missouri Press, 1992), 57.

<sup>54</sup> Martz, *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944*, xiv.

<sup>55</sup> *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 5, Poetry and Criticism, 1900-1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 253.



personal, all six of them are infused with elements of “personal classicism,” a term coined by Dodd, through which H.D. “muted and masked personal experiences.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, for DuPlessis, this shows clearly “that ‘Greece’ functioned in an interlocking fashion: as a sign of female cultural authority, and a set of associations sufficient to encode issues of sexuality.”<sup>57</sup> Friedman proposes that H.D.’s refrain from publishing the trio is due to one of two reasons: “perhaps because their intensely confessional tone was inconsistent with her notion of the poet as clairvoyant, or possibly because these poems were too painfully private for her to publish, H.D. did not continue to develop this personal lyric discourse.”<sup>58</sup>

Whatever the reason was for H.D., her personal tone reappeared, more powerfully and, for Friedman, even “without Greek masks,”<sup>59</sup> in *Bid Me to Live*, a novel of which she wrote the first draft in 1939. It revolves around autobiographical events that took place during the years between 1916 and 1919. The writing of this novel was triggered by her psychoanalytic sessions with Freud in which he advised her to write about the troubles she experienced during that period in order to overcome them. Friedman thinks it “centers on her response to rejection first by Aldington, then by Lawrence as they intersected with the historic horror of the First World War.”<sup>60</sup>

The painful motive behind her writing was not just her jealousy and anger as a wife but also her feeling that the spirit of Aldington, the man and the poet, was threatened first by the effect of war on him and second by his relationship with Flo which, as H.D.

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<sup>56</sup> *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet*, 57.

<sup>57</sup> *H.D.*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Friedman, *Penelope’s Web*, 65.

<sup>59</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 31.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

believed, was getting serious. Guest, in *Herself Defined*, thinks that “‘Amaranth’ probably refers to Flo. It was Flo’s ‘commonness,’ not her attractiveness, that bothered her [H.D.] – she feared it would ‘sully’ Aldington’s poetry.”<sup>61</sup> Her same fear and pain persisted when, in 1917, Aldington started a new relationship with a woman called Dorothy Yorke whom he used to meet during his leaves. But, again, what scared H.D. most was that she noticed how Aldington was changing, especially as a result of the war. He was no more the sensitive poet but rather he turned into a harsh ‘soldier’. He was “no longer her companion-lover, he seemed to be a conquering ‘Roman’ whose military masculinity led him inevitably into an affair with the conventionally beautiful and feminine Dorothy Yorke.”<sup>62</sup> H.D., in one of her letters to Harriet Monroe, related that while she and a companion of hers (most probably Aldington) were at the site of a house debris after the war, he strongly kicked with his army boots Browning’s poetry volume which was lying on the floor and said: “What is the use of all this – now?” She realised that the danger of war faced by a nation does not only lie in the death and the destruction it brings – because all this can be replaced and rebuilt – but in its devastating impact on the spirit of man in general and the muse of the artist in particular.

The infidelity or rejection she suffered from with the men she loved – Pound, Aldington and Lawrence – and the imperceptions and insensitivity of the men who brought and advocated war and destruction made her strong, creative, clairvoyant and alive. In “Toward the Piraeus,”<sup>63</sup> the speaker is addressing her lover:

You would have broken my wings,  
But the very fact that you knew

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<sup>61</sup> *Herself Defined*, 78–79.

<sup>62</sup> Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 29.

<sup>63</sup> In his article “H.D.: Set Free to Prophecy,” Louis Martz suggests that this poem was “written or conceived during the curative voyage to Greece in 1920, as the poet ponders the disaster recorded in the “Amaranth” triad.

I had wings, set some seal  
On my bitter heart, my heart  
Broken and fluttered and sang. (p.176)

“The hurt I suffered has freed my song,”<sup>64</sup> she wrote in a letter to John Cournos<sup>65</sup> in 1916. She is on a mission to be a woman and a poet, to successfully combine creativity and feminism, despite the obstacles inside and around her. In *Many Gods and Many Voices*, Martz states that “the struggle of woman to assert her independent integrity in the face of male misunderstanding, betrayal, or demand for submission underlies her entire career, reaching a climax in *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*.”<sup>66</sup> Surviving the experiences she went through with men and war endowed her with a prophetic vision that would be developed and expressed in layers till the end of her life.

#### IV

H.D.'s writings about the two World Wars represent a testimony of a person who witnessed, suffered from and survived these wars. It is a testimony of a civilian, a victim, a woman and a poet. She wanted to be the voice of the consciousness of the civilians who were bombed, starved and bereaved for the loss of their loved ones at the front or in the cities. H.D. herself was a victim of wars. She was traumatized especially by WWI when she lost her brother, her father and her child, let alone the loss of her husband – the lover and the poet – for the cruelty of war. Her oeuvre shows a woman in the process of

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<sup>64</sup> Donna Krolik Hollenberg et al., ‘Art and Ardor in World War One: Selected Letters from H.D. to John Cournos’, *The Iowa Review* 16, no. 3 (1 October 1986): 134.

<sup>65</sup> An American poet and novelist. He was a friend of both H.D. and Aldington, but became close especially to H.D. when her husband joined the army and started his affair with Flo Fallas.

<sup>66</sup> *Many Gods and Many Voices: The Role of the Prophet in English and American Modernism* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 97.

development, from a mere observer of women and men in different cultures and times moulded into their traditional roles to an advocate of women's rights and their vital constructive functions in contrast to the destructive functions of men as warmongers. For H.D., artists, including herself, have an enormous role to play in times of wars and, more importantly, after such times. They are the ones who would restore the spirit of a nation after being effaced by terror and brutality.

After the First World War, the grief stricken H.D., accompanied by Bryher, went on several journeys which changed her perspectives as a woman and a poet forever. She told Bryher about her desire to go to Delphi in Greece as she had faith in its healing power for the soul. Delphi, for her, "was the shrine of the Prophet and Musician, the inspiration of artists and the patron of physicians."<sup>67</sup> But they were advised not to go there for the journey would be dangerous for two women on their own. Nevertheless, one of their most significant destinations was Greece. During that trip in 1920 and in her room on board ship on the island of Corfu, H.D. saw a series of visual pictures on the wall, "like transparencies in a dark room, set before lighted candles,"<sup>68</sup> or, as described by Adalaide Morris, "the casting of an image onto a screen."<sup>69</sup> Among these 'picture-puzzles', which she thought were derived from past memories, "there fell inevitably a shadow, a writing-on-the-wall, a curve like a reversed, unfinished S and a dot beneath it, a question mark, the shadow of a question – is this it?"<sup>70</sup> For the unconscious or sub-conscious of a person like H.D. who had spent her life seeking personal or universal answers, a question mark is hardly out of context.

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<sup>67</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1974), 50.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>69</sup> 'The Concept of Projection: H. D.'s Visionary Powers', *Contemporary Literature* 25, no. 4 (1 December 1984): 412, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208054>.

<sup>70</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 29–30.

Urged persistently by her companion, Bryher, to seek the help of a psychiatrist, H.D. started, in 1933 and 1934, a series of psychoanalytic sessions with Sigmund Freud, whose treatment proved to be fruitful as she started to write again after the writer's block she was passing through. Her meetings with Freud were important to her so as to be freed from the pressure of the old thoughts which dwelled in her mind for many years (they were mainly the burden of the First World War), and to launch new or rather consequential ones. "In the Vienna of the early 1930s, with its lengthening shadows," H.D.'s friend, Norman Holmes Pearson, explains in his "Forward" to *Tribute to Freud*<sup>71</sup>, "she was putting together the shards of her own history, facing a new war, knowing it would come, fearing it as she had feared its predecessor."<sup>72</sup> For Friedman, "psychoanalysis served H.D. as a dimension of quest that allowed her to confront and transform the intersecting personal and historical disasters of her century."<sup>73</sup> About the relation with her analyst, H.D. says: "[w]e had come together in order to substantiate something. I did not know what. There was something that was beating in my brain; I do not say my heart – my brain. I wanted it to be let out. I wanted to free myself from repetitive thoughts and experiences. ... I knew that I, like most of the people I knew, . . . was drifting."<sup>74</sup> Thus, Freud had a dual task as H.D.'s healer; the first was to make her deal with the demons of the past war and conquer them, and the second was to prepare her to face a looming war in which she would undertake her role as a poet-seer and a healer: "[w]ith the current gathering force, I could at least pull in to the shallows before it was

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<sup>71</sup> *Tribute to Freud* is a memoir about H.D.'s psychoanalytic sessions with Freud written in 1942 and first published in serial form as "Writing on the Wall" in *Life and Letters Today*. In 1956, it was republished with *Advent*, a journal of the analysis, under the title *Tribute to Freud*.

<sup>72</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, vii.

<sup>73</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 17.

<sup>74</sup> *Tribute to Freud*, 13.

too late, take stock of my very modest possessions of mind and body, and ask the old Hermit who lived on the edge of this vast domain to talk to me, to tell me, if he would, how best to steer my course"<sup>75</sup> Freud triggered her initiation into the spiritual reality away from the confines of the material reality.<sup>76</sup>

Her desire to understand the enigmatic and unsettling visionary experiences she had encountered in Corfu was another strong motive that encouraged her to see a psychoanalyst who might be able to explore the depths of her unconscious mind and to provide her with answers to her perplexing questions, one of which was about the source of these psychic events. In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. remembers how she and Freud interpreted the writing she saw on the wall in a Corfu hotel:

We can read or translate it as a suppressed desire for forbidden 'signs and wonders,' breaking bounds, a suppressed desire to be a Prophetess, to be important anyway, megalomania they call it - a hidden desire to 'found a new religion' . . . or this writing-on-the-wall is merely an extension of the artist's mind, a *picture* or an illustrated poem, taken out from the actual dream or daydream content and projected from within.<sup>77</sup>

But it suits her to also think that dreams could be a medium through which the gods communicate or inspire. She thinks of her visionary experiences as messages that need to be decoded because they may convey what she was destined to do in order to be granted the healing and transformative creativity. So, it is not strange that H.D., despite the baffling nature of the incident she experienced, was not put off by it; actually, it fascinated her and made her feel there was something special about it, or herself, and all she needed was to comprehend it.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 158.

<sup>77</sup> *Tribute to Freud*, 51.

Freud helped her to translate the “oracular voice of the unconscious . . . to become the Pythoness of Delphi in her poetry, to reintegrate the separated branches of religion, art, and healing into a poetic ‘tripod’ of wisdom;”<sup>78</sup> and, thus, creating a new religion that would find the light in her poetry of the Second World War, particularly in her war *Trilogy*. This makes her another twentieth-century poet with a prophetic voice after such voices had been present in Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets*, William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, and Wallace Stevens’s notion of a ‘supreme fiction,’ his new god.

“Her sessions with Freud had taught her to regard her visionary experiences as special poetic powers,”<sup>79</sup> and had, in Friedman’s words, “influenced the explosion of her poetic voice into the dimension of prophecy.”<sup>80</sup> Freud would lead her through the maze of the unconscious, to uncover what is hidden, to reach for her destiny and to engage fully in her true artistic self. Despite the fact that, as H.D. says in *Tribute to Freud*, her psychoanalyst “dismissed any suggestion of some connection with the old mysteries, magic or second-sight, ... the projected pictures, seen in daylight, puzzled him.” Yet, for him, they were merely a “symptom of importance.”<sup>81</sup> The analysis with the ‘Professor’ motivated her to search more the mystique of death and what follows, as her letters and her library sources show, but she was mainly interested in the Egyptian afterlife as part of her curiosity about Eastern philosophy, an interest clearly stated in her autobiographical novel, *The Gift*, and which would later be poetically handled in her poem *Helen in Egypt*, written between 1952 and 1954. Of course, the main catalyst for such an

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<sup>78</sup> Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 74.

<sup>79</sup> Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca, N.Y. ; London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 123.

<sup>80</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 70.

<sup>81</sup> *Tribute to Freud*, 173.

interest, beside her analytical sessions with Freud, was the numerous deaths caused by the Second World War; the whole milieu of loss was not entirely fathomable for her at that time.

The impact of these visionary incidents in Corfu or, as she calls them in *Tribute to Freud*, “‘real dreams,’ actual psychic or occult experiences,” reinforced by a previous conviction in her inheritance of mystical abilities from her Moravian family, made H.D. more interested in spiritualism and psychic fields. This interest was fed by wide reading and attending lectures revolving around occult thinking and spiritualism. She even joined the Society for Psychical Research. Those experiences, according to Friedman, “probably provided H.D. with the greatest impetus to begin serious study of esoteric traditions in the twenties.”<sup>82</sup> At that period, she had not written about spiritualism; her poetry showed no manifestations of spirits, ghosts or supernatural phenomena until the forties, finding a more compulsive and urgent motive represented by another devastating world war. H.D.’s interest in the occult extends to traditional and contemporary mystic and religious beliefs and rituals; but what caught her attention constantly and increasingly was spiritualism, what is beyond death and the medium through which the dead may contact the living or vice versa. Her interest in this part of the occult would build up throughout her life and permeate her thoughts and art to the end.

Being a descendent of a Moravian Christian maternal family whose creed and rituals she imbibed since childhood, H.D. believed in a life after death. “It was a fact,” she explains, “but a fact that I had not personally or concretely resolved. I had accepted as part of my racial, my religious inheritance, the abstract idea of immortality, of the personal soul’s existence in some form or other, after it had shed the outworn or

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<sup>82</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 160.



outgrown body.”<sup>83</sup> It frustrated her that Freud did not believe in such ‘abstractions’ and did not give much credit to spiritual and occult incidents. For her, there are two phases of future for all people; the one that we expect to take place as long as we exist, and “a more imminent, a more immediate future,”<sup>84</sup> by which she means the afterlife in which Freud had no faith. Disappointed at this, she says: “it worried me to feel that he had no idea – it seemed impossible – really no idea that he would ‘wake up’ when he shed the frail locust-husk of his years, and find himself alive.”<sup>85</sup>

The ideas of life after death and the underworld had been always present in her poems from the beginning, though they were mainly within the world of mythology and ancient cultures. With time, and with the increased influence of modernism and its new ideologies and interests in spiritualism, philosophy and psychoanalysis, H.D.’s involvement in these fields also grew to be part of her literary method in understanding and finding a cure for the man-made plights in the new era. In her essay, “The Underworld of H.D.’s Helen in Egypt,” Harriet Tarlo believes that “H.D.’s conscious interest in the whole notion of the afterlife (as opposed to the mythological underworld) deepened after her analysis by Freud.”<sup>86</sup> Helen Sword calls H.D. “a ‘cryptopoetic’ writer, obsessed with concealment and revelation on the one hand and on the other hand with the poetics of death.”<sup>87</sup> The continuous threat of death during the First World War forced H.D. to contemplate how close life and death are and how one could feel death in life. For her, reaching the edge of death means to start living again. “In a sense, it seems I am

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<sup>83</sup> *Tribute to Freud*, 43.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> ‘The Underworld Of H. D.’s Helen In Egypt’, *Sagetrieb*, 15, no. 1 & 2 (Spring & Fall 1996): 174.

<sup>87</sup> *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 118.

drowning,” H.D. says describing what she felt watching symbols mysteriously projected on the wall of her hotel room:

already half-drowned to the dimensions of space and time, I know that I must drown, as it were, completely in order to come out of the other side of things . . . not dead to this life but with a new set of values, my treasure dredged from the depth. I must be born again or break utterly.<sup>88</sup>

Friedman rephrased the above quotation from *Tribute to Freud* in her influential book, *Penelope's Web*, saying that “she had to drown in the unknown depths of the unconscious, recover its treasures through psychoanalytic decoding, and rise to the surface reborn,” referring, rightly, to her sessions with Freud as being akin to “a death of the old self and a rebirth of the new through an initiation into secret wisdom.”<sup>89</sup>

For H.D., every part of the natural world around her has hidden enigmatic meanings. Similarly, hidden meanings can be detected in “cultural artefacts, including human speech.”<sup>90</sup> Deciphering these cryptograms is the task that the visionary poet needs to undertake. And “even death,” Sword argues, “can be pried open like a crypt to reveal secrets of spiritual resurrection.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Tribute to Freud*, 53–54.

<sup>89</sup> *Penelope's Web*, 119.

<sup>90</sup> *Sword, Ghostwriting Modernism*, 118–19.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

## Chapter 2

### H.D. and WWII

#### *WHAT DO I LOVE?*

H.D. was in Switzerland when she heard about Britain's declaration of war on Germany in September 1939. She decided to come back to London despite the attempts of family and friends to persuade her to travel to America for her safety. She felt she was morally committed to Britain and its people, her first readers. What compelled H.D. to do this was "the puritan element,"<sup>1</sup> as Bryher put it. She might have been referring to H.D.'s roots going back to her father's Puritan ancestors, or to her being a strong-willed and determined woman. When she eventually decided to go to America in 1946, H.D. was very enthusiastic about this trip, saying to Bryher: "you see, I have a puritan spirit, and I want to be there by March 1 at least."<sup>2</sup> This spirit was clear to Norman Holmes Pearson as well; on 6th October 1943, he wrote H.D. a letter in which he praised her as being "part Puritan. And a lot more besides. But that part which is Puritan affects everything else, is never quite shaken off, is a strength to you as well as . . . a frustration if one imagines it never exists. I suppose we all have it somehow or other, regardless of birthplace."<sup>3</sup> In 1944, during her stay in Cornwall, H.D. wrote a letter to Pearson, who was in London, describing her feelings: "I am still wallowing in the quiet. I have my 'Puritan' conscience out of its

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Donna Krolik Hollenberg, *Between History and Poetry: The Letters of H.D. And Norman Holmes Pearson* (University of Iowa Press, n.d.), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 30.

cupboard & it is making me feel wretched & 'guilty' at leaving you all there in bomb-alley."<sup>4</sup>

This desire to be with the civilians under attack and to feel that she was one of them, is unquestionable; but another motive may come to one's mind in reading her correspondence, as well as some of her prose and verse oeuvre during and after the Second World War, and that is her belief in the necessary near-death experience – her own situation in London – as a prelude to rebirth. "Death becomes the all important idea – and that idea is so familiar – I just didn't want to leave things untidy,"<sup>5</sup> she says in one of her letters to Marianne Moore in 1940 to describe the atmosphere in London at that time.

The bombing of London is apocalyptic, but for H.D., apocalypse is not the end of everything or a time of reckoning to be feared by the sinner and welcomed by the righteous; rather it is a phase that needs to be experienced in order to witness resurrection while still on this earth. Such hard times were her opportunity to fulfil her duty as a poet-seer in bringing peace. She was proud and exhilarated that she could withstand the bombing and the dreadful conditions along with her fellow civilians. She even wrote in another letter to Marianne Moore: "every new morning is like a return from a bout of fever ... and strangely I, personally, and others who have been able to stick it, seem to feel more alive and physically stronger than for years."<sup>6</sup> She was talking not only of herself but also of the other civilians, and their heroic endurance that she immensely admired. Later she would do their courage and resourcefulness justice in her poem, "May 1943."

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>5</sup> H.D. to Marianne Moore, 30 October 1940, unpublished letter, Rosenbach Memorial Library.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Hollenberg, *Between History and Poetry*, 18.

It seems that the hardships she and the country were going through had brought vitality to H.D. the person and the poet. She enthusiastically continued to write during and after the Second World War. She fervently wrote memoirs, novels, and poems. In a 1944 letter to her friend, Mary Herr, she described how busy she was: “I have never worked so hard as in the past few years – a terrific creative urge that, I suppose, is a sort of escapism but a cerebral drug, too that has kept me sane and alive – the writing is crazy, if you will – but has acted as a sort of safety valve.”<sup>7</sup> The gratitude should be attributed partly to Freud, who reinforced her confidence in her talent as a poet, and partly to her own self-confidence as a spiritually gifted person.

The approach of a new world war renewed H.D.’s attention to the occult, the supernatural, old mysteries and rituals, and different religions. Adding that to her belief in the power of sciences such as astrology, astronomy, numerology and psychology which complement such interests, her writings from now on would be an attempt to found a faith syncretizing all these together for the sole purpose of restoring peace and establishing a new beginning. Friedman believes that “though she did not attend church or join organizations, the occult helped H.D. to endure the omnipresence of sudden, random death”<sup>8</sup> brought about by war. In a letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> October 1941 to her friend, Viola Gordon, from whom she used to receive books about transcendental subjects, H.D. told her that these books were more than heaven to her because “the supernatural, within reason, is anodyne”<sup>9</sup> that it, as paraphrased in *Psyche Reborn*, “softens both the pain of fear and the dreariness of rational life in wartime where getting food for supper could

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<sup>7</sup> H.D. to Mary Herr, 8 February 1944, unpublished letter, Bryn Mawr Library.

<sup>8</sup> *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H. D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 170.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

occupy a whole day.”<sup>10</sup>

This interest led H.D., in the same year, to meet Arthur Bhaduri, who was known for his psychic powers, and with whom she shared her ideas of the supernatural and the occult. She even started to attend séances arranged by him or by other people with the same interests. These séances were so motivating that she, in later years, held them in her place with Bhaduri, his mother and Bryher until she felt she was qualified enough to conduct a séance on her own. In 1945, after the bombing of Hiroshima, she was convinced that she was receiving messages from R.A.F. pilots who were killed in the Battle of Britain. She shared this information with the hero of this battle, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, who had lost his pilot son to the war and who himself was interested in ideas of resurrection and was, he believed, receiving messages from his dead son and his dead R.A.F. pilots. H.D. wanted him to help her to decrypt those messages and to convey their importance to people since these messages represented warnings, as she narrates the event in *The Sword Went out to Sea*<sup>11</sup>, against the dangerous natural and climatic ramifications of the atomic energy, and even against a potential third world war. She was emotionally and dutifully involved in the surrounding current events, and we should keep in mind that her “modernist impulse toward the inner explorations of esoteric tradition and psychoanalysis was not a rejection of the external world as irrelevant, but an attempt to find a vision that would explain it.”<sup>12</sup> She believed that reformation should start within

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The full title of this autobiographical novel is *The Sword Went Out to Sea (Synthesis of a Dream)*, by Delia Alton. Its writing took several years until it was finished in 1947, but was not published in H.D.'s lifetime. It is a spiritualist novel about the events H.D. went through during the Second World War and her relationship with Bhaduri and Dowding. It reflects a great deal of H.D.'s “disturbed consciousness” of which she herself wrote: “The Sword traces my intellectual and emotional life to its conclusion or rather to its fulfillment” (Quoted in Janice Robinson, 1982, p.345).

<sup>12</sup> Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 176.

each individual so that it could spread to a whole society. In *The Sword Went out to Sea*, she writes: “In saving myself, one creates a shell, not the isolated, highly individual spiral-shell I spoke of, but a minute coral-shell, one of a million, or a single wax-cell of the honeycomb” (p. 41). She felt that imparting any mystic knowledge she acquired or encountered was part of her social as well as artistic commitment, and that became her primary purpose during those critical times.

“Thus, by the time the Second World War began,” Helen Sword concludes, “H.D. was primed at last to traffic in both literal and literary ghosts.”<sup>13</sup> In 1941, she wrote “R.A.F.,” a poem that “recounts a ghostly visitation from a dead pilot.”<sup>14</sup> This poem, with “May 1943” and “Christmas 1944,” constitutes the collection entitled *What Do I Love?*, which was written between 1941 and 1944. The poems were aiming to “address the deprivations caused by the shortages, the death of a civilian ambulance driver, a wounded Royal Air Force pilot, and the final Christmas at war.”<sup>15</sup>

Explaining the catalyst behind collecting the *What Do I Love?* pamphlet, H.D. says in her “H.D. by Delia Alton:” “Bryher has suggested that I have a selection of unpublished poems set up. I choose three sequences that differ entirely from the recognized H.D. of the ‘early poems’ as well as from the three sets of poems written during War II, the Trilogy.”<sup>16</sup> Also, On 15<sup>th</sup> October 1950, H.D. wrote a letter to Pearson, telling him that the collection was being printed by *Life and Letters Today* that year, and that she had sent it to him as a

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<sup>13</sup> *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca, N.Y. ; London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 123.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>15</sup> Annette Debo, ed., *Within the Walls and What Do I Love?: H.D.* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014), 5.

<sup>16</sup> ‘H.D. by Delia Alton’, *The Iowa Review* 16, no. 3 (1986): 199, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20156321>.

pre-Xmas copy; it is just three poems, I think you have them, a series that I call May 1943, another I call R.A.F., the third and last, Christmas 1944. They hardly fit into any of the Trilogy sequences, but I like them and they do very well in this tiny book that I call 'What Do I Love?' I have left the signature out, as I will sign the copies with Xmas greetings. I have 30 copies here; I think there are 50 altogether.<sup>17</sup>

In "H.D. by *Delia Alton*," H.D. twice states that these poems are dated 1941, 1943 and 1944. They were republished in Martz's *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944* according to this chronological order rather than following the original order in the 1950 pamphlet arranged by H.D. herself, the sequence of which, Susan Schweik assumes, "places initial emphasis on civilian experience [in 'May 1943'] rather than on the male combatant of 'R.A.F.'"<sup>18</sup> For Schweik,

Though not a single one of the many wartime anthologies of war poetry circulated in London included an example of H.D.'s work, *What Do I Love?* asserts her place as a war poet; . . . [it] reminded its British readers of what they and the poet with them had endured, exploring what it meant to live in one of those bombed cities.<sup>19</sup>

"R.A.F.," as the title indicates, is about a pilot in the Royal Air Force, whom the narrator of the poem meets on a train from Cornwall to London, as H.D. explains in her memoir, "H.D. by *Delia Alton*." They start a short conversation in which the pilot reveals with a stammer: "I'm just out of hospital, / but I'm still flying." The narrator, with her italicized "*of course*," seems angry because she knows

what fire lay behind his wide stare,  
what fury of desire

impelled him, (p. 485)

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Louis L. Martz, ed., *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), 621–22.

<sup>18</sup> *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 350.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.



and many other young men, to go to war and fight to the death. Suzanne Hobson contends that with the outbreak of another world war, it has become clear to H.D. that it is the patriarchal desire that leads to wars, violence and the waste of life of those who are drawn after the idealistic idea of heroism and sacrifice. "Church and State," she continues her argument, "are 'both [still] militant' and the task of the poet is to recover an occulted vision of peace and equilibrium from amid the ruins to which these passions have brought the modern world."<sup>20</sup> The narrator feels sorry for the young pilot and his comrades, and is

stricken  
as never before,  
  
by the thought  
of ineptitude, sloth, evil  
  
that prosper,  
while such as he fall. (p. 492)

MacKay argues that H.D. also praises her own courage for which she deserves to be rewarded "some inch of ribbon," not only for supporting these pilots but for being in a position to witness their loss and see goodness overcome by evil; the cruelty of war and warmongers have ended the lives of these good men.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the woman is grateful for his, and other R.A.F. pilots', courageous role in the Battle of Britain, to the extent that she thought he was as great as Apollo and

the sun  
is only a round platform  
  
for his feet  
to rest upon. (p. 490)

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<sup>20</sup> *Angels of Modernism: Religion, Culture, Aesthetics 1910-1960* (Springer, 2011), 157.

<sup>21</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 9.

Acknowledging the decisive part played by these pilots in saving the country, H.D. is also aware of, and asserts more than once, the fact that it is the fight of a whole country, the civilians alongside the soldiers, and the women alongside the men; everyone is playing their role. Annette Debo states that, unlike the Second World War, in the First "the line separating civilians and soldiers often blurred. H.D., like many people living in Britain, felt that they were active participants in this war, fighting a just war against an invading, oppressive enemy."<sup>22</sup> This idea is proudly documented in several of H.D.'s letters to her friends<sup>23</sup>, as well as in this poem – and the whole collection – when the narrator, H.D.'s persona, makes it clear to the pilot that she knows what he has been through because the city is another front for the Battle of Britain in which she "was there the whole time" (p. 487).

In H.D.'s work, it is generally noticeable that the line between life and death is not clearly defined. There is a grey area in which the living look dead, and the "dead seldom act dead: they feel, they reminisce, they talk."<sup>24</sup> This vagueness is felt in "R.A.F." as well. Captivating, the first half of the poem holds in suspense whether the narrator is talking to a living pilot or to the spirit of a dead one. It gives the impression that meeting and talking to the pilot on the train is an 'actual experience;' he was flesh and blood. Nonetheless, their later encounters are definitely woven by the visionary imagination of the narrator. It was a brief encounter with an "instantaneous flash, / recognition, premonition, vision;" they are "two separate twin-beings" who now belong to two different time zones because

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<sup>22</sup> *Within the Walls and What Do I Love?*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> H.D.'s personal papers correspondence, manuscripts and typescripts, photographs, and subject files are held at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>24</sup> *Sword, Ghostwriting Modernism*, 121.

the Archangel's own fine blade  
so neatly divided us,  
in the beginning. (p. 488)

She is seeing and talking to this spirit which visits her again at her desk, and wondering:  
"Has he come for me? / is this my particular winged messenger?" or

was it only a sort of politeness,  
did he "drop in," as it were,  
to explain  
why he had not come sooner? (p.490)

The pun, "drop in," is a clear indication that the pilot 'fell' in battle, and it is his spirit that is visiting now. It is as if H.D. wants to make this experience of talking to the dead credible, as she emphasizes it more in "H.D. by *Delia Alton*" when she explains:

the narrator . . . suggests that he "drop in one day." He does "drop in" some months later. . . . This was an actual experience:  
he stands by my desk  
in the dark  
He did not stay very long and he did not speak.<sup>25</sup>

She compares him to Hermes, "the coming-one / from the stars," and believes that he is visiting, because he has a message that will, eventually, be delivered to her:

He came again,  
he did not speak;  
.....  
he is emissary,  
maybe he will speak later . . . (p.487)

This is an indication of her belief in her important role as a talented poet-prophet waiting to perform her pivotal task through casting her enlightening messages that would metaphorically save people from the abyss and lift them into the sanctuary of heaven. In

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<sup>25</sup> 'H.D. by Delia Alton', 199–200.

his *Many Gods and Many Voices*, Martz concludes from H.D.'s version of Euripides' play, *Ion*, published in 1973 that "the voice of the prophet, though often bitter in denunciation, is ultimately optimistic: the prophet believes that her people, at least part of her people, can be saved – a remnant that can lead to a great renewal."<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, this technical arrangement of the kind of voice an artist-prophet usually utilizes is customary to her writing; H.D. begins with a sense of despair and doom, but heading to the end, her creative work starts to deliver an outlet looking ahead to the future accompanied by an optimistic tone. Clearly this could be easily applied to the collection under discussion, starting with the difficulties and atrocities of the war faced by a nation (in "R.A.F."), but ending with a celebratory hope for a new beginning (in "Christmas 1944"); with some more effort, this method, performed consciously or unconsciously, can even be felt in every single poem of the pamphlet. The general mood of "R.A.F." is frustrating and rather hypnotizing, so that even the reader is likely to have "dozed off in the roar / and the train rumble" (p.489). The narrator senses the everlasting and melancholic impact that this war – and any war – would cause; she is already nostalgic for ordinary peaceful times:

how I had thought  
 this field, that meadow  
  
 is branded for eternity  
 (whatever becomes of our earth)  
  
 with the mark  
 of the new cross,  
  
 the flying shadow  
 of high wings,  
  
 moving  
 over the grass. (p. 487-88)

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<sup>26</sup> *Many Gods and Many Voices: The Role of the Prophet in English and American Modernism* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 94.

She is aware of the new principles and beliefs that this violence is bringing; it is as if a new religion – "the new cross" – has already superseded an established one; in a word, spiritualism and grace have been substituted for mechanism and materialism. Friedman contends that

It is important to remember that H.D. was neither apolitical nor oblivious to the rise of social movements that tore apart the fabric of the twentieth century. ... Even the messages she interpreted from the RAF pilots and her subsequent descent into madness attest to her concern with the political world which she correctly perceived as dangerously headed in the direction of atomic war.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, she will not give up or render her work into a mere record of what is going on around her. She has to be the healer; her words are the antidote to reverse the effect of the poison administered by modern materialistic values. And essential to the healing process is the integration of spiritualism and the occult in her writing, be it verse or prose, in order to fulfil the 'utopian imagination' which Hobson discusses thoroughly in her book, *Angels of Modernism*. H.D., Hobson explains, was widely taken as indifferent to the bitter reality around her because of her "out-of-date response to a situation that demanded something more than a warmed-up version of Yeats's occult modernism."<sup>28</sup> It is a "calculated risk" because, as Elizabeth Anderson explains, "writing within this genre allows for flights of imagination that do not so much ignore politics as insists that political action alone will not transform the world,"<sup>29</sup> particularly since politics is a patriarchal establishment run by warmongers in most cases. Accosting the human imagination is as necessary as accosting the human mind.

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<sup>27</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 176.

<sup>28</sup> *Angels of Modernism*, 156.

<sup>29</sup> *H.D. and Modernist Religious Imagination: Mysticism and Writing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 32.

H.D.'s interest in the relation between the two worlds of the living and the dead, whether in her personal life or in her career, is a way of finding an outlet from a pessimistic situation. Perhaps she wishes for answers to be provided by spirits from the beyond which now possess a combination of both the follies of the human race and the wisdom gained from the afterlife, or so she believes. This does not make her very different from the many bereaved people who tried to contact the spirits of the loved ones lost in the First and Second World War. While such people desired to communicate with their dead relatives out of their inability to let them go, and for the sake of personal consolation, with not much consideration of the fact that they are trapped in the past and detached from prospects for the future, H.D. hoped for a consolation that provides a way to rectify the present for a brighter and more peaceful future, not just for her personally but for a whole community experiencing the war dilemma. Hence, for her, "a spectral return must have some purpose beyond consolation."<sup>30</sup> She needed a closer relation with the world of the absent from which she might get answers or solutions. Anderson believes that the "dead airmen's reiterated calls for peace indicate H.D.'s desire to resolve the question of survival in a meaningful way."<sup>31</sup> She goes on to propose that her

myth-making retains a degree of ambivalence and hope for healing that does not close off the traumatic ruptures in the text. In H.D.'s writing, creative and spiritual practice embedded in intimate communities of both the living and the dead provide a means for consolation and continuing to live,<sup>32</sup>

and that is, concisely, her mission as a poet-prophet.

The second poem of the collection, "May 1943," shows H.D.'s attempt to lift the spirit of the people by actually addressing and reminding them that the hardships of war

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 32–33.

will eventually dissolve and peace will prevail again just as all wars and hardships had ended in the past.

Almost from the start of the poem, she evokes feelings of relief and happiness by taking the reader back in time to old places in which there were vitality and peace. The setting is spring time in London, and although the signs of destruction that the war has left on the city are clear, it reminds her – and invites the reader to live these memories – of Venice, a city she visited before and loved: “and the steps of William's orangery / at Kensington, / become the Venetian doge's water-stair” (p.493). She leads us throughout the long third part of the poem into benevolent times of peace and happiness where

humanity returns  
to this exquisite untidy place,  
and oddly with humanity the fashionable ghosts  
come back ... (p. 494)

But, all of a sudden, the reader is awakened from the dreamlike atmosphere of safety and repose by the placard announcement about the “*destruction caused by German incendiary bombs / dropped on Kensington Palace, 14 October 1940*” (494). Meaning well, she is skilfully playing on the senses of the readers to shake them out of that peaceful ambience into an awareness of how wars could diminish cherished peacefulness of place and mind, and how pivotal, yet possible, it is to restore such days of “humanity.” Indeed, it is a poem of hope, despite the losses:

but enemy action has not driven away  
the happy ghosts  
somehow it has brought them back:  
  
this is not a poem  
only a day to remember,  
I say the war is over ...  
the war is over ... (p. 495)

H.D., after presenting a dystopian portrait of London in “R.A.F.,” proposes, in “May 1943,” that a utopia is always possible afterwards and, to use Debo’s words, “the idea of a world untouched by either war may be reachable, or at least this war-torn world may yet be healed and transformed back to its prewar state, a characteristically modernist statement which relies on the belief that a foundation exists and can be recovered.”<sup>33</sup> The poem asserts the healing power of the word and of poetry. Just like the carpenter, H.D. is a fixer; both are needed to set things right:

he has his chisel,  
I have my pencil:

he mends the broken window-frame of the orangery,  
I mend a break in time. (p. 493)

However, she appeals for the healing contribution of every individual. “May 1943” is about the spirit of the English people and their brave resistance. H.D. gives an example by presenting the character of Goldie, the emergency mobile driver who refuses to abandon her duty despite warnings of increasing danger of fire, “a female hero” of which the poem “develops a revisionary eulogy, . . . and in general it valorizes a specifically civilian war heroism.”<sup>34</sup> Debo holds that “H.D. chose her [Goldie] as a central figure of this poem because she represents the stubborn British spirit in its willingness to sacrifice,”<sup>35</sup> to hold its ground and to wait for the best. The people did not “leave the sinking ship” like

rats, and the result was  
the ship didn’t sink  
because  
the rats knew /the timber true . . . (p. 499)

They once had

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<sup>33</sup> *Within the Walls and What Do I Love?*, 83.

<sup>34</sup> Schweik, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut*, 243.

<sup>35</sup> *Within the Walls and What Do I Love?*, 35.



frog face,  
frog lust,  
frog bellies  
in the dust  
of the Last Judgment Day; (p. 500)

but, the ordeal has transformed them, and

now you can clearly see  
what frogs in the sun  
become:

salamanders in the flame,  
heraldic wings surrounded the name  
English from Engisc from  
Engle, Angle  
from the Angles who settled  
in Briton. (p. 500)

As for Goldie, she is now conceived as a modern saint. Her sacrifice would not be in vain; she would turn into a role model, a beacon to look at for inspiration and for finding the right direction to safety:

Goldie or Gretel in wollen socks  
scatters bread-crumbs to show the way  
through the dark forest, or did you say

a Saint with Halo beside a wheel  
is set on an altar where people kneel,  
to take their bread from a priest, instead

of Gretel who changed her crumbs  
for pebbles? The pebbles lay like little shells  
under green-boughs that swayed like water,

while over and through it swam sea-girls;  
the youngest princess begged feet for fins,  
Goldie, Gretel or Saint Catherine? (p. 501)

In this poem, and in the whole collection of *What Do I Love?*, H.D. refrains from using referencing to Greek mythology and culture as she usually does in her previous works, rendering her ideas complex and not easy to decipher, especially by for the layman. Here, instead, she alludes to folk stories well-known to almost everyone of her readers.

References to Goldie, Gretel, mermaids and a Saint with Halo render the poem almost didactic and show H.D.'s urgent need to address as many as she can with simple informative messages. This shows, one may say without being on the verge of overstatement, that H.D. bears in mind that these are people who live in such trying times in which a prophet is needed, she is needed, to straighten things up, and thus she should be one of them and experience what they are going through in order for her to be accepted as a prophet and for her words and messages to be grasped as revelations.

Her emphasis on the changes that are sweeping the world continues in "Christmas 1944," the third and last poem of *What Do I Love?*. She starts with the scientific term "stratosphere" in order to refer, less romantically or religiously, to the sky or heaven, indicating the place which "was once where angels were." But now, due to the impact of war and an "experience of a world beyond our sphere,"

the angel host and choir  
is driven further, higher,  
or (so it seems to me) descended to our level,  
to share our destiny. (p. 502)

Many English poems present allegorical images of war in the skies between celestial creatures to tell the story of creation and its moral lessons, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*; or just to symbolize the eternal enmity between good and evil on earth and amongst human beings. Instead, the heavens in H.D.'s war poems are emptied. Different from that orthodox understanding, the poems of *What Do I Love?* "explore the connections between aerial warfare and 'war in heavens,' but in place of a sky filled with the noise of majesty of Miltonic forces they offer a sky evacuated of life: the pilots are fallen and the angels have been dispersed by the incursion of technology into the stratosphere."<sup>36</sup> This means that angels have become vulnerable, and the war has victimized them as it has the

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<sup>36</sup> Hobson, *Angels of Modernism*, 158.

humans. They no longer have a special religious or spiritual significance. They have been replaced and the sky is now swarming with winged machines. Everyone and everything are displaced and are losing all sense of time, place and purpose of living: "are we here? or there? / we do not know" (p.502). A chaotic violation of spatial and temporal order in H.D.'s poetry has been touched upon by both Hobson and Sword. Hobson hypothesizes that

Changes in the nature of warfare have opened out the time and space in which human lives are lived so that it encroaches on the time and space of the angels and the effect in H.D. . . . is vertiginous; it is as if the horizon marking the end of time has dissolved into the everyday making it impossible for bodies both angelic and human to orientate themselves in relation to a fixed point.<sup>37</sup>

Sword contends that the elimination of boundaries is H.D.'s method in repairing what is broken, in other words, "by shattering conventional notions of linear temporality, confounding history by collapsing past, present, and future into a single 'spectral moment': a temporal unit, in Jacques Derrida's definition, 'that no longer belongs to time, ... that is not docile to time.'<sup>38</sup> In her work, the spatial and temporal anarchy is projected as a reflection of the psychological anarchy which she tries to settle down, but only after shaking it off first. For her, analysing and understanding the ailment is an initiation of the healing process. But what H.D. fears is that chaos sometimes leads to a feeling of surrender:

waiting from hour to hour,  
  
hoping for what? dispersal  
of our poor bodies' frame?  
what do we hope for?  
name remembered? faults forgot?  
  
or do we hope to rise upward?  
no – no – not to those skies . . . (p. 502)

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>38</sup> *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 127.

She seems to question the traditional Christian view of accepting death and hoping to be forgiven and redeemed for the afterlife. For her, this is giving up before trying everything to live this life especially in such times. Aspiring for the afterlife is not the required contingency plan when facing hardships, but

rather we question here,  
what do I love?

what have I left un-loved?  
what image would I choose  
had I one thing, as gift,  
redeemed from dust and ash? (p. 502)

The gifts signify love, hope and potentiality for the future that people should search for, excavate from under the debris and cling to. They are artistically beautiful gifts from places where the conflict of war was most severe:

A Dresden girl and boy  
help up the painted dial,  
but I had quite forgot  
I had that little clock;

but there's another treasure,  
that slice of amber-rock,  
a traveller once brought  
me from the Baltic coast,<sup>39</sup> (p. 503)

It is all about the hopeful spirit of Christmas, because although people now witness a state of apocalypse and "we think and feel and speak / like children lost," resurrection is possible if we remember that

for one child too, was cast  
at Christmas, from a house  
of stone with wood for beam  
and lintel and door-shaft;

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<sup>39</sup> H.D., purposefully, mentions Dresden and the Baltic coast as they underwent catastrophic bombings in 1945. This suggests that either the poem was written after 1944 – the composition date given by H.D., and as shown in its title – or it was later edited by her (after she heard about those places being heavily bombed.)

go – go – there is no room  
for you, in this our Inn ... (p. 504)

H.D. aims at surviving the blow of war and its calamities, and at resurrecting humanity from this deathlike experience. Her interest is not in the orthodox rebirth (though she mentions Christ as a symbol of hope and resurrection) after the physical death or after the apocalyptic end of this world, but rather the one experienced while alive; it is more like an earthbound moral framework of belief than the traditional Divine belief. In "H.D. by *Delia Alton*" the writer says, "there is in life, as in death, resurrection. She [H.D.] could not know in 1933, 1934 that resurrection could occur in life, as in death. That is, she could not know it as an actual personal experience though she could sense it in a dream or she could resurrect her past adventures."<sup>40</sup> That is what H.D. believed in and worked for, particularly after she was psychoanalysed by Freud and had experienced a kind of rebirth on both the personal and the vocational level.

In her oeuvre, H.D. has constantly referred to, and identified herself with, the Greek mythological figure, Psyche, and her strenuous journey searching for immortality and reunion with her lover, Eros. H.D. even interpreted one of the shapes she visualized on the wall of her room in the Corfu hotel as Psyche. "The name 'Psyche,'" Friedman elaborates,

comes from the Greek word for "soul," often portrayed in Greek art as a butterfly that leaves the body at death. Psyche is the spirit that survives physical decay to be reunited with the divine. But in the story . . . psyche must undergo severe trials culminated by the archetypal descent to the underworld before she can rejoin Eros.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> 'H.D. by Delia Alton', 210–11.

<sup>41</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 9.

H.D.'s long lasting belief in this story helped her overcome the personal traumas and the deathlike trial of the Great War, and laid the basis for her poetic prophecies.

Reading "Christmas 1944" brings to mind T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," written in 1927 to constitute with other poems a series entitled *Ariel Poems*. In a voice recording of Eliot reciting this poem, he says it was published "as a kind of Christmas card,"<sup>42</sup> which reminds us of H.D.'s letter to Pearson in which she mentions that she wanted to sign the *What Do I Love?* collection with Christmas greetings. Also, both poems have some common themes: changes of the times accompanied by a feeling of alienation, the struggle of living in modern times, and the hope that Christmas and the birth of Christ can bring, the metaphors of birth and death and how they may ambiguously overlap. Even some words like 'journey' and 'lintel' are present in both poems. One may deduce that H.D. must have read some of Eliot's works. Nevertheless, while Eliot's way out of this chaos is, in most of his poems, through adherence to the Christian belief, H.D.'s prophecy is not as orthodox; she wants people to maintain spiritual faith in love, beauty and art embraced by, and established in, any form of religion and at any time. Such faith is represented in the poem by little things such as the gifts which, though they are not physically present any more, the narrator still wants to salvage from memories and dreams:

it's true I lent or gave away the amber,  
the swallow's somewhere else in someone's house,  
the clock was long ago, dismantled, lost,  
the cat was dream or memory or both;  
but I'll take these – is it too much? (p. 504)

Thus, the survival of these gifts and the love which they represent is the aspired-for reformative rebirth after death; and that is the point behind the title of the collection.

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/t-s-eliot>.

## TRILOGY

Just as she has emphasized in her pamphlet, *What Do I Love?*, that love and beauty eventually survive destruction and violence, H.D. again uses this theme in her war epic *Trilogy* to heal and renew. It is by decoding the runes of these abstract but everlasting values that resurrection after apocalypse will be achieved; this is a task that poets have been relentlessly carrying out throughout the ages, evoking life from death via language, a medium that would survive anywhere and at any time. From her reading of *Trilogy*, Belinda McKay deduces that “H.D. conceives of her poetic role as revealing the spirit of love, which is the light in human darkness. She traces all the manifestations of the spirit of love, bringing together all religious traditions as if evoking the legions of light against darkness;”<sup>43</sup> and this would be part of her prophetic vision in this collection of poems.

*Trilogy* is a collection of three poems – “The Walls Do Not Fall,” “Tribute to the Angels” and “The Flowering of the Rod” – written between 1942 and 1944. H.D. makes a distinction between her early imagist poems, which were described by the critics and herself as ‘crystalline,’ and her later epic poetry of which she says, “It is the pillar of fire by night, the pillar of cloud by day.” The clear reference to the Bible here is elaborated on by Alik Barnstone in her introduction to *Trilogy*:

She [H.D.] refers to the story of the children of Israel escaping Egypt in Exodus 13.21: ‘And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night.’ Her poem, she implies, is an incarnation of God’s words, showing the path. She asks the reader to venerate both her voice and the figure of Woman as poet, mystical seer, and god.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Living in the End Time: Ecstasy and Apocalypse in the Work of HD and Janette Turner Hospital.’, *Queensland Review* 17, no. 2 (2010): 83.

<sup>44</sup> *Trilogy by H.D.: Introduction and Readers’ Notes* (New York: A new Directions Book, 1998), vii.

This, obviously, manifests H.D.'s faith in the poet-prophets, of whom she is one, being the conduit which orients those who get lost in the chaos of adversities. She believes that the world around us is beautifully full of symbols, signs and ancient words and, being a poet and seer, she considers herself not only qualified but also compelled to recognize and interpret these signs and codes to synthesize a doctrine that can bring about redemption and resurrection of the soul. McKay attributes H.D.'s interest in mysticism to Moravianism and her early exposure to its practices and beliefs, part of which is "seeing the ordinary world as replete with signs and wonders that render it extraordinary; undergoing conversion from one state to another; experiencing the body as a site and sign of inner change."<sup>45</sup> In "The Walls Do Not Fall," she is trying to impart this special knowledge to others, enticing them to become the initiates, who adopt this interpretive view of the world, and to participate in a process of renewal and healing.

In his *Mysticism in Postmodernist Long Poems*, Joe Moffett contends that "if we insist on reading *Trilogy* as a war poem, we should recognize its use of spirituality as a coping mechanism during a time of crisis. The poem seeks trans-historical or even eternal values at a moment of seeming cultural collapse."<sup>46</sup> While Sarah Graham, in her article, "Hymen and Trilogy," agrees with Moffett, her argument is confined to woman's identity and recognition of selfhood within a war-stricken world, considering *Trilogy* an "epic poem that offers a spiritual response to war principally through the recuperation of biblical women, particularly Mary Magdalene."<sup>47</sup> Graham argues that the war, which added to the discrimination between men and women, had made H.D. turn her attention

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<sup>45</sup> 'Living in the End Time', 85.

<sup>46</sup> *Mysticism in Postmodernist Long Poems: Contemplation of the Divine* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2015), 31.

<sup>47</sup> 'Hymen and Trilogy', in *The Cambridge Companion to H.D.*, ed. Nephie J. Christodoulides and Polina Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 113.



from the eroticism of women as power, which she focused on in her early poetry, to their inherent spiritual strength and how this could be exploited to heal “damaged women” and, above all, a damaged society.<sup>48</sup>

The specific dates written at the beginning of the poems in *Trilogy* show that H.D. makes it clear to her readers that she was in London, experiencing war first-hand, insinuating that her poetry is written about her as well as about them. This aim was also fulfilled in "May 1943" at its very beginning, and at the end of its third section. She wants to involve the reader more in a current issue that concerns all in order to find a way out, in order to heal.

## “The Walls Do Not Fall”

The dedication of *Trilogy* “To Bryher: for Karnak 1923 from London 1942” shows that H.D. compares the ruins of London caused by World War II with those of Karnak in Egypt caused by the passage of time or even by the excavations that were being carried out by Britain by the time H.D. was visiting the place with her mother and Bryher in 1923; she projects a situation in the present next to another in the past, skipping space and time and making “there, as here” (p. 509). More than one purpose can be deduced from this parallelism. Acheson believes that H.D.’s dedication is to make “an esoteric connection”<sup>49</sup> right from the beginning. It also indicates a palimpsestic connection, historical and psychological. What H.D. has learned from psychoanalysis is that the pages on which the past was written cannot be erased entirely. These pages cannot be blank again in order

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>49</sup> “‘Conceived at the Grave’s Edge’: The Esoteric Eschatology of H.D.’s *Trilogy*”, *Literature and Theology* 12, no. 2 (1 June 1998): 193, <http://litthe.oxfordjournals.org/content/12/2/187>.

to be rewritten, rather the present should be written over what is left lingering from the past, and deciphering the result is a way of understanding this book of life. Furthermore, Elizabeth Willis contends that the link H.D. draws between the ruins of the two places “suggests an intimate and complex subjectivity of place. It is a tribute of sympathy and, in part, an acknowledgement that London’s wartime devastation bears a relation to the earlier British excavation at Karnak as well as to earlier conquest of Egypt.”<sup>50</sup> Guest shows how much H.D. was affected by her visit to Egypt, to the historic remains of Karnak and Luxor in particular, and from now on the Egyptian gods and world of mysteries are going to be part of her mythological reservoir after it was confined to the Greek world.<sup>51</sup>

Part of what Pearson grasped from reading "The Walls Do Not Fall," and from the letter H.D. wrote him in 1943 to clarify the poem, was that she was trying to connect a current situation she was witnessing with her personal history and with the wider and older history of humanity. In that letter, H.D. explains:

The parallel between ancient Egypt and ‘ancient’ London is obvious. . . . the ‘fallen roof leaves the sealed room open to the air’ is of course true of our own house of life – outer violence touching the deepest hidden subconscious terrors, etc. And we see so much of our past ‘on show’, as it were ‘another sliced wall where poor utensils show like rare objects in a museum’.<sup>52</sup>

The violence H.D. refers to in this letter is not just that of World War II, but of World War I as well, that was her first true experience with war and random death, which made the roof of her own ‘house of life’ fall, revealing her innermost fears and worries to herself,

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<sup>50</sup> ‘A Public History of the Dividing Line: H. D., the Bomb, and the Roots of the Postmodern’, *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 63, no. 1 (2007): 98, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/211841>.

<sup>51</sup> *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World*, 1st ed (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1984), 156–57.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in *Trilogy: H.D.* (New directions, 1973), vii.

and later to Freud, as a first step on the path of her psychological recovery. In the same vein, Robinson proposes that the

walls that do not fall are the walls of London, the structure of the western world which stands up to the threat of Hitler and fascism. But WDNF has a palimpsest quality; one metaphor is superimposed upon another. And the walls that do not fall are those of the poet's individual being, the psychic structure which has its foundation in the new strength H.D. found through her work with Freud.<sup>53</sup>

A less optimistic interpretation is suggested by Susan Gubar who thinks that the still-standing walls "testify to the divisions and barriers between people, between historical periods, within consciousness itself."<sup>54</sup> In any case, H.D. discovered that baring her psyche or the subconscious after being traumatized by the First World War was the only way to make her face her fears and re-embrace the creativity that was buried under that fear. This personal experience is what made her believe that the destruction and the falling of the roof may result in the uncovering of what was hidden and protected. It may reveal something old and forgotten but, at the same time, precious and meaningful. This situation is similar to the excavations that lead to the discovery of buried historical treasures.

The archaeological excavation is an analogy of more than one process of discovery which H.D. refers to in this poem. The first is her psychoanalytic therapy with Freud and her own introspection over the years between the two world wars; the second is the war itself and its elimination of protective barriers like roofs and walls; while the third is her unfolding of the palimpsestic accumulation of the components of history and the runes of its enigmas and languages throughout her writings. What these actions have in common

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<sup>53</sup> *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 305.

<sup>54</sup> 'The Echoing Spell of H. D.'s "Trilogy"', *Contemporary Literature* 19, no. 2 (1978): 207, doi:10.2307/1207955.

is the unearthing of what is buried beneath a protective shell to reveal a hidden truth that carries traces of the past to help understand the present. Regardless of the aim and intention of the disruption required to carry on such an act removing the shell, the secrets disclosed could be a treasure that is given a chance to relive and to inspire again. This resurrection completes the perpetual cycle of death followed by redemption and rebirth. In *Trilogy*, one may trace the idea of the havoc preceding the discovery to the story of the Apocalypse in the Bible, which somehow is the end that generates a solution. After all, the literal meaning of this ancient Greek word is ‘uncovering.’

Arguably, what H.D. wants to say is that whatever the reason that caused the fall, and whether we support that reason or not, our duty is not to linger on it but to search beyond it for potentials for creativity and renewal and for motives to reconstruct and relive; idly moaning over the wounds would delay their healing. It is destruction but not, as Simon Featherstone says, an “epochal decline in the manner of Eliot's *The Waste Land*;<sup>55</sup> rather it might revive something precious that has been buried for a long time. The past will add to the future no matter how terrible it was. She does not stop at the crisis but moves on to deal with what will happen after that.

Therefore, H.D. invites the reader to “enter, / the tomb” in Egypt and “the temple” in London because “there as here, there are no doors” (p. 509). The openings of tombs in Egypt and of places in London for whatever purpose are also a process of uncovering what has been hidden, like opening our minds to release what has been suppressed for a long time. It is as if destruction and near-death experience brought in by the war evoke sacredness and spiritualistic effect that are difficult to feel in ordinary times. The disclosure of the contents of a previously closed place inspires H.D. as a poet to reform

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<sup>55</sup> *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 103.

through writing and to fulfil her prophecy. H.D. believes that inspiration is born out of death and annihilation, as they cause a “kind of psychological rupture that makes possible spiritual discovery,”<sup>56</sup> and will eventually spur the power of creation:

ruin everywhere, yet as the fallen roof  
leaves the sealed room  
open to the air,

so, through our desolation,  
thought stir, inspiration stalks us  
through gloom:

Unaware, Spirit announces the Presence . . . (p. 509-10)

and admits “the poetic inspiration that could not have entered an intact edifice or a closed mind.”<sup>57</sup>

The mystic value of Karnak, shrouded with “mist and mist-grey, no colour;” is durable and, for H.D.,

still the Luxor bee, chick and hare  
pursue unalterable purpose  
in green, rose-red, lapis;  
they continue to prophesy  
from the stone papyrus, (p. 509)

although all that is left from the city is its ruined walls. It is the power of the words and signs left on its ancient walls that outlived destruction and the power of the sword. She wants to say that the inspiration and creativity born after the walls of her psyche fell apart have outlived the war and its tools, and

when the shingles hissed  
  
in the rain of incendiary,  
other values were revealed to us,  
  
other standards hallowed us;  
strange texture, a wing covered us,

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<sup>56</sup> Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 127.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

and though there was whirr and roar in the high air,  
there was a Voice louder,

though its speech was lower  
than a whisper.

(p. 520)

It is the inspirational inaudible voice of her dreams and visions.

It is worth mentioning here that H.D. does not offer justifications for violence or destruction, but solutions for actual existing problems that could not be stopped in the first place. In fact, it is an agonizing process through which the physical destruction of places caused by “Apocryphal fire” (p. 510) reflects the mental, psychological and spiritual chaos and unsettlement making “men roll, drunk / with a new bewilderment, sorcery, bedevilment” (p. 510). She presents an image of a damaged body whose “flesh” was “melted away, / the heart burnt out, dead ember, / tendons, muscles shattered, outer husk dismembered” (p. 510) by the brutality of the war. It is the figurative destruction of the nation, of its physical entity, its mind and its soul and spirit. This disfigured body looks like the scattered “poor utensils” among the debris of the “sliced wall” and “like rare objects in a museum” (p. 510); they are all empty frames laid open to onlookers after survival.

H.D. draws, literally and figuratively, a harsh yet factual image that could put her readers into a desperate and gloomy tone, but she immediately retrieves them to a territory of hope when she concludes with: “yet the skeleton stood up to it” and “the frame held” (p. 511) by which she is attempting to say, if the spirit of the nation is now broken and its mentality disoriented, its people, though now traumatized, will survive the calamity. Annihilation of bodies and bricks does not terminate the soul; it is the skeleton and the frame.

After the historical connection made in the dedication, H.D. starts "The Walls Do Not Fall" with the most current action taking place that she and her readers are witnessing at first hand: the falling of bombs on London that used to be called 'incidents' by the press. This "popular euphemism for bombing," in Graham's words, conveys "both casual understatement and the inescapable reach of the bombing."<sup>58</sup> It is somehow ironic; they are not something serious, just "incidents," but actually "here and there" (p.509) indicates they are unpredictable and random, which makes them a very dangerous and imminent threat for anyone and, consequently, the everyday ordinary life of the city has become the setting of a war front.

Bringing up occurrences that the war had effected in the everyday life of London continues in the second and third lines, "and rails gone (for guns) / from your (and my) old town square" (p.509). It is another physical destruction to indicate that the barriers which are usually constructed for protection and privacy are now gone, hidden things are now open and revealed, people and life itself have become more vulnerable and the place is not a city any more but an open space or, more likely, a battlefield.

H.D. establishes from the beginning an intimate connection with her readers, trying to say she is an inhabitant of this city and in the middle of the action; in short, she is one of them. She makes sure to draw the attention of the reader to this fact by bracketing "and my;" otherwise, saying "our old town square" instead might make the speaker's part in the situation pass unnoticed. Moreover, reversing the pronouns in this line, Graham accurately argues, "might have sounded grudging, even patronizing."<sup>59</sup> As in *What Do I Love?*, H.D. stresses here the fact that despite being American, what she has

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<sup>58</sup> "'We Have a Secret. We Are Alive': H.D.'s Trilogy as a Response to War", 2002, 164, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/35139>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

shared with the people of this country under fire makes her no less English than they are. I think it is not an overstatement if I say she consciously bears in mind that these are the people who live in such trying times in which, typically, a prophet is needed, she is needed, and thus she should be one of them and experience what they are going through in order for her to be accepted as a prophet and for her messages to be heard as revelations.

H.D. believes in the power of a community armed with artistic beauty and looking for the truth. This power can make changes if desire is strong enough. Her words and her poetry are her armoury with which she could summon the powers of the old and new mysteries to synthesize a new consciousness by which a weary nation is recovered. Thus, to fulfil this prophecy, H.D. the leader needs to find faithful followers in her readers.

Nanette Norris contends that H.D.'s life and art responded to two of the innovations that modernism had introduced; namely, theories of spirituality and poetics. By the first Norris means "the existence of God, the place of organized religion, the existence of the soul, the purpose of corporeal life, and whether it is possible to connect with spirits in another dimension."<sup>60</sup> The second innovation is concerned with "how the written word connects with a greater spiritual reality (and whether it does), the role of the poet or writer in such creation, and the spiritual purpose of the written word."<sup>61</sup> I believe that for H.D. it was more than just moving on with the current as a poet; what compelled her to follow this twofold quest was her belief that her talent as a woman poet and her gift as a clairvoyant combined would eventually lead her to unravel the mysteries of life, death and redemption. Friedman also asserts that "Her sense of destiny as poet-

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<sup>60</sup> *Great War Modernism: Artistic Response in the Context of War, 1914-1918* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 103.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*



prophet in the modernist apocalypse was certain and took on various forms of quest . . . most importantly in her epic, *Trilogy*.”<sup>62</sup>

H.D.’s distinguished artistic method in presentation lies in her disruption of boundaries; she puts different mythological and religious figures from different times and cultures in contrived contexts through which their healing wisdom could be synthesized to create a modern prophecy, making *Trilogy* a tapestry of visions or, in Barnstone’s words, “a personal Bible . . . [that] brings together the old and the new, the scientific and pragmatic, and the esoteric and mystical.”<sup>63</sup> She continues her argument by saying that if “H.D. does not establish a new religion, she certainly ‘makes it new’ while creating an eclectic scripture that derives from Egyptian, Greek, and biblical traditions.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, H.D. is trying to shape her own eschatological visions that are suitable to her age and its dilemmas, as well as to her own personal and poetical aims.

Reuniting the oldest three disciplines – religion, art and medicine – and deciphering their mysteries using the medium of language can create a visionary insight into the concepts of redemption and resurrection. With time, this understanding has become deeper and deeper for H.D. and her readers. This process of perception can take place only if we look into all types of cultures, religions, beliefs, sciences and human beings. For this purpose, she has to be the scribe and the prophet in order to “construct densely allusive, syncretistic texts, forging links between different times and places through palimpsests, as of drawing on the extant traces of past prophecy and renewing prophecy in the present.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 7–8.

<sup>63</sup> *Trilogy by H.D.*, vii–viii.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>65</sup> McKay, ‘Living in the End Time’, 75.

*Trilogy* explores the role language and poetry can play in redeeming spiritual faith after a crisis. It is one of the themes of this war epic, explored specially in its first poem, "The Walls Do Not Fall". H.D. says that the power of poetry is questioned and poets are resentfully accused, and almost from the beginning of the poem we hear the voice of a hostile interlocutor or interlocutors trying to undermine the importance of this artistic writing, pointing out its uselessness in facing the enormity of actual happenings:

your rhythm is the devil's hymn,  
your stylus is dipped in corrosive sublimate,  
how can you scratch out  
indelible ink of the palimpsest of past misadventure? (p. 512)

But H.D. is relentless in defending her profession and its pivotal part in such times of spiritual decay. She is trying to prove that poetry is not a dispensable luxurious entertainment in such difficult times; rather it is an effective tool in restoring what has been lost and in fighting imposed and corrupt values. It is the ethical duty of every poet to "search the old highways / for the true-rune, the right-spell, / recover old values" (p. 511); and thus, she strongly proposes a stance:

Let us, however, recover the Sceptre,  
the rod of power:  
  
it is crowned with the lily-head  
or the lily-bud:  
  
it is Caduceus, among the dying  
it bears healing:  
  
or evoking the dead,  
it brings life to the living. (p. 512)

She wants to be the carrier of the "Sceptre," the staff of authority, and to bring a time of recuperation after struggling with ailments. In addition to authority, this sceptre is a symbol of the knowledge she craves and is trying to assemble by way of decoding the

spiritual enigmas scattered amongst the layers of history. Interestingly enough, the sceptre she proclaims is now acquiring feminine traits symbolized by the lily.

But, it is important to remember that H.D. emphasizes her role not only as a poet but as a woman as well, and recommends not to “listen if they shout out, / your beauty, Isis, Aset or Astarte, / is a harlot” (p.511). Summing up what poetry means to H.D., Robinson says it “had been her inheritance, her gift. Poetry is recording the ‘eternal realities.’ As a poet it was her responsibility to bear witness to the eternal as well as the historical truth.”<sup>66</sup> For the critical voices, written words and symbols are mere “scribblings,” but for H.D. and her fellow scribes they are the regenerate interpretation of humanity and life, that “we take them with us / beyond death” because they are “indelibly stamped / on the atmosphere somewhere, / forever” (p. 519); and by this, she answers her critical interlocutors.

The poet or the ‘scribe’ is represented in the poem by Thoth and Hermes Trismegistes. The speaker of the poem again appeals to people with the emotional “let us,” which identifies the speaker with the receiver for more persuasion. The poet’s voice here seems like that of a preacher, inviting his congregation and himself as a role model, to the path of righteousness; or of a recruiter raising an army of initiates to believe in, and defend, the “spiritual realities” as a guide to rebirth and renewal:

Let us substitute  
enchantment for sentiment,

re-direct our gifts  
to spiritual realism,

scrape a palette,  
point pen or brush,

prepare papyrus or parchment,  
offer incense to Thoth,

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<sup>66</sup> H.D., 313.

the original Ancient-of-days,  
 Hermes-thrice-great,  
  
 let us entreat  
 that he, by his tau-cross,  
  
 invoke the true-magic,  
 lead us back to the one-truth,  
  
 let him (wisdom),  
 in the light of what went before,  
  
 illuminate what came after . . . (p. 537)

The speaker of the poem does not only abolish the harsh judgement of people slandering poets, rather she demands they show respect and appreciation towards “those who have done their worm-cycle” (p. 517): these are the writers who are protected by their own written creation. H.D., the poet, identifies herself with the worm, a symbol of all poets in the poem and of the serpent of Hermes, a despised creature that ultimately produces a beautiful thing, silk; whereas the ultimate output of H.D. is her prophetic poetry, another source of beauty. The worm passes through a long journey, meshed with suffering and perils:

I escaped spider-snare,  
 bird-claw, scavenger bird-beak,  
  
 clung to grass-blade,  
 the back of a leaf  
  
 when storm-wind  
 tore it from its stem;  
  
 I escaped, I explored  
 rose-thorn forest ... (p. 515)

Similarly, H.D.’s journey in life has been eventful and painful. Yet, she implies, it has been worthwhile because “poets speak a universal language that is the hope of humanity.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Barnstone, *Trilogy by H.D.*, x.

The image of the worm's life cycle is continued to indicate what poets like H.D. could gain after accomplishing their sacred task:

I profit  
by every calamity;  
  
I eat my way out of it;  
gorged on vine-leaf and mulberry,  
  
parasite, I find nourishment:  
When you cry in disgust,  
  
a worm on the leaf,  
a worm in the dust,  
  
a worm on the ear-of-wheat,  
I am yet unrepentant,  
  
for I know how the Lord God  
is about to manifest, when I,  
  
the industrious worm,  
spin my own shroud. (p. 516)

With determination, H.D. continues to support her conviction of the durability of language by presenting evidence of its being the carrier of all meanings and truths throughout history, saying that “gods have been smashed before / and idols and their secret is stored / in man’s very speech” (p. 517); so the scribe “takes precedence of the priest, / stands second only to the Pharoah” (p. 518). Words, in effect, have defeated even death, and scribes are resurrected every time that which they wrote is mentioned and its meaning is evoked. Out of the ashes left behind by two devastating world wars and a broken psyche, H.D. excavates an eschatology of survival and eternity.

Moffett believes that war is not the central topic of *Trilogy* and recommends seeing it as “a jumping-off point for the poem,” and that we should not “lose sight of the fact that her creation of this text is in reaction to her surroundings and an escape from them.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Mysticism in Postmodernist Long Poems*, 33.

He states that there is a direct reference to the war which is clear only through the first tercet at the beginning of “The Walls Do Not Fall,” after which H.D. stretches her interest to times and places far away from her present.<sup>69</sup>

It is partially true that, at the beginning of the poem, H.D. deals with the topic of an ongoing war explicitly and in details, yet she never drops the theme for the rest of the poem, or even for the entire collection of *Trilogy*. History, for H.D., is not an escape from her present; it is, in fact, a way of dealing with this present. She implicitly tackles contemporary subjects like an ongoing war through a series of visions about different cultures, myths, religions, ancient texts and rituals, as well as figures from all the above conforming to no spatial and temporal restrictions, and all integrated to constitute a whole new visionary project that can solve modern and current issues, that is, war and violence, in addition to her internal struggles. H.D. is not the usual war poet who is usually a male combatant writing from the trenches and reflecting immediate images of destruction and fighting the enemy; the trenches in H.D.’s poems are those dug in the soul and the human psyche, hers and others’, by traumas of experiencing war and decay throughout the physical world around us.

H.D. starts her poem with images of destruction left by war, a topic that concerns all the spectra of her readers; then she talks about the essential contribution of poets to the preservation of humanity and its values; she maintains her focus on the importance of language and the word, but this time it is the woman who will make all the difference via her feminine spiritual association to the secrets and mysteries of the world throughout history. From the past, H.D. conjures universally familiar women characters, real or mythic, from the different traditions of Christianity, Greece, Rome, Egypt and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

paganism; but, in her poetic treatment of such characters, she does not adhere to the traditional and orthodox perceptions of them. H.D.'s significant contribution is her experimentation with dauntless revisions of the familiar images and improvisation of new roles, by means of which to originate new understanding of long-established conceptions about them. Her artistic mastery of such revisions is, beyond doubt, present in *Trilogy*. By depicting a revised image of these female figures, she aims to inspire new roles for the modern woman, by which to undermine the sovereignty of an androcentric society, so that the female could rectify what the male authority has devastated so far through militarization of the modern mentality and starting wars just to secure more male hegemony and power. Alicia Ostriker argues that this revisionary adaptation is represented, for example, in H.D.'s shift of images, from the phallic ones — the sceptre, the rod, Caduceus, the stylus, the pen and the quill — to the “organic and uterine” feminine images — the shell-fish producing the pearl, the worm becoming a cocoon and then transformed into a butterfly, the cup with water turning into wine, and an urn “in which a seed of faith sprouts into a tree of life.”<sup>70</sup>

DuPlessis neatly sketches the order by which this process is actualized: “Her [H.D.'s] assumption of gender authority in the rescripting of these tales opens the narratives first by showing what they said in their deepest crevasses about women's psyche and social place, then by inventing a female perspective always implied, but never articulated, and finally by . . . offering ‘female revelation.’”<sup>71</sup> Then, the reality H.D. aims to create is not only spiritual but feminine as well, so that it could face the traditional material and patriarchal authority. Featherstone similarly observes that H.D. first freed

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<sup>70</sup> Alicia Ostriker, *Writing like a Woman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 35.

<sup>71</sup> *H.D.: The Career of That Struggle* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), 86.

herself from the shackles of “a male language and form” before she could convincingly present a feminist response to militarism in her war poems.<sup>72</sup> Her spiritual protocol as a poet is multifold, but the task that she will diligently attempt to achieve is the deconstruction of traditional androcentric beliefs, secular and religious, so that she can reconstruct new beliefs more tolerant of the female spiritual and intellectual strength.

Julie Goodspeed Chadwick argues that while H.D. writes her novel, *Bid Me to Love*, in response to the war from which she suffered, and as a part of her own healing process suggested by Freud, *Trilogy* is her way to heal a nation after being traumatized by war.<sup>73</sup> Thus, in the first work she is a patient, in the second she is a healer. A poem gives more freedom in expressing the artist’s feelings and intentions without having to conform to the story line or the specific number of characters in a work of fiction. Therefore, the poet can expressively and spontaneously follow the conscious and unconscious urge with unrestrained overflow of feelings and notions for the purpose of handling a topic through the depiction of disparate stories, figures and images from different realms stretched over unbounded and variable time spans. This artistic manipulation renders the whole process of writing poetry therapeutic or, in other words, mentally and spiritually liberating. Psychologically, then, writing about the trauma of war means facing it and discerning it further to come up with — or to stumble on — frameworks of spiritual salvation, healing and recovery.

Language is H.D.’s medium, but Riddel rightly assumes that “the language she used is not simply an Adamic language, newly coined for its moment. Language is that which has

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<sup>72</sup> *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader*, 103–4.

<sup>73</sup> *Modernist Women Writers and War: Trauma and the Female Body in Djuna Barnes, H.D., and Gertrude Stein* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 66.



endured history, absorbing its changes into a durable form.”<sup>74</sup> This palimpsest quality here applies first to the language itself which functions as a link to connect historical eras and whatever they encompass; second to the poet’s psyche and the layers of the unconscious, as our present and future mental, psychological and emotional states are not isolated from the past, rather they build on its ramifications; and third to the work itself since it resembles an epic journey witnessing different people, times and events in digressive narratives. This connectedness and everlasting relationship are H.D.’s new creed which she promotes through the repeated supplication of “let us,” the whole poem’s structure of couplets, repetition, and all kinds of rhyme that create a musical appeal, specifically in stanzas invoking action, turning the poem into a litany to be recited by the prophetic voice of the speaker and echoed by her followers, the initiates:

In no wise is the pillar-of-fire  
that went before

different from the pillar-of-fire  
that comes after;

chasm, schism in consciousness  
must be bridged over;

we are each, householders,  
each with a treasure;

now is the time to re-value  
our secret hoard

in the light of both past and future,  
for whether

coins, gems, gold,  
beakers, platters,

or merely  
talismans, records or parchments,

explicitly, we are told,  
it contains

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<sup>74</sup> ‘H. D. and the Poetics of “Spiritual Realism”’, *Contemporary Literature* 10, no. 4 (1 October 1969): 459, doi:10.2307/1207691.

for every scribe  
which is instructed,

things new  
and old.

(p. 537-8)

In this sense, language is immortal and regenerative. It revives eras, nations, peoples, faiths, rituals, myths and individuals only if the concealed meanings, which H.D. believes words have in addition to their surface meanings, can be understood and interpreted. It is a task accomplished only by those who believe in the spiritual entities of our universe, and with whom H.D. identifies because

we know each other  
By secret symbols,

though, remote, speechless,  
we pass each other on the pavement,

at the turn of the stairs;  
though no word pass between us,

there is subtle appraisalment;  
even if we snarl a brief greeting

or do not speak at all,  
we know our Name,

we nameless initiates,  
born of one mother,

companions  
of the flame.

(p. 521)

Ostriker remarks that "H.D.'s ultimate subject is the shared human psyche, and her community of initiates potentially includes anyone who actively seeks personal integrity and the reunion of a divided self."<sup>75</sup> Still, the fact that H.D. addresses the female initiate cannot be overlooked, especially when one traces her eschatological poetics throughout

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<sup>75</sup> *Writing like a Woman*, 31.

the rest of *Trilogy*. Words, this community's medium, act as preservers and reformers, and hence comes the importance of the scribe in recreating a "spiritual reality" by way of bringing together the old reservoir of humanity with the present and the future.

In *Trilogy*, pagan, Greek, Egyptian and Judeo-Christian narratives are introduced into the then contemporary apocalyptic world war narrative in order to forge a new personal mythology that can bring about a vision of survival, regeneration and peace, in a sense that echoes the traditional Christian vision of resurrection and living blessedly in the Kingdom of God after surviving the woes of Armageddon. Yet, this new faith, according to H.D., can only be performed through a feminist perspective born out of spiritual visions and dreams. H.D.'s belief in her poetic talent and spiritual gift makes her the perfect candidate to be the prophetic feminist voice that will bring peace after war and rebirth after death. Thereby, the poetics of *Trilogy* can be considered as "a topical treatment of woman's war suffering by a woman and a generic template for a feminist rendering of war poetry."<sup>76</sup>

O'Brien says that during the idle period of H.D.'s career — about a decade before the Second World War — she "had been actively voiceless," but through her major works during this war she "speaks from a number of voices;" he attributes that to her "fragile state of mind,"<sup>77</sup> which she experienced during the hectic situation in London, representing it with an image of loss, disorientation and fragility, when she was trying to find a way out of the unknown. She was trapped:

so mind dispersed, dared occult lore,  
  
found secret doors unlocked,  
floundered, was lost in sea-depth,

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<sup>76</sup> Goodspeed-Chadwick, *Modernist Women Writers and War*, 67.

<sup>77</sup> *Saying Yes at Lightning: Threat and the Provisional Image in Post-Romantic Poetry* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2002), 74–75.

subconscious ocean where Fish  
move two-ways, devour;

when identity in the depth  
would merge with the best,

octopus or shark rise  
from the sea-floor:

illusion, reversion of old values,  
oneness lost, madness. (p. 533)

Yet, she is willing to take a risk in this whirlpool as long as when she survives it, she will be equipped with wisdom and union instead of madness and dispersal. H.D. once said in a letter to Cournos, her lover, justifying why she could not resume her relationship with him and describing her feelings toward her husband, Richard Aldington, after they were separated: "I love Richard with a loving searing, burning intensity. I love him and I have come to this torture of my free will. . . . I could have found peace with you. But of my own will, I have come to this Hell. But beauty is never Hell. I believe this flame is my very Daemon driving me to write. I want to write."<sup>78</sup> Perhaps, when she wrote these words, H.D. had in mind Arthur Symons's poem, "Modern Beauty," in which he says, "I am the flame / Of Beauty, and I burn that all may see / Beauty." Ezra Pound was fond of these lines and would cite them in his *Cantos*. H.D.'s inclination to the extreme was met when she refused to leave England for a safer place during both World Wars and professed in *Trilogy*, as Ostriker observes, that "the poet must struggle . . . toward a rejection of chronology and linear narrative, a stilling of jeering external voices and internal fears, before her personal reconstructive visions can crystallize."<sup>79</sup> It is worth noting that in *Trilogy*, the concept of beauty is different from that in her early imagist poems, in which

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<sup>78</sup> Helen Carr, *The Verse Revolutionaries: Ezra Pound, H.D. and the Imagists* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 836.

<sup>79</sup> *Writing like a Woman*, 32.

it was mostly visual (of human and mythic figures and of nature). Here, it is about the hidden beauty found in the truth, in the mysteries and runes around us, and the ecstasy is that which emerges from deciphering the enigmas of life and eschatologies attached to them.

Despite the hardships she encounters during her spiritualistic and artistic quest, she feels the satisfaction of

... I know, I feel  
the meaning that words hide;  
  
they are anagrams, cryptograms,  
little boxes, conditioned  
  
to hatch butterflies ... (p. 540)

The speaker clarifies this with an example:

Osiris equates O-sir-is or O-Sire-is;  
  
Osiris,  
The star Sirius,  
  
Relates resurrection myth  
And resurrection reality  
  
Through the ages ... (p. 540)

Friedman reports that "H.D. records the following in a red notebook now at the Beinecke containing information culled from her reading: '*Sirius* – the brightest fixed star in sky – Isis or *Sirius. Sothis*.'"<sup>80</sup> I find Quinn's remark on such wordplay by H.D. quite illuminating; he reasons that she

demonstrates how she attempts to liberate the hidden meanings of words. Her technique is to play a spiritualistic word game whereby the sound and spelling of words with religious association remind her of others of the same sort, regardless of the denotative gap between them. In this way, her consciousness of the oneness of the deity in all cultures is reinforced.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 320.

<sup>81</sup> *Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), 120.

Therefore, for H.D., words are “containers whose outer surface belies hidden transformational power.”<sup>82</sup> Decoding the contents of these containers is like giving a new life to them and to what they stand for, not once but every time the boxes are opened after they were covered.

It is the eternal myth of resurrecting Osiris by Isis after he was dismembered and scattered. It is a female figure that would maintain an eternal love. The story of Isis makes H.D. realize – as she illustrates in her memoir, “H.D. by *Delia Alton*” – that “Isis takes many forms as Osiris”<sup>83</sup> and, hence, “women are individually seeking, as one woman, fragments of the Eternal Lover.”<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, mentioning the myth of the dismembered Osiris may serve another purpose. It takes the reader back to the second part of “The Walls Do Not Fall,” to the “shattered body” with “outer husk dismembered” (p. 510) by a contemporary war in contemporary times. It is the literal, as well as the figurative, dismantling of bodies and psyches of the war’s victims and of the nation. Through this connection, H.D. cunningly asserts that healing and rebirth are possible through restoring and reviving old myths and merging them with the new ones.

Then the question “what mystery is this?” in part 41 of “The Walls Do Not Fall” is asked repeatedly by Isis herself, depicting the process of the resurrection of the god, Osiris, as mysterious and mystical. Friedman states that “the dog-star Sirius . . . was ‘a sign from heaven’ announcing the rising waters of the Nile which brought new life and crops. . . . This symbol of returning life was also known as the star of Isis. . . . Together Isis and Osiris unite to encompass the androgynous unity of the One, the ‘Creator, Fosterer,

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<sup>82</sup> O’Brien, *Saying Yes at Lightning*, 110.

<sup>83</sup> H.D., ‘H.D. by Delia Alton’, 182.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

Begetter.”<sup>85</sup> The setting in this section is again Egypt, on the banks of the Nile, where Osiris the “seed” is

drowned  
in the river;  
the spring freshets  
push open the water-gates.  
...  
where heat breaks and cracks  
the sand-waste,  
you are a mist  
of snow: white, little flowers. (p. 542)

Reading this particular matter, Pearson quotes – in his introduction to *Trilogy* – from a letter H.D. wrote him in 1943:

Egypt? London? Mystery, majic [sic] – that I have found in London!  
The mystery of death, first and last . . . Osiris being the spirit of the  
underworld, the sun under the world, the setting-sun, the end –  
implicit there always the idea of the sun-rise – and above all the  
ever-lasting miracle of the breath of life.<sup>86</sup>

It seems that, for H.D., the act of drowning is life-giving. Osiris is re-born after he is drowned; and H.D. herself needed to experience figurative “drowning” in order to survive the psychological ramification of the First World War. In *Tribute to Freud*, which she wrote in 1944, H.D. says: “I must drown completely and come out on the other side . . . not dead to this life but with a new set of values, my treasure dredged from the depth. I must be born again or break utterly.”<sup>87</sup> This is the “mystery” that Sirius/ Isis is wondering about; it is a purging process.

H.D. identifies with Isis: both are healers and revivers, who mastered the secrets of the spiritual realities and have endeavored on a mission of resurrection of the self and the other. “Like the goddess,” O’Brien believes, “she is intent on restoring ‘oneness lost’ –

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<sup>85</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 225.

<sup>86</sup> *Trilogy: By H.D.* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1973), vii.

<sup>87</sup> *Tribute to Freud*, ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1974), 54.

both her wholeness and the unity of the now-divided divine.”<sup>88</sup> Section 42 poses three more eager questions about the outcome of the mystical journey of death and rebirth:

O, sire, is this the path?  
over sedge, over dune-grass,

silently  
sledge-runners pass.

O, Sire, is this the waste?  
Unbelievably,

sand glistens like ice,  
cold, cold;

drawn to the temple gate, O, Sire,  
is this union at last? (p. 542)

O’Brien points out the “parallelism” between the first two questions saying that “‘waste’ may be ‘path,’ just as ‘ruin’ and ‘Presence’ are mysteriously connected. The two questions/notions seem to fuse in Isis’s/the poet’s final question, ‘is this union at last?’ ‘Union at last’ rather than ‘oneness lost’.”<sup>89</sup> It is the union of different cultures and times manifest in all the contradictions of the images of the above stanza.

The final part of the poem ends with a possibility. The image of chaos and disorientation and the feeling of uncertainty in the opening of "The Walls Do Not Fall" are presented again in its final part. The setting is apocalyptic:

*Still the walls do not fall,  
I do not know why;*

*There is zrr-hiss,  
Lightning in a not-known,*

*Unregistered dimension;  
We are powerless,*

*Dust and power fill our lungs  
Our bodies blunder*

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<sup>88</sup> *Saying Yes at Lightning*, 113.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.



*Through doors twisted on hinges,  
And the lintels slant*

*Cross-wise;  
We walk continually*

*On thin air  
That thickens to a blind fog,*

*Then step swiftly aside,  
For even the air*

*Is independable,  
Thick where it should be fine*

*And tenuous  
Where wings separate and open,*

*And the ether  
is heavier than the floor,*

*and the floor sags  
like a ship floundering ... (p. 542-3)*

The vocabulary, here, indicates uncertainty, instability and vulnerability on an emotional level, as well as the physical level – of body and place. The verb “know” alone is repeated four times, but always with negation: “I do not know why,” “lightning in a not-known,” “we know no rule” and “discoverers of the not-known.”

After the enquiry of whether it is “union at last,” the reader expects a definite answer from the poet-prophet but all s/he gets is unexpected, though courageous, statements: “we are powerless” to the extent that “we know no rule / of procedure,” and although “we are voyagers, discoverers / of the not-known, / the unrecorded; we have no map” (p. 543). As a matter of fact, the speaker is not sure about redemption and surviving the apocalypse; it is only “possibly we will reach haven, / heaven” (p. 543). Friedman finds H.D.’s style artistically commendable, since what “gives this quest its particular

modernist quality is the recognition of potential failure and the underlying uncertainty of goal.”<sup>90</sup>

Nevertheless, this controversial ending involves more than one speculation on H.D.’s purpose. In going back to where she started this poem, H.D. might be insinuating that the sacred and spiritual quest journey is cyclic and continuous, where the end is the beginning, that is to say, where death is rebirth; it is, as Pearson puts it, poetry “conceived at the grave’s edge.” It is this spiritual search and discovery that blows life into humanity. By not reaching a definite end and establishing a possibility of a new start, H.D. proclaims that time and history are not linear and not moving toward an ending, as stated by orthodox religions, rather they are cyclic and regenerative, making the whole universe a palimpsest construction. That is probably the reason why the poem ends where it starts. In the same way, Acheson proposes that *Trilogy*, as a whole, “imagines time both as shaped and as open. At this level it seeks not to keep death at bay, but to incorporate it”<sup>91</sup> and to seek a safe “haven,” but not necessarily “heaven.” Still, looking at all the invocations H.D. makes throughout the poem, one may venture and come up with a simple speculation to explain this surprisingly open ending; the technique is simply provocative, addressing the human nature that is usually lured by, and dragged to, discovering the unknown and the uncertain; and thus, to make sure that the quest for salvation and resurrection shall continue.

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<sup>90</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 105.

<sup>91</sup> ““Conceived at the Grave’s Edge””, 192.

## “Tribute to the Angels”

In "Tribute to the Angels," H.D., Martz contends, “boldly and wittily finds her role as prophet justified.”<sup>92</sup> She refers, for the purpose of comparison, to the Book of Revelation in which John testifies to what he saw and, thus, “H.D. explicitly assumes the role of witness to war that she has been yearning to embrace.”<sup>93</sup> But, she also quotes the warning words of this messenger against altering this Book’s prophetic words:

I John saw. I testify;  
if any man shall add  
God shall add unto him the plagues . . . (p. 548-9)

Yet, H.D.’s whole prophecy is that of change and revision. Taking courage and justification of her stand from the same book, she argues: “*but he that sat upon the throne said, / I make all things new*” (p. 549). This ambivalent attitude toward Revelation and its apocalyptic vision, shown in what looks like a debate with John, proves cunning in persuasively submitting her case and in questioning his “version of redemption while offering her own version.”<sup>94</sup> Making things new is at the core of her vision and the task she intends to achieve; and since “John was a prophet and seer; so too can the poet be, and so too by implication can we be.”<sup>95</sup>

The image presented at the beginning of the poem is similar to images in "The Walls Do Not Fall" – that of the shell and its peril and of the cocoon and its worm. Here, in "Tribute to the Angels," it is an image of alchemy, of the “Bitter, bitter jewel / in the heart

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<sup>92</sup> Martz, *Many Gods and Many Voices*, 100.

<sup>93</sup> Sarah Graham, ‘Falling Walls: Trauma and Testimony in H.D.’s Trilogy’, *English* 56, no. 216 (21 September 2007): 308, <http://english.oxfordjournals.org/content/56/216/299>.

<sup>94</sup> Gubar, ‘The Echoing Spell of H. D.’s “Trilogy”’, 208.

<sup>95</sup> Arthur Versluis, *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 108.

of the bowl" (p. 252) whose colour and nature is yet to be discovered. In *No Man's Land*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that, in "Tribute to the Angels," "alchemical art . . . is identified . . . with the poem-bowl in which language will be transmuted into a mother tongue."<sup>96</sup> It is a linguistic alchemy. In the same bowl, words are transformed

till marah-mar  
are melted, fuse and join  
  
and change and alter,  
mer, mere, mere, mater, Maia, Mary,  
  
Star of the Sea,  
Mother. (p. 552)

Marah, the bitterest material, is transformed by "alchemy [which] was her metaphor for artistic creation,"<sup>97</sup> into something holy: water, "sea, brine, breaker, seducer, / giver of life, giver of tears" (p. 552). Anderson proposes that "the bitterness of marah and brine are retained, suggesting that this is an essential part of the word-goddess-jewel transformation."<sup>98</sup> The mystical transmutation culminates in the creation of "Mother." The capitalization suggests Mary, Mother of Christ and Mary Magdalene; or it may even suggest divination of motherhood. H.D. "sees the function of the poem/bowl as the transformative redefinition of language itself,"<sup>99</sup> and this Hermetic alchemy is a process of crystallization by which what is culturally underestimated or rejected becomes accepted, and the distorted image of woman becomes the sanctified image of the Lady. Anderson concludes that all "is transformed: word, material, divinity, the poet herself."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 193.

<sup>97</sup> Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 207.

<sup>98</sup> H.D. and *Modernist Religious Imagination*, 79.

<sup>99</sup> Gubar, 'The Echoing Spell of H. D.'s "Trilogy"', 208.

<sup>100</sup> H.D. and *Modernist Religious Imagination*, 79.

Martz contends that it is the power of will and imaginative creativity that makes “the crucible of the mind creates a jewel”<sup>101</sup> and even gives it life:

Green-white, opalescent,  
  
With under-layer of changing blue,  
With rose-vein; a white agate  
  
With a pulse uncooled that beats yet,  
Faint blue-violet;  
  
It lives, it breathes,  
It gives off – fragrance? (p. 554)

Nevertheless, this kind of power is not available for anyone, but only for the elite, whose minds are open to accepting the spiritual occurrences in the universe around them.

Yet, the power of invoking Hermes and Thoth by means of submission to spiritual realism and starting to rewrite the esoteric runes and interpreting the hidden meaning of words have “been proved heretical” by the critical interlocutors in “The Walls Do Not Fall.” In the same way, the transformative power of H.D., which is the alchemist’s, in “Tribute to the Angels” is “poison, / food for the witches’ den” (p. 454) to the critics of feminine artistic creativity. Yet, H.D., the speaker, is persistent in her task and willing to turn “venereous, lascivious” (p. 553), the connotations that desecrate Venus’s name, into “venerate, / venerator” (p. 554). She staves off patriarchal perceptions of female divinity and synthesizes, as an alchemist does, a new image drawn from her dreams and visions.

Instead of Hermes, the god, H.D. evoked in “The Walls Do Not Fall,” here she brings back Hermes, the sage and emblem of occultism. “Hermes Trismegistus / is patron of alchemist,” and “his province is thought, / inventive, artful and curious;” in other words, all the attributes needed for an alchemist to “collect the fragments of the splintered glass,” “melt down and integrate” (p.547) and then turn into a “jewel.” Hence, it is another

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<sup>101</sup> *Many Gods and Many Voices*, 101.

process of recreating and resurrecting what has been destroyed by the Second World War or, more extensively, by man anywhere and at any time. She invokes Hermes, her muse, to “steal” and “plunder” the past and to

take what the old-church  
found in Mithra’s tomb,  
  
candle and script and bell,  
take what the new-church spat upon  
  
and broke and shattered . . . (p. 547)

This mythmaking out of the new doctrines, merged with the old rejected ones is the wished-for results of this hermetic process. Tony Trigilio remarks that, in the first poem of *Trilogy*, Osiris has turned from a symbol of resurrection into “zrr-hiss,” the sound of bombs, a reminder of war and destruction, and offers an explanation of H.D.’s transition from “The Walls Do Not Fall” to “Tribute to the Angels” as far as reference to Hermes is concerned:

The poet-prophet’s apocalyptic vision fails to reconceive images of destruction as representation of revelation. To stage the revision of apocalypse so that representations of destruction might suggest those of renewal, H.D. condenses the dominant countercultural images of prophecy from Walls into the alchemical tradition of Hermes Trismegistus . . . by rewriting the monologic voice of the Apocalypse of Saint John in order to redeem images of women in divine discourse.<sup>102</sup>

Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar outline H.D.’s shift of methods in delivering her prophetic messages, with no alteration of the purpose; they observe that while

“The Walls Do Not Fall” testified to the poet’s sense of election and calling, “Tribute to the Angels” . . . moves through the next stage of prophecy, elaborating on the justification and adoption of the poet-prophet, whose fantasy of a mother tongue and whose vision of a female muse of her own will empower her to repair the defaced image of divinity in the soul.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> ‘*Strange Prophecies Anew*’: *Rereading Apocalypse in Blake, H.D., and Ginsberg* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), 105.

<sup>103</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man’s Land*, 192–93.

In her essay, "The Echoing Spell," Gubar takes H.D.'s poetics to the level of a miracle when she argues that "H.D. undertakes not merely the archaeological reconstruction of a lost past, but also a magical transfiguration not unlike Christ's creation of the sustaining loaves and fishes or the transubstantiation of bread and water into body and blood."<sup>104</sup>

In "Tribute to the Angels," the multiple indications of the "New Jerusalem" of Revelation show clearly that the Christian apocalypse was in H.D.'s mind throughout the writing of the poem, and remind the reader that her verse is neo-prophetic and neo-apocalyptic, so to speak. The first allusion to the "New Jerusalem" is when an unknown interlocutor "you" in the poem tells her that "Your walls do not fall, he said, / because your walls are made of jasper" (p. 548). It is as if "her assurance of life is basically a Christian hope for the afterlife. Her reply is that it may well be, except that her walls are not four-square but another shape which refers to her own personal New Jerusalem,"<sup>105</sup> and by this H.D. affirms her approach in revising the old, but on her terms. She absorbs what she wishes from the past and remould it in a way to suit the present and to vouch for her own creativity. Graham explains that the "revelation that H.D. offers to counter the "Revelation" of the Christian faith is that language, on the hands of the poet, works like a spell: it makes things happen. . . . the poet becomes a god-figure who uses language to create and to challenge conventional faith."<sup>106</sup>

H.D. makes another challenge to the orthodox jurisprudence written in the Book of Revelation that befalls man in this life and beyond it. While the seven angels in

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<sup>104</sup> 'The Echoing Spell of H. D.'s "Trilogy"', 207.

<sup>105</sup> J. Lee Kaufman, 'Theme and Meaning in the Poetry of H. D.' (Ph.D., Indiana University, 1959), 286, <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/301888696/citation/AD77B495056E48F7PQ/1>.

<sup>106</sup> "'We Have a Secret. We Are Alive": H.D.'s Trilogy as a Response to War', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44, no. 2 (1 June 2002): 185, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/35139>.

Revelation carry the wrath of God into seven bowls ready to be poured and start the Apocalypse, H.D.'s angels carry a hope of rebirth, and redemption as well for all humanity. As a result, the eschatology she offers is based more on humanistic principles of eagerness for survival than on an orthodox religious system of a divine power. She is reclaiming authority via possessing the power of the word and the knowledge she feels from the mystical universe around her.

This gnostic reasoning leads her to the contemplation of the apocalypse as a transitional phase that brings about rebirth after death; it is not an act that terminates all things. Consequently, by insisting on the cyclic nature of time and life, H.D. is incorporating death as part of life; it cannot be escaped but can be survived. And to conform to her theory, she accepts war as a natural part of life. It gives value to survival, resurrection and continuity of life. In *Trilogy*, Acheson remarks, "time circles backward and forward and, as in theosophy, in a redeeming rather than a repetitive spiral. This is the context for the poem's revision of the orthodox understanding of judgment."<sup>107</sup>

Although not explicit, the setting of "Tribute to the Angels" is London again and the signs of destruction left by the Blitz. Just as in "The Walls Do Not Fall" where H.D. says "Pompeii has nothing to teach us, / we know crack of volcanic fissure," here she takes us to London by comparing it to other places, Rome and Jerusalem, that once had been war-shattered; London suffers to the extent that

Never in Rome,  
so many martyrs fell;  
  
not in Jerusalem,  
never in Thebes,  
  
so many stood and watched  
chariot-wheels turning,  
  
saw with their very eyes,

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<sup>107</sup> "'Conceived at the Grave's Edge'", 194.



the battle of the titans,  
saw Zeus' thunderbolts in action  
and how from giant hands,  
the lightning shattered earth  
and splintered sky . . . (p. 550)

It is a modern scene of a man-made apocalypse where wrath is carried and poured, not by angels or mythical gods, but by flying machinery. These are times of another war and H.D. seems to understand its inevitability. Hence, her poems “do not attempt to overcome this crisis they more successfully transform it”<sup>108</sup> because “not in our time, O King,” she says with irony and anger, “the voice to quell the re-gathering, / thundering storm” (p.549). It seems that these lines purposefully come immediately after the canto of “*I make all things new*” to show the contradiction in the biblical prophecy itself. Still, she needs to accept this reality in order to start a process of healing and revival. H.D. offers a more convincing argument for this purpose; she and the people of London

with unbowed head, watched  
and though unaware, worshipped  
and knew not that they worshipped  
and that they were  
that which they worshipped . . . (p. 551)

She, thus, accepts Uriel, the angel of war, as “God’s very breath;” he is equal to

Raphael, Gabriel, Azrael,  
three of the seven – what is war  
to Birth, To Change, To Death?  
yet he, red-fire is one of seven fires,  
judgment and will of God . . . (p. 550)

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

So, he – red-fire – is one of the elements of life, time and its repeated cycle; it is even implied that Uriel is part of the human nature, since the fire of the thunderbolts in the sky people were “watching” and “worshipping” is the same fire

of strength, endurance, anger  
in their hearts,  
  
was part of that same fire  
that in a candle on a candle-stick  
  
or in a star,  
is known as one of seven,  
  
is named among the seven Angels,  
Uriel. (p. 551)

The signs of destruction are still there, “but the levelled wall / is purple as with purple spread / upon an altar;” yet, the colour here does not indicate blood and death, rather it is rebirth

this is the flowering of the rood,  
this is the flowering of the reed,  
  
where, Uriel, we pause to give  
thanks that we rise again from death and live.” (p. 551-52)

This is symbolic of the sacrifice of Christ and its redemptive power. In the same way, the sacrifice of the people who lost their lives for the war will not be in vain. In the act of the miraculous flowering that H.D. veneers, life is conjured from death.

In section [15], H.D. presents the fifth angel, “Annael – this was another voice, / hardly a voice, a breath, a whisper” (p. 556). Nonetheless, Annael is the companion of Uriel, the “companion of the fire-to-endure / was another fire, another candle” (p. 556). For H.D., the angels are all congruent and one completes the other; together they create a harmonious rhythm of life, death and renewal, “as when in Venice, one campanili / speaks and another answers” (p. 556). In the same manner Uriel was paid gratitude, now “where Annael we pause to give / thanks that we rise again from death and live” (p. 561), because

death is over and the war is over – for now – and it is time to recuperate and re-live. In her eschatological poetics, H.D. depicts the roles of these two angels as periodical just like the seasons,

So we hail them together,  
one to contrast the other,

Two of the seven Spirits,  
Set before God

As lamps on the high-altar,  
For one must inexorably

Take fire from the other  
As spring from winter,

And surely never, never  
Was a spring more bountiful

...  
Tell me, in what other city  
Will you find the may-tree

So delicate, green-white, opalescent  
Like our jewel in the crucible? (p. 557)

They are just like life and death, one follows the other to create a balance and establish a belief that there will always be resurrection after death, but it is not the orthodox Christian resurrection she prophetically envisions. Her version is metaphorically presented by the image of the “charred tree before us, / burnt and stricken to the heart” coming to life (p.558). The miracle evokes bewilderment and wonder:

Invisible, indivisible Spirit,  
How is you come so near,

How is it that we dare  
Approach the high-altar?

We crossed the charred portico,  
passed through a frame – doorless—

entered a a shrine; like a ghost,  
we entered a house through a wall;

then still not knowing  
whether (like the wall)

we were there or not-there,  
we saw the tree flowering;

it was an ordinary tree  
in an old garden-square. (p. 558-59)

In the inquisitive mind of the speaker, reality entangles with the imagination; the two worlds become one, but “knowing” is not the ultimate goal because beauty sometimes lies within the mysterious and the inexplicable.

For H.D., seeing life springing from the midst of death was epiphany, which would not have taken place if it were not for the interference of Uriel; rebirth can happen only after there has been death. To Versluis, it “is an account of self-transcendence (not knowing whether we were there or not-there), but also of a meeting with an invisible spirit, an angel manifesting in the flowering tree, in the high-altar of a ruined building.”<sup>109</sup> The poem signals the poet’s attempt to assert that mystical manifestations can be triggered by things as “ordinary” as the tree in the old square and the flowering of the rod which indicate hope after destruction and rebirth after death. These are confirmations of spiritualism and divinity that we may encounter in our everyday life as long as life continues; mysterious visions and signs are not only those written in the scriptures or witnessed by prophets and saints, they are regenerative and not confined to traditional religions, rather they *are* the religion of the human soul:

We are part of it;  
we admit the transubstantiation,

not God merely in bread  
but God in the other-half of the tree

that looked dead –  
did I bow my head?

did I weep? my eyes saw,

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<sup>109</sup> *Restoring Paradise*, 108.

it was not a dream  
yet it was vision,  
it was a sign,  
  
it was the Angel which redeemed me,  
it was the Holy Ghost –  
  
a half-burnt-out apple tree  
blossoming ... (p. 561)

Here, H.D. uses abstract and vague words like “vision,” “sign,” “Angel” and “Ghost” to describe the whole experience; however, her tone is persuasively assertive that it is actual, though indescribable:

This is no rune nor riddle,  
it is happening everywhere;  
  
what I mean is – it is so simple  
yet no trick of the pen or brush  
  
could capture that impression;  
music could do nothing with it . . . (p. 559)

It seems here that H.D.’s eschatological agenda is partially fulfilled; it is resurrection and renewal after death. Nevertheless, the feminine role in this agenda needs to be acknowledged in order to make the difference she desires; and this, undoubtedly, is what distinguishes her from the other modern male poets who have tried to come up with ways of dealing with the loss of faith and the disillusionment of the modern man in the midst of a chaotic world. Despite the reverence she pays the Angels, specifically Gabriel, it is not him who manifests to her in her dream, as he did in St. John’s dream. H.D. sets her own version of epiphany when she describes what she saw in that dream:

the Lady knocked;  
.....  
and she was standing there,  
actually, at the turn of the stair. (p. 562)

And even after she wakes up, the Lady “was there more than ever” (p. 563). She describes the appearance of the Lady as something she did not anticipate and could not dominate, insinuating that she (H.D.) is a prophetess receiving unexpected mystical revelations:

I had been thinking of Gabriel,  
the moon-regent, the Angel,  
  
and I had intended to recall him  
in the sequence of candle and fire  
  
and the law of the seven;  
I had nor forgotten  
  
his special attribute  
of annunciator; I had thought  
  
to address him as I had the others,  
Uriel, Annael;  
  
how could I imagine  
the Lady herself would come instead? (p. 563-4)

In this poem, there is more than one indication of survival and resurrection; here, as “the flowering may apple from a bomb-charred tree in a vacant lot, Mary is the principle of blossoming incarnate in the damaged historical time after the London Blitz.”<sup>110</sup> In canto [36], she describes the Lady as

the new Eve who comes  
  
clearly to return, to retrieve  
what she lost the race,  
  
given over to sin, to death;  
she brings the Book of Life, obviously. (p. 569)

Eve is like Venus, who is culturally degraded into a symbol of lasciviousness and carnality, while “the very root of the word,” H.D. insists, “is kin / to venerate, / venerator” (p. 554). Eve has always been judged as sinful and as the one who has inflicted mortality on all

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<sup>110</sup> H.D., 92.

humanity. Yet, in this poem, the “new Eve has transformed her punishment,” Barnstone explains, “And the flowers [of the burned-out apple tree] are the flowers of rebirth, resurrection and immortality which grow from Eve’s knowledge and, it is implied, from the tree of knowledge of good and Evil.”<sup>111</sup> It is not hard to understand that H.D. here is identified with Eve; she seeks knowledge to change rooted perceptions, mostly patriarchal, of her time and to achieve self-affirmation.

The Lady in the dream is not the Virgin Mary of the Bible; she manifests in the dream bearing “none of her usual attributes; / the Child was not with her” (p. 567); rather, the female figure brings with her something unseen, inexperienced and unheard of before:

she is the Vestal  
from the days of Numa,

she carries over the cult  
of the Bona Dea,

she carries a book but it is not  
the tome of the ancient wisdom,

the pages, I imagine, are the blank pages  
of the unwritten volume of the new . . . (p. 570)

This denotes the start of creation. Not carrying a child means she is not merely the mother of the patriarchal authority or the male-prophet, the role for which she is given the quality of sacredness; rather she, the female, is the authoritative representation carrying the unwritten book that will be filled with a new prophecy, it is the new scripture. “Because Mary,” DuPlessis similarly observes, “carries a book, not a baby, H.D. proposes the female authority of scribe and lawgiver, but unlike the Sibyl ‘shut up in cave’, it is not a law in

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<sup>111</sup> *Trilogy by H.D.*

collaboration with (Roman) patriarchy. H.D. offers the possibility that Mary is not a conduit for One whom she bore, but is herself the One: the goddess is God.”<sup>112</sup>

Another possibility that Ostriker proposes is that the Lady “appears to be the feminine equivalent of the transfigured Christ.”<sup>113</sup> This could be considered as the ultimate poetic revision of the Christian orthodox iconography H.D. has attempted so far; undermining the divinity of God in favour of a female agent of divine power. “Through poetic language and techniques,” Chadwick similarly contends, “H.D. redefines God to make space for a female-centered spirituality in her palimpsestic design.”<sup>114</sup> It is her response to an androcentric society that, she believes, needs to be renewed for the greater good. She is finally able to face this patriarchal society, in which she has been always identified according to its measurements, and to the criteria put by men in her personal life – her father and her husband – and in her professional life – Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence and other contemporary men of literature, amongst whom female creativity is usually disparaged or even effaced.

H.D. asserts her vision of the lady and attempts to describe her through negating people’s traditional expectations about the Lady. This Lady in the dream is “stripped of her myriad old forms – Isis, Astarte, Aset, Aphrodite, the old Eve, the Virgin Mary . . . and released into new, as yet unnamed power.”<sup>115</sup> The Lady is all women at any time and in any place, and hence she is H.D., the scribe, as well. She is the female authority and its abilities of renewal. She is a symbol of intellectuality and knowledge with which the book

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<sup>112</sup> *H.D.*, 93.

<sup>113</sup> *Writing like a Woman*, 33.

<sup>114</sup> ‘Mary-Ing Isis and Mary Magdalene in “The Flowering of the Rod”: Revisioning and Healing Through Female-Centered Spirituality in H.D.’s Trilogy’, *Florida Atlantic Comparative Studies* 10 (2008 2007): 29–30, [http://home.fau.edu/peralta/web/facs/flowering\\_of\\_the\\_rod\\_2.pdf](http://home.fau.edu/peralta/web/facs/flowering_of_the_rod_2.pdf).

<sup>115</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, eds., *Signets: Reading H.D.* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 292.



of the empty pages in her hand will be written. In *Trilogy*, H.D. aims at “excavating the female by creating alternative scripts,”<sup>116</sup> as the Lady is seen carrying a volume of blank pages devoid of words and not “the tome of the ancient wisdom.”

Collecot says that the Lady in the vision “defies the scripts of maternity and ‘ancient wisdom’ by carrying a book whose pages are ‘the blank pages / of the unwritten volume of the new’”<sup>117</sup> This “act of defiance,” Gubar surmises, is “the condition of a new sort of writing for women.”<sup>118</sup> The Lady is still holy but her role is shifted from a mother to a scribe; thus, H.D. gives prominence to her own role as a poet with a prophecy. In imagining such parallelism between herself and the persona of the Lady when writing this poem, she must have had in mind Freud’s words to her: “You were born in Bethlehem [Pennsylvania] . . . Bethlehem is the town of Mary.”<sup>119</sup>

## “The Flowering of the Rod”

H.D. continues her prophecy of healing and spiritual resurrection throughout *Trilogy*, dedicating its last poem, “The Flowering of the Rod,” for this same purpose; this time it is mainly executed through the spirituality of the superimposed female, through a woman like Mary Magdalene, who had been herself healed and now she enacts the role of the healer. The spiritual narrative of this poem, Chadwick argues, proposes “female-centered spiritual healing through the poetic performance of reclaiming and venerating Isis and

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<sup>116</sup> Ostriker, *Writing like a Woman*, 33.

<sup>117</sup> Diana Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism: 1910-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 177.

<sup>118</sup> “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity’, *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 259, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343162>.

<sup>119</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 123.

Mary Magdalene.”<sup>120</sup> The culmination of her prophecy is set early within the title of the poem; it is the feminization of the rod (the phallic symbol of masculine power).

In “The Flowering of the Rod,” H.D. provides her own version of the Biblical story of Mary Magdalene, Kaspar and Simon to set things right and to rectify traditional perceptions of woman’s value. As a woman, poet and one of the elite who understands the mysterious signs inherent in our universe, H.D. acknowledges her responsibility towards a broken society which needs a greater role for woman to reform it. The reformations she promotes in her poetry include the characters and mentality of both men and women; the modern man needs to be more receptive of the vitality and wisdom of his contemporary woman, as well as that of women in history. They have become true partners even in the hardest of times, like those of war; from the cities which became another war front, the woman turned into a fighter and a healer, literally and spiritually. So that the man could achieve this understanding, it is of equal importance that the modern woman herself develops a greater sense of responsibility and self-confidence in her abilities as a partner, and sometimes even as a leader.

H.D. herself has suffered from such society, which considers women a minority that needs constant guidance and rules from an upper authority characteristic of an androcentric society. Her family was a small version of such a society; her mother was artistically talented, but her talent was belittled by a patriarchal husband who assigned himself the sole authority over the household, and for whom she eventually gave up her dreams; she was left with one voice only, that of a submissive housewife. H.D. herself was psychologically troubled by the submissiveness of her female role model. Consequently, for her mother “to serve as her daughter’s inspirational muse and model,” Friedman

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<sup>120</sup> ‘Mary-Ing Isis and Mary Magdalene’, 29.

explains, “she had to undergo considerable transformation. While she consistently signified in H.D.’s writings women’s artistic potential, she also represented the women whose talent had been thwarted and mind diverted by her identification with her husband, sons, and masculine culture in general.”<sup>121</sup>

Leaving home for Europe at a young age was H.D.’s first step in breaking the shackles that limited her artistic development by tying her to an unbalanced masculine-feminine role. The second and most important step was her therapy with Freud. He helped her to realize her feminine worth and value in making a difference, the importance of her art and even her spiritual potential. All combined, she came to believe, would give the power to forge a new history where woman, real or mythic, could be the leader rather than the follower.

With the occurrence of two brutal wars, H.D. realizes that the damage caused by male hegemony is not limited to the familial milieu only, rather its impact stretches to a whole society and the wide world. In effect, the poetic mission she started for the purpose of healing herself had to extend to include healing of marginalized womankind and war-afflicted society.

H.D. points out the distinction between the third poem of her war trilogy and its first two poems; she states her purpose behind this poem in its first section when she urges herself and her reader to “leave the smouldering cities below / (we have done all we could) / we have given until we have no more to give” (p.578). This is understandable since “The Flowering of the Rod” was written at the end of 1944, when the war was almost over and destructive raids were no longer expected, so there is no point in lingering on the debris and the physical ruins. It is a time for renewal. Robinson

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<sup>121</sup> *Psyche Reborn*, 140.

emphasises that H.D. was aware of the approaching end of the war and that it “was not to bring about the end of the world; it was necessary to build a new world. This was a task for visionaries and poets (jugglers) as well as for the more material reconstructionists,”<sup>122</sup> since “she sees war as an enemy to spiritual consciousness.”<sup>123</sup>

On the other hand, Graham claims that, at the time of writing "The Flowering of the Rod," the situation was hopeless for H.D. because there were still indications that the war was not coming to an end soon. It is “a poem of war-weariness and depression”<sup>124</sup> in which H.D. wants to leave the burning cities and avoids talking about starting a new world *after* the end of war, as she attempted in the first two poems of her trilogy.<sup>125</sup> In the third, she seeks redemption and resurrection in a world that is still war-stricken, with no anticipation of closure. There is no further allusion to London specifically, rather she alludes to all the cities of Europe lurking under the apocalyptic fire; her references and vision now are more universal. “This willingness to speak openly about the meaning and consequences of the war is what,” Robinson believes, “H.D. loses or rejects in ‘The Flowering of the Rod.’”<sup>126</sup>

Arguably, by “smouldering cities,” H.D. means those mentioned in her first two poems, but in "The Flowering of the Rod" she does not talk about war in the cities but resurrection by love. It is the final step of her vision. In both cases, she needs to leave. Robinson deduces that H.D.’s “project is to escape, in her own consciousness, the world

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<sup>122</sup> H.D., 328.

<sup>123</sup> Quinn, *Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)*, 124.

<sup>124</sup> Graham, ‘We Have a Secret. We Are Alive’, 1 June 2002, 194.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> H.D., 195.

of war, destruction, and death."<sup>127</sup> Perhaps she thinks that since war and destruction proved to be meaningless and endless, she needs to find meaning and happiness in a different world. In the second world war, the city had become an actual war zone. As a result, it is very likely that H.D.'s intention here is to mentally abandon the physicality of the city which, by its identification with war, burdens the consciousness and hinders communication with the spiritual side of the universe.

H.D. addresses her readers with the voice of a leader, imposing herself as a role model who understands their fear and doubt. But, for her, time is of the essence, and everyone needs to take the initiative of embarking on this transitional phase, even if

In resurrection, there is confusion  
if we start to argue; if stand and stare,  
  
we do not know where to go;  
in resurrection, there is simple affirmation,  
  
but do not delay to round up the others,  
up and down the street; your going  
  
in a moment like this, is the best proof  
that you know the way . . . (p. 579)

Although she does her best to make her request appealing, she sets forth the possibility of failure; still, it is worth trying the process until we succeed in attaining something far superior than surrendering to the status quo. She admits that eternity is not a fixed point at the end of a journey; rather it is the repeated transitional process, the ability to restart the journey again and again, and throughout which the speaker repeatedly feels

Satisfied, unsatisfied,  
satiated or numb with hunger,  
  
this is the eternal urge,  
this is the despair, the desire to equilibrate  
  
the eternal variant;  
you understand that insistent calling,

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

that demand of a given moment,  
the will to enjoy, the will to live,

not merely the will to endure . . . (p. 581)

“In Trilogy,” Anderson states, “resurrection is not so much the goal of the quest as the journey itself, both a movement and a sanctuary along the way.”<sup>128</sup> Still, resurrection, in effect, is as important since each single journey would eventually end, and rebirth becomes the goal again for the journey to start over.

H.D. admires the strenuous effort made by the “actual or perhaps now / mythical birds” (p.581) who are in constant hovering over the place of the long-drowned island of Atlantis, and wonders, “who knows the desperate urge” (p.581) of those birds which

seek but find no rest

till they drop from the highest point of the spiral  
or fall from the innermost centre of the ever-narrowing  
circle?

for they remember, they remember, as they sway and  
hover,  
what once was . . .

(p. 581)

And “what if the islands are lost? What if the waters / cover the Hesperides? They would rather / remember” (p. 581). The idea of grave loss for something held dear, and the questions beginning with “What if” are reminiscent of Yeats’s poem, “Easter, 1916,” in which he assesses the sacrifice of the Irishmen who led an uprising against British rule to gain independence, but they were executed for it: “they dreamed and are dead; / And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?” In this poem, Yeats, like H.D., insists that there is always a price for beauty, love and freedom, as he repeats, “A terrible

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<sup>128</sup> H.D. *and Modernist Religious Imagination*, 108.

beauty is born.”<sup>129</sup> The physical exhaustion of the birds’ journey is but a simple sacrifice offered for the spiritual gain:

O, do not pity them, as you watch them drop one by  
one,  
  
for they fall exhausted, numbed, blind  
but in certain ecstasy,  
  
for theirs is the hunger  
for Paradise. (p. 582)

In the same way, this appreciation of the spiritual sublimity over the immediate materialistic satisfaction goes for H.D., as she “would rather drown, remembering – / than bask on tropic atolls,” addressing others who deny the imaginative or spiritual reality and adhere to the rules of the actual material reality of “iron, steel, metal” – H.D.’s metaphor for this war-dominated reality – and comparing their purpose in life to hers:

yours is the more foolish circling,  
yours is the senseless wheeling  
  
round and round – yours has no reason –  
I am seeking heaven;  
  
yours has no vision,  
I see what is beneath me, what is above me,  
  
what men say is-not – I remember,  
I remember, I remember – you have forgot:  
  
you think, even before it is half-over,  
that your cycle is at the end,  
  
but you repeat your foolish circling – again,  
again, again;  
  
again, the steel sharpened on the stone;  
again, the pyramid of skulls . . . (p. 582-3)

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<sup>129</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J. M. Dent, 1990), 230.

She urges people not to surrender to their physical reality or get absorbed by it; aiming at a higher and more significant goal, though sometimes unattainable, would lead to a paradise of some kind, and this should be the purpose of living. She preaches that “the sublimity of the goal gives dignity even to those who do not reach it;”<sup>130</sup> and sometimes it is enough to experience love because, for her,

only love is holy and love’s ecstasy  
that turns and turns and turns about one centre,  
reckless, regardless, blind to reality . . . (p. 583)

But what kind of love is she talking about, and how to seek it? The contrasted emphasis of the trilogy poems is highlighted by Quinn saying that, unlike the faith in God which was only a possibility in “Walls” and “Angels,” faith in “Flowering” is assumed; and since H.D. is “[c]onvinced of the omnipresence of a benevolent Spirit, she plans to turn her back on human affairs and to devote herself to achieving a transcendental union with God. . . . [S]he wants nothing less than to experience eternity while still alive.”<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, H.D. would not accept this union without revising the divine system first, until it is convenient to her pursuit. She clearly states that the true meaning of rebirth lies within the transcendental realm in this universe rather than the physical:

now having given all, let us leave all;  
above all, let us leave pity  
and mount higher  
to love – resurrection. (p. 578)

Only love and beauty will bring back life and peace, and will provide concepts of a revisioning of the world, so the speaker is changing course and interest:

I go to the things I love

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<sup>130</sup> Quinn, *Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)*, 124.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–24.



with no thought of beauty or pity;

.....

I have given  
or would have given

life to the grain;  
but if it will not grow or ripen

with the rain of beauty,  
the rain will return to the cloud;

.....

pitiless, pitiless, let us leave

The-place-of-the-skull  
to those who have fashioned it. (p. 578-9)

In section [8] of the poem, H.D. is proud, whether she is “the first or the last / of a flock or a swarm” (p. 583); what is important is that

I am the first or the last to renounce  
iron, steel, metal;

I have gone forward,  
I have gone backward,

I have gone onward from bronze and iron,  
into the Golden Age. (p. 584)

She has taken the action of abandoning the iron age of war and its masculine machinery and moved into a better age of spiritual gain and peace, a paradise attained through feminine contribution. By saying “the first or the last,” H.D. implies, for the purpose of encouragement, that people have done this before and others will continue to do it after her. Whether she succeeds or not in this escape, taking the step is an accomplishment in its own right. She is aware that her audience might take her for granted, just as the society which is used to take woman’s status for granted, so she asserts what she believes to be the truth about herself and her art, being

No poetic phantasy  
but a biological reality,

a fact: I am an entity  
like bird, insect, plant  
  
or sea-plant cell;  
I live; I am alive . . . (p. 584)

She is one of the essential entities that comprise the universe and as valuable as any.

In section [10], she moves one step further and openly assigns herself prescient abilities by identifying herself with

a frozen Priestess,  
A lonely Pythoness  
  
Who chants, who sings  
In broken hexameters, (p. 584-85)

who predicted the destructive impact of World War II on the cities. They did say, “you will fall, you great cities, / (now the cities lie broken); / It is not tragedy, prophecy” (p. 584), but their voices were not appreciated or believed just because they were females.

Once again, H.D. asserts the importance of effecting change through starting a journey, supporting her argument with the story of Christ who “was the first that flew” and experienced resurrection:

He journeys back and forth  
between the poles of heaven and earth forever;  
  
he was the first to wing  
from the sad Tree . . . (p. 586)

The story of Christ’s resurrection and repeated journey between heaven and earth indicates that what is important is to embark relentlessly on the quest that renews resurrection and forgiveness, keeping in mind that “resurrection, a healing or a metaphorical return to life, is ‘a sense of direction’ rather than a destination.”<sup>132</sup> The

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<sup>132</sup> Goodspeed-Chadwick, ‘Mary-Ing Isis and Mary Magdalene’, 30.

longed-for absolution is desired not for the sake of an afterlife, but for the sake of living,  
as when Christ

having flown, the tree of Life  
bears rose from thorn  
  
and fragrance vine,  
from barren wood . . . (p. 586)

In short, the voyage is worthy, and the voyagers will be rewarded.

H.D. makes use from an awareness of the benefits of the traditional narrative of Jesus's story of life and resurrection to gradually propose her own modified version of it:

He was the first to say,  
not to the chosen few,  
  
his faithful friends,  
The wise and good,  
  
but to an outcast and a vagabond,  
*to-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.* (p. 586)

Both versions of the story indicate that after death come life, hope and a promise of heaven, though H.D.'s is mostly metaphorical. It seems that she is trying to make people believe that positive change is never too late and it is open for all; and a proof is found in Jesus being benevolent to "the twisted or the tortured individuals, / out of line, out of step with world so-called progress; / the first to receive a promise was a thief" (p. 586).

The main character in the poem, Mary Magdalene, is introduced in section [12]. She is one of those outcasts. For her world, she was "an unbalanced, neurotic woman," simply for, in H.D.'s version of the story, "having left home / and not caring for house-work" (p. 587). Traditionally, she is stigmatized as a sinful woman. In the "Flowering," her spiritual transition made her "the first to witness His life-after-death," (p. 586) being with Christ in Heaven.

Mary Magdalene “struck an uncanny bargain / (or so some say) with an Arab,” a merchant, to buy an alabaster jar of myrrh to anoint Jesus’s feet. He told her that “what he had, was not for sale” and this will be affirmed later as what he had was not to be paid for with some materialistic value, but with a spiritualistic one. Later in the poem, H.D. will identify this merchant as Kaspar the magus. He himself needed the myrrh “for the double ceremony, a funeral and a throning” (p. 587) of Jesus. For the rest of the poem, H.D. will combine the two occasions of offering myrrh to Jesus: before his crucifixion and at his birth. When Kaspar refused to sell her the jar and asked her politely to leave, she ignored his request. The Arab was struck by her attitude and saw her as “unpredictable,” since women at that time were supposed to be predictable, understandable and submissive. Mary Magdalene was not anymore, since she decided to atone for her sins by anointing Christ’s feet.

Still trying to convince Kaspar to sell her myrrh, her head scarf slips to the floor, revealing “her hair – un-maidenly – / It was hardly decent of her to stand there, / unveiled, in the house of a stranger” (p. 590). Her hair is a symbol of her feminine spiritual power, and the falling of the scarf is the start for the reclamation of this power. She did not try to recover her hair, rather she started to describe herself;

I am Mary, she said, of Magdala,  
I am Mary, a great tower;

Through my will and my power,  
Mary shall be myrrh;

I am Mary – O, there are Marys a-plenty . . . (p. 590)

This is H.D. indicating that Mary Magdalene is herself Virgin Mary, Mary of Bethany, the poet herself and all women, of whom H.D. is trying to present a new image, casting redemption on all of them.

Soon, Kaspar realizes that there was something extraordinary about Mary's hair; it became a source of light, "as of moon-light on a lost river / or sunken stream" (p. 591).

Nevertheless, he still cannot comprehend the meaning of this mystery, as he

handed her her scarf;

it was unseemly that a woman  
appears disordered, disheveled;

it was unseemly that a woman  
appear at all. (p. 591-2)

This shows the male tendency of obliterating the female personality, without giving it a chance to emerge and to enact its role.

Finally, without knowing how, Mary Magdalene attains the jar of myrrh and attends the ceremony of Christ's coronation in Simon's house. Within the society of men and the followers of Jesus, she was not welcome. In "Tribute to the Angels," H.D. suggests that a woman is capable of taking the lead in renovating the nation by establishing new laws, a role usually performed by a male leader. But in this poem, she has not embarked on this mission as yet; the pages of the book the Lady is carrying are still empty. In "The Flowering of the Rod," this mission of spiritual healing is accomplished by Mary Magdalene when she gains the jar of myrrh from Kaspar, one of the Magi, in order to anoint the feet of Christ. This female revolutionist finally finds her "sense of direction" which will eventually lead her to "remuneration" (p. 583), that is to say, personal and collective spiritual revival, as well as a cultural acknowledgement of her role as equal, if not a substitute, to that of the male patriarch.

Chadwick contends that, in *The Gospel of Mary* and *The Wisdom of Faith*, Mary Magdalene is depicted as a woman with a potential for spiritual leadership and teaching, for which she was respected by Jesus himself. In the canonized Biblical texts, however, Mary is denounced by many men – like Simon (Peter) in the Gospel – who conformed to

the tradition of patriarchal power which stripped women of any social or spiritual authority. Chadwick continues her argument saying that “Peter instructs the disciples to exclude Mary in the *Gospel of Thomas*, another Gnostic and non-canonized work: ‘Let Mary be excluded from among us, for she is a woman, and not worthy of Life.’”<sup>133</sup> H.D. depicts the extremity of this misogynistic tendency of Peter (Simon) when he brazenly wonders why Jesus is tolerant of Mary:

they call him a Master,  
but Simon questioned:

*this man if he were a prophet, would have known  
who and what manner of woman this is.* (p. 595)

It is Mary Magdalene of the secret un-canonized manuscript, then, that H.D. characterizes in "The Flowering of the Rod" to represent her female spiritualistic vision of healing, redemption and rebirth through revising the traditional concept of masculinity.

Despite all the rejection she sensed in the people around her, she sat on the floor and started “un-weaving / the long, carefully-braided tresses / of her extraordinary hair” (p. 594) in order to use it for anointing Christ’s feet. By this act of Mary, the process of change and spiritual rebirth was taking place. This scene is apocalyptic as it reveals something hidden and the revelation is accompanied by ecstasy. When Kasper saw her, he

did not recognize her  
until her scarf slipped to the floor,

.....

... When he saw the light on her hair  
Like moonlight on a lost river,

Kasper  
Remembered. (p. 598)

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–32.

It was a moment of revelation to Kaspar triggered by a mystery uncovered; it was a vision that flashed for less than a second, and he “heard an echo of an echo in a shell.” He discovered that the woman, who was accused by all as being devils or daemons-ridden, is now redeemed; the vision informs him that “*in her were forgiven / the sins of the seven / daemons cast out of her*” (p. 598). These demons, throughout history, are the mythic and Christian female figures, including Eve and the Virgin, who have been always stigmatized as sinner. Now Kaspar recognizes the true value of Mary, and that she is actually all these women; “and though it [the vision] was all on a very grand scale, / yet it was small and intimate;” that was “Paradise / before Eve” (p. 602).

His vision also takes him back in history to Atlantis, the long-lost island where

he saw the islands of the Blest,  
he saw the Hesperides,

he saw the circles and circles of islands  
about the lost centre-island, Atlantis;

.....

he, in that half-second, saw  
the whole scope and plan

of our and his civilization on this,  
his and our earth, before Adam. (p. 601-2)

Kaspar, here, is identified with the birds who remember a lost world to which they belonged, but now is forgotten. H.D.’s “conventional males illustrate the need for change at the level of epistemology itself;”<sup>134</sup> thus, it takes a man like Kaspar, who “received the title Magian / (it is translated in the Script, Wise Man)” (p. 600), to decipher “old signs and symbols” and “the whole secret of the mystery” (p. 601) through “only the most

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<sup>134</sup> Gertrude Reif Hughes, ‘Making It Really New: Hilda Doolittle, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the Feminist Potential of Modern Poetry’, *American Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (1990): 397, doi:10.2307/2712940.

painful application” (p. 600). Kaspar is one of the initiates and the companions of the flame from "The Walls Do Not Fall," and he is the alchemist from "Tribute to the Angels;" they are of the few who could grasp H.D.'s 'Spiritual Reality' as a way of changing the actual physical reality.

Gertrude Reif Hughes asserts this idea when she writes that this concept of "spiritual reality", requiring appropriately enhanced capacities to apprehend it, entailed ideas about cognitive faculties. Doolittle envisioned new ways of knowing, as well as new kinds of knowledge."<sup>135</sup> Kaspar understands the voice echoed in the shell, and can translate its messages, "though the sound was other / than our ears are attuned to;" it is the sound of the palimpsestic history:

through spiral upon spiral of the shell  
of memory that yet connects us

with drowned cities of pre-history;  
Kaspar understood and his brain translated:

*Lilith born before Eve  
And one born before Lilith,  
And Eve; we three are forgiven, we are three of the seven  
Daemons cast out of her.* (p. 603)

The knowledge Kaspar gained is important, as it reveals mysterious dimensions in the universe; it is the kind of knowledge that is connected to the occult, to spirituality and the beyond. Nevertheless, H.D. attaches no significance to the knowledge that seeks to justify and explicate the first type of this faculty: the spiritually acquired knowledge. In section [40] of "Flowering," she explains that a lot of the details of Mary and Kaspar's story cannot be accounted for. She asserts this point as the line, "no one will ever know," is repeated three times; and the idea is emphasized again at the end: "no one would know exactly /

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.



how it happened / least of all Kaspar” (p. 608). Thus, even Kaspar, the wise man, does not possess all kinds of knowledge.

The palimpsestic nature of H.D.’s poetic narrative takes the reader from Kaspar’s revelatory scene in Simon’s house, where Christ was to be crowned King, to the Nativity scene, where Kaspar is joining the other two magi. He carries one jar of myrrh, and he “thought, there were always two jars, / the two were always together.” The reader understands that the other jar is with Mary Magdalene, but Kaspar the Magus does not remember, and still wonders,

why didn’t I bring both?  
or should I have chosen the other?”

.....

It was always maintained

That one jar was better than the other,  
But he grumbled and shook his head,

No one can tell which is which,  
Now your great-grandfather is dead.

(p. 610-11)

The two jars that have been always together are man and woman, and each jar carries the gender of its owner. Yet, Kaspar remembers the traditional conviction that he has been told all his life, that they are not equal; one of them is better than the other. It is the belief that H.D. is trying to deconstruct in her work: the long-established norm that man is superior to woman.

By the end of the poem Kaspar offers baby Jesus and his mother a gift, the jar of myrrh, which he thinks unworthy in comparison to the gift of the other two Wise Men; especially because he has lost the other jar. Mary speaks to him so that he looks at her, and tells him that he brought “a most beautiful fragrance, / as if all flowering things together.” Kaspar is surprised at her comment because he knows that “the seal of the jar

was unbroken,” and “the fragrance came from the bundle of myrrh / she held in her arms” (p. 612). Trigilio interprets this final epiphanic encounter in terms of H.D.’s poetics of apocalypse and rebirth or renewal: “the apocalyptic conversation between Mary and Kaspar culminates in a physical birth that echoes christ’s.”<sup>136</sup>

Perhaps H.D. wants to say that the second jar is Virgin Mary herself; she has delivered a bundle of myrrh to the world for redemption. It is true that Christ is the redeemer, but it is her existence which made that possible. H.D. maintains Christ’s status and role in the messianic tradition; nevertheless, a woman’s worth, presented in the figures of virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, has been asserted and promoted to a higher level to surpass or, at least, to parallel that of man.

The vision Kaspar reached at the end of the poem absolves Eve of the original sin, the stigma associated with her and, by extension, with all female figures throughout the history of humanity. Eve, Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Isis, Lilith and H.D. herself are all unified to represent the divinity of the redeemed female.

In this war collection, what distinguishes the revolutionary female figure in *Trilogy* from that in H.D.’s other poetic works, be it prior or subsequent to *Trilogy*, is that she is cleverly, and thus persuasively, presented within the narrative of a long-established religious tradition of Christianity, rather than the narrative of Greek or pagan history. Isis, Venus, Astarte are not absent in *Trilogy*, but they are eventually identified with Mary (of Magdalene), the Lady, the Mother.

H.D.’s prophetic vision in *Trilogy* has its ground in the stories of diverse spiritual beliefs and rituals; it is not an entirely original creation. It is more likely the findings of

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<sup>136</sup> *Strange Prophecies Anew*, 22.

research into these beliefs and rituals, compiled and sifted out to yield a new revised faith.

“Seeking to overcome traditional paths of spirituality,” Moffett observes,

yet still drawn to them in even a tangential way, *Trilogy* occupies a middle ground between discovering a new means of vision on one hand and attending to past literary approaches in the other, particularly the commitment to mythology and the modernist investment in fragmented poetics.<sup>137</sup>

At this stage of her career, H.D. feels confident to probe the wealth of history, near and far, to select, modify and refashion its diverse elements in order to come up with a fresh way of life and belief full of potentialities for a better world guided by female-centred spirituality. Riddel explains H.D.’s fascination with the mythological gods and goddesses that are present in almost all of her poems, saying that, for her, “mythology, like language, is the durable history of all human truth: the subjectivity which is real because it has been objectified in a recurrent and thus universal form.”<sup>138</sup> Time in *Trilogy* is not static or confined to the present, rather it constantly moves forward and backward. This notion is strongly supported by Arthur Versluis in his book, *Restoring Paradise*, stating that H.D.’s writings “reflect a sense of the transparency of time and place” and proposes “that past, present, and future continually intermingle, and that it is possible to realize a timeless state she terms the ‘over-mind,’ . . . in which the individual consciousness is exalted, and out of which all great work is generated.” Furthermore, Versluis maintains that “the dead and the living are not separate but part of an interwoven continuum.”<sup>139</sup> In summation, H.D.’s understanding of the universe is that it functions within a cyclical movement that encompasses life and death, and hence comes her belief that history, the universe and her

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<sup>137</sup> *Mysticism in Postmodernist Long Poems*, 42.

<sup>138</sup> ‘H. D. and the Poetics of “Spiritual Realism”’, 456.

<sup>139</sup> *Restoring Paradise*, 117.

own life are part of a palimpsest, the content of which is continually rewritten without obliterating the original. Throughout her career, H.D. has sought to be one of the scribes who adds a new layer to this palimpsest; her writing “works to surface the terrors and redirect them to constructive ends;”<sup>140</sup> whether these terrors are generated in her psyche, her life or in a world under the burden of violent wars.

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<sup>140</sup> Adalaide Morris, *How to Live / What to Do: H.D.'s Cultural Poetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 111.

## Chapter 3

### Robert Lowell and WWII

#### *Land of Unlikeness*

It is only natural that when a culture witnesses significant changes accompanied by a spiritual decay, artists try to fill in the vacuum by restoring an old faith that used to act as a backbone holding a nation together, or creating a new one in order to salvage morale and to act as a redemptive substitute in the event of an approaching apocalypse. Robert Lowell is not different from these artists; he was deeply involved in an age which he called his, and of which he wanted to be a part. War, Fascism, Communism and Democracy had created an age of turbulence and provoked a foreboding atmosphere that gave many people a reason to foresee the imminent deterioration of American civilization.

Most critics agree that Lowell's awareness of these changes made him keen to get involved and try to reform what he saw as threatening; he believed that his poems could convey a prophetic voice needed in such trying times as a reminder and as a warning to people. What encouraged Lowell to forge an authoritative voice in his poems at an early age, Stephen Burt contends, was the fact that he "began to write serious poetry at a time, and in a milieu, in which critical doctrines seemed to have an unusual ability to shape young poets."<sup>1</sup> In a 1963 interview with Alfred Alvarez, Lowell says:

My first book was written during the war, which was a very different time from the Thirties. Then violence, heroism, things like that, seemed much more natural to life. They seemed everyday matters and that governed my style. Things seemed desperate. Even though our cities weren't bombed you felt they might be, and we were destroying thousands of people. The world

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<sup>1</sup> 'Rebellious Authority: Robert Lowell and Milton at Midcentury', *Journal of Modern Literature* 24, no. 2 (1 November 2000): 338, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/16605>.

seemed apocalyptic at that time, and heroically so. I thought that civilisation was going to break down, and instead I did.<sup>2</sup>

This clearly shows that Lowell himself was a scared young man in a collapsing world in which he deeply felt his responsibility and his role as a poet and a human being. He believed that, in order for people to find a way out of a current chaotic situation governed by immorality, materialism and violence, they needed to be reminded of true Christianity to save humanity and to find salvation. Doreski argues that Lowell, throughout his poetic career, had always been trying to reflect the exact nature of his age, his own experiences as well as those of post-war America.<sup>3</sup> Edward Gelpi agrees that Lowell's career is "deeply expressive and symptomatic of its period."<sup>4</sup> The early Lowell furnished his poems with his visions of a country in a predicament, the traces of which almost always go back to the history of his New England.

In addition to his school education, as a young man, Lowell was acquainted with religious writings that were well-known at the first half of the twentieth century. For example, many of Lowell's ideas expressed in the poems of his first collection, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), show how much the books of Christopher Dawson had influenced him. Dawson was one of the important and famous twentieth century writers who, through his ideas about the new world, set the base for a belief in a consequent apocalypse. In his writing, he blames the new politics of totalitarianism and capitalism for the collapse of

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<sup>2</sup> 'Robert Lowell in Conversation', in *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 77.

<sup>3</sup> William Doreski, *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors: The Poetics of the Public and the Personal* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), xix.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Reign of the Kingfisher: Robert Lowell's Prophetic Poetry', in *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 51.

the moral values that amounted to the incitement of an unjust war.<sup>5</sup> “The great conflict,” he says in his *The Judgement of the Nations*, that led to world wars and the division of Europe “is the result of . . . science and mechanization being used, in the one case, in a commercial spirit for the increase of wealth; in the other, in a military spirit for the conquest of power.”<sup>6</sup> The new apocalypse promotes spiritual and political reformation through the reviving of religious values.

In general, the twentieth century was a fertile soil for the concept of ‘apocalypse’ to thrive among people who were facing new challenges and threats on a universal scale. At the beginning, thinkers and writers drew attention to the catastrophic reality of a world on the verge of ending, but only within the context of the traditional interpretation of Biblical prophecies and apocalypse, that is, Doomsday, the original sense of the word. It was fear of the ultimate physical ending of this world, which would be substituted with the immortal Kingdom of God that would welcome only obedient Christians, while eternal doom would be the destiny of those who are not. The discourse of these writers was essentially of fear, warning and reminding readers of lost faith. It was mainly to urge people to find the path of redemption before the imminent end of history was inflicted by God. At the same time, it was a discourse of hope that a ‘golden age’ for the true believers would replace the present peripheral one after passing the trying times.

Gradually, the scope of the writer’s interest in the apocalypse had begun to change; the universality of events, including two world wars, had made the urge to seek change and repentance not only an individual necessity, but a collective one; the individual ego is not the only sinner any more, it is the whole national decayed consciousness that needs

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<sup>5</sup> Jerome Mazzaro, *Robert Lowell and America* (United States: Xlibris, 2002), 14–15.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 15.

to be rectified. After surviving the First World War, it had become clear that man-made apocalypses would strike again and again, until they brought wilderness to our humanity. Consequently, the secular apocalypses, in the sense of cataclysmic endings inflicted by man or nature, are interpreted in terms of the orthodox divine apocalypse. The term – apocalypse – has developed within Western religious and secular traditions to denote not the eventual and irreversible end of history, but the possible multiple endings of societies, cultures and ideologies; and each time sweeping away fragmented constituents of our humanity in the process. Nevertheless, with this interest in the destiny of the mass, the singular consciousness is still the centre of attention; this time the goal is to survive the eclipses of the human psyche soiled by private or public social and political predicaments.

Over the span of his career, Lowell had tackled the apocalypse within both of its contexts, religious and secular; forging his own eschatological narrative in reaction to the chaos around him and inside him. Through their work, modernist writers like W.B. Yeats, Oswald Spengler, Christopher Dawson and T.S. Eliot had reacted to the foreign ideas and attitudes quickly casting shadows on their age and had, Jerome Mazzaro remarks, “insisted that the Christian nations of the world were in danger of losing their Christian cores by giving in to such secular notions and, further, of forcing upon themselves world destruction and everlasting Judgment.”<sup>7</sup> Lowell was acquainted with this body of literature and, being deeply concerned with the events of war and politics around him, and in his search for reasons and explanations for them, he resorted to religion, and the apocalypse in particular, at the outset of his career. But, unlike most modernist poets, he was interested in the tradition and culture of New England as well as their modern traces that would eventually, he disputed, bring about an apocalyptic end to modern America.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.



Jay Martin points out that “Lowell’s way with poetry would be neither Hopkins’s nor Eliot’s. In the American Romantic tradition, he not only merged poetry with religion but equated both with culture.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, at that early stage, The Eliotic effect is clear in Lowell’s early poetry more than in the work of any other poet of the first half of the twentieth century. Lowell especially reacted to the way Eliot had dealt with and reflected the struggles of the modern era and the loss of faith. To a larger extent, as a matter of fact, it is Lowell who revived Eliot’s Christian trajectories, with the difference that the young poet’s religious entanglement is more limited than that of his senior’s; it is Catholicism which Lowell hails at the expense of Calvinist Protestantism. However, both poets hated Puritanism and the bourgeois atmosphere they lived in. For Lowell, the combination of both had incited the vicious and gradually-declining contemporary America. In reaction to his present milieu, and in his search for his identity to start his poetic role, Lowell came to the realization that if he wanted to make an improvement with his art so that it could lead to reformation, he himself needed to be reformed first. He became a Catholic, just as Eliot had become a high Anglican or Anglo-Catholic in the Church of England.

Lowell's ancestors were among the first to arrive in Boston on the Mayflower from England. They, both on the paternal and maternal sides, were part of the essential contributors who established the Puritan Protestantism in New England. In 1917, Robert Lowell was born in Boston, Massachusetts, to Robert Traill Spence Lowell, a commander in the navy, and Charlotte Winslow, the daughter of one of the well-known businessmen in the American mining industry. His family was famous for its literary and political figures, like Amy Lowell and James Russell Lowell. Its long-established religious heritage, steeped in Puritan Protestantism, would always make Lowell’s conversion to Catholicism

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<sup>8</sup> *Robert Lowell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), 11.

in 1942 a matter of controversy.

Detecting a reason, or reasons, for Lowell's inclination toward Catholicism could be a hard task; nonetheless, his critics have always tried to explain the motives behind his adoption of new faith and whether that faith was genuinely felt or just a mere whim. They have offered more than one reason for his conversion, the weakest of which is his marriage to a Catholic woman, Jean Stafford, the novelist, in 1940. When, in 1971, Lowell was asked by his interviewer, Ian Hamilton, about what made him convert to Catholicism, Lowell himself was not sure about it, and attributed it to his feeling of despair and some difficulties faced by him being a newly married young man with no income. These circumstances, he admitted, made him "too tense to converse, a creature of spiritual severity. Christianity was a welcome."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he thought it was because he had been in touch with an abundance of religious knowledge, so the options were open and clear for him. But this almost obscure answer does not satisfactorily, even to a minimum degree, provide a clarification for his becoming a renegade.

Lowell's society was war-stricken and governed by materialism and a capitalist government that had created money-worshippers instead of proper Christians; all this resulted in a moral and spiritual deterioration. As a young man living in such a society, Lowell was confused, restless and unstable, just like the world around him. This chaos brought about in Lowell the 'rebellion,' as he expressed himself in a poem entitled so; it was the product of strong inner impulses. Lowell was looking for a new belief, a source of personal comfort as well as a redeeming path for a whole nation. In his early poems, he wanted to address the malaise of American culture and then to heal it. Moreover, as a protestant, Lowell was spiritually shaken and sceptical; he was in need of a new spiritual

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<sup>9</sup> 'A Conversation with Robert Lowell', in *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 161–62.

ground to identify himself with, and on which he could establish a base for attacking the falsities of his inherited faith. He rejected his own New England ancestors who, instead of promoting the religious values of their Puritan Protestantism, had established a secular capitalist society immersed in Machiavellian values of self-interest and hostility. They took the eschatological doctrines of the Old Testament for granted, manipulating them to suit their worldly materialistic pursuits, and forging new ones that were more political than religious. "Lowell's conversion to Catholicism," Philip Hobsbaum believes, "gave him a weapon against his family, and this mode of ascetic philosophy afforded a fine opportunity for self-justification"<sup>10</sup> and liberation from the feeling of guilt for being part of this culture and its shifting beliefs. In short, to release the tension inside him and to show opposition to his own history as well as the present, he needed to free himself from personal and social restraints, to become a rebel, an artist, and a Catholic. Mark Rudman also thinks that "young Robert felt most alive when engaged in the spirit of rebellion making manic statements, crying out against loneliness and injustice and the fact of death," and that "it was liberating for Lowell to become a Catholic . . . Catholicism allowed him an outlet for his violence and his ever present need to be bloody and civilized at the same time."<sup>11</sup>

As a way to unload the burden of his familial ties, conversion to Catholicism has served Lowell well at the time, but it also definitely served the young zealous poet inside him as well. As an artist, Lowell was in need of beliefs and mythical codes for his poetic creation. William Doreski is certain that "the youthful Lowell was fascinated with religion

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<sup>10</sup> *A Reader's Guide to Robert Lowell* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Robert Lowell: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 36–37.

as ritual and as the source of powerful mysteries.”<sup>12</sup> He needed a substitute for his denounced faith in order to provide him with new spiritual ideologies on which to embark as a poet-prophet. No wonder, then, that “[f]rom the start, Lowell’s poetry manifested a lifelong struggle for faith and the aesthetic to express it.”<sup>13</sup> In conclusion, then, it is obvious that Lowell’s conversion to a new faith was a decision made with emotional as well as rational incentives. Embracing Catholicism is a very important phase in his life. It may reveal different aspects of his complicated psyche, expressed by means of his writings throughout his entire career.

Although Lowell resented the representations of his religious tradition, it was one of the most important influences on his personal life and vocation. He was quite knowledgeable in his religious heritage, its dogmas and apocalyptic prophecies. He reminisces about his education: “I was brought up as an Episcopalian Protestant, with a good deal of Bible reading at school. We had a rather sceptical attitude, but we were rather saturated (even in this late day) with it.”<sup>14</sup> Lowell’s forefathers, the early Puritans who colonized North America in the seventeenth century, believed that it was the plan of God for them to migrate from England to this new and would-be sacred land on which the Kingdom of God will be ultimately established. They wrote extensively about the eschatology they modified out of the Catholic and Protestant doctrines; and their preferred form of writing was the Jeremiads. They were serious sermonlike writings by well-known figures – like Edward Johnson, Richard Mather, his son Increase and grandson Cotton – who helped to setup the religious, social and political bedrock for their

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<sup>12</sup> *The Years of Our Friendship: Robert Lowell and Allen Tate* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> A. Alvarez, ‘A Talk with Robert Lowell’, in *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 102.

new society. The jeremiads of the New England Puritans condemn other contemporary decadent cultures and communities that do not comply with the original concepts of their faith, and prophesy the eventual apocalyptic downfall of these cultures. They also talk about the conclusion of this world with the apocalyptic Armageddon between Christ's followers, after his awaited Second Coming, and the Antichrist's followers from the non-believers and the corrupt Christians. Yet, these writings offer hope as well; the great battle between good and evil will be culminated in victory for the army of light which will be rewarded a utopian society by God to live in.

In their literature, the Puritans aim at living in peace in the Promised Land, but not until they have experienced war. The contrasting feelings these writings provoke are the same gained from reading Lowell's *Land of Unlikeness*. The poet opposes war, its catalysts and its ramifications, through the employment of violent and angry preaching tone and content, making the collection "explicitly antiwar, yet enthralled with war."<sup>15</sup> Paul Mariani accurately states that nearly all of the poems of *Land of Unlikeness* are "anti-war, apocalyptic, and prophetic in the style of Jeremiah and the Old Testament prophets."<sup>16</sup>

War and peace are not the only components of antithesis in Lowell's poems. He is also confused as far as his country's history and politics are concerned. He himself admits this fact in an interview, saying that "Violence and idealism have some occult connection. . . . The ideal isn't real unless it's somehow backed by power. . . . but in a way I feel it is our curse that we can't disentangle those two things."<sup>17</sup> Somehow, it seems that this feature – a common one of youth – in the personality of Lowell's country has penetrated his own

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Price, ed., *Critics on Robert Lowell: Readings in Literary Criticism*, Readings in Literary Criticism ; 17 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), xv.

<sup>16</sup> *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 103.

<sup>17</sup> Alvarez, 'A Talk with Robert Lowell', 103.

personality, making him intertwine the idealistic values and ideas he seeks through his religious poems with violent tone and images.

“Lowell was attracted to war and had studied it extensively, fascinated by such figures as Napoleon and Alexander the Great, but his idea of war centered on individual dignity and heroism, not the bombing of civilians.”<sup>18</sup> In 1942, he considered enlisting for the war; he thought violence was sometimes necessary and this war had its justifications. But, by 1943, he refused to participate in the war and called himself a ‘conscientious objector’ after he knew about the bombings of German cities and their civilians to completely annihilate this country, and the same fate was planned for Japan. Lowell’s objection was not against wars per se, but against the way in which the United States fought this specific war.<sup>19</sup> In a conversation with Hamilton, Lowell explains: “I became an objector after the saturation bombing of Hamburg and the proclamation of unconditional surrender.”<sup>20</sup> This refusal led him to be sentenced for a year in prison, of which he served five and a half months, an experience he wrote about in his poem, “Memories of West Street and Lepke.”

“Christmas Eve in the Time of War,” a key poem in *Land of Unlikeness*, talks about materialism as the evil power which incites wars. Materialist people are attacked again in the figure of the “Capitalist” who, as presented in the subtitle of the poem, “Meditates by a Civil War Monument.”<sup>21</sup> It is Christmas Eve and the materialistic world is celebrating grotesquely, “Tonight the vengery of capital / Hangs the bare Christ-child on a tree of gold,”

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<sup>18</sup> Doeski, *The Years of Our Friendship*, 65–66.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> ‘A Conversation with Robert Lowell’, 164.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Bidart and David Gewanter, eds., *Robert Lowell: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 887. All further references to Lowell’s poems will be indicated by a page number in parentheses from this source.

but “Tomorrow Mars will break his bones,” (p. 887) another harsh image of the figure of Christ.

For the meditative capitalist, war is a destructive apocalyptic power; the monument’s statues of the soldiers are likened to an “Anonymous machinery from raw men, / it rides the whirlwind, it directs the drums,” to announce the end. Contrary to logic, instead of asking for salvation in such threatening times, the man asks the help of his idols, “Santa Claus and Hamilton,” to keep his material gains safe and “To break the price-controller’s strangle-hold.” He is a defiant hypocrite; he is aware that “The Child has come with water and with fire” and “His stocking is full of stones! Stone men at war.” Nevertheless, he cares only for his profits, and he has not changed:

Twenty years ago  
I strung my stocking on the tree – if Hell’s  
Inactive sting stuck in the stocking’s toe,  
Money would draw it out. (p. 887)

There is a glimpse of regret at the end of the poem when the capitalist realizes that he himself has become a victim of war; his “child is dead upon the field of honor: / His blood has made the golden idol glimmer,” (p. 880) so he says “woe unto the rich that are with child,” for Christ says: “I bring no peace, I bring the sword, / . . . My nakedness was fingered and defiled” (p. 880). In this poem, as well as in “The Boston Nativity” which is another poem in the same collection, “the suffering of the innocents at the hands of the powerful is symbolized by the death of a child.”<sup>22</sup>

The title of the poem, the time in which it was written (during WWII) and the monument all say that war will not cease to happen. Two kinds of war are implied here: the war that annihilates lives like the Civil War and the Second World War, and the one

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<sup>22</sup> Hugh B. Staples, *Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 16–17.

that annihilates ethical and religious values fought by Capitalists and Utilitarians, who live by the laissez-faire principle. The general tone of the poem is one of despair, and the “note of lamentation is only balanced by a not very confident plea for personal salvation.”<sup>23</sup> Corruption and ignorance of religious and moral values are not restricted to modern times or to the generation of the poem’s persona; the roots are far back in the past: “I ask for bread, my father gives me mould” (p. 888). Lowell again is criticizing his Puritan forefathers for being the source of now-prevailing unchristian attitudes.

In *Land of Unlikeness*, religion and the apocalypse are depicted allegorically through images taken from continuing social, political and materialistic conflicts from the heart of his modern world, along with their offspring, the war, and through embodiments of Christ and Mary in many unorthodox images. “For Lowell,” Allan Tate points out, “the war seems to have been Armageddon; . . . bombers become destroying angels, warships are Leviathans. Cane and Abel, Adam, Mars, Bellona, Satan and even the Virgin appear as contenders in the cosmic field while the issue hangs in doubt.”<sup>24</sup> Reflecting on the final judgment as an approaching end, his poems are made into warnings against a world war of massive destruction allegorized as Armageddon, but not between good and evil, or between Christ’s and the antichrist’s armies as prophesied in the Bible; rather it is a secular Armageddon in which the weak are defeated by the strong and most resourceful, and after which there will be no new utopian earth. Richard Fein affirms this characteristic feature of Lowell’s war poems in which “war becomes the immortal equivalent of religion, a weird mirror image of Christianity . . . [which] cannot conceive of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Price, *Critics on Robert Lowell*, 40.



the cross without a horrendous gargoyle catching it.”<sup>25</sup> In “Christ for Sale,” one the most explicitly religious poems in *Land of Unlikeness*, Lowell criticizes bitterly the materialistic endeavours of people which turned the world into a big marketplace where there is a price for anything and anyone including Christ, a symbol of all Christian convictions, who is given up in return for worldly profits. The poem is full of graphic religious symbolism and images depicting equally harshly, with “prosaic vulgarity,”<sup>26</sup> the figure of Christ as well as his abusers:

In Greenwich Village, Christ the drunkard brews  
Gall, or spiked bone-vat, siphons His bilged blood  
Into weak brain-pans and unseasons wood:  
His auctioneers are four-hog-fatted Jews.  
In furs and bundling of vitality,  
Cur ladies, ho, swill down the ichor in this Dye. (p. 880)

The auctioneers of Greenwich Village are the greedy “merchants of the earth” mentioned in the Book of Revelation (18:11), who inhabited Babylon before it was consumed by apocalyptic fire as a punishment from God upon its corrupt people. Implicit in these lines are Lowell’s premonition that American places like New York, “Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan” (p. 880) will face the same destiny of Babylon, Gomorrah and Sodom for their moral and religious degeneration. Stephen Yenser characterizes the nature of these images as repellent “not so much because of what is seen in this world as because of the way in which it is seen,” and their ugliness “arise[s] not from description or apparent description but rather from abstraction and caricature.”<sup>27</sup> In a similar way, Staples admits that Lowell’s revulsion towards these modern materialistic inclinations is evident in this

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Mary and Bellona: The War Poetry of Robert Lowell’, *The Southern Review* 1, no. 4 (1 October 1965): 820, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/12915>.

<sup>26</sup> Staples, *Robert Lowell*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Circle to Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 14.

poem, but this does not prevent the images from being “emetic rather than aesthetic,”<sup>28</sup> especially in the last stanza when “The lunchers stop to spit into Christ's eye. / O Lamb of God, your loitering carrion will die” (p. 880). Lowell prophetically describes current realities in his own modern society and warns of the consequences; he “stands apart from his native land within his native land, and thus takes up the posture of the prophet. . . . he sees what he sees, and he feels it is his mission to awaken, not to soothe.”<sup>29</sup> He ends the poem without giving a shred of hope or encouragement for change and reformation. Resentment and disappointment at the new unchristian and dehumanizing values adopted in his country make him an angry prophet who wants to rattle his people’s minds and open their eyes to an imminent Day of Judgment. He does this through his pejorative poetic employment of traditional religious images of Christ, Mary, and of the cross throughout the poems in this collection. But it is hard not to notice that Lowell, in his own way, is actually reaffirming the sacred importance of these icons by portraying a doomed world in their absence.

The same ideas of “Christ for Sale” are depicted in “The Boston Nativity,” another poem in *Land of Unlikeness*, in which the state of America is guilty of becoming a pagan civilization exchanging Christ for social and political sovereignty. This civilization will be consumed by the Second World War whose destructive impact is symbolic of the Judgment Day:

“Peace and goodwill on earth”  
Liberty Bell rings out with its cracked clang.  
If Baby asks for gifts at birth,  
Santa will hang  
Bones of Democracy  
Upon the Christmas Tree.

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Lowell, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Glauco Cambon, *The Inclusive Flame: Studies in Modern American Poetry* (Indiana University Press, 1965), 223.

So, child, unclasp your fists,  
And clap for Freedom and Democracy;  
No matter, child, if the Ark Royal lists  
    Into the sea;  
So the Leviathan  
Will spout American. (p. 868)

The tone is bitter and sarcastic. The bells which are supposed to announce the advent of Christ are arrogantly announcing the alleged American “Liberty,” “Freedom and Democracy” instead. Ironically, this modern “clang” precipitates the nation’s apocalyptic end and man will be consumed by the same destructive power he has created.

Not only is his conversion to Roman Catholicism explicitly expressed in his early work, but his disdain for and criticism of his forefathers’ faith and their whole culture are as openly manifested. Still, sometimes the reader can feel Lowell's ambivalent attitude towards these two opposites; even Catholicism, his faith of choice, is not as perfect as he desired, and Puritanism, despite his criticism of it, has its own heroes. R.P. Blackmur describes this ambivalence as a fight inside Lowell: “[W]hat is thought of as Boston in him fights with what is thought of as Catholic; and the fight produces not a tension but a gritting.”<sup>30</sup> Blackmur continues his argument saying that “Lowell is distraught about religion; he does not seem to have decided whether his Roman Catholic belief is the form of a force or the sentiment of a form.”<sup>31</sup> It seems that, for Lowell, the contrast is between the doctrine of a faith and the men who are supposed to implement it but, in reality, they do not; they rather disfigure it in the process. He had seen this in his birth faith and later in his acquired one during the fifties.

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Notes on Eleven Poets’, *The Kenyon Review* 7, no. 2 (1945): 348, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4332608>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

This fickleness of mood can be applied to what he thinks of his Puritan ancestors. His pride in a long line of famous names and family ancestors who accomplished so much for their nation frequently turns into a bitter attack on the misdeeds they committed in the past and are perpetuating in the present. His strong attraction to his Protestant ancestors made him unable to detach himself from the past, from the history of humanity and the history of America which is his own. Randall Jarrell provides a clarifying metaphor, saying that "Of New England Mr. Lowell has the ambivalent knowledge one has of one's damned kin." His upheaval against the atrocities of the present always drew him back to rebel against the past which, for him, had begotten these atrocities in the first place. The children of light, as the Puritans proudly called themselves, have become, through Lowell's poetic sarcasm, dangerous serpents. Instead of believing that the Puritans are the pious children of God and the chosen for an eternal blessed life after the great Apocalypse, Lowell thinks they broke the sacred covenant which entitles them to this blessed destiny, and describes with a derisive tone their corruptive influence when they stopped to be the "Children of Light;" they are vehemently criticized:

Our fathers wrung their bread from stock and stones  
And fenced their gardens with the Redman's bones;  
Embarking from the nether land of Holland,  
Pilgrims unhouseled by Geneva's night,  
They planted here the serpent's seeds of light . . . (p. 31)

The effect of their negligence of religious commitments and their immersion in the spiritually devastating sins – the same ones for which they used to criticize Europe – has had its manifestations in contemporary America, in the form of wars and absence of spiritual and ethical values.

The impact of Catholicism on Lowell's work is strangely pronounced in his early poems, including both content and structure; most of them are religious with a preaching tone, reflecting the Biblical style of obscure imagery and complex symbolism. But it is also

the undeniable influence of New Criticism and its literary men that shaped his poetry at its early stages.

Lowell's parents chose for him to enter Harvard University in 1935. He spent a year there, but being unhappy with the experience and his parents' constant attempts at steering his life, his psychiatrist, Merrill Moore, arranged for him to go to Tennessee in the south and be the apprentice of Ford Madox Ford. The two were to meet at the house of Ford's friend who happened to be Allan Tate. In this man, Lowell found a "friend, magisterial teacher, and literary father – exactly what Lowell was seeking,"<sup>32</sup> and he would become "Lowell's entree into the literary world of the 1940s and his first thorough coach in the craft of verse."<sup>33</sup> Lowell was so enthusiastic to start this new artistic phase in his life. He set a tent on Tate's lawn for three months, after which Lowell dropped out of Harvard and joined Kenyon College. There, his teacher was John Crowe Ransom, who "set the self-consciously Aristotelian, anti-Romantic, ceremonious, and politically orthodox intellectual tone," along with his "New Critical emphasis on wit and paradox."<sup>34</sup> Both Ransom and Tate had influenced Lowell's way of writing greatly; and he had always acknowledged this. In one of his interviews, Lowell says:

I began writing in the thirties and the current I fell into was the southern group of poets – John Crowe Ransom and Allan Tate – and that was partly a continuation of Pound and Eliot and partly an attempt to make poetry much more formal than Eliot and Pound did: to write in metres but to make the metres look hard and make them hard to write.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Martin, *Robert Lowell*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Burt, 'Rebellious Authority', 338.

<sup>34</sup> Martin, *Robert Lowell*, 9–10.

<sup>35</sup> Alvarez, 'Robert Lowell in Conversation', 81.

Accordingly, Lowell had adopted the conventional forms that distinguished Ransom's poetry, along with his emphasis on the importance of technique and diction. Lowell was also affected by Tate's approach as a poet who, in turn, had Eliot as a role model. Tate was less formalistic than Ransom, and tended to concentrate more heavily on intricate metaphors and images that made the meaning behind them difficult to understand.

Looking closely, the reader may easily detect all these features predominant in the poems of *Land of Unlikeness*. In 1974, Lowell explains his style during this early period of his career: "[t]he kind of poet I was largely determined by the fact that I grew up in the heyday of the New Criticism. From the beginning I was preoccupied with technique, fascinated by the past and tempted by other languages. It is hard for me (now) to imagine a poet not interested in the classics."<sup>36</sup>

The basic idea behind *Land of Unlikeness*, as summarized by Hobsbaum, is "an attack on America for having fallen away from Christianity."<sup>37</sup> The title discloses the general theme of this collection, suggesting that its poems' concerns are historical and modern, religious and secular at the same time. In this work Lowell describes modern Christians consumed by worldly obsessions and forgetting about the original humane values of their religion. Lowell's *Land of Unlikeness* shows its writer's immersion in sorrow over the corruption of the human soul and the spoiling effect of a new capitalist culture. It, thus, "records the quest of a Christian for religious security against a background of chaos, disorder and destruction."<sup>38</sup> The title is a translation of St. Bernard's words, *regio dissimilitudinis*, "a wasteland in which modern folk wandered aimlessly

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<sup>36</sup> Stanley Kunitz, 'Talk with Robert Lowell', in *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 85.

<sup>37</sup> *A Reader's Guide to Robert Lowell*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Staples, *Robert Lowell*, 22.

away from God.”<sup>39</sup> They have lost their likeness to God and, thus, they are not even like themselves any more, since “when the soul has lost its likeness to God it is no longer like itself.” It is an apocalypse-triggering situation where there is so much evil, corruption, deception and hatred swarming the earth and turning it into a ‘land of unlikeness.’ In the poems of this collection, we hear the poet’s loud voice against forsaking ethical traditions of early New England, the current war, and the loss of faith under the pressure of a materialistic society. For him, John Crick says, “man is either poised agonizingly between the worlds of myth and monster, animal and angel, or operating in a world irredeemably given over to secular pursuits.”<sup>40</sup> In August 1943, Lowell wrote a letter to his mother describing the poems of this collection as “cries for us all to recover our ancient freedom and dignity, to be Christians and to build a Christian society. I think of Blake’s hymn:

‘I shall not cease from mental fight  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have build Jerusalem  
In England’s green and pleasant land.’”<sup>41</sup>

In his introduction to the *Land of Unlikeness*, Allan Tate sees that, in the explicitly religious poems of this collection, Lowell acts as a reformer whose poetics “points to the disappearance of the Christian experience from the modern world, and stands, perhaps, for the poet’s own effort to recover it.”<sup>42</sup> Lowell definitely could not just stand watching helplessly; his criticism of past and present social, political and religious failings was expressed in different personal and poetical tactics; through his conversion to Catholicism, adoption of an angry and violent tone and writing with deliberate formality

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<sup>39</sup> Henry Hart, *Robert Lowell and the Sublime* (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 123.

<sup>40</sup> *Robert Lowell* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1974), 23.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 83.

<sup>42</sup> In Price, *Critics on Robert Lowell*, 37.

and baroque style to alert the readers themselves to the danger of neglecting the old values of which America was once proud, and to shake their relative complacency with a world of corruption in which their true humanity is marginalized.

“The Wood of Life” is a stark example of Lowell’s adoption of the baroque manner in his early poetry. The ceremonial scene depicted in the poem is majestic with strong and overlapped religious images and symbols. The monotonous iambic pentameter of the ‘In Memoriam Stanza’ with which this poem is written expresses man’s repeatedly committed sins throughout history and his annually performed artificiality of Good Friday veneration on the one hand; on the other hand, it is also a reminder of the repeated grace of God endowed on his creatures through the Christ’s sacrifice and the “royalist bier of state” whose “beams have cured / The Golden Fleece.” Nevertheless, it is all mere “Cold Comfort” and the world is still in “shiver” (p. 882).

In “The Wood of Life,” Lowell shows a mixture of feelings: reverence, bitterness and denunciation tinted with irony. He describes the usual ceremony taking place on the Good Friday in which the sacrifice of Christ is remembered and mourned. He starts the poem with a question, “Who raises up this royal banner / Whose wooden mystery so shines?” (p. 882), as if wondering about the continuous mystery of the crucifixion, and more about the people performing this religious ceremony who are ostensibly glorifying Christ’s sacrifice on this particular day, yet they desecrate his teachings everyday, walking the opposite road to the righteous one recommended by him. The celebration of the cross, the “Dangerous and refulgent Tree,” is only a disguise of our persistent corruption and decay – as “King’s purple covers up your taint” – since the original sin: “What the worm and human want / Wrung from the first man’s extacy” (p. 882). Lowell gravely accentuates the unchristian life that modern Christians are leading, complacently



thinking that they have already secured absolution through solely believing in Christ and the pain he suffered to redeem them without acting upon it:

Here are scales whose Reckoning-weight  
Outweighs the apple's fell dejection;  
Our cornerstone, the Jew's Rejection. (p. 882)

People show sorrow and piety on this one particular day only. With an ironic tone Lowell criticizes man's selfishness, hypocrisy and paradoxical behaviour, including himself:

Christ Crucified is all our reason  
And most in this dark hour  
We will invoke, O Cross, your power,  
Our prime, at best, is Passion's season. (p.882)

In this poem, Lowell reflects on historical and contemporary facts with a critical tone but without explicitly providing alternative solutions. Implicitly, he emphasizes that faith should be reinforced by deeds, and recommends less secular indulgence.

Glauco Cambon starts his essay, "Robert Lowell: History as Eschatology," with a translation of Friedrich Schiller's quotation from his *Letter on Aesthetic Education*, which Cambon finds fitting to Lowell, the man and the artist: "The poet stands in time, yet rises above it, like the philosopher; or at least his presence in time is not entirely timebound, if he is to fulfil his mission as a witness."<sup>43</sup> Lowell's thoughts and inclinations evident in his poems are unrestrained, temporally and spatially. His poems, right from the beginning, show his deep preoccupation with issues related to the modern age he lived in, but these present issues are magnified through fathoming the past. Both time zones are coexistent in his poems. His historical references are particularly those of his country in general and his family in particular. As a poet, he is a witness to the present and to the past by proxy,

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<sup>43</sup> *The Inclusive Flame*, 219.

being an heir of that past; his Puritan ancestry allows him to modulate with ease between national history and family history.

Lowell's poetic content, mood and style are steered by the Biblical eschatologies which fit appropriately to a work written in a time of violence and war, and are affecting the present in one way or another. He learns from history and cannot separate himself from it, and this makes Richard Poirier consider Lowell "our truest historian. He evokes the past not as if it alone were history but as if its meaning exists necessarily in its relation to that more important element of history which is himself, now and here."<sup>44</sup> Helen Vendler compares Lowell, in his public political poems, to Walt Whitman in the way that he "folded epic images into lyric, history into feeling. . . . Lowell could dispense with ideology, but not with history . . . [and] could not escape historical facts – he was bursting with them all his life – but he needed to decide which facts mattered."<sup>45</sup> Yet, his mindset is not confined to the past, and his reactions are not helplessly dictated by his old culture and traditions; he is a creator and not a mere imitator; for Cambon, he "is one of the most history-conscious American writers of our time precisely because he has a quarrel with history."<sup>46</sup> Lowell artistically brings together thesis and antithesis to create a synthesis of beliefs that still bear on people's understanding. This enables him to conjure his own eschatological visions that the reader is able to comprehend through common allusions from history. In his early poems, Lowell attempts to adjust history to conform to the present occurrences and, in effect, to persuasively convey his conviction about the modern world collapsing and running toward an apocalypse. Mazzaro argues that, in this

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<sup>44</sup> 'For the Union Dead', in *Critics on Robert Lowell*, ed. Jonathan Price (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., n.d.), 96.

<sup>45</sup> *The given and the Made: Recent American Poets*, T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures (London: Faber, 1995), 4.

<sup>46</sup> *The Inclusive Flame*, 219.

respect, Lowell is not different from the twentieth-century “mythic” writers like Joyce, Yeats, Lawrence, Pound, Eliot and Thomas Mann, who used “typological frames of classical and early Christian thought,”<sup>47</sup> especially since modern psychological studies propose that “the structures of self-consciousness are repetitious as well – the phylogenetic must be repeated ontogenetically.”<sup>48</sup> He takes the reader back and forth through the religious and political history of New England to explore “the fate of selfhood in time, and his basic method the examination of the convergence in man of past history and present circumstances.”<sup>49</sup> Lowell explores the historical references and compares them to the present in order to deal with it and to have a better reading of the future, and the byproduct – which is probably his intention in the first place – would be an exploration and understanding of the self.

The repetition of this artistically creative process would naturally create a temporal cycle. His method is justified “in the sense that any experience to have significance must be seen in relation to previous and projectable experiences, the whole significative system of man’s thinking may be seen as repetitive.”<sup>50</sup>

Herbert Leibowitz affirms that time for Lowell is not only cyclic, rather “in his imagination past and present work simultaneously;”<sup>51</sup> and he goes on to maintain that “the qualities of his rhetoric, modified from volume to volume, are frequently the qualities of American rhetoric, just as the private experiences he transcribes are the salient

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<sup>47</sup> Mazzaro, *Robert Lowell and America*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Martin, *Robert Lowell*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Mazzaro, *Robert Lowell and America*, 20.

<sup>51</sup> Herbert Leibowitz, ‘Robert Lowell: Ancestral Voices’, *Salmagundi* 1, no. 4 (1966): 25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40546446>.

features of American experience.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, even when he talks about his own present and his family’s past, they are one and the same to him, and the changes he wants his poetry to effect in his society are the same that he desires for himself; he needs salvation and absolution for his soul as well as for the society’s, since their destinies are entwined. Throughout his poems, Lowell does not distance himself from his readers: the man and the poet are one, and, for him, “the personal became the public, regardless of how awkwardly those distinct realms coupled. His audience responded to the interplay of personal and political demons, and flocked to his readings.”<sup>53</sup> Of course, this contributed greatly to his wide appeal as a poet and as a public figure. Doreski reflects on this dual effect, saying that “Lowell was far more than the presiding figure of an outmoded literary era. His work and his public presence reached beyond the parochial world of modern poetry into political and social worlds of protest, unease, dissent, and racial agony.”<sup>54</sup> Doreski explains more of Lowell’s appeal attributing it to the fact that he spoke to people of all ages and of all intellectual and literary levels.<sup>55</sup> Rudman agrees that “one of Lowell’s defining characteristics as a poet is worldliness: his familiarity with people from all walks of life and all times.”<sup>56</sup> While Richard Tillinghast, less elaborately, justifies this appeal as “something that was simply part of his character, one that struck those around him as *sui generis*, that drew people to him and made them love him.”<sup>57</sup> In her *Robert Lowell and the Confessional Voice*, Paula Hayes contends that Lowell’s early poetry seems, on the surface,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Doreski, *Robert Lowell’s Shifting Colors*, xiv.

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

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

<sup>56</sup> *Robert Lowell: An Introduction to the Poetry*, 71.

<sup>57</sup> *Robert Lowell’s Life and Work: Damaged Grandeur*, Poets on Poetry (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 29.

to have no trace of the poet's personal life and problems; it is merely concerned with the problems of the American culture and its faith, as well as the spiritual decay of the modern era, all expressed in a frenzy of formal language.<sup>58</sup> Yet, as one digs deeper, it would become clear that the relationship between the outer conflict taking place around the poet and his inner personal traumas is, undoubtedly, reciprocal; the suffering is shared, it is social and individual. The healing attempts in his poems are aimed at the collective psyche and consciousness as well as his own. As a recap to this duality, one may say that the interactional mechanism of Lowell's psyche and way of thinking is markedly poured out into his poetic art. In one of his interviews, he describes his beliefs and inclinations:

One side of me . . . is a conventional liberal, concerned with causes, agitated about peace and justice and equality, as so many people are. My other side is deeply conservative, wanting to get at the roots of things, wanting to slow down the whole modern process of mechanization and dehumanization, knowing that liberalism can be a form of death too.<sup>59</sup>

Lowell, the man and the poet, has a complex character of which he is aware and admittedly explains; it makes him a modernist and postmodernist at the same time; in other words, a conservative rebel.

### *Lord Weary's Castle*

The themes of *Land of Unlikeness* extend to Lowell's second collection of poems entitled *Lord Weary's Castle*, published in 1946 and granted a Pulitzer Prize in 1947. Lowell focuses on the lost commitment of people towards God, on the vow they made in the past

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<sup>58</sup> *Robert Lowell and the Confessional Voice* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2012), 2.

<sup>59</sup> Kunitz, 'Talk with Robert Lowell', 85–86.

of leading a life of righteousness in order to earn His eternal reward in His Kingdom after He saved them from prosecution in Europe and led them to the new land of freedom in New England. They broke this vow in exchange for a materialistic immoral world. For Lowell, this thoughtless and irresponsible abandonment of the ideal for mundane worldly gains had started gradually with the early New England settlers including their men of religion and continued till the present.

The idea of the Divine wrath and punishment awaiting the sinners is presented in almost all the poems of his early collections whose poetic forms are equally and appropriately rigid. The titles themselves suggest clearly this main theme and the content of these two verse collections: "The land that was destined to form the Kingdom of God on earth rewrote itself as the land of unlikeness, and the glorious house on the hill faced the final ruin as *Lord Weary's castle*, an edifice founded on injustice. The motif runs through many poems in these two collections."<sup>60</sup> Both books are evaluated by Fein as "works of outstanding intellectual vigor and technical proficiency. . . . these volumes took their shape from the idiosyncratic energies of Lowell as a Christian, more specifically as catholic, even more exactly as a renegade convert."<sup>61</sup> Almost all these poems highlight matters of religion, politics, culture and morality, all wrapped in historical and contemporary contexts stretching over temporal and spatial spans.

The title of Lowell's second book is mainly taken from the old Scottish Ballad of 'Lamkin' which talks about an aristocrat who refuses to pay what he owes to the mason for building him a castle. When the Lord travels away, the mason takes revenge upon him by killing his wife and son. Yet, being familiar with the Jeremiahs, Lowell might as well

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<sup>60</sup> Selim Sarwar, 'Robert Lowell: Scripting the Mid-Century Eschatology', *Journal of Modern Literature* 25, no. 2 (2001): 118, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39066>.

<sup>61</sup> Fein, 'Mary and Bellona', 821.

have had in mind the chastising words of God by which He addresses the King of Judah: “Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; *that* useth his neighbour's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work.” [Jeremiah 22: 13]. Thus, the reader is introduced to the themes of this volume – ingratitude, punishment and justice – right from the beginning. Jarrell, in his frequently quoted review essay, “From the Kingdom of Necessity” (1947), elaborates on the modernist chaotic themes around which this book revolves:

The poems understand the world as a sort of conflict of opposites. In this struggle one opposite is that cake of custom in which all of us lie embedded like lungfish – the stasis or inertia of the stubborn self, the obstinate persistence in evil that is damnation. In this realm of necessity the poems push everything that is closed, turned inward, incestuous, that blinds or binds: the Old Law, imperialism, materialism, capitalism, Calvinism, Authority, the Father, the rich who will ‘do everything for the poor except get off their backs.’ But struggling within this like leaven, falling to it like light, is everything that is free or open, that grows or is willing to change: here is the generosity or willingness or openness that is itself salvation; . . . this is the realm of freedom, of the Grace that has replaced the Law, of the perfect liberator whom the poet calls Christ.<sup>62</sup>

The subject matter then is about what the modern man has created and, ironically, from which he has been suffering; it is about evil, sin, punishment and redemption.

Further to the religious intent of the title, Austin Warren points out social and political ones: “disaster is befalling the house, and the household, of aristocratic (Calvinist, capitalist) New England, which has failed to pay its moral bills to the ‘lower orders,’ its instruments;”<sup>63</sup> and in the absence of justice, the rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer. As a matter of fact, the two explanations are inseparable; secular greed and thirst for power and its gains push religious values to the margins for

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<sup>62</sup> ‘From the Kingdom of Necessity’, in *Critics on Robert Lowell*, ed. Jonathan Price (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1974), 47.

<sup>63</sup> ‘A Double Discipline’, *Poetry* 70, no. 5 (1947): 262, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20590172>.

not serving these agendas, while the absence of these values would eventually effect injustice, misuse of power and warmongering.

Early works of Lowell show that religion is the criterion by which he measures what is right and what is wrong, and against which the degree of morality is compared. And, according to Lowell's standards showcased in his first two volumes, "war is a distortion of religious experience;"<sup>64</sup> therefore, it is a distortion of social, intellectual and ethical principles.

Peter P. Remaley also discusses the secular and religious ethical implications in a society, especially in time of war, emphasizing that the "poetry of *Lord Weary's Castle* is thus unmistakably moral in that it defines in the broadest of terms the moral condition in which man lives."<sup>65</sup> In this volume, Lowell sketches the modern man as an exile, lost in the vortex of spiritual and moral bankruptcy characteristic of his age of wars and materialism. But Remaley believes that this

Exile's soul makes choices, passes judgments, wrestles with self-reproach, deludes itself with false hopes, and struggles to discover new ones. And in so doing, he exposes the fact that life is a series of moral conditions, the problems of which are those of the will and belief in relation to eschatological ends, which ultimately makes the moral experience spiritual or moral in nature.<sup>66</sup>

One may apply what Remaley argues here to Lowell the man and the poet, since he himself resembles the exile put under the microscope in the poems of *Lord Weary's Castle*; he is torn between the ideal past to which his biological, religious and moral roots extend and the violent turbulence of the present negatively affecting these values and putting him at a crossroads between coping with present and holding on to the old values. In this

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<sup>64</sup> Fein, 'Mary and Bellona', 820.

<sup>65</sup> 'The Quest for Grace in Robert Lowell's "Lord Weary's Castle"', *Renascence* 28, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 119, <http://search.proquest.com/pao/docview/1290917935/citation/983DFA746>.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*



respect, Norma Procopiow contends that Lowell is like Matthew Arnold in the sense that the latter “linked the production of good literature to the health of society, thus making value judgments about both society and literature;” and, similarly, through poems saturated with historical and current human tragic experiences, Lowell “attempted to unite reason and the will of God.”<sup>67</sup> The arguments of all these critics affirm that Lowell is a poet endowed with a modern and realistic prophetic vision that provided him with a voice that was, as described by Hamilton, “fiery, yes, but it was also educated.”<sup>68</sup>

From the very start, the reader would acquire a good idea about the basic theme and ideas encompassed in this volume. Starting with the artistic frontpiece illustration of the book, sketched by Lowell’s friend, Frank Parker, which shows the look of guilt on Cain’s face turning his back to his dead brother after committing the first murder in the history of humanity. In addition, realizing the story of the ballad from which the title of the book is taken, along with the content of the first poem, it becomes clear that “*Lord Weary’s Castle* studies the dulled consciousness of modern man, weary of morality and responsibility, indifferent to crime, numb to punishment, ungrateful and purposeless.”<sup>69</sup> Philip Cooper agrees that the poems in this volume resonate the ramification of man’s act of reflecting his inherited violent nature upon the world he lives in; so, “[b]etrayal and bloodshed everywhere mark the human predicament with the brand of Cain, and that is what the title of the book reflects.”<sup>70</sup>

Our world and its inhabitants, suffering from self-inflicted predicaments, are symbolically pictured as recently freed Germany in “The Exile’s Return,” the first poem in

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<sup>67</sup> *Robert Lowell: The Poet and His Critics* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1984), 180.

<sup>68</sup> *Robert Lowell*, 104.

<sup>69</sup> Martin, *Robert Lowell*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> *The Autobiographical Myth of Robert Lowell* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 53.

*Lord Weary's Castle*. After *Land of Unlikeness*, Lowell moves on from dealing with war and how it could be prevented to concentrating on the outcome of this war and on a world that is trying to forget and heal.

Yenser compares the “gray, sorry and ancestral house” (p. 9) in this poem to the castle of the volume’s title; and both Lord Weary and the Exile return to sabotaged homes with scenes of death, and physically and spiritually desolate spaces no more occupied by familiar faces:<sup>71</sup>

You will not see  
Strutting children or meet  
The peg-leg and reproachful chancellor  
With a forget-me-not in his button-hole ... (p. 9)

Lowell presents a sense of possible hope and renewal of faith in the lines: “already lily-stands / Burgeon the risen Rhineland, and a rough Cathedral lifts its eye,” although these places have turned into Hell “where the ‘braced pig-iron dragons’ guard the entrance like a pair of infernal beasts.”<sup>72</sup> Quoting Dante<sup>73</sup>, “Voi ch’entrate” from *Inferno*, which is part of the inscription written on the entrance of Hell addressing the sinners to abandon all hope as they enter, Lowell also addresses the exile in the poem, and even the readers. But, by the end of the poem, Lowell suddenly changes his tone from sombre to hopeful with “Voi ch’entrate, and your life is in your hand” (p. 9), positing the idea that the situation is similar to Hell, yet salvation is a matter of choice and there is still an opportunity of spiritual renewal since the addressees are not actually dead; they have

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<sup>71</sup> *Circle to Circle*, 72.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>73</sup> Lowell’s inclusion of lines from Dante’s work is a technique he learned from T. S. Eliot. Another example can be found in “The Soldier,” another poem in *Lord Weary’s Castle*. In his book, *Robert Lowell: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Mark Rudman points out that such techniques “which seem like outrageous gestures are merely standard stylistic ingredients of modernist poetry,” 18.

survived the war, but now each is responsible for one's self. It is "an uncertain future," Rudman thinks, "when the collective psyche will no longer be able to vent some of its darkest feelings through the guise of a common cause."<sup>74</sup> At the same time, the poem expresses a warning and a reminder of the bleak destiny awaiting people unless they take action to deny the moral and spiritual decadence that has been prevailing since the early history of the Puritans, and restore true faith to their hearts because they do have a choice. After all, the poem is about "the attempt of exiled modern man, after his loss of grace, to return to the blessing of God."<sup>75</sup>

The Exile in Lowell's poem is a representation of the modern man who has lost his spiritual connections with God and religion; he is the whole American nation which, in the anarchy created by war and the new capitalist ideology, has abandoned its true religion and moral identity. Yet, Lowell's tone in this poem is not of anger and despair, rather he is like a compassionate preacher encouraging his congregation to repent and turn to God and Christ for spiritual absolution, otherwise they will continue to be exiled from God's mercy.

By the time of writing *Lord Weary's Castle*, it had become clear to Lowell that infusing personal experiences and feelings with the more public and universal subject matters would make the poet closer to his readers and more persuasive. His religious visions would seem more like realistically applicable attempts at reforming current secular problems than mere cold and reproaching preaching for the sake of arousing feelings of guilt, fear and moral obligation. His poems had become more localized. This is evident from the fact that Lowell chose some poems from his first book to be revised and

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<sup>74</sup> Robert Lowell: *An Introduction to the Poetry*, 16.

<sup>75</sup> Remaley, 'The Quest for Grace in Robert Lowell's "Lord Weary's Castle"', 117.

included in the second one, and his selections were not random; they reflect part of the gradual change that Lowell's career had gone through over the years. He excluded poems with the most explicitly religious themes and references, intensified by hyperbolic images. When, in a 1961 interview with Frederick Seidel for the *Paris Review*, Lowell was asked about the kind of poems he took over from *Land of Unlikeness* into his second volume, *Lord Weary's Castle*, he explained:

I took out several that were paraphrases of early Christian poems, and I rejected one rather dry abstraction, then whatever seemed to me to have a messy violence. All the poems have religious imagery, I think, but the ones I took were more concrete. That's what the book was moving toward: less symbolic imagery. And as I say, I tried to take some of the less fierce poems. There seemed to be too much twisting and disgust in the first book.<sup>76</sup>

For Louis Simpson, "Lowell kept the more concrete poem; . . . he has turned away from symbolism and is focusing on concrete particulars. He is seeing and hearing intensely."<sup>77</sup>

Of the early poet's apocalyptic imagery, Mazzaro says it is not "vivid enough for good epical poetry. He [Lowell] seems merely a young man in a library using the Bible as a source book for poetry."<sup>78</sup> For Staples, this could be true as far as his writing of the first collection of poems is concerned, because in *Lord Weary's Castle*, "Lowell is to gain a greater control over the violence of his imagination, and at thirty he is to attain the maturity and insight that enabled him to write, as Jarrell has said, one or two poems that will be read as long as men remember English."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, ed., *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 52.

<sup>77</sup> *A Revolution in Taste: Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 139.

<sup>78</sup> *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 32.

<sup>79</sup> Staples, *Robert Lowell*, 31.

While Lowell is talking about the present in *Lord Weary's Castle*, his sources go back to classical mythology and philosophy, history, and old religious rituals and creeds. In his poems, the contemporary events are drawn against old experienced ones to get the reader involved as a spectator from a vantage point on a panoramic view of what had happened before, what is happening now and what is going to happen as a logical result. This may give the reader a sense of responsibility and obligation toward the currently discussed issues in order to make some positive changes before it is too late. In Lowell's poetry, the modern characters are versions of the old generations; the current corruption and violence are versions of the same old attitude; and new wars and its generals are versions of old wars and their generals that took place in history, as in "Charles the Fifth and the Peasant" and "Napoleon Crosses the Beresina." Fein says: "all of the poems about previous wars are really ways of talking about the present one. Contemporary blood letting continues man's historical and relentless experience."<sup>80</sup> Lowell's mentioning of certain known dates and places in wars serve to refer to more generalized occurrences.

Lowell included "In Memory of Arthur Winslow" from his first volume of poems in the second, and this emphasizes the idea that he has become more interested in infusing the personal and somehow autobiographical into his new style of writing. The cosmic is encompassed within the personal; the individual apocalypse, like the death of Arthur Winslow, is a miniature of the expected cosmic apocalypse that the war and modern political and capitalist agendas would eventually bring. In this poem, Lowell seems mostly discontented with the spiritual deterioration around him. Discerning the reason for the loss of faith and the subsequent effect of this loss on the modern era, he cannot ignore the role his Calvinist ancestor played in making religion a mere facade for their

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<sup>80</sup> Fein, 'Mary and Bellona', 823.

worldly, and even unethical, interests. His grandfather is a symbol of this modified Protestantism which allowed a nation to get steeped into the morass of war and materialism.

In “In Memory of Arthur Winslow,” Lowell talks about the death of his grandfather in a way that shows his “meditation upon themes of material pride and the death of both humanistic and spiritual idealism,”<sup>81</sup> and, as Marjorie Perloff rightly states, “no other modern American poet has been so obsessed with death and last things as has Lowell.”<sup>82</sup> The poem under discussion deals with death on a personal level, as is obvious from the title, and on a more general level, as a universal fact faced on a larger scale, specifically under the shadow of war. The physical sickness of his grandfather is a reference to the spiritual and moral sickness of the American nation as a whole, eating away at the very core of what used to be a solid ground for religious and social values.

The imagery and language of a poem like “In Memory of Arthur Winslow” are not as starkly violent, didactic and critical as those of other poems about the war and the present social and political violation of the moral and Christian codes. It is more contemplative of the human fate, individual or collective; it is about the meaning and purpose of our lives and the inevitable ending. It hides within its lines the constantly raised question: which is more mysterious, life or death? Nevertheless, the personal aspect of the poem reveals a great deal about Lowell’s eschatological understanding of Christianity; and, since the poet’s cosmic concern is coated with the autobiographical, this same eschatology goes for Lowell’s America in time of war. The sick and dying Arthur

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<sup>81</sup> Vereen M. Bell, *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 13.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Death by Water: The Winslow Elegies of Robert Lowell’, *ELH* 34, no. 1 (1967): 116, doi:10.2307/2872304.

Winslow along with war-stricken America are facing imminent apocalyptic endings and both will be accountable for their sins.

When Lowell, in his mind, is talking to his dying grandfather saying: “You ponder why the coxes’ squeaking dwarf / The *resurrexit dominus* of all the bells,” it implies that peace is not the next phase after death for Arthur Winslow. A long purgatorial journey is awaiting him in which Charon rows his soul across Acheron. For Perloff, these lines indicate that “Winslow’s death is a prelude to greater suffering.”<sup>83</sup> Contrary to the traditional elegy, then, the poet here does not offer a soothing end for the soul of the mourned; peace is not the final resting place, not for sinners like Winslow.

Lowell wants to say there is a very thin line between life and death, and these two worlds almost overlap. The transition from the images of actual present life into transcendental images of the afterlife is almost immediate and fluent as the speaker of the poem tells Arthur Winslow that “longshoreman Charon come and stab / Through your adjusted [death]bed,” and continues to describe images from the beyond bleeding into ordinary images of everyday life, “as the local details,” Gelpi notes, “pile up, only suddenly to yawn on illimitable vistas: the Charles now the Acheron, the children’s swanboats now Charon’s ferry, the dying and bedridden patient now the farthest voyager:”<sup>84</sup> The artistic craftiness here did not escape Staples as well, who says with admiration that Lowell’s “astonishing ability to move with ease from the moral geography of Boston . . . to the cosmic scene, in which symbolism drawn from both Christian and pagan traditions are harmoniously fused:”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>84</sup> *American Poetry after Modernism: The Power of the Word* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21.

<sup>85</sup> Staples, *Robert Lowell*, 29.

Grandfather Winslow, look, the swanboats coast  
That island in the Public Gardens, where  
The bread-stuffed ducks are brooding, where with tub  
And strainer the mid-Sunday Irish scare  
The sun-struck shallows for the dusky chub  
This Easter, and the ghost  
Of risen Jesus walks the waves to run to  
Arthur upon a trumpeting black swan  
Beyond Charles River to the Acheron  
Where the wide waters and their voyager are one. (p. 23)

This is one of the places where Lowell seems ambivalent and uncertain; his words bear more than one interpretation. His feeling toward his dying grandfather is mixed, as it has always been toward all his forefathers. In a way he is reassuring the old man that his journey from life into the beyond is as smooth as cruising Charles River, giving him hope for redemption and acceptance with “the ghost / Of risen Jesus walks the waves;” and, according to Jarrell, Lowell draws this image to show that “even death is seen as liberation, a widening into darkness: that old closed system, Grandfather Arthur Winslow, dying of cancer in his adjusted bed, at the last is the child Arthur whom the swanboats once rode through the Public Garden.”<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, in the midst of his soothing attempt, Lowell tends to deliberately describe the Irish enjoying a sunny day in Arthur’s old city, very close to where he is lying invalid and soon to be absent from this city and the whole world. In Lowell’s mind, there might be a picture of the Catholic dominance over his grandfather’s Calvinist theocracy; and, hence, there is a kind of justice now that the oppressed are overcoming the oppressor. Does Lowell mean to be cruel to the father figure whom he adored and idealized as a child? It is an argument that cannot be easily ignored, but to which Lowell’s critics often turn a blind eye. It betrays his life-long inner conflict that compelled him once to renegade and become a Catholic, and then to de-convert or even to start questioning any faith.

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<sup>86</sup> ‘From the Kingdom of Necessity’, 47–48.



In the second section of "In Memory of Arthur Winslow," the setting of which is the cemetery of Dunbarton where his maternal ancestors are buried, Lowell feels nostalgic for "the heroism or accomplishment or moral seriousness of earlier times."<sup>87</sup> In the cemetery where Arthur Winslow is being buried in the presence of his relatives,

the dwarf pines are green  
From watching for the day  
When the great years of the little yeomen come  
Bringing its landed Promise and the faith  
That made the Pilgrim Makers take a lathe  
And point their wooden steeples lest the Word be dumb. (p. 24)

With these words, Lowell is paying respect to the dignified early forefathers who had made sacrifices in order to honour and preserve their faith from forgetfulness, as opposed to the present Puritan relatives, including Arthur Winslow himself, of whom

The first selectman of Dunbarton spreads  
Wreaths of New Hampshire pine cones on the lined  
Casket where the cold sun  
Is melting. (p. 24)

At the end of this section, Lowell gives an image of disdain for the modern Winslows, dead and alive, showing the change in the sincerity of faith from past to present times, as "The preacher's mouthing still / Deafen my poor relations on the hill: / their sunken landmarks echo what our fathers preached" (p. 24). Lowell's tone of disappointment laments the obliteration of his material and spiritual heritage more than he laments the death of his grandfather; indeed, this is where the true elegiac sense of the poem lies.

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<sup>87</sup> Alan Holder, 'The Flintlocks of the Fathers: Robert Lowell's Treatment of the American Past', *The New England Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (1971): 47, doi:10.2307/364942.

Yet, in the poem's fourth part, entitled "A Prayer for my Grandfather to Our Lady," the speaker is hopeful that his grandfather might be redeemed of his sins and his final destination would be heaven after crossing Acheron, which is "the mildest form of hell, and since in Movement IV the narrator is still praying for his grandfather, the implication is that Acheron is Lowell's equivalence for purgatory. The Christ who walked on the water is capable of bringing the grandfather out of Acheron to Heaven."<sup>88</sup> As a matter of fact, Lowell here prays for himself as well, keeping in mind his descent from a long lineage of figures who broke their religious vow and turned it into a facade behind which they make their worldly materialistic profits:

Mother, for these three hundred years or more  
Neither our clippers nor our slavers reached  
The haven of your peace in this Bay State:  
Neither my father nor his father. (p. 25)

Lowell's bitterly ironic, and somehow sarcastic, voice shows he is not really confident that his prayer would be heard. Thus, being aware of the atrocities committed by his Puritan family, Lowell posits a harsh, and somehow inappropriate, image of Mary which only shows that he is almost desperate and in need of a miraculous power to gain forgiveness and redemption; but his appeal is meshed with strings of doubt and even despair of not getting answered:

Oh Mother, I implore  
Your scorched blue thunderbreasts of love to pour  
Buckets of blessings on my burning head  
Until I rise again like Lazarus from the dead:  
*Lavabis nos et super nivem dealbabor.* (p. 25)

Although Perloff contends that in this part "the poet seems to remember the

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<sup>88</sup> Stanley M. Wiersma, 'Lowell's in Memory of Arthur Winslow, Movements I and IV', *Explicator* 30, no. 2 (1971), <http://search.proquest.com/pao/docview/1290292532> No page number.

requirements of the elegy form and provides what looks like a conventional consolation motif<sup>89</sup> by praying for salvation, yet his words act as a reminder of the sinful life his ancestors had led and the false faith of “The Painted Paradise of harps and lutes” that would “Sink like Atlantis in the Devil’s jaw” (p. 25). In a way, then, this part of the poem also breaches the traditional “requirements” of the elegy. Lowell seems psychologically unable to ask for forgiveness because he feels that neither his ancestors nor he deserve to be forgiven.

The allegory is clear in this poem in which Lowell “projects family history onto American history so that he can better judge the lineage of his sins.”<sup>90</sup> Arthur Winslow is representative of the New Englanders and Modern Americans whose indulgence in the unchristian distractions of this world would save them no peaceful place in the afterlife no matter how powerful they are, and instead of being rewarded with the Kingdom of God, the resting place will be where “The stones are yellow and the grass is gray / Past Concord by the rotten lake and hill” (p. 24).

The effect of the eschatological rhetoric of the Bible, as well as its imagery and expressions, can be traced easily in Lowell’s early poems. A good example from *Lord Weary’s Castle* to illustrate this fact is “To Peter Taylor on the Feast of the Epiphany” in which war and religion entwine to form Lowell’s favourite poetic subject throughout his early career. With the beginning of the poem, the speaker confesses that secular wars will end only by Armageddon; it is the only powerful solution against the masters of evil who hunger for power and utilitarianism:

Peter, the war has taught me to revere  
The rulers of this darkness, for I fear  
That only Armageddon will suffice

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<sup>89</sup> ‘Death by Water’, 121.

<sup>90</sup> Hart, *Robert Lowell and the Sublime*, 124.

To turn the hero skating on thin ice  
When Whore and Beast and Dragon rise for air  
From allegoric waters. (p. 48)

The air of the statement is somehow prophetic, though its ironic indication is hard to ignore since the whole poem “cites Armageddon as the only effective antidote to war and rampant materialism” along with, Dwight Eddins continues, “the brutal misuse of political power.”<sup>91</sup> Here, optimism and pessimism are simultaneously marked in Lowell’s tone which suggests a policy of fighting fire with fire. One may even feel a sense of giving up on the part of Lowell, a sense that is inconsistent with the role of a prophet. Man’s evil will be stopped only by the Apocalypse and the Day of Judgement, and in this poem, it is the Armageddon of St. John’s prophecy.<sup>92</sup> Lowell’s anticipation has turned from man’s reformatory repentance and redemption as a way out of secular and spiritual dilemmas, which he urged throughout most of the poems of *Land of Unlikeness*, to the end of time and the end of this self-destructive world as the only logical conclusion.

The poem focuses on wars – historical, current and those which yet to come – and it also “sets power and wealth against fear,”<sup>93</sup> the main theme of the poem, in its different forms: religious and secular; old and new; of wise men who, with epiphany, saw the purpose of life and of the ignorant who are blind to such truth. Fear, for Lowell, is universal, ubiquitous and timeless; it had been felt in the past:

Fear is where  
We hunger: where the Irishmen recall  
How wisdom trailed a star into a stall  
And knelt in sacred terror to confer  
Its fabulous gold and frankincense and myrrh . . . (p. 48)

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<sup>91</sup> ‘Poet and State in the Verse of Robert Lowell’, in *Robert Lowell*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 43.

<sup>92</sup> Mazzaro, *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*, 51.

<sup>93</sup> Josephine Miles, ‘Lowell’s Language’, in *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 39.

And it is felt now,

where the lantern-noses scrimmage down  
the highway to the sea below this town  
and the sharp barker rigs his pre-war planes  
to lift old Adam's dollars for his pains . . . (p. 48)

“To Peter Taylor on the Feast of the Epiphany” is written about the day of manifestation, in which people remember the story of the newborn Christ and how the magi experienced epiphany in seeing him. Addressing his old friend Peter Taylor throughout this poem, Lowell himself (the speaker) experiences a kind of secular epiphany, that is to say, intellectual rather than spiritual; facts are manifested to him as he is taught by materialism, modern values and war along with those who fuel its fire. He now realizes that the changes he has been calling for are unlikely to happen and, hence, the world is in need of Armageddon. So, instead of fearing war and “the rulers of this darkness,” Lowell reveres them because their actions and attitude will be an incitement to an apocalyptic end, and that may generate renewal since “apocalypse may scare or punish the corrupt back to the path of righteousness.”<sup>94</sup> Hamilton comments on Lowell’s religious and political stance at the time, supporting his opinion by quoting from a letter Lowell wrote to Peter Taylor on January 12, 1945:

His sense of catholic mission was sustained, he said, by a vision of a postwar world dominated by the Utilitarian threat: ‘there will be more wars, a universal materialistic state [and] Christians will be driven underground.’ The time had come ‘to be very evident indeed about our faith.’<sup>95</sup>

Lowell talks like a prophet or a zealous seer with a desperate and warning voice. The Armageddon is the end that will bring the beginning, the renewal that promises hope and

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<sup>94</sup> Hart, *Robert Lowell and the Sublime*, 81.

<sup>95</sup> *Robert Lowell*, 100–101.

a better world. In this, Lowell resembles Yeats for whom, in his “cyclical view of history, nativity and apocalypse are two ends of the same gyre.”<sup>96</sup> Henry Hart further explains that Lowell, in his ambivalent personality and poetics, is in search of the sublime, the source of which he cannot locate decidedly.<sup>97</sup>

It is most probable that Lowell is being ironic, at the onset of the poem, in describing man in general as a “hero skating on thin ice” (p. 48). With all its rife corruption, the world is at the brink of annihilation and living it has become more and more a threatening and fragile condition like walking on “thin ice” that is susceptible to breakage at any moment while people are ignorantly enjoying “skating” on it, not realizing that their fall is quite eminent and danger is right underneath the “allegorical waters” (p. 48). The irony here is that man’s worldly ambition, wealth, power and greed make him fearless even in the face of death:

December’s daylight hours have gone their round  
Of sorrow with the sun into the sound,  
And still the grandsires battle through the slush  
To storm the landing biplanes with a rush –  
Until their cash and somersaulting snare  
Fear with its fingered stop-watch in mid-air. (p. 48)

That is probably why Lowell thinks that only Armageddon will break man’s arrogance.

In *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*, Mazzaro argues that, in “To Peter Taylor,” Lowell compares two situations for the purpose of accentuating the difference between the past and the present, saying that the “Epiphany, the day on which the Wise Men presented their gifts to the Christ Child, opposes man’s present situation. Rather than love, fear prevails.”<sup>98</sup> A more likely interpretation is that Lowell, the modern man, is like

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<sup>96</sup> Hart, *Robert Lowell and the Sublime*, 80.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*, 52.

the magi, whose wisdom “knelt in sacred terror” in front of the newborn Jesus “to confer / Its fabulous gold and frankincense and myrrh” (p. 48); Lowell similarly fears with reverence “the rulers of darkness” and the warmongers who traded blood for money. Despite the difference in motives, their existence would bring about wars, as the existence of Christ would eventually bring about Armageddon. Lowell’s two-sided inner reaction towards wars and violence, oscillating between fear and reverence, had been fighting for hegemony, and would continue to do so till the end of his life.

Eddins proposes another interesting evidence of Lowell’s ambivalence. The critic infers that the poet identifies himself with “the violent state on the one hand, and its victims on the other.”<sup>99</sup> Perhaps Lowell conceives of war as fearful and beautiful at the same time because war, in reality, is a stark and unimpeachable affirmation that stamps the war starters, or the state in general, as villains and those who suffer its horridness as victims. These contrasting human roles become especially obvious in times of war. But, as a victim, Lowell’s “suffering is tempered by his superior perspective”<sup>100</sup> which makes him believe that with the approach of end time, spurred by a divine wrath, justice will be served through punishment of the sinners and reward of the sufferers. And that would be the awaited beauty which would put an end to fear. “In anticipating this justice,” Eddins justly argues, “the poet becomes identified with the divine version of that violence which he condemns in its secular forms, and the reader is faced with the old Christian paradox of the militant, threatening lover of peace.”<sup>101</sup> This attitude of double standards employed by Lowell is actually what puts him in the line with prophet poets like, for example, T. S. Eliot in writing *The Waste Land*. The reoccurrence of wars throughout history, accompanied

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<sup>99</sup> ‘Poet and State in the Verse of Robert Lowell’, 44.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

by his religious convictions and his troubled and ambivalent psyche make Lowell meditate “on the cataclysm of the Second World War as if he were considering the fearful and wonderful aspects of the sublime.”<sup>102</sup> Despite his antagonism to this barbaric, yet unavoidable, inherent human act of ending life, Lowell also sometimes sees war as a means of bringing a new life; we cannot expect resurrection unless there is death. This, for Lowell, means “the fear of war is also, paradoxically, its attraction.”<sup>103</sup>

Lowell’s perplexed impulses and sensibilities regarding war are never clearer than in “The Soldier,” another poem in *Lord Weary’s Castle* that deals with war and religion. The image of “The soldier drowned face downward in his blood” (p. 38) is again a harsh image of a corpse just like the one of Christ’s crucified body in “Christ for Sale.” But the blood of the soldier is worthless and of no avail, unlike the blood of Christ the saviour which is a means of redemption for all Christians. The sacrifice of this soldier is meaningless because it is a meaningless war in the first place.

Not only do the soldier’s soul and blood seem worthless, but his corpse is buried under the snow, and “Until the thaw he waited, then the flood / Roared like a wounded dragon over shoal / And reef,” and, with cruelty, “rolled his body like a log to Styx.” This mighty flood, an instrument of death, had even “snatched away his crucifix” (p. 38).

With the continuity of life, given that the flood occurs in Spring, the soldier is dismantled physically and spiritually; he is completely forgotten, as if he never existed. Lowell again asserts the futility of war and the loss of lives which will happen again and again until the time will come when Armageddon will put an end to this cycle as Lowell anticipates in the previously discussed poem.

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<sup>102</sup> Hart, *Robert Lowell and the Sublime*, 80.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*



Even the destiny of this soldier's soul seems uncertain, unlike the long-lasting belief of most pagan or divine religions, according to which the souls of martyrs and war heroes would undoubtedly abide forever in heaven. In Lowell's poem, two angels – presumably the good and evil angels – are fighting over the dead soldier's soul either to be taken “with bill-hooks” (p. 38) either to Heaven or to Hell – not much of divine bliss in this image. Although Lowell does not say it clearly, the reader may discern that the soldier in this poem (and soldiers in any war) is innocent and guilty at the same time; his role is to kill his enemy – another soldier – or to be killed by this same enemy. So, for any soldier the roles are interchangeable; he is both the victim and the perpetrator. This same idea is presented more explicitly in “Losses,” a poem written in 1944 by Lowell's friend and critic Jarrell, who depicts the daily lives of soldiers on the field of battle and their end, concluding that soldiers, on both sides of the front, are all similar: “We read our mail and counted up our missions – / . . . / Till our lives wore out; our bodies lay among / The people we had killed and never seen.”

The end of “The Soldier” does not manifest the voice and purpose of a prophet; rather, Lowell here is a mere pessimist and uncertain poet. This actually serves well the feeling of perplexity toward the purpose of war and the casualty it usually leaves behind.

Lowell's concern about the futility of war, violence and death is persistent within his most frequently discussed and greatly appreciated poem in *Lord Weary's Castle*, “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket;” this concern comprises part of its theme. For Paul J. Dolan, “The Quaker Graveyard” is “a poetic meditation on the meaning of death by a Christian Poet.”<sup>104</sup> Yet, reading it carefully, one understands that the poet is meditating on the futility of life itself. It revolves around faith, God, man's creation, his weaknesses

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<sup>104</sup> ‘Lowell's “Quaker Graveyard”: Poem and Tradition’, *Renascence* 21, no. 4 (Summer 1969): 171.

and his sins which render him an exile in his own world, as well as the divine punishment incurred and the shy hope for salvation before and after death. The theme is presented through the use of historical, literary and religious myths, reflecting the troubled consciousness of the contemporary Christian who lives the experiences of war and overpowering materialism.

The poem is initially written to mourn the death of Lowell's cousin, "Warren Winslow, Dead at Sea," who was killed in an accident when his warship exploded while it was anchored in New York harbour due to a technical error causing the death of 123 enlisted men.<sup>105</sup> The writing of the poem is triggered by his premature death which "motivates a reconsideration of anything Lowell has thought, experienced, and read."<sup>106</sup> His body was never found and the descriptive scene of the burial of his body at sea refers to fictional not real events. Lowell's feelings of anger and shock at human nature, which leads man to kill and get killed in different ways and for different reasons, are expressed through violent images and a loud drumming rhythm. Reacting to these concerns, Lowell wrote "The Quaker Graveyard" as an

elegiac expression of some of his most urgent preoccupations: the nature of God, the possibility of salvation, the destructive effects of spiritual alienation, the Heracleitean flux of warring elements in the phenomenal world, and man's ultimate importance in the grip of natural forces and the hands of the great God,<sup>107</sup>

showing Lowell's poetic skills as well as the depth of his consciousness and thought. In it he deals with war, history, humans and nature through both religious and secular

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<sup>105</sup> Stephen Fender, 'What Really Happened to Warren Winslow?', *Journal of American Studies* 7, no. 2 (1973): 188, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27553051> In this article, Fender discusses in detail the facts related to the actual incident, defending or refuting some of the opinions written about it by other critics who have had their take on the poem.

<sup>106</sup> Doreski, *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*, 54.

<sup>107</sup> Staples, *Robert Lowell*, 45.

perceptions.

The poem starts with an epigraph from Genesis (1:26): “Let man have dominion over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air and the beasts and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth.” It indicates that God has given man the power to control nature and all its elements for the sake of sustaining his living and not out of cruelty or hubris. Immediately after that, section I starts with an image of a stormy sea which “was still breaking violently” (p.14). The lively image of the epitaph is contrasted with the image of death by which Lowell describes the body of a drowned sailor and the process of salvaging it:

the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light  
Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,  
He grappled at the net  
With the coiled, hurdling muscle of his thighs,  
The corpse was bloodless, a botch of red and white,  
Its open, staring eyes  
Were lustrless dead-lights  
Or cabin-windows on a stranded hulk  
Heavy with sand. (p. 14)

The irony here is that man, who is supposed to be the catcher of the fishes, the fowls and every creeping creature, is now himself helplessly caught in a net and dragged out of the sea; Warren Winslow, or the sailor, has not had “power over the elements”<sup>108</sup> as Genesis suggests; it is rather the opposite. Lowell's description of his cousin's drowned body found by a warship represents “a conventionally iconographic scene”<sup>109</sup> and For Dolan, it “is meant to rub our faces in the . . . ugly fact of death. The death of Warren Winslow, however, is not just the death of one man. *Genesis* and *Ahab* and *Lycidas* and *Poseidon* combine in the first section to identify the death of Warren Winslow with a wider human

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<sup>108</sup> Dolan, ‘Lowell’s “Quaker Graveyard”’, 172.

<sup>109</sup> Doreski, *Robert Lowell’s Shifting Colors*, 53.

predicament.”<sup>110</sup> Lowell makes an association between the sailor, Warren Winslow, Ahab, the whalers and the soldiers. On the one hand, they have lost their lives during combat with man or nature; on the other, they themselves practised violence against humanity and nature. So, in a way, they are victims and perpetrators. The persistent vengeance enacted by Ahab against the whale in *Moby Dick* is similar to that taken by America and its soldiers against their counterparts during the war; violence begets violence, even on the part of nature:

We weigh the body, close  
Its eyes and heave it seaward whence it came,  
Where the heel-headed dogfish barks its nose  
On Ahab’s void and forehead . . . (p. 14)

Although part of the theme of the poem is the military war and the losses it brings, yet it also deals with the innate war within man’s soul and mind, as well as his war with the natural world around him. Enemies are not confined to those fought at the front; they are sometimes the least expected. For that matter, Stephen Fender does not deny that

there was an enemy ‘out there’, but for Robert Lowell, writing in 1944, the real theatre of operations was in home waters, the real violence self-generated, the real struggle within the American soul. Behind the allusions, which hint at such a theme, lies a contemporary event, which though it does not appear as such in the poem, might have stood in the author’s mind as a perfect emblem for the same idea.<sup>111</sup>

In the same vein, Louise Bogan argues that “[t]o Lowell, man is clearly evil and a descendant of Cain, and Abel is the eternal forgotten victim, hustled away from sight and

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<sup>110</sup> ‘Lowell’s “Quaker Graveyard”’, 172.

<sup>111</sup> Fender, ‘What Really Happened to Warren Winslow?’, 190.

consciousness.”<sup>112</sup> Is it not more logical, though, to think that both good and evil reside within man since he is the descendent of Adam who brought into this world both Cain and Abel, symbols of good and evil respectively? Hence, it is more understandable why he is a victim and a perpetrator at the same time, and from his poetics, it seems that Lowell realizes this logic and uses it to analyse the surrounding events which he deals with in his poems. As a matter of fact, as discussed earlier in *Land of Unlikeness*, this realization comprises part of Lowell’s understanding of himself. Fein similarly proposes that the figures of Cain and Abel in *Lord Weary’s Castle*

are the primeval aggressor and victim who bother Lowell’s imagination. Actually, Cain appears under different names – Napoleon, Charles v, Blucher, Louis xvi. Lowell is haunted by the Cain-general, who murders for national aggrandizement and for glory, and by the Abel-victim – Indians, cousin Warren Winslow, a German ‘blue-lipped priest’ killed by Allied phosphorous bombs, and the many unnamed victims of ‘jellied fire.’ Sometimes the Cain-Abel figures merge in the persons who end up as victims of their own aggression – Quaker sailors on the Pequod crusade, the victim of the gallows in ‘France’ who sought lebensraum, and, to circle round again Louis xvi.<sup>113</sup>

Lowell calls the dead body of the sailor a “portent;” it should be a warning sign for the other sailors that a similar fate is awaiting them. On a larger scale, it is also a warning to mankind and a reminder of its helplessness against the power of death which, undoubtedly, thrives on violence:

Sailors, who pitch this portent at the sea  
Where dreadnaughts shall confess  
Its hell-bent deity,  
When you are powerless  
To sand-bag this Atlantic bulwark, chaste  
In his steel scales . . . (p. 14)

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<sup>112</sup> ‘Lord Weary’s Castle’, in *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 29.

<sup>113</sup> ‘Lord Weary’s Castle Revisited’, *Modern Language Association* 89, no. 1 (1974): 38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/461665>.

The sea, in Lowell's poem, is one of the tools with which God punishes the disobedient and those who take on his divine role and assume "hell-bent deity." Lowell here leaves no room for salvation; death is final and irreversible, and the speaker tells the dead sailor's shipmates to "ask for no Orphean lute / To pluck life back;" they will not get the redemption they wish for. For Jake Adam York, this "echoes Milton's 'Weep no more,' although Lowell's imperative is decidedly more pessimistic, a refusal of consolation in the face of a final death."<sup>114</sup> All the sailors can do is to accept this fact and give him a proper burial: "The guns of the steeled fleet / Recoil and then repeat / The hoarse salute" (p. 14).

Heather Dubrow discusses further these lines as she says:

Lowell declares that it is pointless for art to attempt the kinds of immortalization that other writers in his genre claim to have achieved. ... Instead of musical harmony between man and the natural world, Lowell offers us the dissonant sounds of the guns. ... The speaker rejects the claims of art for a less comforting but more honest acceptance of the inevitability of death.<sup>115</sup>

By this, Lowell admits the limited capacity of the modern man whose way of facing death has become confined to his use of machinery and weapons, as the unpleasant sound of the guns has replaced the sound of the lute.

The wealth of the poem comes from the multiple sources, varying among religious, historical and literary, that feed Lowell's knowledge, and are manifested throughout the poem. Utilization of these common sources is a tool with which the poet forms judgments to posit his prophetic insights about a current dilemma. Lowell begins his poem with a reference from the Bible, but soon he moves to the use of literary references from

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<sup>114</sup> 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket', in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Eric L. Haralson (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>115</sup> 'The Marine in the Garden: Pastoral Elements in Lowell's "Quaker Graveyard"', *Philological Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 134, <http://search.proquest.com/pao/docview/1290899070/citation/983DFA74605F4F53PQ/23>.

Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Milton's "Lycidas." And as he starts to talk about the death and burial of the sailor, foreseeing the end of his mates (and of the modern man in general), all allusions turn to Greek myths of Poseidon, "the earth-shaker," and Orpheus. It is as if Lowell does not want to connect the acts and fate of the modern warrior to Christianity, and accordingly he leaves no room for redemption, salvation or any kind of afterlife; rather, it is damnation awaiting nature and humanity killers. Furthermore, "The Quaker Graveyard" is always compared to Milton's "Lycidas" in terms of more than one aspect;<sup>116</sup> besides the largely similar structure, both poems lament the death of a young man closely connected to the poet. Those young men were lost to the sea and their bodies were never found.

In the third section of the poem, Lowell asserts the meaningless death of Warren Winslow:

All you recovered from Poseidon died  
With you, my cousin, and the harrowed brine  
Is fruitless on the blue beard of the god . . . (p. 15)

Here, Lowell insinuates the death of soldiers and whalers as well; they are blamed for their own destiny since

time's contrition blues  
Whatever it was these Quaker sailors lost  
In the mad scramble of their lives. They died  
When time was open-eyed,  
Wooden and childish; only bones abide  
There, in the nowhere, where their boats were tossed  
Sky-high, where mariners had fabled fabled news  
Of IS, the whited monster. (p. 15-16)

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<sup>116</sup> See Hugh B. Staples, *Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 45 for more details about the structure of the poems. Also see Paul J. Dolan, 'Lowell's "Quaker Graveyard": Poem and Tradition', *Renascence* 21, no. 4 (Summer 1969) for the thematic similarity between the two poems.

The relation between man and nature has become reciprocally violent, none dominates the other and vengeance is mutual. After death, Warren Winslow, like Arthur Winslow, becomes “one with the wide water. The wide water, in these poems, represents the power of Lowell’s prophetic voice. His family is lost in it.”<sup>117</sup> Nick Halpern continues to infer that this elegy for the cousin “shows little personal grief or even family feeling. Even his disgust is upstaged by the verbal excitement. [He] turns the full force of his prophetic rhetoric on his family.”<sup>118</sup> By diverting to discuss different issues, in the poem, apart from the death of his cousin, Lowell draws attention to a specific point made here as well as in other poems in *Lord Weary’s Castle*: there is nothing special about the death of these people, and they will soon be forgotten and become part of the ordinary cycle of life and death.

Staples thinks that “the Quakers symbolize human cruelty – which has for its cause spiritual alienation and for its motive economic greed.”<sup>119</sup> By referring to the war between the sailors and nature, Lowell is also contemplating the cruelty of the Second World War. In all these struggles, people act with no mercy, defying the tenets of Christianity. They are corrupted by materialism and crooked politics, and corrupting the earth they live in. The ungrateful behaviour is punished by God in life, before the apocalyptic eternal punishment; war itself is a punishment. And again, Lowell suggests no hope of a mortal life after this immortal one. In his article, “Lowell’s Graveyard,” Robert Hass says that he himself “went back to the poem looking for the vision of an alternative world. There is none. There’s grief and moral rage as the poem imagines the whole of

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<sup>117</sup> Nick Halpern, *Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill, and Rich* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 61.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–61.

<sup>119</sup> *Robert Lowell*, 49.



human life as a sterile violence.”<sup>120</sup> Antagonism between man and nature will continue and man’s greed and selfishness will bring about his own end; “it is our own persistent violation of our proper relations with nature and God that has brought us these quasi-divine powers we are incapable of using wisely.”<sup>121</sup> While Lowell might be the true Catholic who believes in an afterlife of either torture or happiness, what he concentrates on in his poetry is forging some wisdom about how to make this life better first. He is trying to rectify people for the sake of people, in order to deal with the squalor committed on earth and thus avoiding a divine wrath; and to do that, there is no better way than honestly following the laws of a true religious doctrine set to put things right in life for a happy afterlife.

Lowell’s tone of despair continues in section IV, but this time it is expressed with a prophetic warning. Putting greater blame on the sailors for the fate they are facing and for victimizing nature, he first predicts that “This is the end of the whaleroad and the whale / Who spewed Nantucket bones on the thrashed swell.” It is also “the end of them [sailors], three-quarters fools, / snatching at straws to sail /Seaward” (p. 16). By the end of the section, Lowell foresees that with the passage of time and with death continuously reaping lives, hope for salvation seems, again, unattainable:

This is the end of running on the waves;  
We are poured out like water. Who will dance  
The mast-lashed master of Leviathans  
Up from this field of Quakers in their unstoned graves? (p. 16)

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<sup>120</sup> ‘Lowell’s Graveyard’, *Salmagundi*, no. 37 (1977): 57, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40547067>.

<sup>121</sup> Alan Williamson, *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 37.

After pointing out the deterioration of people's faith in present-day America, the poet, in section VI, "Our Lady of Walsingham," nostalgically turns to the past to describe how sincere believers were in their faith:

There once the penitents took off their shoes  
And then walked barefoot the remaining mile;  
And the small trees, a stream and hedgerows file  
Slowly along the munching English lane,  
Like cows to the old shrine, until you lose  
Track of your dragging pain.

And even the sailors "were glad / And whistled Sion by that stream" (p. 17). On the one hand, the current weak or non-existent Christian faith is represented by the way Lowell draws the image of Mary as being no longer effective:

Our Lady, too small for her canopy,  
Sits near the altar. There's no comeliness  
At all or charm in that expressionless  
Face with its heavy eyelids. (p. 17)

On the other hand, her face "Expressionless, expresses God: it goes / past castled Sion," and eventually "the world shall come to Walsingham" (p. 17); faith in God will prevail again as everything is continuously renewed throughout the non-stop cycle of birth and death.

The "denunciatory prophetic tone disappeared" in this section, Jarrell contends, "along with the savagely satiric effects that were one of the poet's weaknesses."<sup>122</sup> Perloff thinks that the sixth section does not incorporate well within the general context and mood of the rest of the poem: "the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham stands in sharp opposition to the Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket, and it is hard to see how these symbolic locales can be fused. . . . Part VII is therefore a rather lame conclusion."<sup>123</sup> Staples, on the

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<sup>122</sup> 'From the Kingdom of Necessity', 49.

<sup>123</sup> 'Death by Water', 129.

other hand, praises Lowell as “the discordant moods of the first five movements are a careful preparation for the contrasting harmonious *largo* of stanza VI – ‘Our Lady of Walsingham’ and for the resolution in the section which follows.”<sup>124</sup> Philip Cooper agrees with Staples as he contends that “‘Our Lady of Walsingham’ . . . makes, with its serenity, a ground, a space, a sounding board for the great violence that dominates the poem as a whole.”<sup>125</sup> Simply put by Crick, the section “is something like the ‘consolation’ passage in a traditional elegy.”<sup>126</sup> As a matter of fact, this technique is understandable and even brilliantly effective; it is all about showing alternatives, and what can do that better than proposing two completely different moods and environments (the disruption of the marine world versus the calmness of Mary’s shrine) with the liveliest description? Lowell draws a contrast between this section and the rest of the poem in order to give hope again, though not ultimate; he opens a path for redemption, it is the path to Walsingham and to “Our Lady” who “knows what God knows” (p. 17). The image of Mary, as in “A Prayer for My Grandfather to Our Lady,” is evoked as a way for salvation. As in other poems in *Lord Weary’s Castle*, the early sections of “The Quaker Graveyard” state that the Puritan dream of a celestial city of God is undeserved and thus no longer valid, but Lowell’s Catholic faith makes him always find refuge in appealing to Mary and her blessings for forgiveness. He wants to show the reader that such refuge provides worldly comfort, as well as hope of an eventual redemption and eternal bliss.

Lowell retains the violent images and high-pitched tone in the last section, in which the poem “ends as it begins, with apocalyptic winds and high seas:”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Robert Lowell, 46.

<sup>125</sup> *The Autobiographical Myth of Robert Lowell*, 22–23.

<sup>126</sup> Robert Lowell, 33.

<sup>127</sup> Kay R. Jamison, *Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 92.

The empty winds are creaking and the oak  
Splatters and splatters on the cenotaph,  
The boughs are trembling and a gaff  
Bobs on the untimely stroke  
Of the greased wash exploding on a shoal-bell  
In the old mouth of the Atlantic. (p. 18)

For Lowell, the sea is life itself, in all its different forms and in everything it encompasses; it starts, ends and restarts relentlessly: “Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors, / Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish” (p. 18). His faith tells him that there will be resurrection and an afterlife after this one, but his doubtful consciousness is not interested in the beyond and does not see the purpose behind this gift of life only to be soon taken. Lowell seems confused and unsure of the futility of life and the whole process of creation since “the Lord God formed man from the sea’s slime / And breathed into his face the breath of life,” but soon “blue-lunged combers lumbered to the kill” (p. 18). Not only is war without sense and purpose, but life itself is painfully aimless: “there is violence in the forming of life as well as in its taking,”<sup>128</sup> says Kay R. Jamison. Lowell does not talk about what happens after death. Instead, he looks at creation as a constantly repeated process of life and death. In the same way, he does not emphasize the idea of Christ’s resurrection in his poetry; rather, his birth and crucifixion occupy a larger space of his thinking and poetry.

Despite his doubts, what Lowell is trying to say is that God has kept his end of the deal with man (the covenant of the rainbow in Genesis 9), but man has not. Thus, he is held accountable for the atrocities committed against nature which God has put at his disposal, to be used reasonably for his needs. The vengeful acts of nature against man are a punishment fairly deserved. Furthermore, man’s avarice and innate violence will lead

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

him to self-destruction; humanity will be eliminated by the human beings themselves. “Man invokes his doom,”<sup>129</sup> as Fein contends. Consequently, “The Lord survives the rainbow of His will” (p. 18); life will start again and man will witness renewal after a seemingly apocalyptic end. This seems like a convenient prophecy coming with the end of the Second World War. He realizes all this will be repeated again; disobedience of mankind, worldly apocalypses and survival. It is the cycle of life and death.

“The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” for Dolan, completes “the great English tradition of the religious and personal elegy.”<sup>130</sup> Nonetheless, it is probably more suitable to be considered as a universal elegy, as it laments not just the death of one person, but the collective loss of lives that Lowell had witnessed during the Second World War for no logical reason. Wars were expected, by Lowell, to continue due to man’s ignorance, his cruelty toward nature, including his own kind, his lack of faith, and his exchanging of ethical and spiritual values for materialistic ones. In an even more general elegiac context, Lowell mourns the fate of all humanity, the cycle of life and death to which they submit and from which there is no escape. Throughout its seven parts, “the poem,” in Stephen Regan’s words, “expands geographically and historically to become a searing indictment of the abuse of political power and the corruption of religious belief.”<sup>131</sup>

Allan Williamson believes that it was Lowell’s intent, when writing the poem, to produce a proper elegy with all the conventions of this genre; yet, “they become less and less applicable or illuminating as one becomes involved in the inner life and problems of

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<sup>129</sup> ‘Lord Weary’s Castle Revisited’, 36.

<sup>130</sup> ‘Lowell’s “Quaker Graveyard”’, 171.

<sup>131</sup> ‘The Art of Losing: American Elegy since 1945’, in *American Poetry since 1945*, ed. Eleanor Spencer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 186.

the poem.” Consequently, Williamson considers it “as a complex and religious meditation, creating (in the most important ways) its own form.”<sup>132</sup> The poem is

a field of conflict between opposing forces within the poet’s psyche, and by extension within the collective psyche of our civilization. “The Quaker Graveyard” brings into high tension irreconcilable dualities of human experience: life and death, cruelty and suffering, rebellion and submission, violence and love, sin and salvation. An elegy for a drowned sailor, and at a deeper level an elegy for the poet himself, the poem is at bottom an elegy for all people as they encounter the dark contradictions of their nature and fate.<sup>133</sup>

Contemplating the ramifications of the Second World War, Lowell must have realized that writing an elegy to lament one person was no longer a sufficient purpose or feature in a twentieth-century elegiac poem when the world has witnessed too many deaths and calamities, and the loss has become personal and collective simultaneously. There is also the issue of the deterioration of the importance of faith for modern man, which is usually a source of consolation to the poet and the reader; religious belief is not personally compelling anymore and thus no longer an enticing subject. Subsequently, Lowell’s poems addressed to some of his dead relatives are only ostensibly elegiac in the traditional sense of the word; poems like “In Memory of Arthur Winslow,” “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” and “Mary Winslow” “carry,” Hamilton explains, “little direct feeling, nor do we get from them any clear sense of who these people were.”<sup>134</sup> His elegies are addressed to more than an individual. Regan describes the modern American elegy as intimate and searing, especially those mourning friends and poets; yet, he also observes that “what gives this poetry an added poignancy is the intimation that it also

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<sup>132</sup> *Pity the Monsters*, 35–36.

<sup>133</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 54–55.

<sup>134</sup> Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 105.

mourns the lost structures of belief and value that once upheld the ideal of an afterlife and made consolation possible.”<sup>135</sup>

Perloff argues that Lowell’s poems written as elegies to his relatives “display a bitterly disdainful preacher-poet who regards the lives of the dead relatives he has presumably come to mourn as so many exempla of the ultimate failure of the New England Puritan vision.”<sup>136</sup> She continues to argue that “The Quaker Graveyard” “contains no lament,” though she deduces a roughly similar purpose behind this work, assuming that “it deals with the rapacity and greed of the New England Protestants of the nineteenth century, who are linked in Lowell’s mind to the modern patriotic capitalists, here represented by Warren Winslow, who fought for a meaningless case in World War II.”<sup>137</sup> Throughout this complicated and multifaceted poem, Lowell angrily denounces the hypocrisy of his Puritan forefathers. To build their religious sovereignty on a solid ground, they took the ideal Rome as a role model for their future promised land; but, in reality, they indulged in the evils of capitalism and all worldly distractions that Christianity bans. They adopted shifting meanings for God’s teachings, turning them from being a faith that can lead to Paradise into a motto under which they could arrogantly rule the world. For Lowell, God’s wrath will definitely befall such a state in all forms of calamities. Eddins argues that “In the theocratic universe of the early Lowell, ultimate justice” represented by Divine punishment and apocalyptic ending “is not only possible, but inevitable” and the guilty “must face the purification of the apocalypse.”<sup>138</sup> Like their forebears, twentieth-century Americans, represented by the sailors, have shifted the

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<sup>135</sup> ‘The Art of Losing’, 184.

<sup>136</sup> Perloff, ‘Death by Water’, 117.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>138</sup> ‘Poet and State in the Verse of Robert Lowell’, 43.

meaning of the covenant of the rainbow – Lowell quotes as the epitaph of the poem – in which God honours man, for their advantage and materialistic gain forgetting in the process Christian and ethical principles and incurring apocalyptic punishment manifested in the rage of nature.

*Lord Weary's Castle* represents a significant development in Lowell's work. As Crick argues, the "poems now are more personal, more localised, and more related to specific historical events; and yet, paradoxically, they work with a sharper edge of universality."<sup>139</sup> In the same way that he conjured up the history of the Quaker whalers and their long-established career of hunting whales, Lowell invokes the history of another type of hunter: reapers of human lives or warmongers, and who is a better representative of this type than Napoleon Bonaparte? In "Napoleon Crosses the Berezina," Lowell connects his eschatological understanding to war and history. In this sonnet, he picks a historical war in which Napoleon's formidable forces were defeated as they were crossing the Berezina river heading back from Russia. Mazzaro points out that "all wars are alike," hence, Napoleon is just another pretentious warmonger, preceded by Charlemagne and followed by Hitler; he is not the first and will not be the last:

Here Charlemagne's stunted shadow plays charades  
With pawns and bishops whose play-canister  
Shivers the Snowman's bones, and the Great Bear  
Shuffles away to his ancestral shades . . . (p. 37)

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<sup>139</sup> Robert Lowell, 28.



Lowell describes Napoleon and his men as cold-blooded warriors and as “the ultimate in secular force and ambition,”<sup>140</sup> showing them as representative of man’s inclination to fight and display power anytime and anywhere since God put him on earth, ready to trespass God’s limits and break His rules to satisfy his ambitions and greed and, thus, even to desecrate “the Holy Land” or the Christian creed. But, just as Napoleon and his “Hussar and cuirassier and grenadier / Ascend the tombstone steppes to Russia,” the disobedient will eventually, at the End of Days, break down and be punished. “God’s vengeance,” Eddins explains, “takes the form of a military cataclysm which prefigures the Apocalypse, as the poem’s Biblical epigraph makes clear.”<sup>141</sup> Lowell quotes Christ’s words in Matthew (24:28): “For wherever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together” with which he describes to people the indications of the Last Day. Lowell makes it clear that this war, with its great losses, is a symbol of the apocalypse.

During the battle of Berezina, the Biblical image is literal as well as figurative;

Here  
The eagles gather as the West invades  
The Holy Land of Russia. Lord and glory  
Of dragonish, unfathomed eaters, rise!  
Although your Berezina cannot gnaw  
These soldiers-plumed pontoons to matchwood, ice  
Is turning them to tumbrels, and the snow  
Blazes its carrion-miles to Purgatory. (p. 37)

The river carries the defeated soldiers’ dead bodies covered with snow as the Styx carries the dead to Purgatory; by this image, Lowell emphasizes the apocalyptic setting of the poem, as well as the repetitive quality of history. “War is like the end of the world,”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Eddins, ‘Poet and State in the Verse of Robert Lowell’, 43.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> ‘Notes on Robert Lowell.’, *Renascence* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1955): 79,  
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1290922610/citation/4DD9200968754DD9PQ/1>.

Standerwick observes; like the Apocalypse or the Armageddon, it ends life but soon another restarts to repeat the cycle. Hence, Lowell insinuates that just as there were more wars to start since the defeat of the mighty Napoleon, the fire of more others will be ignited after the end of the Second World War.

Although the poem seems like a warning against violence and lack of spiritual integrity, Lowell does not offer a substitute; rather, he puts forward for consideration that evil will roam the world till the end of time. Standerwick continues to argue that

When war becomes a favorite pastime for leaders and nations, then really 'we are poured out like water,' we are wasted, we are condemned. It only remains for the eagles to hover over the place where the bodies shall be. Nor does Robert Lowell assuage the harsh tenor of his words, for war has stalked its prey too long and too doggedly.<sup>143</sup>

But, Mazzaro contends that if this motif of recurrent events is taken from a purely historical viewpoint, it would be conferred as "a degree of determination and lack of free will on the mechanics of history. This determinism would be most disastrous to those whose likeness to God has already been diminished."<sup>144</sup> Still, Lowell implies, the wise are those who stick to their faith in order for them to be of the chosen mentioned in the Bible.

As mentioned earlier, one of the characteristic features of Lowell's poems is their temporal and spatial expansion. In them, time stretches from the farthest past of classic myths and religious stories, to the nearest past of the Puritan New Englanders, up till it entwines with Lowell's present. And though Lowell's main concern is the present and its troubling issues, he often resorts to the past to highlight the present. In the same way, Lowell virtually visits places from all these periods of time, forming a palimpsest where

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*, 29.

all the cities are spiritually and symbolically connected to provide the reader with a panoramic perception that covers a certain aspect that Lowell is interested in. The places may vary from Biblical Babylon to Puritanical Boston, Concord and Salem, up to Modern America and even to the City of God anticipated after the apocalyptic end.

Throughout his life, Lowell, the man and the poet, has tried to find some significance and value in the Puritanical history of his family and nation; he needed to discern guidance and meaning in their religious and social tradition to use in dealing with the present dilemmas of his nation, especially during war. But Lowell found tradition wanting for this purpose; and although he often mentions the famous names of his ancestors who had participated in establishing the foundations for their society, he did not turn a blind eye to the horrific deeds others had committed, more or less, for the same purpose. From this comes Lowell's constant ambivalence and fickle attitude towards his forefathers and their tradition. As a result, Lowell's poems show his awareness of the fact that the early Puritan cities, built with the vigour and perseverance of their settlers, are an important accomplishment to be proud of; nevertheless, he feels disappointed at what the false application of the tradition of these cities has effected in modern America. This honest reaction of Lowell is manifested well in his poem, "The Park Street Cemetery" (in *Land of Unlikeness*) and its revised version in *Lord Weary's Castle*, "At the Indian Killer's Grave."

In his early poetic oeuvre, Lowell adapts his inherited Puritan theory in which ideas of death, resurrection and the afterlife were intricately associated with the building of modern America and its thriving towns and cities. His ancestors were supposed to prepare a place of piety for the future Kingdom of God, and instead they became absorbed in worldly progress even if it was on the expense piety. The outcome is secular cities immersed in violence and greed. Lowell inverts even the eschatological significance that

the early colonists attached to their cities. Thus, he does not only criticize and refute New England's eschatology, but he presents his own bleak eschatology which is completely the opposite of his ancestors'. These old Puritan colonies are now spiritually and morally disintegrated; they are no longer the anticipated heaven on earth for the believers.

In the early Calvinist tradition of the Puritan theocratic colonists like John Winthrop, the cities of Boston, Salem and Concord are places where the longed-for Kingdom of God would be established as the promised shelter and reward for the chosen righteous Christians to inhabit after they triumph in the Armageddon. In his writings, Winthrop asserts these eschatological beliefs: "God hath provided this place to be a refuge for many whom he means to save out of the general calamity."<sup>145</sup> In Lowell's early poems, these cities have become allegories of Babylon, the city doomed in the Bible for its indulgence in sin and defiance of divine laws. These apocalyptic cities connote the entire modern United States, wallowing in the mire of moral and spiritual decay and soon to face its inevitable drowning, as the anger of God is already manifested through all the epidemics and wars befallen this world, where His justice will eventually predominate.

In "Salem," the poet praises the values of the old city before it was polluted with greed and spiritual decline, the impact of which is manifested in modern Salem. The speaker addresses a modern seaman about

How the draft  
Lashes the oily slick about your head,  
Beating up whitecaps! Seaman, Charon's raft  
Dumps its damned goods into the harbor-bed, –  
There sewage sickens the rebellious seas. (p. 29)

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<sup>145</sup> Quoted in Sarwar, 'Robert Lowell: Scripting the Mid-Century Eschatology', 119.

The alliteration in the third line and the image itself show Lowell's disgust at the rotten modern world. Even the Charon who, in a mythical sense, takes the dead on his raft across the Styx, in Lowell's eschatology ferries "damned goods" that symbolizes the fate of non-spiritual humanity losing God's Grace. The speaker continues to address the seaman, but this time with a nostalgic tone, reminding him of glorified images of seamen from the old tradition of Salem, and drawing a contrast between the past and the present: "Remember, seaman, Salem fishermen / once hung their nimble fleets on the Great Banks" (p. 29). The nostalgia-driven reproof continues, and the speaker now posits a question that could be either rhetorical or real:

Where was it that New England bred the men  
Who quartered the Leviathan's fat flanks  
And fought the British Lion to his knees?     (p. 29)

The poem evokes, and is motivated by, a mixture of feelings; nostalgia, derision, ridicule and disappointment are all felt in this short comparison between old and modern America.

Titled after one of the first Puritan settlements in New England, "Concord" is another significant poem in *Lord Weary's Castle*. In it, Lowell illustrates another comparison between the past and the present, between an old American city built on the basis of faith and morality and its present state where war and materialism have left their devastating marks. Ironically, the modern man driving the Ford created by modern technology is searching for heritage in Concord: "Ten thousand Fords are idle here in search / Of a tradition" (p. 30). But, is it a tradition of which to be proud, and from which to learn something worthy?

Lowell seizes upon the opportunity to expose the irony inherent in the place name, showing how concord has quietly turned into discord. From Concord's past, Lowell brings

to mind how the bells of the Unitarian churches announce the religious rituals connected to the memory of Christ's crucifixion, while people are blindly preoccupied with their materialistic quest at the expense of the spiritual one:

Over these dry sticks –  
The Minute Man, the Irish Catholics,  
The ruined bridge and Walden's fished-out perch –  
The belfry of the Unitarian Church  
Rings out the hanging Jesus. Crucifix,  
How can your whited Spindling arms transfix  
Mammon's unbridled industry, the lurch  
For forms to harness Heraclitus' stream! (p. 30)

Selim Sarwar explains that “the most significant correspondence between Concord and the doomed communities in St John's vision lies in the facts of soulless materialism and distorted faith: it worships Mammon, the beast-god of wealth and adheres to a wrong creed.”<sup>146</sup> These rituals have become mere empty performances which carry no sincere meaning any more. Still, despite the bleak image of modern Concord, Lowell leaves a thread of light and a loophole for making a change and regaining some of the old glory by taking advantage of the stream of Heraclitus “for the only forms,” Cambon confirms, “with which that stream can be ‘harnessed,’ that is, with which time can be redeemed, are those of meaningful ritual, thought, and art, not the feverishly multiplied machines on which we pride ourselves.”<sup>147</sup> The modern man is “idle” and of no use to himself or to his nation because he has become rootless, with no reliable reservoir of traditional ideals to invigorate him and to pull him out of his superficial preoccupations and mundane way of life.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> *The Inclusive Flame*, 222.

Lowell sustains the declamatory tone as he criticizes the massacres committed by the Puritan early settlers of Concord against the Indians; and instead of hearing the echo of a triumphant scream of great accomplishments, one may imagine and hear “The death-dance of King Philip and his scream / Whose echo girdled this imperfect globe” (p. 30). Again, Lowell chooses a certain point in history to expose the fact that the “American military aggressions go all the way back to the ways against the Indians, in particular to the King Philip’s War, when the Governor of Plymouth was Lowell’s ancestor Josiah Winslow.”<sup>148</sup>

Lowell’s adverse judgement of his ancestors’ infamous legacy of enforcing their power is exhibited again by reemploying the historic incident of King Philip’s wars and his brutal death in “At the Indian Killer’s Grave.” The poet addresses the hypocrisy of his Puritan forefathers who “burned villages and slaughtered young and old, with pious fierceness, while the godly souls throughout the land were helping them with prayers.” Lowell, to enhance his criticism, borrows this sarcastic quotation from Thoreau as a headnote for his poem to clearly introduce its themes: cruelty and persecution practiced through unjust war against the weak under the cover of a religious creed.

Lowell is standing in the graveyard where his ancestors are buried, and towards whom he feels contempt and shame for the atrocities they committed in that war:

Behind King’s Chapel what the earth has kept  
Whole from the jerking noose of time extends  
Its dark enigma to Jehoshaphat;  
Or will King Philip plait  
The just man’s scalp in the wailing valley!      (p. 56)

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<sup>148</sup> Fein, ‘Lord Weary’s Castle Revisited’, 38.

These guilty Puritan bodies turn the cemetery's "great garden rotten to its root;" this is how disgusted Lowell is at their deeds. They were defeated, and now mocked, by "Death, the engraver." He imagines King Philip saying that "The Judgment is at hand; / Only the dead are poorer in this world" (p. 56). It is as if this leader had cast a curse on these aggressors that would follow them till the end of times. Lowell believes that God will eventually do the Indian victims justice, and this punishment is well-deserved; "that their theology could countenance such 'holy' wars," Herbert Leibowitz clarifies, "so repels him [Lowell] that he consents to their punishment."<sup>149</sup> Lowell stiffens his addressing tone even more, informing them, in King Philip's voice, that their "puns/ And verbal Paradises" will not find ears anymore to fall on; and their

election,  
Hawking above this slime  
For souls as single as their skeletons,  
Flutter and claws in the dead hand of time. (p. 57)

Lowell here accentuates his blame of his ancestors not only for their old offensive hostilities, but for the present war which is an extension of the previous conflicts, and an expression of the violent agenda adopted by the early settlers to empower their status and to satisfy their crave for control on the expense of their religious and moral values, as well as the lives of others. Modern America has inherited that agenda and is using it well to empower her state, this time in the name of democracy.

Lowell's despair in his present America comes from his disappointment in its past, which, in turn, compels him to look for an alternative tradition and experiences on which to base his quest for solutions and answers for current problems and chaos. Consequently, Lowell turns to Roman Catholicism, the oldest European convention which

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<sup>149</sup> 'Robert Lowell', 34.



his ancestors had renounced before embracing Puritan Calvinism. Staples recapitulates Lowell's purpose behind his poems "as a constructive search for positive values – in Catholic mysticism, in the perspectives of history, in human relationships."<sup>150</sup> In another poem in *Lord Weary's Castle*, "Dea Roma," he refers to Rome as the city which was to represent the ideal state of Christianity and politics, and to Catholicism as the only path that leads to salvation and redemption, but even Rome has had its share of corruption since "Satan is pacing up and down the world:"

Some years, your legions soldiered through this world  
Under the eagles of Lord Lucifer;  
But human torches lit the captains home  
Where victims warped the royal crucifix:  
How many roads and sewers led to Rome. (p. 51)

Nevertheless, as in many of his poems, Lowell still believes that Rome is a place where faith was genuine and will eventually be the whereabouts of redemption and of reaping the bliss behind Christ's sacrifice as

from the dry dome  
Of Michelangelo, your fisherman  
Walks on the waters of a draining Rome  
To Bank his catch in the Celestial City. (p. 51)

Although Hobsbaum finds "there is an extent of ambiguity . . . that renders unclear any reason why Rome should be more free from censure than Boston,"<sup>151</sup> it is actually understandable if we remember that at the time of writing *Lord Weary's Castle*, Lowell was still an enthusiastic believer in Catholicism (of which Rome is an emblem), who opposed his forefathers' faith of Puritan Calvinism (of which Boston is an emblem).

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<sup>150</sup> Robert Lowell, 14.

<sup>151</sup> *A Reader's Guide to Robert Lowell*, 18.

Roman Catholicism was the refuge he sought, where he could find a way to heal the ailments of his age after attributing their causes to all the trespasses committed by his forebears.

The first stanza of “As a Plane Tree by the Water” describes a nightmarish image of Boston woven by one of Lowell’s flights of fantasy typical of his early poetry, especially in *Land of Unlikeness*:

Darkness has called to darkness, and disgrace  
Elbows about our windows in this planned  
Babel of Boston where our money talks  
And multiplies the darkness of a land  
Of preparation where the Virgin walks  
And poses spiral her enamelled face  
Or fall to splinters on unwatered streets.  
Our lady of Babylon, go by, go by,  
I was once the apple of your eye;  
Flies, flies are on the plane tree, on the streets. (p. 49)

The title and the images of the poem are derived from the Bible and the story of the Exodus, to insinuate that the world, represented by his city, Boston, is on the verge of doom because of the prevalent spiritual vacuum and symptoms of materialistic decadence. Crick rightly observes that, in Lowell’s poems, Boston can take different manifestations: “a Baudelairean nightmare, a City of Dreadful Night, the *urbs* of Juvenal and Horace are just a few; but always, it represents some lost ideal.”<sup>152</sup> The portrayal of the city taken over by evil continues in the second stanza, turning it into a modern version of Babylon, where “Flies, flies are on the plane tree, on the streets” and

the devil’s long  
Dirge of the people detonates the hour  
For floating cities where his golden tongue  
Enchants the masons of the Babel Tower ... (p. 49)

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<sup>152</sup> Robert Lowell, 2.

The last stanza emphasizes the apocalyptic features overwhelming the poem; Boston and, by implication, all other cities of America and the modern world, are ready for the resurrection of Christ, for redemption, since wisdom (the plane tree on the streets) had abandoned them and been replaced by mercantile greed and meaningless brutal war leaving the cities plagued by perversion on spiritual, moral, social and political levels. The Atlantic, a symbol of purity and renewal, indicates a degree of hope and change, as well as a sincere faith and yearning for the sacrifice of Christ:

O walls of Jericho! And all the streets  
To our Atlantic wall are singing: "Sing,  
Sing for the resurrection of the King." (p. 49)

Despite the emphatic singing, the tone of despair is clearly evident in this poem and, as in "To Peter Taylor on the Feast of the Epiphany," the only solution to the present corruption sweeping earth is an apocalyptic end followed by the Day of Judgment. In both poems, the speakers describe the city with hallucinatory and terrifying images that anticipate the end of the world. Lowell offers no suggestion or advice in relation to this life; the prophetic voice, here, is one of warning not soothing.

Lowell's speakers, or personae, in such poems feel, and generate in the reader, horror and disdain; they "face the visions of apocalyptic disaster with the bitter foreknowledge of already aborted utopias; his divine cities wilted even before they had a chance to be born."<sup>153</sup> Even in "Where the Rainbow Ends," the last poem in *Lord Weary's Castle*, one would expect, from its position in the volume, that the poet is going to suggest a path of hope and a loophole that guides to salvation. Yet, it is just another poem that

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<sup>153</sup> Sarwar, 'Robert Lowell', 127.

“prefigure[s] the apocalyptic destruction of Boston, the New Babylon”<sup>154</sup> where the speaker prophetically describes a bleak image of Boston, right from the beginning, as he

saw the sky descending, black and white,  
Not blue, on Boston where the winters wore  
The skulls to jack-o'-lanterns on the slates,  
And Hunger's skin-and-bone retrievers tore  
The chickadee and shrike. The thorn tree waits  
Its victim and tonight  
The worms will eat the deadwood to the foot  
Of Ararat: the cithers, Time and death,  
Helmed locusts, move upon the tree of breath . . . (p. 69)

In this first stanza, the setting resembles a forest in which the strong devour the weak, and the faces of danger are numerous. This dreadful state of his city leads Lowell, in the second stanza, to envision the Day of Judgement where Boston and its inhabitants are swinging between Heaven and Hell: “I saw my city in the scales, the pans / Of judgment rising and descending” (p. 69). As in several other poems in *Land of Unlikeness*, such a vision is “just like those Edwards and his fellow preachers employed to terrorize the faithful.”<sup>155</sup> Lowell does not condemn his people to damnation, nor optimistically expect for them salvation; their fate is still not determined and, thus, he wants his readers to take seriously into consideration the imminent threat that they are facing, and at the same time he proposes that there is still a chance for those seeking reformation and redemption. Boston, here, “represents the whole of modern worldliness in its state of decay caused by the dissolution of Christian consciousness,”<sup>156</sup> and is expected to face divine punitive consequences for it. Crick concurs with the above as he declares that for

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<sup>154</sup> Staples, *Robert Lowell*, 29.

<sup>155</sup> Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 13.

<sup>156</sup> Remaley, ‘The Quest for Grace in Robert Lowell’s “Lord Weary’s Castle”’, 120.

“Lowell, the city’s decline as cultural ideal has always related to a vision of New England as failed metaphysical promise.”<sup>157</sup>

The rainbow in the poem has two indications; the first is a false one represented by the bridge over the river and its two towers resembling pepper pots, which reminds us of “the proverbial image of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the symbol of Mammon.”<sup>158</sup> This secular rainbow “makes an idle mockery,” DeSales Standerwick thinks, “out of God’s promising rainbow,”<sup>159</sup> and replaces the one mentioned in Genesis that refers to God’s covenant with man and to a new start after the flood which Noah and his followers survived:

and a winter drifts to where  
the pepperpot, ironic rainbow, spans  
Charles River and its scales of scorched-earth miles. (p. 69)

The wintery atmosphere sets the dismal mood of the poem and makes it even more clear that there is no real rainbow in the city.

The second indication of the rainbow refers to the genuine image in the Bible, at the end of which a promised salvation is granted. Thus, the poet proposes two different possibilities for the ‘end’ of the rainbow; the first rainbow, an emblem of the materialistic greed of the Bostoners who established it, carries no connection to spirituality and ends where it began, on the ground of this desolate place with no hope for salvation, and the speaker, seeing himself as a prophet “pointing the direction of mankind,”<sup>160</sup> describes this end as an ominous vision that reminds the reader of St. John’s vision in Revelation (21:2):

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<sup>157</sup> Robert Lowell, 3.

<sup>158</sup> Staples, *Robert Lowell*, 107.

<sup>159</sup> ‘Notes on Robert Lowell.’, 81.

<sup>160</sup> Mazzaro, *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*, 55.

“And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.” But what the speaker of Lowell’s poem sees is far less promising:

I saw my city in the Scales, the pans  
Of judgment rising and descending. Piles  
Of dead leaves char the air –  
And I am a red arrow on this graph  
Of Revelations. (p. 69)

The other possibility with which the rainbow ends is presented in the last stanza; it is a hope for salvation, but only when the “victim,” or the exile, disconnects himself from the spiritual and materialistic havoc of the city, brought about by war and lack of faith, and positions himself at the altar where salvation is sought:

In Boston serpents whistle at the cold.  
The victim climbs the altar steps and sings:  
‘Hosannah to the lion, lamb, and beast  
Who fans the furnace-face of IS with wings:  
I breath the ether of my marriage feast.’  
At the high altar, gold  
And a fair cloth. I kneel and the wings beat  
My cheek. What can the dove of Jesus give  
You now but wisdom, exile? Stand and live,  
The dove has brought an olive branch to eat. (p. 69)

The perplexed exile from the first poem of *Lord Weary’s Castle* finally makes the choice, in the last poem, and gets to the altar, seeking wisdom. In this final stanza, the speaker, Lowell’s persona, and the exile are one, and they all represent modern man and the heir of the messianic tradition, that is no longer embraced properly, and of the Puritan eschatological visions that Lowell inverts in his early poems persistently and with a prophetic zeal. The voice heard at the end advising the listener to “stand and live” is the inner voice of the instinct of survival taking advantage of a chance that offers hope and redemption: the end of war, the harbinger of which is the dove bringing an olive branch

along with an implied wisdom. This time the dove is from Jesus as a reminder of his sacrifice to redeem sinners like the modern man; and the holy ghost, whose wings beat his cheeks as he kneels at the altar, indicates “to man that the olive branch of eternal peace is the direction of his salvation.”<sup>161</sup>

But does the end of war really mean peace to Lowell? The resurrected world which emerged after the flood, and from which the dove brought an olive branch to Noah’s ark to indicate that the flood had receded, did not continue to be peaceful for long; life was renewed along with good and evil, with man’s struggle for survival and with more wars to start. This cycle continues, and Lowell anticipates the same scenario of violence and corruption will start again after the end of the Second World War. His anxiety was not diminished with the end of the military war because, for him, the real war lies within the human psyche and consciousness since the creation of Adam. This is what makes the hope Lowell offers at the end of this poem, and at the end of the whole collection, neither affirmative nor complete.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 55.

## Chapter 4

### Robert Lowell and the Cold War

#### *Life Studies*

Lowell's 1959 collection of poems takes on a new dimension, different from that of his first two collections. The shift is stylistic as well as thematic. James Longenbach, elaborating on this transformation, says, "after writing several books of highly praised New Critical well-wrought urns (objective and impersonal), Robert Lowell understood the poetry could be fragmentary, subjective, personal, and the result was *Life Studies*, a watershed in twentieth-century poetry."<sup>1</sup> This work is generally considered the transitional phase in Lowell's career, though it was preceded by his third major book of poems, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951). Similarly, in this volume, Lowell came up with different style and content from his first two volumes: "he now gave up orthodox affiliation with any church and proceeded to use Western civilization and his personal crisis as material for his poetry."<sup>2</sup> He also utilizes the mythic story of Persephone and Pluto as a basis for his plot.

Many critics consider *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* book a failure, or, at least, not highly regarded, especially in comparison with the poet's previous Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Lord Weary's Castle*. No matter how this book was received, however, it is a liminal step within Lowell's progressive career and personality, which shows his first attempt at self-analysis and personal projections. Lowell veered away from dealing with subjects,

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<sup>1</sup> *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Martin, *Robert Lowell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), 20.



issues and characters as abstractions or representations of something more general towards a more identified context in which characters are less vague and more real than those in his early poetry. In *The Mill of the Kavanaughs*, Lowell concentrates more on the personal within a secular content. The theme is love and morality, treated within the story of Anne Kavanaugh sitting on her own, and remembering her troubled life with her late husband.

Lowell left the church, Catholicism, the puritans and his prophetic warning voice behind since they did not yield the results he was aspiring for in reforming a corrupt civilization and finding his own inner peace; and, realizing the need to refrain from the distant and detached abstractedness of *Land of Unlikeness*, Lowell brought some humanity into his new poems. He now wrote with dramatic and narrative new experiences, not necessarily his, but are familiar to all. This poetic experiment was incarnated in *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*.<sup>3</sup> It is understandable that the themes of the book might not be a reflection of Lowell's personal experience, yet Lowell's mind cannot be severed from that of the speaker, whose dramatic monologues are directed by the stream of consciousness technique, a form of self-psychoanalysis. It is around this period that Lowell started to develop an interest in this science to help understand his troubled self after signs of his mental illness started to manifest themselves more regularly. Accordingly, "baffled urgency became the keynote"<sup>4</sup> of this book.

After *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, it took Lowell several years before he could produce a publishable work: "his imagination seemed clogged."<sup>5</sup> Lowell himself gives an

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 80.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Martin, *Robert Lowell*, 28.

account of the writer's block he suffered from and what that made him feel. In March 1957, he said in the essay he wrote about one of his poems,

I became sorely aware of how few poems I had written, and that these few had been finished at the latest three or four years earlier. Their style seemed distant, symbol-ridden and willfully difficult. ... I felt my old poems hid what they were really about, and many times offered a stiff, humorless and even impenetrable surface. ... I felt that the best style for poetry was none of the many poetic styles in English.<sup>6</sup>

In the same essay, he also admitted that he had been writing prose for some time, and that the shape and rhythm of prose had influenced his style in writing his later poems.

The first time Lowell was hospitalized for his mania was in 1949.<sup>7</sup> The death of his mother in February 1954, not long after his father passed away, adding to that an age that refuses to succumb to peace with a nuclear war lurking beneath the surface, all led Lowell to suffer from repeated manic-depressive episodes, for which he was hospitalized and received electroconvulsive therapy several times. In June 1954, he suffered from a severe breakdown, and, on the advice of his psychiatrist, for therapeutic purposes, Lowell started to write about his childhood memories and family relations in prose. During that period of his life, "his reading of Freud, reinforced by psychotherapy, seems to have suggested to him that the only truly important history was family history – the ultimate source, after all, of the driven and grand behaviour of his historical heroes."<sup>8</sup> This personal prose history was later published under the title, *91 Revere Street*, constituting the second part of *Life Studies*. In the first part of *Life Studies*, Lowell includes three poems,

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<sup>6</sup> 'On "Skunk Hour"', in *Robert Lowell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Parkinson (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 132.

<sup>7</sup> Kay R. Jamison, *Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 163.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made: Recent American Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 10.

“Beyond the Alps,” “The Banker’s Daughter” and “Inauguration Day: January 1953;” while the four poems dedicated to Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz and Hart Crane comprise the third part. As for the poems of the fourth part of the book, except for “Skunk Hour,” they mostly revolve around some of his late family members, concentrating mostly on his father’s character and their father-son relationship.

Most of Lowell’s critics consider *Life Studies* as the hallmark of “confessional poetry” of the twentieth century. It was Rosenthal who coined the term in his article, “Poetry as Confession” in 1959 after reading *Life Studies*; he argues that “Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, there is a lot more to these poems than just being an influx of autobiographical reflections, though they rightly fall under Axelrod’s categorization of confessional poetry for which he pinpoints three key features: “an undisguised exposure of painful personal event, . . . a dialectic of private matter with public matter, . . . and an intimate unornamented style.”<sup>10</sup> This classification can, nonetheless, be applicable to a poem like “Rebellion” from Lowell’s second volume, *Lord Weary’s Castle*. In this poem, Lowell describes himself in a hysterical state, arguing with his father until he knocks him down:

You damned  
My arm that cast your house upon your head  
And broke the chimney flintlock on your skull. (p. 32)

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Poetry as Confession’, in *Critics on Robert Lowell: Readings in Literary Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Price (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), 71.

<sup>10</sup> *Robert Lowell*, 98.

This violent encounter is the culmination of years of psychologically troubled relations with his father and his family, direct and extended:

Last night the moon was full:  
I dreamed the dead  
Caught at my knees and fell: and it was well  
With me, my father. (p. 32)

All this seems very personal and private, until Lowell connects the incident to a larger and more general context, suitable to that of the majority of his early poetry. His father is a living emblem of his Puritan ancestors, whom he repeatedly back-slashed in his early poetry, and in whom he saw the deformity of old principles and the weakness to act apt to them. In multiple ways, the disintegration of his private world is a miniature picture of the disintegration of his country and of a world on the verge of apocalyptic retribution, in which “Behemoth and Leviathan / devoured our mighty merchants. None could arm / Or put to sea” (p. 32).

The last two lines of the poem, “the world spread [in pain] / When the clubbed flintlock broke my father’s brain” (p. 32), effortlessly recapitulate the intermingling of the personal and the cosmic, making the poem virtually belong as much with *Life Studies* as it does with *Lord Weary’s Castle*.

The second important phase of Lowell’s career, then, is delineated by *Life Studies*, the work that defines, despite his mental illness, the mature Lowell, as a man and as a poet, with his different secular and religious perspectives. Through this new authentic and intimate approach, Lowell has drawn upon his own personal life, with his eye constantly on the realistic life around him. He has realized that the open and private nature of his poetic contexts requires a poetic form that is different from that of *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary’s Castle*; he now needs to relinquish the formalism of New Criticism and the difficult-to-understand verse. No need any longer for the baroque and

highly aesthetic forms of poetry; the style needs to be simple, direct and spontaneous rather than contrived. It was Randall Jarrell who advised him to write in this way, and he did realize the sense behind it. Writing the autobiographical and reading Jarrell's work enabled him to discover "the means of manipulating the psyche to recover the past in a way that could escape the myths of regionalism,"<sup>11</sup> a means he was unlikely to attain with the theory of New Criticism.

Designating Lowell's poetry of the fifties as confessional gives the impression that it is detached from the political atmosphere and the effects of an ongoing cold war on the culture and society. It may seem that Lowell has been selfishly and narrowly preoccupied with personal and familial affairs, while the Americans were lurking under the pressure of the political tension, the threat of a nuclear warfare and the constraints enforced by a Capitalist government to keep at bay the threat of communism. The years of the cold war, with its implication of a coming nuclear war leading to the nuclear arms race "all made apparent that a final cataclysm was no longer a matter of religious speculation confined to a few 'bible-thumbing nuts,' but a real and present possibility that could occur at any point," and "indicated a new apocalyptic pocket in the American psyche."<sup>12</sup>

Lowell's anxiety about the problematic political situation in America and the world is clearly expressed in a letter he wrote to Jarrell on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1961, reminding him of a conversation they had in the Spring of 1959, prior to the publication of *Life Studies*:

I remember once, the last time at Greensboro, I think, when you came into my room and began talking out of a blue sky about the ills of our culture. . . . the world is very much under my skin and really seems like a murderous nightmare when one looks

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<sup>11</sup> Paula Hayes, *Robert Lowell and the Confessional Voice* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2012), 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

outward. I am sick of nations armed to the teeth. It can't be true  
we must raise a finger or a whisper.<sup>13</sup>

In another letter Lowell wrote in the autumn of the same year to William Meredith, he says that the “nuclear air gets on my nerves. It seems a hideous comedy that we should charge the globe with so much ruin. I guess I felt that way about the bombing in the last war. But somehow it's now come to a head.”<sup>14</sup> In “Fall 1961” (*For the Union Dead*), Lowell writes with heavy irony, “All autumn, the chafe and jar / of nuclear war; / we have talked our extinction to death” (p. 329).

Looking closely at Lowell's confessional poems would, unequivocally, reveal a genuine reflection prompted by the current occurrences of the age. As a matter of fact, his manic depressive-episodes were partly triggered by the same anxieties that preoccupied the American consciousness, along with his personal losses and troubled family history. Consequently, writing autobiographically about his mental problems is, one way or another, writing, though covertly, about his troubled age. Adam Beardsworth proposes a justification for Lowell's implicit, as opposed to explicit, poetic references to political turbulence: “While his incarceration as a conscientious objector taught the consequences of outspoken political defiance, his subjective autobiographic style allowed him to express an implicit dissent that evaded the surveillance of increasingly repressive state policies.”<sup>15</sup> While this might be an eligible excuse, one should keep in mind that Lowell had experienced several serious manic-depressive episodes, and it was quite normal to focus his writing on his mental state as a method of self-understanding and, hopefully,

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 294.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 294–95.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Learning to Love the Bomb: Robert Lowell's Pathological Poetics’, *Canadian Review of American Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 96–97, <https://muse-jhu-edu.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/article/377466>.

self-recovery. In his early poems, his literary voice was dedicated to the attempt of healing the ailment of his society; however, during the mid-phase of his career, coinciding with his mental collapse, this same voice is needed to heal his own ailment. Lowell, also, might have been conscious of the possibility that the openly demonstrated objections of a man who was diagnosed with a serious mental illness and intermittently institutionalized might not be taken seriously, or might even have an adverse effect on his credibility.

In conclusion, like his apocalyptic imagery and prophetic visions, his interest in the contemporary political conflicts of his age went undercover, but never disappeared. His new poetic investment in the personal and confessional becomes another medium of expression of all his other concerns.

In "Beyond the Alps," Lowell is on the train from Rome to Paris, and he is in a meditative mood about this geographical journey in which he also sees the journey of his life so far. His meditation is projected in the poem within a framework of "historical interests and the cyclical view of man."<sup>16</sup> The symbolic nature of the poem is displayed right from the start in its epitaph, along with its setting and occasion: "*On the train from Rome to Paris. 1950, the year Pius XII defend the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption*" (p. 113). The itinerary of the train's journey, "considered in terms of ascent and descent, and backward and forward motion,"<sup>17</sup> is metaphorically similar to that of Rome's history and what it represents. Lowell's obsession with the historical rise and fall of civilizations (exhibited clearly in *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle*) has not subsided yet; the general theme of the poem is "the decline of Rome, politically and spiritually, as an

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<sup>16</sup> Jerome Mazzaro, *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 95.

<sup>17</sup> Hugh B. Staples, *Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 68.

allegory for later history and the lost possibility of spiritual heights.”<sup>18</sup> Lowell reminds us that this is the city that was ruled by men like Caesar and Mussolini, insinuating that this city has witnessed mad violence before the spread of Christianity up to the decline of faith in the modern age with the break of world wars and the erosion of spirituality they brought about. The poem emphasizes, at the same time, the idea of the recurrence of violence throughout our cyclical history. The theme is also figurative of the transformation permeating the poet’s life, including his art and faith. The atmosphere of the journey and all the minute details around him act as a reminder to Lowell of what he has been through so far, to the extent that he can see how “Life changed to landscape” (p. 113).

It seems that his manic depression has taken its toll on him; he is self-conscious and tired of his new troubled self, haunted by a new troubled age. In his nostalgia for older tradition and its people who were blessed with complacency and clear-mindedness, he is also nostalgic for the old sane Lowell who was aspiring to a better world, a world which he was looking forward to becoming part:

I envy the conspicuous  
waste of our grandparents on their grand tours –  
long-haired Victorian sages accepted the universe,  
while breezing on their trust funds through the world. (p. 113)

This is a common preoccupation of all modern poets: an intensified sense of past glory in comparison to a perverse present. Lowell’s search for his personal and artistic identity should not be separated from his search for more comprehensive dimensions of existence, human nature, belief, and the enigma of life and death. Throughout his entire

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<sup>18</sup> Sue Mitchell Crowley, ‘Mr. Blackmur’s Lowell: How Does Morality Get into Literature?’, *Religion & Literature* 19, no. 3 (1987): 37, <http://www.jstor.org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/stable/40059353>.



career, Lowell has been always concerned with his personal consciousness as part of its collective counterpart; his own history and problems are always attached to, and moulded by, the world's history and problems. While in his early poetry, he connects everything to religion and, more specifically, to his Catholic faith and its eschatologies, in this middle phase of his career, his eschatological concerns have become more secular and personally oriented, which is understandable since he confesses, with a tone of a defeated warrior whose valour has proved useless, "Much against my will / I left the city of God where it belongs" (p. 113), as his train leaves Rome to Paris. It is an indication of abandoning his adopted faith and its correlative formalistic poetry. His doctrinal doubts do not mean he has forsaken religious faith altogether, but rather that he is attaching more importance to the capacity of mankind in healing itself, regardless of the faith embraced; and part of his role as a poet is encouraging this capacity, dealing with universal problematic and lingering issues, and "answering them with honesty, directness, and the strength of a gifted, perceptive individual who no longer finds it possible to appeal to an order higher than the human."<sup>19</sup> This change of attitude might as well be a poet's logical reaction to the attitude of his art's recipients, who are more and more drifting away from a sincere belief in a Divine power, and rather believing in their own resources and capabilities varied among scientific, technological, philosophical, psychological, and whatever innovations the modern age is carrying with it.

Mazzaro provides an encapsulation of the ideological and poetical development taking effect in the poems of *Life Studies*, starting with "Beyond the Alps": "The movement of the train up and down the Alps, hurrying to complete its journey, reflects Western civilization – Etruria, Rome, Paris – hurrying to complete its identity in the same up-down

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<sup>19</sup> Ralph J. Mills, *Creation's Very Self: On the Personal Element in Recent American Poetry* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1969), 28.

motion. As defined by Lowell, the forces” – mainly ideological and working against Rome – “are human understanding, which yearly reduces occurrences from the realm of the miraculous to the realm of the scientific. Modern Man, no longer able to cope with the mystery of the past, is reluctantly carried along in this motion of civilization.”<sup>20</sup> Lowell himself a version of the modern man who cannot turn a blind eye to the changes around him; they are inescapable. After being the loyal Catholic convert for several years, he is now discovering new forms of faith, propagandized by men of science, philosophy, art, psychoanalysis and politics.

Lowell became fascinated with the quickly spreading trend of psychoanalysis, and became an avid reader of Sigmund Freud. In a 1953 letter he wrote his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, Lowell says: “I am a slavish convert [to Freud’s work] . . . Every fault is a goldmine of discoveries. I am a walking goldmine.”<sup>21</sup> He felt that Freud’s psychological interpretations of human nature made him understand more about life and about himself, and answered questions that religion could not. In his 1965 interview with Alvarez, Lowell says that looking back at his own background, Freud’s’ ideas can provide a reasonable explanation for his “peculiar history: brought up as a Protestant, then a Catholic convert. . . . Freud seems the only religious teacher. I have by no means a technical understanding of Freud, but he’s very much part of my life. He seems unique among the non-fictional teachers of the century. He is a prophet.”<sup>22</sup> Kay Redfield Jamison insightfully comments on the attraction Lowell felt towards Freud’s writings: “Lowell was drawn to Freud’s affinity for the past and his portrayal of the intricacies of the human condition. . .

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<sup>20</sup> *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 201.

<sup>22</sup> A. Alvarez, ‘A Talk with Robert Lowell’, in *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 102.

. They both grappled with the hard truths of the mind: irrational forces that drive behaviour and belief, madness, war, and death.” At the same time, Jamison maintains that in spite of his admiration for Freud, Lowell was put off by “Freudian orthodoxy . . . with answers to be presented ‘like the Catechism.’ . . . Lowell did not believe that psychoanalysis could treat the madness that broke in him. But, he said, Freud ‘provides the condition that one must think in.’”<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, in later years, Lowell's regenerative way of thinking made him less interested in psychoanalytic theories and techniques in general. Hence, another form of conviction is found wanting and relinquished by Lowell.

Another audacious image in “Beyond the Alps,” by which Lowell emphasizes the decline of the traditional religious value in his modern society in contrast to the rising star of science is that of the Pope himself, a symbol of the Church and God's authority:

When the Vatican made Mary's Assumption dogma,  
the crowds at San Pietro screamed *Papa*.  
The Holy Father dropped his shaving glass,  
And listened. His electric razor purred,  
His pet canary chirped on his left hand. (p. 113)

Modern values are taking over and replacing orthodox ideals; the meaningless pet canary replaces the dove, or the Holy Ghost, which traditionally sits to the Father's left. Thus, if the city of God and the Pope himself have come under the influence of mechanization and materialistic evaluation, what can a poet do now but conform to this engulfing change?

Lowell's perspective towards the dogma of the assumption is somehow sarcastic as he is weighing its impact and significance against an age fraught with new scientific ambitions carrying different challenges to the human brain:

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Lowell: *Setting the River on Fire*, 166.

The lights of science couldn't hold a candle  
to Mary risen – at one miraculous stroke,  
angel-wing'd, gorgeous as a jungle bird!  
But who believed this? Who could understand? (p. 113)

Whether the modern world has descended too low, or Lowell has aimed too high with his Catholic paradigm, concordance between the two seems unattainable. His “mountain-climbing train,” that might speak for his religious convictions or poetic reflections, “had come to earth” (p. 114). “Figuratively,” Staples explains, “the mountains – whether Everest, the Alps or Acropolis – are symbols of human aspirations and religious ideals towards which man’s soul has been drawn at various epochs in Western civilization.”<sup>24</sup> Lowell's overall aspirations, thereby, have become less exalted and more realistic:

Tired of the querulous hush-hush of the wheels,  
the bleary-eyed ego kicking in my berth  
lay still, and saw Apollo plant his heels  
on terra firma through the morning's thigh . . .  
each backward, wasted Alp, a Parthenon,  
fire-branded socket of the Cyclops' eye. (p. 114)

The shifting of beliefs and values within a general and personal context, spanning over a long period of time, and occurring in different places is exhibited in the poem through Lowell's mixing of “disparate symbols and images in an apparently disordered fashion, miming the motion of the journey, its jolting and the ascent and descent of the Alps.” These images, Cosgrave continues to clarify, “invariably symbolise aspects of man's condition; the jumble and disorder of the journey, with its changing speed and directions, reflects a more basic disorder of nature, disorder of impulse, aspiration and action.”<sup>25</sup>

By the end of the poem, Lowell further touches on the theme of change, creating images inspired by his surroundings. In the past, religious faith personified in the church

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<sup>24</sup> Staples, *Robert Lowell*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> *The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970), 120.

and the Pope were available and close to people's comprehension and everyday affairs, but today it has become similar to the peak of Mount Everest, hard to reach without an exceptional effort:

There were no tickets for that altitude  
once held by Hellas, when the Goddess stood,  
prince, pope, philosopher and golden bough,  
pure mind and murder at the scything prow –  
Minerva, the miscarriage of the brain.

Now Paris, our black classic, breaking up  
Like killer kings on an Etruscan cup. (p. 114)

So, in the present time, all eyes are on Paris again, home of revolutions and secular interests and ideologies, though it has had its share of violence. This is where Lowell is heading, in body and in soul. The disintegration is not confined to Paris or Europe, it is of the whole ethos dominating the evolving world, in comparison to Rome's deteriorating old ethos. Unlike in his early poetry, Lowell here is not preaching or warning against quitting old tradition, and definitely not suggesting any path of redemption for himself or for others; he himself is, literally and metaphorically, leaving on that train in a new mission of reconnaissance.

Although the military conflict has been over for several years now, Lowell, occasionally, still finds a motive that makes him write about politics, the cost of war and the everlasting violent human conflicts. "Inauguration Day: January 1953" is a sonnet in the first part of *Life Studies*, the subject of which, as evident from the title, coincides with the election of Eisenhower as president of the United States in 1953. Choosing the sonnet form to write about this inauguration is in itself sardonic. Contrary to the traditional purpose of this form in expressing personal feeling, or in glorifying and praising a prominent figure of authority, Lowell writes this sonnet to talk about a city suffering from the chill winds of warfare and politics, as well as to chastise a figure who has just

ascended to power, disparaging this achievement as nothing but threatening and detrimental.

His poetic moral scheme is still shaped by an orthodox Christian framework, yet this does not necessarily mean that he lends credence to it, rather he might just find it an effective artistic tool for conveying a certain idea in a more recognizable way. For Lowell, it is now about balancing the religious – anchored forever within his being of intellectuality, if not of faith – and the political or the personal. His images are still retrieved from the Christian scripture or Christian mythology to allegorically refer to something secular, though it is not as clear and vibrant as in his early poems, and the reader of these new poems may need to make an extra effort to understand his poetic allusions, unless he is familiar with those evident in *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle*.

Rosenthal describes the poem as “a severe, tragically tinged, short satire on Eisenhower.”<sup>26</sup> The atmosphere of the new era and of renewal proposed in “Inauguration Day” does not seem promising here despite the changes taking place, including a major change in the representatives of authority. Despite its form and occasion, the poem is not a celebratory one; in fact, it verges on the function of elegy, mourning a city buried under the snow and a new phase of national degradation starting with a new militaristic figure taking over. From the onset of the poem, Lowell ushers the reader into an atmosphere of fear, insecurity, apprehension of what is to come and even death:

The snow had buried Stuyvesant.  
The subways drummed the vaults. I heard  
the El's green girders charge on Third,  
Manhattan's truss of adamant,  
that groaned in ermine, slumped on want. . . . (p. 117)

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<sup>26</sup> *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 32.

One more time, Lowell resorts to his favourite subject and source, history, to shed light on the present. The Dutch colonial governor, Peter Stuyvesant, who surrendered New Amsterdam to the British in 1664, has been hailed and immortalized as a hero by naming a place after him. But, again, he is one of the war leaders who had done more harm than good; hence, the Stuyvesant Square is covered with snow, invoking a forbidding sense of death.

He pictures New York, where social divisions are manifested clearly, as a place still imbued with the spirit of war, and he does that through infusing heavy sounds heard in the subway, similar to the sounds of a battle, with words like “buried,” “drummed,” “vaults” and “charge.” He deprives his audience of any false sense of peace and complacency, so that their attention is drawn to the latent inconsistencies around them that could shatter their reality at any moment.

Lowell continues with his brilliant choice of words that bear more than one level of meaning, as in the phrase “Cyclonic zero of the word” (p. 117). Not only is the weather cold, but any prospects for the future seem frozen with the threat of violence always looming. One cannot overlook the religious allusion here; it is as if Lowell wants to say that in this renewed world, and contradictory to the Biblical phrase, “In the beginning was the Word,” this Word of God is now forgotten or even negated to a “zero” level, thus, turning the atmosphere and setting of New York apocalyptic, as in Boston and Concord in his earlier poems. God Himself is replaced with the “God of our armies, who interred / Cold Harbor’s blue immortals, Grant!” (p. 117).

Lowell looks back on the Civil War and equates Eisenhower with one of its generals, Ulysses S. Grant, who defeated Robert E. Lee in 1864, but lost a large number of

his soldiers.<sup>27</sup> In the poem,

Lowell saw the iced-over spirit of Ulysses S. Grant living on in Ike, both men having stepped into presidency after serving as the country's commanding officers during two perspective cataclysmic wars. He thought of Grant ordering his soldiers to move against the enemy barricades at Cold Harbor, of men in despair pinning their names to their uniforms so that at least their riddled bodies might be identified. Cold Harbor, the birth of the dogtag, where in one hour ten thousand had died on the orders of an inept commanding officer.<sup>28</sup>

Lowell criticizes both men for being warmongers who drive men to their fatal end by killing each other in the name of patriotism, and for which these leaders are rewarded with memorials. In a letter he wrote on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1952 to Allen Tate, Lowell describes what Eisenhower reifies for him: "Ike is a sort of symbol to me of America's unintelligent side – all fitness, muscles, smiles and banality."<sup>29</sup> Lowell criticizes the ugly side of America, its dishonest and hypocritical ambitious social and political policies – a subject he has frequently handled in his poems.

Lowell scornfully addresses Grant's statue: "Horseman, your sword is in the groove!" (p. 117): another smart and intriguing choice of words by Lowell that leaves the reader with more than one potential meaning. The sword being in the groove indicates that using weapons and getting involved in wars have become the trend that this nation values and aggrandizes more and more every day; the future orientation of America is determined by its dependence on the sword. By this, Lowell sees a traditional pattern recurrent since the establishment of New England (though no mention here of his Puritan ancestors, their wars or their religious eschatologies by which they justified their

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (London: Faber, 1987), 1033.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 222.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 197.



trespassing, yet, the historical correlation is insinuated by Lowell's reference to the cyclical occurrences of events). A second meaning of "in the groove," though not quite distinct from the first, is that the horseman has mastered the use of the sword over the years; it has killed so many that it has become a habit and part of the familiar.

In both instances, we are reminded of the Horseman of the Apocalypse, portending ultimate destruction, and whose "horse went forth. It was bright red and its rider was granted permission to take peace from the earth and to make men slay one another. And he was given a great sword" (Revelation 6:4). This horseman was 'War' in the Bible. Lowell is thinking of the inevitable, of death. He is also probably echoing Yeats, a poet he had read extensively and whose grave carries the epitaph: "Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by." Yeats is here addressing the horseman of the apocalypse who carries no sense of guilt, as death is the eventual destiny of mankind. This takes Lowell's thematic intention to a higher level; in addition to America's growing political and militaristic power that threatens its national peace, it is also a reference to the ultimate destiny of humanity under the dominance of ideologies advocating violence and weaponry. Surely, this reminds the reader of the eschatological temperament with which Lowell's early religious poems were imbued, suggesting that *Life Studies* represents both a continuity with that earlier work and a departure from it.

Lowell associates snow and cold with the two war leaders he conjures from history to showcase their destructive and fatal influence. In the same way, he associates the character of Eisenhower, as a former military leader and a current president, with ice – "a fitting metaphor for a Cold War administration"<sup>30</sup> – punning on the words "ice" and "Ike" to imply that the same dismal influence is expected:

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<sup>30</sup> Mariani, *Lost Puritan*, 222.

Ice, ice. Our wheels no longer move.  
Look, the fixed stars, all just alike  
as lack-land atoms, split apart,  
and the Republic summons Ike,  
the mausoleum in her heart. (p. 117)

The ambience of the city is that of immobility and stagnation despite this time of change.<sup>31</sup> Lowell does not see a better prospect on the horizon and cannot read a future in the stars, as they are fixed, but dangerously splitting apart as an indication of the nuclear weapon the government possesses and a potential nuclear war. This is another apocalyptic image, foreseen in the ordinary fixed stars. In December 1947, burdened by the nuclear arms race and the US atomic experiment performed on Japan, Lowell expressed these concerns in a letter he wrote Elizabeth Bishop, in which he says, "When the next atom bombs fall, there won't be any more inhabitable Atlantic coast in our life-time."<sup>32</sup> Although the ominous indication of a disaster and the prophecy are not easily detected here, they are similar to those in "Concord" and "Boston" from his early work, where they are vigorously and extensively portrayed. In the midst of this political, cultural and spiritual fragmentation, Lowell feels helpless as a modern man and as an artist; the word of the poet is not effective any more in the face of the post-war community, which ironically summons Ike to be their saviour, and for whom they will build another monument to preserve him as a reminder of their history of blood-shedding.

The image of Ike as a saviour serves as a confirmation of the contradictory and pretentious values of America, a leading force that acts as world saviour acclaiming

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<sup>31</sup> Lowell, in "Memories of West Street and Lepke" (*Life Studies*), calls his current decade "the tranquillized Fifties," marking a universal problem as the cold war, as well as his personal psychological problems subdued with medical tranquillizers. Also, at that time, several new kinds of tranquilizers were being marketed and consumed. Another indicative meaning of the phrase is related to his abandoning of his zealous Catholic faith and becoming a more neutral believer.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Mariani, *Lost Puritan*, 161.

democracy as its method, while it has become a highly developed modern military power armed with nuclear bombs. A political policy like that makes it hard to draw a line between good and evil; the boundaries between what is right and what is wrong have become blurred, and values, personal and public, have lost their clear identification. In a 1963 interview with Alvarez, Lowell expresses his worries in relation to the characteristic political ideologies of his country:

I'm very conscious of belonging to the country I do, which is a very powerful country and, if I have an image of it, it will be one taken from Melville's *Moby Dick*: the fanatical idealist who brings the world down in ruins through some sort of simplicity of mind. I believe that's in our character . . . It is not all on the negative side, but there is power there and energy and freshness and the possibility of ruin.<sup>33</sup>

So, the feature that Lowell diagnosed in the Puritan New Englanders, he can still detect in their offspring who are now ruling modern America, hiding behind logos of liberty and a better future for the world, instead of sermons of messianic redemptive rewards in a resurrected world, while the hidden agenda of both parties focuses on self-interest and omnipotence.

The above image of the stars and ice, along with the mood and atmosphere of the poem and the morbid image of the city and its monuments, all accentuate a sense of the apocalypse and an imminent eschatological end within a secular framework. Lowell's vision is "epical rather than dramatic," and it "suggests the style, theme, tone, structure, and language of Lowell's wartime prophecies."<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Lowell's mid-career eschatology is not as intense and trenchant as it was in his first two collections of poems

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<sup>33</sup> 'Robert Lowell in Conversation', in *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 77.

<sup>34</sup> Mazzaro, *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*, 95.

when he was a “fire-breathing Catholic.” We no longer hear of Armageddon, Leviathan, anti-Christ or the celestial City of God; rather, the war is cold, the leviathan is an atomic or nuclear bomb, and the havoc anticipated with the Apocalypse is looming now with the accretion in misuse of power and immoral application of science and technology.

“Skunk Hour,” the last poem in *Life Studies*, is the hallmark work that clearly distinguishes the development of Lowell’s character and art. In his afterword to *Collected Poems*, Frank Bidart takes the status of the poem to a higher level when he contends that it “dramatizes, perhaps for the first time in the history of the lyric, the moment when the mind sees, acknowledges its insanity.”<sup>35</sup>

The beginning of the poem pictures the disintegration of the speaker’s world, and the degeneration of its old traditions into superficial and lifeless materialism. Greed and decadence have become the norm in a world experiencing decay on social, political and religious levels; disillusionment is taking over and the poem traces its continuation into the self. “The first four stanzas,” as Axelrod and Deese categorize them, “are written in the wryly humorous and loosely associative descriptive manner that ‘Life Studies’ was substituting for the mythic metaphors of *Lord Weary’s Castle*.”<sup>36</sup> In these stanzas, the speaker narrates the time line of declining events from the past to the present in a single place, Nautilus Island in Maine, delineated through a description of its people and what they have been experiencing. There is the “hermit heiress” whose “son’s bishop. Her farmer / is first selectman in our village; / she’s in her dotage,” and “[s]he buys up all / the eyesores facing her shores, / and lets them fall. / The season’s ill.” Also, there is “our summer millionaire,” who died and his “nine-knot yawl / was auctioned off to

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<sup>35</sup> Frank Bidart and David Gewanter, eds., *Robert Lowell: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 998.

<sup>36</sup> *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 65.

lobstermen;" while "our fairy / decorator brightens his shop for fall," and he has "no money in his work, / he'd rather marry" (p. 191). Lowell, of course, wants this place to be representative of a more universal time line: the decline of what is historically normal into something grotesque and desolate. In "Skunk Hour," Kearful summarizes, "the terminal poem in *Life Studies*, the hermit heiress is the terminal 'life study' of a dying New England aristocracy, to which Lowell himself belonged."<sup>37</sup> It is a post-war society that has lost its cultural and hierarchical structure. The overarching theme of retrogression covers the appearances of places and values of their inhabitants, as well as the character of the speaker himself. The physical place, Perloff proposes, becomes a "topography of the poet's inner landscape."<sup>38</sup> He is falling into insanity, and he is aware of it. Lowell, at this stage, is conscious of the changes sweeping his mind and there is nothing he can do about it; they have become part of who he is. Everything is out of the ordinary; nature, in terms of time and place, is distorted and does not bring joy any more, rather sorrow and putrescence: "The season's ill" and "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill" (p. 191); the image of the falling leaves looking like stains of blood depicts Autumn and the death it ushers into the world.

What is also out of the ordinary is the speaker's desire; he is drawn to sexual perversion. Lowell, unexpectedly, changes the scenery and the mood of the poem, in the fifth stanza, into utter disturbing seriousness: "One dark night, / my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull" (p. 191). Lowell could have said he drove the car up the hill, but he wants the reader to sense the power of the machine taking the lead over humanity. Beardsworth

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<sup>37</sup> 'Signs of Life in Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour"', *Connotations* 23, no. 2 (2014 2013): 318, <http://www.connotations.uni-tuebingen.de/kearful0232.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 4.

further elaborates that “invoking the mechanization of post-war mass culture with his reference to the ‘Tudor Ford,’ Lowell links the image to a sense of alienation and loss that results from his objectivization within its corresponding conformist mass.”<sup>39</sup> The dark night is a reflection of his physical environment and his own psyche. It is as if the speaker is climbing to a death’s head, with a clear reference to Calvary where Christ was crucified. His intention is to spy on lovers meeting in their “love-cars” where

Lights turned down  
they lay together, hull to hull,  
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .  
My mind’s not right. (p. 191)

These few lines show that within the depth of his psyche, the love scene is equated with a death scene; cars look like tombs laid next to each other, with no mention of the lovers inside; the whole scene is dehumanized and doomed with macabre hollowness. This bleak image is enhanced by the reference made to “graveyard” and “skull.” For the speaker, the desire for love is meshed by the desire for death; it is a suicidal tendency of a mind that is not right. Lowell admits that during writing the poem, “somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide.”<sup>40</sup> It is the apocalypse of a troubled soul, and the climax of self-revelation, where he divulges, “My mind’s not right” (p. 191). The inner turbulence of the speaker is forwardly put, and no endeavour is made to intensify it; its brilliant impact lies in its simple openness.

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Learning to Love the Bomb’, 110.

<sup>40</sup> “On ‘Skunk Hour.’” 132.

The speaker's sense of belonging to the island is set forth in the stanzas that depict the place and its people: "we've lost *our* summer millionaire" and "now *our* fairy / decorator" [Italics mine]; and, by implication it is Lowell's sense of belonging to the whole world. Both considerations serve to show that the deconstruction of the place is a deconstruction of the character, and both involve loss of identity. Despite this sense of belonging, however, the speaker is lonely, disoriented and cast out in a desolate place; he is the exile from *Lord Weary's Castle*. In both cases, the exile inhabits a chaotic world, where he feels lost and disillusioned and is in search of identity and absolution. "Skunk Hour" is "not primarily a poem of literary but of social allusion. . . . [It] depicts the psychic consequences of failing to live within the corporate ideology of the age. . . . The poem attempts to gather sufficient information for Lowell to define himself before he goes mad for lack of response."<sup>41</sup> As is always the case with Lowell, through the process of searching for these responses, investigating the outer world's crisis parallels his analytic introspection, as his inner precariousness has become a reflection of the surrounding decadence: "The season's ill" and so is his spirit.

It is evident from the poems of *Life Studies* that Lowell's manic episodes make their attacks anywhere and anytime; when he is in a mental institution as in "Waking in the Blue," in prison as in "Memories of West Street and Lepke," or in a coastal tourist village as in "Skunk Hour." For Lowell, the whole world has become an embodiment of rottenness and craziness that enhances his own mental collapse.

Lowell, now, moves from analysing his surrounding environment to self-analysis and, without hesitation, he confesses his most personal and disturbed feelings of emptiness and loss of internal coherence:

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<sup>41</sup> William Doreski, *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors: The Poetics of the Public and the Personal* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 90.

I hear  
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,  
as if my hand was at its throat. . . .  
I myself hell;  
nobody's here . . . (p. 192)

Going out in this unsettling night, and loitering in his car to attain some kind of sexual satisfaction is actually an attempt at escaping the dark impulses inside his mind and spirit; but, like Milton's Satan, he finds hell inside himself, incarnated in the murderer who is trying to choke his spirit. This must have been terrifying to Lowell; it is a horrible moment of apocalyptic revelation, in which he realizes he can easily lose control over his state of mind, leading to complete madness.

The revelation of Lowell's persona marks "a hallucinated sense of physical and psychological existence as an infernal calvary in which mechanical impulses drive dehumanized material objects to a violent end."<sup>42</sup> The human connection he seeks in watching these lovers is supposed to make him feel less lonely, because he knows at one level that it is his seclusion that drives him further to madness, but this kind of connection only accentuates his depression, because it is not real or interactive and happens at a distance. The poem, Doreski infers, "depicts a community in corporate failure, which results in blocked, frustrated, or incomplete discourse."<sup>43</sup> Lowell's persona in the poem is alienated, physically and spiritually, from his environment. In the same way, Lowell himself is getting further and further estranged from his world; coping with the changes around him and trying to understand them prove more difficult as he realizes his predicament of losing mind and faith in this dark night from the abyss, which is "not a

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<sup>42</sup> Axelrod and Deese, *Robert Lowell*, 65.

<sup>43</sup> *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*, 89.



Christian mystical one like Saint John of the Cross's,"<sup>44</sup> and hence it "is not gracious, but secular, Puritan, and agnostical,"<sup>45</sup> as Lowell reveals in his essay, "On 'Skunk Hour'." So far, the redemption the mentally damaged Lowell is looking for can be only partially found in writing; therefore, he is still in search of a full redemptive experience.

Most of the critical responses to this poem insist that at this stage of Lowell's life, he has lost his religious faith completely; yet, his mania shows references to remnants of spiritual belief which he neither adheres to nor renounces. His eschatological enquiries have become more personal; he wonders to what end his mental, sexual and spiritual apocalypse will take him; will death be the answer and the relief; where is the redemption within his own disturbed mental realm?

In the seventh stanza, instead of the acts of sexual love he came to watch in the first place, something bizarre and unexpected draws his muddled attention:

skunks, that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their souls up Main street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spare spire  
of the Trinitarian Church. (p. 192)

The apocalyptic psychological terror of the speaker is a minimized version of the terror generated in the world around him; and, as in most of Lowell's poems, the private experience acquires a public meaning. The image is somehow reminiscent of a marching army, invading a peace to occupy and take control of it. It is as if a military power is replacing an old system of faith whose representative "spire" is "spare" and no longer

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<sup>44</sup> Albert Gelpi, 'The Reign of the Kingfisher: Robert Lowell's Prophetic Poetry', in *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 65.

<sup>45</sup> 'On "Skunk Hour"', 131.

effective. The skunks, Axelrod proposes, “are the militant, brutish new order, commanding the ruins of the former civilization.”<sup>46</sup> These creatures are assuming their power over the materialistic domain of the town – Main Street – along with its spiritual domain – the Trinitarian Church. Disgust and ugliness are the new criteria in this new world, and Lowell predicts that such qualities will nurture and dominate; they will not be easily daunted or intimidated because the society has become oblivious to its old values and is swallowed by its own disintegration, like the lovers who are entrapped in their cars, “careless” (as the sound on the radio bleats) and oblivious to the existence of the marching skunks. The situation here is similar to that of the cities in Lowell’s poems of the 1940s and their inhabitants; they go about their normal life, ignorant of the imminent danger around them. The difference noted here is that the apocalypse in “Skunk Hour” is not laden with religious symbols and violent images, and is not described with an enthusiastic and heightened tone; and though the image of the skunks is terrifyingly grotesque, they do not cause havoc in the town.

After the climactic moment of the mental breakdown, Lowell, strangely enough, sees the marching of the skunks as “affirmation, an ambiguous one.”<sup>47</sup> There is an immediate change in the perceptions of the speaker; he is no longer a voyeur. Inexplicably, even to him, he relates to these skunks in more than one way; their “moonstruck eyes’ red fire” reminds him of his own enraged and crazy spirit. However, these skunks generate a kind of energy for life inside him that pushes him to “stand on top / of our back steps and breathe the rich air” (p. 192). This idea finds support in Bell’s words, “the ‘rich air’ that is cryptically incompatible with the poem’s darkening mood . . .

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<sup>46</sup> *Robert Lowell*, 131.

<sup>47</sup> Lowell, ‘On “Skunk Hour”’, 132.

is identified with survival, of course: breathing it keeps one going.”<sup>48</sup> Being unable to enjoy proper human contact and overwhelmed with self-deprecation for scavenging for pleasure, he finds himself identified with these repellent creatures scavenging for food; yet, their tenacity and wilfulness to exist encourage him to recover. These ostracized and isolated monstrously perceived animals are forcing their way through a civilization of nothingness to which they do not belong. The speaker watches, with admiration,

A mother skunk with her column of kittens swills  
the garbage pail.  
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup  
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,  
and will not scare. (p. 192)

They benefit from the discard of the society, and this makes their persistent will to live counteract the collapse and disintegration of this society; in them, “as a nocturnal scavenger, pest, and undesirably scented creature, Lowell finds the ideal symbol of praxis in the face of nothingness. Alone in the abyss of postwar culture his speaker sees only the skunks, who carry on and survive not in spite of the bleakness of culture, but because of it.”<sup>49</sup> The appearance of the skunks with full vitality in the middle of a gothic and existential night of nothingness, where the nihilistic speaker envisions death alongside love and sex, is an affirmation of renewal and regeneration, even if it means a rebirth of a new or unfamiliar form of life with different values. Again, Lowell asserts the cyclical movement of history or life and death, though figuratively. Perhaps this is what he meant when he described the sudden appearance of the skunks as “affirmation, an ambiguous one.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 69.

<sup>49</sup> Beardsworth, ‘Learning to Love the Bomb’, 112.

<sup>50</sup> ‘On “Skunk Hour”’, 132.

What this personally suggests to Lowell is that he might survive the deep chasm within his psyche, which identifies him with the ill culture of self-negation around him, and to which he is confined through a sense of belonging. Thus, by implication, he might survive the degenerative post-war world, to which he lost his mind and reassuring faith. Like the mother skunk which finds sustenance in the stale leftovers, there is a possibility that Lowell the artist finds sustenance in stories of a declining culture. As a result, resurrection is still a possibility, as he finds a sort of redemption in breathing the “rich air” despite the stickiness.

As a general note about this transitional phase in Lowell’s career, Williamson infers that Lowell “could not separate himself from his time; for it was in this time that he had renounced Catholic utopianism and turned to psychoanalysis and to a relativistic, socially sophisticated irony as the tools of insight and the rationale of form. And the aspiration of *Life Studies*, though muted and doubtful, was, on the whole, toward ‘difficult ordinary happiness.’”<sup>51</sup> “Skunk Hour,” though, does not come up with absolute reassuring answers to Lowell’s lifelong questions about life, religion or how to make a bewildered mind cope with a weltering world. In his acceptance speech for the National Book Award, Lowell says, “When I finished *Life Studies* I was left hanging on a question mark. I am still hanging there. I don’t know whether it is a death-rope or a life-line.”<sup>52</sup> As a result, making “Skunk Hour” the last poem of his volume, *Life Studies*, indicates that his manic depression still has a hold on him, the fluctuation of his faith has not disappeared from his mind and his poetry, and the world around him is still disintegrating, at least for him. So far, Lowell’s inner and outer tensions are still the same: unresolvable.

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<sup>51</sup> Alan Williamson, *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 78.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 277.

## Coda

Having investigated the literary and biographical backgrounds of H.D. and Robert Lowell, I have come to the conclusion that they share more similarities than differences. They are both American, from Puritanical origins. H.D. was raised in accordance with her mother's faith, Moravianism, while Lowell was brought up as an Episcopalian Protestant. Neither poet held solely to their inherited faith for long; H.D. soon showed interest in all religions and patterns of faith, selecting from each what she found suitable for her poetic ideas, so that she would later propose her own syncretic faith. In his mid-twenties, Lowell converted to the Roman Catholic Church. A few years later, he abandoned Catholicism to become a religious sceptic.

This study is based on the shared interest of the two poets in war, the overarching theme of their poems, under which lie all the disintegrations and the malaise of the modern age, mainly prompted by the First World War. In their poems, they seek to understand the reasons behind the military violence, and the deterioration of old values and beliefs that renders the modern self an exile in its own world. Both H.D. and Lowell agree that war is a meaningless facade that shows the ignorance and cruelty of mankind, for which they blame the dehumanizing scientific and militant strategies of an age that finds solutions in violence and power enforcement. For H.D., there is another target for her condemnation; she holds religious and classical myths accountable for warmongering and its consequences, since these orthodoxies support a society of masculine predominance and conceptions of violence as feasible.

Another shared interest that demonstrates itself clearly in the poetry of H.D. and Lowell is the shaping of history and the way it operates with regard to the traditional

paradigms of faith. Lowell mainly shows a deep involvement with his personal and familial history, and an ambivalent attachment to his Puritan ancestors' social, political and religious history. For H.D., history represents much older patterns of faith, rituals and mysteries. Her treatment of historical mythologies and beliefs goes back to those cultures of paganism, Egypt, Greece and Rome, with special interest in the Christian creed and Biblical stories. Still, they both agree on one important perception of history, which is its cyclical nature. This, in turn, makes war a recurrent event which they can do little to prevent, but they can surely try to minimize its devastating effect and promote a cyclical process of renewal and reconstruction similar to resurrection after the apocalypse.

This shared outlook on history, though, evokes different reactions in each of them. On the one hand, for Lowell, looking back at the history and tradition of America is somehow disappointing and even shameful; that is why he rebelled against the religious and cultural background of his forefathers. He conjures their original eschatological system only to invert it; this inversion, of course, includes the apocalyptic notion of Puritan New England. The City of God anticipated in Boston has turned, in Lowell's poems, into a city doomed to face the fate of Babylon; and, in his poems, Lowell transforms the Puritan Americans from the 'Children of Light' into the serpents of evil. His aim is to awaken people's interest in the importance of the spiritual past, to warn them and, at the same time, to chastise those who undermined its importance in the first place by exploiting spiritual traditions as a cover for their perversities.

On the other hand, history being cyclical is an opportunity for H.D. to write new prophetic versions of its religious and mythical traditions with personal meaning and modern references; it is a source of inspiration. She acts as an eclectic reformer whose mind and senses are open to any religious or mythic beliefs and their rituals as long as they form a part of the new syncretic faith she aspires to demonstrate in her poems. The

recreation of these myths throughout her poems is a form of resurrection; she transcribes old languages and the product is a revised system of belief that does not lose ties with the traditional one. It is important for H.D. that this process takes place within a framework of prophetic feminine context of healing and resurrection after a crisis.

This breaking with convention and defying of the traditional authorities set H.D. and Lowell apart from poets like Eliot and Yeats; the first never gave up on asserting the significance of the Church, while the second never lost faith in the state despite the political turbulence in Ireland. Their radical non-conformism has made some critics consider them as post-modernist iconoclastic poets who radically challenged established truths and create their own supreme fictions.

One of the most important shared biographical details is that H.D. and Lowell went through a transitional phase that had a transformative impact on their personal lives and careers. What stimulated the change was mainly the First World War for H.D., and the Second World War for Lowell. After that, they embarked on writing more personal poems; for Lowell, they were even called “confessional.” H.D. and Lowell cut loose from the poetic forms with which they were defined so far, and they found freer and more confident voices for their post-transitional poems.

It is logical to discover, then, that the personal parallels the universal in the works of H.D. and Lowell; each reflects the other. The disintegration of the physical setting of their poems mirrors the emotional and mental disintegration of the individual and of the society, including the poet and his/her personae. The apocalypse in their poems functions at one level as a blow to consciousness, and leads to feelings of self-annihilation before conceiving a visionary rhetoric of healing and rebirth. For example, the speaker of “Skunk Hour” reaches a stage of apocalyptic mania where, in “a dark night,” he conceives

of himself as “hell,” before he stands on Calvary Hill, suggesting resurrection and some sort of determined hope for the resumption of life.

Similarly, H.D., in *Trilogy*, envisages apocalyptic images in our modern age, the genesis of which is derived from the orthodox Christian depiction of an Apocalypse that will end the world in preparation for a day of judgement and resurrection. H.D.’s imagined apocalypse is triggered by war, the catalysts of which are violent and utilitarian concepts that have replaced the spiritual and ethical ones. This man-made apocalypse is depicted within the physical environment of a place devastated by acts of war, as well as within the individual and collective consciousness. This is clearly demonstrated in the first poem of the collection, “The Walls Do Not Fall.” Trigilio remarks that “H.D.’s construction of an apocalyptic consciousness in *Trilogy* emerges from her blurring of the boundary between materialist and visionary modes of psychic representation,” and by implication, “locating the immanent in the apocalyptic and the apocalyptic in the immanent.”<sup>1</sup> Although Trigilio’s argument is confined to H.D.’s poetry, this study has made it clear that the same can be said of Lowell’s poems, where the crisis within the psyche is a continuation of the outer crisis, and the physical and moral disintegration of a world suffering from the ramifications of war resembles the spiritual and psychic disintegration residing within Lowell’s personae, or even Lowell himself.

The present study deduces that, in several poems of H.D. and Lowell, cities, named or not, are depicted so as to imply the closeness and belonging of the poet to his environment, and to invite the reader as well to feel this close proximity. It is also concluded that the images with which H.D.’s cities are portrayed in early poems like “The Tribute” and “Cities” are those of figurative destruction and dark apocalyptic atmosphere,

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<sup>1</sup> *Strange Prophecies Anew*, 17.



just as in Lowell's portrayal of Boston, Salem and Concord. In these places, the decay is caused by the ubiquitous market values that operate at the expense of the spiritual values, and by a process of mechanization that produces a self-alienated human being. The setting and the descriptive depiction of the cities in H.D.'s later poems that deal with the Second World War, such as "May 1943," "Christmas 1944" and "The Walls Do Not Fall," show literal destruction and debris left by actual warfare, including the bombing of London. The apocalyptic impact here is tangible, as well as abstract.

Lowell's first two volumes, *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle*, are known for their intense religious imagery and symbolism, with frequent references to the apocalyptic tradition of Christianity and its eschatology in general. These references are employed as warning signs against the consequences of estrangement. Yet, Lowell does not emphatically propose a clear and confident outlet for salvation or relief from the crises of war and spiritual bankruptcy. Similarly, he does not end his poems with a hopeful tone for a better future; his vision is more likely to be hesitant and ambiguous, as in "The Exile's Return." These poems rather provide a harsh and bitter criticism of the causes of war and work through focused descriptive images of death, violence and internal exile. The poet's voice at that early stage of his career is very similar to that of an angry preacher or prophet.

Lowell's later book, *Life Studies*, is endorsed by most critics as an exemplary representation of confessional poetry. Although it does concentrate on details from Lowell's personal life and the people in it, most of its poems are related to the theme of war. It is clear that Lowell never relinquished the idea of the apocalypse, and nor did he cease his eschatological contemplation within religious and secular contexts. The idea of redemption and resurrection is more evident in "Skunk Hour" than it is in most of his early poems. It is not easy to define Lowell's faith in any stage of his life and career, but it

has definitely subsided by the time he abandoned the Roman Catholic Church. The general tone of the poems of *Lord Weary's Castle* is strict, austere and almost forbidding, while the poems of *Life Studies* are written with a touch of warmth and humanity, a feature that would be inherent within his style for the rest of his career.

Unlike his early poems, in which his vision is to emphasize humanity's likeness to God, his mid-career poems investigate the individual's likeness to an original ethical self, rendering Lowell's vision during this period more realistic than mystical, and the poetic treatment more secular than religious. Nevertheless, in one way or another, Lowell was interested in the redemption of the self within a religious context; but, more specifically, within a secular one. Sin, and the sense of guilt it causes, is presented in the later poems mainly as a transgression against society and its ethos, as opposed to those trespasses against God and his rules in the earlier poems, where punishment is conceived in terms of spiritual damnation and God's apocalyptic wrath. The punishment the individual faces in Lowell's later poems is the loss of identity and consequent social estrangement. This breakdown of communication shatters dreams and aspirations in a world advocating scientific progression, but neglecting spiritual evolution. Such ailment in the individual leads to social malaise.

H.D. and Lowell did not entirely negate older eschatological models, rather they revised them and transformed them into new ones customized for an age governed by the rules and regulations of science, industrialism and military empowerment. Both are concerned with the eschatologies that serve humankind in this life and on earth, not after their actual physical death, or after the end of this universe as predicted in orthodox religious literature, where the righteous believers will blissfully reside forever in the Kingdom of God, while the wicked and the disobedient will perish in hell. "Apocalypse as both destruction and unveiling – as both the end of old forms of thought and being and

the beginning of a new end/purpose – is represented by these poets in language that forecasts the turn from teleology to ontology in critical theory and cultural studies in the West.”<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding, Lowell’s early poetry evinces the Catholic poet who speaks in terms of the teleological theory behind the eschatology of the apocalypse and resurrection, at least as a way to make his poetic prophecies cogent and applicable, by deriving them from a long-established religious creed.

Despite some obvious differences in personality and style, H.D. and Lowell engineer their eschatologies in a time of war in strikingly similar ways: both evaded the linear plot of traditional Christianity in birth, death, redemption (heaven) or damnation (hell), and both established a counter-belief in a cyclical movement of history that is not confined to a certain time or place. Not fully comprehending or believing what lies beyond the end of existence or what resurrection really involves according to Christian teaching, they propose a more reassuring fate for humanity: after the end, there is a new beginning, after a spiritual and psychic death, there is resurrection and healing. This is their way of overcoming the fear of death and finality in a world plagued with the destructive recurrence of war and conflict. This sense of resistance and survival is evident in the continuing value of their work which, in itself, is part of the cosmic cyclical process. Their poems convey the importance of the word as an enduring medium for reservation and renewal at the same time. In its continuity, poetry itself becomes a kind of immortality, holding in tension the known life and the unknown afterlife. In a sense, it has become its own eschatology. In the beginning was the Word of God and its eschatology, and within the cyclical process of history, the word has been transformed into a poetry that illuminates the future as much as it illuminates the past; its prophetic role is to heal and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 15.

renew hearts and minds, and hence to create a new sense of eschatology that spurs and quickens spiritual resurrection. The epitaph on Lowell's grave says it all: "The Immortal is Scraped Unconsenting from the Mortal."

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