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Introduction: Writing

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Introduction: Writing · *Adalaide Morris*

OUR H.D. CENTENNIAL ISSUE of *The Iowa Review* brings together a disparate group of women and men whose creative life H.D. has touched and even transformed. Some of the writers, like Perdita Schaffner, her daughter, and Silvia Dobson, her longtime friend, were part of H.D.'s extended family; others—including her cataloguer at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, two of her publishers, her biographer, and several of her sharpest readers—did not know H.D. and may scarcely know each other but are, nonetheless, joined by and for their connections to this stranger. The forces that turn readers into poets, essayists, biographers, or critics often include a fierce attentiveness that can make a distant writer's rhythms seem more familiar to us than the rhythms of those with whom we live day-by-day, side-by-side. The focus of this issue is the charged connections that have made H.D. an agent of confusion, exhilaration, and change in the lives of those to whom her work has been crucial.

In addition to her own letters from World Wars I and II, the missing second chapter of *The Gift*, and the reflections she entitled "H.D. by *Delia Alton*," the issue contains poems and essays that testify to H.D.'s continuing influence. If one of her accomplishments was to perfect the genre of the tribute, it is fitting that these poems and essays pay the sincerest form of flattery. Like her tributes, they are partial and motivated mixtures of biography and autobiography. Along with the poetic meditations of Robert Duncan's great *H.D. Book* and the feminist essay of homage as developed by writers like Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker,¹ these writings ground their spiritual, aesthetic, and political vision in the particulars of a life. In this and in reaching back to claim a woman writer as precursor, they undo two of the abstractions that anchored my graduate education: the idea that great poetry is somehow isolated from life and the assumption that it is written almost exclusively by men.

Literary scholars of my generation were trained in departments dedicated to the disinterested study of what Yeats called "monuments of unaging intellect." The professors were male, the bulk of the students were male, the authors we studied were male: there was nothing, in fact, to interrupt the hypothesis that intellect itself was male. Exceptions merely

reinforced the rule. The few women on the faculty were mostly tenured assistant professors consigned to freshman composition, and the one or two women poets on our syllabi were eccentric and suspicious. Our Emily Dickinson, for example, was not the tough thinker who, in Adrienne Rich's phrase, "chose to have it out on her own premises"² but a half-cracked spinster poetess, and H.D., if we read her at all, was not the author whose consistently experimental work crosses five decades and includes seven volumes of poems, an epic, four prose tributes, ten novels, numerous short stories, several autobiographical meditations, and a corpus of film criticism, reviews, and translations but the author of a few bright, brief imagist lyrics who was important largely because she was associated with important men, men like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, D. H. Lawrence, and Sigmund Freud.

Starting in 1969, with Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women*, feminist scholars set out exuberantly to apply perceptions developed outside academia to central academic concerns. Early enterprises included raids on bastions of literary criticism that pretended to apolitical objectivity, missions to search out and discredit sexual stereotyping in literature, and forays to find and establish lost, neglected, mis- or displaced women writers. We took the configurations that monuments of unaging intellect pose as natural, neutral, and inevitable and found them to be artificial, motivated, and amenable to change. In our alertness to mystifications, we were suspicious; in our concern with relations of power, we were political; and in our vision of vaster, richer, more egalitarian possibilities, we were utopian. Thus, the battle lines were drawn, and in 1979 when Annette Kolodny entitled her observations on the theory, practice, and politics of feminist literary criticism "Dancing Through the Minefield," she was reflecting on the risk.³

Kolodny's "mines" are the encased explosives planted by mainstream critics to destroy the adversary's vehicles and personnel. These mines have frequently enough gone off, but neither feminist critics nor their vehicles have been destroyed. Feminist scholarship has, in fact, become one of the most successful and revolutionary enterprises of the past decade. It has radically expanded the possibilities, changed the questions, and altered the procedures of literary criticism. Even the stance of the speaker has been complicated, for if feminist critics still must dodge labels like "harpy" and "shrew," sympathetic male critics now step carefully around the personae

readily available to men, personae that in Cary Nelson's wry list include "the benign paterfamilias, the cornered rat, the condescending authority, the defender of the sacred, the guilty supplicant."⁴

Because any criticism that challenges a dominant cultural practice is charged, feminist critics will continue to expose themselves to repercussions, but I would like to suggest that it is time to complicate Kolodny's metaphor in order to capture the less defensive aspects of our enterprise. Feminist critics who have "danced" their way through the "minefield" have created a terrain that might now more properly be considered a *mind-field*, a region of complex intellectual and cultural possibilities. This mind-field has been central to contemporary readings of H.D.

The first major feminist essay on H.D. was a short piece in *College English* entitled "Who Buried H.D.? A Poet, Her Critics, and Her Place in 'The Literary Tradition.'"⁵ The assumption behind Susan Stanford Friedman's title is that H.D.'s work, like that of many women writers, was not simply "lost," "neglected," or "forgotten." These are benign terms, terms we use for misplaced car keys or bus change, and they cover over the fact that "the literary tradition" is a constantly tended, constantly chosen social construction, not something given but something made through continuous small acts of exclusion.

As Friedman shows, several interlocking procedures were used to bury H.D. The simplest was to tag her as an imagist so that the same few brilliantly compact poems written between 1913 and 1917 were anthologized, read, and extolled to the exclusion of her later masterworks. If imagism is the root of modernist poetry, H.D.'s early poems were its seed, as Cyrena N. Pondrom has convincingly argued.⁶ In their fascination with the men H.D. knew, however, modernist critics turned to her, if at all, tangentially or even anecdotally, seeing her as Pound's girlfriend, Williams' walking companion, Aldington's wife, or Lawrence's muse.

Because women in our culture tend to be the *bearers* rather than the *makers* of meaning,⁷ what has counted is not what the heroine does but what she stands for (love, beauty, betrayal) or stimulates (the poem, the passion, the Trojan War). Among the major purveyors of this ideology were the close friends and colleagues who exerted tremendous pressure on H.D.'s early career. When Pound told H.D., "You are a poem though your poem's naught,"⁸ he meant she should be a proper muse and leave the writing to him. When D. H. Lawrence told her, "Stick to the woman

speaking. How can you know what Orpheus feels? It's your part to be woman,"⁹ he meant a proper lady would leave the heroic parts to him.

Like H.D.'s fellow poets, the first scholars to peruse her work assigned the orphic roles to her male companions. The gender stereotyping that informs their readings is visible in the contrasting pairs of adjectives they selected for H.D. and her fellow poets, for the same critics who extolled Pound's heroic egoism and high energy found H.D. self-preoccupied and high-strung while others who elevated the religious, philosophical, and linguistic explorations of Pound, Williams, and Eliot condemned H.D.'s parallel quests as inappropriate, obscure, or abstract. This scholarly double standard, of course, reinforced H.D.'s confinement to imagism, promoted further anecdotal and reductive readings, obscured her stature as a major poet, and allowed modernism to continue to be formulated as a homogeneous male movement.

The response of feminist critics has been a twofold reconstitution of literary traditions: first, a rethinking of the theory of modernism, its politics, poetics, and use of mythology and history; second, the formulation of a separate women's counter-tradition. Both approaches insert H.D. into literary history, but the first is integrationist, searching for overriding similarities between male and female writers, while the second is separatist, searching for differences. For a writer like H.D., both approaches are necessary. Her alignment with Pound, Williams, Lawrence, and Eliot helps us see her specifically modernist desire to reshape culture, mythology, history, and language according to the vision of the artist-initiate; her alignment with Sappho, Stein, and Woolf helps us comprehend the specifically female construction of her vision and psychodynamics of her growth.

After a writer's work is completed, survival depends on a community of readers who come to care deeply about the words the writer has put on the page. In my experience, H.D.'s readers are remarkably responsive and tenacious. Students who first encounter her work in a class stray beyond the syllabus, stay past the hour, and then start reading groups for the following semester; writers who read her pursue through her poems the openings Denise Levertov has called "doors, ways in, tunnels through"¹⁰; and scholars who turn to contemplate her work stay to learn both from her and from each other.

Texts are always places of intersection, sites at which reader, writer,

and the surrounding culture coincide and collaborate. More than any writer I know, however, H.D. gives readers the sense of thinking not *about* her but somehow *with* her. She seems to take us along: "*We are voyagers,*" she says, "*discoverers/of the not-known,//the unrecorded.*"¹¹ Because her voyages breach so many borders, what H.D. discovers and records challenges the maps by which we have customarily charted our course. It is this that makes the encounter with her texts so exhilarating: the words she put on the page have the capacity to change the lives we lead.

As poets have always known, the relation between word and world is close, so close that change in one realm necessitates a change in the other. If conventional language maps conventional terrain, voyages into the unknown and not-yet-recorded will generate writing that is, in some way, eccentric, extravagant, or experimental. Customary language no longer suffices, and we must renew old words or create new ones. New or renewed words enable new habits and actions, habits and actions that will then, in their turn, generate new signs, new linguistic possibilities.¹² This unending circulation between language and life gives H.D.'s texts their potential to revolutionize not only our words but also our worlds.

For many of the writers in this issue, it is precisely this interchange between language and life that has made reading H.D. a transformative experience. The poems and essays we have gathered each emerge from some point at which H.D.'s words intersected and altered a writer's world. As tributes to the profound power of literary texts to change our ways of thinking, feeling, and saying, we believe they form a fitting testimonial to H.D. on the occasion of her 100th birthday.

The Iowa Review is happy to join *Poesis*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Sage-trieb*, and *Agenda* in presenting a special H.D. centennial issue. Many people have contributed to the production of this tribute. For their skill in all the arts involved in turning typescripts into finished pages, I would like to thank Christina Davis, Peter Junker, Ann Reckling, Mary Stefaniak, and Thomas Tyrer. For his creativity, support, and unending patience, I thank David Hamilton, Editor of *The Iowa Review*. For help with manuscript material, I am grateful to Diana Collecott, Rebecca Faery, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Louis Silverstein. And, finally, for their hospitality during the gathering of much of this issue, I thank Jay Semel and Lorna Olson of The University of Iowa's University House.

NOTES

1. For listings and summaries of the published chapters of Duncan's *The H.D. Book*, see Mary S. Mathis and Michael King, "An Annotated Bibliography of Works About H.D.: 1969-1985," *H.D.: Woman and Poet*, ed. Michael King (Orono: University of Maine, 1986). For examples of the feminist essay of homage, see Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 157-83; Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora," *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers and Artists Write About Their Work on Women*, ed. Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, Sara Ruddick (Boston: Beacon, 1984), pp. 430-447; and Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Biographer and Subject: A Critical Connection," *Between Women*, pp. 397-411.
2. Adrienne Rich, "I Am in Danger—Sir—," *Necessities of Life: Poems, 1962-1965* (New York: Norton, 1966).
3. Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 6 (1980): 1-25.
4. Cary Nelson, "Envoys of Otherness: Difference and Continuity in Feminist Criticism," *For Alma Mater: Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship*, ed. Paula A. Treichler, Cheris Kramarae, and Beth Stafford (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press), p. 91.
5. *College English* 36 (1975): 801-14.
6. Pondrom, "H.D. and the Origins of Imagism," *Sagetrieb* 4 (1985): 73-97.
7. This tendency is explored by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6-18.
8. *HERmione* (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 212.
9. *Bid Me to Live (A Madrigal)* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 51.
10. Denise Levertov, "H.D.: An Appreciation," *Poetry* 100 (1962): 182.
11. *Trilogy* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 59.
12. My thinking about language and experience is informed by Teresa de Lauretis' book *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).