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Natural Imagery and the Construction of a New Femininity in HJD.'s Early Verse

By

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Summary

Hilda Doolittle, othenvise known by her initials H.D., was an American woman poet of the modernist er a. Her early verse which is collected in her Collected Poems (1925) offer an immense variety of natural imagery which establish allegories for themes she was most concerned with: womanhood and male dominance. Her lovefor nature is apparent in almost all her poems but her desire to define femininity through a rich use of natural phenomena is even more obvious. ~H.D.'s searchfor the meaning of the significance of being a woman pushed her to employ natural objects as metaphors for her philosophy of womanhood. Her early verse is strictly impersonal and adheres to Imagist techniaues which, in the end, strengthen her rejection of Victorian femininity and glorify a new, perhaps less tamed, more untamed woman-ness.

Özet:

H.D. kısaltmasıyla tanınan Hilda Doolittle Amerikan modernist döneminin imgeci kadın şairlerindendir. Collected Poems (1925) adlı şiir kitabında yer alan imgeci doğa şiirleri şairin kadın konusunu irdelemesine izin verir. Doğa imgelemeleri ile dolup taşan şiirlerin bir kat altında yeni bir kadın olgusu ve düşü yatar. Yirminci yüzyılda çokça tartışılan kadın konusu ve erkek egemenliğinin sorgulanması HD.'nin doğa imgeleri kullanımıyla derinlemesine irdeleyebildiği

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konulardır. H.D. doğa şiirlerinde, özellikle çiçek şiirlerinde geleneksel kadın tiplerini yine gelenekselliği çağrıştıran çiçek tipleri ile simgeler. Güzel kokan güller ve bahçe çiçekleri, evcilliği, klasik kadın güzelliğini, uysallığı ve zarafeti çağrıştırdığı için HD. bu çiçekleri küçümser ve çirkinser. Tersine, kadının gizemini, iç zenginliğini, gücünü, vahşiliğini, ve korkuya karşı dayanıklılığını yüceltmek amacıyla HD. bu özellikleri simgeleyen doğa olaylarını ve vahşi, hatta çirkin, çiçek isimlerini sıralar şiirlerinde. H.D.'ye göre erkek egemenliği altında yapma bebeklere dönüştürülmüş Viktorya dönemi kadın tipi çirkin ve utanç vericidir. Yeni kadın modeli ise fırtınalı havalarda tek başına ayakta kalan ve bunun için bir erkeğin korumasına ihtiyaç duymayan kadındır, ve asıl güzel kadın odur.

it is ironic that H.D.'s uncompromisingly impersonal nature poems were in fact her most personal strivings for self-realization. H.D. "found herself as it were, through her descriptions of nature. Although she was not generally regarded as a feminist, H.D.'s early verse welcomes - indeed demands - a feminist reading. The experience of being a woman and defining 'womanhood' was a priority in and for H.D.'s verse, in spite of its covertness. As a female poet in the first half of the twentieth century, the majority of her readers approached her verse with gender-biased expectations. H.D.'s intent was to prevent any gender specific approach to her poetry. The initials 'H.D.' not only suggest androgyny but an effort at privacy as well.

H D.'s poetry and prose introduced new lyric and mythic forms to the modern era. Some of her strongest influences (and close connections) include: Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell, Richard Aldington, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein. A younger generation of poets like Robert Duncan, Ailen Ginsberg, and Denişe Levertov highly admired H.D.. H.D. was born in Pennsylvania in 1886 and, in a way her life and work stand for many modernist experiences to the extent that they diverged from Victorian norms, and that H.D. herself was an expatriate poet having been raised into an age of radical technological change and shocked by the terror of two world wars. The radical reevaluations of conventional gender roles, feminism; and the development of literary manners, and the disruption of traditional symbolic methods also constituted immense impact on H.D. and her contemporaries. H.D. is primarily known as a poet, especially for her Imagist poetry and her epics inspired by classical Greek mythology, *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt.* in 1925, *Collected Poems of H.D.* appeared, containing her previously published volumes *Sea Garden(l9l6), Hymen{* 1921), and *Heliodora and Other Poems(l924)* - and several translations from Greek.

The principles of Imagist poetry, most ambitiously experimented by Pound and Lowell in the 1910s are explicitly illustrated in HD.'s early works. Imagism demanded a verbal precision and an impersonalism which lead the way to a more incisive and dynamic form of expression. In her work H.D. gives "direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective"; she tries to "use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (Pound, 1945: 3). In his article "The H.D. Book, Part I: Chapter 2" in *Coyote's Journal* Robert Duncan notes that the poems in HD.'s first book, *Sea Garden* (1916),

> ...gave presence to, and were aroused by a presence, in rocks and sea, thunderous surfs, gardens and orchards exposed or sheltered... The line of her verse grew taut... tensed to provide a mode in which reverberations of these presences might be heard. The image and the voice or dramatic persona provided a nexus in poetry corresponding to the outer and inner worlds in which she worked towards higher and finer modes. (Duncan, 1967 : 14,16,11)

In her *Collected Poems* H.D. regards the natural world with great admiration, but also manipulates it for the search for 'self. This study evaluates H.D.'s employment of natural imagery and her impersonal technique in her *Collected Poems* as a substantial attempt to transcend conventional gender boundaries. *Sea Garden,* the first book of H.D.'s verse published in 1916 and later included in *Collected Poems,* is a sequence of modern pastorals set in a symbolic green world removed from conventional space and time. A feminist methodology interprets the pastoral settings in HD.'s *Sea Garden* as flight from the subjugations of being a woman in a male dominated social order. Two poems have been selected from *Sea Garden;* "Sea Rose", "Sea Poppies", one Hellenic poem "Eurydice" and two other nature poems from her *Collected Poems,* "Sheltered Garden" and "The Mystery Remains" in order to illustrate the poet's use of impersonal natural objects as an effort to repress the confinements of history and specifically the conventions of femininity. All five poems denounce sexual categories by first denouncing the traditional characteristics of the classic *'female'.* In her book *Penelope's Web* Susan Friedman remarks, "The impersonal discourse that constructed this persona represented HD.'s first solution to the problem of gender posed by the post-Victorian male world of letters." Friedman further notes that the landscapes of *Sea Garden* represent, "an exile from... the fatherland and motherland of social order; and from the traditional division of labor that her parents represented - her father, the austere professor and astronomer; her mother, artistically gifted, but dedicated to the career of her brilliant husband" (Friedman, 1990: 55).

"Sea Rose", the first poem of the *Sea Garden* poems, encodes a rebellion against conventional femininity and displays an implicit irritation about this conventionality. A literal reading of "Sea Rose" reveals two different kinds of roses being compared and contrasted to one another; a sea rose and a domestic rose:

> Rose, harsh rose,
> marred and with stint of petals,
> meagre flower, thin,
> sparse of leaf,
>
> more precious
> than a wet rose,
> single on a stem -
> you are caught in the drift.[1]

The 'wet rose', the 'spice-rose'; these are references to the classical domestic rose; the one gentlemen would present to their female lovers, or better yet, compare them to. Protected, fragile, rich and lovely, the 'rose' is humiliated in H.D.'s "Sea Rose". Human reference does not appear on the literal surface of the poem, but the rose is traditionally and closely associated with delicate femininity, classic beauty of a woman, "eroticism and female genitalia" (Friedman, 1990: 57). The sea-rose is the victor in the speaker's eyes; it is described as 'harsh' and 'sparse', 'marred' and 'meagre', 'stint[ed] 'thin' and 'stunted'. Nevertheless it is the sea-rose that has all the attention of the speaker, it is the sea-rose that deserves praise and admiration for its courage, its will to fight difficult winds and harsh water waves. H.D.'s rhymes are randomly scattered and intensify the sea rose's position of being outcast. The syntactic repetition of passive verbs whose actors are absent - "you are caught," "you are flung," "you are lifted" - suggests the vulnerability of the sea rose. Nonetheless, the poet praises what is despised and rejects what is typically valued - "you are more precious"; its "acrid fragrance" is superior to the scent of the soft rose of the sheltered garden. A figurative reading connotes that these two flowers symbolize two kinds of womanhood, and the contrast is actually between a classical femininity and a new feminine identity introduced by the speaker. The new woman is different, alone, freer, stronger, a fighter maybe, not delicate, not beautiful, not fragrant. Whatever a mild, protected lovely woman-rose is, H.D.'s new woman-rose is not. The not-ness of this new rose type is glorified, whatever is dismissed by the conventions H.D. embraces. The harsh rose is disfigured,

weakened by wind and sand, alone, and therefore worth elevation and veneration.

The meagre sea rose, wild and windblown in the sand, shows that this flower is clearly less protected than a domestic rose, but stronger and therefore more dignified. The poet aspires to praise the wild flower, and this suggests appraise for the undomesticated woman, and a desire to flee from Victorian femininity, to embrace a rather untamed woman-ness.

H.D. treasures natural objects, especially ones that can endure stormy conditions. She loves strong sea flowers more than the usual garden flowers because they survive the violent waves and winds. "Sea Poppies" is a *Sea Garden* poem that appraises the power of endurance. Poppy is a plant with herbs that have milky juice, showy flowers and capsular fruits. H.D. is describing the flower's color, its fruit and odor. One gets a picture of golden yellow color of the flower and how its fruits have spilled on the sand. The speaker associates these grains of the poppy with treasure and says these tiny fruits have fallen beside the shrubs on rocks in order to be bleached.

Amber husk
fluted with gold,
fruit on the sand
marked with a rich grain,
treasure
spilled near the shrub-pines
to bleach on the boulders:

The nouns and adjectives used for the flower point to a very precious treasure. The words 'gold', 'rich', and 'treasure' are used to valorize the poppy and foreground the speaker's appreciation of the beauty and the life giving force of the seeds. Although the sea poppy's root has been tangled by pebbles, drift and shells, this is not a disadvantage. For the flower is still beautiful and its leaves are the color of fire. The speaker draws a comparison between the perfumes of two kinds of leaves; the fragrance of the sea poppy's 'bright leaf is superior to that of a meadow leaf:

your stalk has caught root
among wet pebbles
and drift flung by the sea

and grated shells
and split conch-shells.

Beautiful, wide spread,
fire upon leaf,
what meadow yields
so fragrant a leaf
as your bright leaf?

The comparisons of the flower to gold, its fruits to a treasure, its leaves to fire, stress the speaker's cherishing attitude and admiration for this product of nature. H.D.'s intention to convey her feelings for natural elements is achieved by the use of details and a combination of adjectives that have emotive connotations. The landscapes are all products of the poet's imagination and consciousness. H.D. combines sensitivity and toughness together with beauty and strength. Preference for wild nature governs HD.'s poems about nature. In her book *Poets and Their Art* Harriet Monroe recognized this quality and was surprised to find it in so cultivated an artist:

The astonishing thing about H.D.'s poetry is the wildness of it - that trait strikes me as I read her whole record in the *Collected Poems* .... She is as wild as deer on the mountains .... She is never indoors, never ever in a tent. . .. She is, in a sense, one of the most civilized, most ultra refined of poets; and yet never was a poet more unaware of civilization, more independent of its thralls . . ..It would be an interesting speculation to consider how much H.D. owes to the pioneers whom all Americans descend from more or less. (Monroe, 1932: 92,93)

The most observable feature of *Collected Poems*—and of HD.'s work generally—is her long lasting attraction to ancient Greece. Many of the titles of the collection are Hellenic. More than twenty of the poems are in the form of by characters either from classical Greek literature or imagined as having lived in those times. Several of her poems are in form of dramatic monologues spoken by ancient Greek mythic figures. "Eurydice" is one of H.D.'s Hellenic poems most indicative of her ideas on 'classical femininity' (classical in both senses; ancient Greek, and conventional). The space and time of "Eurydice" is classic Greek mythology. This poem established the kind of myth poems H.D. was to write for the next twenty-five years. The speaker is clearly a female and the monologue-poem is meant to be read as the subversion of a Greek myth that, according to H.D., devalues the integrity of women. The strong male-centered romanticism of the plot in this

classic love story of "Orpheus and Eurydice" is replaced with the powerful, critical voice of the woman poet. Friedman states "'Eurydice' is the first of many poems in which H.D. deconstructed a masculinist cultural text and reconstructed a female text by making the woman speak" (Friedman, 1990: 65).

In the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Eurydice is raped and sent to the underworld. Orpheus, believing that his music can overcome all problems, decides to take "the fearsome journey to the underworld" (Hamilton, 1942: 104) to rescue Eurydice by bringing her back to the realm of the living. He can take Eurydice back on "one condition that he would not look back at her as she followed him, until they had reached the upper world" (Hamilton, 1942: 105). This fearsome journey turns out to be a miserable one when Orpheus looks back too soon and loses Eurydice forever. In the myth, Eurydice is pictured as a mild and receptive wife awaiting Orpheus in hell and sadly turning back to the shades when he loses his chance to save her.

In HJD.'s poem "Eurydice", the heroine has little resemblance to the patient, passive creature of the classical, "Orpheus and Eurydice". H.D.'s Eurydice is sharp tongued and high spirited; she reproaches Orpheus for grasping her from the "death lichens" black underworld and then condemning her once more to the shadows. She accuses him of being arrogant and ruthless "so for your arrogance / and your ruthlessness /1 am swept back". Orpheus is no longer much of a hero. If he had had more self-confidence he would not have looked back.

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

H.D. effects the transformation of the traditionally passive Eurydice largely through the use of flower images. Flower images in H.D.'s poems are always more than mere pretty names, mere colors and fragrances. Thomas B. Swann, in his book *The Classical World ofH.D* maintains that "By means of a flower catalogue of patient intensity [H.D.] represents a last word and at

the same time anticipates spiritual victory in preferring the flowers of her own heart" (Swann, 1962: 53). The word, "flowers" occurs ten times in this eight-page monologue. In addition, three specific flowers - crocuses, windflowers and saffron flowers are mentioned several times, and are also described in their varieties, colors, textures and fragrances. These flowers are the symbols of the upper world which Orpheus' doubt and hesitation has made Eurydice lose. As Eurydice continues her monologue, the names of the flowers seem to bloom and burn, they seem to show Eurydice her isolated condition. But she rises above this condition, turning to her inner resources and believes that in the end she has lost nothing.

yet for all your arrogance
and your glance,
I tell you this:
such loss is no loss,
such terror, such coils and strands and pitfalls
of blackness,
such terror
is no loss;

and the flowers,
if I should tell you,
you would turn from your own fit paths
toward hell,
turn again and glance back
and would sink into a place
even more terrible than this.

Eurydice claims her own world of flowers. She has more fervour than Orpheus and the splendor of the earth. Eurydice has "more light" against "blackness" and the "stark gray" of the underworld. "At least", Eurydice says, she has "the flowers of myself ... the fervour of myself for a presence". Eurydice would rather live with the flowers and light of her own self-wealth, she would prefer her own thoughts and spirit rather than become like Orpheus and enjoy the flowers of the upper world. It is this unwavering uprightness that makes Eurydice one of H.D.'s heroines. By using her poetic license H.D. is displaying traditional characters in new settings and/or in

unconventional behavior. HD.'s classicism is in accord with her private wish. Swann contends that "[H.D.] shaped the classical world to her own temperament" (Swann, 1962: 173). H.D.'s outlook concerns the place and position of the female in relation to men, or, her man. "Eurydice" is ultimately about unconventional womanhood and unconventional manhood. Eurydice talks, asserts, affirms, rejects. She possesses inner richness, independence, and self-reliability. Orpheus lets down, betrays, proves weak, immature and imprudent. Eurydice's attitude is H.D.'s proof of the suffocation of the traditional female.

'Suffocation' is a common feeling one receives from several of the nature poems, for, the general attitude is a desire for escape and to embrace something new, different, free and undomesticated. The suffocation felt due to gendered-ness and the quest for genderless-ness is a prominent feature in the landscapes of H.D..

As in "Eurydice" an indirect language of flowers is also employed in "Sheltered Garden" for the purpose of conveying a new femininity. "Sheltered Garden" manifests a revolt against traditional image of femininity. This poem encodes a flight from the confinements of the suppressed, 'model' femininity, which lies under the domination of patriarchal society. H.D. uses objects of nature, flowers, herbs, bark, weed, fruit, frost and wind to express her idea of a real and new beauty and to show her rejection of the archetypal feminine type of womanhood. In "Sheltered Garden" HD. uses tender pink flowers in a garden and protected "fruit under cover" as metaphors for the conventional feminine beauty. According to H.D. the typical woman in the male dominated society was expected to be soft, delicate and safe from the external world. In H.D.'s time, the archetypal woman was not supposed to be involved in any work that could prevent her from being elegant, this type of women should not be damaged and, like flowers in a sheltered garden, they should be covered and protected from rough conditions. H.D. took a stand in her poetry against this idea of the delicate, protected woman and in her poem, the poetic persona has "had enough" of carnations which are a symbol for this woman-type.

H.D.'s persona here expresses a feeling of suffocation, she seems to be trying to free herself from a super-abundance of delicacy symbolized by wax lilies, herbs and sweet-cress. She desires to escape from sweetness and softness and tenderness associated with the "pinks" of conventional womanhood.

have had enough.
I grasp for breath.

I have had enough -
border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies,
herbs, sweet-cress.

Oh for some sharp swish of a branch-
there is no scent of resin
in this place,
no taste of bark, of coarse weeds,
aromatic, astringent-
only border on border of scented pinks.

H.D. celebrates whatever is unrelated to the conventional woman symbols. The poet praises the sharp and the coarse, the hard and the harsh, the unripe and the unlovely. We can make a list of contrasting images:

Softness	Hardness
Pink	Bark
Sweet cress	Sharp branch
Scented pinks	Coarse weeds

H.D. condemns whatever corresponds to the mild and vulnerable woman, not directly but through Imagist techniques. Images of delicacy and harshness have been depicted by the use of different kinds of natural objects. The images of mild objects within their tender surroundings immediately create a soft and fragile atmosphere.

Have you seen fruit under cover
that wanted light-
pears wadded in cloth,
protected from the frost,
melons, almost ripe,
smothered in straw?

H.D. depicts the state of being delicate and fragile through images of pears stuffed in cloth and melons covered with straw in order to be protected bv external influences, such as too much light or frost. She suggests just the

opposite state of existence is better; she prefers that the fruit should be naked and that they should have the chance to test their own strength. In her article "H.D.'s Romantic Landscapes" Cassandra Laity remarks on this image,

> Its dense, enclosed atmosphere proves stifling rather than protective; frequently overripe, the lush vegetation suggests the cloying sweetness of decay. Despite its sensuous promise, the love bower is actually sterile and blighting in its all-consuming torpor which anesthetizes its victim, overpowering all generating impulses, including sexual desire. As a metaphoric projection for mental processes, the garden signifies statis, escapism and psychic fragmentation rather than process, intellectual striving, and psychic unity. (Laity, 1990: 113)

Why not let the pears cling
to the empty branch?
All your coaxing will only make
a bitter fruit-
let them cling, ripen of themselves,
test their own worth,
nipped, shrivelled by the frost,
to fall at last but fair
with a russet coat.

The "russet coat" of the fallen fruit proposes H.D.'s new concept of beauty. Beauty is real when it is achieved through struggle; for without the strength to fight beauty suffocates. As a result the speaker desires the wind to be hard on natural and delicate objects so that these mild objects can really fight and test their potential by undergoing pain and danger. The speaker wants the wind to break, scatter, snap, fling, trail, hurl, tear and twist all the natural items which are protected in the sheltered garden. And finally the speaker desires to get away from the sheltered garden and she is dreaming of "some terrible/wind tortured place."

For this beauty,
beauty without strength,
chokes out life.
I want wind to break,
scatter these pink-stalks,
snap off their spiced heads,

fling them about with dead leaves-

0 to blot out this garden
to forget, to find a new beauty
in some terrible
wind-tortured place.

H.D.'s alternative new woman may be unconventional, even violent but is never fruitless. H.D. recognizes and glorifies the inherent potential of a female to give birth and sustain regeneration and the continuity of life. Nature has a cycle and mechanism of renewal, so does the woman. H.D. combines the two life cycles of nature and the female in her poem, "The Mystery Remains". The cycle of life is a mystery and this cycle only belongs to nature and women. The female persona in the poem represents all femininity. She "keeps the cycle of seed time" and she is as nurturing as the sun and rain. The female is compared to Demeter, for, Demeter was the Goddess of corn, "it was natural that the divine power which brought forth grain should be thought of as a goddess, not a god," (Hamilton, 1942: 47) because in that time it was the woman who worked in the fields, who scattered the seeds and reaped the harvest. This is why the poetic persona applies the words "multiply" and "renew" to herself, these words describe woman's ability to give life, spread and increase life.

The mysteries remain,
1 keep the same
cycle of seed-time
and of sun and rain;
Demeter in grass,
I multiply,
renew and bless
Iacchus in the vine;

The persona now continues with Dionysus, the second most important God of fertility, the god of wine. She blesses Dionysus and says she is the one who "holds the law," the law of regeneration and the cycle of nature. Although creation is a mystery she "keeps the mystery true."

I hold the law,
I keep the mysteries true,
the first of these

to name the living, dead;

I am red wine and bread.

The poetic figure in the poem representing all women is all embracing, she announces she is 'red wine and bread,' which are the symbols of Jesus Christ's blood and body which he sacrificed for mankind. In a sense, the speaker is a power giving life to mankind just as Christ had done. This could also be reflecting an antipathy towards Jesus being referred to as always a male figure. The female speaker declares that she can be a Christ, a giver, a savior. The persona continues to say that she is "the vine, the branches, you and you." These last lines show that femininity has a quality of reaching all parts of creation, the vineyards and wine are part of nature and they are also I, the female persona. The 'branches' symbolizing greenery in nature are also identified with I, the woman. And the final words "you and you" indicating all people on earth. The woman is the power that gives life to the whole of humanity.

H.D. establishes a comparison between the cycle of life within nature and the cycle in human life. The parallelism suggests the closeness of women to nature; only a woman can truly acknowledge the mystery and law of the life cycle, because she is the one who begins it.

In the poems analyzed in this study H.D. attempts to illustrate the "feminine power", its inner riches, its beauty, its ability to renew and give birth. H.D. does this with the help of natural imagery, flowers as a symbol of the inner richness of women, seeds as a symbol of woman's ability to give life and to continue it. As a result H.D. reflects the closeness of woman to nature through natural imagery. H.D. also implies her irritation towards conventional femininity by associating it with tender flowers like wax-lilies or sweet cress. H.D. prefers to represent women by sharp and course natural imagery, showing her reaction to the conventional soft and tender woman. Janice Robinson in *The Life and Work of an American Poet* notes;

What we must first understand in HD.'s poetry is what we might call a figural or allegorical interpretation of nature. Every natural occurrence, in all its everyday reality, is correspondingly a part of a spiritual world order, which is also experiential and in which every event is related to every other event. In the western literary tradition, nature has traditionally been understood to be feminine and mute; H.D. makes nature speak. Because her perspective is feminine rather than masculine, she interprets events in terms of the timeless natural world rather than in terms of the historical process. (Robinson, 1982: 56)

As Janice Robinson relates, H.D. makes nature speak, just like she makes Eurydice speak. H.D. has the power to make traditionally 'mute' phenomena affirm themselves. And eventually through an intense exploration of nature H.D. sets herself on the path to self-discovery. Through her disgust for mediocrity and conventionality H.D. recognizes a woman's hidden strength. Her works condemn a comfortable, soft life and seek danger and risk as experiences to be valued. H.Monroe states that "[H.D.'s] feet know the harsh rocks, but never the ordered hardness of pavements. Her breath is drawn from bright breezes and bold winds, but never from the walled-in atmosphere of rooms..." (Monroe, 1932: 92). The depictions of nature in free verse and with Imagist techniques in the chosen poems not only demonstrate H.D.'s poetic expression but also reflect her focus on the feminine consciousness in poetry. The allegorical interpretation of H.D.'s chosen poems communicate an endeavor to break the hegemony of male dominance and offer a new femininity for the twentieth century.

Notes

1. All poems cited in this article are from *Collected Poems* by Hilda Doolittle. (1983). (Ed. Loize Martz). New York: New Directions.

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