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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12483>

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Publisher**

European Association for American Studies

**Electronic reference**

Natasha Anderson, « Matte Robinson, *The Astral H.D.: Occult and Religious Sources and Contexts for H.D.'s Poetry and Prose* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2018-1, Online since 18 May 2018, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12483>

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- 1 Matte Robinson, *The Astral H.D.: Occult and Religious Sources and Contexts for H.D.'s Poetry and Prose*
- 2 New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Pp. 193. ISBN: 9781628924176
- 3 Natasha Anderson
- 4 The occult is a mysterious, mystical, and all too often misunderstood topic for modern readers. The occult also forms a central part of H.D.'s poetry and prose. Yet it can be difficult to reach the esoteric roots of H.D.'s ideas owing to the complexity of her writing. H.D.'s inclusion of Bar-Isis and Venus who "strikes at eight" (105) in her literature at first seems like a simple reimagining of classic myths. Nevertheless, her allusions – ranging from religious figures such as Lucifer and Lilith to nature symbols such as pine cones and roses – are all interconnected through occult philosophy. Matte Robinson helps cut through the fog of common misconceptions surrounding the multifaceted spiritual references within the poet's works in his newest publication *The Astral H.D.* The author offers a meticulous and mesmerizing look into the profound and overshadowed world of esotericism. His reference guide explores H.D.'s sources, journals, and letters to explain how she redefined legends and rewrote experiences in her literature.
- 5 *The Astral H.D.* provides a succinct summary of major occult and religious concepts shaping H.D.'s late literary works. Robinson deliberately writes his book as a complementary work to Susan Stanford Friedman's renowned *Psyche Reborn* (xvi) by delving even deeper into ideas such as the Kabbalah and astral doubling. In contrast to many previous critical readings of H.D., which either focus on only one aspect of her occult activities or avoid discussing the esoteric influences on her work outright, Robinson unites the kaleidoscopic array of H.D.'s literary inspirations in his scrupulously researched book.

- 6 In the Introduction, Robinson explains the thematic structure of his book. His research is based on H.D.'s marginalia of her most frequently read esoteric books and her fluid reworking of previous literary productions. In order to discuss the complex and often interwoven occult ideas within H.D.'s writings, Robinson often revisits earlier discussed topics to uncover further layers of meaning. The book offers some biographical analyses such as how H.D.'s 1920 visit to Corfu sparked her renewed interest in Hermetism during the 1940s and 1950s. Above all, Robinson examines how the critical occult works of Robert Ambelain and Jean Chaboseau influenced H.D.'s poetry and prose ranging from *Helen in Egypt* to *Hermetic Definition*.
- 7 The first chapter illustrates the importance of both social and temporal networks guiding H.D.'s exploration of esotericism. From a social perspective, H.D. focused on identifying major acquaintances in her life as seven Masters guiding her towards "inner transformation or initiation" (54). This retrospective investigation of her relationships helped her balance the inspiration and traumatization she experienced with key people in her life such as Hugh Dowding, Ezra Pound, and Sigmund Freud. From a temporal perspective, H.D. investigated memory and reincarnation cycles as sources of theurgical knowledge. She thereby differentiated between two goals of occult research: the more common path of magic, which aimed at affecting the physical world, and the higher form of theurgy, which strived toward "self-development" (168) and enlightenment. Prior knowledge of the occult and religious mythology is helpful for readers when traversing this dense discussion of pagan symbols and hermetic reflection. However, Robinson assists readers by concisely outlining the most important concepts before delving into explorations of H.D.'s research and writing.
- 8 Chapter two further expands the examination of H.D.'s rewriting process by juxtaposing the symbolism of Tarot cards, the Zodiac, and cathedrals. Robinson discusses how H.D. uncovered similarities between paganism and Christianity through a process of "erasing the boundaries between angels and demons" (69). For example, H.D. compared the familial rebirth cycle of the Egyptian deities Orisis, Isis, and Horus with the Christian triad of God, Mary, and Christ. She linked this reinterpretation of mythologies to her own experiences by inscribing herself as a dual mother/lover figure enabling death and rebirth cycles in *Hermetic Definition*. By highlighting this search for parallels, Robinson reveals how duality plays a central role in H.D.'s writing from astral doubles to the contrast of "love (l'amour) and death (la mort)" (78).
- 9 Chapter three reveals another dichotomy through the figures of Lucifer and Lilith, whom H.D. reinterpreted as the source of knowledge. Yet here Robinson intriguingly challenges H.D.'s focus on doubles. He argues that "the triad, the trilogy, the *ternary*" – rather than the duality – truly lies at the heart of H.D.'s writing (106). Robinson explains that the omnipresence of intertwined opposites links to the occult idea of a middle pathway: the Hermetic approach of achieving balance and enlightenment by overcoming binaries. His discussion expertly weaves together various occult symbols such as the staff and the Tree of Life with the middle pillar Tiphereth. Here, however, the reader would have benefited from visual diagrams of esoteric structures such as the levels of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life and the designs of Chaboseau's Tarot cards in order to gain a greater understanding of their intricacies.
- 10 Chapter four expands upon the concept of triads and unifying dualities by exploring H.D.'s interest in theurgical rituals. Robinson states that there is little evidence whether H.D. actually performed such ceremonies as much greater value was ascribed to astral

rites. However, he also reveals that practically applied theurgy meshed with H.D.'s interest in psychoanalysis. In addition, this section illustrates how she used two occult theories to find an underlying structure to her life: by seeing her acquaintances as an egregor or a "circle" (146) of reborn souls and by retrospectively organizing her writing in consecutive *lustra*. Robinson thus identifies psychoanalysis and the occult as H.D.'s twin sources of self-reflection in a quest of interpreting her experiences and achieving balance. *The Astral H.D.* concludes with an explanation how spiritual sources influenced both H.D.'s literature and life, providing her with a reborn self-confidence as she found legitimization for her experiences and visions in the occult.

- 11 Overall, Matte Robinson offers a broad yet detailed analysis of the recurring themes and networks that shaped H.D.'s diverse works. By focusing first on her sources, Robinson disentangles the many threads of thought and theory that makes H.D.'s literature such a fascinating tapestry of mythical symbolism. The book's strength lies in its appeal to both novice readers of H.D. and seasoned researchers. While the multilayered meanings of hermetic hierarchies and occult symbols can be perplexing, Robinson works through the various strata with admirable attention to detail and dedication. The methodical descriptions of central hermetic concepts help newcomers orient themselves in the world of occult mythology, while the comprehensive look at H.D.'s relationship with her esoteric sources is a valuable source for any library of modernist literature.