

The Choir House and the Blast Furnace:
H.D.'s Bethlehem

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What men say is-not—I remember

—H.D., *The Flowering of the Rod* (1944)

THE MODERNIST POET Hilda Doolittle, who published under the pen name H.D., was born on 10 September 1886 and grew up at 118 Church Street in the “old town” of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. As she looked west down Church Street from her childhood home, she could see the beautiful and impressive stone choir houses that had been erected in the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Moravians founded Bethlehem as a utopian religious community, an egalitarian “city on a hill.” As she looked south from her family home, across the Lehigh River, she could see the imposing blast furnaces of the Bethlehem ironworks and the spires of Lehigh University, a private, modern research university built with steel-company profits.

This was an intimate, familial landscape. Hilda’s forebears had been among the city’s eighteenth-century founders, and her mother’s family remained leaders of the Moravian community. They had also helped to found the Bethlehem Iron Company (soon to be renamed Bethlehem Steel), and her father was one of the early faculty members at Lehigh University, where her older brothers were educated. But this was also a quintessentially modern landscape that embodied with extraordinary compression and visibility the historical forces and violent transformations of modernity.

Hilda left Bethlehem when she was ten years old, moving with her family to the outskirts of Philadelphia when her father joined the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania. She went on to attend Bryn Mawr College briefly, where she began a lifelong friendship with Marianne Moore, and, during her late teenage years, she also befriended Ezra Pound and his Penn classmate William Carlos Williams. She moved

to London in 1911 and lived, for the rest of her life, as an expatriate in Europe. Over the course of five decades, H.D. became an influential figure of the modernist avant-garde. She published more than a dozen volumes of poetry, including the early imagist poems that brought her widespread acclaim and the magisterial, feminist long poems, *Trilogy* (1946) and *Helen in Egypt* (1961). She also wrote three powerful memoirs, *The Gift* (about her Bethlehem childhood), *Tribute to Freud* (about her psychoanalysis with Freud), and *End to Torment* (about her complex relationship with Pound), as well as a substantial body of experimental modernist fiction. Some of this prose was published during her lifetime, but much has been published posthumously in recent decades, as a growing cohort of critics has celebrated H.D. as a feminist progenitor and a revelatory explorer of queer sexuality.

Although she never lived in Bethlehem again, she remained preoccupied with the city of her childhood throughout her life. For fifty years, H.D. struggled to resolve the contradiction between the choir house and the blast furnace, between the egalitarian promise of Moravian Bethlehem and a violent modernity defined by industrialization and world war. She became especially focused on the paradoxes of the city's history during the 1940s, when she herself endured the destructiveness of modern warfare as a survivor of the wartime bombing of London. H.D.'s poetry and memoirs from this period took on a mystical, even prophetic tone, but this writing was also her most politically engaged. Indeed, we cannot grasp fully H.D.'s mature feminist, antiwar vision, if we do not understand the history of the provincial city of her childhood, since that history offered her both a diagnosis of modernity's cataclysmic violence and a way of imagining alternatives. In the 1740s and 1750s, the founders of Bethlehem created a vibrant community characterized by startling forms of economic equality, racial integration, and the empowerment of women, but they also began to betray their most impressive egalitarian accomplishments from the very outset. By the time of Hilda's girlhood a century and a half later, this city founded by the descendants of pacifist, peasant communitarians had become an epicenter of the modern military-industrial complex, and the early promise of female

flourishing had been foreclosed. In her modernist memoir *The Gift* and the book-length feminist, antiwar poem *Trilogy*, H.D. invented mythopoetic strategies to keep alive the betrayed promise of equality that lay, half-buried, in the city's history. In these works, written at the height of her powers, H.D. also asserted that those who feared the collapse of patriarchal authority and racial hierarchy had unleashed the destructiveness of modern militarism. By memorializing the city's flawed but significant egalitarian achievements, and by calling on her readers to honor a promise long broken, she proposed that we might yet escape the unfolding disaster of industrialized global war.

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In the middle of the eighteenth century, Bethlehem was one of the most egalitarian places in colonial America. The town had been founded on the Pennsylvania frontier in 1741 by members of a central European Pietist sect, known in German-speaking places as the *Brüdergemeine* (Unity of the Brethren) and in the English-speaking world simply as the Moravians. The founders of Bethlehem were the descendants and spiritual heirs of Hussite peasant revolutionaries who, in fifteenth-century Moravia and Bohemia, challenged the underlying power relations of their feudal society, condemning all forms of hierarchy as sinful violations of Christ's teaching. Taking the Sermon on the Mount as a practical blueprint, these Christian radicals created free communities of peasants and artisans based on the communal sharing of wealth, the repudiation of violence, and the cultivation of universal literacy so all might interpret for themselves the word of God. The Hussite radicals were violently suppressed and the original Unity of the Brethren was destroyed during the religious wars of the seventeenth century. But those who traveled to the Pennsylvania frontier in the 1740s believed themselves to be the carriers of a "hidden seed," a suppressed religious and social vision, a late-medieval liberation theology. They built in Bethlehem a prosperous religious community characterized by exceptional forms of equality.

They called their economic system the General Economy. During Bethlehem's first two decades (1741–1761), everyone worked for the

community. They received, in return, not wages but the necessities of life (food, clothing, and shelter), as well as equal access to a socialized system of universal education, healthcare, childcare, and care for the elderly. They lived in communal dormitories, ate in communal refectories, and wore similar clothing, patterned on the dress of central European peasants. The founders of Bethlehem were not interested in constructing family homes or family farms or in accumulating private property. Instead, they set out to create an egalitarian community in which everyone could lead a full spiritual life and in which as many people as possible could devote their energies to intellectual, creative, and religious activity. They invested, accordingly, in communal infrastructure and technological innovation.

The General Economy was a dazzling success. In the first two decades, a population that grew from seventeen to almost seven hundred practiced more than fifty different crafts, many of them water powered. They erected highly sophisticated multipurpose mills and created the first system of municipal running water in North America (half a century before Philadelphia). They built handsome and impressive multistory communal dwellings, or choir houses, which stand to this day. Eighteenth-century visitors were amazed by the town's beauty, prosperity, and technological achievements. Israel Acrelius, a Swedish traveler, insisted in 1754 that the beauty of the city was "equal to Konunga-Hof," the summer residence of the Swedish King. John Adams marveled at the mills and waterworks, which exceeded anything in Boston. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the people of Bethlehem abolished poverty. No one feared destitution in illness or old age. High quality medical care, delivered by trained doctors and nurses, was freely available to all. They achieved nearly universal literacy, for women and men of all races, in a community populated by migrants from five continents who spoke dozens of languages.

In its founding generation, the city also empowered women, achieving a high degree of gender symmetry. The community was organized not in family units, but in "choirs": same-sex cohorts of people at the same stage of life. There were separate choir houses for girls and boys, single women and single men, married women and married

men, widows and widowers. This form of social organization had its origins in the early Hussite communes. But the practice of the choir system in Bethlehem was also strongly influenced by the theological vision of the Moravians' charismatic eighteenth-century spiritual leader, Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, who believed that only women could minister fully to the spiritual needs of other women, as only men could do for their brothers. In Bethlehem, the choirs were the central unit of social, economic, and spiritual life: choir mates lived, ate, slept, worked, and worshipped together. The sex segregation of the choir system led, as a result, to extraordinary forms of autonomy, homosocial community, and leadership for women in Bethlehem. Women were responsible for raising and educating girls, for teaching one another trades, for managing the economic life of their choirs, for tending to the spiritual needs of their sisters, and for representing themselves in the governing councils of the city. Girls required, and received, an education comparable to that of boys.

The authority and stature of women in Bethlehem were rooted, at a still deeper libidinal and spiritual level, in Zinzendorf's mystical Pietist theology, which recent Moravian historians, including Craig Atwood and Paul Peucker, have enabled us to understand in detail. Under Zinzendorf's influence, the Moravians practiced an intensely Christ-centered religion, focused, above all, on the emotionally charged, daily meditation on the sufferings of Jesus during the crucifixion, on the blood and wounds of the Savior through which they believed humanity had been redeemed. Zinzendorf urged his followers to focus, in particular, on the Savior's side wound (inflicted by a Roman soldier), which Zinzendorf systematically described as a womb or vaginal opening through which all humanity had been reborn. In this way, Zinzendorf participated in a minority tradition within Western Christianity, stretching back hundreds of years, that had imagined the Savior as an androgynous figure, at once male and female. Zinzendorf elaborated this tradition by developing an explicitly eroticized variant of the Christian theological concept of mystical marriage. He insisted that all human souls were female (in men and women alike), that all souls would become the "brides" of Christ ("playmates" in the

“marriage bed” of the Savior), and that through marital sex, wives and husbands could experience an ecstatic foretaste of their ultimate union with God. Zinzendorf promoted (as I have argued elsewhere) what we might today describe as a queer theology: Moravian spiritual practice rested on the daily meditation, by men and women, of their ecstatic union with an androgynous deity. This theology also encouraged a spiritualized gender fluidity, as Moravian men embraced the female soul within, and Moravian women identified their sexual bodies with a savior who was eroticized as male. Zinzendorf’s theology also challenged one of the religious foundations of Western misogyny, insisting that Christ’s incarnation (and Mary’s reproductive labor) had forever lifted the taint of original sin from women’s sexual bodies, as from men’s. Since Zinzendorf proclaimed not only that all souls were female, but also that the Holy Spirit was “mother” of the Church, no practicing Moravian could doubt the female dimension of the deity or the equal divinity within women.

The choir system, and the theology on which it rested, thus guaranteed women’s leadership and had far-reaching practical consequences. Women held spiritual as well as practical authority, serving as the most intimate religious mentors (choir “laboresses”), as deaconesses, and as missionaries preaching to other women. It is not clear whether they preached to mixed gatherings of men and women in Bethlehem, but Zinzendorf insisted that the sisters had as much “right to the priesthood” as men—and one woman, Anna Nitschmann, wore the Bishop’s purple vestments and had the power to ordain other women. The Moravians encouraged marriage and marital sex (which was regarded as a liturgical practice). In Bethlehem, they also socialized domestic labor (childrearing, care for the elderly, cooking, cleaning, laundering) explicitly in order to liberate women for leadership roles, including travel as missionaries. In this way, they resolved practically the conflict between motherhood and vocation. Not surprisingly, rates of marriage and childbirth were high in the founding generation. At the same time, the choir system freed women from any compulsion to marry for economic or material reasons. Unmarried women, Single Sisters, had a full, honored place in Moravian society, assured of

lifelong care and homosocial community, access to skilled labor, spiritual vocations, and leadership roles—as well as opportunities to raise children, in the nurseries and girls' choirs, if they were so inclined. And since all women, like all men, worked for the community, each was encouraged to find those forms of labor to which she was particularly suited.

In its founding generation, Bethlehem also achieved forms of racial integration that were rare in colonial America. The Moravians believed that all souls (and not merely a spiritual “elect”) had been redeemed by the Savior, and they regarded themselves as having a special calling to evangelize among enslaved Africans and among the native people of the Americas. Bethlehem had been built, in part, as a hub for this missionary endeavor. As a result of these convictions, they welcomed to Bethlehem people of all races and nations who embraced their particular vision of Christian redemption. In the founding generation, Africans, Asians, Native Americans, and Europeans lived together on terms of material equality and crossracial intimacy in the choir houses of Bethlehem. Once admitted to the church, they became full members of the General Economy, assured of lifelong care in the choirs. Members of all races were educated together and worked together in the fields and workshops. They ate, slept, sang, and prayed together in the choirs. During worship, they washed one another's feet and exchanged the kiss of peace. After death, they were buried side by side with their choir mates, each with a gravestone of the same size facing the sky, in acknowledgment of their equality in the eyes of God. One can see them to this day in God's Acre, the original Moravian cemetery in Bethlehem: Igbo and Irishman, Mahican and Moravian and Malay, each brother and sister identified by tribe or nation of origin.

But the Moravians betrayed their own most impressive egalitarian accomplishments. The racial inclusiveness and integration on which the Unity prided itself was undermined, from the outset, by brutal contradictions. Although they welcomed native people into their choirs as brothers and sisters, Bethlehem's founders built the city on land that had been stolen by the English in an especially cynical manner from

the Lenni Lenape only a few years before. The leaders of the community also calculated, explicitly, that their evangelical efforts would be most successful among native people who had been dispossessed from the land. Similarly, most of those literate Africans, living on terms of material equality in Bethlehem's choir houses, were enslaved. Since there was hardly any private property in the town, these enslaved people were mostly owned by the church. The Brethren had decided to purchase enslaved Africans within a year of the city's founding, in order to solve an early labor shortage. Some members of the congregation appear to have challenged this decision to buy human beings, regarding slavery as incompatible with the long traditions of the Unity. Those with most authority, however, insisted that slavery might be reconciled with spiritual equality—and that enslaved Africans might prove less “insolent” and disruptive to the community than white hired hands. In the founding generation, the congregation purchased approximately three dozen Africans. Most of these ultimately gained admission to the Church and became full members of the General Economy. But they were chattel nonetheless. They were the enslaved founders of an egalitarian city on a hill.

After Zinzendorf's death in 1760, the German leadership of the international *Brüdergemeine* (the worldwide Moravian church) abolished the General Economy in Bethlehem, which led to the swift collapse of economic equality and gender symmetry in the city. Some European leaders of the church had always been uncomfortable with the radical economic arrangements in Bethlehem and with the unconventional gender order it supported. Within a month of Zinzendorf's death, they acted decisively and against the apparently unanimous wishes of Bethlehem's residents. They insisted that the people of Bethlehem abandon communal housekeeping in their choirs and return, wherever possible, to living in conventional, male-headed families and that each family become responsible for its own economic success or failure. The European leadership of the church insisted that if Bethlehem was already prosperous under the General Economy, then the pressure of market relations—the individual fear of poverty and the pursuit of prosperity—would encourage everyone to work still

harder and would enable the community to send more funds to assist in paying off the debts of the international church. The leadership was also determined to restore respect for social rank, class hierarchy, and private property and to curtail what they regarded as unnatural forms of female authority. As a result of the abolition of the General Economy, economic inequality and a fixed division of labor asserted itself in Bethlehem for the first time. Women lost most of the forms of leadership, spiritual and economic autonomy, and civic authority they had valued so highly. Women without husbands, fathers, or other male relations were permitted to continue living in the Single Sisters' and Widows' choirs, but these groups rapidly descended into poverty and lost their former authority. The European leadership had succeeded in checking what they regarded as the "ruinous" spirit of equality in the city, but they also undermined the communal ethos that had attracted most brothers and sisters to Bethlehem. Within five years of the abolition of the General Economy, the population of the city shrank by twenty percent. The marriage rate fell by almost half and the birth rate by more than a third. These trends continued for fifty years.

By the time of H.D.'s birth in 1886, a century after these events, Bethlehem had become a far more conventional place. The Moravian church had become a mainline Protestant denomination, which now regarded with embarrassment the libidinal intensities of Zinzendorffian theology. Bethlehem had ceased to be a closed religious community in 1843. After the abolition of the General Economy, the city experienced forms of class stratification and economic inequality evident elsewhere in the United States. By the middle of the nineteenth century, 5 percent of households controlled 50 percent of privately owned real estate. The remarkable experiment in gender symmetry and racial integration was long past, but the memory remained. The egalitarian, communal origins of the city were built into the landscape: the grand choir houses were still standing; the racial integration of the founding generation was recorded on the gravestones in God's Acre. The Single Sisters' House and the Widows' House persisted: though these choirs had lost their former authority, a small minority of Moravian women continued to choose to live together as sisters. The tradition of

educating girls persisted too, in altered form, in the celebrated, private Moravian school for girls. And because the Moravian church endured, and Moravian Bethlehem remained a tight-knit community, many residents of the "old town" traced their family roots to the city's founders. The story of the founding was an intimate family history, a shared communal tradition. Hilda Doolittle, a native daughter of Bethlehem, inherited this potent, ambiguous legacy.



Hilda Doolittle was also heir to Bethlehem's other half, to the startling, modern industrial city rising on the southern banks of the Lehigh River. She was the daughter of the steel company and the research university built with its profits.

Doolittle's maternal ancestors, the Weisses and the Wolles, were members of the Moravian elite. After the abolition of the General Economy, they were among those who won the ensuing economic competition. H.D.'s grandfather and his brothers owned significant parcels of real estate south of the Lehigh River, and they sold this land, where portions of the Bethlehem ironworks and Lehigh University were built. Indeed, Hilda's great uncle, Augustus Wolle, was one of the original visionaries of large-scale, industrial iron production in Bethlehem. With the railroad baron Asa Packer and the financier Joseph Wharton, Wolle founded in 1857 the Saucona Iron Company, which became the Bethlehem Iron Company in 1861 and then the Bethlehem Steel Corporation in 1904.

The Bethlehem Iron Company originally produced iron (and then steel) rails for the burgeoning American railroad system in the 1860s and 1870s. But they entered this glutted market late, and the company saved itself from collapse by turning, instead, to the profitable business of armaments production. The United States was becoming an imperial power and it entered with gusto into the global naval arms race. While Andrew Carnegie, the leader of the largest steel company in America, was willing to produce armor to protect American ships, he refused on principle to produce shells, believing that aggressive military might and standing armies would undermine American

democracy. But the leaders of the Bethlehem Iron Company seized the opportunity, agreeing to produce both naval armor and the shells to pierce it. Moreover, they eagerly sold to American and foreign governments alike. It was a perfect business model. In the 1890s, when the United States went to war in Cuba and the Philippines, the Bethlehem Iron Company grew rapidly and generated enormous profits.

By the time of H.D.'s childhood, over three thousand men were laboring in the Bethlehem works—more than four times the entire population of the city at the conclusion of the General Economy. Immigrants poured into South Bethlehem to take jobs in the steel plant, and the city became once again a polyglot, multiethnic settlement of laborers from many nations. But the working conditions were appalling: twelve- and fourteen-hour shifts, seven days a week, for subsistence wages. And workers were maimed and killed with frightful regularity. (In 1909 alone, for example, at least twenty-one men died on the job, and 10 percent of workers were scalded, burned, crushed, crippled, or otherwise seriously injured.) But the owners were making fantastic profits and were determined to protect them. Charles Schwab, who had supervised Carnegie's Homestead plant after the murderous suppression of striking steelworkers in 1892, was now running the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, and he responded to union organizers with a firm hand. When the Bethlehem workers struck in 1910, Schwab's private army and state troopers rode them down on horseback, firing their guns and clubbing workers in the street. One man was shot to death. Intimidation and destitution broke the strike. Meanwhile, the owners and senior management built impressive mansions, many of them on the north side of the river—some on Church Street itself, a block from H.D.'s childhood home. When World War I arrived, the apotheosis was complete. Charles Schwab became one of the richest men in America, and in the midst of the war, as people died by the hundreds of thousands in Europe, he invited the steel elite to raise their glasses to the toast: "may this prosperity continue." The city founded by peasants and artisans who carried the "hidden seed" of pacifism and the communal sharing of wealth had become an epicenter of the modern military-industrial complex.

Lehigh University developed as an adjunct to the steel company. The two institutions were symbiotic, growing in tandem. The university was founded in 1861 by Asa Packer, whose railroad holdings had made him one of the richest men in Pennsylvania and carried him (despite his taciturnity) to the US Congress and nearly to the governor's mansion and the White House. At the time, Packer's founding gift was the largest ever to an American university—and for generations, the owners and managers of Bethlehem Steel funded Lehigh's endowment. One of America's first technical universities, Lehigh was designed to produce the kind of practical knowledge that enabled the steel company to achieve and maintain its competitive place in the rapidly changing technological landscape of American steel production. For generations, Lehigh engineers helped to make Bethlehem Steel one of the richest corporations in America. In return, steel management gave generously to the university. Most buildings on campus were named for the steel elite who controlled the university's board of trustees for generations. The university, in turn, paid less tangible but important status dividends to its rich benefactors. Most members of the early Bethlehem Steel elite came from modest backgrounds and had little formal education or cultural sophistication. Lehigh enabled them to acquire and display the cultural capital they required to secure the class status that wealth alone could not procure. In one variant or another, this is the story of America's nineteenth-century private research universities, from Duke and Carnegie-Mellon to the University of Chicago and Stanford. The same processes helped to transform the most elite seventeenth- and eighteenth-century divinity schools like Harvard and Yale into modern research universities. But in Bethlehem, the relation between industrial corporation and university was unusually intimate. Students could see the blast furnaces from their classrooms. Workers could see the university spires from their row houses.

And the little girl, Hilda Doolittle, could see Lehigh and the steel works from her family home as clearly as she saw the choir houses. Her family had helped to found each of them: the betrayed egalitarian commune; the profitable steel plant producing guns and munitions for

global warfare; and the university where her father was one of the first faculty members, teaching mathematics and astronomy to young men like her brothers.



Hilda Doolittle's life, like millions of others', was scarred by the industrialized carnage of modern warfare. Her father had survived the Civil War, but had been psychologically wounded by what he had seen and done as a teenage soldier in the Union army and by his brother's death from typhoid fever during the slaughter. H.D.'s own beloved brother, Gilbert, died fighting in France during the First World War, a loss she grieved all her life. She believed that the terrifying onset of that war had caused her to lose her own first child through miscarriage, and her husband, the poet Richard Aldington, had returned from the battlefield with shell shock. The rise of Hitler in Germany during the 1930s, and the impending threat of a second global conflagration, precipitated a psychological crisis for H.D., as it did for so many of her contemporaries. She went into psychoanalysis with Freud in Vienna in 1933. Her visits there to work with him intensified her awareness of the vulnerability of European Jews to genocidal racial violence. This was a matter of intimate personal resonance since her lover and longtime companion, Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman), was Jewish. H.D.'s psychoanalysis enabled her to explore urgent personal matters—including her bisexuality and her yearning to claim her full creative and spiritual authority—in the context of a violent world that seemed committed to destruction and domination. H.D. spent most of the war years in London. She survived the Blitz of 1940–1941, when German warplanes rained bombs on the city. As she lived through the nightmare of civilian bombing, H.D. tried to make sense of the technologically sophisticated killing and the terror she endured, night after night. In response, she produced some of the finest work of her career—and in the canon of modernism. In that work, she returned persistently to the city of her childhood. The choir house and the blast furnace might, she felt, help to explain the catastrophic violence of modernity and might point the way to emancipatory alternatives.

H.D. began writing *The Gift*, the memoir of her Bethlehem childhood, during the worst of the Blitz, and she completed it in 1943, when the terror was still fresh. *The Gift* is an ambitious work of modernist nonfiction, a literary tour de force of psychoanalytic introspection and historical memory, moving back and forth in time across a period of two centuries, from the era of Bethlehem's founding in the 1740s, through the nineteenth-century history of her family, and on to the poet's wartime experience in London.

In the opening chapters, H.D. tells a gendered story about nineteenth-century Bethlehem. She describes the "old town" of her childhood as a beautiful and intimate place, suffused with the history and spirituality of the Unity, a place in which many families were direct descendants of the founders, and in which women of all ages—relatives and neighbors alike—addressed Hilda as "Sister." But she describes it, too, as a place in which women and men had not flourished equally. She traces a lineage of impressive men, each of whom had been able to realize his distinctive "gifts," to cultivate his creative, spiritual, and practical talents. H.D.'s great-grandfather, Jedediah Weiss (born in the eighteenth century and alive almost until H.D.'s birth) was an accomplished clock maker and silversmith, a beekeeper and gardener, as well as a gifted singer, who had a sacred and visible public vocation in the community as a member of the trombone choir. H.D.'s grandfather, Papalie—Francis Wolle—was a Moravian minister and principal of the girls school (the Ladies' Seminary) at the height of its national renown, but also a scientist and artist, who mastered microscope and paintbrush to produce botanical studies of freshwater plants. Her uncle Frederick Wolle, a gifted musician, achieved international recognition as the founder of the Bethlehem Bach Choir. Though an outsider to the Moravian community, Hilda's father, Charles Leander Doolittle, is seen by his daughter as an intellectual "explorer," a distinguished astronomer and university professor.

H.D. represents the women of her family, in contrast, as thwarted in their desire to embrace and develop their gifts. Hilda's beloved grandmother, Mamalie, wanted in youth to "be a single Sister" and to develop her spiritual vision in the Single Sisters' House, but her

first Moravian suitor warned her that outsiders regarded this kind of women's community as a "Popish practice," and he convinced her to marry instead. Hilda's mother, Helen, a creatively vibrant young woman, taught music and painting to the girls at the Ladies' Seminary, and possessed a "rich and vibrant" voice. But Helen overheard her imposing father, Papalie, once describe her singing as "dreadful noise" and she never sang again, even in church. She then "gave away" her musical gift to her brother Frederick. Helen's sexual renunciation mirrored her abdication of artistic expression, as she turned away a sexually exciting early suitor, a "Spanish Student" who glimpsed the libidinal vitality that Helen was in the process of burying. Helen then passed on the legacy of self-denial, insisting that none of her children was "gifted." Her daughter Hilda must then confront the lifelong challenge of affirming in herself the gift of creative, spiritual, and sexual vitality.

In the middle of *The Gift*—at its heart—H.D. reveals "the secret" of Bethlehem's founding generation. Here she explains that the founders' betrayal of their own egalitarian accomplishments in the middle of the eighteenth century has had lasting effects across more than a century, that it has produced the painful history of thwarted womanhood that the author has witnessed so intimately within her own family. H.D. reconstructs, in short, an origin story that explains her tantalizing maternal inheritance—and that story provides, by memoir's end, the master metaphor for the betrayed egalitarian promise not only of Bethlehem, but of America itself. H.D. explains that she learned "the secret" as a ten-year-old child from her grandmother. As the telling unfolds, the author explains that the story may not actually have been uttered, spoken out loud, but may have been transmitted through some nonverbal (perhaps unconscious, perhaps mystical) communication. As H.D. tells the tale, in the early days of Bethlehem's founding, a group of Moravians and a group of native people met on a small island in the Monocacy Creek, a place called Wunden Eiland, the Island of Wounds. There, they made the ecstatic discovery that the Holy Spirit of the Moravians and the Great Spirit of the Lenape were one and the same. Relinquishing distinctions of race, tribe, nation, and sect, they accepted the revelation that all human

beings were spiritual kin, members of a common family. The meeting was inspired and consecrated by two women, Anna von Pahlen and Morning Star. To confirm the peaceful, egalitarian integration of their communities, the European woman agreed to join the Lenape, and the native woman joined the Moravians. All promised, joyfully, to honor the gift of this revelation. But other members of the Unity regarded the meeting as a "blot on the church" and saw the pledge as a "scandal." The "stricter Brethren of the church said it was witchcraft." Since "you can be burnt for a witch," not only the participants but also those who might later share the story were driven, by fear, into silence. And so, as H.D. explains, "there was a promise and there was a gift, but the promise it seems was broken and the gift it seems was lost." Because they repudiated their own vision of human equality, and the peace that follows from it, the founders, according to H.D., had brought a "curse on the land" that manifested itself in the "great wars" that followed.

In the story of Wunden Eiland, H.D. creates an idealized mythopoetic condensation of historical dynamics that she had gleaned from family lore and from the sustained research into the history of Bethlehem that she recorded in her detailed "notes" to the memoir. It is history as told by the greatest of our imagist poets. (Indeed, in its historical ambition, *The Gift* demonstrates the representational power of an imagist nonfiction prose that exceeds, in some respects, even the related experiments of Williams's *In the American Grain* and Dos Passos's biographical prose-poems in *U.S.A.*) Into the image of Wunden Eiland, H.D. compresses many carefully selected facts. There was actually a small island in the Monocacy Creek that the early Moravians called the Island of Wounds and employed for spiritual purposes (until they redirected the stream and incorporated the island). There were many spiritual conversations between the Moravians and the Lenape during the early years, and the missionaries did, in various ways, seek to link their own spiritual visions to those of the native people whom they sought to convert. Anna von Pahlen (along with her husband, Bishop John Cammerhof) was one of those strongly associated with Zinzendorf's transgressive, mystical theology—and Paxnous

was, indeed, a Lenape sachem (said by H.D. to be husband of Morning Star). These and other facts have been compressed into an allegorical tale and, ultimately, into the metaphorically dense and resonant image of Wunden Eiland, which emerges as the passionate encapsulation of the Moravians' original egalitarian commitment to crossracial intimacy and the leadership of women. That image also contains what H.D. regarded as the catastrophic betrayal of this egalitarian commitment. Those within the community who feared racial and gender equality employed violence to reinforce structures of dominance and to frighten into silence those who might seek to transmit the memory of an egalitarian and pacific communion.

In the final portion of *The Gift*, H.D. focuses her attention on that legacy of violence, fear, and silence. As she cowers in her London flat during the Blitz, afraid that she will be burned alive and buried in the rubble, H.D. recognizes that the terror she endures is not entirely new, is not only a response to the planes and bombs. She recognizes that she has inherited this fear from her grandmother, Mamalie, who was also terrified that she would be burned alive, and from her mother, whose fear drove her to give away her own "gift" and to bury her vitality. H.D. recognizes, in short, that she has inherited from her maternal forebears both the gift of a revolutionary egalitarian vision and a terror that has prevented women, for generations, from expressing it. For H.D., the story of Wunden Eiland explains the patriarchal aggression that had produced that fear and compelled that silence. And Wunden Eiland explains not only the gendered dimension of this story, but also its racial component. For the "stricter Brethren" regarded the meeting on the Island of Wounds as a "scandal," not only because women led and consecrated it, but also because it entailed a rejection of racial hierarchy and the fantasy of stable racial difference on which the city and, later, the American nation rested.

Through the story of Wunden Eiland, H.D. insists that, by betraying the promise of equality, the founders had brought upon themselves a cycle of violence and bequeathed to their descendants a toxic inheritance of "great wars" that would persist, generation after generation. That legacy of warfare was manifested, most immediately, in

the genocidal racial violence toward native people (what H.D. called “the crime of a whole nation” in *The Mystery*, a novel written during the same period). Because of that violent history, white people were plagued by guilt, anxiety, and fear of native retribution, real and imaginary. In *The Gift*, H.D. explains that she was haunted in childhood by little-understood stories about the massacres at Gnadenhuetten. In 1755, Lenape warriors, enraged by dispossession, murdered eleven Moravians at the largest of their mission towns; in 1782, ninety-six native people, mostly women and children who had converted to Moravianism, were murdered in cold blood by white people in a new mission town of the same name. Hilda was haunted by the traces of this history in her own home, where her father casually displayed a Native American skull on his book case, and she suffered from guilty, anxious fantasies about being “scalped” by “wild Indians.”

H.D. is concerned with a longer history of warfare, stretching into the present, of which the mass murder of native people was an early manifestation. She proposes that in the history of Bethlehem, one can see that organized violence—the systematic preparing and unleashing of war—has served as a manic defense against the promise of equality. In the story of Wunden Eiland, some of those with positions of privilege and authority in the founding generation, the “stricter Brethren,” threatened to burn alive as “witches” those who wanted to share the promise and pleasures of equality. Both the threat and the fear of violence then passed down through the generations.

H.D. is preoccupied throughout *The Gift* with the steel plant that loomed on the southern bank of the Lehigh River. For a little girl growing up in the “old town,” the blast furnaces were both a vivid presence and alien, harder to understand than the choir houses. Even as a child, Hilda intuited that the steel plant embodied a destructive modernity that had superseded the choir houses, a profitable and toxic modernity that the city embraced and bequeathed. Hilda’s family saw that the smoke and ash, the pollution from the blast furnaces, was killing the trees planted in the first generation, including the apple tree planted by Zinzendorf himself from seeds brought from Herrnhut, a last living embodiment of the utopian promise. Fifty years later,

as H.D. cowers in her London flat, she must confront the terrifying truth that the loudest of the explosions, the munitions that seem most to threaten her destruction, are coming from the Allies' own guns. With a terrible irony that H.D. evokes but cannot quite bring herself to name, the armaments of Bethlehem have come to find her on the other side of the Atlantic, and they threaten now to burn her alive and bury her in the rubble.

In the concluding pages of *The Gift*, H.D. asserts that even in the midst of war—indeed, especially in the midst of war—it was still possible to end the cycle of violence by honoring, at last, the broken promise of equality. Following a logic that is at once historical and psychoanalytic, she insists that the terror she has endured during the Blitz might itself provide the path back to such an affirmation. If she can name accurately its long history, then she can liberate herself from a fear she has always known. She suggests that the threat of violence that silenced generations has now manifested itself on such a spectacular scale that perhaps there is nothing further to fear. The bombs falling from the sky, the munitions exploding throughout the city, have finally shattered the “shell” of fear in which she has been encased since girlhood. She is free at last to declare the vision of equality, the promise of universal kinship, so long ago betrayed. On the final page of the memoir, she fuses the idioms of her astronomer father and her mystical grandmother to assert that “our earth is a wounded island as we swing round the sun.” At this moment of apocalyptic modernity, in the midst of a second world war endured by a single generation, H.D. contends that the globe itself is Wunden Eiland. Humanity as a whole must confront once more the promise of equality or the destruction that follows from its continued denial. H.D. insists that the time has come for the choir house to respond to the blast furnace. Not because the Moravians had kept the promise of equality, but because they could feel in their hearts the cost of its betrayal.

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As H.D. was writing *The Gift*, she was simultaneously composing the feminist long poem that she ultimately entitled *Trilogy*. Like

The Gift, *Trilogy* emerges from H.D.'s preoccupation with the city of her childhood. The poem also attempts to resolve the contradiction between the choir house and the blast furnace, although here the process of mythopoetic condensation and allegorical abstraction has been carried out more fully. *Trilogy* is an ambitious poem, a dazzling work of feminist syncretic revision. It explores the long arc of Western mythology and religion, from ancient myth to the Old and New Testaments, in order to identify historical and psychological sources of twentieth-century violence. In its range of allusion and cultural ambition, *Trilogy* resembles the related modernist projects of Eliot and Joyce, Pound and Williams. And just as Joyce was mulling over the Dublin of his youth and Williams the Paterson he had known all his life, H.D. was preoccupied with Bethlehem. The details of Bethlehem's history, the sensuous specificity of the Moravian "old town" that she lovingly records in *The Gift*, appear only in fleeting and fragmentary images in the pages of *Trilogy*. But in its deep structure, H.D. retells in abstracted, universalized form the tale of Wunden Eiland. As in *The Gift*, she contends that the world-destroying violence of twentieth-century militarism was rooted in a long, historical denial of human equality—and, especially, in the patriarchal repudiation of women's full humanity and right to flourish. In the poem, as in the memoir, she insists that the torrential violence of modernity might still be overcome by honoring the long betrayed promise of equality.

Trilogy begins where *The Gift* ends, with the calamity of the Second World War. *Trilogy's* first volume, *The Walls Do Not Fall*, opens with this deceptively simple (and mild) evocation of the Blitz:

An incident here and there,
and rails gone (for guns)
from your (and my) old town square

Here, H.D. captures with characteristic compression the way in which the modern city was being torn apart by violence from without (the bombings or "incidents" of the Blitz) and by militarism within (the "rails" protecting London's gardens and squares are melted down for armaments production). And here, as throughout *Trilogy*, Bethlehem

lies just beneath the poem's surface. It was in the city of her childhood that the production of "rails" for civilian transport gave way to the production of "guns." From *Trilogy's* opening lines, the poet alerts us that she is speaking at once of "my" "old town square" in Bethlehem and "yours" in London and countless other towns and cities in an era of global warfare.

Throughout *Trilogy*, H.D. reminds her readers that she is writing in direct response to the contemporary challenge of world war, an urgent and now universal crisis that humanity as a whole must address. At some moments, she evokes the destructiveness of the Blitz sensuously and concretely—as, for example, in the final poem of *The Walls Do Not Fall*: "there is zrr-hiss. . . we are powerless, // dust and powder fill our lungs / our bodies blunder // through doors twisted on hinges." At others, H.D. emphasizes that militarism threatens to destroy not only lives and cities, but also the thoughts and feelings that might still save us. In wartime, knowledge is adapted to the work of murder: "folio, manuscript, old parchment / will do for cartridge cases." Forbidden knowledge that cannot be harnessed for the war effort is destroyed: "the burning of the books," she explains, "remains / the most perverse gesture." War threatens all of those who hold onto "the secret" of universal kinship, those "spinnings // of the rare intangible thread / that binds all humanity." And H.D. insists, as she did in *The Gift*, that those with power ("our betters") imagine that they can intimidate into silence those who hold onto forbidden knowledge. Those who profit from war believe that "we will soon be swept aside, / crumpled rags, no good for banner-stuff."

Over the three volumes of *Trilogy*, H.D. suggests that beneath the spectacular violence of modern militarism lies a more fundamental, more pervasive, centuries-old violence: the patriarchal repudiation of women's full humanity. This movement, from modern war to ancient and persistent misogyny, is one of *Trilogy's* central gestures. And in this movement, H.D. repeats the central explanatory gesture of *The Gift*: that the broken promise of equality leads to the "curse" of war; that the founders' fearful repudiation of their own egalitarian vision prevented generations of women from flourishing in the city of

Bethlehem and contributed to a cycle of violence that found its full twentieth-century expression in global war.

H.D. recounts this tragedy, not merely of Bethlehem, but of Western history, in the most sustained way in the final volume of *Trilogy*, *The Flowering of the Rod*, through an allegorical encounter between two figures, each densely encoded with layers of allusion. Mary is a syncretic figure who combines the many Marys of the New Testament: she is at once the Virgin Mary (who conceives immaculately and gives birth to the Savior), and Mary Magdalene (often represented in patriarchal Christianity as the harlot-apostle), and Mary of Bethany (“reviled for having left home/and not caring for house-work”; “having borne a son in unhallowed fashion”). She is also Eve (whose desire brings sin into the world) and Lilith (who precedes Eve and refuses to accept her subordination to Adam, at the dawn of humanity). She also embodies myriad women from ancient mythology, including Athena (Greek goddess of wisdom, art, and war), Venus (Roman goddess of sexual love), Diana (virgin goddess of the hunt and of childbirth), Demeter (goddess of fertility), Isis (Egyptian goddess of fertility and magic), and Astarte (Levantine goddess of sexuality and courage). Into the syncretic figure of Mary, H.D. combines the full panoply of female capacities—intellectual, creative, sexual, spiritual—so often denied, buried, or reviled in patriarchal cultures that have insisted on women’s subordination. The second figure of H.D.’s allegory is Kaspar, who is at once one of the Magi (come to honor the birth of Jesus), one of the Apostles, and a wealthy merchant. In the encounter between Mary and Kaspar, H.D. conducts once more—but now on a world-historical, mytho-religious plane—the foundational tragedy of her birthplace: the denial of equality. In Kaspar, H.D. embodies a version of Bethlehem’s male founders. As some of the Moravian brothers saw in their sisters in the 1740s and 1750s, Kaspar glimpses in Mary a full humanity as luminous as his own. He has a vision of the plenitude and divinity within Mary that “made his heart so glad” he “laboured so/with his ecstasy.” But like Bethlehem’s male founders, Kaspar fears what he also admires in Mary. He shares the anxieties of the other

male apostles who see in her "a Siren . . . a mermaid," whose beauty tempts them to destruction. His fear leads him to repudiate her, repeatedly, with a patriarchal dismissal: "*it is unseemly that a woman/ appear disordered, dishevelled, // it is unseemly that a woman/ appear at all.*" In the allegorical encounter between Kaspar and Mary, H.D. proposes that the drama of Bethlehem's founding generation has also been the drama of Western culture. In Kaspar's repudiation of a radiant equality he had previously recognized, H.D. identifies the source of a violence that had now engulfed the world.

In *Trilogy*, as in *The Gift*, H.D. affirms that even in the midst of global war, it was still possible to honor, however belatedly, the broken promise of equality and to turn back the river of blood. Here, as in the memoir, she emphasizes that even in the era of mass-civilian bombing, some survive. Writing in December of 1944, the poet declares in *Flowering of the Rod*: "we have shown//that we could stand;/we have withstood//the anger, frustration,/bitter fire of destruction." And in her allegorical idiom, she insists emphatically on her repudiation of militarism and the carnage it leaves behind: "the harvester sharpens his steel on the stone;/but this is not our field, // we have not sown this . . . let us leave//The-place-of-a-skull/to those who have fashioned it." The daughter of the blast furnace goes on to declare: "I am the first or the last to renounce/iron, steel." The poet who had grown up in a city in which arms merchants had "harvested" great wealth by "sharpening" their "steel" and by producing weapons that turned whole cities into the "place-of-a-skull" now repudiates this version of modernity, declaring "this is not our field, // we have not sown this."

In order to separate herself from this military-industrial modernity, H.D. commits herself in *Trilogy*, as she does in *The Gift*, to an excavation of the past, to a particular strategy of memory. In both works, she seeks to remember the egalitarian promise that was buried by violence and fear. In her memoir, H.D. represents herself as a little girl listening to her grandmother's story of an egalitarian meeting on a vanished island in the Monocacy Creek. In *Trilogy*, she transmutes and universalizes the tale of Wunden Eiland, figuring herself now as

a bird hovering over a vanished island paradise from ancient mythology. She is one of those “who still (they say) hover/over the lost island, Atlantis.” H.D. affirms that this vocation of memory is urgent and practical: “seeking what we once knew,/we know ultimately we will find//happiness.” She insists that “what once was—they remember, they remember.” When H.D. declares in *The Flowering of the Rod* that “what men say is-not—I remember,” she adopts a prophetic voice but she also speaks a literal truth, an embodied, material, historical knowledge.

As a child, she had seen the Single Sisters’ House, and in adulthood she recalled the stories of a founding moment when the spiritual, creative, intellectual, and sexual authority of women had been affirmed. In the pages of *Trilogy*, she enacts a similar process of memory, but now on a more ambitious cultural-historical scale. “Mary” (or, as she calls her in the second volume of *Trilogy*, “the Lady”) embodies the full human complexity of women—as artists and protectors, as leaders and prophets, as sexual and spiritual beings, fully equal to men. H.D. stages in the final thirty poems of *Trilogy* the patriarchal dismissal of this female figure in order to move steadily backward in mytho-religious time to the moment before repudiation. Having represented both Kaspar’s ecstatic recognition of Mary’s radiant humanity and his repeated denial of it, H.D. ends with Kaspar (now as one of the Magi) seeing Mary for the first time, and recognizing that she contains within herself all the beauty and fertility of life, “a most beautiful fragrance,/as of all flowering things together.” Reworking the foundational Christian myth, H.D. leaves us with the image of Mary, not as vessel or conduit for a male savior, but as herself divine, holding in her arms not the infant Christ, but a bundle of “myrrh” that stands for her own redemptive plenitude—a plenitude fully recognized by Kaspar.

Trilogy thus enacts, on a larger scale, the same itinerary as *The Gift*. Beneath the nightmare of modern, industrialized warfare lay an older, more fundamental and persistent violence: the violence of the powerful who fear an equality they have already glimpsed, already recognized—indeed, an equality they yearn for, even as it frightens

them. (H.D. describes Kaspar's repudiation of Mary as "the last inner defense/of a citadel, now lost.") H.D. insists in both works that the systematic preparing and unleashing of violence has been a manic defense against that knowledge of equality. And in both works, she affirms that the cycle of violence can still be ended, if we have the courage to embrace an egalitarianism that we need not invent from whole cloth, but which we have already known, however fleetingly and imperfectly, in the past. This was the lesson of H.D.'s *Bethlehem*. For *Hilda Doolittle*, the alternative to the blast furnace lay in the choir house—not in its betrayed ending, but in the still unrealized potential of its beginning. As she surveyed the ruins of London after the Blitz, she insisted that we might yet leave behind the "place-of-a-skull," but only by renewing the broken promise of equality.



H.D.'s feminist and antiwar vision has made her an indispensable writer for the twenty-first century. Her imagist poems brought her many admiring readers in the early twentieth century and, a few decades later, her increasingly ambitious work attracted influential advocates, including the Yale literary critics Norman Holmes Pearson and Louis Martz. But it was H.D.'s feminist vision that inspired second-wave critics, including Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, to reclaim her work, and four decades of feminist scholarship have now established H.D. as a central figure in the canon of literary modernism. Her bold exploration of gender fluidity and queer sexuality, especially in her experimental fiction, has further intensified her emancipatory significance for feminist and queer critics in the current generation. At the end of humanity's bloodiest century, H.D.'s work has taken on a still greater urgency because of her analysis of the roots of modern militarism in long histories of racial and gender domination. Some of H.D.'s male contemporaries who were canonized earlier—such as Eliot and Pound—responded to the catastrophe of world war through an anxious embrace of misogyny and racism. In contrast, H.D. insisted (like some other previously marginalized

modernists, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston) that only by surmounting patriarchal and racist fantasies of superiority could we save ourselves from the cataclysmic violence of modernity.

Like many of her modernist contemporaries, H.D. recoiled from the horrors of two world wars by withdrawing into myth and mysticism. But her work should also be recognized as a sustained and trenchant response to concrete historical realities. In *The Gift* and *Trilogy*, she struggled to make sense of the technologically sophisticated destruction of modern cities and to manage the terrifying experience of civilian bombing in the 1940s. In these works, she sought to explain how the older, deeper historical contradictions of the provincial city of her childhood could help to explain that cataclysm. In order to understand the Blitz, H.D. needed to understand the blast furnace and the paradoxical process by which it had emerged from the choir house. She studied Bethlehem, both in the archives and in the emotionally rich and uncertain memories of her childhood. Over decades, she invented literary strategies for shaping and memorializing a half-buried history.

The emancipatory feminist energy of H.D.'s work derives, most of all, from her successful creation of a radiant, symbolic language to keep alive a betrayed historical promise of female flourishing. In *The Gift* and *Trilogy*, she produced not merely mystical fantasies of equality, but a memory of egalitarian realities that, however flawed and fleeting they may have been, confirmed the viability of alternatives to patriarchal domination and militarism. In the face of violent modernity, H.D. remembered the Sisters' choir houses on Church Street, which she had seen every day of her girlhood. In *Trilogy*, she claims a prophetic voice, but she speaks also as a historian when she insists, "what men say is-not—I remember."

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