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The Iowa Review

Volume 16

Issue 3 Fall: *H.D. Centennial Issue*

Article 13

1986

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Recommended Citation

Collecott, Diana. "A Double Matrix: Re-Reading H.D." *The Iowa Review* 16.3 (1986): 93-124. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3427>

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A Double Matrix : Re-reading H.D. · *Diana Collecott*

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Three years ago, I was preparing to spend nine months in the United States on a research fellowship and looking forward with delight to my first prolonged period of intensive study since working for a doctorate some ten years before. In the interim, as part of a larger change of orientation, my main academic interest had shifted from the male poets of Anglo-American Modernism to the female ones—especially H.D. (1886–1961). As it turned out, I had to remain in England for three months during the autumn of 1983, to recover from surgery that removed my womb, under the care of my recently widowed mother. For both of us it was a painful period of loss and recovery, a time of silence and gestation: of the new work and the next phase of life. Removed from my contemporaries and professional milieu, I was once again in the family home I had left in late adolescence, confronting her wifeness and motherhood while I lived through my own “failure” to bear children. In spite (or because) of this, there was a renewed continuity between the child I had been and the adult I had become. My only writing at this time was an introduction to H.D.’s memoir of childhood, *The Gift*, so a resonance was set up between my work on her and her work on herself.

In consequence, the six months of 1984 that I spent among the H.D. papers at Yale were very fruitful. Besides, they were “time out” from my uncomfortable but more or less continuous commitment, as a student and then as a teacher, to the British academic system. It was an occasion for what Adrienne Rich has called “re-membering”: in this case, a double act of recovery, of a woman writer marginalized by a literary history defined and mediated by men, and of my own womanliness, which was suppressed as part of the internalization of patriarchy in the universities. “We think back through our mothers if we are women,” wrote Virginia Woolf; but for those whose social and intellectual formation took place in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, no less than for her generation and H.D.’s, this is hard to achieve, given the overwhelming influence of male mentors and literary forefathers. So that re-reading H.D. came to involve interrelated

recognitions: of the bond with the mother, whether real (biological, emotional) or ideal (“the woman artist,” the Goddess), and with other mothers; these include the French intellectuals Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva, who helped me to understand what it means to be a “subject in the making,” the American feminist critics Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Susan Stanford Friedman, who helped me to begin to see H.D. whole, without privileging the early over the late work, the poetry over the prose, the published over the unpublished writings.

Two poets, both of whom in their different ways acknowledge *their* maternal inheritance, also stand at the threshold of my renewed interest in H.D.: Denise Levertov and Adrienne Rich. Together they inspire the interplay of vision and re-vision that must structure our perceptions of her work. H.D. emerges from the dissensions of our era as a holistic artist, for whom the psychic and the somatic are in touch. To know her is to confirm what she knew as “the other-side of everything,” which includes all that lies beyond patriarchal religion, beyond racialism and beyond the “heterosexual presumption.”

Since the feminist presses have been offering the possibility of writing directly for other women, I’ve experienced a modest but persistent freeing from the self-censorship we have all engaged in, though my training in personal discretion and the citation of established authority still runs deep. When invited to write about H.D., I was both excited and daunted by the opportunity to identify myself openly as a reader of specific gender, sexuality, education and experience. I was also aghast at the banalities that a “straight” account of these conjunctions brought forth. I resolved to follow Emily Dickinson’s clew and “tell it slant.” The multifaceted use of quotation that resulted may seem to some a classic instance of modernist evasion, but it has been enabling for me. I realize that there are suppressions, silences and empty echoes here; but there are also showings, recognitions and subject-rhymes. (In order to avoid footnotes, I have identified the authors by name only in the text, giving details of their works in a single note at the end. Where there is no name, it is my writing.)

Once I had found a medium in which my mind could move freely, the piece almost “wrote itself.” Perhaps what H.D. calls the *unc.* (unconscious) was at work here, excavating earlier levels, saying more than one meant or thought one knew. The next stage was happily a collective one: sharing the writing with friends who would comment honestly and

amending it in the light of their reactions. The French feminist Hélène Cixous has spoken of “the labour of un-forgetting, of un-silencing, of un-earthing, of un-blinding and un-deafening oneself.” From before this specific project, many friends have shared that labour with me: Linda Anderson, Julia Ball, John Broadbent, Ruth First, Penny Florence, Cynthia Fuller, David Fuller, Jeanne Blanchenay Houghton, Ben Knights, Wendy Mulford, David Punter, Winifred Rushforth, Sandi Russell, Nicole Jouve Ward, Sarah Whittaker, Liz Yorke. Sue Roe believed this writing could come to birth, Rachel Blau DuPlessis was its *sage-femme* and Flick Allen performed the caesarian operation.

By comparison, scholarly writing has often been more lonely, more difficult (though not more demanding) and less real to me. It is part of my job to read essays by other people—whether those of undergraduates or professional critics. I am concerned at the contradictory relationship between the kinds of discourse in which poetry is written and the kinds of discourse in which it is written about. In my mind’s eye, the prose paragraph has come to resemble a monolith: a stone blocking the “cave of making,” obstructing the reader’s movement between the secondary text and the primary text that is under discussion. To equate sequential logic with the convincing “thrust” of phallogentric criticism might be to oversimplify, but I’ve been drawn for some time to the subversive wordplay and multiple activity of *l’écriture féminine*. I also wanted, here, to create a text in which physical space has its part in the play of meanings, just as our bodies do in what Kristeva calls the “semiotic process.” Hence the lavish layout, which invites the reader to consider the rhythm of each double-page unit as part of the movement of the whole piece. Even the space after the last words should be active in this, lest they suggest too easy a closure.

A DOUBLE MATRIX : RE-READING H.D.

In her mother's . . . in her mother's
house, after long absence, the girl . . .
the young woman strokes the bed cover,
a dis-/ a displaced caress. She has s-/
struggled with her mother, refused her,
refuses to apologise. Cries/ represses
tears. Strokes the bedcover saying,
sotto voce: 'I was inside her. She. She
bore me. If I deny her, I deny myself.'

WHY SHE?

I say I : I am going to say I.

(Nicole Jouve)

What is 'i'? The primal scratch—
the mark made by the child on the body
of the mother: 'I want to get in . . .'
The mark of the mother's presence,
her upright posture, in the mind
of the baby.

(Juliet Mitchell)

Learning to write. Mummy guides the pen.
When I can do it myself—I laugh.
(It was a sense of presence).

We have crawled back into the womb;
you command?
be born again,
be born,
be born;

H.D., 'Magician'

SHE IS I.

The last part of the lecture concerned the archi-trace as erasure: erasure of the present and thus of the subject, of that which is proper to the subject and of his proper name. The concept of a (conscious or unconscious) subject necessarily refers to the concept of substance—and thus of presence—out of which it is born.

(Jacques Derrida)

I laugh, holding the pen, making
meaning on the page, spell my name
("Diana could read when she was four"
— the maternal boast). Later the
laughter goes with a delight in the
intelligible: she directs me
into reading, teaches me to hear poetry
and to speak it.

JOUISSANCE

Laughter is the evidence that the instant *took place*: the space that supports it signifies time. Located elsewhere, distant, permissive, always already past: such is the *chora* that the mother is called upon to produce with the child so that a semiotic disposition might exist.

(Julia Kristeva)

chora = a receptacle . . .
(according to Plato: 'an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in a mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible')

= = J'OUIS SENS

First, Giovanni wanted to surpass his father, within the very space of the lost-unrepresentable -forbidden *jouissance* of a hidden mother, seducing the child through lack of being.

But then, and most importantly, Giovanni could share in this both maternal and paternal *jouissance*: He aspired to become the very space where father and mother meet. . . .

Our long biographical and historical, sacred and figural journey has shown that for Bellini, motherhood is nothing more than such a luminous spatialization, the ultimate language of a *jouissance* at the far limit of repression, whence bodies, identities and signs are begotten.

(Julia Kristeva)

Motherhood —

I saw the first pear
as it fell —
.....
and I fell prostrate
crying:

H.D., 'Orchard'

My mother chose motherhood; the books
were unwritten, or written too late . . .

EITHER / OR ;

the PROBLEM!

As for my next book, I am going to hold
myself from writing till I have it im-
pending in me: grown heavy in my mind
like a ripe pear; pendant, gravid,
asking to be cut or it will fall . . .

(Virginia Woolf)

My brother is considerably taller. I am
five and he is seven, or I am three and
he is five. It is summer. The grass is
somewhat dry, a few leaves crackle under
our feet. They have fallen from a pear
tree that has large russet pears. The pears
have been gathered. (*Pears? Pairs?*) . . .

H.D., *Tribute to Freud*

NOT BOTH

My body knows it will never bear children.
What can I say to my body now,
this used violin?
Every night it cries out strenuously
from its secret cave.

Old body, old friend,
why are you so unforgiving?

Why are you so stiff and resistant
clenched around empty space?

Jane Cooper, 'Waiting'

The child cries in frustration at all
she cannot do—yet.

The woman bleeds for the last time—
almost to death. She needs a blood trans-
fusion before they will perform a hysterectomy /
/take out her uterus / remove her womb

I WANT A FUSION

Now there is a space where her
womb was

a receptacle?

'Not a big organ, the size of a
grapefruit perhaps' (the surgeon's
knowing smile) : 'women always
imagine that the uterus is large.'

Nonetheless, the contractions
were agony, overwhelming—though
they brought nothing to birth

Three lines remained with her from
their 'O' level study of *King Lear*:

'Oh how this mother swells up toward my heart!

Hysterica passio, down thou climbing sorrow. . .'

and

'Never, never, never, never, never.'

(She had herself used the latter in
teaching as an example of trochaic
pentameter . . .)

*ma pauvre chère amie . . . ce sont
les larmes d'une déçue . . .*

(I have forgotten the French for
'womb'—a Freudian slip? The
dictionary supplies a Latinate word
of the masculine gender: *uterus*.
Ah, *un uterus déçu* . . .)

OR TRANSFUSION OF MY MOTHER'S ART
H.D.

but using a new kind of writing, a rhythm for
the first time associative, personal, ruminative
and atemporal, she has gotten . . . to another
kind of inspiration. One might well apply
Kristevan terms about the *chora*—the release
of an imagined primal space from the body of
the mother . . .

(Rachel DuPlessis on H.D.)

Unlike H.D., I do not know Greek. I do not know whether *chora* can be related to *choros* and to the rhythms of the moving body, the speaking voice. I am content for the moment that in my mind both *chora* and *matrix* relate to the imaginary space in which the womb had moved. And now they make, what? A space for the dance, for laughter, thought or song—

Rhythm,
a sequence of linked instants,
is immanent to the *chora*
prior to
any signified spaciousness:
henceforth, *chora*
and rhythm,
space and time
coexist.

(Julia Kristeva)

for you are abstract,
making no mistake,
slurring no word
in the rhythm you make,
the poem,
writ in the air.

H.D., 'The Dancer'

One may write music and music but who will
dance to it? The dance escapes but the
music, the music—projects a dance over
itself which the feet follow lazily if
at all. So a dance is a thing in itself.
It is the music that dances but if there
are words then there are two dancers, the
words pirouetting with the music.

(W. C. Williams)

The heterosexual presumption? I, too, fell for the Jungian dream: a formal ballroom, black and white, Lord Yang and Lady Yin dancing together. Did my 'Unconscious' bully me into matrimony (a dignified and commodious sacrament) —at 21? The groom in black, the bride in white: *animus + anima*. And all the time my conscious mind insisting that I was supplying a perfect example of Sartrean 'bad faith.' Sleepwalking with one's eyes open . . .

At university, D.H. Lawrence was thrust down our throats. Never mind that three-quarters of Eng. Lit. undergraduates were women. We went down on him. How many never woke from *that* dream of fulfilment? I must owe to Lawrence—or was it to Frieda?—the brute courage to leave husband for lover. Looking for Mr. Right: the *Woman's Own* recipe for schizophrenia (patient husband, rejected and dejected, seeks Jungian analyst —for me). So that, in the end, you only feel whole when you are alone

The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—
A dignified and commodious sacrament.
Two and two, necessarye coniunction . . .

T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker'

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet,
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
Wavering!
See, they return, one, and by one,
With fear, as half-awakened;
As if the snow should hesitate
And murmur in the wind,
and half-turn back . . .

Ezra Pound, 'The Return'

HERSELF?

Herself, indeed! A meaningless hieroglyph. The text of H.D.'s *Her*, written in the 'twenties, remained unpublished until the 'eighties (this is the 'sixties, remember?). But I forget, there was *Bid Me to Live*—so named by H.D.'s male mentor, who was evidently touched by the feminine plea in Herrick's poem that the author herself chose as epigraph, recalling her romance with Aldington, gone beyond in the novel itself. Published finally in 1961, noticed only for its portrait of Lawrence as Rico, and damned by *my* male mentor, in an authoritative review, for its 'vibrant subjectivity.'

Yet for me H.D.'s war novel brought another reality into view: a sickening swing of the camera through 180° from the interminable trenches—mud and maleness—to the lone woman in a London room intermittently invaded by the world. *Hidden from History*: a breakthrough like Sheila Rowbotham's, talking to a seminar in the seventies not about dating, but 'dating'; but hard to recognize, to act on, at the time.

Written actuality is subjective: even the first papyrus was once a blank.

(Helen McNeil)

SEE THEY RETURN —

. . . to the sightless realm where darkness is married to dark
and Persephone herself is but a voice, as a bride,
a gloom invisible enfolded in the deeper dark
of the arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again
and pierces her once more with his passion of the utter dark
among the splendour of black-blue torches, shedding
fathomless darkness on the nuptials.

D.H. Lawrence, 'Bavarian Gentians'

Whenever a woman goes to write a novel she
first chooses herself as heroine . . . *women*
are incapable of the indirect method.

Richard Aldington, *The Egoist* (1914)

Orpheus with his lute made trees,
And the mountain-tops that freeze,
Bow themselves when he did sing . . .

Shakespeare and Fletcher, *King Henry VIII*

I recited that as a child. When,
as a woman, I heard the voice of
Eurydice, the wood moved within me.
(‘And here am I, and wood within this wood’).

Rico to Julia: 'I don't like the second half of the Orpheus sequence as well as the first. Stick to the woman speaking. How can you know what Orpheus feels? It's your part to be woman, the woman vibration. Eurydice should be enough . . .'

H.D., *Bid Me to Live*

EURYDICE

So you have swept me back,
I who could have walked with the live souls
above the earth,
I who could have slept among live flowers
at last;

so for your arrogance
and your ruthlessness
I am swept back
where dead lichens drip
dead cinders upon moss of ash;

.

here only flame upon flame
and black among the red sparks,
streaks of black and light
grown colourless;

why did you turn back,
that hell should be reinhabited
of myself thus
swept into nothingness?

The British Museum, 1967: I found this poem in the yellowing pages of *The Egoist* of fifty years before. Its 'vibrant subjectivity' shocked me: where was the decorum one had come to expect of the 'Perfect Imagiste'? Little wonder that Pound did not praise the poem in his essays, nor Pearson re-print it in the *Selected Poems of H.D.* (1957). Again we would wait—for the posthumous *Collected Poems* of 1983 (did Eliot or Pound wait for a 'Collected' until they were dead?) By then, the *New Freewoman* had been long under the earth, but the name still vibrated in that margin of consciousness that I excluded as a postgraduate pursuing, in the pages of *The Egoist*, the least trace of Eliot and Pound. The same margin would bleed into the text when I later read Aldington's testimony that, when H.D. was assistant editor of *The Egoist*, 'Ezra and Eliot pushed her ruthlessly aside,' or her own cry from the heart: 'I can't think that I *must* be Pound-Eliot.'

The 'double bind' of the woman academic—
who does not menstruate until she has her
doctorate.

To be a woman poet in our society is a double
bind situation, one of conflict and strain.
For the words 'woman' and 'poet' denote
opposite and contradictory qualities and roles.

(Suzanne Juhasz)

Must the multiple nature of female desire and
language be understood as the fragmentary,
scattered remains of a raped or denied sexuality?
The rejection, the exclusion of a female
imaginary . . . places woman in a position where
she can experience herself only fragmentarily
in the little structured margins of a dominant
ideology, this mirror entrusted by the (masc-
uline) 'subject' with the task of reflecting or
redoubling himself.

(Luce Irigaray)

Myself then, imperfect, in a room of my own,
gathering the scattered limbs of a thesis. . . .
'Congratulations! You've broken through the last
barrier of male privilege!' *Unhunhhh*.
Writing a C.V. is painful: one is over-conscious
of spaces: how to account for the 'lost' years
of marriage—no children to show for it.
Marital status? Divorced. (Oho, a divorcee).
Ph.D., 1972: *William Carlos Williams and the Need
for a Specifically American Poetic*, catalogued,
of course, under my married name, which came
last. It was with a kind of secret shame that
I had signed on, in the B.M. Reading Room, under
the name I grew up with: at least this would be
my own province, booklined against bank-managers
and professors who insisted to the contrary
(‘But of course now you are married you will
take your husband’s name’; *I x take thee y . . .*)
The B.M. Reading Room: submerged in an undersea
womb of one’s own . . .

I did not know how to differentiate
between volcanic desire,
anemones like embers
and purple fire
of violets
like red heat,
and the cold
silver
of her feet:

.....

there is a purple flower
between her marble, her birch-tree white
thighs,
or there is a red flower,

there is a rose flower
parted wide,
as her limbs fling wide in dance
ecstatic
Aphrodite,
there is a frail lavender flower
hidden in grass;

O God, what is it,
this flower
that in itself had power over the whole earth?
for she needs no man,
herself
is that dart and pulse of the male,
hands, feet, thighs,
herself perfect.

H.D., 'The Master'

WHERE ARE THE POETESSES? . . .

If you take the moon in your hands
and turn it round
(heavy, slightly tarnished platter)
you're there

if you pull dry sea-weed from the sand
and turn it round
and wonder at the under-side's bright amber
your eyes

look out as they did here,
(you don't remember)
when my soul turned round,

perceiving the other-side of everything . . .

H.D., 'Sigil'

I LOOK EVERYWHERE FOR GRANDMOTHERS, AND SEE NONE . . .

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

Aldington, Richard, Mrs. (H.D.)

D., H. See Doolittle, Hilda

Doolittle, Hilda (Mrs. Richard Aldington)

H.D., see Aldington, Mrs. Richard

See . . . see . . . see . . .

In a sense, it seems I am drowning; already half-drowned to the ordinary dimensions of space and time, I know that I must drown, as it were, completely in order to come out on the other side of things (like Alice with her looking-glass or Perseus with his mirror). I must drown completely and come out on the other side, or rise to the surface after the third time down, not dead to this life but with a new set of values, my treasure dredged from the depth. I must be born again or break utterly.

H.D., *Tribute to Freud*

Try again. Abandon Lawrentian phallicism
for Poundian formalism. *Objectivity and
again objectivity!* Well, it got you a job,
didn't it? Yes—the position of honorary
male. One (one?) can refuse privilege. It
flutters the dovecot when one does, but
fresh stereotypes settle like snow.

YOU ARE A POEM,

The tutorial essay shaded into the academic
article, published under two names: my
father's and my husband's. Until the late
seventies, everything I wrote was really
written for my doctoral supervisor:

wandering about the body's writings
le corps nous mène jusqu'aux autres
in each to defeat the invigilator.
imagine no kindly scoutmaster.
he/I enters even here between us.

(Wendy Mulford)

What had happened to my body meanwhile?
Was it running alongside to catch up with
the bilingual talking head, asking its own
questions, breathlessly, as it came? That
sturdy autonomous child, myself, was certainly
in the offing, refusing to be side-stepped or
ignored, laughing joyously, insisting on its
presence in the text. ('Diana was always
foursquare'—my mother's voice again.) The
answers, then, came less directly from H.D.
than from Adrienne Rich—

THOUGH YOUR POEM'S NAUGHT,

(E.P. on H.D.)

THE PROFESSOR, MOSES, AMEN-RA ETC.
. . . ROLLED INTO ONE

(H.D. on Freud)

But in fact we were always like this,
rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference
Birth stripped our birthright from us,
tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves
so early on
and the whole chorus throbbing at our ears
like midges, told us nothing, nothing
of origins, nothing we needed
to know, nothing that could re-member us.

Only: that it is unnatural,
the homesickness for a woman, for ourselves . . .

Adrienne Rich, 'Transcendental Étude'

or Olga Broumas—

This/ is the woman I woke from sleep,

but before them was H.D.—

This is Gaia, this is the beginning. This is the end. Under every shrine to Jupiter, to Zeus-pater, or Theus-pater or God-the-father . . . there is an earlier altar. There is, beneath the carved superstructure of every temple to God-the-father, the dark cave or grotto or inner hall or *cella* to Mary, Mère, Mut, mutter, pray for us.

H.D., *The Gift*

Tribute to Freud was as baffling and exciting as my first reading of the *Waste Land, Shantih*: 'The Peace which passeth understanding.' *J'ouis sens*. It was like being a child again, tracing the story, reading the 'Writing on the Wall' with H.D. (for the Freud title was not hers). Playing with meanings like the old game of Heads, Bodies and Legs—the head, at last, cautiously coming together with the body. Living with different levels of narration and interpretation (Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* might be a model), dwelling on signs and images, savouring her scepticism at his answers . . .

the woman that woke/ me sleeping.

Olga Broumas, 'Sleeping Beauty'

it is true that we play puss-in-a-corner, find
one angle and another or see things from different
corners or sides of a room. Yes, we play hide-
and-see, hunt-the-slipper, and hunt-the-
thimble and patiently and meticulously patch
together odds and ends of our picture-puzzle.
We spell words upside down and backward and
crosswise, for our crossword puzzle, and then
again we run away and hide in the cellar or
the attic or in our mother's clothes-closet.

H.D., 'Advent'

'But you feminists—women of your generation—
you are destroying marriage, destroying the family
. . . Everything I lived for—'

'Women. Yes, we are important to each other. Yet
I love my father and my brothers. Nothing is taken
from you.'

after Daddy's death, the gentle rites
of recall, going over old photographs:
she nestles in her father's lap /
I remember the warmth of his arms

beyond all other, the Child,
the child in the father,
the child in the mother,

the child-mother, yourself;

H.D., *Helen in Egypt*

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