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The Ethos of the Conscious Unconscious
W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and H.D.'s theories of a universal mind
Amy Stidham
2017–2018 Wolf Humanities Center Undergraduate Research Fellow
University of Pennsylvania
English Honors Thesis

"...but if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I

move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality…"

-W.B. Yeats, The Symbolism of Poetry

The past haunts the present incessantly in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." Madame Sosostris, the bumbling fortune teller with a cold, deals tarot cards colored with icons of the literary past to predict the future. The drowned Phoenician sailor, the Belladonna, the man with three staves, the one-eyed merchant, and the Hanged Man cannot be extricated from an explicitly literary past. In his notes on the poem, Eliot specifies that he intends for the man with three staves to be interpreted as the Fisher King, a character of myth. The Hanged Man reflects the hooded figure that appears in Part V of "The Waste Land," an allusion to Christ, and the Belladonna refers to the Virgin Mary, making Christian literature crucial here as well.

In Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he outlines a manifesto of how poets should connect to the past of the literary tradition in which they are writing. In other words, he specifies how poets should be dealing these tarot cards, interpreting anew canonical literary figures. He believes that a poet should never invest his poetry in the personal; instead, the poet should converse in the language of universals, turning canonical figures and ancient symbols into fresh poetry. W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and H.D. all have conceptions of a collective unconscious[1] or access to the past that connects them to the literature and thought that came before them, allowing them to have this connection that Eliot presents. Their

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[1] While this term was coined by Carl Jung in his 1916 essay, "The Structure of the Unconscious," 13 years before Yeats published his theory, it is, in my opinion, the most legible term with which to introduce it. By her close friendship with Freud and interest in psychoanalysis, it can be assumed that H.D. was familiar the term at the time she published her theory in 1919 (Kibble 42).

theories also propose justifications for their entrances into literary communities they would not have known without these connections to the past: the poetry of Irish nationalism for Yeats and the predominantly male literary community for H.D. This essay will do the work of tying these theories of collective unconscious directly to literary tradition and defining their place in the creation of an ethos of universal connection in both Yeats's and H.D.'s poetry, and a more individualistic ethos in the poetry of Pound.

It is not revelatory to conclude that W.B. Yeats was deeply invested in mysticism. Following the example of his wife Georgie, Yeats became interested in automatic writing, or the practice of allowing a spirit to inhabit one's body and write through it. However, his tendency towards mysticism began before his marriage to Georgie in 1917.[2] In his essay, "Magic," published in 1903, he narrates an experience with a friend, also referred to as an evoker of spirits, who projected images into his mind; Yeats perceived them as reality. These images came from a collective unconscious containing all of the thoughts and memories of people throughout time. Yeats calls this collective unconscious the 'great mind.' Much more interesting, however, are the more subtle ways in which this great mind relates back to poetry and literary tradition. Poets have a special ability to access the great mind in order to create great poetry and to understand otherwise unfamiliar people and cultures.

H.D., one of the most prominent female poets of the modernist era, also outlines her own theory of a collective unconscious in her work, "Notes on Thought and Vision," published in 1919, though she calls this collective unconscious 'the over-mind.' While H.D.'s theory is less invested in mysticism, it is deeply concerned with the literary, and it allows

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[2] Yeats's experience with and thoughts on automatic writing are documented in his essay "A Vision," published originally in 1925, though a greatly revised and more widely-read edition was published in 1937.

H.D. to bolster her reputation as a poet, specifically a female poet writing into a predominantly male literary community, through association with more prominent thinkers throughout history[3]. When H.D. accesses the over-mind in a moment of inspiration, she can understand the thoughts of philosophers and artists such as Socrates and da Vinci, giving her access to the details of intellectual tradition ("Notes" 23-24). Yeats's and H.D.'s theories both represent and defend the ethos of their writing, specifically their writing into worlds historically foreign to them: Yeats is a Britisher attempting to create a new Irish literature; H.D. is a woman trying to navigate a predominantly male literary tradition.

Pound is much less interested in mysticism than Yeats and H.D., but his essay "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" does suggest a connection between the thoughts of all people. However, most important for Pound is the individual *virtù* that shines above this collective similarity. This *virtù* is what makes people unique, great thinkers geniuses, and poetry brilliant. Pound recognizes this *virtù* in thinkers and poetry, allowing him to translate texts, not explicitly or word for word, but while still maintaining the *virtù* of the text, the most important aspect of it. Pound's theory of collectivity serves as a foil to those of Yeats and H.D. For Pound, the collective is less about connection and more of a tool by which the individual's unique talent can stand out.

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[3] H.D. intended for *Notes* to be a piece of scientific data and shared it with her friend and doctor Havelock Ellis. However, he rejected it as such and discouraged H.D. from publishing it, in part because of its lack of investment in conventional scientific discourse and in part because its author was a woman. A more comprehensive analysis of this exchange can be found in Robin Pappas's "H.D. and Havelock Ellis: Popular Science and the gendering of Thought and Vision."

Yeats and the great mind

In W.B. Yeats's essay, "Magic," he outlines a theory of a connection between all people that he believes can be accessed via symbols. He calls this theory and the practice thereof 'magic,' and considers those who call upon symbols to be practitioners of magic. It is my argument that this logic would extend to literary tradition and a connection between authors and poets through time that is more tangible than this collective unconscious, perhaps suggesting that the role of the author or poet would be to take the intangibility of this 'magic' and make it visible.

Yeats's three doctrines of this theory of the great mind are:

(1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols. ("Magic" 21)

First focusing on Yeats's second doctrine, it is crucial to note that memory is a term inextricable from history, drawn even further beyond civilization and humanity to simply "Nature herself." However, the memories in the great mind are not solely our own, and they

are constantly shifting, melding, moving, creating one massive collective memory, which is a more truthful and emotional version of history itself. Yeats believes that he can access all of these memories. He believes that he can connect to thoughts, cultures, people beyond his own mind and body.

When this second doctrine is considered in light of Yeats's Irish nationalism, it can help explain his intense desire to build a national culture for Ireland, despite the deep-seated division in Ireland and despite the fact that he is not even Irish. As Michael North outlines in "W.B. Yeats: Cultural Nationalism," Yeats wanted, and attempted, to escape the religious divisions of his contemporary Ireland by "antedating and...post-dating Christianity" with the use of myth, specifically Irish folklore (31). Yeats's strategy of utilizing pre-Christian myth is part of an effort to universalize — much like the great mind — although within the limits of Irish memory and history. Yeats is trying to return to a different, much earlier time, before contemporary conflicts and divisions. In the footnotes to "The Second Coming" in James Pethica's edited collection of Yeats's works, Pethica interprets Yeats's thoughts on the role of his theory of gyres in "The Second Coming" as saying that "the end of a Christian, subjective age" and "the beginning of an objective age" are imminent (76). Therefore, Yeats's strategy of unity is to transcend the problems of the present by moving backwards, before the conflict began, and he finds symbols from this time within the great mind, specifically Irish mythology, and uses them to create a national poetry that will, hopefully, unite the Irish people.[4]

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[4] It is worth noting that this effort to unify Ireland did not entirely work. Michael North also notes in "W.B. Yeats: Cultural Nationalism" that the average Irish citizen at the time, Protestant or Catholic, rejected Yeats's poetry, ironically, because it did not acknowledge Christianity enough. Yeats's poetry was not lauded as part of the Irish national literature until several decades after his death, by Irish intellectuals hoping to capitalize off of his fame.

However, it is also worth noting that Yeats feels compelled, at times against his own wishes, to create poetry out of his connection to the great mind. He says in the beginning of "Magic" that he "would put this belief in magic from [him] if [he] could" (21). He senses something sinister and looming in the conjuring of symbols and 'spirits' of the great mind. In his complex memory of his first encounter with an evoker of spirits — a person who has the ability to project images from the great minds into the minds of others — he notes that one person is "forbidden to see" some aspects of the vision being evoked ("Magic" 24). Yet again, in the final section of "Magic," Yeats says that at several points while writing the essay, he became "uneasy," because things he was writing seemed to be part of some secret (48). This aspect of his great mind seems to go beyond any comparison to literary tradition, which is in its essence a communal endeavor, a conversation between minds, except for the fact that the great mind compels poets to create. Yeats cannot help but use the great mind to give life to the Irish literary tradition, even if the Irish people do not rally around his nationalist poetry with much vigor.

Yeats's infamous Rose, representing Ireland whenever it appears in his poetry, also draws a clear connection between Yeats's literature and his third doctrine of magic: "That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols" ("Magic" 21). In "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," from Yeats's collection of poetry also entitled *The Rose*, the Rose is clearly the featured symbol, both starting and ending the piece:

> Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!
>
> Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways; (lines 1–2)

Come near — I would, before my time to go,

Sing of old Eri and the ancient ways:

Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days. (lines 22–24)

The beginning and end of the poem are similar, but not copied exactly, similar to the idea in magic that a poet should draw from the past in order to create fresh poetry. In fact, through echoing the structure of the opening and closing lines with the tripling of the Rose and the repetition of 'come near,' Yeats emphasizes both the similarities and differences between the open and close. The Rose, 'come near,' and 'ancient ways' are all kept in the closing lines, and they all connect to the great mind. The Rose is the symbol that brings the past nearer to the poet so he can 'sing,' or write, of these ancient ways found in the great mind. However, the differences are also more apparent through the comparison, specifically the change in punctuation from exclamation point to period, which suggests a tonal shift as the poem progresses and echoes the uneasiness that Yeats feels in regards to the great mind.

The Rose is also distinctly associated with the past, even in the title alone, imagining the Rose as Christ upon the cross of time and associating it with both Biblical history and time itself. The speaker is singing of "ancient ways" as he interacts with the Rose, much as Yeats does when he writes of Irish folklore, therefore practicing 'magic' (line 2). The speaker of this poem has a complicated relationship with the Rose, calling it a "proud Rose" (line 1) and beckoning it "come near, come near, come near" (line 13), but also asking it to "leave [him] still" (line 13). While he interestingly does not wish for it to come too close, the speaker does want to interact with the past, and specifically the Irish past as the Rose cannot be dissociated from Ireland when Yeats is evoking it. The capitalization of Rose also connects to

the capitalization of Nature in Yeats's second doctrine of magic, giving it similar authority as a symbol of the great mind.

I would also like to address the fact that "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time" evokes Christian imagery despite Yeats's desire to write both backwards and forwards into a pre-Christian time. In this poem, along with many others, such as "The Second Coming," Yeats utilizes Christian symbolism without paying any special homage to its figures or values. On the other hand, figures of Irish mythology are brought to life as characters with a voice to represent a collective ethos of Ireland. For example, in "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time," the rood is a tool by which Yeats expresses the sacrifice and suffering of the Rose, Ireland, over time. However, in "Fergus and the Druid," both Fergus and the Druid, figures of Irish mythology, have voices and drive the poem forward with their dialogue. In "The Song of Wandering Aengus," Aengus is the speaker of the poem and the subject of its action. Christian symbols would also necessarily be a part of the great mind by the virtue of their centrality to the western tradition, but Yeats wants to give life to those symbols that will best represent the ethos of Ireland as he sees it. He does, however, fail to address the fact that many cultures are much more likely to be symbolically evoked than others. This problem becomes especially clear when Yeats says, "I have come to believe so many strange things because of experience, that I see little reason to doubt the truth of many things that are beyond my experience" ("Magic" 48). Magic permits Yeats to write about experiences that he himself has not had, however this advantage for Yeats also reduces those experiences to his perception of them from the great mind.

In another connection to literary tradition, Yeats also specifically says that "the poet, the musician and the artist" are "successors" of the "masters of magic," though they use

magic only half consciously while the masters use magic completely conscious of its origins, effects, and consequences (46). This statement implies that the public is entirely unconscious of the great mind, poets are half conscious of it, and only the masters of magic fully understand it. It is difficult to say where Yeats himself fits into these categories, as he is not the 'evoker of spirits,' but he also seems to know more about magic than the average poet.

Yet his evocation of William Blake throughout "Magic" indicates connections between the literary and the magical. Yeats says, "It may be, as Blake said of one of his poems, that the author was in eternity" ("Magic" 30). The author becomes an author — instead of just an individual — when he is 'in eternity.' Authors have an exceptional ability to understand the great mind and the universality within it, the aspects of history that transcend time.

The poet's role in the connection between the great mind and the literary can be further explored in Yeats's poem "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes."[5] Twice in the poem, Yeats mentions "the mind's eye," which operates very similarly to the great mind of his theory outlined in "Magic." It conjures up "cold spirits" (line 2) that "were dead yet flesh and bone" (line 48), similar to the powers of the evoker of spirits. This mind's eye can make the dead seem alive.

> On the grey rock of Cashel I suddenly saw
>
> A Sphinx with woman breast and lion paw,
>
> A Buddha, hand at rest,

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[5] Michael Robartes is a figure that appears throughout Yeats's work. In *The Wind Among the Reeds*, Yeats says that he used Robartes and another figure, Hanrahan, "more as principles of the mind than as actual personages" (73), another connection between Robartes and abstraction of the mind.

Hand lifted up that blest;

And right between these two a girl at play

That it may be had danced her life away

For now being dead it seemed

That she of dancing dreamed. (lines 17–24)

The most prevalent image conjured in this poem dances. The other two images are the Sphinx and Buddha, connecting the mind's eye to history and the past, "time overthrown" (line 47). The anaphora beginning the lines introducing the Sphinx and Buddha ties them together, differentiating them from the ballerina and emphasizing the strangeness of the contrast between her play and her death. The ballerina, again in contrast to the Sphinx and Buddha, is unnamed, corroborating Yeats's claim that the great mind can allow a poet to connect with the thoughts of any person, not just the thoughts of the great figures of history. The Sphinx and Buddha also represent different cultures, suggesting again that the great mind is not only English or Irish, but all-encompassing.

The speaker in the poem also seems to be compelled, like Yeats, by the mind's eye. He is "obedient to some hidden magical breath," also invoking the title of Yeats's essay (line 13). If the mind's eye is a reflection of Yeats's theory of the great mind, then the connection to the poet and the literary is explicit in this poem, since after seeing these images from the mind's eye, the speaker of the poem "arranged it in a song" (line 65). The seer of the mind's eye is the poet. The mind's eye appears again in Yeats's poem "The Magi." The speaker can "see in the mind's eye" (line 1), and there he finds "ancient faces" (line 4). While the speaker in "The Magi" is not explicitly defined as a poet, the mind's eye here is still connected to the

past and even to an "uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor," which could be the secret that makes Yeats so uneasy when he writes about magic. The speaker of "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" also asks, "When had I my own will?" (Line 7). He is compelled to these visions, just as Yeats feels he is compelled to understand the great mind despite his uneasiness.

Tahrir Hamdi, in an essay about Yeats's mystical beliefs, cites Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" to defend his sincerity when outlining these theories and attempting to create an Irish consciousness, despite his connection to England (96). Hamdi suggests that perhaps what Yeats hears "in the deep heart's core" is an ancient Celtic consciousness (line 12). To push her argument further, I suggest that perhaps the 'deep heart' itself is the great mind that Yeats speaks of in "Magic," since he defines it as *the* deep heart instead of his own. Yeats also says that "our life in cities … deafens or kills" ("Magic" 37) a person's ability to understand magic, perhaps suggesting why Yeats wants to "arise and go now" ("Innisfree" line 1) to a place filled with "bean rows" (line 3) and "honey [bees]" (line 4), a world filled with the natural, not the urban, just as the great mind comes from the memory of Nature herself. He also notes that the "Faery people," who are the spirits of the great mind, come from "The Land of the Living Heart," which he specifies as the "heart of the world" ("Magic" 49). That would therefore designate the great mind as a 'heart' twice and a heart that is 'alive,' much as it seems the deep heart of Innisfree is. The poem, from the same volume as many of his famous poems about the Irish Rose and published 11 years before "Magic," perhaps speaks to Yeats's inability to escape the call of the Irish past, even if the Irish people rejected his reinterpretation of it, and his wish that he could escape the sharpness of reality and instead reside within the fantasy of magic.

H.D. and the over-mind

H.D., in "Notes on Thought and Vision," outlines another theory of collective thought, this time called the 'over-mind.' She describes it in comparison to a jelly-fish. It is "fluid yet with definite body" ("Notes" 18). While no person can ever know all of the over-mind, they can be inspired by parts of it. In terms of the jelly-fish, H.D. describes this state of consciousness as never being able to know the body of the jelly-fish but being touched by and knowing the feelers. Therefore, H.D. believes that poets can gain inspiration from the over-mind, but they can never be all knowing, which is a departure from Yeats's argument that the great mind encompasses all thought and all memory, which poets are able to access and understand and utilize in the form of symbols.

H.D.'s over-mind, like Yeats's great memory, is something that requires special skill to access. However, for H.D., that skill is intellect. She says that reaching the over-mind is "no 'inspiration,'" but instead "sheer, hard brain work" ("Notes" 26). However, she explicitly defines the over-mind as the "concern of the artist" ("Notes 40), while Yeats thinks that the great mind itself can be accessed by the artist, but only fully utilized by the evoker of spirits. H.D.'s theory is much less about mysticism and more about the ability of any man or woman to access the thoughts and ideas of great thinkers throughout history with enough effort. While Yeats believes that poets have been inescapably chosen to be haunted by the great mind, accessing the over-mind is not an inescapable duty for H.D., but an end result of hard work. I do not intend to imply, however, that it is easy. H.D. claims that it is only "for the greatest" ("Notes" 49) and it is sometimes even "mental agony" ("Notes" 19). Much like Yeats, H.D. does not always find the over-mind to be pleasurable.

This aspect of H.D.'s theory is reflected in her poem "Adonis." In "Adonis," the speaker claims that all people are as exceptional as the beautiful youth. They have all "died once" (line 2) and "[stand] apart, like [him] / fit to be worshipped" (lines 34-35). All people are, in some way, capable of being Adonis, and her wording even suggests that people who are not being praised as he is are being overlooked, which is why it makes sense that her poetry tends to take figures of the past, particularly female figures, and give them a new voice and new perspective.

H.D.'s poetry is also filled with mythology, but it functions differently for her than it does for Yeats. While Yeats intends mythology as a unifying gesture, H.D. reclaims female figures of myth and rewrites them from a feminine perspective. For example, in her poem "Eurydice," H.D. tells the story of Orpheus' failed attempt to rescue his wife Eurydice from the underworld, but this time from Eurydice's perspective. In the original story, Orpheus must not look back when taking her back to Earth. He must trust that she is following him. However, he looks back at the last second, and so she is sent back to the underworld. Her anger comes out in H.D.'s poem:

> So for your arrogance
>
> and your ruthlessness
>
> I have lost the earth
>
> and the flowers of the earth,
>
> and the live souls above the earth,
>
> and you who passed across the light
>
> and reached

ruthless; (lines 82–89)

H.D. calls out the protagonist of the original myth as arrogant and ruthless, the latter description even deserving its own line. She is willing to look critically at figures canonized in the past as flawed but heroic. She is also willing to give a voice to victims — a voice that is vitriolic and accusatory and one that asks readers to look beyond just those "who passed across the light" (line 87).

H.D. aligns herself with Sappho to emphasize the importance of women with access the over-mind. In "The Wise Sappho," H.D. discusses her connection to the poet of Lesbos, indicating that she believes Sappho was connected to the over-mind as well. She says that Plato "speaks of this woman as among the wise" ("Notes" 68), and then goes on to name the other great thinkers that respected her thereafter, such as Sophocles, whom she says has access to the over-mind, and Catullus ("Notes" 69). Sappho's inclusion in the over-mind gives H.D. a precedent for being there as well and provides for her another example of a female perspective present in the Western literary canon.

In fact, in Matthew Kibble's essay, "Sublimation and the Over-mind in H.D.'s 'Notes on Thought and Vision,'" he looks closely at H.D.'s language and notices her conscious effort to "negotiate both male and female metaphors for creativity" when describing the over-mind (46). The over-mind is both "mother" and "begetter" (Kibble 46). The over-mind is also both active and acted upon, regardless of the gender of the artist. It is active in that it chooses what and what not to show the artist, or with which feelers of inspiration it will touch the artist, in terms of H.D.'s jelly-fish metaphor. However, it is passive in that it cannot choose what the

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artist will write. H.D. is attempting to create a metaphor for creative inspiration that is apt for both men and women, regardless of gender.

H.D.'s poetry often gives a new life and voice to the female figures of mythology, allowing them to be agents of their emotions and to feel their own anger, where before they were objects of blame, causes of grief for male figures. On the other hand, Yeats retells stories of mythology in order to reignite nationalism in Ireland and to unite a people around a common background of myth. These utilizations of mythology reflect both theories of collective unconscious — Yeats's great mind and H.D.'s over-mind. H.D. is inspired by the past, but breathes into it, giving feminine life to characters who were previously understood emotionally as objects. Yeats sees mythology as a tool of unification, bringing together a people around a collective of poetic art and myth.

Yeats believed that the great mind and his inescapable calling to utilize it to bring the people of Ireland together around a national literature justified his writing into a culture to which he did not belong. He was a Britisher who simply moved to Ireland, but his devotion to Ireland is clear in his passion for her past and her contemporary representation. However, I do not claim that his own waiver of responsibility of representation should be enough of a justification for the Irish people or for his readers, both contemporary and future. However, it could be an explanation for his behavior and a method for navigating his complicated relationship with Ireland.

On the other hand, H.D. utilized her connection to the over-mind strategically in order to insert herself into the predominantly male literary community. In order to be taken seriously, she had to acknowledge the canon. She does this by knowing and understanding literary and intellectual history, which she connects to via the over-mind. However, while she

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still pulls her inspiration from the canon of intellectual thought, she does more than flatter it. She forces it to acknowledge its own female characters and their feelings and their stories from their perspective, even when that perspective was flat in the canon beforehand.

Pound and the individual *virtů*

While Ezra Pound's poetry and thought are less based in mysticism than Yeats's, in "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris," he shows a slightly more mystical side to his thought process. He outlines a theory of the *virtů* of the individual, the one trait that stands out within the "cosmos of souls" that lives inside each man ("I Gather" 28). In other words, the soul of each man is comprised of the souls of all men, and the one unique aspect of each man's soul is his *virtů*. This *virtů* affects a man's "point of view" and "attitude toward life," but is not either of these things exactly ("I Gather" 28). Therefore, a poet's *virtů* affects his poetry. In addition, no two men have the same *virtů*, explaining why there can only be one Homer, one Dante, one Shakespeare.

Already the connections to Yeats are clear. In Pound's view, the souls of all men exist in the soul of each man, whereas, in Yeats's view, magic can allow a person to connect to the minds of all men who came before him. One difference here, even at this surface level of Pound's theory, is that it is rooted in the individual person. All of the souls of the cosmos are contained within every man. Some higher level of consciousness, like Yeats's great mind, doesn't seem to need to be reached. However, *virtů* is an even more interesting departure from Yeats's magic, because it suggests that it is the differences between souls, not the connections, that are most important when creating a great work of literature. Pound claims that, because works are influenced by their authors unique *virtů*, "no amount of technical

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cleverness can produce a work having the same charm as the original" ("I Gather" 28).

Therefore, straight imitation is meaningless without the addition of one's own unique *virtù*.

Pound's emphasis on *virtù* is also a departure from H.D.'s utilization of collective thought. H.D. uses the over-mind as a medium for collaboration of thought, for learning. She learns the language of the great thinkers before her in order to negotiate in their world and understand their ideas. Pound also wants to learn, but not to form connection. He wants to emphasize and utilize the strengths of the *virtù* and the individual, and he has no desire to change it, as H.D. wants to change some of the perceptions of women in the canon. He also has no desire to imitate it. He simply wants to preserve or recontextualize it, keeping it, at its root, exactly the same.

This balance between imitation and *virtù* is also investigated in Pound's poetry. In "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley [Part I]," the struggling writer ponders the appropriate subject for his poetry.

> For three years, out of key with his time,
>
> He strove to resuscitate the dead art
>
> Of poetry; to maintain "the sublime"
>
> In the old sense. Wrong from the start— (lines 1–4)

He "strove to resuscitate the dead art," but then realizes that this tactic was "wrong from the start." He wants more than "the classics in paraphrase" (line 28). Of course, the poem is littered with literary references, but set on a "modern stage" (line 23).

Pound also struggled with the balance between imitation and creation himself when writing "Canto II." He originally planned to model the beginning of the poem after Robert

Browning's *Sordello*, but eventually decided against it ("The Cantos Project"). Instead, he

begins the poem, "Hang it all, Robert Browning, / there can be but the one 'Sordello.'" (lines

1-2). Just as he insists in "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" that each person has a unique *virtù*,

which is never repeated in another person and cannot be imitated, neither can the form of

Sordello.

Perhaps another example that could illustrate the uniqueness of *virtù* and its place in

literature is Homer and his role in Pound's *Cantos*. Pound says that Homer's *virtù* is that he is

"conscious of the world around him" ("I Gather" 29). Therefore, this *virtù*, exactly as it

existed in Homer, cannot be imitated. However, Pound's "Canto I" is a rewriting of Homer's

Odyssey. This contradiction can be resolved in Pound's ubiquitous statement: "Make it new."

His poem still allows for the *virtù* of the original Homer to exist within itself. Pound's art,

perhaps his *virtù*, is to portray Homer's story in a new light.

Pound is often seen as a poet of translation, which as I suggested above could perhaps

be his *virtù*, but at the very least can illustrate the balance for him between imitation and

originality. In Ming Xie's work, "Pound as Translator," he looks into this role of Pound's,

which is in many ways connected to his theory of *virtù*. He claims that "Pound's poetics is

essentially a poetics of translation" (204). This idea becomes more relevant when one realizes

that translation, for Pound, is "to respond to the *virtù* of the translated" (Xie 207). In other

words, Pound wants to find the unique, individual *virtù* of a work and make that *virtù* legible

in another context or language. I use the term 'legible' loosely when it comes to Pound, since

his translations turn the original art object into something new and often complicated, instead

of just presenting it exactly as is in another language or dialect. However, this begins to draw

in questions of translation that are beyond the scope of this argument. Regardless, Pound's

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end goal is to preserve the *virtù* of Homer in "Canto I." He wants to include his own *virtù*, making his own talent and art a part of the original, but without losing the core of the original. While it is impossible to prove whether or not Pound was successful in translating something as elusive as *virtù*, his method of translation is certainly clear. In *Cathay* as well, Pound translates Chinese poetry into English, but not word for word — of course not, since he did not read Chinese, but also with the main goal of preserving the *virtù* of the poems, not of translating them word for word.

In "Canto II," the literary references or 'translations' build to what almost seems like a collage. The first line, "Hang it all, Robert Browning," clarifies that these references certainly aren't an attempt at imitation or even necessarily homage. However, by the fifth line, Pound has brought up So-shu, a Chinese mythological figure, potentially a reference to Shojo, the god of sake: "So-shu churned in the sea." Therefore, Pound wants this poem to be international, but it still feels like a traditional epic poem with the imagery of the sea.

Helen in three contexts

When the different theories of Yeats, H.D., and Pound are put into relief through three of their poems, all about Helen of Troy, Yeats's "No Second Troy," Pound's "Canto II," and H.D.'s "Helen," the connections between these three theories and their effects become more apparent. Yeats chooses Helen because of what she symbolizes — desire and deceit — in order to represent a figure of his reality, Maud Gonne, a lover who rejected him several times and whom he became obsessed with thereafter.

Why should I blame her that she filled my days

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With misery, or that she would of late

Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,

Or hurled the little streets upon the great,

Had they but courage equal to desire?

What could have made her peaceful with a mind

That nobleness made simple as a fire,

With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind

That is not natural in an age like this,

Being high and solitary and most stern?

Why, what could she have done being what she is?

Was there another Troy for her to burn? (lines 1–12)

Yeats mythologizes a real woman out of spite, suggesting that she could be nothing but symbolic of deceit and destruction, because "what could she have done being what she is?" (line 11). The incomplete sonnet structure of "No Second Troy" leaves the reader unsatisfied and suggests the speaker is as well, reinforcing the bitterness seething in the poem. While more biographical than many of his poems written for the purpose of Irish unification, "No Second Troy" still adopts mythology and its symbolism similarly, utilizing symbols from the great mind to connect with and express the present.

Pound's "Canto II" does not focus exclusively on Helen, as the other two poems do, but its focus on other women as well is even more enlightening. For Pound, the key to good poetry is the *virtù* of the poet, and Homer has one of the most important and distinct *virtùs* for Pound. He also specifies that Homer's *virtù* is that he is "conscious of the world around him"

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("I Gather" 29). Therefore, his focus on a character like Helen is evidence of what he believes to be a genius and conscious observation of people, and specifically of women, by a person extremely qualified by virtue of his *virtù* to make observations about the world.

"Eleanor, ἑλέναυς and ἑλέπτολις!"

    And poor old Homer blind, blind, as a bat,

Ear, ear for the sea-surge, murmur of old men's voices:

"Let her go back to the ships,

Back among Grecian faces, lest evil come on our own,

Evil and further evil, and a curse cursed on our children,

Moves, yes she moves like a goddess

And has the face of a god

    and the voice of Schoeney's daughters,

And doom goes with her in walking,

Let her go back to the ships,

    back among Grecian voices." (lines 11–22)

The Greek in line 11 says, "helenaus and heleptolis, destroyer of ships and destroyer of cities" (*The Cantos Project*). This is a reference, of course, to Helen of Troy. Roxana Preda notes in *The Cantos Project* as well that this quote is a reference to Aeschylus, which would present Helen from the Greek perspective for this poem, which is less than favorable. He also begins the line with the name 'Eleanor,' instead of Helen, a reference to the Queen of France who left her husband, the King of France, for the future King of England (*The Cantos*

Project). Already, in the beginning of the poem, Pound has mentioned two instances of betrayal by women.

He continues to say, "poor old Homer blind, blind, as a bat," though we know from "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" that he believes Homer's blindness to be a strength that led to the development of his *virtů*. Therefore, the "murmur of old men's voices," can be taken more seriously, since it is associated with Homer and, from Pound's perspective, his *virtů*. These 'old men's voices' repeatedly threaten the arrival of 'evil' and a 'curse.' Pound repeats 'evil' three times and 'curse' twice, emphasizing the weight of the threat of an unfaithful woman.

Pound utilizes and references the works of poets with great *virtů* to bolster the thought and significance of his own poetry. He wants to make a statement about unfaithful women in his poetry, so he references an unfaithful woman, Helen, as represented by a poet who he believes to be one of the greatest thinkers of all time. In including this reference in his poem, he wants to contain the *virtů* of Homer's original story and original character, therefore allowing that *virtů* to shine for itself within his poem, since he cannot imitate it, according to his thoughts in "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris." For Pound, a connection to the individual light and talent of thinkers of the past is what drives his poetry. Unlike Yeats, who does not distinguish between great thinkers and regular people. Yeats wants to make a connection with his reader through the utilization of symbols from the great mind. Pound wants to create an effect on his reader by combining and recreating and 'translating' the distinguished talents — the *virtůs* — of just the best thinkers. Yeats wants to utilize the great mind to create unity. Pound wants to reference the canon to highlight the *virtů* of the individual mind.

H.D., however, is more concerned with the figure of Helen herself than with the poet behind her or her potential to be used towards a purpose. While she does not write "Helen" in the first person as she does with "Eurydice," she does still give a fresh perspective to the past.

> Greece sees, unmoved,
>
> God's daughter, born of love,
>
> the beauty of cool feet
>
> and slenderest knees,
>
> could love indeed the maid,
>
> only if she were laid,
>
> white ash amid funereal cypresses. (lines 12–18)

The speaker calls Helen "God's daughter" and a woman "born of love" in order to contrast her humanity with Greece's hatred (line 13). The poem elicits some sympathy for Helen, but is particularly concerned with assessing the loathing cast upon her. H.D.'s main point is to contrast the good in Helen with her death. She ends with a stark line, emphasized by the fact of its being longer than the rest: "white ash amid funereal cypresses," which is surprising immediately following Helen's defense. Although it also defends her, since it highlights the gruesomeness of wanting her dead (line 18). H.D. brings new perspective to the figures of the over-mind and instills them with new life, provoking thought about the representation of women in the canon.

Yeats, Pound, and H.D. handle the responsibility of inspiration — of being conscious of that which others are unconscious of — differently. Yeats sees this consciousness as a duty. He is responsible for enacting change in the real world, for representing the country he loves,

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despite his nationality or the public reaction to his efforts. The great mind allows Yeats to go beyond himself. H.D. sees the over-mind as a tool, a language she can utilize to legitimate her work and change the perception of women in literature. It teaches her to speak in a language that the literary community will understand, then she shifts the focus around it to reflect feminine experience. The over-mind provides H.D. with the resources she needs to be heard. For Pound, the ability to recognize and 'translate' *virtù* is the key to great poetry. *Virtù* is innate. It cannot be imitated. *Virtù* allows Pound to translate poetry without losing its innate qualities, preserving its genius and enhancing his. Consciousness of the thought of the past is powerful. It is a responsibility, a gift, a curse. It is a language with which Yeats, Pound, and H.D. navigate the literary present in order to say what they need to with their poetry.

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