

The Consolation of Things: domestic objects in H.D.'s writing from the Second World War

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Abstract

This paper analyses the spiritual consolation of domestic objects – Christmas decorations, food, flowers - in the writing of the American writer H.D. The paper asks how H.D.'s engagement with crafting material things formed a spiritual response to the time of crisis in which she wrote her mature poetry and prose. The paper analyses the prose texts *The Gift* and "Writing on the Wall" as well as the poem "Christmas 1944" whilst also drawing upon archival research into H.D.'s letters of the period as intertexts for the autobiographical writing. The French theorist Hélène Cixous's writing on the gift forms a framework for considering gift exchange amongst H.D.'s friends as a process of crafting community in the face of trauma. In H.D.'s work ordinary things become extraordinary and create pathways towards healing and consolation.

In 1944 H.D., reflecting on her analysis with Freud the previous decade, wrote that at her first session he had said "you are the only person who has ever come into this room and looked at the things in the room before looking at me". Indeed, throughout the memoir "Writing on the Wall", Freud's study and the things in it form a significant part of the analysis. H.D.'s written rejoinder to Freud is that "he is part and parcel of the treasures" and again, "you are contained in the things you love".¹ Freud suggests an opposition between himself and the things which H.D. denies. Here the boundary between subject and object is troubled as the things shape and contain subjectivity.

H.D. might be forgiven her social lapse, if we consider Freud's study; it is a room full of shelves and cabinets of books and antiquities, objects from ancient cultures (largely Roman but also Greek and Egyptian). Beyond the typical cluttered Victorian interior, his collection of antiquities moves the space to the realm of the museum.² Yet Freud's study is clearly not a museum as he would frequently handle various objects, move them around, or offer them to H.D. for comment. Many line up along his desk, forming a screen between the desk and the analysand's couch, itself covered with richly detailed rugs and cushions.

¹ H.D.: "Writing on the Wall" in *Tribute to Freud* (New York, 2012 [1956]), 97, 99.

² In "Advent" H.D. describes him as "a curator of a museum": in *Tribute to Freud* (New York, 2012 [1956]), 116.

Antiquities are a certain kind of object: ancient, beautiful, expensive, markers of cultural capital and cultural memory, the opposite of the ephemeral and ordinary.³ In this article I want to consider them alongside other objects in H.D.'s work with a humbler provenance: domestic gifts and Christmas decorations. These things enable an exploration into some of the key concerns of H.D.'s writing in the 1940's: namely, war trauma and the subsequent search for consolation which H.D. finds in relationships, spirituality and creative practice. Things play a paradoxical role for H.D.; frequently employed in metaphorical or symbolic terms, they are associated with both abstract meaning and materiality. Ordinary things are rendered extraordinary by their spiritual or emotional significance, and yet their very ordinariness remains part of their value.

H.D. was the pseudonym for the American writer, Hilda Doolittle. She first travelled to Europe in 1911 and then settled in London. She began publishing poetry as part of the Imagist movement, publishing her first poems in *Poetry* in 1913 and her first volume *Sea Garden* in 1916. The First World War was a traumatic time for her, she had a miscarriage, her marriage broke up, her brother was killed in France in 1918 and her father died shortly after. At the war's end she became pregnant and nearly died of influenza after the birth of her daughter in 1919. At this point she began a relationship with Bryher – the writer, heiress and arts patron – that would last the rest of her life. The two lived together, primarily at Bryher's home Kenwin in Switzerland although they also travelled extensively and returned to London at the outbreak of the Second World War. H.D. lived in London through the entirety of the Second World War despite the efforts of many friends to persuade her to return to the United States. The prolonged stress and malnutrition led to a breakdown in her health in 1946 and Bryher managed to get to her a sanatorium in Switzerland. H.D. spent the next fifteen years moving between residential hotels in Lausanne and Lugano, while continuing to write prolifically until her death in 1961.

For H.D. writing forged a connection between the material world and divine mystery. Like many Modernists, she was interested in art's potential as a resource for cultural renewal. However, she did

³ Some of the antiquities may well have been objects of everyday use in their time, but their survival across the centuries confers on them a degree of value that removes them from the realm of the ordinary.

not see art as a replacement for religion but as a means to, and expression of, spiritual understanding. H.D.'s religious syncretism allowed her to draw upon a number of different religious and esoteric traditions and to engage with spiritual concerns in her writing without subordinating it to the demands of doctrine. Her spiritual interests were wide-ranging indeed, including Moravian Christianity, astrology, Tarot, numerology, spiritualism, Kabbalah, Greek Paganism, and the cult of St Teresa.

Gardenias and Gods

H.D.'s memoir "Writing on the Walls" was serialised in *Life and Letters Today* in 1945 and 1946. She did not have access to her notes from the analysis (they remained in Villa Kenwin in Switzerland when H.D. returned to London at the start of the war) and the memoir is a series of impressions, rather than a straight record.⁴ She had gone to Vienna in 1933 in hopes that Freud would help her overcome the writer's block she felt was caused by the "residue of the [First World W]ar". However, she soon came to feel she could not discuss her war-horror with him, conscious as she was of the escalating crisis in Europe and the threat to Jews. However, she could and did explore the spiritual experiences she had had following the war – in the Scilly islands in 1919 and her tour of Greece with Bryher in 1920. Throughout the memoir H.D. draws connections between spirituality – whether the peculiar visions she saw projected on the wall in Corfu as she attempted to follow the path to Delphi or her memories of a Moravian Christian childhood – creativity and psychic health.⁵

In considering the significance of Freud's antiquities in H.D.'s memoir, critics have tended to focus on their role in H.D.'s engagement with, and challenge to, Freudian theories around transference, female creativity, sexuality and religion.⁶ The most sustained attention has come from Adalaide

⁴ After the war, H.D. collected and edited her notes from the analysis and published them as "Advent" along with "Writing on the Wall" in the volume *Tribute to Freud*. When reading "Advent" it's important to bear in mind this double-dating; it is a curious text with its origin in the 1930s but selection and editing occurring after the Second World War and Freud's death.

⁵ H.D. and Bryher were unable to visit Delphi but the visions H.D. saw included a tripod that she interpreted as a reference to the Delphic oracle.

⁶ See Diane Chisholm: *H.D.'s Freudian poetics. Psychoanalysis in translation* (Ithaca & London, 1992), 34-36; Diana Collecott: *H.D. and Sapphic modernism, 1910-1950* (Cambridge & New York, 1999), 254; Susan Stanford Friedman: *Penelope's web. Gender, modernity, H.D.'s fiction* (Cambridge, 1990), 299, 304

Morris in considering the antiquities in terms of exchange.⁷ Morris's theorisation of gift economy has wider implications for H.D.'s work in this period, so it is worth outlining here.

H.D. sent gardenias to Freud in celebration of the arrival of his antiquities which were shipped to London after he fled Vienna in 1938. H.D. noted the flowers were "to greet the return of the Gods" and Freud subsequently shared a joke with her, describing the note that accompanied the flowers and adding "other people read: Goods".⁸ Adalaide Morris reads this exchange as part of a larger gift economy based in generosity. The gardenias themselves mark an earlier exchange in which Freud and H.D. swapped stories of visiting Rome (he had remarked "the gardenias, in Rome, even I could afford gardenias").⁹

Morris draws upon the work of anthropologist Marcel Mauss and cultural critic Lewis Hyde to articulate two ways in which the exchange between H.D. and Freud is marked as part of a gift economy rather than an economy of scarcity: temporal lag and a third partner. H.D. had long wished to give Freud gardenias; she attempted to give them on a number of birthdays and failed. When she finally does so, it is several years after the initial exchange of memories. The gift marks intimacy – H.D. knows Freud's memories of gardenias and his ongoing desire for them. The passage of time also allows H.D. to demonstrate that she recognises the significance of his gift of reminiscence.

Furthermore, telling the tale of the gardenias at the beginning of "Writing on the Wall" indicates that the written tribute is the larger gift, one that proceeds over a decade after the analysis – which was itself Freud's larger gift to H.D. – and after Freud's death. Morris notes that this demonstrates how Freud's gift was transformative; it takes H.D. time to absorb the gifts of the analysis and put them into circulation again.¹⁰ Morris goes on to argue that a third partner is essential in a gift economy. Giving-in-return involves two people and a static structure; however giving-in-turn opens outward: "before a return donation the gift must leave the boundary of the ego and circle out into mystery".¹¹ "The spirit of things" or the "god in the goods" increases as the gift is passed on only after the intervention of a

⁷ See also Douglas Mao: *Solid Objects. Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton, 1998), 3-4.

⁸ H.D.: "Writing on the Wall", 11.

⁹ H.D.: "Writing on the Wall", 9.

¹⁰ Adalaide Morris: *How to live / what to do. H.D.'s cultural poetics* (Urbana & Chicago, 2003), 127.

¹¹ Morris: *How to live*, 128.

third party. This dynamism puts the gift into process.¹² In H.D.'s gift of gardenias, the antiquities form the third party. Objects themselves are part of the dynamic, sacred nature of the gift economy, not merely items to be exchanged.

The French theorist Hélène Cixous explores the concept of a feminine libidinal economy that escapes the constricted logic of giving-in-return in an early essay 'Sorties'.¹³ Cixous argues that "there is no 'free' gift. [...] But all the difference lies in the why and how of the gift, in the values that the gesture of giving affirms". Cixous's understanding of the feminine economy is that such giving is positive, it does not circle around or attempt to cancel out lack, but instead "gives *for*".¹⁴ The dynamism we see in Morris's understanding of a sacred gift economy (drawn from Maus and Hyde) is crucial to Cixous's theorising. She emphasises movement – "a cosmos where eros never stops traveling", a femininity that indicates an openness to the other, difference that is both within and without as boundaries are porous.¹⁵ Sal Renshaw argues that Cixous, like Derrida, argues that the gift as such is impossible –but that this very impossibility prompts us to consider how giving might happen in spite of this impossibility. For Cixous, the masculine economy is one that privileges closure, the gift always affirming the subjectivity of the giver at the expense of the other and foreclosing difference by the expectation of return. The feminine economy is based in plenitude and celebration of difference such that the other's subjectivity is not marginalised by the assertion of the giver's stronger agency.¹⁶ For Cixous such gifting necessarily involves the sacred as it must be experienced "like grace falling from the sky" in order to circumvent the giver/receiver binary that prompts exchanges tending towards closure.¹⁷ Renshaw considers some of Cixous's later writing on animals as an exploration of how it may be possible to love difference, to understand otherness as a gift and to receive such love.¹⁸ In this article I wish to explore themes of difference, love and circulation, not through the animal/human

¹² Morris: *How to live*, 130.

¹³ As many critics have noted, Cixous is not advocating a simple correlation between the feminine and women in a straightforward "anatomy equals destiny" argument, rather she argues that women have a greater (though not exclusive) degree of access to such an economy (hence its term feminine) because of their social positioning.

¹⁴ Hélène Cixous & Catherine Clement: *The Newly Born Woman*, Betsy Wing (trans.) (London, 1996), 87.

¹⁵ Cixous: *Newly Born Woman*, 86-87.

¹⁶ Sal Renshaw: "Graceful gifts. Hélène Cixous and the radical gifts of other love" in Joy (ed.): *Women and the Gift. Beyond the Given and the All-Giving* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2013), 131-33.

¹⁷ Cixous qtd. in Renshaw "Graceful gifts", 133.

¹⁸ Renshaw: "Graceful gifts", 134.

binary but through the relations between humans and object. In looking at H.D.'s work, we see how such graceful giving may be approached through the consideration of materials and things.

H.D.'s gardenias are addressed to the antiquities, labelled "Gods"; this introduces a third partner moving the exchange into the realm of the sacred and "directs gratitude beyond the personal, temporal, and quantifiable".¹⁹ Gardenias are in some ways the opposite of the antiquities. They are ephemeral rather than ancient, and do not bear the same weight of religious and cultural symbolism. Yet they are also valuable and rare (H.D. struggles to find them) – if on a rather different scale – and are associated with Rome, the source of many of Freud's treasures. The spirit of the gift and the process of giving-in-turn draws together disparate objects, revealing both their commonalities and their differences.

Gardenias and antiquities, the things in the room that are simultaneously goods and gods – mobilise a gift economy and, perhaps more radically, trouble the boundary between subject and object. This type of giving in turn is common in H.D.'s writing of the period and, as Morris argues, is symptomatic of an ethos that pervades her life and work. Although her exchange with Freud has garnered critical attention, the ubiquity and importance of gift giving across her work invites further analysis as it surfaces in a number of different locations across both her creative writing and personal correspondence.

H.D. and wartime gift exchange

The presence and maintenance of intimate communities is an important theme in H.D.'s writing from the 1940's.²⁰ What is particularly relevant to my work is the dynamic relationship between objects and persons within these social networks. H.D.'s letters frequently reference gifts exchanged within her circle of friends and this becomes even more prominent during the war. Certainly rationing and

¹⁹ Morris: *How to live*, 128. H.D.'s gift of gardenias is not mentioned in "Advent" as the event took place long after her sessions. However, there is a similar if more understated instance of gift economy in the text. The third partner in "Advent" is Bryher. She supported H.D.'s analysis financially and emotionally through letters and gifts (she was a strong advocate for psychoanalysis, believing it to be a great gift to her generation). H.D. frequently mentions flowers appearing on her desk. Like the gardenias, these gifts were unsigned, but the recipient knew the giver's identity.

²⁰ I have discussed this in more depth in "Sacred belonging: writing, religion and community in H.D.'s World War II novels" in *Women: a cultural review* 23:3 (2012), 271-86.

scarcity led to the increased market value of material goods, but there is also an excess value of affection mobilised by such gift-giving. The circulation of letters and materials extended H.D.'s circle of friends from those nearby who shared stresses and privations of wartime Britain to those across the ocean who were eager for first-hand accounts from the UK and in turn sent parcels with much needed food and other supplies.²¹ Beyond the significant material support indicated in such gifts there was a sense of solidarity and extended community marked by these exchanges. The objects themselves circulate. H.D. describes receiving parcels from American friends and in turn making up parcels from their contents to share with other friends in England. Edith Sitwell wrote a gushy letter in response to one such wartime gesture, thanking H.D. profusely for both her letter and the tea that accompanied it.²² The giving-in-turn of domestic goods – tea, honey, flowers, fruit – nurtures these circles of friendship, as do the letters that record generosity and gratitude.

Similar exchanges are found in H.D. and Bryher's correspondence, but they reveal greater intimacy over a longer stretch of time. H.D. frequently returned to significant shared experiences in her letters and autobiographical fiction. For example, in 1938, she wrote in response to a gift from Bryher, enthusing over a large box containing many daffodils. She comments that they reminded her of Bryher's support and care both in 1919 and ever since, noting the scent of the flowers is the fragrance of healing.²³ H.D. alludes to Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in describing the flowers as "Daffodils [...] that come before the swallow dares", a direct quote that may have been a coded passage between herself and Bryher (the two often used a kind of private short-hand in their letters). H.D.'s daughter's name, Perdita, comes from the same play and the reference may also indicate H.D. and Bryher's shared maternal role (Bryher legally adopted Perdita and Perdita referred to Bryher and H.D. as her "two mothers"). In H.D.'s work human relationships are bound up in the objects exchanged between

²¹ Annette Debo notes that the correspondence between H.D. and her British friends tends to minimise or avoid much discussion of the struggles and stresses of wartime living. Her letters to American friends were more frank and detailed but even here she (and Bryher) tended to downplay both the extent of the privations caused by the scarcity of food and goods and the danger they were exposed to in the Battle of Britain, the Blitz and subsequent bombing raids: 'Introduction' in *Within the Walls and What Do I Love?* (Gainsville, 2014), 5-6.

²² Edith Sitwell: "Letter to H.D., Undated, 1942-44?" in H.D. Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (New Haven). For further discussion of the significance of tea and nationality in H.D.'s writing see Bryony Randall: "'Funny, but no hybrid'. H.D., tea and expatriate identity" in *Symbiosis* 13:2 (2009), 189–210.

²³ H.D.: "Letter to Bryher, 2 March, 1938" in Bryher Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (New Haven).

individuals. The material properties of such objects are not incidental to the relationships. These objects do more than signify – they embody the relationship in their particularity.

Craft and children's creativity

H.D. invokes the spiritual dynamism of things more explicitly in her novel *The Gift* when she muses on her childhood memories of Christmas. The text was written between 1941 and 1943, with a later section of notes added in 1944. It remained unpublished in her lifetime; an abridged version was published by New Directions in 1982 with the full version appearing from The University Press of Florida in 1998. In an extended essay written between 1949 and 1950, a meditation on four decades of writing, H.D. describes *The Gift* as an “autobiographical fantasy”; clearly underlining tension between fact and fiction, the instability of memory and the way writers shape the presentation of past events for particular narrative purposes.²⁴ The text oscillates between H.D.’s childhood in Pennsylvania and London during the Second World War and draws on the Moravian traditions of her childhood as well as the history of the Church in its early years in the Eighteenth Century in Moravia and the American colonies. Through the text the child Hilda searches for the meaning of “the gift”, one that includes both artistic talent and spiritual wisdom or prophecy. The gift that is spiritual and creative draws these abstractions into connection with the gifts that are material objects. The gift in process comes to signify creativity, without losing its material manifestations.

Her descriptions of the Moravian Christmas are heavily detailed, focusing primarily on her family’s domestic traditions.²⁵ The family’s preparations are many and varied, involving complex decorations. She begins her narration obliquely, approaching the festival by connecting a Saint Bernard dog that appears in memories and dreams with the Egyptian Ammon-Ra and the Roman Aries or “gold-fleece Ram”: this is typical of H.D.’s habit of layering mythologies and memories. She then shifts to a more domestic scene:

²⁴ H.D.: “H.D. by *Delia Alton*” in *Iowa Review* 16:3 (1986), 189. H.D. was prompted to write this reflection on the themes and connections across her past work by Norman Holmes Pearson, her literary executor and friend who established her archive at Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library: Adalaide Morris: “H.D.’s ‘H.D. by *Delia Alton*’” in *Iowa Review* 16:3 (1986), 175.

²⁵ H.D. also describes the Moravian church services but the emphasis is on the domestic rituals.

Our Ram however, had not gold-fleece, his fleece came from Mamalie's [H.D.'s grandmother] medicine-cupboard. It was pulled off in tufts from a roll of cotton for making bandages or for stuffing pillows or for putting in ears with a little oil or for borrowing to make a quilt for the new bed for the doll-house.²⁶

What follows is a fairly elaborate explanation of this seasonal domestic craft, known to all within the Moravian community but mysterious to outsiders:

You may wonder what mysterious occult ceremony requires cotton-wool from Mamalie's medicine-cupboard, a knot of wire and the gardening-shears which did not belong on [her grandfather's] desk, match-sticks, a lump of clay. You yourself may wonder at the mystery in this house, the hush in this room.²⁷

Domestic objects are out of place and ordinary materials transformed. With the clay, matchsticks and cotton-wool H.D.'s grandfather makes sheep, which go on the Moravian putz, a nativity scene set under the Christmas tree on live moss.

The children also participate in the Christmas crafting and H.D. takes their work as an opportunity to draw together the context of creativity, the objects of creation and the activity of creativity itself. The narrator plays up the element of suspense by introducing an unknown "thing". However, we soon find out that this mysterious "thing" is not an object but an activity:

The "thing" could not begin if there were not an old end or several almost burnt-out stumps of last year's beeswax candles [...] It was not only the smell of the moss, it was not only the smell of the spiced ginger-dough that was waiting under a cloth in the biggest yellow bowl on the pantry-shelf, and yet it was all these; it was all these and the forms of the Christmas-cakes. [...] The "thing" was that we were creating. We were "making" a field under the tree.²⁸

Here, again, fragrance is significant. The 'thing' may be a process that includes both fragrances and forms; it requires ordinary objects to come into being, things seen and unseen. The intimacy of process and object, the suggestion that a process too, might be a thing, is suggestive of the gift economy as the things and activities not only circulate among the family members but also transform the home into a spiritual space.

²⁶ H.D.: *The Gift by H.D. The complete text* (Gainesville, 1998), 85.

²⁷ H.D.: *The Gift*, 85.

²⁸ H.D.: *The Gift*, 88-89.

In her reading of Cixous, Sal Renshaw suggests that “God [is] that ultimate signifier of unknowable gifting”.²⁹ In her evocation of the Moravian Christmas, H.D. emphasises the mystery inherent in this domestic activity as the source of the creativity that is itself a gift. She then moves to consider the objects of the children’s creativity. She describes the creation of Christmas cakes and decorations as a spiritual activity that instantiates the Incarnation:

God had made a Child and we children in return now made God; we created Him as He had created us, we created Him as children will, out of odds and ends; like magpies, we built him a nest of stray bits of silver-thread, shredded blue or rose or yellow coloured paper; we knew our power. We knew that God could not resist the fragrance of a burning beeswax candle!³⁰

H.D. suggests that the domestic creativity of children recasts divine creativity. God is seduced into being. Offered beauty, God is unable to resist. The densely layered imagery and incantatory, repetitive language evoke this scene of creation for the reader, placing us in the position of God – also seduced by the beeswax candle. The children’s activity here resonates with Walter Benjamin’s evocative description of the children’s tendency to make discoveries in the interstices of culture: “They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. [...] In using these things they [...] bring together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship”.³¹ In setting up a parallel between the childlike and divine creativity, H.D. suggests that God also creates out of scraps and odds and ends.

As the theologian Ann Pedersen argues, “To engage in that which is beautiful is to become part of the imagination of God”.³² H.D. frequently emphasises a close association between divinity and beauty throughout her work; this is particularly pronounced in her writing from the Second World War where

²⁹ Renshaw: “Graceful gifts”, 138.

³⁰ H.D.: *The Gift*, 89.

³¹ Walter Benjamin: *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London & New York, 2006), 52-53. This way of creating also suggests the practice of patchwork that has lent important imagery to many feminist theologians and theorists, see bell hooks: *Belonging. A Culture of Place* (London & New York, 2009), 154-68; Kwok Pui-lan: *Post-Colonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (London, 2005), 46; Adrienne Rich: *Dream of a Common Language. Poems 1974-77* (London & New York), 76-77.

³² Ann Pedersen: “Creativity, christology and science. a process of composition and improvisation” in Coleman, Howell & Russell (eds.): *Creating Women’s Theology* (Eugene, 2011), 168.

she explores the vexed question of the value of art in wartime.³³ The Second World War saw widespread damage and destruction to civilian arenas such as churches, galleries, palaces and businesses, as well as the more personal losses in private homes and thus a frequent concern of H.D.'s is the loss of beautiful objects and buildings. Yet she also grapples with the pragmatism of wartime that would suggest such concerns were frivolous against the massive loss of life and the practical needs of mobilisation, i.e. should paper be used for books or for weaponry?³⁴ The fragility and mutability of objects is underscored throughout H.D.'s wartime writing. In her epic poem, *Trilogy*, she mourns the destruction of books and scorns those who suggest manuscripts are best used for cartridge cases while in her postwar novel, *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, she indicates that the bombs turn an ordinary street into the transitory world of theatre "the debris [...] sometimes left a half-house open, like a [...] stage-set".³⁵ Destruction and creation are folded together; objects out of place both display their ordinariness and suggest alterity.

The writing style of *The Gift* reflects this activity of making out of scraps as H.D. patches together narrative fragments of different times and different places. The ritualized language surrounding this emphasis on the material suggests that writing itself is another activity that sacralises the mundane. The children's creation of God out of beeswax and tissue paper is reflected in the writer's creation of a nest for God through the use of metaphorical scraps and narrative fragments.

The piecing together of fragments also suggests the work of archaeologists, as H.D. reflects when considering the objects in Freud's study. In "Writing on the Wall" she describes the process of psychoanalysis as a process of collection and patchwork:

Thoughts were things, to be collected, collated, analysed, shelved, or resolved. Fragmentary ideas [...] were sometimes skilfully pieced together like the exquisite Greek tear-jars and

³³ The connection between divinity and beauty is most explicit in the 1943 poem "Ancient Wisdom Speaks from the Mountain". For further discussion see Elizabeth Anderson: *H.D. and Modernist Religious Imagination* (London & New York, 2013), 157-62.

³⁴ Debo notes the "Books for Battle" campaign which saw many books used for munitions production; H.D. was ambivalent about the campaign, recognising the military need but worrying about the loss of interesting books amidst the dross: "Introduction", 24.

³⁵ H.D.: *Trilogy* (New York, 1998), 16; H.D.: *The Sword Went Out to Sea. (Synthesis of a Dream)* by Delia Alton (Gainesville, 2007), 57. Richard Schechner correlates the use of ordinary objects in children's play with the theatre: *Performance Theory* (New York, 1988), 9.

iridescent glass bowls and vases that gleamed in the dusk from the shelves of the cabinet that faced me where I stretched, propped on the couch in the room in Berggasse 19, Wien IX.³⁶

In this description it appears as if the objects are more instrumental to the analysis than the analyst himself. Here, again, the subject is formed by objects, although the emphasis here is on mending what is broken, rather than creating something new out of fragments.

The scraps with which children make a world suggest the provisional nature of their creative activity; the “thing” H.D. describes is dependent on the smell of gingerbread and the biggest yellow bowl. Thus the larger context of war, which dominates the narrative of *The Gift*, is indicated even in the childhood scenes as the objects are mutable, subject to change and precariously aligned. In the closing chapter of *The Gift*, H.D. draws a more explicit connection between her meditations on Christmas and the context of conflict within which she wrote:

I could not visualise civilisation other than a Christmas-tree that had caught fire. There had been a little Christmas-tree here on the table, where the lamp now was. That was the first tree we had had since the ‘real’ war and the fragile glass-balls, I had boasted, had withstood the shock and reverberation of steel and bursting shell [...] unpicking shredded green tissue-paper from a tinsel star, I said, “look at this, it’s as bright as ever and this glass-apple isn’t broken.”³⁷

Here we have another configuration of the relationship between scraps and wholeness. The shredded tissue paper harkens back to the children’s nest for God and the glass apple is another instance of incarnation, sheltered by tissue paper. The apple remains unbroken and for H.D. this is both solace and hope: a witness to ongoing life.

H.D.’s model of creativity – out of chaos – out of odds and ends – picks up the imagery of chaos as the ground of creation in Genesis 1. In *The Face of the Deep*, Catherine Keller develops a theology of *creatio ex profundis*, in opposition to the classical *creatio ex nihilo*. This is a biblical model of creativity, finding commonality between the God of Genesis 1 who broods over the formless deep – the Hebrew *tehom* - and the God of Genesis 2 who creates humanity out of dust. Keller draws on Whiteheadian process theology to argue for beginning as not a singular point of origin but a

³⁶ H.D.: “Writing on the Wall”, 14.

³⁷ H.D.: *The Gift*, 215

“beginning-in-process, an unoriginated and endless process of becoming”.³⁸ This understanding of creation as unfolding from the chaotic, formless deep undermines the traditional distinction between divine and human creativity: God creates from nothing, humanity creates from something. In this alternative view creation is part of the gift economy, giving-in-turn means taking God’s gift of creation and in turn creating God – a radically relational view of divine becoming.

Poetry as gift

In 1950, H.D. had a small group of poems printed as a chapbook titled *What Do I Love?*; this slim volume was distributed as a Christmas gift to a number of her friends. The chapbook contained three war poems (“May 1943”, “R.A.F.” and “Christmas 1944”) that H.D. had written between 1941 and 1944 but did not feel fit with the sequences of lyrics in the volumes of *Trilogy*.³⁹ This volume highlights poetry as gift –both materially in terms of the printed poems given in tribute and more abstractly in the immaterial language of the poems themselves. This is brought into sharper relief by the final poems focus on Christmas. “Christmas 1944” is another exploration of the role of things in wartime. The poem begins in celestial company as the angels are given a choice between rising higher (out of the realm of aerial combat) or descending to share in the human experience.⁴⁰ The poem’s speaker considers whether to hope to transcend the arena of strife and loss, but then concludes that a more important consideration is to ask “what do I love?”.⁴¹ The poem’s speaker considers what

³⁸ Catherine Keller: *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London, 2003), xvii.

³⁹ The poems in *What Do I Love?* were published in the ‘Uncollected Poems’ section of the *Collected Poems* where their positioning loses sight of the significance of H.D. placing them together. They have recently been made available as H.D. ordered them in *Within the Walls and What Do I Love?*, a critical edition edited by Annette Debo and published by the University of Press of Florida in 2014. *Within the Walls* is a collection of H.D.’s short stories written in the early 1940s. They were initially published in a limited edition by the Windhover Press in 1993, the 2014 edition is the first to make them generally available. Like much of H.D.’s prose they are highly autobiographical and address the material experiences of living in wartime London and also more abstract ruminations on the effect of war on the author’s mental state, sense of time and concern with writing specifically and creativity more broadly. In her introduction to the volume, Debo notes that H.D. viewed the poems of *What Do I Love?* as a coda to this collection: the final story in *Within the Walls* (“Before the Battle” was written first, in 1940, but H.D.’s placed it last in her ordering of the manuscript) introduces both *What Do I Love?* and *The Gift*: Debo: “Introduction”, 5.

Susan Schweik compares “Christmas 1944” with *The Flowering of the Rod*, the final volume of *Trilogy*, in her analysis of the significance of Christmas in war poetry more generally and H.D.’s “disrupted and disruptive New Testament Narrative”: *A Gulf So Deeply Cut. American Women Poets and the Second World War* (Madison, 1991), 242-90.

⁴⁰ Here we see a connection with *Trilogy* as angels are a significant presence in the second volume, *Tribute to the Angels*. For more on angels in H.D.’s mature work see Suzanne Hobson: *Angels of Modernism: Religion, Culture, Aesthetics, 1910-1960* (Basingstoke, 2011), 141-81.

⁴¹ H.D.: *Within the Walls and What Do I Love?* (Gainsville, 2014), 173.

beloved object should be taken from “all, all your loveliest treasures” if only one thing is allowed to be carried away “as gift, / redeemed from dust and ash” (here we see a reference to the anxiety over the loss of home and possessions threatened by the war).⁴² She chooses a number of objects – a clock, a lump of amber, a painted swallow, even a cat – all are precious for their emotional associations as well as their beloved physical details. Yet this list of objects is immediately made more complicated as the poem’s speaker indicates that all of them have already been lost, broken or given away. The cat is a memory or a dream and the objects are only held in the speaker’s memory. She defiantly claims to hold onto all of them, despite the injunction to choose one, but also worries “*is it too much?*”⁴³ The speaker likens herself and her comrades to lost children and identifies with the Christ Child who was made homeless, losing the security of the stone and wood shelter of the Inn for the precarious shelter of the manger. The speaker offers up her beloved objects to Christ, thus the things become gifts once again. In “Christmas 1944” we see how objects that are lost, broken or given away are also cherished: “redeemed from dust and ash” they carry memories of a time of peace. Heaven touches earth, first in the angels who gather the “loveliest treasures” and invite the speaker’s choice, then in the Incarnation, portrayed as God’s solidarity with all those who have been cast out and made lost. The poem’s speaker draws close to divine life in communing with the angels and in offering up her treasures to another lost child. If in *The Gift* the children created a nest for God out of scraps, then in “Christmas 1944” H.D. offers the divine objects that are broken or elsewhere, yet still beloved. There is a sense here in which even those things that are lost are not truly gone; memory proves a consolation in a time of great loss. In giving the poems themselves as a Christmas gift several years after the war’s end, H.D. invokes the memories of wartime, prompting her readers to also consider what they love.

Things in Process

In this paper I’ve considered several different kinds of things: flowers, antiquities, home-made Christmas decorations. H.D.’s texts emphasize how these disparate things are all in process. Even Freud’s antiquities are not static. They move from Vienna to London and mobilise the gift economy,

⁴² H.D.: *Within the Walls*, 174. In the bombings of July 1944 friends of H.D. and Bryher had their home hit. Bryher described the incident and commented that she and other friends had an hour to salvage what they could from the ruined building: Debo: “Introduction”, 91.

⁴³ H.D.: *Within the Walls*, 174.

intervening in H.D. and Freud's relationship – both within the study and beyond. With the Christmas decorations we see more clearly that it is the process of making that is most important to H.D. This dynamism is crucial to the generative openness of the feminine gift economy explored by Cixous. Cixous's theories partake of both the genres of manifesto and utopia, and we see similar commitment to hope in the midst of bleak violence and loss in H.D.'s writing.⁴⁴ The unfolding of divinity in the world, through the co-creation of children, a writer or a network of friends, suggests that consolation may be found in the most ordinary places and things – rendering them extraordinary.

Stirling, December 2014

⁴⁴ H.D.'s utopian longings come through even more clearly in *Trilogy*.