Groundhogs and Ducks: What Else Will the Poet Put in Her Doctorate?

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Abstract: This paper describes how I wrote poetry as part of my doctoral self-study. As someone with an MFA and a published book of poetry, I set out to investigate my own poetic writing process. To do so, I engaged in a fictive correspondence with the dead Modernist poet, H.D. [Hilda Doolittle, b. 1886 - d.1961], writing to her and imagining her writing back. Often I would send her a poem-in-progress. This article will look at two such poems, both written to free myself from a period of writer's block experienced mid-doctorate. By writing them, I was able to face how afraid I was of my own creative urges and, thus, find the resilient determination to go on.

The arts offer us some of the oldest ways of knowing, ways much more ancient than those of biochemistry, sociology, or computer science. Paleolithic hunters once sought to understand their relationships to the hunted by drawing the crushed ochre and charcoal shapes of these animals on the shadowy galleries and twisting, limestone corridors of the Caves of Altamira and Lascaux. Today, modern painting, poetry, music, or dance still draws from a primordial source of images as old as that of a fleeing bird-goddess, a charging bull, or a gnarled apple tree. Steeped in centuries of human experience, the imagery of the arts, speaking as it does of cosmos and creation, of the sacredness of animals, of gods and heroes, of revelation, death, and transformation testifies that human beings have always sought to understand themselves in this way. Blake scholar and poet Kathleen Raine and Brian Keeble(1982) reminds us that "the arts are the more ancient, normal way of self-exploration" (p. 28). Thus, I will explain in what follows how I wrote poetry, as a "normal way of self-exploration," in my recently completed doctoral dissertation.

First Letters

In brief, my doctorate, *Of Swans, the Wind and H.D.: An Epistolary Portrait of the Poetic Process* (1999), was a self-study of my direct engagement as an emergent woman poet with my own poetic process. Chief among its writing strategies was a yearlong fictive correspondence that I entered upon with the dead Modernist poet, H.D. [Hilda Doolittle]. After reading all of her work and much of the literary criticism written about her, I conducted a series of imagined exchanges with H.D, sending her my musings about poetry, along with drafts of my own poems, which she critiqued and returned. For example, the first letter I sent to H.D. began in this way:

November 12, 1996

Dear H.D.,

So glad to have met you on Parson's Beach. It was dawn. I was catching my breath, having just run my Rottweiler, and could barely make you out. Just a dot, originating where? Perhaps from the great, Victorian cottage on the point?

Yes, you began as a dot. Slowly, you advanced down the empty beach where I sat lulled by the drag of the waves. I had settled down on a dune, as if awaiting you. As you drew closer, my dog suddenly bolted towards the surf, pursuing something. A sandpiper? A water sprite? I ran through a patch of fog to fetch her back, and that is how we really met. You stopped like a bemused sleepwalker to watch me drag my drenched companion out of the surf.

As the climbing sun burns off the last gauzy bits of fog enveloping your form, I begin to make you out: a long lilac skirt and a vest embroidered with meanders and flowery motifs soften your largeness. Light glints off the silver work of bracelets that jangle along a lean wrist. Restlessly, you brush back a lock of bobbed, white hair to expose high cheekbones, a gaunt, determined face. I offer to get you a beach chair from the car, but you refuse, quickly sitting down beside me with the agility of a person much younger than yourself, as if we had no time to lose....We do not make small talk, but address only the largest of subjects [subjects like Milton's invocation of a muse at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*] (Hussey, 1999, p. 17).

The next day, this imagined reply from H.D. begins as follows:

November 13, 1996

Dear Charlotte,

Our August encounter was fortuitous. It got me out on the beach, wet and sandy, qualities I haven't considered in some time.

Rest assured, I am an experienced mentor — Bryher, my life-long companion, always played the younger pupil to my accomplished artist. She even presented me to her wealthy parents, Sir John and Lady Ellerman, "as a chaperone, an older woman who would safely lead Bryher out into the world" (Guest, 1984, p. 117). Going a step further, my once-upon-a-time Bloomsbury friend, John Cournos (1926), in his insightful, if somewhat degrading. parody of me, entitled *Miranda Masters*, writes that at times I acted as a daemon (Hussey, 1999, p. 26).

Lot Wave Across Her Brain

Mentoring many younger writers in her lifetime, H.D. had now appeared to inspire my doctoral efforts. Ah, but she, like many others, was a fickle muse. I will now look at two of my poems — "Groundhog to her Children" and "Wetlands" — to see how they contributed to my doctoral study. Both were conceived during a period when H.D. had gone on an extended holiday to Greece and wasn't answering my letters. Both resulted from my being sick with flu.

Although I had planned to write poetry as part of my doctoral

text, it was never easy. My academic side would quickly take over, ordering me to read, read, read, then write reams and reams of expository discourse, thereby blocking every avenue towards my drafting a new poem, or receiving guidance from H.D. Instead, the expository voice would rationalize: "Let's face it. It takes much longer to complete a poem than an essay. Think of how few pages you will produce!"

Exhausting myself, I often fell sick. With my defenses dropped, a rebellious desire to stop theorizing and return to my poetry flared up. This rebellious wish to overthrow academic discourse and start drafting poems introduced itself as a counter-voice, *another speech*, as H.D. would call it. In her highly autobiographical novel, *Paint It Today* (1992), the protagonist is afraid of the voice running through her heated mind, the one most closely aligned with her creativity that could strike out, injure, or even destroy others, her parents in particular:

> There was another speech. That speech she could not rehearse in words. That speech was a hot wave across her brain. . . . There were no words to this speech. A fear possessed her that suddenly she might find words to this speech, that she might shout or sing those words, and that they would break, those good and simple people, shrivelled to ash, before her utterance, or that they might seize her, somehow tear the fiery sandals from her feet and bind her down forever. (p. 41)

I could identify with this "hot wave across her brain" which threatened to rush in, burn my doctorate to an ash, and shout out the delirious words of some fugitive poem. Feverish and in bed, I began writing in my journal about an animal image from a recent night dream that *felt* like a symbol of this conflicted part of myself. Reading over my freewrites, I discovered an emergent, even urgent voice, that of an unlikely persona that needed to speak the following:

> GROUNDHOG TO HER CHILDREN:
> Dig. Dig
> is what you were born for,
> bulldozing with your wide heads,
> tapping ledges with blackened nails
> to shore up storage rooms
> near a wood. Cold and fattened,
> let the plunge hole take you under:
> loosening gravel; you'll slip
> through hollowed tunnels,
> rooms of drying dandelions,
> stolen cabbages and beets,
> to where the leafy sleep nest waits,
> cloistered between frost-line
> and flood. Plug up its door
> with a wad of straw, mixed
> with your spittle. Then kneel,
> head below heart,
> as you curl like a woolly fiddlehead
> into a ball. Water will slow
> to ice, your body stiffen,
> beyond panic to where
> the heart grows light.
> Surrender will be sweet——
> three or four bitter months,
> unless your shadow calls you back.

Giving a poetic voice to my rebellion brought with it a deeper understanding of my doctoral process. As I worked the above text, its groundhog came to represent the part of myself that could define boundaries and dig in (with the head) to writing both poems and literary criticism. Letting this groundhog image unfold as it would, draft by draft, helped me unearth an unsuspectedly resilient part of myself that could go on.

The Terror of Inspiration

Shifting from the expository to the poetic also helped make more real to myself the theory I had gotten lost in, such as Susan Gubar's (1981) essay, "'The Blank Page and Female Creativity." Here, Gubar describes the terrors many women feel while submitting to their creative urges. For example, many women's weak boundary definitions and lack of self-assurance can prevent them from surrendering to their creativity. Gubar continues:

> If artistic creativity is likened to biological creativity, the terror of inspiration for women is experienced quite literally as the terror of being entered, deflowered, possessed, taken, had, broken, ravished — all words which illustrate the pain of the passive self whose boundaries are being violated. (p. 256)

There are a number of woman poets, points out Gubar (1981), who describe themselves as wounded by their own creativity:

> Like Mary Elizabeth Coleridge who sees her lips as a silent wound, or Charlotte Brontë who suffers from a "secret, inward wound" at the moment she feels the "pulse of Ambition," or Emily Dickinson who is bandaged as the empress of Calvary in some poems and as the wounded deer in others, women writers often dread the emergence of their own talents. (p. 256)

I, too, had to suffer sickness before permitting myself to write a poem. I began wondering, "Is the little groundhog mother a muse figure?" If so, she is edgy, surrounded by dangerous rustling, and quick to resort to the *plunge hole*. She councils her offspring — fledgling poems — to submit to a seasonal trance, but her final words ring ominously: the shadow may call them back to a womb of death. This provoked more thinking about groundhogs. If a hibernating groundhog wakes up too quickly, she may die. She needs to shiver for a few hours to increase her body temperature and heart rate before moving about. Surrender to hibernation is perilous, as surrender to my poetry also could be. Too big a temperature drop during aestivation results in deadly ice forming inside a groundhog's body.

By risking something as academically unpromising as a persona poem about a female groundhog, I began to understand experientially the theory I had been reading intellectually. For example, moving from the nearly unconscious, dreamed groundhog image through a series of freewrites that shaped themselves into her voice, I allowed a hidden part of myself to speak. H.D.s "hot wave" (*Paint It Today*, 1992, p. 41) had found some words. Thus, I not only identified with the fear of submitting to my creative urges mentioned in the H.D. novel and the Gubar essay (1981), but came face-to-face with it in my poem. This fear was no longer a theme or a theory; it was my own!

My flu was beginning to abate, but my fear did not dissipate. Exposed, out in the open, it resumed the fight. Dampening down my still questionable creativity, I abandoned my groundhog poem. Instead I busied myself, preparing to write some theory-driven letters to H.D. about how a woman artist often distrusts her emergent voice (Gubar, 1981, 256). One step forward, two steps back.

Key Words/Inner Worlds

To do so, I started reading how Anne-Louise Brookes analyzed the "key words" (1992, p. 98) that emerged in her own dissertation, words that reminded me of those H.D. saw as too "hot" to handle (*Paint It Today*, 1992, p. 41). In *Feminist Pedagogy: An Autobiographical Approach,* Brookes (1992) says she began examining her "key words," because they "signaled that aspects of my development were arrested" (p. 98). A sexual-abuse survivor, Brookes reread her own texts, in order to highlight the energized words that came from that "inner place" of "unspeakable" memories (pp. 99, 5). For example, she identified *absent* as one such word. "I was drawn to the term *absent*," explains Brooks, "because it was for me a key word. It describes my experience of 'hiding in an essay.' As well, it describes what happens to me when I am afraid" (p. 98).

Hiding and afraid in the expository mode. I could relate! Ah, but Brookes's bibliography was beckoning seductively, so instead of trying to go naked into a poem, I took Sylvia Ashton-Warner's (1963) *Teacher* down from the shelf. Brookes includes this pivotal book in her doctoral reference list because it inspired her key word analysis technique. *Teacher* describes how its New Zealand author, Ashton-Warner, struggled to motivate her Maori primary students to read and write. She soon realized these culturally disenfranchised children possessed "two visions, the inner and the outer. Of the two," writes Ashton-Warner, "the inner vision is brighter" (p. 32).

She then set out to draw-up a "Key Vocabulary" of words associated with their "inner world" (1963, p. 35). Those "two-dimensional and respectable" stories of Dick and Jane written in "the vocabulary of the English upper middle class" would not do for the Maori in her infant room, because their inner vision centered "round two main instincts, fear and sex" (pp. 41, 42). Ashton-Warner goes on to describe the Maori children sharing their inner words with her:

> Out press these words, grouping themselves in their own wild order. All boys wanting words of locomotion, aeroplane, tractor, jet, and the girls the words of domesticity, house, Mummy, doll. Then the fear words, ghost, tiger, skellington, alligator, bulldog, wild piggy, police. The sex words, kiss, love, touch, haka [Maori war dance]. . . . Out push these words. The tendency is for them to gather force once the fears are said. (p. 39)

Sex and fear? When we cut through our own academic respectability, are we any different from these children? What also struck me about such key words was how similar they were to H.D.'s view of the hieroglyphs she saw in 1923 at the newly excavated, Egyptian tomb of King Tutankhamen. For H.D., these riddle-like emblems needed to "be consulted, returned to, interpreted" (Robinson, 1982, p. 262). As Robinson explains, "the hieroglyph appealed to H.D.'s imagination because the sensation experienced and recorded sensually is disproportionate in size to the object through which that sensation is received" p. (368). Similarly, *key words*, erupting like glowing nuggets from the surface tensions of a text, contain a nexus of associations, feelings and memory traces, even glimpsed landscapes, or a worldview of much larger proportions than the word, or words themselves. These hieroglyphic, energized bits of language often haunt our minds and call us to explore them. In "The Walls Do Not Fall" H.D. (1983) writes:

> the meaning that words hide;
> they are anagrams, cryptograms,
> little boxes, conditioned
> to hatch butterflies. (*Hatching the Words*, p. 540)

Illuminating as this foray into literary criticism had proved, the artist in me had had enough. I fell sick again. Expecting little of myself and with H.D. silent and sequestered in sunny Greece, I returned to my groundhog poem, not from a place of empowerment, but from a dreamy, flu-induced reverie. Lying on the couch with odd bits of Brookes, H.D., and Ashton-Warner floating around me in the ethers, I began developing a heuristic to lighten my mood. I jokingly referred to it as "Hatching the Words," because as H.D. (1960) in *Bid Me to Live* wrote: "she brooded over each word, as if to hatch it" (p. 163). [See Figure 1 for step-by-step explanation of this heuristic.]

In this vein, I started playing around with the draft of my groundhog poem, hoping to generate more images, or phrases to add to it. Too sick to make any editorial decisions about key images or phrases, I simply free-wrote about each of the poem's words. My strategy, or lack there of, sought to combine Anne-Louise Brookes's notion of key word analysis with H.D.'s idea that each word is a hieroglyphic portal, an opening through which to glimpse some inner spaciousness.

Propping myself up on a pillow, I began to think of how H.D. wished to "mend a break in time" (*Collected Poems*, 1983, p. 493) through a poetry that would provide a glimpse of the eternal now. In *Paint It Today*, H.D. writes that

> the visible world exists as poignantly, as ethereally as the invisible. There is another world, or a combining of two worlds. When we get the visible and the invisible together that makes another world. I used to believe in the past and what I called the future; when you get the past and the future together you get what I call, now for the sake of argument, the present, at least a poignant and ethereal present which I call the visible world. (1992, p. 80)

Inspired by this passage, I began free writing about each word in "Groundhog to her Children." I asked: what does the word tell me about (a) my past, (b) my present, (c) my future, and (d) what strong emotions does it express? Via quick, free-associative spills, I strove to portray the "poignant and ethereal present" composed of the interplay of memory (the past) and desire (the future) that can bring about a synthesis of external and internal states or, in more Platonic parlance, can allow nature to mirror the soul.

Figure 1. Heuristic Used for Writing "Wetlands"

Heuristics for Hatching the Words
She brooded over each word as if to hatch it.
H.D., *Bid me to Live* (1960, p. 163)

1. Circle the "key-words" of a given text (Brookes, 1992, p. 98).

2. Free-write about these key words and any others as well. Start this writing off by answering the following questions about each word:
   a. what does this word have to do with my past?
   b. with my present?
   c. with my future?
   d. what strong emotions does it express?

3. A fifth question you might ask as well is, "What would someone real or imagined, dead or alive, have to say about this word?" Whoever first comes to mind, let them speak (e.g., try adopting a persona, a mask).

4. Now quickly write 10 metaphors for your word (e.g., groundhog is like . . .).

5. Go to the thesaurus and look up your word, and free-write phrases that come quickly to mind as you scan the word-lists of which your word is a part.

6. Now from all these verbal broodings, start nuggeting, or extracting the authentic, energized bits and see if you can make a poem skeleton, or can add a metaphor, a vivid memory, or vignette to your essay or story. Hopefully some butterflies will fly out of these little boxes, some wet, hungry meadowlark break free of its egg.

Finally, a few more butterflies escaped their boxes as I jotted down ten metaphors for each of the poem's words. Ensconced on the living room couch, I spent over a week submitting myself to "the language of lying-in. . . . a dissolving of the boundaries of self and other, inside and outside, a vertiginous moment in which language unlatches" (Kloepfer, 1984, p. 43). I let sounds, rhythms, and rhymes lead me. For example, with the groundhog poem's opening line, "Live on a field's edge," I let the word, "past," reverberate off, or collide with "field," or "edge" such that their juxtaposition jump-started a train of thoughts. My questions about past/present/future tense followed not a logical, but more of a musical querying that periodically repeated the key word and the tense. Like a musical motif, the juxtposed"field/past" allowed me to develop a theme and its repetition.

I filled up one journal and begin a second with words that became, as H.D said, like "cryptograms, / little boxes" containing so much beneath their surfaces. For example, from line 13 of my poem, "Groundhog to her Children," the words *heads/past* generated this unsuspected landscape, coloured by the feeling of being lost midlife in an unfinished dissertation:

WETLANDS

Bulrushes behind newly built cottages,
winter homes for a few that the road
curves me past to the river—
light on water, I turn and look across
to my mother's land
where yesterday morning the dog and I
floundered,
as if entangled by an unseen leash,
through snowy thickets to the sandy point,
but lost our way heading back.
No walker, or bushwhacker had broken trail
in some years.

Dense undergrowth
ends all trace of a path,
in spite of how I try to keep
the growl of the sea
at my back. Too distant, the summers
Dad revved up the chain saw. Head bent,
deaf to its roar, he straddled
the racing blade, steadying it
like a small tornado
to bite through upstart brambles
and shrubs.

He inched methodically towards the river,
without a stumble, a lost beat. Swatting
mosquitoes he guided the smelly,
stuttering
machine through the now quiet forest,
scattered with deer spoor
the dog paws at before blazing
ahead:
swampy patches, drifts of snow.

I aim for what I think will be east
of the neighbour's property
to come out on the road to the monastery
but, grasping at a false premonition
like one blind-folded and spun
around,
I find myself a mile west
in a tidal marsh I'd never seen before—
frost-matted reeds, brittle grey-iced pools,
their bubbles crackling underfoot.
Nearing an old railroad
bridge
on a low elbow of land, I wander along,
hoping for a road, a way
home—heading east,
I've come out west to startle up
ducks that veer, tilting off
on thunderous wings
the winds twist and turn,
squalling. They flap upriver,
teaching my eyes to soften
through patches of fog,
led due north by their compass-like hearts,
with more certainty than
myself.

Contending with Song and Counter-Song

Although a "normal way of self-expression" (Raine, 1982, 28), writing poetry in the context of my dissertation proved a struggle. I had no models to follow. Secondly, I felt a pressure to produce pages, rather than compress and purify language into a well-crafted poem. Dreading, at times, my emerging talents, both academic and literary, I often pitted the expository against the poetic. Thus, my poetic voice became rebellious, while my expository side kept muting and masking its counter-song. Far from experiencing poetry writing as something normal, I often had to fall sick to engage it fully, as did Charlotte Brontë and Emily Dickinson, who also felt wounded by their creativity urges. Nevertheless, when I could face myself, my poetry provided a personal, detailed, and highly revealing means of self-exploration. When I could let go and play with a poem's sounds, rhythms, rhymes, and sensuous images, they always carried me deeper than theory could into my inner world.

And what meanings did my poems make? I will only comment on the two already discussed texts. A quickly performed key word analysis reveals that the word *head* appears a few times in both poems. For example, in "Groundhog to her Children," it occurs twice. The first *head* suggests that my intellect is bulldozing a way into my doctorate. This is followed by the more cautionary, second usage of the *head* as being placed "below the heart" that suggests the intellect must submit to the emotions. I must, therefore, stop using academic discourse to hide from the longings and fears that my poems would reveal.

In my first draft of "Wetlands," I repeat the word, *head*, five times, using it to indicate both the human head, as well as to head somewhere. One emergent meaning of this word suggests that if I continue to operate solely from my intellect, I will grow more disoriented and eventually lose my way in the academic undergrowth. Another glimpsed meaning indicates that I have gone astray on terrain that is "my mother's land," along with so many others who have lost their nerve. So, with my muse H.D. in absentia, which way to *head*? Where is my instinctive dog-friend leading me? On a poetic adventure in a wild tidal marsh, similar to the hunt for self-understanding and for the courage to overcome one's fear, that plunged those at Altamira, or Lascaux into their bear-haunted caves.

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