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# Alchemical Transformation and the Grief-Threshold in H.D.'s Helen in Egypt

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ALCHEMICAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE GRIEF-THRESHOLD

IN H.D.'S *HELEN IN EGYPT*

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Literary Studies

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by

Eliza C. Bennett

June 2012

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Title: ALCHEMICAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE GRIEF-THRESHOLD IN  
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### **Abstract**

In H.D.'s lyric epic, *Helen in Egypt*, Helen of Troy experiences a phenomenological transformation in the brazier of the heart, which burns both on the beach of her new home in Egypt and in the depths of her psychic life. I have envisioned a process by which Helen psychologically enters into the brazier's flames to begin an alchemical process, so that she might see the beauty of the earth emerge and understand the rhythmic significance of the heart's perception. I call the brazier's (or the heart's) place of alchemical transformation the *grief-threshold*, which balances Helen on the edge of the underworld, but also reveals that beauty is the aquifer of life's longing, both for her, and for mythical figures of her imaginal experience. The visitations of figures like Achilles, Theseus, and Paris, bring Helen closer to understanding *coniunctio*, the alchemical marriage of masculine and feminine that takes place in the brazier of the heart. Her identification with mysterious feminine figures like Aphrodite, Persephone, Thetis, and the Egyptian goddess Isis provides a mythic landscape through which to welcome *anima mundi*—the soul of the world—inherent in the earth's beauty. She finally learns that the alchemically transforming heart perceives with a greater trajectory than the marooned mind, expanding the body and the psyche into intimate relationship with an Aphroditic consciousness that reveals the conversational wisdom of the earth and the heavens.

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## Table of Contents

Alchemical Transformation and the Grief-Threshold	
Introduction—H.D, Phenomenology, and Liminal Space .....	1
The Brazier of the Heart .....	9
Sacred Marriage—Anima and Animus.....	13
<i>Prima Materia</i> and Initial Containment.....	17
Memory and Forgetfulness .....	24
Alchemical Death .....	32
Death and Egypt.....	35
Aphrodite—The Veil of Earth’s Beauty .....	40
Mythical Imagism, Personification, and the Imaginal .....	48
Conclusion—The Heart’s Beginning.....	59
Works Cited .....	62

## **Alchemical Transformation and the Grief-Threshold**

### **Introduction—H.D., Phenomenology, and Liminal Space**

It is the muted voice of the dying winter embers  
Which enchants this heart of mine,  
This heart which like the covered flame  
Sings as it is consumed.

—Toulet (Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis* 4)

does the ember glow  
in the heart of the snow?  
yes—I drifted here,

blown (you asked) by what winter-sorrow?  
but it is not sorrow;  
draw near, draw nearer;

—H.D., *Helen in Egypt* (174-175)

Poet and novelist, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), produced her imaginative work with a wise sensitivity to the close relationship between the individual's existential journey and the mythic world of inherent phenomena. As a wandering American expatriate, H.D. spun her lyric images within the thick new weavings of the modernist movement, which sought to critique, undo, and patch-over the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century's fraying, traditional, cultural fabric. This environment of inherited values could no longer fit an ever-shifting modern world and the emergence of international violence, scientific discovery, and disappearing communal mythos. Such a time gave birth to modern world wars and relied upon a heavily scientific and Cartesian-influenced landscape of technological progress and spiritual alienation. In the unraveling meaning, the ethos among economically progressive cultures reflected a binary tradition that separated the mind and the body, the

body and the earth, and the subjective and the objective, leaving the human being lost in a world of grief, longing for the inherent plurality of being, but cut off from complex psychological reflection.

Despite the objective fantasies of a modern, dualistic scientific tradition in which individuals often rely on binary formulations to describe their positions and inclinations, the poem embodies a way of speaking that is not constrained by binaries. From the positivistic perspective, it is difficult to articulate experience without the judgment of critical thinking; however, continental philosophies and the mytho-poetic reflect the movement and rhythm of lived experience prior to more abstract dichotomies. When we experience something for the first time like a first kiss, we do not judge our experience against previous data, but rather glean given meaning from the power of our primary encounter. In book five of “Leuké,” H.D. writes,

*Helen must be reborn, that is, her soul must return wholly to her body...But ‘of the many, many in-between?’ he asks. “The memory of breath-taking encounter with those half-seen” must balance and compensate for the too intense primary experience. (H.D., Helen 162)*

Through Theseus’ inquiry, H.D. shares her perspective on the liminal origins of modern thinking. Thinking itself has spiritual foundations, but in a binary perspective, it moves away from its foundation, from its body. Abstract thinking does not realize that is standing on its own hypo-static shoulders without storied or experiential context. In this realm of duality, we forget that our thinking is something that has been given to us from outside of ourselves—we do not own our thoughts. In this passage, H.D. is preparing and watching for the movement of her thinking—watching things comes to her from the spiritual realm with their “breath-taking” emergence. In this way, thinking is liminal

itself, always in-between worlds; however, upon constant abstraction and overly personalized possession, it begins to create its own static world, neglecting lived experience. Thus, people dangerously begin to think that it is the only world.

Consequently, amid this universal struggle in description, there are always those poets and philosophers who understand the need to return to lived experience, to revive the stories and lessons of personal descent into deeper psychological complexities and reveries. For such persons, personal and cultural grief becomes an inevitable companion, especially to those sensitive hearts, like H.D., who understand the necessary and significant presence of this transformative phenomenon in a world permeated by positivism. In her poetic creation, *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. writes with a perceptive and mythical vigor, enlivening the in-between and the “half seen,” and imagining the immeasurable purpose of poetry in the dwindling continuity of meaningful experience.

Also during this time, phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and his student Martin Heidegger gave voice to a new philosophical language with which to articulate the deep need to return to direct experience. In part one of his book, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl writes,

The exclusiveness with which the total world-view of modern man, in the second half of the nineteenth century, let itself be determined by the positive sciences and be blinded by the prosperity they produced, meant an indifferent turning-away from the questions which are decisive for a genuine humanity. (5-6)

These questions could not be answered by positivist science, but only through the observance of actual lived encountering and description. In phenomenology, Husserl desired to discern a form of consciousness that would transcend the subject-object split, the dangerous mind and body alienation of Cartesian duality and modern scientism.



Martin Heidegger expanded the trajectory of phenomenology for, unlike his predecessor, he did not constitute philosophy as a necessarily rigorous science. He believed that such an approach repudiated a genuine philosophical attitude (Kockelmans 20). In addition, rather than hold up phenomenology as the pure source of all philosophy, Heidegger wanted to employ only those phenomena that are able to assist in existential enlightenment, thus leading to his vision of establishing a universal ontology. He was interested in offering a philosophy of being that first and foremost studied the nature of human experience. E.F. Kaelin, in his book *Heidegger's Being & Time: A Reading for Readers*, describes Heidegger's intention: "The aim of the discourse that is truly phenomenological, then, is to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (36). Especially relevant in the reflection of literature and narrative, Heidegger's ideas are grounding. The root of such phenomenology is to let experience speak and show itself, which amounts simply to the description of lived experience and what it means to be a human being. This can manifest in larger contexts of being such as what it means to be a woman, an American, a poet, or more immediate and affective ways of being such as being hopeful, being in love, or being in grief.

Not too long after the emergence of phenomenology in the philosophical atmosphere, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard took hold of its deep connection to his literary sensibility, especially to the direct, sensual connection that poetics has to living, moving experience. He also felt the impending need for a language that understood how to rectify what Walter Benjamin knew, that in the modern environment of de-mythologized, scientific progress, "experience has fallen in value" (Benjamin 83-

84). Initially, before he discovered phenomenology, Bachelard was a historian of natural science, and he observed that science was actually forced to stand guard against the “poetic beguilements” that might sway its purpose and conclusions (Thiboutot 156). Therefore, Bachelard sought an empirical, pure, scientific form of observation, free from these poetic obstructions that blocked the path of scientific progress. Reversely however, he actually abandoned his scientific skepticism and assumed a more literary stance among dreams and poems. Words then became buds, vessels of “instantaneous metaphysics” (157) that were waiting to burst with new life and revelation, rather than to function as signs or tools conveying objective reality.

Bachelard became dedicated to a phenomenology of being that is resonant and present in the rhythmical sonority of the poetic image. He sensed that the “poet speaks on the threshold of being” (Bachelard, *The Poetics* xii). His vision took him to this threshold where language and being come together to create an in-between experience of ultimate wholeness in the transcendent and transformative “poetic instant.” Such a moment creates a more inhabitable world, wherein divergent, yet complimentary practices like literature, science, and psychology can come to dwell together in contribution to the world. Finally, Bachelard concentrated on “poetic reverie as a phenomenology of the soul” (xvii). Ultimately, such reverie would bring the individual into timeless intimacy with the natural elements and the beauty of the cosmic world.

H.D.’s lyric epic, *Helen in Egypt*, embraces this timeless intimacy, and provides a nurturing container for the poetic instant. H.D.’s work is most often categorized within the movement of poetic imagism. The imagists, like her colleague Ezra Pound, focus directly upon the revealing and imaginative effect of the image, with direct treatment of

the thing and the world itself. This poetic movement does not hang long in the reader's perception before it lands gracefully in the directly experienced "lifeworld" of phenomenology, which Husserl famously deemed as a "return to the things themselves." Through the containment of the living image, the poem dwells inside of an alchemically transformative space, one that creates a phenomenologically inhabitable world, where the human psyche can explore the depth of its experience. Denise Levertov, whose poetry is known to have been influenced by H.D., writes of H.D.'s work:

It is poetry both 'pure' and 'engaged'; attaining its purity—that is, its unassailable identity as word-music, the music of word-sounds and the rhythmic structure built of them—through its very engagement, its concern with matters of the greatest importance to everyone: the life of the soul, the interplay of psychic and material life. (Bloom 10)

She also writes that *Helen in Egypt* is a "world that one may enter if one will; a life-experience that gives rise to changes in the reader" (10). Into this world, H.D. invites the figures of classic and Egyptian myths, the voices of the natural world, and the human imagination to explore and expand the in-between spaces of the human psyche.

Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological reflections on poetic reverie and the transformative poetic instant, as well as the psychological reflections of Robert Romanyshyn, James Hillman and other more current phenomenological, Jungian philosophers, help to illuminate the elemental and mythical beauty in H.D.'s work. Her poetry explores the lifeworld of grief as an in-between space that she visits in her artistic creation. Her productions from this space cannot help but express the lament and longing of a soul who grieves for the return of the fullness of soulful perception and lived experience. As one enters H.D.'s feminine, mythological, and post-world war poetry,

one feels the transformative lure in her expression of a liminal rebellion, that of a participating woman, a searching philosopher, and a grieving citizen.

In her lyric epic, *Helen in Egypt*, written in the early 1950s and published the year of her death (1961), H.D. places the illusory heroine, Helen of Troy, in Egypt after the Trojan War. Helen is visiting or inhabiting what she calls an “Amen-temple,” where she and her lost lover Achilles experience “timeless-time” (H.D., *Helen* 13) and grapple with the desire for change held within the flames of the “brazier.” In this almost alchemical space, the characters and the epic reader enter into the poem’s liminality, where grief dwells and burns. *Helen in Egypt* follows a transformative alchemical process, mining the depths of experience and visiting what I call the *grief-threshold*—a liminal landscape of the human heart, the underworld, imaginative reverie, living memory, and finally of the earth’s natural beauty. I have sought to name this space to give physical containment to its psychological existence. This is the threshold upon which the psyche encounters the often-inexplicable environment of human plurality in grief, where the dilemma of binary opposition breaks down into the instantaneousness of lived experience. Even in its momentary escapes from form—as H.D. inserts poetic, prose introductions to each new section—*Helen in Egypt* transports the reader into the imaginal realm, where psychic figures and images share the grief-threshold, and where the language of the heart might play with the lines that often divide outer and inner, external explanation and the body’s intuition.

In part one, the “Pallinode,” Helen finds herself transported from a war-torn environment to Egypt, where she feels at peace studying the images in the Egyptian sacred script:

there is mystery in this place  
I am instructed, I know the script,  
the shape of this bird is a letter,  
they call it the hieroglyph. (13-14)

Helen believes herself to be the interpreter of symbolism. In her new, peaceful life, she “*achieves the difficult task of translating a symbol in time, into timeless-time or hieroglyph or ancient Egyptian time. She knows the script, she says, but we judge that this is intuitive or emotional knowledge, rather than intellectual*” (13). Early in the epic, the acknowledgement of her internal wisdom instigates Helen’s journey of the heart, one where she must enter into the contained symbolic vessels of experience or the phenomenological worlds of poetic image. Susan Friedman, one of H.D.’s main critics, writes that Helen’s “search for wholeness takes a complex narrative form that operates on two levels simultaneously: a linear journey through space and time and an inner journey into the layers of dreams and memory, and the out-of-time dimension of ‘enchantment’” (Friedman, “Creating” 168). Though she moves through an awareness of measured time and space, Helen is not embarking upon this journey as a victim of the intellectual mind marooned by conceptualization and measured thinking. Rather, this inner journey welcomes her intuition and, as will be discussed, invites Helen to open her heart as both an organ of perception and a vessel in which to hold the qualities of her experience and memory. Within her own brazier-like interior life, she can read the ancient hieroglyphs written on the inner walls of her own heart. Only here, can she experience the sorrow and revelation at the grief-threshold, and invite the reader into a third realm of transformation, in which begins the imaginative conversation between the outer world and the psychic life.

## **The Brazier of the Heart**

It seems that one such symbol of liminality has been overlooked, perhaps for the sake of more frequently mentioned images or the complicated relationships between mythic characters. I have decided to closely examine what others have neglected: the ever-burning presence of the “brazier” in *Helen in Egypt*. The brazier is a significant part of H.D.’s poem, constantly holding the shifting flames of human feeling; in fact, the brazier is an alchemical vessel in which coal burns and fire blazes. This container, often made of metal, appears in the excavations of many ancient cultural landscapes as a foundational source for heat, light, and cooking. The brazier contains many interactions and meditations throughout *Helen in Egypt* and becomes the container of Helen’s grief and psychic transformation—its embers smolder and transform her experience throughout the story, reappearing, burning, and evoking memory. Finally, by symbolically entering this vessel, Helen begins to re-live and associate her confusing experiences of love and war, time and space, guilt and freedom. As she draws herself “nearer the brazier” (H.D., *Helen* 170), she encounters its grief-threshold, enters the alchemy of her own experience, and emerges, no longer the interpreter of symbolism, but as a transformed woman, who knows and appreciates the heart’s deep perception and the necessary phenomena of grief and longing.

During the same time period in which H.D. was writing *Helen in Egypt*, Gaston Bachelard was also producing his own influential and reflective work on poetics. In his interpretive containers of phenomenology and poetic reverie, Bachelard spent much of his career closely examining the mysterious nature of the elements: earth, water, air, and fire. Edward K. Kaplan calls Bachelard a “‘psychoanalyst’ of the elements” (2).

Bachelard's work with the poetics of fire proves to be a helpful poetic and psychoanalytic lens through which to envision the transformative role of the brazier and elemental influence of fire throughout *Helen in Egypt*. In his noted works on fire, Gaston Bachelard tracks the various forms and movements of the element, from igniting passion, to the engulfing flames of psychological revolution, and finally to the comforting and glowing embers of grief and memory. In all cases, his reveries regarding fire remain faithful to the transformative magic of alchemy, and thus, like H.D.'s epic, provide mythological image and containment for the mysterious marvel of human existence. Bachelard's most useful works on this topic include *The Flame of a Candle*, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, and *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire*, a book compiled and posthumously published (in 1988) by Bachelard's daughter, Suzanne Bachelard.

One cannot look further into the smoldering embers of the brazier without encountering the elemental reality, powerful imagery, and human experience of fire. In one meditation on fire, Bachelard writes, "Fire smolders in a soul more surely than it does under ashes" (Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis* 13). Bachelard sees the study of this element as a reflection of the blazing intensity of being. After his death, Bachelard's daughter found these words in his notes on fire:

A psychology of the experience of fire must devote itself to the study of the whole spectrum of human experience, from the transformation of a contemplated flame into a source of inner riches to the transformation of a hearth's brilliance and heat into the intimate possession of fire. This psychological study, were it able to define a field of cohesive imagery, would describe an internalization of cosmic forces. Once we are willing to experience fully the prodigious variety of images of fire, flames, and glowing embers, we become aware that we ourselves are living fire. The most important lesson to be learned from this psychology of the experience of fire [*le feu vécu*] is the importance of opening ourselves to a

psychology of pure intensity, of the intensity of being. (Bachelard, *Fragments* xii)

Bachelard's reveries and meditations on fire all emphasize an imaginative internalization of the dynamic element. His work is truly phenomenological because in his literary movement to embody the image, he articulates something that we already know in the living of our lives. In his words, the reader can feel his or her own experience of the hearth's brilliance and the heat of the flames that burn in the human heart.

Bachelard also writes of his childhood reveries with fire. Like many children, he spent much time sitting in front of the hearth, watching the flames rise and fall, wild yet contained. Such simple meditation moves the being close to the flames, creating a space of "inner riches" and "intimate possession," within the heart. If the heart holds this space, then Bachelard's passage offers the imaginative notion that its inner flames will dance with the forces that reside outside of the self. Through the heart's ability to perceive its relationship to the cosmos as well as to personal experience, it becomes the brazier of shifting and transformational fire. James Hillman writes that "the heart's way of perceiving is both a sensing and an imagining: to sense penetratingly we must imagine, and to imagine accurately we must sense" (Hillman, *The Thought* 108). The heart is an organ of perception, liminally creating the rhythm of life; the heart senses its relationship to the cosmos and so imagines the divine into the earthly realm.

In this time-imbued space of the heart, where inner and outer, past and present facilitate and serve one another, we embody the fires of grief and the burning phenomena of our lived experience. As Helen longs to discover the meaning in her past experience and her current phantom existence, H.D. writes, "*The mind cannot answer the*



*'numberless questions' but the heart 'encompasses the whole of the indecipherable script' (85). The heart provides the containment needed for her experience to become known to her; it holds this fire for all of us, else we might go up in the flames of raging anger or smolder away in unbounded pleasures.*

Moreover, when we gaze into the flames, watching the fire consume all that it encounters, we often feel the presence of longing—both the longing of the hungry flames and the longing of our hearts to create meaning. Longing is the phenomenon through which the heart experiences the movement of time. The heart is the rhythmical organ that “keeps time,” maintaining a constant lyrical sensitivity to its presence. Upon the grief-threshold, the heart feels time more than ever, weighed down with unrequited desire and hopeless depression, or strengthened with new promise for the future. With the appearance of Achilles, H.D.’s Helen begins her inner journey with a heavy heart, emerging from an unknown phantom-like existence, in which she experienced war, lost love, and the scorn of the angry world: “She whom you cursed / was but a phantom and shadow thrown / of a reflection” (H.D., *Helen* 5). But with the gross awareness of her heart’s deep longings, she is able to begin refining her appreciation of the world’s phenomena. She begins differentiating her experience and is thus able to feel the space of the imaginal and mythical realm. Her heart becomes a real space, just as the brazier is a real space into which time enters her life and broadens her sense of its difficult and transformative power.

With a deep awareness of the time’s bodily rhythm, William Blake writes in his illuminated work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “Eternity is in love with the productions of time” (7). As the human heart reflects the larger fires in the stars of the

cosmos, it cannot escape a deep appreciation for the presence of time. Time reminds the heart of its grief, its longing for a relationship to the larger cosmic world. In Helen's own experience of grief and longing, time can enter at the grief-threshold and reveal to her a world that knows her material nature and loves the productions of her spiritual journey.

### **Sacred Marriage—Anima and Animus**

One only realizes soulful engagement between spirit and matter when one encounters the archetypal and sometimes opposing forces of one's own inner life. The alchemical process with its central image of fire, serves almost as a home-base, a contained narrative in which the varieties of differing experiences and opposing images can come together, dissolve and separate in order to regain wholeness. In a chapter titled "Alchemy and the Subtle Body of Metaphor" Robert Romanyshyn writes,

[A]lchemy is a way of knowing where consciousness or spirit belongs to matter or nature, a way of knowing which recognizes that spirit matters and that matter yearns to be in-spired. Alchemy is and was a way of knowing and being which holds difference within relation. It does not deny the tension of difference between consciousness or spirit and matter or nature. Quite the contrary, in accepting this tension alchemy depicts a way of knowing through intimacy and relation rather than through separation and difference. (Brooke, *Pathways* 35)

In the fires of the brazier, the energetic difference between the masculine and feminine unifies in a sacred marriage. Alchemists and those who are fascinated by its science and psychology often refer to the "solar" and "lunar" aspects of its process. The union of the solar and lunar is called the *coniunctio* or the new "hermaphroditic consciousness" (Schwartz-Salant, *The Mystery* 27). Within the individual, it is the sacred marriage of the divine spirit and the earthly soul. This marriage of spirited masculine and soulful feminine appears often in *Helen in Egypt*, both in Helen's relationships and in the

hermaphroditic expansion of her own consciousness. Bachelard, like his psychoanalytic contemporary, Carl Jung, studies fire and alchemy through the dialectics of animus and anima, or the masculine and feminine expressions of the unconscious, in order to “arrive at a complete psychology of fire,” one in which we can “live at both poles of our androgynous being, able thus to experience fire both as violence and reassurance, sometimes as the image of love, sometimes as the image of anger” (Bachelard, *Fragments* xiii). The animus fire is the violent, active fire that is in constant motion to destroy and renew, whereas the anima fire would be expressed in the reassuring warmth and generative containment of the hearth. The brazier requires both of these energetic conflagrations to be present. In this way, fire within the brazier does not come to represent one single archetype or figure along Helen’s journey, but rather becomes the heart’s inner dialogue between forces that burn along the grief-threshold.

In her book *Psyche Reborn*, Susan Friedman discusses the psychoanalytic reflections in H.D.’s work, especially in conversation with H.D.’s experience as an analysand of Sigmund Freud. Like many critics, Friedman also discusses the similarities between the work of Carl Jung and H.D., though the two never met out of H.D.’s loyalty to Freud. Though there are many strong resemblances and even parallels, one in particular certainly resides in this union of masculine and feminine. H.D. sought to retrieve the feminine, which was often pushed beneath the spirited male ego inherent in modern progress. Friedman writes, “Jungians in particular would agree with H.D. that the ‘feminine principle’ personified in the anima has been greatly undervalued in the rationalistic, technological west” (Friedman, *Psyche Reborn* 270). H.D. understood that an epic, masculine form, which traced a woman’s journey toward selfhood, would indeed

stumble across the masculine obstacles of rationalism and progressive materialism. As a poet, she would seek to reclaim the mythical value of the feminine for a world much in need of a restored and balanced psyche. With this aspiration in mind, *Helen in Egypt* becomes a container for the feminine to approach the masculine, for the anima to demand its equal inheritance from the natural and spiritual world.

In the beginning of the “Pallinode,” Helen only just begins to sense the alchemical mixing of the animus and anima. At first, with the appearance of Achilles, she perceives this marriage through the lens of her worldly and romantic relationships. However, underlying her discerning questions about love and union, resides the intuition of a deeper and greater balance of the soul. In the first few pages of the epic, Helen asks:

...are you Spirit?

are you sister? Are you brother?  
are you alive?  
are you dead?

the harpers will sing forever  
of how Achilles met Helen  
among the shades,

but we were not, we are not shadows;  
as we walk, heel and sole  
leave our sandal-prints in the sand, (H.D., *Helen* 6)

Upon Achilles’ arrival, Helen begins iterating the presence of energetically gendered qualities. He has yet to recognize her, and as he is a figure entering her liminal realm, she has yet to really realize him and his role in her transformation. However, she sees eternity in their union, and a process—that must be alchemical—in their becoming together. Together they walk, “heel and sole.” Here, Helen intuits masculine and feminine images of their union. Achilles, the glorified and mighty hero of antiquity, is

the “heel,” imagined in the very location of his physical woundedness. Achilles’ heel is that aspect of his masculine energy that brings his spiritedness—his animus—closer to the earth and to Helen’s “sole” (soul) or her embodiment of anima. It is not a surprise that in her attempt to protect him by dipping him in the bath, Achilles’ mother Thetis leaves one spot vulnerable to the necessary wounding of the falsely invincible ego. Only by the wounding of his proud and hyper-masculine spirit, can Helen see enough of an escape from the egotistical, so that she might enter the imaginal realm of the burning brazier. James Hillman writes of the wound in the young male “puer” archetype of myth (in Achilles, Ulysses, Prometheus, Philoctetes, an even Christ), in an attempt to show the transformation in masculine energy, where the feminine enters at the balance between the puer (youth) and the senex (old man) consciousness: “In the chalice of the wound is soul. This means that psyche is the aim of our bleeding love and that the wound is a grail. The opus is not in Jerusalem; it is right here in our own wounds” (Hillman, *Puer* 116). His words are alchemical for he employs the alchemical aspiration of the “opus”—the formation of the final philosopher’s stone—a transformed union of matter and spirit. Likewise, to realize her own opus, Helen longs to appreciate the accessibility in the unions of her journey. Achilles, Paris, and Theseus take turns visiting her as figures of the animus to help her understanding the marriage of masculine and feminine, both in her external relationships and in the aspects of her own inner life.

Also, H.D. weaves the Egyptian Osiris and Isis cycle into the Greek epic form. As will be later discussed, Helen embodies the beautiful Isis (among other images of the divine feminine), the feminine principle that serves to re-member the dismembered masculine Osiris so that they may create a child out of their union. When the two come

together in a lasting union of tension and complement, then may the “harpers sing forever” and the shadows of the anima and animus realize themselves out of the flames of brazier and onto the shifting sands of the soul’s landscape, walking hand in hand.

### ***Prima Materia and Initial Containment***

The varying qualities of fire, including the active animus and the calming anima, can help to trace fire’s shifting influence as the alchemical catalyst in Helen’s transformation. Throughout H.D.’s self-reflective epic, Helen develops the fierce courage to embark on a journey inward into the flames of her tragic experiences. Her journey becomes one of deep and real grieving, where she must meet the beings of her past and stand with them on the threshold of life and death. She enters into the world of fire and of the heart, one where, as Bachelard describes above, the *intensity* can lead her to the deeper perceptions of her own grieving heart.

In the beginning of the epic, Helen first encounters Achilles, hoping that he will not remember her as “Helena, hated of Greece” (14). In her apprehension and sensitivity, she is flooded by the doubt that any individual might encounter on the road to spiritual awakening and individuation. As previously stated, she sees herself as the translator of symbols, so everything she sees and feels is poignant, and standing agape in its vulnerability. Roger Brooke, a Jungian phenomenologist writes, “Symbols are not representational signs, but the presencing of a mystery in such a way that psychic life is integrated and the person is transformed” (Brooke, “The Self” 609). As Helen stands with the recently shipwrecked Achilles next to the blazing fire that he builds for her, she introduces the inner journey that lies ahead by acknowledging the mysterious presence of the contained fire: “We huddled over the fire,/was there ever such a brazier?” (H.D.,

*Helen* 13). Thus begins Helen's fascination and her process of entering into the liminal world of the brazier, where she must encounter time and grief, but also the revealing fires of the soul's experience.

In this moment, Helen acknowledges the transformative call of the flames. She fears the exposed and grief-laden journey ahead, and in a last minute plea before the process begins, she appeals to the flames for a return to the innocence of her prior existence: "*flame, I prayed, flame forget, / forgive and forget the other, / let my heart be filled with peace*" (14). Before Achilles arrives to remind her of who and where she once was, Helen's previous existence was phantom-like, divorced from real experience. But now her memories and encounters with "the other" are here, on the beach, in conversation with her. The fires have started to burn and so has Helen's movement inside the brazier of the heart, where life burns. Like a soldier who has returned from the battlefield, Helen learns that she cannot move forward without healing the past and encountering the trauma in order to begin the grief process. We often want to forget the pain of the past and move forward unscathed. Like Helen, the human being might panic when his or her fantasy of progress has no ground below, no clear direction. However, the human heart knows the natural and cyclical movement of a healing psyche. One prays to forget, and prays for a peaceful heart. For Helen, the impetus for her pleas can allow her to begin taking up the wounds of both her abuse and transgressions, the unfinished business of her grief. Grief teaches her that her wounds are her work. In our modern world, phenomenological therapy invites us, rather demands us, to do just that—face the wound, not merely the solution, in order to understand and engage in conversation with the experience. Such is the phenomenological understanding into

which Helen must enter to be truly alive and engaged with her experience. The flaming brazier provides her, and the reader, with an image for this transformation, a place to return and renew (or discover) appreciation for nature's deep wisdom and movement.

In an alchemical sense, Helen's plea to forget and the subsequent, necessary return to nature could also be interpreted as her desire or intuition to return to the *prima materia*, a term with a long history that dates back to the pre-Socratics. In a simple definition, the *prima materia* embodies the original form or substance of matter before transformation begins. When alchemists adopted this idea, they sought to reduce or return substances to their original, undifferentiated states: "Bodies cannot be changed except by reduction into their first matter" (Waite 34). In a psychological sense, H.D.'s Helen might simply fear the changes and experiences ahead; however, she also finds herself in intuitive preparation. Immediately after her poetic pleas, the following prose reads, "*Or who is she? She says that Helen upon the ramparts was a phantom. Then what is this Helen? Are they both ghosts?*" (H.D., *Helen* 15). Here, Helen struggles with the blending and differentiation of spirit and matter. She may not know how to directly access her *prima materia*, but she knows that in order to move forward, she must consult her dreams and doubts and ask the important and difficult questions. Was her life in Troy a dream? If so, are her memories still welcome in her current condition? Will she become something beyond the confines of this phantom self? Like a willing patient going to psychotherapy for the first time, Helen must surrender the self-proclaimed notions of who she is and who she once was. In his book, *The Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy*, Edinger writes about the alchemical process of return and renewal: "The fixed, settled aspects of the personality that are rigid and static



are reduced or led back to their original, undifferentiated condition as part of the process of psychic transformation” (10). Likewise, Helen intuitively that she will encounter the phenomena like an unfixed and vulnerable client. In the company of her fears, she must willingly approach the grief-threshold within the brazier’s flames. Here in the pressure hold of the container, she may begin to “cook” in her *prima materia* so as to re-form with the presencing of her dreams and longings.

Bachelard, too, acknowledges the primordial quality of the fire that enlarges our world. His image of the flame turns us toward the phantom-like importance of our memories, dreams or “reveries,” and psychic encounters. He writes,

The flame summons us to see for the first time. We have a thousand memories of it; we dream of it. It takes on the character of a very old memory, and yet we dream as everyone dreams; we remember as everyone else remembers. Then, obeying one of the *most consistent laws* of this reverie that happens before a flame, the dreamer dwells in a past which is no longer his alone, the past of the world’s first fires. (Bachelard, *The Flame of a Candle* 2)

This combination of both seeing for the first time and feeling the presence of inherited memory is the driving force of experience behind the notion of a hermeneutical loop. For instance, as Helen moves through her experience she begins to know where she has been. She might even begin to see the spiritual qualities of the *prima materia* that, like the seed waiting to spring forth new life, informs and microcosmically embodies the reality yet to come. Bachelard’s flame and Helen’s brazier contain the expanding world of the inner life that must necessarily contain the fires of the past. As aforementioned, the heart is the rhythmical organ that can contain this expanding world, for it understands the movement of time. As T.S. Eliot, another modernist poet, writes in “Little Gidding” from his *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time. (39)

T.S. Eliot's famous words beautifully and simply display how the heart, by returning, might begin to differentiate within the cycle and rhythm of time. In fact, in the first stanza of "Little Gidding" Eliot speaks of the heart's heat with a "glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier" (31). Exploration may be both external enhancement and internal demarcation within the containment of the heart and the brazier. In *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. is able to create this differentiation in the artifact of the book itself. It serves as the brazier-like containment of both Helen and the reader's experience, revealing our memories of phenomena, blending past and present, sensory experience and mythic reality. Written in a time of scientific progress, where the mechanical world separates matter and spirit, H.D.'s book, like all illuminating poetry (and possibly all literature), shows that there is a way back into a container that holds lived experience with its primordial and circulatory way of revealing itself. Like blood pumping from the heart out and back again, like aforementioned psychotherapy, or encounters with phenomena like love and death, reading this poetry is to approach the grief-threshold, or the violent and healing place of alchemical mixing.

Such experiences provide phenomenological containment, allowing perception to manifest out of the processes of nature and the presence of the mythical. They give us worlds in which to feel individuation and explore our own thresholds. Therapy, literature, and phenomenology all have the potential to put the individual into the larger story. We can escape or more holistically incorporate the ego-centered, Cartesian

worldview, in which direct experience loses its influence, and has a difficult time return to the directness of storied existence. Roger Brooke writes, “Phenomenological discipline requires us to stay with the dream and dreamer’s experience on their own terms” (Brooke “The Self...” 606). What better way for the dreamer to take the individuating initiative, to make his or her own “out-of-time dimension,” than to enter into the poetic artifact of another dreamer. The poet gives us access to the paradigmatic scheme, to the metaphoric world, the imaginal realm, and finally to the liminal threshold. In this way, a piece of literature can be a heart, a container, and a place of alchemical movement.

Within the container, Helen (and also the sensitive reader) comes to realize the psychological significance of grief and return on the path of exploration. Helen’s discerning inclination to find her past conditions opens the mythical and imaginal realm to assist her heart’s perceptive quest. On the looping path of remembering and repeating within the cooking embers and dancing flames of the brazier, she will discover a larger life and the deeper connection between the interiority of things and of the soul. Once again, in a psychological sense, one must re-imagine the quiet resonance and interior movement inside the container of alchemical churning in order for phenomena to show themselves naturally. Robert Romanyshyn, in his book, *The Soul in Grief*, writes that the soul “has its own ritual of grieving, rituals which [plunge] into the organic rhythms of nature” (5). The natural world provides the ultimate landscape for accessing the metaphors of psychological inquiry and growth. Through his own encounters with personal grief (the devastating loss of his young wife), Romanyshyn also perceives more specifically,

If grief has a landscape, and I am certain it does, then it might very well be a simple winter hut in a snowbound forest, a hut whose light and heat are enhanced by the cold outside, intensified into an interior coziness which invites the grieving soul into reverie. (51).

This particular container, a large and tangible brazier, is one that we all can imagine.

This image is welcoming, though lonely, and leaves room for life to cook and expand.

Bachelard, in his gently alchemical manner, also writes a very similar passage in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. He says, “A winter’s evening with the wind howling around the house and a bright fire within is all that is required to make a grieving soul give voice to its memories and sorrows” (3-4). Both Romanyshyn and Bachelard provide images of containment in which the human spirit may exist and understand this existence elementally. The winter huts come to signify a necessary space of transformative reverie.

In his book, *The Mystery of Human Relationship: Alchemy and the Transformation of Self*, Nathan Schwartz-Salant writes about this space: “...archetypal processes create a ‘third area’ ...that cannot be experienced or understood through the spatial notion of insides and outsides (5). The hut needs both the cold and the warmth to become a third area. On the outside of this inhabited brazier, the winds blow and coldness becomes a force to hold at bay. Inside, the glowing fire is warm, life-giving, sustaining, and even affirming. The human psyche inherently knows the significant liminal space between the common notions of outside and inside, between the cold, imposing forces of theoretical objectivity and the warmth of the heart’s perception and inner wisdom. Schwartz-Salant continues, “Indeed we must move beyond the notion of life as consisting of outer and inner experiences and enter a kind of ‘intermediate realm’ that our culture has lost sight of and in which the major portion of transformation occurs”

(5). Throughout *Helen in Egypt*, alongside the ever-present image of the brazier, H.D. gives this space many names: a world of “enchantment,” (2, 90, 138, 225) another “dimension” (20, 45, 85, 107, 112), and the “amen-temple” (1, 11, 39, 63, 212, 255), among others. Her initiation into this realm arrives as an intuitive wonderment: “*There must be an intermediate dimension or plane*” (85). This is a threshold space and exists with as much reality and vigor as the spaces that we create with our needs to compartmentalize into dichotomous visions of the world. This is the world of the brazier. Its warmth and comfort are necessary for grief to find a dwelling place and remain contained. However, without the cold forces on the outside, there would not be a middle space where the human being might dissolve in the heat, and emerge transformed and remolded in the cooling winds of the external world.

### **Memory and Forgetfulness**

Now, we must return to the story, for we have yet to see how Helen’s reality might expand in this liminal, imaginal realm. We last left her by the brazier, dwelling in dread and intrigue. The mysterious power of her intuition intrigues Helen, as she stands in waiting before the flames and the threshold of the unknown. Although she initially wants to maintain memory in the realm of Egypt, she becomes consumed by her fear and lack of control when the flames begin their magical revelation. Helen knows that they will evoke Achilles’ feeling and memory and he will know her only as the hated phantom form of Helen on the ramparts. However, Helen also recalls the individuating taunts and containment of the Amen-script and the hieroglyphs to which she perceives a connection and hopes will serve as blueprints for her psychic searching. She recognizes their calls as inevitable and compulsory, for they brought her here to Egypt’s dimension for a purpose.

Standing before this blazing brazier becomes a defining moment of initiation, where these two characters are flooded by pervading memories of experiences and past feelings.

On an experiential level, the process of remembering is key to any phenomenological experience for we live our lives forgetfully, and it is through memory that the given qualities of any phenomenon, like grief, joy, and hope, revisit us. This remembering is similar to Plato's theory of "anamnesis," for which he argues in his dialogues, *Meno* and *Phaedo*, and mentions in *Phaedrus*. To Plato, anamnesis is recalling into memory that which we already know, and have always known since before birth. What we call learning is actually recollection of knowledge that we possessed before our incarnation into human form. In a phenomenological perspective, Plato's anamnesis becomes the reemergence of phenomena, an experiential revelation into the ways of being human.

Max van Manen, a contemporary phenomenologist, writes about the origin of what we already know. In his book, *Researching Lived Experience*, he discusses the four fundamental "lifeworld" qualities, or "existentials" (101) that make up any phenomena. These four consist of lived relationship (relationality or communality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived space (spatiality). Often one will hear these referred to as "givens," qualities of experience that make up the archetypal drama or the stories of human lives. They are like the *who, what, when, where* of lived experience and help to give a sense of wholeness, a landscape upon which to encounter the ways of being human. The givens are also the constituents of a story, similar to the dramatic elements that impart rounded fullness and containment to the mythic world, and even to the dramatic epic.

One can refer to these four fundamentals in any human experience. However, like a Gestalt, sometimes one existential (one quality of a phenomenon) can appear in the foreground, seeking more recognition. So, for the sake of examination, description, or research, they can be differentiated and discussed separately, but cannot ever be really separated, for they form a unity that makes up the human lifeworld, or the lived world. Therefore, in a poetic story like *Helen in Egypt*—where experiences can exist in the dream-like world of the “Amen-temple”—a lifeworld is there. Regardless of whether or not such an experience deviates from the laws of physics and time, Helen’s lifeworld (in which she experiences the phenomena of longing, guilt, and grief, all containing time, space, body, and others), expands our understanding and our insight into the phenomena of lived experience.

As posited above, we live our experiences forgetfully, for experiences or phenomena, such as belonging, betrayal, hope, and grief do not belong to us. They visit us when memory brings them back through encounter. The burning flames of the brazier serve to inflame memory for Achilles and Helen, reopening the landscape of their experiences and allowing their hearts to hold the capacity of deep feeling. The world of the phenomenon, in this case the world of emerging grief, gains its resonance in a full landscape of givens. Experiences, even one’s own public and private experiences, are often concealed by the veils and motions of daily life; for instance, we are unaware of our homesickness until we hear a song on the radio about the beauty of the trees in the South. Or, in the presence of a dim candle, we find ourselves surprised by the longing we have for a past love. Inside the human encounter with memory, experience returns and reveals

the past begging to be known. In his contributing chapter “Mnemosyne and Lethe: Memory, Jung, Phenomenology,” Charles E. Scott writes,

If I am right in thinking that memories’ happenings pervade our lives, that we belong to memories, then our conscious ways of recognizing them and living in them and through them constitute a living knowledge that tells us about who we are and how we exist. (Brooke, *Pathways* 142)

The past is never dead for it always wants to come back and dwell in the present so that it may *unconceal* in order to reveal the qualities of particular phenomena and who we are in relationship to them.

In the very beginning of the “Pallinode,” when Helen finds herself in Egypt, she immediately reflects upon how memory serves her experience and, unlike her reaction to Achilles’ arrival, expresses that she does not want to forget her past. She is aware of how memory makes her real, for she is “*both phantom and reality*.” Helen meditates upon Lethe, the river of forgetfulness and oblivion that serves to strip away memory for the spirits or shadows moving from the living to Hades. She says “The potion is not poison, / it is not Lethe and forgetfulness / but everlasting memory,” (3). Although the reality might be painful, Helen does not want to lose her most basic and active spiritual perception and the understanding of how her willful movement in the world reveals what has naturally and cosmically already been given to her—that which accompanies being with ongoing, instinctive revelation.

The loss of intuitive memory, and subsequently of being, finds its symbolic dwelling place in the memory-snatching Lethe. In his phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry, Martin Heidegger often interpreted the symbolic river as a natural embodiment of concealed and forgotten being. Of course, as a philosopher who



emphasized the importance of theoretically unadulterated lived experience, he saw this loss as very detrimental to individuals, communities, and the very study of modern philosophy itself. In a chapter called, “Dark Hearts: Heidegger, Richardson, and Evil,” John Caputo writes,

Lethe for Heidegger is not simply the concealment of Being but the concealment of the concealment; not simply Being’s withdrawal, which Heidegger calls the ‘mystery’ (Geheimnis) of Being, but the withdrawal of the withdrawal, which—since this is what leads us astray—Heidegger calls ‘errancy’ (die Irre). (Babich 267)

This sense of errancy appears like a wound from the neglect of hidden being. Whether a personal or cultural wound, errancy (like the errancy of the Prodigal’s Son, Luke 15:11-32) often leads to guilt and a desire to return to the experience that one neglected, or a memory of the time before concealment. Helen understands that her past is dark on the ramparts of Troy and that giving in to the comfort of the phantom-like concealment in Egypt might save her from her pain and her violent memories of war. However, in that concealment, she will remain “Helena, Helen hated of all Greece” (H.D., *Helen* 2), a guilty escapist, unable to fully engage with the feelings of loss, grief, and guilt that emerge in her memories. Throughout the “Pallinode,” Helen continues to fluctuate in her inner dialogue between wanting to remember and desiring to forget. She must begin to understand these seemingly opposing experiences are part of a whole story.

Lethe is, as Heidegger might describe, a stream of *unconsciousness* that represents oblivion, not landscape, a nothingness within which memory is not only inaccessible, but irrelevant. However, the possibility of balancing on thresholds of oblivion, of forgetfulness, and of concealed being can be a natural, experiential movement of life, especially for those who visit the grief-threshold with its vicinity to the

dead. Charles E. Scott brings together the images of Lethe and Alatheia, the goddess of truth or the embodiment of un-forgetfulness and un-concealment. He writes, “memory belongs to a loss of memory and the loss of memory belongs to memory” (Brooke, *Pathways* 148). The appearance of memories can only become present if the loss of memory is also present, for the qualities of giving illumination and letting disappear are both necessary to make an entire experience of being. In her Egyptian solitude, Helen initially distrusts this relationship and the lack of control inherent in forgetfulness. She is unable to grasp its significant role in the revelations yet to come. Almost immediately after Helen expresses a desire to remember, Achilles appears in Egypt, shipwrecked and disheveled. Faced with the manifestation of her phantom past, Helen shifts her desire and senses the danger in memory as the brazier blazes before them. This is when she pleases: “*flame*, I prayed, flame forget” (H.D., *Helen* 14). It is in this moment with the other that her tangible desire returns, and the emerging qualities of being become her own, personal longings. The relationship between forgetting and remembering continues to unfold and reveal.

In fact, immediately after Helen’s exclamation regarding the fire (“was there ever such a brazier?”), her fears and hopes begin to manifest and her pleas for lost memory must smolder away in the embers. Since it serves as the alchemical vessel, the brazier contains the phenomenological power to evoke the memories of the past, or as Bachelard writes, “the past of the world’s first fires.” Sensing this, Helen attempts to hide her features with soot from the glowing embers, as if to desperately speed up the transformative process (16). However, this endeavor is futile, and Achilles instantly accesses his past and remembers who Helen is, or at least who she once was. He

remembers because the fire inflames the phenomena trapped behind the veil of his current life. The fire enhances his phenomenological experience and in his initial, surprising memories, causes him to react to the emerging phenomenon of grief with anger and vengeance. He attacks Helen, clutches at her throat, and calls her “Helena, cursed of Greece” (16). He likens her to Hecate, Isis, a vulture, and finally a hieroglyph. In his frenzied attempt to piece together his strong feelings of contempt, Achilles invokes images from other narratives or landscapes of betrayal, grief, and death. It is not until Helen appeals to his mother, the goddess Thetis, that Achilles’ feelings shift from anger to love, as the name tempts forth more memories of a happier life before violence and war.

Achilles’ attack is a reaction to the surprise of his own dark memories because he does not simply recall the happenings of the past, but rather finds himself swept up in the frenzied flood of his past feeling. Not only does the alchemical and phenomenological vessel evoke his memory, but it also causes Helen to reflect upon the nature of his anger and upon her fear in the face of her love. Additionally, remembers her participation in the larger war and the fire brings her closer to the experience of her dark past and its role in bringing her together with Achilles in this “*out-of-time dimension*” (20).

Bachelard, too, discerns the fire’s ability to beckon memory into the light. He writes, “The flame...summons reveries from memory. It provides us occasions, in our distant memories, for solitary vigils” (Bachelard, *Flame* 23). After Achilles’ attack, Helen begins to slowly recognize that she has a solitary and individuating journey ahead, though she may not be able to yet decipher the “hieroglyph” or understand the psychological significance of the evocative brazier. However, she not only remembers,

but she is also conscious of this revealing memory. She seems to appreciate the emerging phenomena of fear, shock, anger, and regret, as curious meaningful visitors in the Amn-temple. She senses that her appreciation does not stem from an objective understanding of the symbols and hieroglyphs, but rather an intuitive and spiritual process of lived and storied experience. In fact, after Achilles' attack, Helen wonders at her own ability to unconsciously or intuitively remember and know the inducing power of the flames. She says,

I seemed to know the writing,  
as if God made the picture  
and matched it  
with a living hieroglyph;

how did I know the vulture?  
why did I invoke the mother?  
why was he seized with terror?

...

...but with his anger,  
that ember, I became (H.D., *Helen* 23)

This passage displays the subtle and personal movements of memory in the alchemical process. In it, Helen senses her own intuitive wisdom and memory, expressing that somehow, she understands what is written on the inside of the brazier; her memory links her to the spiritual realm and the creations of the divine. In a flaming and fierce moment of phenomenological revelation (when Achilles clutches her neck), the things that she already knows flood her current experience. She does not comprehend exactly what Thetis' role might be, and she does not ask Achilles about his anger. Rather she internalizes these questions, for she knows that only she can answer them through conversation with the emerging, resurfacing images and figures of her own past. Her

journey is a solitary one, though she will not be alone. With Achilles' anger, "that ember," smoldering inside the brazier with the many reveries and figures of her own experience, *she becomes*.

### **Alchemical Death**

Upon sensing her own intuitive memory, Helen's desires once again shift from pleas to forget to prayer-like appeals to remember. Her invocation to Thetis serves to calm Achilles, but it is also a personal cry to the mother, asking to further her psychological transformation: "*let me remember, let me remember, / forever, this star in the night*" (17). In order to create something new from her revelatory memory, the brazier will require a return to the alchemical beginning, or the *prima materia*. And as Helen pleads to Thetis, the mother, this might also be a return to the undifferentiated state in the formative vessel of the womb. In his book on alchemy, *The Forge and the Crucible*, Mircea Eliade discusses the various images and thoughts concerning the *prima materia*, one of which includes the *in utero* musings of Paracelsus (Renaissance alchemist): "The whole world must 'enter into its mother,' which is the *prima materia*, the *massa confusa*, the *abyssus*, in order to achieve eternity" (154). In this sense, the womb becomes like the brazier, the threshold space between spirit and matter. To enter this space the individual experiences death in life, a dis-membering in which one must abandon parts of the former self. In this destruction, the ego-self that depends upon objective influence, external verification, and theoretical knowledge, surrenders to the more feminine and transformative alchemical vessel. Such a death-like and humiliating surrender can be threatening to the comforts of former patterns, values, and even relationships, and can reveal the way being has been concealed; for instance,

experientially, a marriage might reveal its foundation in mutual and superficial dependency, or a career choice suddenly makes the soul feel empty and without direction and meaning.

When Helen appeals to Thetis for the gift of memory, she is essentially taking a step toward this kind of surrender. We have seen that such an inclination is threatening, leading to the bereaved and angry hands of Achilles on Helen's throat. But Helen continues to ponder his anger and violence. She does not run from it, but is rather fascinated by his "*latent hostility*" (H.D., *Helen* 18). She says, "I do not want to forget his anger" (19) and again, "I read the writing when he seized my throat" (25). Her intrigue about his violence resonates with her reappearing intuitive moments in which she expresses foresight regarding her alchemical path. The revelations are frightening, but they open up her eyes and animate her memory. They also bring her closer to the grief-threshold, where death's presence serves to inform and guide the motions of the living. Possibly with more potency, Achilles also fears something in Helen. He sees the presence of death in the past memories that she and the brazier evoke. He feels humiliated by his inability to move through death like she does with profound beauty and flexibility and perceives her fascination with the death yet to come on her alchemical path.

Such self-searching will bring her very close to the liminal grief-threshold, where one reaches into the realms of both life and death, where the flames threaten to consume, but also promise to transform. Bachelard writes of the human desire for and knowledge of fire's encounter with death:

fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all life to its conclusion, to its hereafter. In these circumstances the reverie becomes truly fascinating and dramatic; it magnifies human destiny; it links the small to the great, the hearth to the volcano, the life of a log to the life of a world. The fascinated individual hears *the call of the funeral pyre*. For him destruction is more than a change, it is a renewal. (Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis* 16)

Here, Bachelard also unites the fire of being to the quality of time, suggesting that destruction, and even death, and are not merely endings, but active processes. To begin her inner journey, Helen must encounter the destructive forces of existence. These encounters are yet other forms of returning to the primal alchemical matter. There is a liberating, but often painful death that occurs when the flames of the brazier begin to reveal the heart's phenomena and turn away from the logical demands and rational safe havens of the head. Nathan Schwartz-Salant compiled a book of alchemical writings by Carl Jung. In his enlightening introduction, Schwartz-Salant writes of this initiating death as a process that transforms the individual, even if he or she is not able to grasp an intellectual understanding of the process. However, the inexorable process must proceed for he says, "such experiences of death and rebirth are the beginning of the individual opus, not the end" (Schwartz-Salant, *Jung* 6). With the initiating song of destruction and reformation, the funeral pyre calls to the hearts of the living.

At one point, in fact, Helen remembers the destructive capacity of fire upon those who sought her in the war: "It is the burning ember / that I remember / heart of the fire, / consuming the greek heroes; / it is the funeral pyre" (H.D., *Helen* 20). Like Bachelard's awareness of the "*call of the funeral pyre*," Helen too finds herself immersing in her memories of death. They call to her from the past and the future, singing the song of transformation. Her heart must become linked to that ember at the heart of the blazing

fire. As Bachelard observed, the small links to the great. Her past encounters with the image of consuming flames was once literal, but now becomes the psychological journey of her life in which the images of her past and the beings in her dreams will come to visit her. In Bachelard's conclusion to the proposed *Poetics of Fire*, he writes, "In the realm of fire, each of us becomes a brazier of beings" (Bachelard, *Fragments* 19). The realm of fire is the alchemical realm, the liminal space in which the conventions of logical positivism and modern science fall away and the individual becomes a vessel of reception and psychic conversation. In the introduction to his book *Greeting The Angels: The Imaginal View of the Mourning Process*, Greg Mogenson writes about just this. He says, "From the imaginal point of view, the end of life is not the end of soul. The images continue. Deep inside the grief of the bereaved, the dead are at work, making themselves into religion and culture, imagining themselves into soul" (xi). The brazier provides a space for this imaging of the world to smolder and form. This is the space where true and soulful transformation can occur, where image becomes being and being becomes soul.

### **Death and Egypt**

In these moments, H.D. aligns Helen with mythic beings whose stories take them to the liminal edges, the depths of Hades, and to an awareness of death in life. It is here, that the classical and Egyptian stories come together in an alchemical mixing of mythic metaphor. Throughout the poem, H.D. refers to Helen, or Helen refers to herself, as both Persephone and as the Egyptian goddess, Isis. The Greek Persephone and her Eleusinian mystery serve as the underlying story of descent into the underworld as a rite of initiation. However, it is Achilles who first names her "Isis" during his overwhelming memory and subsequent attack. Helen believes that his anger, as well as her Egyptian exile, turn her



into Isis: "...but with his anger, / that ember, I became / what his accusations made me, / Isis, forever with that Child, / the Hawk Horus (H.D., *Helen* 23). In the next prose introduction, H.D. writes, "*Her vision is wholly Greek, though she returns to the sacred Egyptian lily for her final inspiration*" (24). Why does Egypt become the plane of her transformation? Why does H.D. turn to the Egyptian myths to assist Helen in her journey?

The key to answering these questions resides in the marriage of the Greek and Egyptian imagination and reception of death. For H.D., the Persephone/Hades myth most likely remains too loyal to a patriarchal narrative of overpowering rape and the presence of demonic masculine forces. Though still relevant to the presencing of death in Helen's alchemical initiation, it is clear that the movement toward Egypt and toward Isis constitutes a shift toward something more. Perhaps the Greek/epic ethos does not hold the liminal realm with as much of the lover's embrace and feminine containment.

In his book, *The Dream and the Underworld*, James Hillman employs the myth of Hercules to feature the Greek heroic descent into the underworld and to reveal how this story resonates with the egocentric mentality that modern, Western culture maintains around death. Hercules as the hero-warrior enters the realm of death with violence and a singular ambition to destroy the dark forces. He does not understand the important presence of death and hell and the movement into the imaginal realm and so he begins to attack and chop up the beings and images that he encounters. A warrior who is so willful and action-oriented cannot take the image into his heart.

In our everyday lives, we do not want to go into Hades and into the dream world, because like the Greek hero-warrior, we are so accustomed to chopping and dividing

things up. Both scientific empiricism and the hero's blade attempt to separate images and metaphors and slice them into little compartments of theory and objective understanding. This heroic ambition of plundering, imbedded in the modern Cartesian ego, cannot tolerate the way that the dream and the image are particularizations of the whole. In the death-initiation and the alchemical process, one has to learn to stay with the images and discover what they are saying. One must develop a deep care for the images. Hillman writes,

The culture-hero Hercules as well as all our mini-herculean egos mimetic to that Man-God, is a killer among images. The image makes it mad, or rather evokes its madness, because heroic sanity insists on a reality that it can grapple with, aim an arrow at, or bash with a club. Real equals corporeal. So it attacks the image, driving death from his throne, as if recognition of the image implies death for the ego. The heroic ego literalizes the imaginal. Because it lacks the metaphorical understanding that comes with image-work, it makes wrong moves, and these violently. (115)

Like Hercules, Achilles reacts violently to the seemingly threatening presence of death. Facing Helen before the brazier, he is overwhelmed with his memories of war and destruction. When he attacks Helen, he is reacting to his initial desire to attack death's humiliating capacity. In his associations with death, he invokes the image of Isis, a mythic perspective that he fears: "Oh cursed, oh envious Isis, / you—you—a vulture, a hieroglyph" (H.D., *Helen* 17). However, though threatened, Achilles helps to initiate the Egyptian myth of the Osiris-Isis cycle into Helen's story. In this invocation, the image of Isis becomes something separate from the consciousness of Achilles, or even Helen, rather embodying the movement toward the Egyptian myth of death and rebirth. The Isis-Osiris story resonates more with the alchemical process. In the most resonant part of the mythic tale, Osiris' brother Set (often associated with the evil Typhon), motivated by

jealousy, chops Osiris up into fourteen pieces and scatters them across Egypt (Hart 41). Isis must find the pieces and put him back together so that they may be unified, procreate, and give birth to Horus. Simultaneously alive and dead, Osiris becomes the king of the afterlife. “Osiris is not resurrected in the sense of returning to life as an individual on earth. He enters into a new kind of existence in a separate realm that most beings can only reach by dying” (Pinch 83). In his transformation, Osiris experiences the in-between of reforming into a new realm after the dismemberment of his being. This Egyptian story circles around the phenomenological re-membering of the masculine by the nurturing and polymorphic sexuality of the feminine. The masculine animus must suffer the dismembering humiliation of death in order to experience the love inherent in his re-membering. Similarly, love must suffer death. It is only after suffering her earthly loss, that Isis can begin the alchemical process of re-formation and reach the life-giving union of *coniunctio* with her husband-brother.

Perhaps also, Egyptians are less militaristic than the Greeks, who, though certainly pluralistic, so often return to the epic and heroic journeys of ambitious, Spartan-like and Ares-driven characters like Hercules. The Egyptian myth is the tale of lovers. In fact, it might compare more smoothly to the Greek myth of Orpheus, though Orpheus’ suffering does not return Eurydice or renew their union. However, both myths invite the earthy presence of Eros. Erotic and romantic love enters to confuse, challenge, and join femininity to the old and dark forces of death. The underworld cannot be just a place of masculine rape on the path of alchemical renewal; it must also be a landscape of germinating creativity. In both the realm of death and the experience of grief, Eros enters into Hades, love joins death to make Hell a place where forces merge and initiate visitors

into rebirth. The Isis-Osiris cycle in Egyptian mythology provides a more feminine and Orphic form of the underworld experience, very different from of the underworld of Persephone and Hades.

Through her mythological lens, H.D.'s landscape evokes Eros' instinct-like longing and ephemeral nature in contrast to Hades' death-driven world of modern alienation and progress, which convinces us that a visit to the grief-threshold is a movement toward ultimate doom and annihilation. In *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. evokes the "one name for the thousand lost, Eros, the Hawk Horus" (43). Eros, the oldest and the youngest god of the Greeks, also enters into the Egyptian myth, becoming Horus (the child of Isis and the re-membered Osiris), as Helen herself has taken on the role of Isis, who recovers and enlivens the dismembered Osiris. Through these characterizations, H.D. re-imagines the journey toward recovering the inherent qualities of death that exist in the present and in life. And so by entering Egypt's mythos, grief can become the awareness of the presence of the dead. On this journey, she recognizes that as the grief-threshold allows one to enter into the living qualities of the past and death, it also brings Eros *to* Hades, or brings love into relationship with death. An emerging theme throughout "Eidolon"—the last section of the lyric epic—is the relationship between death and love: "*There is the ultimate experience, La Mort, L'Amour*" (288). In the heart's dimension, through which one accesses the grief-threshold, these two may come together to join dis-membering and dis-orienting Death to the immediacy of the healing poetic word and the soul of the living earth. Only by entering this grieving space as an inhabitable landscape, may one encounter the secrets of death's present-absence and

encounter the imaginative possibilities of the soul's creative, expanding, and living future.

### **Aphrodite—The Veil of Earth's Beauty**

This relationship of death and love has yet another component, it offers the opportunity for the presence of beauty and subsequently, the redeeming source of the heart's longing. Through the suffering of war and grief, beauty emerges as the aquifer of longing for Helen and the figures of her imaginal experience. Without beauty, phenomena have no reason to reveal themselves and death's nihilism reigns as a mere function. Later in H.D.'s poem, Theseus arrives to counsel Helen on the island of Leuké. He is another figure of her animus, who appreciates the beauty of her feminine magic. Many critics, including Susan Friedman, believe that Theseus' consultation with Helen reflects the therapeutic work that Sigmund Freud and H.D. shared during a few months in 1933 and 1934. In yet another liminal brazier, Theseus provides warmth for Helen, who is "blown by the wind and snow," and offers her a Hermetic pair of "fleece-line shoes" from his "cedar-chest" (H.D., *Helen* 147-152). Years after their time together, H.D. wrote her *Tribute to Freud*, a beautifully subtle record of her sessions with the doctor. In her own time of war and loss, Freud brought H.D. the mythic guidance of the hermetic vessel in the form of four walls, a couch, and a threshold upon which to share her dreams and imaginative inquiries. So too, does Theseus, on Leuké, offer containment for Helen's travelling and transforming psychic experience. Theseus asks: "will the brazier dissolve you? / do you fear the embers? / I am Theseus, do you remember?" (147). He helps her to begin differentiating her dissolving primal matter in the alchemical vessel, so that she might access the true beauty and wisdom of the earth, the budding "flower" of

her heart's grief and longing: "*the glowing embers in his brazier will revive her, together they will forget and together they will remember*" (153). However, with a tone of warning, Theseus tells Helen:

It is one thing, Helen, to slay Death  
it is another thing to come back  
through the intricate windings of the Labyrinth;

the heart? ember, ash or flower,  
you are Persephone's sister;  
wait—wait—you must wait in the winter-dark; (157)

As Sigmund Freud did for H.D., Theseus guides Helen through a period of her alchemical process in which she must learn to differentiate between her own perceptions in order to achieve reconciliation. She must encounter the images of her inner experience without the fear and pre-conceived ideas of their externalized, symbolic interpretation. He warns her to not associate death with a desire to conquer, like much of the masculine figures in her story, for death is not the end. On the grief-threshold in the brazier of her heart, she must wait like a smoldering ember in the "winter-dark," for it is not death itself for which she is mourning. Like Persephone, the winter bride of Hades, she mourns for the return of beauty in the living earth. She is and will continue to return from death, but she must learn from its tragic humiliation and suffer the undifferentiated state in the labyrinth-like journey of the heart through death. Then the redeeming beauty, "the flower" or the "magic of the goddess Isis (Aphrodite, Thetis)" (30) will arrive to descend, re-member, and reveal the aesthetic process of creation.

In his book, *The Thought of the Heart & the Soul of the World*, James Hillman writes about beauty, not as decorative or adorned, nor as art or the philosophy of Aesthetics, but as the feminine manifest *anima mundi*, the soul of the world, which we

sense through the heart's perception. Hillman writes, "the beautiful...can only be understood if we can enter an Aphroditic cosmos, and this in turn means penetrating into the ancient notion of *aisthesis* (sense perception) from which aesthetics derives" (42). In an alchemical sense, he says that *aisthesis* responds to the way in which the Aphroditic cosmos reveals a sensory encounter with sulphur, or the cosmic gloss and beauty spread over all creation.

Many times throughout *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. refers to the "veil" of Aphrodite or Cytheraea (the island where Aphrodite emerged from her shell). Eileen Gregory calls the veil's mysterious appearance the "encompassing mystery of Aphrodite/Thetis/Isis, the one who has woven the pattern of Eros that Helen discovers through her enactments and remembrances" (230). These elusive feminine figures carry the soul of the world into the sense experience of humanity. They remind the human heart of the earth and its beauty. The veil begins to represent Helen herself as an apparition of beauty. It covers much of her experience, including how she manifests in others' view, especially to Paris in Troy. Underneath the veil resides the cosmic form of Beauty that evokes this longing; Helen, the phantom and the reality, holds the Aphroditic consciousness for this lyric epic: "The harpers will sing forever / of the unveiled Aphrodite, / a portent, an apparition;" (45). Helen displays an awareness of the veil's phenomenological power. She speaks of Achilles: "it was they, the veil / that concealed yet revealed, / that reconciled him to me," (44). Alchemically then, the veil become the sensory experience of *anima mundi*—it is the sulphuric cosmic gloss that Hillman describes, bringing the characters and the reader closer to their experience by both concealing and unveiling their hearts' longing for

beauty and for soul. In an alchemical summation of the heart's need for beauty, Hillman writes:

[The heart] will be aware that its realities are not real and its unrealities are real, that its feelings are its truth and yet these feelings are fantasies of its desire and auras of its images, that as it loves it lies to further invent its love, and that the sensate sulphuric world with which it burns is so compelling because of our heart-hunger for forms, for beauty, which that sensate world embodies. The heart would be touched, asks that the world touch it with tastes and sounds and smells; *aisthesis*; touched by the image. (Hillman, *The Thought* 74)

What sensitive words with which to examine the work of an imagist! Unlike the aforementioned heroic warrior—who slices up the image for fear of its autonomous and cosmic voice—the imaginal poet is the phenomenologist and the alchemist.

Understanding the most fundamentally beautiful and sensory experience of being “touched by the image,” the imaginal poet brings us into the brazier of the heart so that we might access the sulphuric gloss or veil that envelops the natural earth and moves us toward differentiating our own feeling.

Helen brings the Aphroditic quality of beauty to the story with its capacity to evoke deep longing and to move the heart to action. In her cosmic pluralism, Aphrodite and her veil offer the archetypal setting for the heart to find connection and intimacy with each image or experience. In fact, the process of differentiating one's view, desire, or opinion, most often depends upon whether beauty is present. Hillman says, “psyche is the life of our aesthetic response” (39). When the heart has aesthetic reactions, this is the soul speaking. In this way, beauty becomes the only reason that one can love and that Eros can continue to love experience. Often, forces of stasis, dissociation, and even heroic objectification eclipse beauty and the individual or the culture finds it difficult to



love experience. In his book *Beauty*, the Irish priest, poet, and philosopher, John O'Donohue writes about how experience depends upon the presence of beauty:

Beauty is not an extra luxury, an accidental experience that we happen upon if we are lucky. Beauty dwells at the heart of life. If we can free ourselves from our robot-like habits of predictability, repetition and function, we begin to walk differently on the earth. We come to dwell more in the truth of beauty. Ontologically, beauty is the secret sound of the deepest thereness of things. To recognize and celebrate beauty is to recognize the ultimate sacredness of experience, to glimpse the subtle embrace of belonging where we are wed to the divine, the beauty of every moment, or every thing. (51)

Both in its capacity to be refreshingly simple for the sensory experience and divinely transformative for the spiritual experience, beauty becomes an ever-present character in *Helen in Egypt*. It launches ships and causes deaths. It evokes both memory and anger. And finally it stirs the heart to both love and hatred. Beauty reminds Helen of the incredible “thereness” of her own experience, that she can individuate in the subjectivity of her own aesthetic response.

*Perhaps it is the beauty and the proportion of the pattern that amazes Helen. It is not ‘in the oracles of Greece or the hieroglyphs of Egypt’ that she finds the answer. It is in the simple remembrance of her first meeting with Achilles, and his recognition of her. (H.D., Helen 82)*

Thus she begins, with the help of a pluralistic cosmos, to feel what Gregory calls “the pattern of Eros,” to remain intimate with the experiences of memory, love, and death that take her closer to the answer in beauty. Why would she, or Isis, or the Greek soldiers, or anyone for that matter, endure suffering unless to become connected to the deep Aphroditic consciousness that opens the heart, feels beauty, and responds to the qualities of life? In the last pages of H.D.’s poem, the invocation of Isis and thus the Aphroditic presence, more fully enters the story to bring the alchemical process closer to its longed-

for *coniunctio*: “A man will wait hours on the wharf / for some chance unexpected thing, / the simple magic coming” (280). What does he (or she) wait for? The next lines imply that the answer is the goddess of love and beauty: “Oh, yes, the world knows her name,” for she is “a priceless treasure,” who descends into our waiting world “from the uttermost seas” (281). Aphrodite introduces us to what we truly seek, the feminine soul of the world.

As we wait in the winter-dark or on the wharf’s threshold for the return of *anima mundi*, we begin to understand that in our suffering, in our joy, in our aesthetic experience, we are serving the earth, giving back what has been given. In a phenomenological poly-consciousness we have no use for Cartesian divisions that leave the heart alienated from its own perceptions of nature’s evolutionary beauty. In this freedom of perceptivity, a holistic alchemical process allows the earth to evolve into what it is meant to be. As spiritual beings, surely we are meant to serve this process and the emergent and natural beauty of the divine. On a philosophical level, the scientific tradition posits that, through explanation, compartmentalization, and conclusive judgment of natural data, it too is serving the earth; however, alchemically it is actually destroying it. Technology, its manifested progeny does not necessarily intend to, but it externalizes our experiences of space (for example, broadcasting and the internet), and causes our interior experience of space and time to shrink. When our experience shrinks, there is no room for the gods to enter and evoke our desire and need for beauty. Hillman writes, “Beauty is an epistemological necessity; it is the way in which the Gods touch our senses, reach the heart, and attract us into life” (Hillman, *The Thought* 45). We must bring the heart back, so that it might entice the body to expand the world through conversation with

the divine. We expand the world by embodying the source of containment. For instance, in the experiential container of psychotherapy, one has an hour to expand one's life. Or, as one sits down to read, this process is often contained within the book itself. These will-activities create a certain kind of capacity for the soul. They are exercises, like meditation or yoga, slowly building the heart's muscle, creating space for the imaginal to exist. H.D. concentrates this process into her poetic book, an artifact of internal mythos and cosmic expansion. Its containment mirrors the earth's alchemical process.

As previously mentioned, human experience must participate in this process, for as beauty serves us, we too serve the earth with our own sense of beauty. In his book, *Ways of the Heart*, Romanyshyn discusses differences between the *perceptual body* that moves with the natural rhythms of the earth and the *virtual body* of a technologically dependent atmosphere: "In our lived bodily experience of the world, the world wears the face of our intentions, and our gestures carve into the environment the trace and shape of their meanings" (27). Sensually then, the body must begin to impress and take up more space, though it is, itself, imaginal and *resides* within the heart. For when we love, or pray, or speak, or experience inexplicable beauty, the body begins to expand, but where is it expanding? It expands inside the heart, within the inner community, where Aphrodite and the gods may enter and multiply the figurative presences of the inner life.

In his last moments with Helen, the young Paris realizes that she is really leaving him to pursue something else, something in the way beauty manifests for her. He is distraught and accuses her of falsely impersonating Aphrodite. However, he does not understand that Helen must welcome Aphrodite in order to feel and differentiate her own desire. Paris tries to instruct Helen: "dissolve like fire; / do not repeat / Aphrodite's

inimitable gesture” (H.D., *Helen* 146). While she follows the alchemical process of the earth and feels the expansion of her own perceptual body, Helen remains faithful to the beauty of the Aphroditic experience. We feel alive and engaged with our own intentions, gestures, and feelings, when our hearts are capable of feeling the movement of beauty and desire. The earth is realized within. In 1913, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote an untitled poem that reflects the voice of his *Elegies*. The poem ends,

*One space spreads through all creatures equally—  
inner-world-space. Birds quietly flying go  
flying through us. O, I that want to grow!  
the tree I look outside at’s growing in me!*

I have a house within when I need care.  
I have a guard within when I need rest.  
The love that I have had!—Upon my breast  
the beauty of the world clings, to weep there. (Polikoff 554)

Like the call of the brazier’s flames, Rilke’s poem expresses a burning desire for the beauty of the earth to grow within his being. In order for this connectivity to pass the threshold, the human being must surrender to the processes of nature, what Keats calls the “negative capability” of things—softly willing for the things of the earth, birds and trees, to present themselves as they most naturally are, free of theoretical constraint. Rilke is not grasping after the earth with the possessiveness of his positivist thinking. It is on the threshold of feeling that the natural world may thus be realized within. Feeling is the world’s willful touch that creates a traversable threshold, allowing the bird to fly and tree to grow within the heart—allowing for beauty to enter the hearts alchemy. Then we can welcome Sophia, who “embodies that inner spiritual feminine” (Wehr 82)—*anima mundi*—intensifying the presence of the earth’s wisdom, and solidifying, through union, the heart’s alchemical gold.

## **Mythical Imagism, Personification, and the Imaginal**

Many figures visit Helen on her transformative journey to the grief-threshold and join her in encountering the presence of the earth's wisdom. The brazier houses their meetings like the feminine soul holds the world, containing all of the memories of joy and suffering, freedom and grief, until the earth reveals itself. The animus figures, who appear to Helen, play different roles in her realization of the feminine, poly-consciousness. Paris cannot seem to access the soulful feminine, for as she repeats, "What can Paris know of the sea" (H.D., *Helen* 299), or the depths of psychic life? And "what had Paris to give her?" (301). Paris is a boy, whose beauty is evident, but who cannot understand its manifestations beyond the visible. On the other hand, like Freud's consultations with H.D., Theseus assists Helen in her grief-stricken journey. With his sheltering mythic sensibility, he draws her closer to the brazier and together, they endure the "heart-storm" (159) in which they must encounter lovers of the past and decide whether or not to remember. Theseus has a wizened and experienced presence, but does not compliment Helen's feminine in the Eros-pull of unifying partnership. It is Achilles who becomes her shining star. He embodies the paradoxically present qualities of the animus, through which Helen comes to understand their union and the culminating, symbolic birth of their child, Eros. Gregory writes, "Achilles is from the beginning an image of the fatal hero at his most complex: the hero as brilliant light, but as dark Hades as well, initiator to the underworld; sacrifice and sacrificed, wounding and wounded, lover and son (176). Gregory's description resonates with another figure, Osiris, whose union with and re-membering by the feminine (Isis) produces Horus.

In his book, *The Mystical Marriage*, Gerhard Wehr describes the visual representations of the alchemical opus. The motif of the male-female union happens inside the vessel, producing an androgynous child with characteristics of sunshine and moonshine, the father and mother. Achilles becomes Helen's guiding light of the spirited masculine, helping her understand the sacrifice and self-revelation of a deeper, more spiritual beauty in the union of *coniunctio*. Albert Gelpi describes Achilles as Helen's "filial-fraternal partner" and their union as "a return of the lover-twin of Helen-Achilles" (Bloom 136-137). Through mystical union, Helen becomes aware of the androgynous oneness revealed within her. The Paracelsian alchemist, Gerhard Dorn (Dorneus), wrote about this spiritual union within the self: "*Ex aliis numquam unum facies, quod quaeris, nisi prius ex te ipso fiat unum*—You will never make the One you seek out of the Other unless you first become *one* yourself!" (Wehr 98). In the closing poem called "Eidolon," a separately titled conclusion to the whole of the work, Helen reflects that only Achilles can represent the figure she needs in order to realize the beauty of divine wisdom within her: "Only Achilles could break his heart / and the world for a token, / a memory forgotten" (H.D., *Helen* 304). Although *Helen in Egypt* is not a love-story in the traditional, Western sense, it is a story of the heart, of relationship, and of the love that the world and individual hold in the liminal and transformative spaces of existence.

Helen reflects that Paris could not understand the necessity of the grief-threshold, where figures of life and death congregate to inform the psychic life. Paris could not know of "the infinite loneliness / when one is never alone" (304). Before fully embarking on the journey into the flames, Helen begins to surrender herself to the solitude of grief so that she may fully engage with the figures that inhabit its threshold.

In the following passage, Helen reveals that she must forget Achilles as her lover in life, but incorporate his power as a psychic figure, the shining star, in her heart-altering process of grief. She says that she will forget Achilles,

...but never the ember  
born of this strange attack,  
never his anger,

never the fire,  
never the brazier,  
never the Star in the night. (77)

In the brazier of the heart, Helen must learn of the community in solitude and grief, where even Achilles visits as an inner figure on her solitary journey to the grief-threshold.

In H.D.'s work, these figures come alive in the imaginal realm. Initially, H.D. wrote in the imagist tradition of Ezra Pound; however, by the end of her life, her poems began to take on a fuller body, in which the image transformed into being. We have seen this in the mystical presences of Aphrodite, Thetis, Isis, and the mystical emergences of Achilles, Paris, and Theseus. H.D., who was always fascinated by the occult, knew that the images of the mythic world were more than mere representations of the human condition. In his book, *Modernist Alchemy*, Timothy Materer writes that unlike other poets of her genre and generation, "H.D. did not weave doubts about the validity of the 'dreaming wisdom' or 'daemoniac images' into the fabric of her poetry" (87). Although an analyst of Freud, many interpret H.D.'s work as weaving the archetypal stories of one who has a strong Jungian spirit or bent. Still others, like Norman Holmes Pearson, imagine H.D. as a sort of literary mystic, without need to establish philosophical

loyalties. In his forward to H.D.'s *Hermetic Definition*, he somewhat controversially writes,

Living in literature, she could equally move between myth and metaphors of multiple cultures, understanding with what relevance they could be interchanged. Like many Freudians, she became quasi-Jungian and could bring the cabala, astrology, magic, Christianity, classical and Egyptian mythology, and personal experience into a joint sense of Ancient Wisdom. (H.D., *Hermetic* vi)

H.D.'s steadfast incorporation of mythology and the vivid image allow for the brazier and for the burning embers of alchemical experimentation to serve as truly real and influential spaces in her soul-seeking story. By containing her work in the imaginative and mythical, Helen is also able to encounter the figures of her past and her psychic life. Achilles, Theseus, and Paris, among other mythological beings visit Helen and help to guide and inform her journey along the grief-threshold. These visitations are not merely figments of Helen's, or even H.D.'s imagination, but display the presence of the mythical world in the individual experience.

Throughout the poem, H.D. remains faithful to the theme of the eidolon, the enigmatic image or the illusory phantom. She constantly seeks the answers to eidetic questions regarding the relationship of dreaming to waking, of illusion to reality. In each section of the lyric epic, she continues to circle around the question "Helena, which was the dream, which was the veil of Cytheraea?" (H.D., *Helen* 36). The dream's illusory visitation, and the veil's tangible and sulphuric evocativeness both contribute to the alchemical process that moves into the liminal realm of the brazier. Though she initially wants to separate the dream and veil, she learns that within a mythic and imaginal



consciousness, they are images that both serve to reveal the reality, validity, and beauty of the liminal realm. In fact, Eileen Gregory writes of this relationship in *Helen in Egypt*:

But finally the distinction insisted upon here between dream or veil and *something else* presumably more real cannot be maintained in the poem: all is imaginary, all is real, all is a dream, all is waking. Nor does this indicate a glib dissolution of boundaries, but rather a psychological insight to which the lyric Helen is faithful: everything *is* imaginary and the imaginary *is* real. (229)

The lyric Helen begins to know the presence of beings in her psychic life. Upon their reunion on Leuké, Theseus asks Helen, “where do they go, our old loves, / when love ceases? (H.D., *Helen* 148). Where do the figures of the imaginal and the memories of beauty and Eros go, in order to be accessed by our phenomenological experiences of remembrance? Where do the figures of our lives and our dreams retreat after we meet them on the shores of living time? H.D.’s poem shows us that they go back into the imaginal world, the lyrical world of the dream and of the poem, only to be accessed again through alchemical revelation. Gaston Bachelard knew, as he stared into the flames of the hearth, that “[h]uman experience and human reality are dependent upon imaginary being (Bachelard, *Fragments* 18). Bachelard’s approach to imagination is not only phenomenological, but amounts to an ontology of free imagination that creatively guides human life toward transcendence. He too, sees the image as real, just as much externally inhabiting the world, as it is liminally influential for the individual. He says,

Life within us is neither an essence to be touched at will nor a containable entity. The human being is a swarm of beings. Human beings are never fixed in space or time as others think, and are not to be found even where they themselves tell others to inquire. (19)

To Bachelard, imagination is freedom from a mental imitation of reality, a faculty of “deforming images” (Kaplan 2) and changing images, and a process of constant

accessing, creating, and becoming, which has its own context separate from objective reality.

Helen's dialogues in the poem shift and begin to resemble a turning-inward, a conversation with the figures of her inner life. In the "winter-sorrow," of grief, where she can feel "the ember glow / in the heart of the snow" Helen begins to hear the voices of the unconscious. She says, "It comes to me, lying here, / it comes to me, Helena...there is a voice within me, / listen" (174-175). The voice she hears is in the brazier with her, joined with her, both separate and inside. On a regular basis, Carl Jung also encountered psychic figures, beings with names, with whom he would converse and seek to know his own psychic life. In this way, he turned away from an ego-centric idea of introspection in modern psychology that does not allow for a realm between the ego and the material world. Many writers, philosophers, and religious leaders have engaged in the historical and spiritual battle between imagism and iconoclasm, daemons as important images versus demonology, driven by Christianity. Post-enlightenment and pre-Freud, to "Know Thyself" meant to know the ego, after Freud it was to know the past and patterns of behavior, and after Jung, it became an archetypal, daemonic knowing through figures and images. Through Jung's example, we can loosen the grip of scientific and ecclesiastical fingers upon our imagining hearts and open them to the mythical, metaphorical world.

On a psychological level, Romanyshyn would call this grip the deadening action of the mind's projection. He writes,

Projection rests upon a philosophy of space that separates the inside from the outside, a dualism of interiority and exteriority which identifies the interior with mind or consciousness and the exterior with the world, a world without qualities, a world drained of its erotic complexities, a world of matter that has been de-animated. (Romanyshyn, *Ways* 93)

This way of thinking cannot hope to incorporate the beings of the soul-life, the beings that the heart perceives. A theory of projection, which tends to rule the scientific landscape of our times (and much of the modernists' as well), disregards the presence of psychic figures as individually-created *figments* of imagination. Projection leads to literalism, which neglects the transformative and miraculous potential of the soul, a potential that can only be accessed through the synchronistic assistance and subtlety of metaphor. However, according to Romanyshyn, a metaphor is neither a thing nor an idea, neither a material event nor a psychological experience, but rather a third moment between these that releases the “imaginal” sense between spirit and matter and allows for reverie and the entrance of beauty and synchronicity. He writes that the soul is, in fact, like another country where the psyche is “autochthonous” or an indigenous native. Here, beings of the imaginative psyche become real. Here, Achilles, Theseus, Paris, Thetis, Isis, and others become influential figures in Helen’s dream-life and her contained brazier of psychic alchemy.

In a chapter titled “Personifying/Imagining Things,” from his book *Re-visioning Psychology*, James Hillman writes about this very experience, that of holding conversation and communion with beings outside of the ego-self. As an archetypal and Jungian analyst, Hillman traces the treatment of these relationships through the psychological community from the de-mythologizing of everyday life to the reincorporation of living myth in the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. He writes about the movement of personification, anthropomorphism, and animism from cultures surrounded in myth and living otherness to more modern cultures of scientific empiricism, in which images becomes nothing more than ideas. In his approach to

Jungian psychology, Hillman often cites Bachelard to emphasize his and Carl Jung's phenomenological inclinations in opposition to a modern world ruled by science, logic, and ego-driven subjectivity. In this more scientific and Cartesian view of human psychology, only people are permitted to be subjects. In such an environment that must emphasize the ego and the mind's understanding, the heart's fire and perception are buried and the image becomes merely an idea or a representation, no longer a figure with which to understand being and the world. Such a tradition reduces "ideas" such as alchemy and forces them into the occult, where they are rationally dismissed to the realm of notional magic.

In his chapter, however, Hillman focuses primarily on the experience of personifying, which he defines as "*the spontaneous experiencing, envisioning and speaking of the configurations of existence as psychic presences*" (12). He describes the containing role of the human being, who participates in the process of personifying as follows:

Rather than a field of forces, we are each a field of internal personal relationships, an interior commune, a body politic. Psychodynamics becomes psychodramatics; our life is less the result of pressures and forces than the enactment of mythical scenarios. (22)

Throughout her career, H.D. remained loyal to her mythological inclinations, writing with an awareness of time and the archetypal significance of the mythic sense in everyday existence. Her poetry is home to the figures of the psychic life that include the gods and most importantly the dead. In *Helen in Egypt*, Helen's alchemy of self occurs within the flames of encountering and participating in such "psychodramatics." Before

her many encounters with the figures of her past and those from the underworld, Helen expresses a intuitive moment of her own solitary and brazier-like capacity:

I feel the lure of the invisible,  
I am happier here alone  
in this great temple,

with this great temple's  
indecipherable hieroglyph;  
I have "read" the lily,

I can not "read" the hare, the chick, the bee,  
I would study and decipher  
The indecipherable Amen-script. (21)

This passage describes many layers of containment, from the self to the temple, the lily, and finally the Amen script. But is it possible that despite Helen's search for a way to interpret the symbols of the story, all of these containers become one in the brazier of the heart? It is not the symbol, which ends her interpretations; rather, the meaning resides in that which brews within the symbol. Meaning is being burnt by life.

In the prose following this passage, H.D. writes that though Helen does not, with her intellect, know the script, she is actually closer to it than the author, "*She would re-create the whole of the tragic scene. Helen is the Greek drama. Again, she herself is the writing*" (91). Helen becomes the embodiment of the script, the mythology, and the container in which the stories may take place. She feels the lure of the invisible in her solitude for she is not really alone in her inner life. Depending on one's fantasy of how the archetypal experience manifests, Helen is haunted, visited, and in conversation with the personified forces of the world's imagination. Hillman writes, "*To the mythic consciousness, the persons of the imagination are real*" (Hillman, *Re-Visioning* 17). To

Helen, and to H.D., our old loves always return, for in a mythically contained cosmos, where memory and forgetfulness reveal the earth's wisdom, they never leave.

The process of personifying, an alchemical mixing with psychic beings, would also rely upon the heart as an organ of perception. The heart is the organ that recognizes the passage of time and that its feelings and even its thoughts are not merely personal, subjective belongings, but are archetypal figures of an imaginative world. Personifying “offers another avenue of loving, of imagining things in a personal form so that we can find access to them with our hearts” (Hillman, *Re-Visioning* 14). The heart is therefore the vessel, or the brazier that holds the alchemical capacity of the individual's and the world's imagination. As it senses the flicker of time, what is the imagination doing? It is constantly personifying—rather than ideas, concepts, and notions, the heart sees or feels images, figures, and living metaphors in an archetypal landscape of perception. Imagination is the activity of feeling. For example, when we find ourselves in the dark corners of grief, it is not the notion of sadness that haunts us, or simply the idea of recovery that brings us hope. Rather, our experiences endure the images of the absent loved-one, the emptiness of a favorite chair, or the loved-one's name on a letter in the mailbox. Hope more often resides in the joy of vivid memories, the touch and presence of a child, or the perpetual growth and beauty of the natural world. The heart loves images. If the alchemical vessel is the heart and the heart is where the home is, then it is the images that invite one to feel at home with oneself. One cannot be at home in a theoretical world, where materialism robs the image of its significance. The heart must be a landscape for the imaginal, where past, present, and future collide, so that it does not feel alienated, but rather feels at home in the presence of inner figures.

H.D. also creates this imaginal space in the literary form of her poem. Though playing with the epic tradition in *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. is a lyricist at heart. Her lines in this poem are like the shorter songs of a dotting lover, relying on images as gifts from the natural world in order to sing the beauty of the beloved. The “voice” that Helen hears within her returns, but “*It is a lyric voice this time, a song rather than a challenge*” (H.D., *Helen* 178). Lyric poetry sings a more immediate song than the challenging call of the epic and so must stay close to the immediate energy and longing of the *prima materia*. Romanyshyn writes, “For alchemist and poet the imaginal reveals itself to an oblique vision which alludes, like a metaphor does, to something which always remains elusive” (Romanyshyn, *Ways* 99). When reading Helen’s lyric form, one begins to feel the fleshy bodily movement of images that are being transformed in the alchemical process or in the active imagination. The lyric responds to the call of the living earth and to the voices of the dead. The earth wants the imaginal realm, so that the angels can come in. The lyric poet realizes this and serves it with a deep, psychological faith. When serving the invisible, the poet must receive some satisfaction in realizing that he or she is giving back what has already been given, and therefore, creating culture. Bachelard writes about the creative generation of images:

If I am able to demonstrate here that in poetic imagery there burns an excess of life, an excess of language, I will be able to discover point by point the sense there is in speaking of the heat of language—that great hearth of undisciplined expression in which, afire with existence, in the almost mad ambition to spark some existence beyond, something beyond existence comes into being. (Bachelard, *Fragments* 13-14)

In Bachelard’s vision of the great hearth, it is the lyric language itself that becomes the voice of the imaginative heart, and the uttered words are the flames of transformation that

create anew from what is given in matter. Bachelard expands the psychoanalysis of fire and the metaphor of personal alchemy into the realm of language. He knows that literature and utterance—the human capacities for poetic reverie—are the highest and broadest expression of will and imagination. In their expression, they liberate us from an inert adaptation of reality and return us to the deepest sources of psychic structure and lived experience.

### **Conclusion—The Heart’s Beginning**

“If thou wouldst know thy Self  
Look into the cosmic spaces.  
If thou wouldst fathom the Cosmic Spaces,  
Look inwards into thine own Self.”  
--Rudolf Steiner (Steiner, *Karmic* 35).

H.D.’s poem is a testament to the feeling of living vitality that the image and mythology provide for the human soul. A mythic and imaginal world is one in which human beings feel cosmically aligned and present in their lived experience. As Michael Meade has said, people desire an “appointment” that allows them to see and be confirmed in themselves and their own stories. The many systems in which they participate rarely create this mythic space and so they find themselves “dis-appointed,” feeling like they do not fit in the greater story, if there is one at all (Hanson 4). A larger sense of cultural and spiritual grief emerges from the loss of myth replaced by history and explanation.

H.D. holds tight to the figures of her psychic life, giving them voice in her poetry and releasing them from phenomenological hibernation through the lure of beauty and the ever-presence of mythic memory. Helen’s brazier becomes another place where H.D. enters the imaginal in order to reveal how the text of the psyche writes itself within mythic containment. Alchemically, Helen must allow the grief of war and the beauty of



the earth into her being, so her heart may be transformed in the flames of the brazier. In her differentiating encounter with Theseus, Helen begins expressing an awareness of this:

my heart had been frozen, melted,  
re-moulded, re-crystallized  
in the fires of Egypt,  
  
or in the fire Death,  
the funeral-pyre of the Greek heroes; (156)

Throughout the psychological alchemical process, one experiences the return to *prima materia*, the separation of matter and value, the presence of death and loss, the elemental shift of being, and finally the formation of a psychic union, in which, closer to the ancient vision of the *opus*, the individual merges with the natural processes of the greater earth in the embrace of the cosmos. For Helen, this union happens once her heart becomes engaged as an organ of perception. She begins to hold communion with the figures of her past and the landscapes of her dreams. She learns of community in solitude, death in life, and presence in absence. Most of all she learns that the alchemically transforming heart perceives with a greater trajectory, expanding the body and the psyche into intimate relationship with the wisdom of the earth. In *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard writes,

It is not knowledge of reality that makes us love reality passionately. It is feeling, the first and fundamental value. As for nature, we begin by loving it without knowing it, without really seeing it, by actualizing in things a love that has its basis elsewhere. Then we search for its details because we love it as a whole without knowing why. (115)

One cannot begin to empirically search for meaning before one feels compelled by the beauty of the earth, asking to be known. In the last lines of the poem, before the final phantom presence of “*Eidolon*,” H.D. brings the poetic word and the love of the earth’s wisdom together in a final, instantaneous *coniunctio*:

there is no before and after,  
there is one finite moment  
that no infinite joy can disperse

or thought of past happiness  
tempt from or dissipate;  
now I know the best and the worst;

the seasons revolve around  
a pause in the infinite rhythm  
of the heart and of heaven. (304)

Helen now knows the elemental presence of the earth and its cycles. She understands the phenomenological necessity of her grief and process of memory. Like the imaginative emergence of Bachelard's "poetic instant," Helen speaks of "one finite moment," that digests the wholeness of her experience. Although space and time do move within the vessel, the brazier-heart speaks more fluently the language of the liminal, where one cannot fully measure experience or the cosmos.

The liminal is a "pause" in the rhythm of the beating heart and of the pulsing heavens; it is the space between the lines, and the implied absence in the present. When gazing toward the mountain range or across a sea of waves, this interval realm appears miniscule, but psychologically, Helen recognizes that in the finite moments of liminality resides the great reservoir of in-betweenness, holding the imaginal, the mythic, the real, and the phantom together in one breath of transformation. In the poetic word and the human heart, the "eternal moment" returns and "we stare and stare over the smouldering embers" (269). In her poem, H.D. reveals that only if we visit the belly of the brazier and burn with all those imaginative worlds that yearn for their presences to be known, can we truly live and fully experience the natural and marvelous tides of *being* human.

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