

1981

## Reading H.D.'s "Helios and Athene"

Adalaide Morris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Morris, Adalaide. "Reading H.D.'s "Helios and Athene"." *The Iowa Review* 12.2 (1981): 155-163. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2714>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## Reading H.D.'s "Helios and Athene" · *Adalaide Morris*

H.D.'S SIGNATURE, like her poems, is an energy bundle: a seed, a cocoon, a wrapped mystery. The initials condense the birthname, Hilda Doolittle, which in 1886 anchored her as daughter of Helen Wolle Doolittle, member of a prominent mystic Moravian family, and Charles Leander Doolittle, Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Her writings construct from history and mythology a series of selves which successively extend the figure of her initials: Helmsman, Huntress, Hippolytus, Hippolyta, Hermes, Hermione, Helios, Heliodora, and, throughout, her mother's namesource, Helen: Helen *Dentritis* (of the Trees), Helen of Sparta, Helen of Troy, and, at the center of her most complex and extended identification, Helen of Egypt. Each "Hermetic Definition," as the initial-bearing title of a late poem suggests, is a momentary manifestation of the mystery of identity, a butterfly released from the anagram, cryptogram, little box of her signature.

The signature was at first qualified by a poetic affiliation: "H.D., Imagiste." The poems it signed were until recently H.D.'s best known work, the brilliant imagist poems which began appearing in 1913. Cited by movement theorists as representing quintessential imagist qualities, these poems filled her first volume, *Sea Garden* (1916), and appeared prominently in each of the four successive movement anthologies. The imagists' resolve to strip poetry of what Ezra Pound called "slush" left their work laconic: hard, dry, factual, accurate, freshly recorded perceptions. H.D.'s imagist work has a radiant spareness. In these poems, pools quiver like sea-fish, sea-grass tangles with shore-grass, and wind-driven flowers drag up from the sand a bright and acrid fragrance.

In 1920, when she wrote "Helios and Athene," H.D.'s imagist period was over. The harsh years just preceding provided material which eluded imagist formulations and compressions, material she would work and re-work throughout her life. In London through most of World War I, H.D. had suffered a series of losses: in 1915, she gave birth to a stillborn child, the miscarriage caused, she felt, by the shock of the *Lusitania's* sinking; in 1916, her husband, Richard Aldington, entered the war with

a passion which by 1917 had estranged them permanently; in 1918, her brother (and other self) Gilbert was killed in action in France, a loss that killed her father the following year; and finally, in 1919, H.D., so ill from double pneumonia that her landlady predicted immediate death, gave birth to a daughter, Perdita.

The story of H.D.'s resurgence begins with a young writer's response to *Sea Garden*. Winifred Ellerman, soon to take the name Bryher, came on H.D.'s work in the midst of the war. "There will always be one book among all others that makes us aware of ourselves," she wrote; "for me, it is *Sea Garden*. . . . I began the morning and ended the day repeating the poems." Bryher's passionate self-recognition in H.D.'s work became, when she knocked on her door, an equally intense recognition of the author: "The door opened and I started in surprise," Bryher recounts. "I had seen the face before, on a Greek statue or in some indefinable territory of the mind."<sup>1</sup>

Though she had never been there, H.D.'s poetry was saturated with the landscape, history, language, and mythology of Greece. Greece was, she says later in phrasing which echoes Bryher's, "the land, spiritually of my predilection, geographically of my dreams."<sup>2</sup> A territory of the mind, a geography of dreams, a recognized affinity—everything was in place for the interchange which occurred in spring 1919 when Bryher visited H.D. in the final stages of her illness and pregnancy. The words, Bryher reports, "seemed to come from somewhere beyond my brain":

I was so alarmed by her appearance that I could only stumble through an itinerary of places. I have just found you, suppose I lose you, was the thought running through my head. . . . "If I could walk to Delphi," H.D. whispered with an intensity that I knew I was seeing for the first time, "I should be healed."

"I will take you to Greece as soon as you are well."<sup>3</sup>

All commitments were kept: H.D. survived, Bryher negotiated the trains, steamers, and difficult postwar permissions, and, in the spring of 1920 they began the trip which generated not only "Helios and Athene" but, just after, on the island of Corfu, a vision which seems to have determined the course of H.D.'s poetic and spiritual development.

H.D. and Bryher traveled first to Athens and then set sail for Delphi, Apollo's shrine and their journey's main objective. For over one thousand years, from the 6th century B.C., pilgrims had brought their pain and

confusion to Delphi, and Apollo's oracle—as history, legend, and mythology record—had responded with miraculously prophetic skill. H.D.'s determination to visit Delphi positioned her within this ancient tradition. Consciously or not, it seems clear that what she desired from her pilgrimage was prophecy: instruction about the sources of her survival, assurance of her vocation, perhaps even indication of her poetic direction.

What an immense disappointment, then, it must have been for H.D. and Bryher to be informed that it was impossible for two ladies alone, so soon after the war, to travel the dangerous mountain roads. Unable to disembark at Itea as planned, they were forced to sail on past Delphi to Corfu. But in Corfu something amazing happened. H.D. and Bryher in their hotel bedroom underwent an experience that both in substance and in form stood in place of a session with the Delphic oracle. It was a vision which both predicted and enacted a transcendence for H.D., a rebirth out of the ruins of World War I into a new spiritual dimension, the prophetic capacities from which H.D.'s greatest work emerges.

“Helios and Athene” is the meditative preparation for this revelation. Written in Athens, just before the journey past Delphi, the poem interrupts the generally placid, decorative, at times incantatory verse which just precedes and, for a while, follows it. In its long, rapt prose lines, H.D. has taken new and heretical models: the accreting structure and metrical thickening and thinning of the phrases recall Whitman, and the lilies, birds, and wise serpent recall Matthew and Luke, associations reinforced by the biblical arrangement of the verse units. Its most heretical aspect, however, is the stretch of its anti-imagist project. “Helios and Athene” is not an objective formulation of perception: it is impassioned mythology and history, biography and psychology, aesthetics, epistemology, and metaphysics.

Reading “Helios and Athene” is as rigorous a process as reading H.D.'s late long poems. As in decoding an inscription on a partially erased palimpsest or interpreting a particularly radiant and recalcitrant dream, the reader needs both patience and inspiration, both the skills of research and the arts of intuition. Surrounded by the labors of those H.D. calls “the whole tribe of academic Grecians”—tomes on the Delphic myth and its origin, the Delphic oracle and its pronouncements, pamphlets on the politics of the Greek city-states, debates over the reconstruction of the

lost statues of Phidias, and essays with crackly pages and titles like “The Hermeneutics of the Eleusinian Mysteries”—the H.D. reader becomes, ready or not, a candidate for initiation.

The three bodies of knowledge one needs to read “Helios and Athene” involve Apollo/Helios, Athene, and Demeter. Like a good imagist in search of concision and pictorial clarity, H.D. makes Apollo, intellectualized deity of solar light, into Helios, the personified Greek sun. For the Greeks, Helios was not abstracted light but shining energy; he had little mythology beyond that which helps us see his rising and setting above us. Drawn in his swift chariot, he sheds light everywhere: his eyes flash from his golden helmet; rays glint from his breastplate; draped in wind-whipped gauze, he courses across the sky from eastern swamp to western darkness. While the shape of his name draws Helios close to H.D.’s obsessions (Hellas, Helen, her own initialed identity), the concreteness of the image gives new immediacy to the poetic and prophetic aspects of Apollo’s mythology, aspects which H.D. appropriates for Helios. “God who is light, who is song, who is music, is mantic, is prophetic,” she summarizes in *HERmione*, “that is what Helios means, a god who is prophetic.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout “Helios and Athene” he is identified with Delphi and its oracle.

If one pole of the poem’s spiritual territory is the enlightened, poetic, prophetic Delphi, the other is Athens, seat of wise and powerful governance, manifested here in Athene—not just the abstracted Athene, however, but the precise, forty-foot-high, gold-and-ivory statue, now vanished but once the most sacred, the most costly, and technically the most difficult of all the sculptures Phidias executed for the Parthenon. H.D. describes her with fresh, visionary fullness, as if the statue rose before her eyes. This is Athene Parthenos, the virgin Athene, her virginity signifying not abstinence but intactness: the entire-in-herself, the powerfully inviolate protector of the state. One hand rests on her shield; the other, outstretched, holds an eight-foot-tall image of Nike, the winged Victory. Her rich hair combs back over her temples; her eyes gaze forward with a brilliant thoughtfulness; strength flows through her broad-shouldered, slender-hipped stance. Though her calm seems opposed to the wheeling intensity of Helios, H.D. emphasizes their complementarity. As the stability of Athens was crucial to the survival of Delphi, Athene

was necessary to Helios, a fact H.D. knew not only from history and mythology but also from immediate experience: the poet survives, if at all, in a precarious alliance of ecstasy and steadiness. As the poem puts it, "If Athene's citadel broke, Helios' temple crumbled. If Helios yielded to her, Athene herself was undone."

Through the winged Nike, the reach of the high-crested helmet, even the colossal upsweep of the statue itself, all energy in the figure of Athene rises. Balancing this ascent is the force embodied in the third presence in "Helios and Athene": Demeter at Eleusis. For over one thousand years, until roughly the same period as the Delphic oracle's collapse, the Mysteries at Eleusis enacted a drama of descent: Demeter's search for her vanished daughter, the lost half of herself, the ravished Persephone. So sacred and powerful were the Eleusinian rites that not one of the initiates—in some years numbering 30,000, a figure equivalent to the entire Athenian population—left a clear record of the proceedings. They seem, however, to have functioned much like the ritual at Delphi: under conditions that were kept strictly secret, after fasting, cleansing, and devotions that proved their worth across centuries, in sacred forms which it would have been godless to deny, the vision came again and again. Each initiate, possessed by and enacting the spirit of Demeter, witnessed Persephone's return from the underworld. This was loss restored, life regained, and light risen once again from darkness. It was faith in the possibilities of this moment that supported the linked worlds of Athens and Delphi.

So far, then, the poem superimposes three images. Like three scenes in a dream, they are dramatic, compact, interconnected, and haunting. The stories' most striking common element, the focal point on which H.D. makes them converge, is the serpent which in each embodies the profound forces of the subterranean. The poem begins with the serpent which, in Phidias's statue, "does not crouch at Athene's feet" but, in a rising twelve-foot-high s-shape, "lifts a proud head under the shelter of her shield." In her mythology, the serpent was said to have sprung from an attempted rape by Hephaestus. His seed fell to the ground, and from it rose a son who had at first either completely or partially the form of a serpent. Athene preserved and nurtured him, placing him, as she later placed Ion, Helios's son, in a basket encircled by serpents. He grew to be Erichthonius who, rising from violence and darkness, founded Athens and the worship of Athena.

Delphi's founding was also connected with a serpent, the Python, monstrous creature, death-dealer and chaos-demon, guardian of the sacred springs. Slain by Apollo/Helios, the serpent yielded the prophetic powers which named and flowed through Apollo's seer, the Pythia. In the prophetic session at the Delphic temple, the Pythia, intermediary between Apollo and the questioner, having fasted and prayed, mounted the tripod from which she spoke. She was attended by priests and temple-guardians, but the ceremony was simple: the consultant asked, the Pythia listened, and Apollo illumined her soul so that she knew the future and could, in her own words, reveal her vision to the petitioner. As talismans on her tripod, the Python's bones, teeth, and hide summoned the powers of the unconscious, the instincts which prepared the Pythia for prophecy.

There are countless myths of dragon-serpents which, like the Python, guard access to subterranean springs, to sources of knowledge which, subdued and used properly, turn darkness, disorders, and death into enlightenment, order, and resurrection. Everywhere in the Eleusinian rituals, the serpent is used to summon this dark, prophetic, rejuvenating power. Carried in a basket by Demeter's priestesses, entwining the winged chariot of the initiate, or carved in high relief on Demeter's altars, the serpent, "marked with a pattern as exquisite as the grain of the field-lily petal," embodies the great secret of resurrection and metamorphosis.

It is this, the serpent's knowledge, that H.D. sought in Greece. She needed to know how to bring order out of outrage, how to turn pain to prophecy, how, like Persephone, to rise from the depths of her darkness. If Parts I and III of "Helios and Athene" give us three talismans, three scenes to initiate us into the magic of the serpent, Parts II and IV suggest a method of knowing, embodying, and interpreting these scenes: an epistemology, an aesthetics, and a hermeneutics. Though she sends us ransacking reference works, H.D. everywhere subordinates fact-finding intellect to the possessed/possessing powers of imagination: "Let daemons possess us! Let us terrify like Erinyes, the whole tribe of academic Grecians!" It is worth remembering that Erinyes are, like Medusa on Athene's aegis, snaky-locked: bands of serpents encircle their heads and in their hands they bear snakes like torches. Their process of knowing, H.D. would remind us, is not through abstract thought but through passionate contact: embodiment and enactment.

Art—a statue, a play, a meditation like “Helios and Athene”—helps us do this. It is intercession. It is, H.D. reiterates, a medium, a link, a go-between, a means of approach. It stands between us and those powers which, unmastered, would overwhelm our too frail understandings. Like the Pythia, art joins speaker and spirit, question and answer; like Persephone, it circulates between loss and restoration, lack and amplitude; like Erichthonius, it leads us to the powerfully nurturing Athene. Such an art exacts a response—a responsibility—from its viewer. Where the artist ceases, in H.D.’s formulation, there the soul of the initiate must begin. The statue, poem, scene, or dream is, in her wonderful metaphor, but “a ledge of rock, from which a great bird steps as he spreads his wings.”

The first part of “Helios and Athene” ends with the admonition “Consider the birds. Consider your own soul.” The great bird’s spread wings in Part II dissolve in the last section into the image of the winged Nike, cradled in Athene’s hand, symbol of her mastery, symbol of her soul, and also, in an interesting and complex extension, a symbol of her centrality. In H.D.’s trinity, Athene is one of three, but at the end she becomes also three-in-one: her androgynous solitude combines Demeter’s altruism and Helios’s glorious self-absorption. This was a position which had great appeal for H.D. She was always fascinated by edges and intersections, and the sexual border between male and female was no exception. In her writing, she spoke as Hermes and as Hermione, as Hippolytus and Hippolyta equally. In her life, she maintained dual allegiances to men and women: to Ezra Pound and Frances Gregg, to Aldington or to Kenneth McPherson and, throughout her life, to Bryher. Always, in life, in art, or in mythology, she was compelled by the image of the two-in-one, the brother-sister unit: Hilda and Gilbert, Balzac’s Séraphita and Séraphitus, the Egyptian Isis and Osiris, or, here, Zeus’s children, Demeter and Helios. Athene in this poem is made to link qualities traditionally named “male” and “female.” “Love for Athene,” H.D. summarizes—thinking, as she always does, across many layers at once—“is the surrender to neither, the merging and welding of both, the conquering in herself of each element, so that the two merge in the softness and tenderness of the mother and the creative power and passion of the male.” This empowering duality is perfectly figured by Nike’s two wings, wings which working together



lift, balance, and transport her. With this “double passion” H.D.’s meditation in “Helios and Athene” closes.

The vision in Athens is completed by the vision in Corfu where H.D. foresees her own entry into prophetic power. The Corfu vision is structured like a hermetic re-creation of the Delphic session. In it, H.D., attended by Bryher, is at once questioner and Pythia. As she describes it in *Tribute to Freud*, the vision came like a more orderly “Helios and Athene”: a series of intense scenes which rise, one by one, with luminous, enigmatic clarity. H.D. compares them to playing cards, transfers, or slides. They are images traced in light which she, filled like the Pythia with prophetic illumination, projects outward onto the bedroom wall. Of the symbols, the majority recombine elements from “Helios and Athene”: there is the warrior who has “a distinctly familiar line about the head with the visored cap,” an abstracted androgynous figure who recalls not only her soldier-brother Gilbert but also the helmeted Athene; there is the Delphic tripod, familiar symbol of poetry and prophecy; there is a series of *s* or half-*s* shapes curved like the lifted serpent under Athene’s shield; and, finally, there is the winged Victory, Nike, who in “Helios and Athene” represented the androgynous soul of Athene but now, fully possessed, becomes for H.D. “my own especial sign or part of my hieroglyph.” The vision was an intense strain and, as H.D.’s part of it ends, she thinks, “I must hold on to this one word. I thought, Nike, Victory.’ I thought, ‘Helios, the sun.’” And then, exhausted, “I shut off, ‘cut out’ before the final picture, before (you might say) the explosion took place.”

Once more Bryher comes to the rescue. She had seen nothing until H.D. closed her eyes, but then, suddenly, miraculously, she herself witnesses the last resonant image: “a circle like the sun-disk and a figure within the disk; a man, she thought, was reaching out to draw the image of a woman (my Nike) into the sun beside him.”<sup>5</sup> In a moment which will have repercussions for H.D.’s subsequent work, the paradigm of the Delphic oracle is significantly transmuted. Athene Nike, the soul of the poet, becomes one with Helios. The woman, seen before as a type of Pythia or earthly channel for Apollo’s vision, is now herself assumed into the disk of Apollo/Helios. No longer the speaker of someone else’s vision, she too is a sun, a fully empowered source.

H.D.’s post-World War II poetry accomplishes the prophecy embedded

in the twin visions which occurred in Greece in 1920. In her long poems, *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*, H.D., like the Eleusinian Demeter, would witness rebirth out of devastating loss. Like Athene, she would bring power and wisdom to bear on the preservation of civilized life. And, finally, like the oracle at Delphi, she would connect us to a force that feels lost yet, as she came to know in Athens and Corfu, remains deeply within us: our own spiritual capacities, our ability to make the serpent the instrument not of darkness but of light, song, music, and life.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>*The Heart to Artemis* (London: Collins, 1963), pp. 187-88.

<sup>2</sup>*Tribute to Freud* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>*Heart to Artemis*, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup>*HERmione* (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 110.

<sup>5</sup>*Tribute to Freud*, pp. 45-56.