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## Review of "Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World" by Adalaide Morris

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## Review · *Adalaide Morris*

*Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World.* Barbara Guest. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984. xxii 360 pp. *H.D.: Collected Poems, 1912-1944.* Edited by Louis L. Martz. New York: New Directions, 1983. xxxvi 629 pp.

It is not hard to begin, as both these books do, with the poet's initials. "I have used my initials consistently," H.D. explained in *Tribute to Freud*, "as my writing signet or sign-manual." This signature marked her initiation when Ezra Pound, in 1912 in the British Museum tea room, claimed her poem "Hermes of the Ways" for Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine and scrawled at the bottom of the page, "H.D. Imagiste." While "Imagiste" quickly dropped away, the initials generated a sign language, a system of gestures designating the poet's various incarnations. There were, among others, Heliadora, a figure from the *Greek Anthology*; Hedyle/Hedylus, an androgynously bonded mother and son; Helga Doorn, film actress; Helen Dendritis (of the trees), and Helen of Troy in love with Paris. The title of her last long poem, "Hermetic Definition," subsumes the series of signs, revealing them as disseminations of the mysterious doctrine, initiations into an elusive and never to be exhausted knowledge.

Most prosaically, H.D. was Hilda Doolittle, born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1886 to the astronomer Charles Leander Doolittle and Helen Wolle Doolittle, descendent of a prominent family of Moravian mystics. After a childhood punctuated by the rituals of the Bethlehem Moravians, H.D. must have found Bryn Mawr harsh and flat, and, in any case, Bryn Mawr found her inadequate. She failed Freshman English, did badly in her other classes, and returned after a year to her myths, music, and legends, and to the courtship of Ezra Pound whom she had met five years before as a Tunesian princeling at a Halloween party. Pound's overtures were imperious, erotic, and, as always, pedagogical. As H.D. recalls in *End to Torment*, her tribute to Pound, "One would dance with him for what he might say." They read the Latin and Greek poets, Ibsen, Shaw, Swinburne, and Balzac; they wandered in the woods, which Pound,

mocking Longfellow, pronounced “the fawrest *pri-meval*”; and they talked poetry with their friend William Carlos Williams. When Pound kissed her, however, she felt smudged out, erased, an effect reinforced by his refrain “You are a poem, though your poem’s naught.” Her first poems were written for Frances Gregg, an elusive and compelling figure who opened the couple into a triangle and then remained when Pound departed.

In 1911 H.D. sailed for Europe with Frances and her mother, a trip which began her lifelong exile by launching her into the intense poetic atmosphere of prewar London. When the Greggs left, H.D. stayed to become a central figure in Pound’s campaign to insert Imagism into the literary scene. She spent her days at the British Museum Reading Room and her evenings with writers and editors like Yeats, May Sinclair, Harold Monro, and Brigit Patmore. She married the poet Richard Aldington, developed an intense attachment to D. H. Lawrence, and published in *Poetry*, *The Egoist*, *The Little Review*, and all the Imagist anthologies. “Everything burns me,” she wrote her friend John Cournos in 1916; “everything seems to become significant.” The searing conclusion to this period was World War I during which H.D. suffered a miscarriage, then lost her brother, her father, and her attachment to Aldington, and from which she emerged in 1919 with a child by composer Cecil Gray and the beginnings of an enduring alliance with the novelist Winifred Bryher.

In the remaining forty-two years of her life, H.D. travelled to Egypt and Greece, circulated between residences in Switzerland and London, intersected frequently if superficially with the Parisian avant-garde, had numerous affairs with both men and women, was assessed by Havelock Ellis and analyzed by Freud, endured the bombing of London throughout World War II, and broke down with visions of the coming World War III. Mostly, however, she worked. She wrote poems, autobiographies, novels, plays, essays, and visionary meditations; she acted in films and for a while wrote film criticism; she translated from the Greek and composed an epic rewriting the legend of Helen of Troy. By the time of her death in 1961, she had become the first woman to receive the prestigious Award of Merit for Poetry from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

All this is rich terrain for the biographer, terrain Barbara Guest enters with an explorer’s glee and an anthropologist’s eye for detail. Guest

gained early access to the wealth of unpublished material stored in Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. She interviewed, among others, Bryher, H.D.'s daughter Perdita, her friend and sometime lover Silvia Dobson, and Eric Heydt, the psychoanalyst of her late years in Switzerland. And she read the voluminous mail of these habitual letter-writers, not only H.D.'s interchanges with Bryher, John Cournos, Marianne Moore, and Amy Lowell, but Frances Gregg's letters to H.D., Bryher's letters to her first husband, Robert McAlmon, and Mrs. Doolittle's letters to her cousin Francis Wolle. Guest's work traces H.D.'s and Bryher's complex movements and unearths such little known information as the abortion of the child H.D. conceived with Kenneth Macpherson, the husband of Bryher's second marriage of convenience. Guest's biography is, on the whole, an accurate and complete record, an account that will both stimulate and base future assessments by H.D. scholars.

The emphasis in the book's subtitle—"The Poet H.D. and Her World"—should fall on the second phrase. Guest's real strength is her depiction of the ambiances that surrounded H.D., the eccentric dresses, antique rings, and amber beads which costumed her 5'11" frame, and the personalities who clashed around her. Of these, the sturdy, feisty, fabulously wealthy and loyal Bryher is the heroine. In fact, Bryher's check-book forms a subplot pursued with fascination: \$25 a session for Freud, 20 pounds a night for hotels, a settlement equivalent to \$2 million on H.D., substantial subsidies of Marianne Moore, Edith Sitwell, and Dorothy Richardson, funding for McAlmon's publishing house and Macpherson's filmmaking, and a divorce agreement which transformed McAlmon into McAlimony. Guest's preference is for the down-to-earth, the material nuances of a writer's existence, and this informs her detailed, absorbing accounts of the milieux of H.D.'s writing.

Guest's reading of the poet's initials provides the book's title: *Herself Defined*. The thesis behind this interpretation is that H.D. was obsessed with self-definition and that all her work—her word associations, hieratic images, and hallucinatory landscapes—can be deciphered as clues to the history of the self. With the exception of passages which back an already formulated conclusion, however, Guest sidesteps the writing to concentrate on H.D.'s life in the world. What she finds there is a fragile, high strung, and manipulative woman, a creature of melodramatic "crushes"

and “hysterical” compulsions. In a narrative punctuated with coy chapter titles, lush phraseology, and profuse exclamation marks, Guest attributes to H.D. “an allure irresistible to mortals” (289) and a drive to “do anything, use anyone, all in the name of Art” (79).

H.D. was undoubtedly fragile and driven. These qualities came, however, not from narcissism but from a need to break beyond the self and beyond history. She pressed across psychological and psychic borderlines into areas which seem to embarrass and befuddle Guest. Her breakdowns are passed over in silence or attributed to material or romantic causes, to lack of exercise, financial dependence on Bryher, or passing infatuations. Even the complex and lavishly documented months of her analysis, detailed in daily letters to Bryher, in a notebook kept during the sessions, and in her magnificent *Tribute to Freud*, dwindle into a diagnosis of insecurity and a cure of self-confidence.

The heart of *Tribute to Freud* is the experience which provided its original title, the “Writing on the Wall.” Guest rushes across this important vision, reducing its significance to entertainment for Bryher and commentary on “events of her own life” (125). This was, however, a determinant moment for H.D.’s art, one which reached past autobiography into prophecy and provided both process and justification for her finest work. To Guest, H.D.’s studies of Kabbalah, hermetic mythology, and alchemical philosophy, and her experiments with meditation and mediumship amount to “wee witchery” (22), “extraterrestrial work” (268), and “table-tipping” (262), grotesque and silly gropings after the insubstantial.

Susan Friedman’s *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* provides excellent and substantial elucidation of H.D.’s work with psychoanalysis and syncretist mythology, but Guest, while mentioning Friedman in the acknowledgments, ignores her work in the text and omits it from the bibliography. This may be the result of her decision not “to add to the literary criticism of H.D.’s work” (xi), a determination which also apparently meant not footnoting quotations, not questioning such skewed sources as personal letters and motivated memoirs, not giving interpretive readings of the important documents, and dismissing complexities with a cavalier “who knows?” (73) or a hasty “this is not an exact account” (261). The bibliography mentions two tepid early studies of H.D. by Vincent Quinn and Thomas Swann but omits significant reassessments by feminist scholars like Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Susan Gubar and by poets like

Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov. The one critic Guest does seem to be aware of is Janice S. Robinson, who is also unmentioned but whose theories (that, for example, H.D. was D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley*) she rightly goes out of her way to refute.

The decision not to engage H.D.'s work, however, has other, more important consequences. Poets' lives are centered and sustained by their preoccupations. For meditative poets like H.D., the vision so infuses the life that, to borrow Wallace Stevens' words, "The theory/Of poetry [becomes] the theory of life." To turn to her work only as it points to exterior events is to privilege what H.D. would consider the least layer of the palimpsest, the temporary manifestation in one person's life of large, profound, enduring truths. The purpose of her art is to get at these truths, to tell not her own tale but the whole story of the human spirit, and in so doing to wrench the sterile rationalism of our war culture back into contact with what she calls "spiritual realism."

This is an ambitious psychic and cultural project, and its omission from the biography flattens and distorts the account. It keeps Guest from being moved deeply by what moved H.D., and it prohibits her contact with the sources of H.D.'s strength. H.D.'s greatest poetry is hardly mentioned, while weak and unworked material is cited as a key to her personality. Readers of this biography will not rush to the bookshelf to find H.D.'s poems, nor will reviewers eager to dismiss H.D. find blocks to their view of her as a dubious and flighty figure at the fringes of modernism. Guest's delineation of H.D.'s world is an important and fascinating achievement, one that will inform all future studies of H.D.'s work, but to understand H.D.'s spirit and to comprehend why she made the decisions she made, we need to turn to such critics as Friedman, DuPlessis, and Gubar and, more importantly, to H.D.'s own complex and powerful poetry.

Turning to H.D.'s poetry, however, has not been a simple task. New Directions has kept her epics, *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*, in print, along with three late long poems published under the title *Hermetic Definition*. The Grove Press *Selected Poems*, assembled in 1957 by Norman Holmes Pearson, gives a valuable sprinkling of her work from 1912 to 1952, but the poems are eccentrically organized and titled, sections of poems appear as complete poems, and choruses from longer works or from translations stand without validating contexts. St. Martin's press in 1975 reprinted

her striking first volume, *Sea Garden*, but it has recently been unavailable. Her other early volumes have long been out of print, and a large and important body of her poetry, mostly written in the 1930s, has remained unpublished or scattered about in magazines. Readers who want to put together a sense of her development have had to rely on trips to the collection of H.D. manuscripts at the Beinecke Library, raids on interlibrary loan services, and extensive use of the xerox machine.

The New Directions *H.D.: Collected Poems, 1912–1944* comes, then, as a great gift and service to H.D. readers. Wisely and intelligently edited by Louis L. Martz, it includes a superb introduction, the full texts of H.D.'s *Collected Poems* (1925), *Red Roses for Bronze* (1931), and *Trilogy* (1942–1944), and a hefty 195 pages of previously uncollected or unpublished poems. Martz's notes to the poems supply relevant first publication information, indicate when the Beinecke typescripts have been heavily revised, and note significant variations between the typescripts and the published versions. When there were decisions to make, as, for example, in sequencing the often hard-to-date unpublished work, Martz's choices are judicious. In some cases he has added clarifying dedications or subheads dropped between the first volume publication and the 1925 *Collected Poems*; in others, he has restored parts of poems excised, primarily for personal reasons, from published versions.

H.D.'s early *Collected Poems* reprinted *Sea Garden* (1916), *Hymen* (1921), *Heliadora* (1924), and H.D.'s translations from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Hippolytus* and Homer's *Odyssey*. It also pulled six poems from *Heliadora* into a new sequence of eleven poems she titled "The God," poems which move toward a definition of the poet as prophet and preserver of a world of radiant immanence. The poet is, throughout her work, one of a band of initiates, a "we" who stands against "them," the scientific, utilitarian, masculinist materialists who in "banish[ing] the gods" have bound themselves to a squalid and brutal power politics. Like Pound in "The Return," H.D. wills back into being and binds to us the spirits of a polytheistic culture, here Dionysos, Adonis, Orpheus, Eurydice, Aphrodite, and Artemis. "Each of us," she writes in "Adonis,"

each of us like you  
has died once,  
each of us has crossed an old wood-path

and found the winter leaves  
so golden in the sun-fire  
that even the live wood-flowers  
were dark. (47)

These threshold poems record an inrush of vision and claim a spiritual authority which will culminate some thirty years later in the sustained affirmations of *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*.

"The God" indicates how early H.D. abandoned the taut strictures of Imagism and began to build sequences which release the longer rhythms and deepening meditations of her later work. Two sequences Martz restores are a series of nine poems from the early 1930s entitled "A Dead Priestess Speaks," gathered for Norman Holmes Pearson in 1949, and a triad of poems composed in the late 1930s and called "The Dancer," "The Master," and "The Poet." Of the former, H.D. wrote Pearson, "*A Dead Priestess Speaks* . . . is the title of the first poem and rather describes my own feelings." In it, drawing out of her own confusion and muteness, she revives the voice of women silenced in patriarchal tradition. She speaks as the prophetess Delia of Miletus, as Electra mourning the murder of Clytemnestra, and as Callypso, powerful pre-Olympian goddess of heaven and earth, cursing the careless egotism of Odysseus. After poems on the oracles at Delphi and Dodona, her "Sigil" offers twelve riddles of presence, mysterious markings of "the other-side of everything" (413). The series ends with the paired poems "Priest" and "Magician," poems which carry the riddle forward to the God who "runs the fire in the dew" (423) and Christ the sorcerer who reveals "the whorl on whorl of the light/that was infinity to be seen in glass" (439). "The Dancer," "The Master," and "The Poet," poems to Anny Ahlers, Freud, and Lawrence, address and affirm the artist's bisexual energies. These poems, Martz writes, constitute "a beautiful and significant triad, the healing Master in the center, with the flaming tribute to the female artist on the one side, and the sad, deeply affectionate memorial to the male artist on the other" (xxix).

The most intriguing discovery Martz made among the manuscripts, however, was another triad of poems—"Amaranth," "Eros," and "Envy"—bound together and inscribed "Corfe Castle—Dorset—summer 1917." The date should probably be 1916, the summer H.D. passed at



Corfe Castle while Aldington began his military training nearby. The poems register her anguish over the dissolution of the marriage, her own erotic intensity blocked by fear of another miscarriage and Aldington's passion diverted to other women. H.D. held the poems for eight years and then, as Martz describes, dispersed them through *Heliadora* disguised as improvisations on fragments from Sappho. Epigraphs were added, pronouns shifted, and sections cut in ways that both mask and intensify the sting of rejection. Both the original series and the sapphic fragments are included in the *Collected Poems*, and together they offer a rare opportunity to observe H.D.'s transmutation of autobiographical material.

One theory of H.D.'s development, which Martz's introduction argues eloquently, holds that her poems diminish when they move from a "personal" voice to a mask. The case of "Amaranth," "Eros," and "Envy" supports this theory; other poems, however, do not. Some painfully direct poems, like the unpublished "I Said" written for Bryher, drift and stumble, while persona poems like "Eurydice" and "Circe" speak with ease and authority. The idea that H.D. succeeds when she "breaks through the Greek mask" poses a simple dichotomy between face and "false face," between "truth" and a form of aesthetic dishonesty. A more complex and productive metaphor is one she herself employs, the notion of a palimpsest or parchment containing overlapped layers of writing. Each layer differs, none is more "true" or "honest" than the others, and all must be read together. This is how she understood the spiritual experience registered in mythology, as, for example, in the overlapping tales of Osiris, Attis, Adonis, and Christ; it is also how she read her personal experience, events which "came true" for her only as they echoed or rewrote other stories. To assume the voice of Eurydice, then, is for H.D. not a decorative or evasive strategy but a deepening and authenticating one, the transcription of her experience into the paradigmatic codes of mythology.

The published and unpublished poems of the thirties, brought together here for the first time, provide many examples of failed transcription, whether direct or mythological. With some exceptions, these strained and breathless poems form a trough between the peaks of *Sea Garden* and *Trilogy*. In Martz's perceptive summary, they "heap up repetitions that cry out after emotion, but do not create it" (xxiii). They are almost impossible to read, and most critics, understandably, either ignore or excoriate them.

A full account of H.D.'s development, however, needs to attend to their place as a prelude to the great work of the forties and fifties, and one entry into this might be to consider what seems to be their intent. Their basic principle is variation within sameness, and the short lines that string down the page create a series of rhythmic patterns that are at once verbal, vocal, and physical. These are chants meant to mobilize breath, lips, larynx, and limbs, the whole of the unconscious nervous system, in the creation of a hypnotic or ecstatic moment. The effect she was after seems to be the trance state Eric Havelock in *Preface to Plato* argues was automatic to audiences in an oral culture. The "oral" state of mind preceded our scientific rationalism, the distanced and analytic stance with which we receive the poems, but in Homer, Hesiod, and Euripides it was the vehicle for a healing integration of the sacred and the secular. The reason these poems cannot excite in us the emotion they strive for may be in part H.D.'s clumsiness, but it is also connected with the disjunction she charts in *Trilogy*: our loss of contact with "spiritual realities."

"Resurrection is a sense of direction," H.D. writes in *Trilogy*; "resurrection is a bee-line." In *Trilogy* the dead priestess has come fully back to life and so has the technician who knows how to make us respond. This volume concludes with *Trilogy*, restoring in the notes four extremely interesting sections deleted from "The Flowering of the Rod." It is to be hoped that New Directions will bring out a collection of the late poetry, not only the magazine publications and the important long poem "Vale Ave" but also *Helen in Egypt* and the final mystical meditations. The format of the volume would be strengthened by adding a table of contents for each section, making more immediately perceptible the series and sequences through which H.D. works, but its handsome typography, streamlined notes, and astute editorial decisions could not be improved. The *Collected Poems, 1912-1944* is an invaluable addition to our continuing interpretation of the hermetic definitions that are H.D.'s sign-manual and signature.