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H.D.'s Flaws · *Paul Smith*

IT'S PROBABLY INEVITABLE that H.D. should have become something of a paradigmatic figure as a woman writer and in discussions of women writers' relation to the anglophone modernist tradition. This is, on one level, because she is one of very few women writers in the early twentieth century whose work has been automatically (almost) sucked in to the masculinist canon—there to be celebrated or criticized, loved or despised, but represented just the same. And it may also be partly because very few women writers of the time had such strong connections (troubled ones in H.D.'s case, of course) with the supposed grand masters of modernism—Pound, Williams, and Lawrence in particular—and with the somewhat precious and preposterous “artistic scene” and social life that attended modernism's embarkation and passage.

To be sure, these modernist credentials and the condition of being, as I put it, “sucked into the canon” are not necessarily the most important or even the most rewarding questions to be bringing up in relation to H.D. After all, this is a writer around whose work so many other propositions and arguments can be made. If what I have to say here ends up not repeating those other kinds of claim, it's not that I'm unaware of them or disagree with them. I'm more interested, instead, in looking at how some claims about H.D.'s life and work bear upon a particular set of relationships and their concomitant political effects: relationships, for example, between H.D. and her work and the idea of a canon, on one hand, and to the manners of both traditional masculinist and feminist criticism on the other; and thus, also, the relationship of feminism to the apparatus of male domination (like the canon, insofar as that is part of the mechanisms historically installed by men on a terrain which feminists effectively contest, namely literary studies).

My questions are to be construed around H.D. and her work because for me that work has been salutary. As a student of modernism I've often felt her work as a kind of surprise or as a special treat within a species of writing which I found both problematic and dull—and very often offensive.¹ Without ever really meaning to, but submitting to a kind of necessity, I've tended to think of H.D.'s writing as in some way (or in a number of ways) paradigmatic. A perhaps churlish disdain for high

modernism and for what I think to find in it has led me to privilege H.D.'s work for its ostensible difference. A woman writing with a highly elaborated concern to ask about the relations between language and the convolutions of sexed identity. A woman whose most difficultly achieved work constitutes an instance where masculinist models of writing can be seen undergoing revision. A woman whose complex *oeuvre* is filled with accounts of the interface between preestablished masculine power and emergent feminist power.

Not that I think these qualities, these differences, to be the whole story—although, I sometimes feel with some dismay, they can come to constitute the whole story for some feminist critics who also take H.D.'s work as paradigmatic. Perhaps as a result of being unable to undo totally the privilege and the habits of being a male (critic), I've always wanted to see another story too: the story of what might be described as H.D.'s complicity. That is, the cause of her work (its origin and its tendentiousness) seems to me to reside often quite determinedly within the systems of power and with the empowered men which characterize modernism. Many of the demerits that I take the male modernists to exhibit are not unequivocally revised in H.D.'s work: they are also to a certain degree sustained, or replicated. Thus there is, it seems to me, a kind of double function to H.D.'s writing: it is, by her own account, "bound up"² with (and by) exemplars of masculine power, and tries not only to transcend them but to equal them.

Hers is a project which thus leads quite clearly to a political issue and bespeaks a dilemma which, for all that it is currently most visible in and through the efforts of the women's movement, is common to *any* contestatory or oppositional practice. The problem can be stated in many different ways but it might be put as follows: first, to what extent are the powers of dominant groups and of all the institutional paraphernalia around those powers *enviable* and *accessible*; and second, to what extent are they just *despicable* and *dispensable*? It is not wise, perhaps, for any oppositional impulse to rush to conclusions to such questions. Rather, an equivocation around those problems is a necessary component of contestation itself. To say this is to allow, at least, for the inevitable difficulty of real historical conditions. Since social and political relations are not simple, the temptation either simply to adopt the strategies and modes of already instituted and proven power or simply to dismiss those strategies and

modes is a utopian lure. This is not to say that there can be no use in the utopian urge toward either direction; it's just that neither way can be *the* way.

Feminism has, of course, made such questions, such accommodations, the nub of much of its debate—these problems have been a crucial part of the women's movement for about the last twenty years. Equally, they have been part of many other struggles, in this country and elsewhere, for ages. Of course, to point this out is not to deny the specificity of women's struggles, but it is to recognize that the strategies of resistance and empowerment are not unique to feminism. Wherever resistance is practiced, questions of tactical empowerment inevitably come up.

Saying this in the context of H.D. and her texts may seem a little odd to some. What I have called the double function in/of H.D.'s texts does not always seem to allow them to be described as oppositional. A consideration of, for instance, the relationships with men with which her writing often seems obsessed does not obviously lead toward any sense of feminist empowerment. In fact, one kind of reading of H.D.'s work would conclude that it's ultimately debilitated by those relationships, or by the spectre of masculine power (Pound's, Lawrence's, Lord Dowding's, Freud's, etc.) that it continually inscribes in itself. Such a reading (which would establish H.D. as, in the words of a male colleague, "the poetess of penis envy") is not so much wholly inappropriate as it is distressingly familiar and effective. To be sure, it is a reading born of a lack of political sympathy, of a certain unwillingness in relation to feminism—and, finally, one which refuses much of the strength of H.D.'s texts. But equally, it must be admitted, it is the epitome of the kinds of reading which have assured H.D.'s place in the patriarchal family of the canon—and which have consigned her to the dubious status of sister, or even of maid in that household, awarded points for trying hard but never credited with an independent existence.

It's interesting, by the way, to compare H.D.'s fate in that regard with the fortunes of two other women writers of the era who both have something like the same "connections": Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein. Neither of these is really in the same position as H.D. in relation to the masculinist canon, but each does have her own existence there: Woolf's position is by now virtually unimpeachable; Stein's is secured by dint of the fact that her writing is in the end masculinist and, playing by the right

avant-garde rules, safe enough despite its difficulty. But H.D. is not fully acceptable in the way that both of these women are. This difference may have something to do with the biographically attested sexuality of each of them—H.D.’s being in a sense more of a *mystery* than that of the other two and thus more susceptible of complex and contradictory accommodations on the part of masculinist arbiters of taste (literary and sexual!). Those maneuvers result in an evaluation of H.D.’s work as in some way insufficient but tolerated.

This is a view which I think can be discerned in almost any male writer’s dealings with H.D. Most recently I found it replicated in an English writer’s review of Barbara Guest’s biography, *Herself Defined*.³ Peter Ackroyd ends his review with

. . . and in this biography Ms Guest has captured the ‘feel’ of a life which was fragmented, sometimes desperate and eventually unfulfilled.

It’s true, of course, that Ackroyd’s adjectives here describe H.D.’s “life” rather than, strictly speaking, her texts. But they are the predictable accompaniment for the terms which often describe H.D.’s actual texts. A few of Ackroyd’s remarks: “short and rather toneless lines”; “her fiction is actually more interesting than her later poetry, although even this is something of an acquired taste [!]”; “flat and disjunctive prose”; “a somewhat whimsical manner which relies on a private network of associations and perceptions. She does not seem to think of or care about any audience”; and so on. And all these failings or difficulties for the male reader are, apparently, “in part the result of [a] self-obsession” (women’s threatening and fatal narcissistic flaw, re-presented here, as always, in explanation of their weakness); and they are “also related to the facts of a life in which she was cocooned, subsidised and protected” (a description of a kind of life which women are constantly expected to accept, but which can be turned against them to confirm their weakness).

What’s emblematic about these comments (no more troublesome, probably, in Ackroyd’s case than in many others) is that the link proposed between H.D.’s life-as-a-woman and her writing-as-a-woman has very particular political consequences and arises from the kind of critical pre-suppositions which are always compatible with masculinist domination. I

want for the most part to put to one side this hoary old question — that of the validity of making a firm link between the “life” and the “work” — and simply point out that, so far as most male critics of H.D.’s work are concerned, that is a legitimate(d) and largely automatic link. In a very real historical sense it is one which has always allowed male critics to place women writers where they want them. In part, it’s the flaws of the life which give rise to the flaws of the writing.

A male critic who would be sympathetic to feminism might not necessarily have to abandon such methodological connections, but would, I think, have to recognize something about them if he were to accommodate a woman’s work in a sympathetic manner. In H.D.’s case, that is, he would have to recognize that both the supposed “flaws” of the life and the “flaws” of the writing are simultaneously produced by and productive of specific historical moments and modes of women’s oppression. It seems useless, that is, to try to criticize the work-as-a-result-of-the-life without at least identifying the sexual-political conditions from which it arose, without examining the tensions it maintains (its resistance *and* its complicity) with those conditions, and without thus recognizing the struggle of empowerment going on both within and without the texts.

Equally, it would not be too much to ask that the view of the work of art which lurks behind sentiments like Ackroyd’s be dispensed with. It is possible nowadays to consider that it is precisely in a text’s simultaneous “strengths” and “flaws” (in its contradictions, its fragmentation and lack of fulfillment, even in its desperation) that its import can be found. The old sense of the organic unity of the text and the demands for plenitude, symmetry, and teleological ambition are all caught up in notions of art which have continually claimed for it a transcendent relation to the everyday struggles of human existence. And those notions have, equally, been prominent among the multifarious bulwarks of masculinist privilege in relation to artistic production. Reading the text’s flaws back into the life (and presumably it’s possible to do such a reading the other way around as well) without examining the function of the life or its definition in relation to the forces which surround it ignores the text’s dialectical character. Such readings foreclose, then, not only on the social provenance of the text but also on the oscillatory and “borderline” nature of textuality itself.

And to say all this is to ignore what some might see as an even greater critical arrogance — the assumption that a judgment can be so summarily

made about the completeness of someone's life. It's tempting to ask how Ackroyd's comments jibe with the quotation from H.D. which ends Guest's book: "I think I did get what I was looking for from life and art." But beyond that, the bigger irony here is that Guest's biography consistently discourages all too easy (that is, masculinist) judgments about H.D. and her work. It is a book which, unlike some other attempts to recount H.D.'s "experience," is remarkable for its ability to sketch the details of her life without judgment, without making them fit precisely into a presignified moral schema, and without relating them to unreflexive and institutionalized notions about literature. Equally, it's a book which is clear about the double set of *implications* in H.D.'s life and work. That is to say, it clarifies H.D.'s implication in the world of the high modernists and their acolytes and also suggests what that implies about the work itself. It's never a question here of a straight reading of the life and the work together, but always a question of how the two are implicated. At any rate, Barbara Guest seems to be able to avoid suggesting that either the life or the work could or should have been other than they were/are; neither can be seen as teleological projects, to be summed up or turned to a neat closure; neither is internally consistent or even expected to be; and H.D. herself cannot be handed the entire blame (or even the praise) for the way those two things work out.

The jacket blurb to *Herself Defined* makes much of the fact that Guest is herself a poet and thus more nearly "attuned" or "sympathetic" to H.D. than one might normally expect a biographer to be. A certain suspicion is not unwarranted when such claims are made by publishers' mouthpieces, but in this case it may be that Guest's position as herself a woman writer *has* provided the "sympathy" through which to avoid the doctrinaire certainties about art which underpin masculine criticism and to drop the question about the ultimate value of H.D.'s work. This means, in effect, that the historical impulse of Guest's book takes some precedence over the purely literary. But when it's understood that the notion of the "purely literary" hides within itself both a set of assumptions and judgments about the nature of the work of art and also constitutes the rudiments of a machinery which has historically fed male domination of the literary terrain, Guest's tendency can come to be recognized as crucial.

The establishment of transcendent systems of value and the concomitant ranking of works within canonical formation constitute a central

mechanism in the production and reproduction of power. The maintenance of such a mechanism is perhaps even the sole *raison d'être* for literary studies in this day and age. Our contemporary guardians of "the tradition," some of the more vicious of them now ensconced in the appropriate sections of the Reagan administration, are probably more attuned to the ideological effects of literature and its institutions than are many actual literary critics and writers. In such a context the project of counterposing a women writers' tradition or canon to the one traditionally (and now) proffered is, obviously, crucial. It aims at opposing entrenched privilege and encourages empowerment for women writers and readers. It can also have the happy effect on male readers and writers of demystifying systems of power they have been used to inhabiting.

But for this male critic it can still seem strange to see just the content, as it were, of the apparatus changed without immediate reference to a goal of changing the apparatus itself and the structures of power which govern it. Filling in the gaps in our account of the tradition and making women writers present in history nourishes a certain kind of equality, perhaps, but does not always or necessarily address a critique to the prevailing power structures. Assuming that such a critique is regarded as necessary by feminism (an assumption which I hope I can make, on the grounds that what's fundamentally wrong with patriarchy is the way it *systematically* produces and reproduces its own power and thence very specific instances and kinds of oppression), it might well include a project to review both the advantages and disadvantages of having established this kind of equality as a goal in and of itself. If an understanding, some kind of blueprint, of patriarchal structures is required, then work like H.D.'s (and thus like Guest's) becomes doubly instructive according to what I've called its double function. It can not only be encouraging, but also act as the story of a struggle from which the *terms* of struggle can be abstracted. It's then through those abstractions that the *fundaments* of patriarchal power can be attacked.

What I'm talking about here is already enacted in some feminist work, of course. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* strikes me as an attempt to deal simultaneously with the question of establishing a women writers' tradition or canon (work which the two of them have extended in "their" recent Norton anthology) and the problem of women writers' often unresolved struggle, such as H.D.'s, with the structures of their oppression. Gubar and Gilbert explore, for instance, the lack of con-

fidence or the ambivalence about their work which the women in the emergent canon experience; this ambivalence is usually posed as something resulting from the difficult historical conditions under which their texts are produced. But in Gubar and Gilbert's account these texts are habitually called upon to rise above those conditions, or to be their resolution and thus to be a kind of sufficient triumph in themselves. Without ignoring the real asperity of the conditions from which women's writing has emerged, and without misrecognizing the difficulty of the struggle to speak and to be heard, I'd suggest that texts — whether they're by women or not — can *never simply* be taken as a kind of triumph over real conditions. They might be said to register in some way the struggle itself. But that struggle becomes secondary if the texts themselves are read as signs of having transcended the difficulties and contradictions produced in everyday life by systemic masculinism.

I don't mean here to be offering a correction of Gubar and Gilbert's project, nor to be warning committed feminists of their "errors." Part of what I'm saying, however, assumes the possibility that feminism as a thoroughgoing critique of masculinism will be *for men*, as well as for women, and in saying this I might well come athwart of some of feminism's aspects and projects. If this is to be the case, it seems nonetheless essential that men take the risk of it and involve themselves, perhaps not so nearly in the refunctioning of existing apparatus and structures, but more exactly in the critique of the assumption and reproduction of masculinist structures of power by other men. Thus in relation to a writer like H.D., where feminists such as Gubar and Gilbert might want to see the double function of the texts as ultimately the expression of an aspect of a woman writer's *consciousness*, male critics might do well to investigate the aspects of her texts where there is as it were a conjunction with recognizable masculinist suppositions and ideologies. For example, it could be suggested that what's often essentially important to H.D.'s texts is the nature of masculine power as it is pointed up by precisely H.D.'s *lack* of consciousness. Those moments when H.D. manages to find (as the vernacular goes) her original and authentic voice are intertwined, not just with the kind of ambivalence about her work's value which *Madwoman* explores, but equally with what can appear to be almost a willful ignorance of the complicity of her texts with masculinist authority (in whatever guises that presents itself).

Again, it's here that the double-edged quality of writing which is taken as oppositional might assert itself. Our reading of an oppositional text, of feminist or some other impulse, can, I think, take as a strength the oscillations and the contradictions in the text itself. It is these latter components which seem to me to actually constitute an oppositional text and to be the mark of such a text's provenance and participation in an historically structured set of ideological formations. Without that mark the text is limited in potential political effect (except perhaps for a rhetorical and exhortative effect which would not be negligible, but only part of the story).

Of course, what I'm saying immediately brings up questions which have haunted Marxist critics, among others, for some time now: the relationship between texts and ideologies, between texts and histories, the role of art as a tendentious intervention in those relationships, and so on. From the long history of the attempts to clarify such questions, I'd be inclined here to draw on the claim made by writers like Althusser and Macherey: that texts operate as it were on the cusp between their own ideological provenance or complicity and their function as devices which leave those ideologies and histories open to investigation. Not that the *real* substance of texts' historical and ideological appurtenance—or, far less, of the writer's "experience"—are ever unproblematically made present (or "given to be 'seen,'" as Althusser puts it), but rather that historically existing ideological relationships can be abstracted from the literary text and operated upon by the critic. Wherever critics are willing to have those relationships resolved and "utopianized" the potential power of texts to become transformational (rather than simply oppositional) is weakened or sometimes negated altogether.

It's because H.D.'s work has become a site where these kinds of questions can emerge that it is of importance. Hers is paradigmatically the kind of text which leaves room for no simple answers to the question of its "tendency." But it is precisely in its aspects which are often regarded as its lacks, its flaws and its weaknesses—those judgments which feminist vindication and canonization of a writer like H.D. will sometimes try to counter or overturn—that H.D.'s text can, I think, be claimed to be most strong and vital. H.D.'s work—like all our work and thought, probably—is marked by the very problems it tries to solve. It oscillates, and this oscillation can perhaps come to be considered its very contribution.

This work shows its whole significance, I'd suggest, when it is allowed its residence in the grey areas of its—and H.D.'s—supposed flaws.

NOTES

1. For some attempt to explain and justify (in relation to Ezra Pound, at least) these rather contentious comments, see my *Pound Revised* (London 1983), which also includes a chapter about H.D.
2. H.D. makes this remark in *End to Torment*, which is perhaps the text where she most squarely confronts the experiential basis of what I call the double function inscribed in her work.
3. Peter Ackroyd reviews Barbara Guest's *Herself Defined* (New York, 1984) in the London *Sunday Times*, 26 May 1985.