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# Angela DiPace Fritz, Thought and Vision: A Critical Reading of H.D.'s Poetry

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# Book Review

Angela DiPace Fritz, *Thought and Vision: A Critical Reading of H.D.'s Poetry*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988. 231 pp. $34.95.

by Jacqueline Rinaldi

With the publication of *Thought and Vision: A Critical Reading of H.D.'s Poetry*, Angela DiPace Fritz brings to fruition many years of research on the work of Hilda Doolittle. DiPace Fritz's book, the first full-length study of H.D.'s daunting poetic achievement, has already been acclaimed for its highly controlled focus and meticulous examination of H.D.'s writings. Equally impressive is DiPace Fritz's lucid analysis of the major literary and religious influences on the development of H.D.'s poetry, beginning with the early Imagist poems and concluding with the epiphanic visions in *Hermetic Definition*, completed just before the poet's death in 1961.

H.D. is probably best known for her fortunate literary alliance with Ezra Pound during her first few years in London. An early chapter recalls his role in launching her career as poet on that legendary day in the tea room of the British museum when he edited her poems and elected her "muse" of a small of circle of poets that, in addition to himself, included T.E. Hulme, Richard Aldington, and F.S. Flint. Calling her "the finest Imagist of them all," Pound named H.D. "goddess" of the new poetry, praising her work as "objective —no slither, direct — no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won't permit examination."

Little known, however, are the less fortunate and more turbulent events of H.D's life: her abortive engagement to Pound; her unhappy marriage to Richard Aldington from 1913 till their divorce in 1938; the stillbirth of her first child in 1915; the death of her brother, Gilbert, in the first World War; her numerous extra-marital affairs with people of both sexes; her near death from double pneumonia during a second pregnancy; her severe financial problems after the birth of an illegitimate daughter in 1919; her struggle with a series of disturbing visions during her trip to Greece in 1920; her two years of psychoanalysis with Freud from 1933-1934; and her severe mental

breakdown shortly after World War Two. Though highly sensitive to the impact of these unsettling vagaries in the life of H.D., DiPace Fritz's treatment of them is deliberately sparse. Her strength is her refusal to overtax biography in service of her central focus: to illume H.D.'s poetry as a spiritual quest for both personal and communal redemption amid the disruptions of the modern world.

Born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1886 to a family prominent in the Moravian community, H.D. spent her first twenty-five years, before settling in London in 1911, steeped in the mysticism of Moravianism, an experience, notes DiPace Fritz, that accounts for H. D's unrelenting search for a transcendent self to "piece together the shards of her life, devastated by two world wars as well as by personal adversity." Many poems from H.D.'s first book, *Sea Garden* (1916), reveal her spiritual disquiet. Like Eliot, Pound, and others of her generation, H.D. depicts a world anguished over the absconding gods:

> They say there is no hope
> to conjure you —
> no whip of the tongue to anger you —
> no hate of words
> you must rise to refute

Yet despite strong accusations leveled against the deities, these early poems, notes DiPace Fritz, begin to document H.D.'s persistent faith in the healing power of prayer, expressed here in images of flowers ("We bring the hyacinth-violet, / sweet, bare, chill to the touch"), to summon the return of the gods: "For you will come / you will break the lie of men's thoughts."

H.D's early poems earned high praise from her contemporaries. Amy Lowell extolled her subtle changing rhythms and carefully crafted free verse; Harriet Monroe described her as "a lithe, hard, bright-winged spirit of nature" who writes "a poetry more akin to the aborigines than to the Elizabethans or Victorians," and F.S. Flint called her "the perfect Imagist."

DiPace Fritz contends, however, that adherence to Pound's restrictive credo would have prevented H.D. from assuming her role as "priestess, translator and interpreter of ancient wisdom in modern terms," noting that after 1925 her work reveals "a progressively

complex degree of mythical material . . . not merely to explain or echo her personal experience, but rather to create her own experience." Like other twentieth-century women poets — Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Margaret Atwood to name a few — H.D. continually rewrote ancient myths in an effort to generate a new mythopoesis, classical in form, yet feminine in its critique of the culture's hegemonic narratives that, in her view, had for so long (mis)defined women.

"Eurydice," one of the most celebrated of H.D.'s revisionist works from *Collected Poems* (1925), retells the tale of Orpheus' journey to Hades from Eurydice's perspective; questioning Orpheus' motive for glancing back, an action that condemns her forever to the "colourless light" of the underworld, Eurydice finds the age-old explanation (his great love for her) unacceptable.

> why did you turn?
> why did you glance back?
> why did you hesitate for that moment?
> why did you bend your face
> caught with the flame of the upper earth,
> above my face?

Shifting the center of consciousness from Orpheus to Eurydice enables H.D. to give voice to the traditionally voiceless heroine and free her from entrapment in "romantic thralldom," a totally defining and possessive love between unequals. Betrayed by Orpheus but refusing to succumb to his arrogance, Eurydice, writes DiPace Fritz:

> attains a sense of spirituality that enhances knowledge of self ("and my spirit with its loss / knows this") and that allows for transformation of reality: "before I am lost, / hell must open like a red rose / for the dead to pass."

H.D.'s next volume, *Red Roses for Bronze* (1931), reveals a poetry, increasingly meditative. Efforts to offset feelings of dejection, incurred by unrequited sexual love, as illustrated in "Calliope," lead H.D. towards an acceptance of Denis de Rougemont's idea of Eros as "divinizing of desire . . . infinite transcendence, man's rise into

his God." DiPace Fritz explains:

> She invokes Calliope so as "To climb the intricate heights / of unimpeded rapture" and to transform carnal to sacred love. Her desire is to dwell among the "white throng, / the host of the immortals," who like the "stars, swing free / and need no lamp of silver work or bronze."

Until the appearance in 1983 of Louis Martz's *Collected Poems 1912-1944*, which includes works deliberately withheld from publication during H.D.'s lifetime, it was thought that the years 1931-1944 had been silent ones, for H.D. published no major poetry during that time. We now know that during these years, H.D. had been writing a more prophetic poetry, shaped by her experiences with Freud, who helped her interpret her dream-visions in the ancient tradition of warnings and messages, a development that would become a major poetic in her later, more ambitious works — *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*.

The section on H.D's war poems, begun in 1942 in the midst of the bombed-out ruins of London and published together as *Trilogy* in 1973, is perhaps the most difficult. DiPace Fritz explains:

> The richness and complexity of the new poetry in *Trilogy* result, first, from a nexus of symbols which reflect the poet's war experiences; and second, from the poet's mythmaking consciousness. . . . H.D.'s use of Egyptian mythology, with its bearing on mystery, the Word, and the Cabala, enables her to weave these crosscurrents into a unified vision. . . . Prophecies embedded in Egyptian theogony are related to the Old and New Testament.

Yet, despite the dense religious and mythical allusions in the second and third books, *Tribute to the Angels* and *The Flowering of the Rod*, many sections from the first volume, *The Walls Do Not Fall*, have a stirring simplicity as haunting as Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Paralleling the ruins of Karnak with those of London, *Trilogy* opens with images of war-torn structures, mirroring the collapse of values

on which our world was thought to be built; in the aftermath of search, however, deeper and more satisfying sources of stability are revealed at the roots:

> . . . we pass on
> to another cellar, to another sliced wall
> where poor utensils show
> like rare objects in a museum;
>
> Pompeii has nothing to teach us,
> we know crack of volcanic fissure,
> slow flow of terrible lava . . .
>
> over us, Apocryphal fire,
> under us, the earth sway, dip of a floor,
> slope of a pavement
>
> where men roll, drunk
> with a new bewilderment,
> sorcery, bedevilment:
>
> . . . yet the frame held:
> we passed the flame: we wonder
> what saved us? what for?

The longest and most compelling section of *Thought and Vision* centers on H.D.'s three-part postwar masterpiece, *Helen in Egypt*, an epic poem of great beauty, written between 1951 and 1954 in an effort to liberate Helen from her historic position as a mere object of men's desire. According to DiPace Fritz, the discovery that Helen was never in Troy enabled H.D. "to recreate the myth from a new angle by juxtaposing the traditional and reconverted versions [first invented by Stesichorus and later expanded by Euripides] and by superimposing on these levels her own version of the tale."

> Alas, my brothers,
> Helen did not walk
> Upon the rampart,

she whom you cursed
was but the phantom and the shadow thrown
of a reflection

H.D.'s Helen, explains DiPace Fritz, is a "Psyche / with half-dried wings," a soul emerging from a chrysalis of ignorance and passivity. Efforts to recover her splintered selves, which are "hated on all Greece," lead Helen to the temple of the Egyptian god Thoth-Amen to seek knowledge of the gods. Reentering the sanctuary of her own consciousness, Helen recollects her past, forgiving those "who died imprecating her, beneath the Walls." Had H.D. not revised the Helen myth, says DiPace Fritz, "Helen would have remained a victim of 'Time-in-time,' a memory forgotten."

Throughout her life, H.D. sought to create an image of the authentic self in search of a spiritual reality. In a poem from her last volume *Hermetic Definition* (1961), commemorating her acceptance of the gold medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1960 (she was the first woman to win the award), H.D. defines her life's work as an expression of authentic prayer: "I did not cheat / nor fake inspiration, / what I wrote was right then, / auguries, hermetic definition." As H.D. followed the Magus in the desert and found the path toward deliverance, concludes DiPace Fritz, "she invites us, like the Magi, to follow the star, to read her '*Star-Script*,' — a poetry of portent, mystery, and epiphany."

DiPace Fritz's chronological study of H.D.'s fifty year poetry career gives more complete poem-for-poem explication than any study of H.D. yet published. *Thought and Vision* is an important and engaging book not only for the H.D. specialist but for anyone wishing to immerse themselves in the work of one of the most accomplished poets of the twentieth century, whose major poems are, sadly, seldom anthologized.