

**‘Are you giving yourself to me to make a self?’: Sacrifice, Pronoun Shifts and the
Creation of Self in H. D.’s Prose Works**

Abstract

Experimental shifts between first, second, and third person narration continuously create and destroy the narrative self in H. D.’s prose. These shifts signify movement between various levels of self-consciousness or various levels of experiencing the self by dissolving the borders of the narrator. H. D.’s novels describe the intricacies of searching for the self and the apparent paradox of finding it precisely when it has been given up or sacrificed.

Paradoxically, the self needs to be destroyed in order to be recreated. Moreover her narrative pronoun shifts show that the self needs to be immersed in a larger, shared experience of intersubjectivity to grow and develop, even though this means that the borders of the self lose definition. In this way, H. D. not only navigates the winding road of self-development, but also explores what it means to share universal experiences, primarily those of sacrifice and destruction. H. D.’s works in general are often read as autobiographical and primarily relevant as a key to understanding the lives of her and her contemporaries. This article shows how H. D.’s use of pronoun shifts indicates a concern with her own subjective experiences, but also with intersubjectivity and shared experiences across time and space. Using experiments with pronoun shifts, H. D. shows how personal narratives become universal and how universal narratives become personal, thereby creating autobiographical works that are relevant in a broader context.

Keywords

Hilda Doolittle, pronoun shifts, modernism, experimental narration, sacrifice

Experimental shifts between first, second, and third person narration continuously create and destroy the narrative self in Hilda Doolittle's 'fictional autobiographies,' as Georgia Johnston called them (63). The creation of the narrative self is paradoxically accomplished through a sacrifice of the self; the self needs to be destroyed in order to be created. Narrative pronoun shifts represent this dialectic on the page by conflating first, second, and third person referents. These confluences reflect the personal struggles represented in the texts and are used to explore what it means to share universal experiences, in particular experiences of sacrifice. The pronoun shifts cause an amalgamation of subject, object, and whatever is in between by moving between the first, second, and third person, thereby textually overcoming the apparent contradiction between individuality and universality.

On the thematic level of H. D.'s texts, sacrifice is primarily explored in the context of war and childbirth. The narratives describe the intricacies of searching for a true identity and the apparent paradox of finding the self precisely when the self has been relinquished. The external circumstances that cause H. D.'s characters to make literal, physical sacrifices have implications for characters' sense of self and the sacrifices made transform their self-consciousness. This process is represented on the grammatical level by pronoun shifts. Movement between various levels of self-consciousness – or various levels of experiencing the self – is signified by changes in the personal pronouns used by the narrator, thereby dissolving the borderlines of the narrating self.

H. D. seems to have been of the view that suffering and sacrifice are inevitable facts of life. In *Notes on Thought and Vision* (written 1919, published 1982) – an early formulation of her ideas on the nature of the mind, body, and spirit – she explains why:

There are two ways of escaping the pain and despair of life, and of the rarest, most subtle dangerous and ensnaring gift that life can bring us, relationship with another person – love. One way is to kill that love in one's heart. To kill love – to kill life. The other way is to accept that love, to accept the snare, to accept the pricks, the thistle. To accept life – but that is dangerous. (*Notes* 39)

In other words, love and life are the same thing, suffering is an inevitable aspect of both, and the only way to escape it is to turn one's back on life altogether. The second way mentioned in the quotation is not so much an escape from suffering as it is reconciliation with the fact that suffering is inescapable.

H. D.'s valuation of sacrifice did not diminish later in life. It is clear from her notes, letters, and fictional writings of the Second World War that she regarded the many sacrifices that had to be made during the war as strengthening the community. She is particularly proud of the young women who nursed victims, worked in canteens, and drove ambulances during the Blitz. The poem 'May 1943' – republished in a 2014 volume of H. D.'s collected writings from the Second World War – is an ode to a sacrifice made by the younger generation. A girl named Goldie is killed whilst driving an emergency car through London. Annette Debo suggests 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,' and that Goldie 'represents the national spirit' (*Within the Walls* 35). The figure of Goldie stands as an emblem of the communal effort in wartime; the poem states that 'Goldie was one of us, / we are one with Goldie' (160). Goldie exemplifies the individual that gives her life for the benefit of the community, and in doing so ceases to exist as an individual, but lives on in the communal spirit. Further on in the poem, H. D. writes that 'Goldie was only one, / Goldie's all around us' (161), which indicates the transcendent nature of sacrifice. Goldie is a singular individual, only one person, but she becomes one with all those involved in the war effort. Therefore, she remains 'all around us' (161) by transcending her individual self and transforming into a communal spirit.

Lara Vetter's *A Curious Peril* (2017) argues that H. D. not only found the war rewarding for the community spirit in London, but that she found it 'therapeutic' and a 'psychological necessity' (2). These adjectives may seem remarkable in conjunction with the

trials and tribulations that the war brought, but as Vetter attests, the Second World War allowed for her to work through traumatic memories of the First World War. While the privation of the Second World War certainly impacted her health, H. D. found solace in the sense that Londoners were in it together. Vetter holds that H. D.'s late prose that deals with the Second World War – *The Sword Went Out to Sea* above all – ‘brings together the material, political world with the realm of the immaterial, the mystical, the otherworldly’ (4). H. D.'s concern with the spiritual or ineffable in this and other late novels is not wholly abstract; it also ‘constitute[s] a sustained confrontation with imperial history, specifically the history of the British Empire’ (17). For Vetter, this separates H. D.'s late work from early modernism, in that ‘[t]he turn (...) is outward. The personal spiritual experience has become a communal one.’ (67) This, however, does not obstruct a concern with representations of self for H. D., as Vetter further argues that *The Sword Went Out to Sea* ‘launches the most radical critique of self and its representation. While the autobiographical “I” always already denotes a division of self, during a time of trauma that self is more violently fragmentary.’ (44) I suggest that this is equally true for the works that deal with the First World War. Understanding H. D.'s prose as a simultaneously personal and communal project for working through trauma is key for reading sacrifice as a narrative strategy through pronoun shifts in her entire oeuvre.

For many years, H. D. was primarily known as a writer of poetry due to the difficulties she faced in publishing her prose during her lifetime.¹ In recent years, the publication of her novels, both early and late, has allowed H. D. scholars a better chance to look more closely at these texts than before. There is now a range of works available, from the early experiments of the so-called Madrigal cycle – *Paint It Today* (1992), *Asphodel*

¹ The complicated composition and publication history of H. D.'s prose is discussed in detail by Susan Stanford Friedman in *Signets* (46-51) and *Penelope's Web* (20-3).

(1992), *HERmione* (1981), and the eponymous *Bid Me to Live (A Madrigal)* (1960) – to the later Delia Alton texts, such as *The Sword Went Out to Sea* (2007).

Examples of sacrifice as a narrative strategy are plentiful throughout H. D.'s oeuvre. Vetter broadly indicates its use in the late prose works: 'As the world falls apart, narrative structure crumbles' (*A Curious Peril* 25). I will focus here on the Madrigal cycle because it contains several works that have a consistent use of pronoun shifts. The four novels that make up the Madrigal cycle all tell more or less the same story, albeit in different ways, about a protagonist bearing a strong resemblance to H. D. The cumulative story told takes us from her adolescence, her move to England, through the war years, and ends with the birth of her child. I look at two texts that share the same protagonist, *HERmione* and *Asphodel*, as well as *Bid Me to Live*, which was prepared for publication by H. D. and is often considered to be the finished version of the story. I use it here not only due to its status as the most significant and most widely read of the Madrigal novels, but also because it has so many similarities with *Asphodel* – it is in fact a later incarnation of the same manuscript – that it would be counterintuitive to discuss one and not the other.²

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H. D.'s preoccupation with finding a self is perhaps never so obvious as in *HERmione*, in which the eponymous character constantly appears to question her individuality whilst seeking the origin of that same individuality. The narrative is initially told in the third person and, as it goes along, first person narration breaks through, notably in Hermione's statement early on that 'I am Her. I am Hermione' (*HERmione* 29). Matte Robinson and Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos suggest in '*HERmione* and other prose' that the constant reiteration of

² H. D. thought of *Asphodel* as an 'early edition' of *Bid Me to Live* and left instructions, both in a letter to Norman Holmes Pearson and on the manuscript itself, to destroy it (Friedman, *Penelope's Web* 102, 141, 170). *Paint It Today* is not discussed here as it distinguishes itself from the other Madrigal novels in its use of pronoun shifts, which would merit its own separate discussion.

Hermione's name is a way for her to merge her subject and object selves (132). While my interpretation coheres with this view, I argue that the work of merging the selves is never done; it is ongoing throughout the narrative and Hermione never attains a sense of a firm, unchanging self. The continuous wordplay on the short version of Hermione's name (Her) and the third person singular feminine pronoun (her) increases the sense that identity is based on words, but that this is not a stable form of self. The word-based versions of the self that she is playing with are not necessarily representative of the self for which Hermione is searching.

The sacrifice of the self as subject by creating the self as object – giving up the self to be annihilated and simultaneously immersed into a larger whole – constitutes the contradictory nature of sacrifice in H. D.'s texts. On the one hand, it is self-destructive, and on the other, it is conducive to a regeneration or development of the self by becoming part of a bigger entity. As Hegel argues, it is only by giving up a sense of self, or by putting it at risk, that it is possible to achieve self-consciousness. *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807) states that

it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence... The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. In the same way each must aim at the death of the other, as it risks its own life thereby... (107)

Sacrificing the self is thus not a mere aid to the completion of a fully formed self-consciousness, but it is *required* for the successful development of selfhood. Hegel applies a sacrificial economy to metaphysics in order to formulate a model of the creation of selfhood in relation to society. Knowledge of the self is the only absolute truth according to Hegel, but this cannot be accomplished without the Other. In order to exist, self-consciousness has to be incorporated into another consciousness. Self-consciousness needs acknowledgment and

cannot exist without intersubjectivity, that is, without another self. Acknowledgment from the other creates a true certainty of the self and thereby the existence of self-consciousness.

In *HERmione*, Hermione tries to create or rather recreate her self in an internal monologue, which is not represented within inverted commas, but as the direct speech of the narrator. She ponders the fact that her name is from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*: 'I am out of this book(...) I am Her, I am Hermione...' (*HERmione* 32). H. D. directs the reader's attention eastward a few lines earlier, when Hermione looks at a book that stands beside *The Winter's Tale* on the shelf and thinks that it could be *The Mahabharata*, an ancient Indian epic. What follows is a conflation of Hermione thinking of herself as Hermione and thinking that she is more than Hermione, more than her individual self: 'I am the word AUM. Hermione dropped the volume. This frightened her. God is in a word. God is in a word. God is in HER. She said, "HER, HER, HER. I am Her, I am Hermione... I am the word AUM." This frightened her' (32). Hindus consider the syllable commonly transcribed as Aum or Om as the holiest of all syllables. It is a representation of God or Brahman, the absolute reality or world soul. She realises the sacred nature of this syllable, that it is not like any other, and that it has to be treated with more respect than other, more mundane words. The deep sense of significance that comes over her is too much to bear and she tries instead to repeat her given name so as to keep herself grounded and present in corporeality.

Finding her true identity in Aum means that her real, inner self is not made up of the physical person whose name is Hermione, but rather of the ethereal soul, which is part of a greater whole: the entity represented by Aum in Hinduism, which may be designated as the world soul, absolute reality, or supreme existence. This notion of the human soul being part of a greater world soul is not only present in Hinduism but in many other philosophies, for instance Idealism and Daoism. Her incorporation of elements of non-Christian religions into her writing is well known and researched, as is the interest in ancient systems of thought in

avant-garde circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.³ The idea of chanting Aum as a path to finding the self, and the notion that such a path can be fraught with danger, is both an expression of H. D.'s wish to explore alternatives to Christian spirituality and an illustration of the simultaneous fruitfulness and futility of searching for the self. Hermione's self cannot be found in her name because it is too superficial and isolated. Neither can it be found in Aum, because that it too profound; the only possibility is a fluctuation between the two polarities. Her search for an identity in words thereby concludes with the discovery of something so momentous as to be incomprehensible and frightening, and therefore not possible to explore fully, at least not without Hermione running the risk of losing herself entirely in the greater world soul.

Another way to consider this passage is in terms of creativity. As Aum encompasses the world and all its conscious beings, so does creativity, and the creator must tap into Aum for a creative product to be meaningful to others. In a sense, Aum *is* creativity, and that is why it is both alluring and frightening. Creativity as a means of intersubjectivity is one of H. D.'s core conundrums, as she constantly returns to the idea of a panhuman experience, meaning an experience of life that is shared across the superficial boundaries of gender, age, culture, and historical moment. This is clear from the comparisons with and shapeshifting into historical or mythological characters such as Joan of Arc and Morgan le Fay.⁴ The

³ Just as many of her contemporaries, H. D. was inspired by Jane Harrison's scholarship and fascinated by antiquity in general and ancient Egypt and Greece in particular. Full-length studies of H. D.'s engagement with the classical world include Thomas Burnett Swann, *The Classical World of H. D.* (1962), Eileen Gregory, *H. D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines* (1997), and Diana Collecott, *H. D. and Sapphic Modernism, 1910-1950* (1999). For a full-length study of Harrison's influence on modernist literature, see Martha C. Carpentier's *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot and Woolf* (1998).

⁴ Lara Vetter writes in *A Curious Peril* about a similar kind of shape-shifting that takes place in *The Sword Went Out to Sea*. Vetter argues that the protagonist Delia, 'rather than sharing her body with others, she creates entirely autonomous characters who exist outside of herself.' (65) In this late work, H. D.'s proxy Delia Alton does not compare herself to historical personages; she creates them. Sheila Murnaghan has also explored the element of mythical

permeability of H. D.'s characters allows them to be recreated through imagination; they can conjure themselves as another character, in another time and place. However, the permeable self is also a disadvantage because of its instability. One may wonder if H. D.'s characters ever know who they really are, as they are constantly teetering on the brink of dissociative identity disorder.

The expression of Hermione's experience of the development of self echoes Hegel's dictum that there must be an Other against which to create your Self, in that the pronoun shifts produce the dynamic motion between Self and Other. Building on Hegel, as well as later phenomenologists Husserl and Habermas, cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett suggests that if the self is to be understood as having an experience of consciousness, it has not only to have an Other in which to reflect itself and to be reflected; it has to narrate its self-reflection to another subject. Dennett proposes that the conscious self does not exist at all outside language. He calls the self a 'centre of narrative gravity', which – like other centres of gravity – is an entirely theoretical construct, needed in order to make sense of various concrete facts of life ('Self as Center' 103). Within this explanatory model, the disadvantage of a character's permeable self becomes clear: the self as a centre of narrative gravity is unstable.

The self does, however, need to be flexible in order to develop. Dennett's theory proposes that all we can know about the self is the narrative that is spun around it. This hypothesis is corroborated by the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, who writes that the conscious brain gives the impressions with which it is bombarded 'some kind of coherent narrative structure' that must 'protagonize', which causes the self to form (*Self Comes to Mind* 173, 202). In *Content and Consciousness* (1969), Daniel Dennett explains the reason

characters in H. D.'s writing, arguing that H. D. used myth to understand her experience of the present, in 'H.D., Daughter of Helen: Mythology as Actuality.' Murnaghan traces the fascination with mythology in general and Hellenic myth in particular from H. D.'s childhood, through her early poetry and the relationship with Freud, to the long poem *Helen in Egypt* (1961), which is usually read as a feminist revision of the story of Helen of Troy (see footnote 5).

why we find it difficult to make sense of the consciousness of animals and other sentient beings. He argues that we assume that an experience of consciousness that is not narrated must be different from that of a human experience of consciousness, because ‘if dumb animals are aware of things, have conscious experience, we can never know what it is like, since they cannot tell us’ (134) and if we do not know what it is like, we do not experience intersubjectivity. Human beings understand self-consciousness through the narrative of the self – the self has not only got to be reflective, but also able to narrate its self-reflection to another subject if it is to be understood as having an experience of a conscious self.

To illustrate this in a textual narrative, a ‘you’ has to be created so that the self as a centre of narrative gravity can form. The second person is used intermittently in *HERmione*, but more so in *Asphodel*, which continues the story of Hermione as she travels to Europe, settles in England, and gives birth to a child. In the second half of the novel, ‘you’ is particularly used to refer to several different characters or entities. In *Asphodel*’s first half, it is clearer to whom the second person refers when it is used, for instance in inner monologues of the joint narrator and protagonist – that is, not within inverted commas – addressed to fellow characters:

She had felt the peace of nothingness and she supposed she must now pay. The woman pays. She had paid. She was paying. O Darrington, where are you? I sent you away. You were the one person who could understand this. ... Someone, something wanted her to write. For writing and life were not diametric opposites. (76)

This passage clearly mixes third person stream of consciousness with the first person and the narration zooms in on the character that, for a brief moment, acts as a subjective first person narrator. Another instance is during a music performance by Walter Dowel, one of Hermione’s Paris friends and a great pianist, during which a long internal monologue of Hermione’s is recounted and where more than one other character is addressed in the second person:

It's almost as if you, Clara, understood what I was, am going through. ... But you are stronger than I and O Walter poor little Walter they started you when you were three. ... If I weren't so sorry, didn't feel you so much Walter, I couldn't myself sit so still here... But you Walter, they put you to school when you were three and don't you see, all my life it's killed me, this that they didn't teach me something when I was three. But it doesn't matter. Things don't just happen and if I can't play it makes it better for you, for just this moment. I am crucified for you and you for the thing beyond me that is getting through to you. Is this your own music Walter? (28)

Interestingly, the mention of crucifixion – referring to Hermione's lack of practical or artistic skill, which is perceived to be relative to Walter's in the sense that if she is unable to play, his ability can be allowed to shine – shows that a religiously coded symbol of sacrifice is used to describe a rather ordinary, everyday occurrence of sacrifice. The selfless attitude taken up by Hermione is mingled with a tone of irony, as though she begrudges Walter his role as focal point for the admiration of others here.

The second part of *Asphodel*, which concerns the pregnancy of the protagonist, frequently uses second-person narration to include a person in the dialogue who is not yet a physically self-contained person: the unborn child. This suggests that pregnancy is the most literal form of intersubjectivity, as it is a state in which two persons, two selves, are contained in one physical body. Based on Dennett's theory of self, the two persons are also by necessity contained in one centre of narrative gravity, as the unborn child has no known way of communication with any other self. It has no Other to whom it can narrate itself, unless it is possible for it to experience the mother as an Other and to narrate itself against this entity.

The second person in the latter half of *Asphodel* does not always refer to the unborn child, however. Frequently, Hermione uses it to refer to herself or her partner Beryl, with additional possible referents being the reader or some otherwise unknown entity. The fluidity of referents, as well as the fact that Hermione refers to them all (including herself) as Morgan le Fay, creates a fluid and shared identity between them. However, it is primarily Hermione herself that experiences this porous identity or intersubjectivity. In contrast, Beryl is obsessed with the boundaries of her self, as well as the creation and destruction of self:

She [referring to Beryl] was too young to talk about self, self, self – what was self? Self was a white carnation in a tall, green tumbler, (you can't kill your *self*) self was a lotus-lily folded in the mud, self was the scent of pot-pourri across the fumes of beech bark burning in an elegant room and the polish on the floor and the net of gilt that was the sun, that was the curtain before the window that caught the sun, self was the sun caught in a drawing room curtain, caught now in a curtain that was too heavy.
(*Asphodel* 177)

Hermione uses the second person within brackets to pose a statement simultaneously to herself, to Beryl, and to the reader, which negates the possibility of self-sacrifice in the sense that it is impossible to wipe your self out by way of committing suicide. Hermione states that the self, once found, is indestructible, or at least that it is not possible for oneself to eradicate one's self. Considering Hegel's theory above, she is right; it would require the lack of recognition from others, just as the creation of the self requires the acknowledgement of a community or an other. It is impossible to be a self in isolation; although *Asphodel's* Hermione tries to construct a self independently, she finds that there are parts of her self that are created by others, the influence of which she is unable to combat or even fully understand: 'Hermione had determined to sink into her own self-made aura. Herself [sic] had woven herself an aura, a net, a soft and luminous cocoon but somehow daemon eyes drew out of her all those things, all these other things' (185). Struggling to hold onto her self-made self, Hermione realises that there is no escaping the definitions of others; they create her as much as she does herself, and she cannot protect herself from becoming what others make of her. Even though she tries to define her own self and preserve it in the face of others, '...holding herself in so many layers, so carefully housed,' she becomes 'confused and blurred by the cocoon state she was in. Self. What is self?' (179) The difficulty of answering the question of what self is stems from the difficulty of negotiation between the subjective and objective selves that are created simultaneously, one from within, through the self-reflective gaze, and the other from without, through a multitude of external gazes, which can be in conflict between themselves as well as with the self-reflective gaze.

When H. D. writes that the '[s]elf is a lotus bud slimed over in mud,' it is tempting to think that the value implicit in the statement that Hermione's self-reflective gaze needs protection from the 'daemon eyes' of others means that the lotus bud is the self-made self and the mud is the self that is created by others, and that the self-made self would be better off without being covered in slimy mud. However, mud is generally necessary for flowers to grow; while it is not meant to cover the bud, it is not going to kill the plant or stop the bud from developing into a flower. The use of the word 'slimed' further suggests that the mud sticks to the bud, that the two are not to be separated without some measure of force that could potentially harm the bud, and that the slimy mud makes the bud less visually appealing.

The slimy bud also offers another reading: a slightly unpleasant, albeit fairly realistic, image of a newborn child. The Madrigal cycle displays a curious and problematic relationship between creative writing and childbearing – both are present, but indirectly, as neither is ever described as it takes place, nor is there any rendering of what went on in the mind of the protagonist at the time of either event. Donna Krolik Hollenberg claims that the Madrigal cycle 'revealed the tension between creativity and procreation [H. D.] was experiencing' and that it was not until the Second World War that 'she began to use the symbol of the child both to suggest the human potential to re-create the self and to critique the institution of motherhood' (*Poetics of Childbirth* 6), thereby turning on its head the traditional idea of artistry as incompatible with motherhood. I suggest that H. D. does this already in *Asphodel*, where the child Hermione is pregnant with – the child whom she calls 'small le Fay' in reference to her own doubling of Morgan le Fay earlier in the volume – is overtly said to usurp Hermione's self, whilst containing the possibility to regenerate it: 'Small le Fay, you are more a self than I am, but I am giving myself to you to make a self. Are you giving yourself to me to make a self?' (*Asphodel* 179). This quote implies not only

an acknowledgement of the physical sacrifice that pregnancy entails, but a reciprocity in the sense that motherhood will possibly afford Hermione a new identity.

It is not motherhood, however, that is the focus of H. D.'s fictional renderings of procreation – it is pregnancy and childbirth. The first pregnancies in *Asphodel* and *Bid Me to Live* result in stillbirths; the second pregnancies that culminate in the birth of healthy babies terminate both narratives. The protagonists are never narrated as mothers, only as mothers-to-be, or – rather – as pregnant and labouring women. The significance of this is that it is not the long-term, durational story of a life devoted to motherhood that H. D. wishes to tell, but the physical battle of women's childbearing, one that can be compared and related to men's soldiering. Susan Stanford Friedman suggests that 'H. D. paralleled war and pregnancy as public and private versions of an underlying patriarchal structure [and] proposed women's procreative power as a counterweight to men's violence, as a regenerative force in the (re)birth of both individual and society' in *Asphodel (Penelope's Web 184-5)*. H. D. did not, then, focus on the sacrifice of the mother – a more traditional trope in war literature – but rather on the sacrifice of the pregnant, childbearing woman who renounces herself bodily to bring life to another person.

Another example of sacrifice and pregnancy/childbirth being overtly compared in *Asphodel* is when Hermione considers whether or not it is her fate to become a mother, a thought that appears to terrify her. In a long paragraph of stream of consciousness, she initially thinks of the Virgin Mary as analogous to herself, but she also ponders Christ's refusal of the drink he was offered before his death – a passage that is normally interpreted as Christ's unwillingness to dull his experience of the sacrifice he was about to make – and connects this willingness to suffer with childbirth:

George said there needn't be any children. Must I ever, should I ever have one?
George Lowndes said I would look like Maria della something or other... Incense to numb out your pain but Christ wouldn't take the sponge (O why, why didn't he?) they offered him. Chloroform I read in the *Materia Medica* doesn't always help though

sometimes – don't let me scream. Don't let me die. Perhaps it's my Hell and must we all pass through it to get to meadows thick with water lilies? (13)

The implication is that the bodily trauma of childbirth should be gone through gracefully, without screaming or otherwise displaying the abhorrence Hermione expects to feel at the mortification of the flesh, just as a soldier is expected to run bravely into the firing line. Hermione prays that she will not express the depth of the suffering that she expects to experience through childbirth, but the underlying sentiment might be that she would rather not experience such a thing at all, as the initial thought is about avoiding pregnancy and the question of whether she 'must' at some point in her life have a child. She concludes by asking if we all have to experience suffering to get enjoyment, employing an explanation of sacrificial economy to answer the question of why suffering appears to be a fact of life.

After her miscarriage, Hermione again describes pregnancy as a sacrifice comparable to crucifixion, or possibly even worse, considering the drawn out, tortuous experience of pregnancy:

The state she had been in was a deadly crucifixion. Not one torture (though God that had been enough) but months and months when her flaming mind beat up and she found she was caught, her mind not taking her as usual like a wild bird but her mind-wings beating, beating and her feet caught, her feet caught, glued like a wild bird in bird-lime. (*Asphodel* 113)

She mainly feels the restriction through the imposed rest-cure she appears to have been under, where she has not been allowed to read, write, or see her friends. Additionally, she is pained by her inability to talk about the unnecessarily cruel process she has had to endure without being considered a woman who cannot accept her sacrifice gracefully.

...there were no words to tell it in. How tell it? ...men will say she was a coward, a woman who refused her womanhood. No, she hadn't. But take a man with a flaming mind and ask him to do this. Ask him to sit in a dark cellar and no books... but you mustn't. You can't. Women can't speak and clever women don't have children. So if a clever woman does speak, she must be mad. She is mad. She wouldn't have had a baby, if she hadn't been. (113)

‘Clever women’, it seems, must endure more suffering through the sacrifice of motherhood than others. The unspeakability of the sacrifice is partly due to the unspeakability of women – in particular clever women, who will be seen as mad if they do speak – and partly to the unspeakability of the trauma of childbirth.

The extent to which the Hermione in *Asphodel* considers herself to have suffered through childbirth is clarified by her comparison of her situation to that of Christ, and the almost embittered tone over not having died after the ordeal:

Hermione had had her share of suffering and if she took more than her share of suffering the world would topple over for you can’t arrogate virtue to yourself, you can’t suffer more than Christ – and she had suffered. Dead, resurrected, but she had come to the wrong place. She belonged in heaven after Phoebe [Hermione’s newly born daughter] – and she wasn’t in heaven (200).

After all that suffering, Hermione feels that it would have made more sense to die, with the possibility of being rewarded in the after-life, rather than keep her life and be forced to struggle through the difficulties of being a new parent in the aftermath of war. What she does get, however, is a new piece to add to her experience of self: the identity of a mother.

The experience of sacrifice, self-destruction, and self-creation through pregnancy and childbirth is for H. D. part of a universal and timeless experience of sacrifice and self-development that can be lived via other bodily traumas as well, such as war or ritual blood sacrifice. Whether there needs to be physical suffering or merely a threat of it, the universality and timelessness is significant in these novels, as the narrator constantly draws comparisons to similar situations in history. Ritual sacrifice recurs in the narratives as a basic component of the human condition through the ages. For H. D.’s characters, not least for Julia Ashton in *Bid Me to Live*, it is a prerequisite for understanding their present that they familiarise themselves with the past. Travelling to the past via the mind creates a space where dream and reality – past and present – meet and mix to the point where it is uncertain which is which:

Did the past and the future blend (or would they) in one eternal circle of the absolute, of final beauty? That prayer they quoted (from Plato, was it?), *And may the inner and the outer be at peace*. Here, certainly there was no peace, or peace so hardly won in these rare moments of fulfilment that they became worlds ahead; as he said, as Rico said, “You are entangled in your own dream.” Was, or wasn’t it the dream that mattered? (72-3)

In dreaming of a distant past, the H. D. avatars re-write or re-discover a secret history, a forgotten genealogy, a female lineage and spiritual tradition.⁵ H. D.’s characters find a space for a negotiation of the self in antiquity via sacrifice. Away in Cornwall, Julia comes to terms with the demise of her marriage. She feels whole, healed, and made holy by her new, natural surroundings. Julia wants to perform a ritual sacrifice, to ‘lay flowers on an altar’ (146) to commemorate what triggered these events: the physical sacrifice of her stillborn child, Rafe’s mistress Bella, and Rico, who aided in driving a wedge between husband and wife in various ways. The nature of the peace she feels within is such that it extends not only to her and the events that have recently taken place, but to the physical objects that surround her: ‘Beads of moisture settled on the sleeve of her old coat. Her coat was sanctified by it, this was another story of a fleece’ (147). Drawing a parallel to the Golden Fleece the narrator again emphasises the connection between past and present sacrifice, making it clear that there are literal, physical implications of a spiritual development, and vice versa.

The very first lines of *Bid Me to Live* make it clear that sacrifice is a fundamental concept not just for the characters in this novel, but for people throughout history: ‘Oh, the times, oh the customs! Oh, indeed, the times! The customs! Their own, but part and parcel of the cosmic, comic, crucifying times of history’ (7). Sacrifice is portrayed here as an inevitable, almost natural part of life. H. D. points to the war as the reason why sacrifice is topical, but also indicates that it will always be so because the human race is inherently

⁵ The preoccupation with the place of women in history has caused several scholars to discuss H. D.’s work as a feminist revisionary project. See for instance Susan Stanford Friedman (as Susan Friedman), ‘Psyche Reborn’ (1986), Susan Edmunds, ‘Hysteria and Revolution in H. D.’s *Helen in Egypt*’ (1991), Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Creating a Women’s Mythology’ (1990), and Lara Vetter, ‘Review article of *Majic Ring*’ (2013).

interested in the concept of sacrifice: ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty. But could this truth be beautiful? Maybe it was. They had shouted of honour and sacrifice for two years, three years now. This was winter or early spring but seasons revolved around horrors until one was numb...they were past feeling anything...’ (37) Even though the temporal reference to two or three years is quite specific, the reference to Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (1820) is suggestive of timelessness, as is the nature of concepts like truth and beauty, honour and sacrifice, and the circularity of time, which is represented by the recurring four seasons. ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ describes a sacrificial ritual, which – just like art – is an expression of eternity through repetition and a circular view of time. In H. D.’s text, it is as though time has lost its meaning in the sense that it is no longer reliable as a tool with which to measure the duration of something; since time ‘revolved around horrors’, it appears that it is impossible to conceive of a time when the horrors end.⁶

Bid Me to Live contains its own particular way of working with narrative pronoun shifts. The intermittent shifts come throughout the novel, but there is an additional overarching shift between a first and second part of the book. The first is primarily narrated in the third person and outlines a story of war and marriage – in which the two seem more alike than anyone would care to think – and the difficulties with which Julia Ashton is forced to relinquish and recreate her self, as a writer, wife, and mother. The third person narrative that dominates initially is indicative of Julia’s struggle to find her own voice and to establish herself as a subject in her own right. In the second part, Julia takes over more and more as the first person narrator, even though there are still shifts back to the third person.

⁶ Interestingly, it is in the timelessness of the Cornish milieu that the tattered Julia finally begins to mend: ‘It would take her a long time to get over these past years, and here was space and time to do it’ (*Bid Me to Live* 157).

The very first pronoun shift looks – as many others – like reported speech, but it is not within inverted commas and does not occur in a scene; it is more like an echo of a remembered dialogue:

So-and-so knows someone who has a cottage; won't you take it, Frederick? As if she, Julia or he, Rafe or someone who had met Bella's mother before they gave up their studio in Paris had this right, this power – they were rich, in their way. Take so-and-so's cottage, they have a cottage, a sort of lodge I believe, and it's empty and they asked me and Rafe to go there before he went to France... (*Bid Me to Live* 8)

It seems here as though the communal narration is at the core of this story, as the pronoun shifts are suggestive of a cacophony of voices that could belong to anyone. However, only a short while later, the self-preoccupation seen in *HERmione* and *Asphodel* of the protagonist re-surfaces in *Bid Me to Live*: '...why should she give in now, go, as they urged her, back to America, go, as they suggested, into the country? *J'y suis*. I myself, I myself, I myself. This is my room' (10). The importance of place in this occurrence of the first person narrative voice is indicative of the re-shaping of Julia's American self as British, an identity that has been assigned to her through her marriage. Her husband not only usurps her nationality, but her name as well: 'Mrs Rafe Ashton. That is my name' (11). Throughout the novel, it is painfully clear that Julia has built her self-image on the foundation of the husband. Being forced to sacrifice her marriage, Julia first loses her self and then regains it, all the while negotiating her subjective space in the text through pronoun shifts. The second part of the narrative, which takes place after she has physically become estranged from her husband and is living in Cornwall with another man, sees her re-establish a new sense of self as well as be in control of the narrative by mainly using her subjective, first person voice to tell the story.

As Julia takes control of the narrative voice, she addresses Rico, a friend and confidant, but also a harsh critic of her writing. In her letters to him, which conclude the narrative, she releases herself from his criticism in a characteristically self-effacing way: 'My work is nothing. But, Rico, I will go on and do it. I will carve my pattern on an altar because

I've got to do it. You jeered at my making abstractions of people – graven images, you called them. You are right. Rafe is not the Marble Faun...you are not Orpheus. You are human people, Englishmen, madmen' (*Bid Me to Live* 164). Despite her newfound confidence in herself, she still ultimately credits Rico with bringing her to life and addresses him with respect and servility, despite (or perhaps because of) his disrespectful treatment of her work: 'You said I was a living spirit, but I wasn't living until you wrote to me, "We will go away together." We have gone away together, I realise your genius, in this place. I would like to serve your genius, not only because it is personally, your genius, but because it is part of this place' (183). Julia may now be the subjective narrator, but she is still caught in a world of entrenched gender hierarchy.

H. D. maps the development of a self and the emergence of self-consciousness, that is, a conscious narrative through which the self is constructed. Tracing this development through sacrifice, the narrative becomes more than a straightforward Bildungsroman, as it not only charts the difficulties encountered along the way and acknowledges their impact on the development of the character, but rests in ambiguity. The self is always fragile, and the hard-earned gains do not propel the character to a traditional happy ending, or even to stability. If anything, each step towards self-conscious narration appears to create more uncertainty as to who Julia really is.

This uncertainty or transiency is foreboded in the beginning of the narrative, when Julia looks back on years gone by: 'Then 1915 and her death, or rather the death of her child. Three weeks in that ghastly nursing-home and then coming back to the same Rafe. Herself different' (*Bid Me to Live* 24). The narrative voice equates the physical death of Julia's child in utero in 1915 with the demise of Julia herself, which clarifies the position she is in at the start of *Bid Me to Live*; she has already died, at least once before. She survived the ordeal and

is still alive – but only part of her. The passage suggests that the baby in utero is part of her person, her self, as well as being part of her physically, just as in *Asphodel*.

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Sacrifice thus enables both destruction and construction of the self in these narratives. H. D.'s early prose illustrates the idea of sacrifice as a narrative strategy of self-development through the use of pronoun shifts, which allow for the narrator's persona to change, dissolve, and reassemble, following the flow of consciousness of the principal character. The power of creativity to shape the self is seen as necessary for the existence of the artist, but it is also portrayed as dangerous because it contains a possible detrimental effect in cases where the centre of narrative gravity is lost and the self no longer has any power or control.

Sacrifice is also necessary for creative production in H. D.'s novels because sacrifice produces intersubjectivity and artistic creation requires an intersubjective space. Using pronoun shifts in her fiction to trouble and toy with the binary pair of subject and object, she forms an intersubjective space, a community of selves, within the narrative. The prose works that I have analysed on the one hand provide evidence of a preoccupation with sacrifice and on the other a constant re-imagination, re-evaluation, and re-invention of the self. Inasmuch as the experience and development of a self is universally accomplished through narrative and sacrifice respectively, these novels are examples of one reason why it is important to study narratives of sacrifice. If narrative is how we make sense of our selves in relation to others, then narratives of sacrifice and intersubjectivity must bring those issues to the fore, as these themes centre upon the dissolution of the dichotomy of self versus Other. Using experiments with pronoun shifts, H. D. shows how personal narratives can treat shared experience and how shared narratives deal with personal experience, thereby creating works that are autobiographical yet universal.

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