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## ”Bags of Possibles”

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► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Dussol. ”Bags of Possibles”: Healing the Gap: On H.D., Thomas McGrath & Montage. Aji Hélène; Cazé Antoine; Derail-Imbert Agnès; Oudart Clément. H.D.’s Trilogy and Beyond, Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, pp.45-52, 2014. hal-03057361

**HAL Id: hal-03057361**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03057361>**

Submitted on 7 Jul 2024

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## BAGS OF POSSIBLES

### HEALING THE GAP: OF H.D., THOMAS McGRATH & MONTAGE

#### A. Continuities

The mantle of the snowfall in sections 36 and 37 of “The Flowering of the Rod” is both a linking and a healing device. Like the snowfall at the end of Joyce’s “The Dead,” it joins different locations, in this case Hermon to Hebron. The whiteness of the snow equalizes the differences in color among the former spring’s anemones: “scarlet and rose and red and blue” (*T* 160). The snow brings about a flowering. That flowering is itself a homogenizing of discrete entities since the tiny flowers put out by the “million-million little grass-stalks” “were so small [that] you could hardly/ visualize them separately” (161). Both the snow fall and the flowering also make for temporal continuity: “it had happened before,/ it would happen again” (*T* 161).

The association of the snow with the flowers through the diphthongs [əu] and [au] is carried over into the next section in which Kaspar is said to have “watched all night/ by his youngest **white** camel whose bearing was difficult,/ and cherished the foal – it looked like a large **white owl** – ” (*T* 162). Further linking is achieved through the whiteness common to the foal and the owl. The heal-all quality of the mantling snow is extended by Kaspar’s tender gesture cherishing the foal under his “cloak” before bringing “it to his tent/ for shelter and warmth” (*T* 162).

The fall of the snow is perfectly silent. It is a silent movie which makes for understanding across borders, an objective correlative of that “healing-of-the-nations” that is a foremost concern to the speaker of “The Walls Do Not Fall” (*T* 36).

Bells are another kind of “healers, helpers/ of the One” (*T* 34). The conversation between Venice’s campanili in “Tribute to the Angels” “quilts” together a varied and harmonious soundscape that unifies the townscape: “the whole city (...) / will be covered with gold pollen” (*T* 78). The names of the angels Annael, Azrael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel and later Michael also stand for as many bell-notes which are in turn united by “the deep-deep bell” (*T* 108) of Zadkiel “sounding through them all” (*T* 107). The “head Angel” and deepest-sounding bell of all the peels in the campanili enters the poem as sound before morphing into a being of light. The transition is all the more seamless as the traffic continues both ways. While the etymology of “Zadkiel” – “the righteousness of God” – given right after the introduction of

the name in the poem, directs the reader's attention to the signified common to the Hebrew "el" and to the English "God," "God" just as immediately becomes signifier again in the third couplet of section 42. The four occurrences of "God" in it, partly turn the deity back into sound as, in being located within different metrical units, they mimic the aural perception of conflicting rhythmical patterns that one listening to peeling bells is bound to experience:

"*Theus*, God; God-the-father, father-god/ or the Angel god-father" (T 108) in which "God" is successively the second beat of a spondee, the first one of a trochee, stands alone as a catalectic foot unless it be analyzed as the strong final beat of an anapest with a dactylic mirror-image in the next line.

These currents and cross-currents of bells ringing definitely ... ring a bell; they sound like an echo of Poe's 1849 "The Bells" in which the play on metrical patterns added to the dizzying repetition of the word "bells" creates intricate quasi-figurative sound stories. In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. writes: "I was firmly reprov'd at Miss Gordon's school in West Philadelphia, when I was fifteen, because I firmly stated that Edgar Allan Poe was my favorite among American writers" (TtF 132). And while Poe never had a chance to read Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, who knows if H.D. – this is Duncan's suggestion – "was not carried (...) close upon the margins of (...) the forbidden Tennyson" (HDB 390)? Sections 28 and 106 of the long poem of Poe's single favorite contemporary, the one he called the poet who "could see with his ear," feature "Christmas bells from hill to hill/ Answer[ing] each other in the mist" and "[r]inging in the thousand years of peace" (Tennyson 20 & 70-71).

Interestingly, the section of "Tribute to the Angels" which immediately precedes the grand chimes of section 41, throws into relief "fresh-fallen snow (or snow/ in the act of falling)." This textual vicinity of snow and bells foreshadows the part played by the former as a smoothing agency towards the end of "The Flowering of the Rod."

Bells vibrate and "vibration" is a word H.D. associated with healing. "We want healing in blur of half tones and hypnotic vibrant darkness," she wrote in a contribution to *Close Up*.

She gave both an acoustic and visual signification to the word: to her it meant a "fusion of boundaries" (Mandel), a blurring rich in possibility. Vibration may have been what made Kaspar's vision possible: "a matter of vibration// that matched or caught an allied/ or exactly opposite vibration// and created a sort of vacuum" (T 166).

## **B. What kind of montage?**

Snow, bells and vibrations work toward maintaining a kind of wholeness when, Robert Duncan writes, “[t]he gap was becoming a primary of the American consciousness” (*HDB* 393). “[C]hasm, schism in consciousness/ must be bridged over” (*T* 49). Montage could be that bridge, relying on gaps the better to fill them. What the speaker of “Tribute to the Angels” has to say about the clock applies to what the movie-projector should make possible thanks to montage: “this curious mechanical perfection/ should not separate but relate rather, // (...) this temporary eclipse/ to that other.” A linking of eclipses is a wonderfully apt description of what montage is about if we are to believe Walter Murch, Coppola’s editor, who relates cuts to blinking. If cuts work, Murch explains, it is because they replicate this very natural physiological process which is necessary to punctuate thought: “In arranging the sequence of shots,” “the editor is in effect ‘blinking’ for the audience;” “blinks are the equivalent of mental punctuation marks” (Ondaatje 141). It seems that H.D. had intuited that resolution of the paradox which consists in linking by cutting.

H.D. and her then-partner Bryher both wrote about montage (or “cutting”) around 1929. In the chapter she devotes to Eisenstein in her *Film Problems of Soviet Russia* (1929), Bryher takes the time to give her reader a lengthy explanation of the term. Clearly, she considers this method of composition strongly de-familiarizing: “Usually,” she warns, “the Russians go in for very swift cutting” (Bryher 15). And she also brings out its kinship with poetry: “each picture is a word. Jumble them together anyhow and you get a child’s first composition. Fit them together at varying speeds and you get poetry” (Bryher 15). H.D.’s most thorough defense of montage is found in her 1930 essay on the film *Borderline*: she describes its effect as “jagged” and lightning-like and anticipates the lay person’s difficulty in fully grasping its point: “There is much of meticulous jig-saw puzzle technique in the best of the advanced German and Russian montage, though the uninitiated would not think of it as that” (Donald, Friedberg, Marcus 230).

If indeed, as suggested previously, a healing seamlessness is the vision informing *The War Trilogy*, “montage” as Bryher and H.D. understood the concept in their 1929-1930 cinema writings cannot be the right word to characterize the esthetics of the long poem written over a decade later, unless, that is, the softer and broader view of montage evolved by Eisenstein over the 1930s be taken into consideration, which it should.

Susan Edmunds gives a crisp summary of Eisenstein’s evolution:

In 1930, he had seized upon what he called the Japanese ‘hieroglyph’ to illustrate the montage principle that ‘from the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept.’ On the basis of this principle, he had proposed that maximizing visual conflict between successive shots would shake the spectator out of a passive engagement of the film and into a ‘higher dimension’ of thought, capable of combining antithetical images into new conceptual syntheses. (...) In 1938, this ‘higher dimension’ of dialectical thinking becomes a ‘womb of fantasy,’ (...) syncretically unit[ing] abstract meanings, visual images, and emotional impressions drawn from the montage film into a single (...) ‘global’ or ‘generalized *image*’ (...)

(Edmunds 116-117).

This leads Geoffrey Nowell-Smith to propose that “for Eisenstein there is something mystical in montage after all” in “his fundamental intuition that image, metaphor and montage are at bottom the same thing” (Nowell-Smith xvi).

In bringing to our attention the way acoustical technologies, radio in particular, were a major resource of H.D.’s epics “toward the task of cohesion” “for a public ear newly attuned to a flow of sound,” Adalaide Morris leads one to take one short step further and offer “segueing” as an alternative to “montage” for the stronger emphasis on musical seamlessness that the term implies (Morris 2003, 75). In another chapter of her book, dedicated to a contrastive analysis of H.D.’s poetics and Nathaniel Mackey’s, Morris stresses again how “H.D. tends to mute or suppress the discrepant” (Morris 2003, 196). H.D.’s modernism is of an exploratory *and* reconciliatory type.

### **C. Possible threads: from H.D. to Thomas McGrath**

That is a link among many others with Thomas McGrath’s *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, a 400-page plus epic poem written between the mid-1950s and the early 1980s. To the best of this writer’s knowledge, McGrath did not say anything about having been influenced in any way by H.D.’s epic poems. But I would not put it past him to have wanted to keep a few inspirations top-secret. He enjoyed mentioning Pah-gotzin-kay, the secret place where Crazy Horse was laid to rest. British historian E.P. Thompson once referred in jest to “the full annotated text of McGrath’s Complete Works in the Twenty-second Century” (Thompson, 119). When McGrath was asked by Terrence Des Pres whether he would call using a line

from another poet theft or borrowing, McGrath answered: “Sometimes I think of it as correction. But, you know, in the beginning I said that if invention failed, I’d turn bandit like T.S. Eliot or Butch Cassidy, and I took what I needed” (Des Pres, Gibbons 94-95). If a thread actually runs from H.D. to McGrath, never did Eliot’s oft-quoted remark from *The Sacred Wood* seem so apt: “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different” (Eliot XX). McGrath’s *Letter* should be regarded a major tribute to his predecessor. And it is simply hoped that “[t]o backread H.D. through her alliances with and differences from [, in this case, McGrath’s political mysticism may open] a new angle that yields fresh access to the strengths (...) of her work” (Morris 185).

McGrath, thirty years H.D.’s junior, who died in 1990, was an American Communist from North Dakota who famously challenged McCarthy’s witch-hunters in the name of poetry just as he had confronted the wooden-tongued ideologues of Moscow-approved publications in the USA. Barbara Guest contends that “H.D. avoided politics of any kind” (Guest 116). It may then be assumed that H.D. included herself in the “we” whose voice is heard in section 14 of “The Walls Do Not Fall”: “we are these people, / (...) / who have no part in // new-world reconstruction, / in the confederacy of labour” (T 22). However, the “deployment of the palimpsest” (Morris 210) in McGrath’s epic – referred to as “metamorphic palimpsest” (McGrath 270) – bears a striking resemblance to that in H.D.’s *Trilogy*, in that it is not merely cognitive but political. Like H.D., McGrath came from religion – in his case an Irish-Catholic background, in hers the Moravian Church – and if our assumption is correct, H.D.’s influence on McGrath is translated in the inclusion in the long poem of long-repressed autobiographical material in connection with religion and, more generally, in the freedom to cobble together techniques of the sacred within a poem become “Field of Action” (*HD Book* 55). A. Morris’s characterization of the main common point to H.D.’s *Trilogy* and Leslie Scalapino’s own *Trilogy* applies to H.D.’s *Trilogy* and McGrath’s *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*: “Both (...) situate themselves in a landscape of (...), destruction, and despair without endorsing nihilism; both mobilize the resources of dream vision, mystical tradition, and religious writing without embracing institutionalized faith” (Morris 213).

A whole section of McGrath’s poem resonates with the sound of the bells of Lisbon celebrating the start of the 1974 Carnation Revolution: “And the bells clang from the rushing trucks and tall towers) / Time! – to change angles and angels” (McGrath 301). And in Lisbon

too, the sound of “bell” – [bel] – comes with a whole “season in Ls” (McGrath 292) peopled with winged creatures:

And the Angels dance,

And the Demons – O

Samael!

Azazel!

Azael!

Mahazael!

(...)

the Angels set free ...

– the Demons:  
angelized! –

In the cantrip circle...

(...)

And at center: the Blue Star Kachina,

The little goddess.”

( McGrath 397-399)

The “Blue Star” is SAQUASOHUH, in Hopi myths a [kachina](#) or spirit that will signify the coming of the beginning the new world. In the apocalyptic “rain of incendiary” (T 19), a presence had made itself heard: “The Presence was spectrum-blue,/ ultimate blue ray” (T 20).

Autobiographical material linked with religion comes in McGrath’s poem in the form of a narrative – into which the Lisbon sections are set – of a whole Christmas Eve in North Dakota in the 1920s whose zigzagging route alternately takes the opposite directions of scathing satire (to parry recuperation by established religion) and idyllic pastoral or ritual, before reaching a healing, integrative, H.D.-esque ending.

Unsurprisingly, McGrath’s Christmas Eve narrative features the Wise Men. The final “healing” is embodied by a “*Manwoman’schild*” (*sic*) with the speaker urging that “*his gift*” be born to the child, that “*gift and gear*” should be granted him “[*a*]gainst the night and riding of his need” (McGrath 406-407). Since the Magi were on their way to bring their gifts to the child, the reader will correctly surmise that they are the ones being addressed here. H.D.’s

“The Flowering of the Rod” too ends with the three Magi leaving their gifts next to the Mother and her child with “his gift” repeated three times. Just like McGrath’s wording echoes Karl Marx’s “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need,” the range of meaning of “gift” in H.D.’s thinking included that of a type of economy, a “philosophy of sharing,” alien to capitalism, that originally prevailed among the followers of the Moravian faith: before Bethlehem, Pennsylvania became a capitalistic “Deathlehem” (McGrath).

In H.D.’s *Bid Me to Live* (1960), Julia says: “Once a Dakota poet I knew said systematic starvation was a sort of dope. I don’t mean we starved actually. But doing without non-essentials leaves room, a room. I walked into it here” (*HDB* 613).

In *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* (Part I), only published in book form in 1962 but written in the mid-1950s, I find this:

“Love and hunger! – the secret is all there somewhere –

And the fiery dance of the stars in their journeying far houses”

(McGrath 78).

On a more serious note, should the line of influence be proven true some day, McGrath’s response to H.D. would further demonstrate the germinating power of her work, a matrix of visionary politics and “bag of possibles” – McGrath’s phrase for an Indian medicine pouch – towards “other modes of thinking the world” (Boughn, Coleman 3), an Emersonian version of Modernism outlined in “The Poet”: “All the value which attaches to Pythagoras, Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa, Cardan, Kepler, Swedenborg, Schelling, Oken, or any other who introduces questionable facts into his cosmogony, as angels, devils, magic, astrology, palmistry, mesmerism, and so on, is the certificate we have of departure from routine, and that there is a new witness” (Emerson 278).

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