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978-0-521-25579-0 - Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, H. D.'s Fiction

Susan Stanford Friedman

Excerpt

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Introduction: The Double Weave of H.D.'s Prose Modernism

Penelope: The place of space, stasis, the chaste. The figure of home, the (loyal) body as home, the place of start and finish, the womb/tomb. Unnarratable, the space out of which narrative time emerges, to which it returns. The dutiful daughter-in-law whose weaving and unweaving of the father-in-law's shroud protects the husband's honor. The figure of Not-Helen, the wife as ever-there, never-lost (never-here/ever-lost) maternal body, the origin and end of adventure. A figment of fantasy. Of (men's) modernity.

For. Penelope is a weaver. She too is a trickster, *fabric*/ator, spinner of artifice. She too has a story to tell, woven into a weave of wiles. For her, home is not unnarratable, but the time and space of the going and coming of men – the absent husband, the growing son, the pressing suitors, the dying father-in-law. The loom (womb/tomb) is the scene of motion, constant; the site of production, the place of making, unmaking, and remaking the already narrated. Women's work, the space of women's repetitive time. A web of wiles, a ruse that conceals what it reveals in the discourse of (women's) modernity.

I. PENELOPE'S NOVEL MODERNITY

"It must be Penelope's web I'm weaving," H.D. wrote about "the novel" she was perpetually doing and undoing, the story of her woman/poethood in the modern world split open by war (*Advent* 153). This "novel" – not a single, but rather a composite, palimpsestic text – stands at the borderline between two Penelopes: Penelope as the nostalgic sign of WOMAN in the discourse of (masculine) modernity – the ever-faithful mother/wife lost to the new world of the modern; and Penelope as the weaver, a figure of agency, however circumscribed by the social order, in the production of her own survival. Ever aware of her position in men's texts as signifier of the desired, H.D.-as-Penelope wove herself into the design as another kind of signifi-er, that is, as *the one who signifies*,

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Susan Stanford Friedman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 PENELOPE'S WEB

who signs her own desire within and against an economy that would deny her that agency.¹

To read the woven discourses of the two Penelopes in H.D.'s "novel," we must untangle the dialectical interplay between what Alice A. Jardine has called "gynesis" and what Nancy K. Miller has termed "arachnology." As gynesis, Penelope represents "the putting into discourse of 'woman' as that *process* diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman . . . as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking" (*Gynesis* 25). Within this linguistic economy of desire, Penelope is "the master narratives' own 'nonknowledge,' what has eluded them": "this other-than-themselves [that] is almost always a 'space' of some kind . . . coded as *feminine*, as *woman*" (25). Penelope, within Jardine's framework, is the written, not the writer; she represents the elusive, ever-deferred and deferring signifier that makes (male) texts possible and that gives modernity its special cachet.² As arachnology, Penelope is a woven text marked by "the grossly material, the sometimes brutal traces of the culture of gender; the inscriptions of its political structures" (*Subject* 84). A woman's text, within Miller's perspective, contains the marks of its "signature," the gendered subjectivity that wove it and the "political structures" of the historical moment that conditioned it. Reading woman's texts requires an "overreading," "which reads *against* the weave of indifferentiation to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity" (80). H.D.'s Penelope exercises her agency as weaver/writer within and against a tradition of letters in which she has been fixed as sign. It was for H.D., in the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "the career of that struggle": "It was the struggle not to be reduced, to be neither muse nor poetess" ("Family" 145). "H.D., always," DuPlessis continued in *The Career of That Struggle*, "posited a speaking Otherness, not a silent one" (38).

The (en)gendering of modernism is a story with a number of intersecting narrative threads. Jardine theorized that (male) modernity posits WOMAN as signifier of its characteristic "epistemological crisis" of the subject, signification, language, and writing. Within this perspective, the feminine (en)gendered modernity. WOMAN, or the desire for her, fueled the process of modernist representation and marked its avant-garde forms. By itself, however, this gendered modernism leaves out the story of women-as-writers in its production. It leaves out, to echo Miller, the agency of women who wove their female signatures and the "political structures" of production into their modernist webs. Modernism was thus doubly and differently gendered: first, by the *absence* of the elusive WOMAN whose trace nonetheless governed the signifying process; and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

DOUBLE WEAVE OF H.D.'S PROSE MODERNISM 3

second, by the active *presence* of women as innovative and important figures in the formation of modernist poetics and practice. The interplay between the two generates the question of gender difference in the male- and female-authored texts of modernism. How do the writings of men and women in the modernist period resonate and dissonate? Where do they converge and diverge? Traditional histories of modernism – such as canon-forming texts as Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* or, more recently, Frederick Karl's *Modern and Modernism* – narrate the story of modernism as if women existed primarily as mothers, wives, and lovers of men who were the significant agents of literary history. Revisionist examinations of modernism – such as DuPlessis's *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's three-volume *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, or Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism* – insert women as writers into literary history, an addition that ultimately transforms the terrain of modernism in its male as well as its female forms.³

Gendering modernism – reading gender in modernism – needs to weave together these different strands of how it was (en)gendered. The tendency in male modernism to fix women in the silent space of the feminine meant that many female modernists had to release themselves from this linguistic trap as the (pre)condition of their speech. Unweaving their textualization as WOMAN was inseparable from (re)weaving the story of their own subjectivity. Reading the gender in women's texts, consequently, often means reading intertextually, seeing what Roland Barthes called, in "The Death of the Author," "the multidimensional space in which a variety of writings . . . blend and clash" (*Image* 146). Barthes, as Miller pointed out, regarded intertextual space as "anonymous," a "tissue" of "quotation" without "filiation" or origin in "authors" (*Subject* 79–81).⁴ But Miller's insistence on a "political intertextuality" provides us with a model for intertextual reading that does not erase the historical writer and the conditions of her writing (*Subject* 111). Reading the gendered strands of women's modernist texts means reading both with and against the grain of male texts. As DuPlessis defined the overdetermined intertextuality of women's reading/writing in "Language Acquisition," an essay on H.D.'s modernity:

If a woman reads as she has been read, she will be limited.

Reading the sign of the woman, reading signs generated around women, reading the presence of the sign, woman, in culture, means reading a situation of being read. A woman writer is never just written, she is read, as a woman. So, as a woman, she needs to originate her own reading. Her own methods. (267)

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 PENELOPE'S WEB

The story of filiation, however, is a multilayered set of relations, with same-sex as well as opposite-sex precursors, peers, and newcomers, as Gilbert and Gubar pointed out in *The War of the Words*, volume 1 of *No Man's Land*.⁵ Myra Jehlen's advocacy of a feminist reading strategy that focuses entirely on the no man's land, the borderline of difference between men's and women's writing, excludes the equally significant intertextual dialogue among female texts in the production of a gendered modernism ("Archimedes"). Like many women modernists, H.D. engaged dramatically with the representations of WOMAN in the texts of the male modernists with whom she felt a particular affinity, writers such as Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Sigmund Freud, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and William Carlos Williams. But she also felt and inscribed an affiliation with many of the women who were caught in the same framework, modernists like Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, Marianne Moore, Dorothy Richardson, and May Sinclair. Male writers may have experienced themselves as individuals in the modernist period, but women writers have seldom had the luxury of forgetting their gender in a world of letters that fetishized or forgot them for it. Consequently, reading the gender of modernism, as Shari Benstock has pointed out in *Women of the Left Bank*, requires uncovering the forgotten network of relations among women and learning to hear the intertextual blend and clash on the borders between them.

H.D.'s prose occupies a different place from her poetry in the multiple weavings of gender in the (en)gendering of modernism. It is that difference, as it was formulated and performed in her prose texts, that is the main subject of this book. H.D. was, during her lifetime, and is today mainly identified as a poet. Her fictional self-portraits were always of poets: Ray Bart in *Palimpsest* and *Narthex*; Her Gart in *HER*; Hedylus in *Hedylus*; Julia Ashton in *Bid Me to Live (A Madrigal)*. But her first publications were prose – short story sketches written some time after 1907 and published in newspapers between 1910 and 1913.⁶ During the period when she was establishing herself as an imagist poet, from 1913 until 1916, she probably wrote little or no prose. But, for the rest of her life, she wrote prose – fiction, essays, memoirs, and journals – with as much passion and persistence as she did poetry. Since much of this prose remained in typescript until the 1970s and 1980s, few of her readers knew of its extent, even of its existence. She completed and prepared for publication thirteen full-length novels, for example, only three of which were published in her lifetime. The fiction that she called her "Dijon series" – five novellas and a sketch – was privately printed and distributed in editions of 100 by the same Dijon printer, Maurice Darantière, who produced Joyce's *Ulysses*. Of the eight memoir/journals she wrote, only one, *Tribute to Freud*, was published. *Notes on Thought and Vision*, the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

DOUBLE WEAVE OF H. D.'S PROSE MODERNISM 5

first extended critical/personal essay she wrote, in 1919, remained unpublished until 1982. But she wrote several other such critical commentaries, a number of reviews, and ten essays on avant-garde cinema for the journal *Close Up*. Some twenty-five stories remain unpublished, including a carefully put together selection she called *The Moment* and the volume of fourteen sketches entitled *Within the Walls* written in the early days of World War II that is currently in press.⁷

This extensive production of prose was highly unusual for a writer who was primarily identified as a poet. Of the modernists, perhaps only Lawrence and Stein balanced efforts in prose and poetry with as much attention to each.⁸ For H.D., this double discourse – this split between poetry and prose and the symbiosis between them – was essential to the formation of her modernism. As she reflected about the writing of her verse drama, *Hippolytus Temporizes*, her poetry “was realizing a self, a super-ego, if you will, that was an octave above my ordinary self” represented in her prose (*Compassionate Friendship* 28). “I was working at prose too,” she continued, “there is a bridge needed, but possibly if there had been the bridge, I would have worked at neither. *Palimpsest* is what I am thinking of, published in 1926, in Paris. I must have been working on the two, the poetry and the prose, at about the same time” (28). Looking back in the memoir *Compassionate Friendship* on the decades in which she produced prose and poetry “at about the same time,” H.D. asserted that the symbiotic separation of prose and poetry had made each voice possible.

The formation, function, and form of difference between H.D.'s poetry and prose is the focus of Chapter 1. Suffice it to summarize here that as she initiated the different discourses, her poetry was lyric, impersonal, and clairvoyant while her prose was narrative, personal, and “ordinary.” Of course, her novels were, like Woolf's, lyric and increasingly hermetic; her poetry, in turn, became increasingly narrative, even personal, as *Trilogy*, *Helen in Egypt*, and *Hermetic Definition* demonstrate vividly. But as *Compassionate Friendship* suggests, she needed to establish the polarity in order to deconstruct it.

Barthes's contrast between prose and poetry in *Writing Degree Zero* is instructive for H.D. He stressed that poetry and prose in the modern period are “the product of a particular sensibility” and constitute “a different language”: “poetic language and prosaic language are sufficiently separate to be able to dispense with the very signs of their difference” (42–3). Poetry and prose may look more like one another in modern literature, but they are fundamentally different discourses. Prose, he argued, centers in a narration of the relational, the human, the ordered. Poetry, he countered, is “inhuman,” connecting the poet not to the world, other people, or history, but to “Heaven, hell, holiness, child-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 PENELOPE'S WEB

hood, madness, pure matter, etc." (50). Whereas the "Novel," like "History," relies on narration (29), "poetic speech [is] terrible and inhuman. It initiates a discourse full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and overnourishing signs, without foresight or stability of intentions, and thereby . . . opposed to the social function of language" (48–9). With all the "splendour and freshness of a dream language," modern poetry is a kind of "discontinuous speech," an "erect discourse . . . full of terror. . . and a violent drive towards autonomy" (50–1).⁹

The way in which Barthes's binary does and does not apply to H.D. clarifies, on the one hand, the difference in her double discourse, and signals, on the other hand, the significance of gender for modernism. As in Barthes's formulation, prose and poetry were for her different languages emergent from different sensibilities. Poetry, at least during the 1910s and 1920s, was predominantly impersonal ("inhuman"), nonnarrative, a dream language that projected a "bridge to the sacred," as Adalaide Morris has written ("Projection" 416). Prose focused on the relational in history, the impulse in narrative to make sense of human relations in the "real" world of historical time. But Barthes's masculinization of modern poetic discourse (its erection, violence, and autonomy) does little more than articulate the phallogentric poetics within which H.D.-as-poet had to establish herself. Not "erect" or penile, her poetic discourse was nonetheless "hard," its vulnerabilities as a female voice deeply encoded beneath its crystalline surface. Like her *nom de plume*, H.D., gender in her early poetic discourse was suppressed – still there, but buried, screened. Her prose discourse, in contrast, as the language of history, unveiled the woman and directly narrated the story of her social relations in the world.

Precisely because H.D.'s prose discourse was relational, set in the narrative of history, it was more directly gendered than her poetic discourse. Her Penelope, it will be recalled, was weaving a *novel*, not a poem. Compared to the contained and ordered discourse of her early innovative poetry, her prose is the language of excess, of plentitude, leaking its feminine fluidity all over the surface of the text. Directly about her self as woman/poet in the world, her prose narrated the formation of a gendered subjectivity in an avant-garde language that anticipates post-structuralist experimentalism, especially as it overlaps with *écriture féminine*. Although theorists of post-structuralism often look to poetry as the privileged discourse of the avant garde, prose was for H.D. (especially in her fictions of the 1920s and 1930s) the discourse of disruption and the decentered self. Indeed, portions of Barthes's description of modern poetic discourse serve admirably for her prose: It was a form of "discontinuous speech," a "discourse full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and overnourishing signs, without foresight or stability

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

DOUBLE WEAVE OF H. D.'S PROSE MODERNISM 7

of intentions," with all the "splendour and freshness of a dream language." Her prose experimentalism, written in "white ink," to echo Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa," in turn transformed the poetic discourse of the 1940s and 1950s into one that no longer veiled the woman.

H.D.'s prose, then, played a special and complex role in the (en)gendering of modernism. It provided the verbal space in which she could weave the voice and vision of a woman in the modern world. These experiments, in turn, fundamentally altered her poetry, which increasingly put into play the gendered subjectivity formulated in her prose. Written in the early 1950s, *Helen in Egypt*, for example, is a postmodern poem, "a discourse full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences," a "discontinuous speech." Its postmodernist discourse was first formulated in the novels of the 1920s and 1930s and in the memoirs of the 1940s. Its implicit poetics had been verbalized in a series of little-known or unpublished prose texts written between 1913 and 1947.

II. FORMING A CRITICAL VOICE ON MODERNISM

Eliot, Pound, Woolf, Lawrence, and Stein (among others) published critical essays on literature and poetics that established them in the public eye as important articulators of modernity. In spite of H.D.'s leadership role in the imagist anthologies of 1915, 1916, and 1917 and as assistant editor of *The Egoist* in 1916–17, she appeared to be removed from theorizing about the modern and to be, instead, immersed in the production of her own version of it. This view is, however, only partially accurate. Although alienated from the theoretical posturings that produced vorticism, futurism, and such ventures as *Blast*, H.D. wrote prose during the 1910s from which the beginnings of a modernist poetic can be extracted. "The Suffragette," a narrative sketch probably written about 1913, is the first of these, and although it proposes no aesthetic, it centrally identifies feminism with the new age dawning in the prewar world. The brief narrative, which H.D. did not publish, retells the Jamesian story of American innocence coming to Europe. But instead of finding moral corruption fed by sexuality and greed, the young American girl meets a "new woman," a feminist organizer who convinces her to attend a suffragist meeting devoted to the victimization of working-class women. This organizer, a note on the manuscript says, was modeled on Dora Marsden, the British feminist and founder/editor of the journal *The Freewoman*, which became *The New Freewoman* in 1912 and then *The Egoist* in 1913. "The Suffragette" was probably written about the time *The New Freewoman* changed its name to *The Egoist*, and consequently inscribes the gender-inflected contradictions of the early Anglo-American modernist agenda. Pound had found in *The New Freewoman* a place from

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Susan Stanford Friedman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 PENELOPE'S WEB

which to propound his theories and support avant-garde poetry. Ignoring Marsden's feminist editorials, he developed a new poetic within its pages and finally, in 1913, pushed successfully to change its name. As DuPlessis has pointed out, the name change was symptomatic of (male) modernism's resistance to the feminist project which formed a central part of its challenge to the "old" order ("Modernism").¹⁰ Was H.D.'s socialist/feminist sketch an answer to this resistance? Did she intend to publish it in *The Egoist*? Was it rejected? Did she suppress it?

The fact that we can't answer these questions is emblematic of H.D.'s position as prose writer within modernism. She actually wrote far more prose, including critical essays, than was actually published. Was her prose censored by the men, like Pound, who nonetheless supported her poetry? Did she herself engage in self-censorship, suppressing what might not please? In assessing who should and should not be published in *The Little Review*, Pound wrote its editor, Margaret Anderson, in 1917: "H.D. is all right, but shouldn't write criticism" (*Selected Letters* 107). Pound's judgments were harsh on many, men as well as women. But did this view of modernism's tireless impresario have a chilling effect on H.D.'s criticism, particularly on her desire to define a modernist poetic in prose?

By 1917, H.D. had already published in *The Egoist*, during her stint as assistant editor, three critical reviews of modern poets: Marianne Moore, Charlotte Mew, and John Gould Fletcher. A fourth review, on W. B. Yeats's *Responsibilities*, was written, probably in 1916 or 1917, but left unpublished. The tone of these reviews – at times conversational, at times lyrical – is generous: out of step with the distant authority of Eliot or the abstract blasts of Wyndham Lewis, Filippo Marinetti, or Pound; but very much in tune with the persona that was becoming Woolf's trademark as "the common reader" in her critical essays. Praising aspects of the poetry with which she identified, H.D. defined her own aesthetic by describing the poetic of others. As Gary Burnett argued in "A Poetics out of War," these reviews establish an antimilitarist, antimechanistic poetic that opposes the celebration of violence and machines in vorticism and futurism. Poetry – represented by Moore, Mew, and Fletcher – is her avant garde against an aesthetic of militarism, patriotism, materialism, and nihilism.¹¹ During World War I, H.D. fought for a view of modernity based in the spirit, one that anticipated Woolf's vision in "Modern Fiction," "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," *Jacob's Room*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Like Woolf, she believed that the particular contradiction of modernity lay in the opposition of ephemeral moments of being and the engines of death epitomized by war. Fletcher's poetry "of suggestion" (not "of direct presentation") includes "the whirling of flowers, of boats, of the sea-water, of rain slanting and beating," but also "in grimmer moods," the "swirl of guns, cannon, terror, destruction" ("Review of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

DOUBLE WEAVE OF H.D.'S PROSE MODERNISM 9

Goblins" 183–4). In the post-Romantic age of modernity, the poet is "the soul or mind or inspiration . . . knowing within itself its problems, unanswerable; its visions, cramped and stifled. . . . but flaunting in the face of its own ignorance, its own undaunted quest" (184).

The muted gender inflection of H.D.'s modernism in these reviews developed into a full-blown Eleusinian gynopoetic in *Notes on Thought and Vision*, a generic hybrid of personal meditation on creativity that she wrote in July, 1919, during a healing visit to the Scilly Isles with Bryher.¹² Motivated by what she called her "jelly-fish" and "bell-jar" experiences, H.D. wrote *Notes* to define the layers of consciousness that condition "the soul or mind or inspiration" of the poet and artist. *Notes* belongs alongside Lawrence's cultural/aesthetic treatises, hybrid essays such as *Study of Thomas Hardy* and *The Crown*. Like his, her tone is prophetic, addressing itself to the spiritually dead and embattled modern moment much in need of rebirth. Like Lawrence, she insisted that the reawakening of the spirit had to be based in the body. The intellect and the soul of the artist must, she insisted, be anchored in the material life and desire of the body. Unlike Lawrence, however, H.D. developed her model of awakening out of her postpartum experience, out of the specifically female body that gives birth.

The bell-jar experience in the Scilly Isles occurred about three months after H.D. miraculously survived the birth of her daughter Perdita while she had the war influenza. Her sensation of being suspended in a luminous globe of fluid recapitulated that birth, with herself as mother now in the position of her daughter. Having birthed a child, she herself becomes the fetus who will be born, with Bryher as mother/midwife/lover to the soul:

We were in the little room that Bryher had taken for our study when I felt this impulse to "let go" into a sort of balloon or diving-bell, as I have explained it, that seemed to hover over me. . . . When I . . . told her [Bryher] it might be something sinister or dangerous, she said, "No, no, it is the most wonderful thing I ever heard of. Let it come." . . . There was, I explained to Bryher, a second globe or bell-jar rising as if it were from my feet. I was enclosed. I felt I was safe but seeing things as through water. I felt the double globe come and go and I could have dismissed it at once and probably would have if I had been alone. But it would not have happened, I imagine, if I had been alone. It was being with Bryher that projected the fantasy. . . . (*Advent* 130)

Notes, H.D. explained in *Advent*, is "a rough account of this singular adventure" (130), but not in any literal sense. Rather than narrating the experience (as *Advent* does), *Notes* projects the mother–daughter dyad of the bell-jar fantasy into the mysteries of Eleusis, which are held up as the model for fully integrated creativity.¹³ "The new schools of destruc-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 PENELOPE'S WEB

tive art theorists are on the wrong track," she wrote, with an oblique allusion to the "make it new" modernism of vorticism and futurism (24). Rejecting both the new modernism of violence and the old Judeo-Christian binaries of the body and soul, spirit and matter, she followed the path of the "Eleusinian mystic" initiated into the "mystery of Demeter, the Earth Mother" (52). In the Eleusinian mysteries, she reminded us, the initiate passed through three rooms representing the dimensions that must be experienced and integrated: the passion of the body; the detachment of the intellect; and the mystery of the spirit (29–30). Like Eleusinian mysticism, creativity of the highest order incorporates the body, the mind, and the spirit, to which she gave the name "over-mind" in the essay.

The over-mind is a state of consciousness to which she gained access through the body, specifically through the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Defining the over-mind as a "jelly-fish consciousness" whose "feelers" reached down into the brain and the sexual/reproductive body, she described the state in terms that echo her globe experience in the Scilly Isles:

If I could visualise or describe that over-mind in my own case, I should say this: it seems to me that a cap is over my head, a cap of consciousness over my head, my forehead, affecting a little my eyes. Sometimes when I am in that state of consciousness, things about me appear slightly blurred as if seen under water. . . .

That over-mind seems a cap, like water, transparent, fluid yet with definite body, contained in a definite space. It is like a closed sea-plant, jelly-fish or anemone.

Into that over-mind, thoughts pass and are visible like fish swimming under clear water. (18–19)

The over-mind is imaged as an amniotic globe, the maternal body in which the poet is encased "like a foetus in the body" (19). The poet-as-foetus is in turn the enclosed sea in which her thoughts swim like fish. She is both contained and container, both inside and outside, child of the mother and mother to the poem, her child.¹⁴ Recognizing that her images privilege the female procreative body, she asked: "Is it easier for a woman to attain this state of consciousness than for a man?" (20). The question remains unanswered as she noted that "For me, it was before the birth of my child that the jelly-fish consciousness seemed to come definitely into the field or realm of the intellect or brain" (20). Man's over-mind reaches down into his "love-region," she wrote, and, "My sign-posts are not yours" (24). *Notes* continues its exploration of the mysteries by examining the "love-mind" and the place of sexual ecstasy in the over-mind, open to men as well as women (22–3). But the essay's gynopoetic insistently returns with the reflection that "The majority of