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Form of Promise: Anticipating Poetry and Prophecy with Dickinson and H.D.

The tradition of a prophet giving a prophecy is one that readers of literature have come to know well. The prophet imparts a promise of certain events to come, and with that promise, the prophet prompts a state of anticipation, of unrealized fulfillment, from the listener. As this prophetic addressee is poised to meet the fulfillment of these events, this person is essentially suspended in a liminal space of expectation. Until the events foretold in the prophecy occur, there is still the hanging threat, or possibility, that the prophecy will not be realized. Such a state yields anxiety for the person, but also serves as an enticing unknown world. That is to say, at any point before the prophecy is realized, the prophecy has not come true and may be reduced to conjecture. If and when the prophecy is realized, life becomes straightforward, uncomplicated, and ordered because events have unfolded the way plan has dictated. But if we are to embrace the liminal space of expectation, we may find a fruitful realm of possibilities.

In that sense, prophecy has striking similarities to poetry. Both are a set of words that tease us with the promise of something. In poetry's case, the poet suggests that there is something to figure out in the words he/she writes, and that because he/she has put these ideas into words, someone has the potential to decode the message the poet has presented. Poetry is often marked by its form's resistance to linearity—we know poetry as a genre that not only invites but requires rereading. Thus, any given poem suspends us within a set of words as we work to realize the poem and poet's promise of understanding.

As writers who claim for poetry a communication of promise (or promise of communication) similar to that of prophecy, Emily Dickinson and H.D. demonstrate opposing spaces in which prophecy may be realized: the short, compressed poem and the long, unmetred epic, respectively. However, where they diverge in form, they converge in their demonstration that the most definitive message we might receive from their poetry is that words provide little if any manageable definition. Dickinson and H.D. illustrate that regardless of a poem's length, meter, rhyme pattern, etc., words add to, not detract from, potential uncertainty. Dickinson's prophecies provide physically fewer words and generally lack narrative. H.D.'s prophecy<sup>1</sup> *Trilogy* is one that gives us narrative, more words, and thus more resources, but this conglomeration of language does not necessarily allow us to make more sense of a suggested message.

Traditionally, we consider the prophet a powerful figure because he/she is the source of a message of truth. In poem 533, "I reckon – When I count at all –," Dickinson specifies poets as most powerful, higher than "the Sun – / Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –" (ll. 2-4). If Dickinson ranks poets above God and His Heaven, then she suggests that poets are the strongest bearers of truth. Not only does her ranking strengthen the role of poets, she suggests that poets or prophets are indeed the most direct sources of truth, whereas tradition poses the prophet as a mere messenger for God's ultimate truth. She reinforces this faith in poets when she writes that "the First" on her list of powerful beings "so seems / To Comprehend the Whole –" (5-6), while "The Others look a needless Show" (7). The latter group does not have quite the same grasp on

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<sup>1</sup> I write prophecy as singular instead of plural because technically I am examining one long poem. However, *Trilogy* was originally composed in three separate long poems, and indeed the indeterminacy within whichever smallest unit of measurement a person uses for *Trilogy* (book, lyric, line, word, syllable, etc.) suggests a multiplicity of poems, prophecies, and possibilities.

truth that poets have. Thus, as feminist critics have suggested of some female poets, Dickinson has seized the role of poet as a powerfully prophetic one.

Besides using a poem to establish the power of the poet, she describes it slightly more candidly in a letter (#110) to her brother, Austin. In overtly praising his abilities, Emily writes, “And Austin is a Poet, Austin writes a psalm. Out of the way, Pegasus, Olympus enough ‘to him,’ and just say to those ‘nine muses’ that we have done with them!” (Johnson 101). Inserting hymn meter, her typical poetic form, into the letter, Dickinson figures her brother a psalm-writer, a religious voice of authority. By doing that in parallel structure to figuring him a poet, she equates the religious and poetic voices. In addition, she adds prophetic mythological sources of inspiration when she references “Pegasus, Olympus” and the “‘nine muses.’” Declaring that “we” no longer need those sources of inspiration shows the substantive prophetic powers a poet may hold. Furthermore, to use the word “we” is to suggest that while Austin is the one she is directly praising, she includes herself, as a poet, among the people who no longer need to rely on others for prophetic tellings. In addition, the lightly iambic pulse of that sentence bolsters her strength as a poet-prophet.

But what if we explore the possibility that the precise point in time at which a prophet states truth is not as powerful as the uncertain space of time after its statement and before its fulfillment? Within that unspecified period of anticipation, people have the opportunity to creatively form their own indeterminate truths. Dickinson even suggests that she values this indeterminate space in a letter (#418) about her father’s death to T. W. Higginson, someone upon whom she often called to assess her own poetic skills. In this letter, she speaks specifically of Higginson’s potential prophetic power: “Your beautiful Hymn, was it not prophetic? It has assisted that Pause of Space which I call ‘Father’—” (Johnson 223). In that, Dickinson almost

explicitly states that something beautiful, a prophetic hymn, gives way to a creative suspension or liminal space, a “Pause of Space.” To call that space “Father” further connects (religious) power with liminal space. Thus, Dickinson’s investment in the prophet figure was strong. However, unlike the common model that focuses solely on two points (first, the (poet-)prophet’s authoritative presentation of prophecy and second, the accurate fulfillment of prophecy), her inclination to connect poetic-prophetic power and suspended space invites a richly indeterminate reading of her spaces of words.

Dickinson and H.D. are similar in their belief that the poet holds power and truth. The first book of *Trilogy*, *The Walls Do Not Fall*, illustrates H.D.’s faith in the poet-prophet. Lyric 13 states, “we know our Name, // we nameless initiates, / born of one mother” (521). The word “initiates” suggests that the group of people figured as “we” has been powerfully chosen for such a role. After all, they are “born of one mother.” And because she uses a first-person pronoun, she places herself, a poet, among these chosen people. With this power established in “we,” H.D. shows that “we know our name” despite being “nameless,” attributing more prophetic power to them. In lyric 15, she specifies that “we are the keepers of the secret, / the carriers,” further vesting the power of truth within the poet.

“We,” writers, continue to have power in the second book, *Tribute to the Angels*. Lyric 35 shows that the Lady “must have” great reverence for these writers who carry knowledge and uphold a predestined role:

So she must have been pleased with us,  
who did not forgo our heritage

at the grave-edge;  
she must have been pleased

with the stragglings company of the brush and quill  
who did not deny their birthright[.] (568)

The Lady “must have” approved that these writer-prophets have accepted the role chosen for them—they “did not forgo [their] heritage // at the grave-edge.” Beyond that, their heritage necessitates that they use language—“the straggling company of the brush and quill.” As the Lady “carried a book” (568), her pleasure in these chosen writers is endowed with even greater authority.

But from the beginning of the long poem, H.D., like Dickinson, encourages us to use poetry and prophecy as spaces for creative gestation. And both authors present these spaces for creative gestation as richer than one singular approval or finite fulfillment. *Trilogy* begins with images of physical chaos, a result of war. Because H.D. believed in rebirth from destruction, as evidenced by her experience seeing a single blossoming flower amid a war-ravaged scene, we know that she writes about war in large part as a possibility for regeneration. Similarly, a prophecy, which sets up anticipation of future events, may be a liminal space we embrace because of its rich opportunity for us to sort through unfinalized chaos.

We notice the intent to embrace the liminal space of prophecy amid destruction in the poem’s first lyric:

An incident here and there,  
and rails gone (for guns)

...

mist and mist-grey, no colour,  
still the Luxor bee, chick and hare  
*pursue unalterable purpose*

in green, rose-red, lapis;  
*they continue to prophesy[.]* (509, my emphasis)

The “incident[s]<sup>2</sup>,” “rails gone (for guns),” and dreary grey or colorless atmosphere show the dire straits of destruction. In spite of this dismal setting, hieroglyphic *writing* becomes lively—it forges bright colors over a lack thereof, and, moreover, H.D. gives us reassurance that “they continue to prophesy.” Prophecy, like poetry, contains words that set up an expectation for eventual understanding. The fact that this mention of prophecy appears at the beginning of such an extensive poem shows the poet-speaker’s suggestion that we negotiate meaning within this epic. This beginning is indeed an invitation to the reader: the poet-speaker suggests that confusion and ruin do not necessitate finality when she says two lines later, “there, as here, ruin opens / the tomb, the temple; enter” and two lines after that, “the shrine lies open to the sky” (509). With the poet-speaker’s repetition of the word “open” and her command to “enter” the “tomb” (which is usually seen as an ultimately finalizing symbol), she beckons us into her poem, this liminal space of generating understanding, so we can attempt to decipher the chaotic assemblage of words she provides. In other words, there is now a potential promise of post-ruins poetic recompense. That potential promise equates poetry with a less certain sense of prophecy, and we turn to H.D. as our poet-prophet, someone who can multiply possibility with words.

Dickinson clearly understood and was able to express the burgeoning fertility of words, even within her shortest poems. And this fertility allows for an open-ended state of anticipation as the reader waits for and searches for meaning. The four lines of poem 278 affirm Dickinson’s contention that utterance is really the inception of vitality, and that this inception does not, and perhaps cannot, guarantee a finalizable conclusion or consensus:

A word is dead, when it is said  
Some say –  
I say it just begins to live  
That day.

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<sup>2</sup> H.D. employs the term “incident” to reference the same term used by newspapers to refer to German bombings during World War II.

Dickinson's use of the word "[s]ome" to refer to a group of people tells us this poem is about different voices and opinions coming together, thereby establishing that language is not a concrete construct, but something that is fluctuating and able to be altered by a variety of people's opinions. We see already that Dickinson employs slippery language to show and tell this statement. The single line "Some say –," especially given the dash at the end of it, could be read to indicate either that some say the previous line, "A word is dead, / when it is said," or what the poet-speaker herself says, that "it just begins to live / That day." Dickinson thereby shows as well as tells that speech, even in four compressed lines, gives no straightforward meaning.

Refusing to commit to one poetic message demonstrates the potential power of someone in the in-between prophetic space—post-vision and pre-fulfillment. The space for creative contemplation that poem and prophecy provide is rich and indeterminate, not flat or "dead." In fact, the addition of a new word to the mix marks when "it just begins to live." In this short poem, then, she does not provide much quantity of words to help us determine her point, but she extends our stay within a state of anticipating meaning. And with that, she opens the realm of possibility for ideas we may find.

And possibility was a concept to which Dickinson was very attentive. Her poem 466 suggests that she associated possibility and opportunity closely with poetry, as the poem begins, "I dwell in Possibility – / A fairer House than Prose." Positioning prose, the genre traditionally opposite poetry, as inferior to possibility, suggests that Dickinson encourages us to suspend ourselves within the words of poetry, as reading straightforward prose might not as strongly reward. She figures possibility—and by extension, poetry—as a welcoming house with many opportunities for entry through the numerous windows and doors. Furthermore, the sky serves as



an oxymoronic solid roof when we read, “And for an everlasting Roof / The Gambrels of the Sky”: roof is a definite containment tool, but in making the roof the sky, it is the most inclusive and spiritual barrier possible.

Lilach Lachman corroborates that Dickinson is apt to subvert the notion of two polar, unchanging fates, Heaven and Hell (Lachman 94). Dickinson ends “I dwell in Possibility –” mentioning the potential of the benevolent fate, and, as Lachman suggests, Dickinson undercuts our inclination to view Paradise as a stable end. Indeed, the end of the poem proffers possibility and poetry as space in which we may continue to “gather Paradise –” (12). That optimistic finality is extended with the closing dash, suggesting that Paradise does not constitute the end and that it yields more possibility. In that sense, like many seers before her, she prophesies Paradise, but with the dash and the cyclical, indeterminate nature of her poetry, we can sense that Paradise has not been finalized. Dickinson leaves us, the reader/listener, hanging in anticipation of how Paradise will be realized. But the process itself of negotiating our way to Paradise unfolds a rich space of discovery, and may even deepen our reverence for the typical anxiety of anticipation.

If we continue the contrast of opportunistic poetry and restrictive prose, we can see the value Dickinson bestows in recursive attention to ideas in poem 445. The poet-speaker tells us from the beginning that prose, as the opposing genre to poetry, is confining: “They shut me up in Prose – .” For the rest of the poem, she does not address language literally, but fights the containment prose brings. Specifically, she resists the inactivity that has resulted from this restrictiveness: the poet-speaker tells of being a girl kept in a closet “[b]ecause they liked [her] ‘still’ – .” This parallels the restrictions placed on a girl to those on words. Of course, we as

readers know from “A word is dead, when it is said” that where some people see the death of words, there actually exist rich opportunities for life.

Further in “They shut me up in Prose – ,” Dickinson’s “girl” exploits “the Closet” into which “They” have put her when we read,

Still! Could themself have peeped –  
And seen my Brain – go round –  
They might as wise have lodged a Bird  
For Treason – in the pound – [.] (5-8)

She tells us that her brain is active, “go[ing] round,” in spite of the barriers of the Closet.

Suzanne Juhasz has written about the creative flexibility Dickinson exercises when writing within the confines of her own mind. In particular, Juhasz notes that Dickinson uses “an elaborate spatial vocabulary” to “define a location that is enclosed, private, yet changeable in dimension, that can alter suddenly and violently, that can become vast and limitless” (87). So while this poem’s others, “[t]hey,” might believe the Closet is a closed space and means of containing her, the poet-speaker finds ways to actively search for answers and explore within what Juhasz would call the “mind-space.” Likewise, a bird in a pound<sup>3</sup> is certainly trapped in a dangerous setting that naturally makes the bird nervous. But with that anxiety, the bird finds one place where the ground-bound animals cannot get it—the ceiling. And as it flutters around the top, it retains power over any animals who might attack it. Moreover, Dickinson is relatively casual when she suggests that “[t]hey may as wise have” imprisoned a bird for “Treason.” In so lightly acknowledging such an absurd possibility, she transfers the absurdity she feels—about both the bird and her supposed imprisonment—to the reader.

We are still at great altitudes with the high-positioned mindset of “Himself” in the next stanza. Dickinson overrules traditional patriarchal authority when she suggests that the speaker

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<sup>3</sup> “Pound,” according to the Dickinson Lexicon, may mean “[p]rison; jail; detention facility; holding place for impounded animals; enclosure for confinement of stray creatures.”

is no longer captive in this space set up for her: “Look down upon Captivity – / And laugh – No more have I –” (11-12). Dickinson has therefore turned the notion of captivity on its head—she refuses to write in prose and turns to poetry instead. Poetry itself has parameters in its evident form, but by writing indeterminately within them, she shows that these parameters do not stifle mental activity. Just as in “I dwell in Possibility,” Dickinson uses the final dash to show that she continues to exercise her mind within any suggestion of captivity. The power that Dickinson therefore claims with this poem’s bottom line is a power in continuation, particularly in the continuation of “I,” the poet. We readers do not receive a wrapped-up conclusion to the speaker/character “I” as we might in prose. Instead, Dickinson suspends us forever in anticipation of what more language the “I” poet-prophet might probe and what discoveries and/or creations may come of such explorations.

We also get a strong sense of anticipation with the developing butterfly in poem 142, “Cocoon above! Cocoon below!” One of the first things Dickinson does is question why the cocoon hides secrets everyone else is beginning to understand anyway with the lines “Stealthy Cocoon, why hide you so / What all the world suspect?” (2-3). Our anticipation of both birth and revelation makes the containment in this poem ring prophetically. She figures the “secret” as possessing heightened power, thus somewhat prophetic, when she writes that the secret is “perched in extasy [sic]” (5) and that it “[d]efies imprisonment!” (6). The cocoon, something that tightly wraps and separates its contents from the world, is apparently the extent of the poet-speaker’s perception, as it is both “above” and “below.” Much like the cocoon contains the forming butterfly, the poem contains a forming message: both containments are unfulfilled prophecies. The poem also draws us into it as we work within it to find the message. Working within a contained sphere of cocoon and poetry to realize the indeterminate meanings of the

poem subverts the negative notion of imprisonment. Furthermore, this process suggests gestation as a place for “truth” and its multiple manifestations to emerge.

In constructing this rich containment, Dickinson removes the unsocial connotations of cocoon/prison and make that exile a more fruitful prospect because exile has become ubiquitous and thus likely inclusive. In the second stanza, while Dickinson describes the movements of the butterfly, she simultaneously compels us, the readers, to “interrogate” (10) the product of such a womb/cocoon so that we may understand the inner-workings of such a tight space in a more direct and less “[s]urrogate” (11) manner. At the (physical) end of the poem, the poet-speaker leaves us with thoughts of the communal rewards to be reaped: “The Universe to know!” (12). The cocoon is yet another reinforcement of anticipation from Dickinson. She reminds us her poetry is a constant state of expectation of words and meaning. We may seek “[t]he universe to know,” but we have to understand that if we cannot pin down a solid meaning in this one brief poem, we can only expect the universe to be more elusive.

Poem 1507, “Fame is the one that does not stay – ,” shows us more of the richness of the liminal space that we might associate with the poetic and prophetic. The poet-speaker laments fame and “[i]t’s [sic] occupant” because of their fleeting nature. However, to contrast the first word of the poem (“Fame”), the poem ends with the word “Flame,” which is noticeably similar to the word “Fame,” with the addition of one letter. “Flame” is also a salient last word because it presents a grating half-rhyme with “Germ” two lines before it. The harshness of the half-rhyme is prompted by the subtraction of the “r” sound of “Germ” before the final “m” in “Flame.” This startling half-rhyme contrasts the softer rhyme of the previous stanza’s second and fourth lines, which end with “die” and “incessantly,” respectively. The softer “ai” and “ee” rhyme precipitates our jarring realization of the “erm” and “ame” rhyme. In short, the last word of the

poem is the same as the first, but slightly larger, and the last word triggers a harsh half-rhyme. The accentuation of the final word (“Flame”) against the first word (“Fame”) and against Flame’s rhyme partner (“Germ”) suggests that within the confines of “Fame” and “Flame”—within the contents of the poem—language has germinated a lament of one thing, “Fame,” into the “demand” for something larger, “Flame.” And our demand situates us within an unfinalized state of desire and expectation.

Also between the bookends of the poem, we read, “Or be that most insolvent thing / A Lightning in the Germ – ” (5-6), which suggests that germination is “insolvent,” insufficient, or not rich enough. Again, this mimics the reader or prophetic addressee’s desire for more than just the beginning—for satisfying realization. “Electrical” though “the embryo” (7) may be, the speaker challenges that energy with our collective insistence upon more: “But we demand the Flame” (8). We search for an ultimate product, the flame, of germination. But once again, this poem is cyclical, and its final word calls us back to the beginning of the poem, the first line of which cautions that reputation, glory, or “[f]ame” is only ephemeral and may not be as sustainable as we would like to think. What is, however, sustainable, is the regenerative nature of this poem. It makes the reader continue questioning linguistic meanings within the physically small space (eight lines) of words. In that sense, lingering within a poem to sort through it is “the one that *does* stay.” And that lingering and sorting compels us to vest our faith in the process of finding meaning rather than the ultimate and finalizable product. Finding meaning is a task the traditional definition of prophet might accomplish well, for a prophet is given a quick view of the future. However, before the prophecy is fulfilled, we have the chance to make instead of find meaning. Making is indeed a more uncertain process, but one much more invigorating than simply meeting the foretold events of a prophet’s message.

A mounting question from reading these poems as liminal spaces of anticipation—in which the excitement of waiting for something to happen or figuring out what might happen is more exciting than the occurrence of the actual event itself—is, what kind of anticipatory liminal space might a completely different kind of poem provide? What if we have more sprawling language and narrative in poetry? What does eliminating the barriers of meter and adding the guidance of narrative change about poetry as a state of anticipation? Does the realization of the prophecy change?

Because of the revisionary mythology and revisionary Christianity H.D. effects in *Trilogy*, this long poem is a rich site of poetic-prophetic exploration. This exhausting 129-lyric epic is well-known as a response H.D. wrote to the turmoil and destruction she witnessed after two world wars. Susan Acheson points out that *Trilogy* opens with a question “to which the poem is intended as an answer” and “finally responds by undermining the whole concept of seeking answers and giving judgements” (195). Given Acheson’s note, as we read H.D.’s poetry, we may use it to realize that sifting through chaos is the closest we may get to understanding it. While that process may be cumbersome, it is purposeful, as Sarah H. S. Graham states that “as H.D. suggest[s] in ‘The Walls Do Not Fall’ [sic]<sup>4</sup>...poetry is an essential act” (181).

At the end of the first lyric, we *do* get the flame Dickinson claims “we demand,” and H.D. associates the flame with vitality. The vitality comes from the fact that, in spite of mass destruction, “the frame held,” and a group of people, “we,” “passed the flame” and “wonder / what saved us? what for?” (511). The passing of the flame recalls the Moravian tradition of singing by candlelight on Christmas Eve, the anticipation of the hermetic birth (Moravian Archives). Not only will the flame-bearers sing as prophets do, they will contribute possible

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<sup>4</sup> I make this “[sic]” note not to suggest that Graham is incorrect, but to note that I punctuate the books of *Trilogy* differently (with italics instead of quotation marks).

answers to the questions posed at the end of the first lyric. Thus, the beginning of this epic poem creates a crisis—questions we must solve or answer—within the syntactic “frame” of question and answer. And these answers will not be neat or linear as the flame is mobile and not static. By invoking this dialogic tradition with multiple answers, H.D. sets up a very unstable arena of possibility. Similar to the dissolved question-and-answer paradigm, the two neat moments of prophecy given and prophecy fulfilled are now less stable. *Trilogy* is in effect a suggestion that prophetic tellings are not absolute, but that the process we undergo after the prophecy is sung is what allows us to discover and/or create our own fertile potential.

Finding power in instability, lyric 4 displays an inner and lonesome character as form-shifting: the “flabby, amorphous hermit” who “senses the finite” and then “limits its orbit of being” (513). The “hermit / within” is much like a reader inside a poem because, as readers of poetry, we “[limit] [our] orbit of being,” at least temporarily, to the words of a poem. Furthermore, as participants in this long epic, we have to be willing to let the poem shift our perspectives because one answer to the poem’s initial question is not clearly emerging as superior to any other. So we must resist the need for a finalizable answer from the poem, and allow our perspective to shift with the different possibilities we encounter. Even the hermit’s perspective shifts when the poet-speaker moves from the third-person description of the “hermit within” to the first-person description in “I sense my own limit, / my shell-jaws snap shut.”

H.D. continues to champion the mutable world of possibilities within a poem by asserting the confidence the hermit feels in the gestational safety of the shell. The shell, as a state through which no outside dangers can pass, is therefore comparable to a poem, in which we are situated to decipher the series of words the poem contains, and to the state of anticipation of prophecy. We see the rich space of the shell-poem-prophetic highlighted when the poet-speaker states,

so I in my own way know  
that the whale

can not digest me:  
be firm in your own small, static, limited

orbit and the shark-jaws  
of outer circumstance

will spit you forth:  
be indigestible, hard, ungiving,

so that, living within,  
you beget, self-out-of-self,

selfless, that pearl-of-great-price. (513-14)

The hermit declares that the threat outside the “small, static, limited // orbit” “can not digest [the hermit].” The use of the word “static” is somewhat off-putting because it suggests that there is no motion within the orbit. However, “static” here seems to indicate a controlled generation of self, or the “indigestible, hard, ungiving” barriers within which the hermit is “amorphous” (513). Evidently, this tight orbit will yield the continuous and regenerative “self-out-of-self” that “you beget.” Interesting to note about that line is that it shows a switch to second-person, making it so that the poet-speaker, when speaking of the hermit, has spoken in first-, second-, and third-person. On one hand, the variable perspectives in this long poem welcome the reader into an inclusive selection of identities, but on the other hand, these compounding perspectives make it difficult for “you” the reader to discern a clearly defined identity.

Such confusion from an array of words and images contrasts the tight and economical collection of words Dickinson gives us. Unfortunately for the product-minded but fortunately for the process-minded, both styles of language yield a nebulous and undetermined state for us as readers. The “self-out-of-self” we “beget” is all the more disorienting because it suggests a more evolved self, but that evolution also distances us from the ultimate definition of “self.”



Furthermore, the word “selfless” becomes slippery: we wonder if it refers to the common meaning—the opposite of selfish—or to a state in which self is lacking. Thus, the definition of “self” is another prophecy we have yet to realize.

In lyric 10, we read that the prophet’s power is closely associated with writing:

...they say...

so what good are your scribblings?  
this—we take them with us

beyond death: Mercury, Hermes, Thoth  
invented the script, letters, palette;

the indicated flute or lyre-notes  
on papyrus or parchment

are magic, indelibly stamped  
on the atmosphere somewhere,

forever; remember, O Sword,  
you are the younger brother, the latter-born,

your Triumph, however exultant,  
must one day be over,

*in the beginning*  
*was the Word.* (518-19)

The poet-speaker immediately has a response to the ultimate challenge of what “our” writings are worth: writing endures the death of its author. H.D. strengthens the poet-speaker’s argument for the ability of writing to transcend the time and space its author occupies when the next words she writes are “Mercury, Hermes, Thoth,” who are messenger gods. After that, she attributes the invention of writing to them. Thus, H.D. connects writing with mobile messengers, showing the instability but open possibilities of the written word. She next underscores the importance of written music notes and of their subsequent “indelible[ity],” which effectively ties the prophetic song to the written word; prophecy and writing are now connected as “magic” and sustainable

(“indelibly stamped / on the atmosphere somewhere, // forever”) concepts. When the poet-speaker addresses “Sword,” she tells him that, as violence, he is only temporary (“must one day be over”), and that writing is not only infinite, but it came first (“*in the beginning / was the Word*”). While language, as an anthropomorphic concept, was not literally the first thing in existence, we would be hard-pressed to (realistically) trace our history back any farther than when language was created, because it is language that has served as the aforementioned “frame” of how we know ourselves.

H.D. continues this explanation in lyric 11, which opens,

Without thought, invention,  
you would not have been, O Sword,  
  
without idea and the Word’s mediation,  
you would have remained  
  
unmanifest...

The violence and masculinity associated with the phallic Sword could not be articulated or “mediat[ed]” without “the Word.” “[T]he Word” is then at the root of our “thought [and] invention,” just as, by repeating the words “Word” and “Sword,” we see that linguistically, the word “Word” is a part of the word “Sword.” Albert Gelpi has also pointed out that H.D.’s “pun which makes the ‘word’ mightier than the ‘sword’ is meant to assert the power of language over physical force” (324). While the Word is positioned as a positive liminal space in which to dwell, the Sword is the complementary negative. The Sword represents warfare, which has its own indeterminate space or unknown end. H.D. compels us to abandon the liminal space of Sword and explore that of Word because language and poetry are perhaps our best resources for keeping humans alive. We must remember that in addition to being its own liminal space, many people in the midst of World War II considered it the fulfillment of a terrifying prophecy for

many people. And while the realization of that horror meant physical death for many people, other people remained physically alive, and, as such, were further suspended in the darkest prophecy they could fathom.

And the mutability of language may be the only thing to which we can turn for the opportunity to forge a better future. For, as Dickinson has suggested, the realization of Paradise does not denote closure—realizing Paradise is instead a continuous process. H.D. also presents that utopian finality as something unfinalizable at the end of *The Walls Do Not Fall*: “*possibly we will reach haven, / heaven*” (543, H.D.’s italics). If we are to “reach” a place of safety or haven, even then, H.D. shows that language may change it in the spirit of hermeticism. And we cannot forget the caveat with which she prefaces that situation: “*possibly we will.*” An ultimate, bountiful end cannot be guaranteed; we must continue to accept the future’s mutability, facilitated by language. The Word then still signifies that liminal space of uncertainty but, at times, of hopeful anticipation.

Graham states that *Trilogy*’s next book, *Tribute to the Angels*, is a poem that “is certainly a call for peace and one, [Graham] would contend, that sees language—specifically, the poet’s skill with language—as the key to achieving the peace” (185). Following Graham’s suggestion that *Tribute to the Angels* is a place from which we may learn to improve the human condition, we can commit ourselves to the words of the poem in lyric 22 that champion Word and musical prophecy’s power over that of Sword:

music sets up ladders,  
it makes us invisible,

it sets us apart,  
it lets us escape;

but from the visible  
there is no escape;

there is no escape from the spear  
that pierces the heart. (560)

H.D. aligns music with the mobility of ladders and expansion of space (“it lets us escape”), while warfare, as figured by “the spear / that pierces the heart,” poses a more dismal suspension (“there is no escape from the spear...”). While prophets are known for their association with sight and visions, they also traditionally sing their prophecies. The aural presentation of a prophecy is one that makes more people privy to it, whereas vision excludes more people from the prophetic contents. It then follows that the more inclusive form is the one H.D. prefers because including more people allows for more possible explorations of the prophetic space. H.D. therefore establishes language as an aural tool of unification. Thus, she once again champions the power of language and associates it with prophecy. And, in making that connection, she urges us to dwell within the words of her poem, to speak them aloud and re-manifest them musical, even. The aural and communal essence of language is thus championed over the visual and singular essence, offering a rich space for creative prophetic contemplation.

In lyric 39, we again see that the multiplicitous nature of language allows us the most opportunistic future. The poet-speaker shows us the mutable ownership of the book the Lady carries throughout the poem:

her book is our book; written  
or unwritten, its pages will reveal  
  
a tale of a Fisherman,  
a tale of a jar or jars,  
  
the same—different—the same attributes,  
different yet the same as before. (571)

By first stating that “we” share the book with the Lady, H.D. tells us that poetry, as words within a book, is a collaborative collection of stories, and, as such, the book offers an indeterminate

future of discoveries in which we may take part. And such indeterminacy is possible in spite of the foreseeable physical end of a book. The pages may be “unwritten,” and, subsequently, the pages “will reveal” truths we have not yet realized. “[O]ur book”—or any collection of words in which we participate—is thereby figured as a liminal space of unmapped potential growth. That unfinalizability encourages us to embrace the infinite possibilities within the liminal space of the word. The word is also the medium through which one gives a prophecy. Thus, the giving of prophecy connotes a space of uncertainty and anticipation of meaning, which we ourselves may generate.

*Trilogy's* final book, *The Flowering of the Rod*, demonstrates the regenerative fusion of prophecy and poetry. In lyric 10, the poet-speaker encourages us to dwell within the words of prophecy in the midst of destruction from war, or the Sword, as a Priestess/Pythoness “chants...sings / in broken hexameters” (585). The “prophecy” that emerges from aforementioned “tragedy” is still “broken,” which encourages us to reject the notion of prophecy as finitely given and fulfilled. Rather, the words of a prophet or anyone else are not absolute, and we must sift through a vast disarray of “broken hexameters” like shards of ruin to discern their true meaning. As readers of poetry, we react much the same way to a poem: just because we have finished physically reading a poem from start to finish, we are not often (or should not be) satisfied because our reading is not “complete.” Poetry in fact not only invites but necessitates rereading of its deceptively malleable and subsequently expansive collection of words.

To further communicate the richly regenerative nature of the myrrh, the final lyric, 43, concludes with a nativity scene: the elusive myrrh is (re)born as Mary holds “the bundle of myrrh...in her arms” (612). The myrrh is made even more intangible by virtue of its being “a

most beautiful fragrance” in spite of the fact that “Kaspar *knew* the seal of the jar was unbroken” (my emphasis). His insistence on the myrrh’s containment is comparably unconvincing when considering Mary’s connection with the myrrh. Mary is not only the one to speak of the fragrance, but the one whose bond to the myrrh makes the final two lines of the poem:<sup>5</sup> “the fragrance came from the bundle of myrrh / she held in her arms.” She marks the existence of the myrrh, which is, by nature, difficult to mark because it exceeds the seal. By both speaking of it and carrying it, Mary is the prophet of a substance that resists containment. And a female prophet at that.

As this maternal-poetic-prophetic scene is at the physical end of the poem, we must question whether the rebirth of something magical and uncontainable is an answer to the question posed in the first lyric of *The Walls Do Not Fall*: “yet the frame held: / we passed the flame: we wonder / what saved us? what for?” (511). The closest thing to a stable frame for the myrrh is the regenerative multi-lyriced long poem in which the unfinalizable substance is manifested in myriad ways. But of course the order an epic poem provides creates more uncontainable answers. If the myrrh is indeed holy and deserves our admiration, we will generate this admiration in the words of the poem. Such a message is inevitably an unfinalizable space between the statement and fulfillment of prophecy. Without directly answering the question, we explore a state of anticipation, not knowing when we may find an answer to “what saved us?” nor “what for?”

When compared to Dickinson’s short poems, H.D.’s long poem consists of a physically greater space in which we may delay understanding and revel in the process of figuring out what words mean. In asserting a looser order than Dickinson’s compressed and metered poems, H.D. employs a more varying and sprawling technique. H.D.’s resistance to regularity demonstrates

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<sup>5</sup> These are the final two lines of the poem if the reader excludes “London / *December 18-31, 1944.*”

the variability possible within the contained sphere of poem. With her relatively unbounded poetics, H.D. shows that that poetic order is a deceptive vision static understanding.

And when we shorten our spaces of contemplation to Dickinson's compressed poems, we do not shorten the amount of elusiveness. Even within stricter rhyme schemes and metric boundaries, Dickinson is unfinalizable with her half-rhymes, clever use of syntax, and words with more than one definition. In the two extremes of poetic style that Dickinson and H.D. practice, they prove that poems are a contained space for words, but that poems do not yield the contained understanding of words that we may desire. Poems may tease us with a potentially finalizable message, but perhaps the most finalizable message a poem can tell us is that we should never be absolutely certain what a set of words means. Thus, the poet-prophet role, as Dickinson and H.D. claim it, is simultaneously an intense assertion of power and a purposeful disorientation.

These poets continued to surge through the liminal spaces of poetry because language is the lens through which we understand humanity. Poets, like prophets, leave records of language and insight that travel through geography and through history. Without coming to a finite conclusion of and/or with words, it is safe to say that the best chance we have at understanding ourselves is to work within poem, within prophecy, to develop an appreciation for the process of experience. Instead of marking life by the product of a prophecy fulfilled, let us appreciate the liminal time period before a prophecy is proven correct. Let us live in jeopardy of the validity of language. Relinquishing (a part of) this faith we have in the finiteness of words is the closest we come to subverting and taking control of that pre-prophetic and wildly uncertain state of anticipation.

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