Journal of American Studies of Turkey
9 (1999) : 53-59.

"This bitter power of song": Hilda Doolittle, Grecian Masks and Poetic Creativity in Women

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Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961), a.k.a. H.D., remembered today alongside women poets contemporaneous with her such as Louise Bogan, Elenor Wyle, Edna St.Vincent Millay, and Mariannne Moore, first made a name for herself through her affiliation with the imagist and vorticist schools of modern poetry. Although she remained loyal to these technical innovations throughout her poetic career, her later poetry reflects the consciousness of being a woman aware of her creative talents, while revealing a woman poet having acquired a language of her own. A salient feature of her poetry is her use of mythical characters and incidents, which she initially implemented to mask her being an apprentice artist trying to emulate male poets by adhering to their "impersonal line" of poetic understanding. These Grecian elements later became instruments in masking her heightened consciousness. This article surveys her trajectory from diligently following her male "masters" to the writing of her posthumously published *Helen in Egypt* (1961) in which she has found her own voice, freed of the influence of male discourse as well as of her own anxieties concerning her creativity.

Male Masters/Personal Emotions

H.D. met the poet Ezra Pound when she was fifteen and was engaged to him for a year. Before Pound left for Europe, he introduced her to his close friend William Carlos Williams, another poet. In 1909, H.D. herself left for Europe and settled in London, making friends there with the likes of Ford Madox Ford, William Butler Yeats, and Richard Aldington whom she would marry in 1913.

The shaping influences of these various male acquaintances are felt in her fırst book of poetry *Miscellaneous Poems* (1914, later published in *Collected Poems 1912-1944*) which contains vorticist overtones. In "Oread," the Greek mountain nymph Eomprehends sings of the pleasure she gets in union with the sea:

> Whirl up, sea -
> Whirl your pointed pines,
> Splash your great pines

hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir. (*Collected Poems* 55)

H.D. made extensive use of flower images in her next collection of poems entitled *Sea Garden* (1916, later published in *Collected Poems 1912-1944*). In "Sea Rose," delicacy or harshness, that are properties of flowers, symbolize, I suggest, H.D.'s potential creative energy. The poet-persona asks: "Can the spice-rose/drip such acrid fragrance/harden in a leaf?" (*Collected Poems* 5). A thin, delicate rose when pressed and hardened becomes a leaf concentrated with an "acrid" fragrance. The evidently stultified creative energy gives out an "acrid" fragrance.

H.D. and her husband separated in 1918 upon his infidelity, after she gave birth to their daughter Perdita. By that year, she had already faced a series of other emotional crises: a miscarriage, the death of her beloved brother at the front, and her father's death. Her friendship with Winnifred Ellerman, known as Bryher, helped her undergo this period; he encouraged her to continue writing, and they travelled to Greece, Egypt and the US before finally settling in Switzerland.

Her dejection at being left by her husband benefited her poetic creativity. In "Fragment Forty: Love . . . bitter-sweet-Sappho" (*Heliodoraand Other Poems* 1924, later published in *Collected Poems 1912-1944*), the poet-persona writes that although she "was deserted," "an outcast," and "desperate," she was given the "fire":

I cried:
"I must perish,
I am deserted,
an outcast, desperate
in this darkness,"
(such fire rent me with Hesperus,)
then the day broke. (*Collected Poems* 5)

It is love, though "bitter-sweet," that enables the poet-persona to "rent" the fire of creativity from Hesperus, which will, once the day breaks, fly with "radiant wings over" humanity: "what need to bind love/ when love stands / with such radiant wings over us?" (*Collected Poems* 175). In *H.D.: The Career of That Struggle*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis considers the poem as crucial in the woman poet's process of recovery from despair (at being abandoned by her husband) to the celebration of Eros.

But in *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert question H.D.'s expression of her personal

emotions at a time when she was trying to attain, ostensibly by the use of the male style of "impersonality" in poetry, the level of mastery—and win the appreciation—of men such as Pound. They conclude that H.D.'s recourse to Sappho "articulate[s] . . . the intensity of desire that, transcending the beloved and his inevitable desertion, compels the poet to translate erotic abondon." Referring to Sapho and to the passion associated with her gave H.D. the strength to create poetry out of the pain of abandonment (233-234). While the pain was transmuted into poetry, H.D. was finding her own voice.

Transitional Period

Heliodora as well as H.D.'s earlier collection of poems *Hymen* (1921, later published in *Collected Poems 1912-1944*) both received encouraging criticism praising her new role as the translator or adaptor of Grecian themes—a role which would continue in her later poetry, as mentioned above. The two volumes heralded a transitional period that would define her later career.

In "Cassandra" (*Hymen*), using the mask of the Trojan priestess, H.D assumes and defines her intensity of will-power in becoming a new woman, who yet prays to the God Hymen to be relieved of this consciousness—a burden of knowing her creative potentiality:

> . . . O Hymen lord;
> is there none left
> can equal me
> in ecstasy, desire?
> is there none left
> can bear with me
> the kiss of your fire?
> is there not one,
> Phrygian or frenzied Greek,
> poet, song-swept, or bard,
> one meet to take from me
> this bitter power of song,
> one fit to speak, Hymen,
> your praises, lord? (*Collected Poems* 169)

In this poem, the poetic creativity of a woman, "this bitter power of song," appears to be a burden that needs to be "take[n] from me," accompanied with "ecstasy [and] desire" that it is. "Calypso" (published for the first time in the "Uncollected and Unpublished Poems: 1912-1944" section of *Collected Poems 1912-1944*), on the other hand, with its relaxed and self-confident tone, puts on stage a woman who is

reconciled with herself and the others. This is a new development in H.D.'s poetry. In a long dramatic monologue with Odysseus, Calypso shows herself to be, no longer the "wicked *femme fatale*," ready to "bewitch" Odysseus—that had been the only "mask" and "power" the male had conceded her—but a solitary yet powerful woman whose "beautiful peace has gone" (*Collected Poems* 389) by his intrusion. This inversion of the established myth is, as Middlebrock D. Wood and Marilyn Yalom remark, "the first step toward feminine consciousness (310).

After their encounter, Calypso repeatedly asks Odysseus:

> did I ask you to this rock-shelf,
> did I lure you here?
> did I call, far and near
> ....
> tell me,
> did I whisper to you sought
> that would work a charm? (*Collected Poems* 389)

She goes so far as to rebuke him:

> I am priestess, occult, nymph
> and goddess.
> ....
> you are heavy
> great oaf
> walrus
> whale, clumsy on land
> clumsy with your great arms
> with an oar
> at sea; (*Collected Poems* 389)

Feeling vainglorious, Odysseus is still unable to comprehend the change in her:

> On land, I know my way
> as well as by sea
> she who is light as a bird
> who shouts wilful words
> back to me
> shall know
> Odysseus is at home; (*Collected Poems* 391)

Calypso's reply is mixed with scorn and pity: "Idiot" (391) she ripostes.

Nevertheless, Calypso is all loving, demanding nothing, overwhelming him with her generosity, knowing all the while that as "a man is a brute, and a fool," he will most probably leave her one day. She gives him "fresh water in earth jar, / strange fruits, / to quench thirst." Odysseus confesses that "she gave an ivory comb for / my hair / she washed brine and mud from / my body" and that lastly "she gave me peace in her cave" (*Collected Poems* 399).

A Voice of Her Own

This new vision of womanhood led H.D. to meditate on the nature of her role as a woman poet while she wrote down her reactions to World War II in her trilogy, (*The Walls Do Not Fall* [1944], *Tribute to the Angels* [1945], and *The Flowering of the Rod* [1946] later published as *Trilogy*), a work which holds a spiritual world blending Christian deities with the Egyptian gods Ra, Osiris, and Amon Ra. Her use of the myth of Isis in the trilogy led further to her longest and most complex poem, *Helen in Egypt*, written between 1952 and 1955 but published posthumously in 1961, the year of her death. In that poem, H.D. undeniably acquired a voice of her own, and attained an autonomous selfhood through poetic creation.

Helen in Egypt is based on an alternative myth concerning Helen (known as of Troy), whereby it is not Helen but her phantom who is in Troy, with the real Helen taken to Egypt by Zeus to be reunited with Achilles. I suggest the "Helen" of the poem is also H.D.'s mother, with whom she had made peace. When in 1924 she had written in "Helen" (*Heliodora*):

> All Greece hates
> the still eyes in the white face,
> the lustre as of olives
> where she stands,
> and the white hands. (*Collected Poems* 159)

I suggest that it was her mother H.D. had (also) in mind (see Martz for H.D.'s ambivalent feelings about her mother).

In *Helen in Egypt* H.D. seems to have made peace with herself and her past. The Helen peacefully addressing and consoling Achilles, "fear nothing of the future or the past / He, God will guide you/ bring you to this place" (132) in the opening of the poem is in stark contrast with the Helen of 1924 whom all Greece used to hate and whose death will bring peace to war-torn Greece, as in the lines, "Only if she were laid / white ash amid funeral cypresses" (*Collected Poems* 155).

This new Helen tries to convince her fellow citizens that she is not the Helen they thought she was:

> Alas, my brothers
> Helen did not walk
> upon the ramparts,
> She whom you cursed
> was but the phantom and shadow thrown (*Helen in Egypt* 32)

She moreover possesses newly acquired wisdom:

> the shape of this bird is a letter,
> they call it the hieroglyph;
> strive not, it is dedicated
> to the goddess here, she is Isis;" (*Helen in Egypt* 155)

Helen is now endowed with the power of deciphering the hieroglyph, recreating a language of her own—an ability denied of women for centuries. She starts to undertake the difficult task of "translating a symbol in time, into timeless time / the hieroglyph, the script" (156). Thus, H.D. through the persona, or the "mask," of Helen, affirms that she has acquired the ability to translate the symbols and attain a full command of "knowledge" which is to be transmitted to other people through her poetry.

This knowledge is, in her own words, intuitive or emotional knowledge, rather than intellectual:

> I feel the lure of the invisible,
> I am happier here alone
> in this great temple,
> with this great temple's
> indecipherable hieroglyph;
> I have "read" the lily. (156)

In the prose section of the beginning of Section 3 of Book 2, Helen expresses feeling closer to the inscriptions than "the instructed scribe," for her "the secret of the stone writing is repeated in natural or human symbol." She wonders how she came to know the vulture to make the picture of it: "as if God made the picture and matched it / with a living hieroglyph" (*Helen in Egypt* 156).

Yet all is not unproblematic. When she has full command of the language, God's anger is aroused: "What his (God's) accusation made me / Isis, forever with that Child, / the Hawk Horus." Her rebellious but at the same time autonomous selfhood resists the powerful and the omnipotent: "I was not instructed, but I 'read' the script / I read the writing when he (God) seized my thought." With Achilles on her side,

referring to the knowledge she has acquired, she cries: “they were mine not his / mine all the ships, / mine all the thousand petals of the rose / mine, all the lily petals” (*Helen in Egypt* 144).

Mine all the lily petals: what a glorious victory for the once acrid poet-to-be! Feminist critics such as Alice Suskin Ostriker and Paula Bennet, and the woman poet Adrianne Rich assert that women poets, after going through certain stages of emotional and intellectual growth, reach poetic maturity. They find their own language, a language freed of the dicta of logocentric male discourse. Evidently, that is what must have happened to H.D. The emotional imagist under the umpire of male “masters” developed into a mature artist celebrating poetic creativity in women, ensconced in a Grecian mask.

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