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## H.D.'s "H.D. by Delia Alton"

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## H.D.'s "H.D. by *Delia Alton*"

THE TEXT THAT FOLLOWS has been listed in bibliographies and cited in footnotes under the title "Notes on Recent Writing," but Louis Silverstein, H.D.'s cataloguer at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, points out that H.D. herself gave this text the altogether more baffling and intriguing title "H.D. by *Delia Alton*." The title appears on a page that precedes three of the Beinecke typescripts of the text, a page H.D. created from the quill notepaper bearing the address of her last London flat. As she writes it out, the title turns into a small three-line poem: one line for the writing signature, "H.D.," another line for the ambiguous "by," and a final line for the boldly pencilled but enigmatic "*Delia Alton*."

The title balances the names "H.D." and "Delia Alton": the first, the signature under which she gained fame as a poet; the second, the name with which she signed a cluster of late novels her notes discuss, among them *Bid Me to Live (A Madrigal)*, *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, *White Rose and the Red*, and *The Mystery*. As these notes explain, "Delia Alton" came into being through certain psychic experiences she had during World War II in London: "I feel complete with her," H.D. writes. "Delia Alton tells the story and Delia Alton signs the book."

Both "H.D." and "Delia Alton" are writing signets, and both are very much part of a title the author cited not as "H.D." by Delia Alton but as "*H.D. by Delia Alton*."<sup>1</sup> What H.D.'s title suggests and what these notes give us, then, is a shimmering and unresolved series of reflections: "H.D." side-by-side with the later manifestation of her writing self that she called "Delia Alton," "H.D." created through the agency or medium of "Delia Alton," and the meditations of a larger writing self, a self capacious enough to contain both incarnations or manifestations of her creativity but as yet without a signature. For convenience, here, we will continue to call the author H.D.

The syllable that orients most of the verbs in these reflections is the prefix *re-*, the signal of H.D.'s turning back again or anew to the jumble of published and unpublished poems, short stories, novels, plays, memoirs, tributes, and translations that had accumulated across nearly forty years of creative activity. "It is difficult for a critic to do this," she noted; "it is

difficult for me to do this.” Nonetheless, in twenty-one entries written between December 1949 and June 1950, H.D. reassembled, reread, relived, and remapped what she wryly called her “so far uncollected Collected Works.”

These meditations were destined for “the shelf” that her friend, confidant, and literary consultant Norman Holmes Pearson reserved for her at Yale University’s Beinecke Library. An influential scholar, teacher, and chair of Yale’s American Studies Program, Pearson worked hard to establish H.D. as a poet of eminence and authority. They met during her visit to the United States in 1937, corresponded about the composition and content of her early poems, and then, when Pearson’s work with the OSS stationed him in London during World War II, settled into the companionable ritual of Sunday evening supper. In the postwar years, Pearson became H.D.’s link between the private world of creative production and the public world of book contracts, galleys, jacket copy, publicity, royalties, and awards. She gave him power of attorney for her work, assigned him the copyrights, and named him her literary executor, and he, in his turn, exerted a steady but impassioned pressure on her writing. Throughout the last fifteen years of her career, he received, read, and responded to drafts of her novels and poems, encouraged her to expand her reflections on Pound into *End to Torment*, elicited from her a series of autobiographical notes, and prodded her into preparing the extended self-reflexive meditations she called “H.D. by *Delia Alton*.”<sup>2</sup>

To H.D., whose esoteric turn of mind drove her to decipher everything, the year 1949 resolved into seven-times-seven and suggested she should take a seventh-year break, a sabbatical. Since her postwar collapse and move from London to Switzerland, she had been writing rapidly and relentlessly, assembling “Advent,” the journal of her sessions with Freud, and completing two long and intricate novels. As 1949 opened, Pearson was seeing her tribute to Shakespeare through the press and she had just composed the conclusion to an autobiographical novel begun as early as 1921 and finally published as *Bid Me to Live (A Madrigal)*. It is not surprising that H.D. found the promise of a sabbatical compelling, for she must have been ready to rest, but Bryher broke into this interval bringing from London a virtual “hay-stack of notes and loose leaves and old MSS,” scraps Pearson insisted H.D. save for the shelf at the Beinecke. Though she told Pearson she found “work (thanks to you and that shelf) piling up seven-

times-seven,"<sup>3</sup> H.D. used her sabbatical year to review, reconstruct, and record her accumulated creative production.

Although she tended to present her reflections as "notes," H.D. wrote incisively and with passion on aesthetic matters. Between 1919 and the early 1930s, she had composed *Notes on Thought and Vision*, *Notes on Euripides*, *Pausanias and Greek Lyric Poets*, and a series of meditations on cinema for the journal *Close Up*. She had never, however, not even in her extensive correspondence with other writers, turned to consider the coherence of her own work. The uniqueness of its project makes "H.D. by *Delia Alton*" a rare and valuable document. Written to be read in conjunction with manuscripts still on the shelf at the Beinecke, it remains most immediately accessible to the H.D. researcher, but its brave confrontation with the conditions of creativity should speak in some way to us all.

Between January 1949 when she announced her sabbatical and December when she composed the first entry, H.D. reassembled and reread the scattered fragments of her work. For most pieces of writing she first catalogues the title, composition dates, dedication, and publication history and then, not without glee, turns to the task of literary criticism. Moving nimbly between a reviewer's magisterial "we" and the more humble autobiographical "I," she discriminates between the "early H.D." and "the H.D. of the later *Trilogy*," deplors carelessly corrected proofs and "weedy" writing, celebrates work that retains its fire, and traces the relations of each piece to the others, to her life at the time of writing, and to her life now. Despite the energy and intelligence of all this activity, however, the core of the document is not critical but visionary, for H.D. uses these meditations to restate and reaffirm what she understood to be the writer's responsibility to a larger spiritual world.

Here, as in all her work, H.D. searches through a welter of material for things that "come true." By this phrase she means not just those things that are accurate but, more precisely, those events, attitudes, and ideas that come into alignment with what she considers an essential pattern. Like a carpenter trueing up a board, H.D. measures each item against a standard, searching for particulars that "make a group, a constellation . . . a groove or a pattern into which or upon which other patterns fit, or are placed unfitted and are cut by circumstance to fit."<sup>4</sup> Sometimes this standard is an image; more often, as in "H.D. by *Delia Alton*," it is a myth. The myth she uses to make the scattered manuscripts "come true" is the story

of Isis re-remembering the dispersed body of her brother, lover, and husband, Osiris.

The Egyptian Isis was the great and beneficent goddess whose creative power conceived, brought forth, nurtured, and protected all living creatures. Here H.D. draws from the part of the myth in which Osiris is slain by his wrathful and cunning brother Set. Isis retrieves and hides the body which Set then discovers, tears into pieces, and scatters. After searching the known world, Isis reassembles the fragments and by means of certain god-given words of power restores her lover to life and conceives the child Horus.<sup>5</sup>

As a paradigm, this story offered H.D. multiple advantages. Much of her work draws upon its celebration of an active, resourceful, creative female power, a power that uses language to counter and conquer the forces of violence. What this document emphasizes, however, is the plot's two-fold movement of dispersal and synthesis, a movement that allowed H.D. to align her own act of recollection with a pattern she discerned within the manuscripts themselves. In gathering fragments of writing scattered by the chaos of two world wars, her critical act was to find the formula or pattern that synthesized these many writings into one, and this pattern was itself a story of dispersal and synthesis. In each of the manuscripts, as H.D. reads them, the names change but the characters and their challenges remain the same. The many women of her work—Julia, Margaret, Helen, Veronica, Delia Alton, Elizabeth Seidel, Elizabeth Siddall, and Elizabeth de Watteville—“are of course, they all are, the same woman,” avatars of Isis “who are individually seeking, as one woman, fragments of the Eternal Lover.”

It is possible to read such reiteration as a symptom of obsession, particularly if the figure of “the Eternal Lover” is humanized and the story written off as a conventional romance. Though “romance” is a word that occurs frequently in this text, H.D. uses it to point not to sentimental “love stories” but to “Romany,” the language of the gypsy seers. The search for the “Eternal Lover” is the visionary quest for an idea or an ideal, a messenger or visitor from another realm of consciousness, another field of vision or of knowledge. Each return to this story refreshes and reaffirms the pattern because each introduces a slight displacement, a shift in time or space that alters the emphasis and expands the meaning. Perhaps Norman Holmes Pearson's plan for H.D.'s sabbatical did, after all, supply the re-

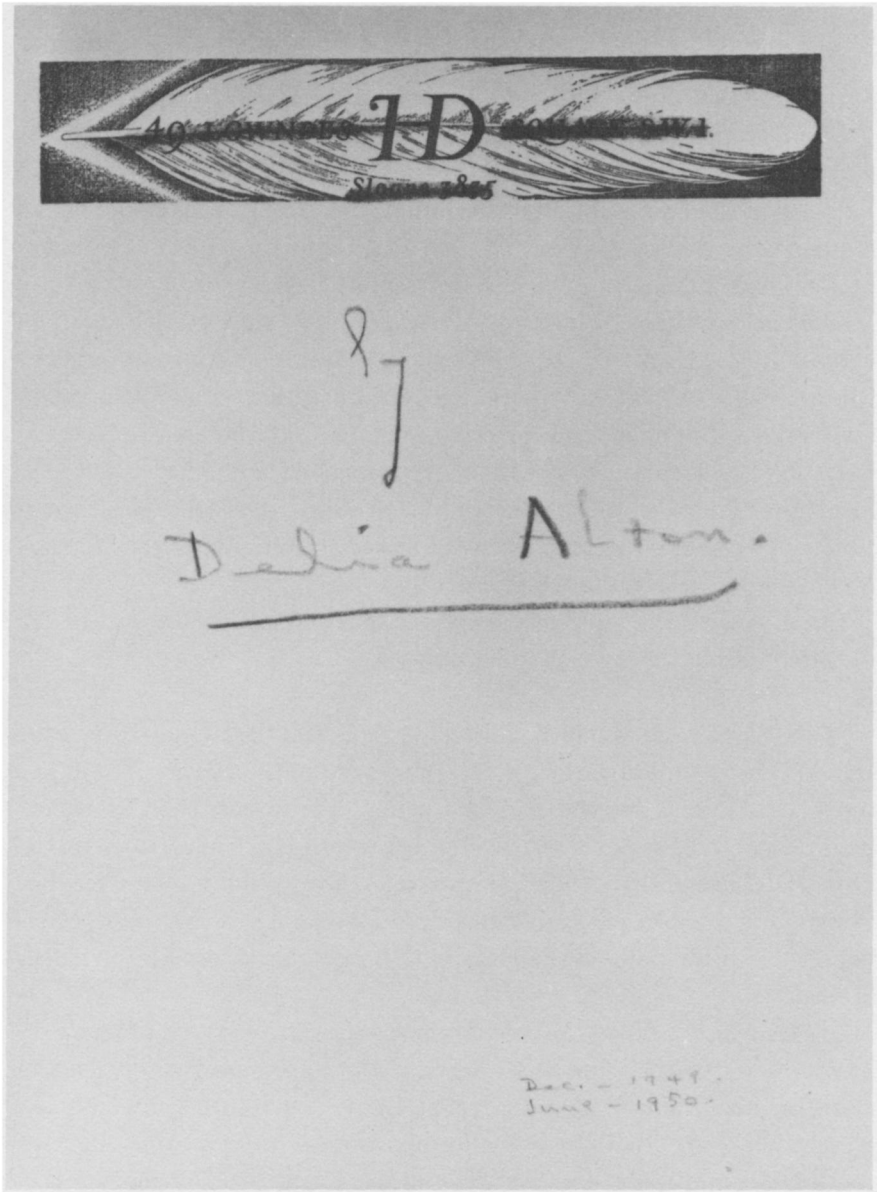
newal she craved, for in the act of gathering her torn and scattered manuscripts H.D. must have found not only more evidence for the pattern's stubborn persistence but additional impetus toward its final great elaborations in the poetry of *Helen in Egypt* and *Hermetic Definition*.

For his generative role here as in so much of H.D.'s life, Norman Holmes Pearson must be remembered; for their generous permission to publish this manuscript, *The Iowa Review* gratefully acknowledges Perdita Schaffner, the Beinecke Library, and New Directions Publishers.

*Adalaide Morris*

#### NOTES

1. Louis Silverstein referred me to H.D.'s citation of this title in her February 24, 1960 entry for "Bosquet (Thorn Thicket)" (letter, December 6, 1986). In H.D.'s citation, the whole title is italicized.
2. For information on this important relationship, see Susan Stanford Friedman's entry on H.D. in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 45, *American Poets, 1880-1945*, ed. Peter Quartermain (Detroit: Gale Research, 1986), p. 142; Barbara Guest's *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 266-68; and L. S. Dembo's "Norman Holmes Pearson on H.D.: An Interview," *Contemporary Literature* 10 (1969): 435-46.
3. H.D., letter to Norman Holmes Pearson, dated January 10 [1949], at the Beinecke, quoted with the permission of Perdita Schaffner and the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.
4. *Tribute to Freud* (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 29.
5. For a full recital of this myth, see the work of E. A. Wallis Budge, particularly *The Gods of the Egyptians, or Studies in Egyptian Mythology*, Vol. II (New York: Dover, 1969), pp. 123-26, 186-94, 203-5. As the Beinecke catalogue of her library indicates, H.D. owned and read many of Budge's books. A number of critics have commented on H.D.'s use of the figure of Isis, but see especially Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), pp. 147-50, 230, 286-87.



Collection of American Literature, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University