

The Importance and Interest of H.D. as a female Modernist poet

Louise Nuttall

H.D.'s reputation as the 'most perfect' of imagist poets has caused her importance within the modernist canon to remain undisputed.¹ Her later, post-imagist work such as *Hymen* (1921) has received further interest due to its 'explicitly gendered discourse' reflective of a developing feminist perspective parallel to the changing politics of its time.² Whilst 'deeply encoded gender issues'³ have also been identified within her earlier work, their significance has often been overlooked, and was in fact completely unnoticed by contemporary critics such as Monroe whose primary concern with H.D.'s poetry was its lack of engagement with human experience.⁴ This interpretation is opposed by Robinson who describes H.D.'s earliest poems as 'introspective studies' reflecting 'a process of disentanglement and discovery' in relation to her own experiences.⁵ Following on from Robinson's interpretation I shall explore the ways in which the features of H.D.'s imagist poetry are rooted in the expression of this female subjectivity as part of an innovative feminist perspective.

One of the most prominent aspects of H.D.'s work is her "palimpsest" form. This layering of images reflects the Bergsonian influence brought to Imagism: 'Many diverse images, borrowed from very different orders of things, may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized.'⁶ This form, asserted by Hulme as that best suited to a direct portrayal of the experience of thought,⁷ is seen in the combination of natural and mythological symbols in 'Hermes of the Ways'.⁸ Despite evading interpretation through their variable significance in isolation, when used together these symbols evoke numerous tensions and contribute to an overall sense of inner turmoil. These tensions, such as that between 'the many-foamed ways/ Of the sea' and 'him/ Of the triple path-ways, Hermes' parallel the opposition symbolised by the meeting forces of land and sea 'where the sea-grass tangles with Shore-grass'. With Robinson's psychoanalytic analysis in mind, the 'vortex or cluster of fused ideas' achieved by this palimpsest reflects the conflicting emotions of subjective experience and the struggle for their expression.⁹

H.D. achieves this expression through her original use of symbolism; described by Robinson as a reversal of its traditional form: 'In allegory the universal, archetypal events are usually personified; in H.D.'s poetry impersonal events are employed to present particular

¹ Harriet Monroe, 'Book Review: Two Anthologies', *Poetry A Magazine of Verse*, 8, 5 (August 1916) <<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1210698784718750.pdf>> [accessed 9 January 2009] pp. 255-259 (p.258)

² Susan Stanford Friedman, 'H.D. (1886-1961)' in *The Gender of Modernism: a critical anthology*, ed. by Bonnie Kime Scott (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.86

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Monroe, 'Book Review: Two Anthologies', p.258

⁵ Janice S. Robinson, *H.D.: The Life and Work of An American Poet* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), p.36; p.35

⁶ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by T. E. Hulme (London, 1913), p.14

⁷ Michael Roberts, *T. E. Hulme* (Faber & Faber, 1938), p.281

⁸ H.D., *The Collected Poems of H.D.* 6th ed. (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1940), p.55. Hereafter referenced within the text.

⁹ Ezra Pound, 'As for Imagisme', *The New Age*, XVI, (28 January 1915)

<<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1140814350421165.pdf>> [accessed 9 December 2009], p. 349

situations.¹⁰ Rather than taking Robinson's questionable biographical stance, extending these disputable 'particular situations' to represent a less specific personal subjectivity allows this statement to be supported by H.D.'s use of mythological symbols. By portraying emotion implicitly through natural imagery, H.D. is described by Monroe as possessing a 'completeness of sympathy'¹¹ with nature which relates her work to Hulme's theory of the movement of the artist 'back within an object by a kind of sympathy'.¹² This projection of personal consciousness onto the impersonal is also seen in H.D.'s use of myth. H.D.'s incorporation of 'wayside Hermes',¹³ of Greek mythology within her portrayal of personal experience exemplifies the 'private use of the classical past' identified by Riddel in her allusion to mythic figures as counterparts of her own ontological states.¹⁴ By projecting her own associations onto classical mythology rather than relating her moods to pre-existing, conventional interpretations, H.D. is thus shown to reverse traditional allegory as a means of 'universalizing' her subjective emotions.

This technique can be associated with the portrayal of specifically *female* subjectivity through comparison with Kristevan theory. By defying the conventions of a symbolic system rooted in a male-dominated literary culture and patriarchal society, H.D.'s work can be linked to the 'second phase' of feminism; begun in 1968 according to Kristeva, and characterised by the 'exploration of the dynamics of signs' by female writers in order to create 'a language for their corporeal and intersubjective experiences'.¹⁵ Through this comparison, H.D.'s 'personal aesthetic' thus reflects the search for a new 'language' suitable for the expression of feminine concerns.

This feminine aesthetic is achieved by her symbolism through its relation to temporality. By uniting the mythological past and the timelessness of nature through her palimpsest form, H.D.'s poetry gains a sense of the eternal. The absence of narrative order resulting from the simultaneity of this form is also seen by Robinson to remove all sense of 'a linear temporal sequence', hence reflecting the characteristic rejection of this aspect of patriarchal symbolic order which Kristeva associates with the 'second-phase' of feminism.¹⁶ In place of this linear temporality, H.D.'s aesthetic anticipates the 'cyclical and monumental' temporality of 'Women's Time' described by Kristeva.¹⁷ This sense of 'repetition and eternity' portrayed in 'Hermes and the Ways' through the natural cycles of wind and tide is emphasised through the cyclical structure of the poem itself. Amy Lowell described this circular nature as one central to imagism: 'the whole poem must be rounded and recurring as the circular swing of a balanced pendulum.'¹⁸ This is exemplified in 'Hermes of the Ways' where the non-finite progressive tense of 'Playing' and 'facing' is combined with the simple present tense to depict both the natural scene: 'the great waves/ Break over it' and the figure of Hermes: 'Who awaiteth', as universal truths which transcend temporal and spatial limits. When followed by an abrupt switch to the finite past tense in 'The great sea foamed' and the progressive past tense of 'you have waited' during the final stanza, these anaphoric references link these earlier parallel images to a specific experiential present implied by this direct address. This links back to earlier suggestions of the present moment through the exclamation 'It whips round my ankles!' and the proximal deixis of 'This white stream'. Having created

¹⁰ H.D.: *The Life and Work of An American Poet*, p.71

¹¹ Monroe, 'Book Review: Two Anthologies', p.258

¹² T. E. Hulme, *Speculations*, ed. by Herbert Read, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p.144

¹³ Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels* (New York: Free Press, 1967), p.240

¹⁴ Joseph N. Riddel, 'H.D. and the Poetics of "Spiritual Realism"', *Contemporary Literature: Special Number on H.D.*, 10, 4 (University of Wisconsin Press: Autumn 1969) pp.447-474 (p.452)

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time' (1977) , in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) pp.349-369 (p.355)

¹⁶ Robinson, H.D.: *The Life and Work of An American Poet*, p.73

¹⁷ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p.352

¹⁸ Amy Lowell, 'Preface to *Some Imagist Poets 1916*', *Imagist Poetry*, ed. Peter Jones (Penguin, 2001) pp. 136-140, p.138

this movement between parallel images and the different temporal levels they embody, the poem concludes by returning to the timeless ‘shore’ image of the opening stanza: ‘Where sea-grass tangles with,/ Shore-grass’ hence demonstrating the ‘rounded’ structure described by Lowell and the cyclical temporality of feminine subjectivity which it reflects.

This cyclical nature is attributed by Lowell to the use of a natural rhythm or ‘cadence’ which contributes to the ‘central movement’ of good Imagist poetry. Within this overall movement are smaller circles of movement or what Lowell calls ‘strophes’: ‘circles can be added to circles, movement upon movement’.¹⁹ Such a ‘strophe’ is seen in ‘Hermes of the Ways’:

Dubious,
Facing three ways,
Welcoming wayfarers,
He whom the sea-orchard
Shelters from the west,
From the east
Weathers sea-wind;
Fronts the great dunes.

The circular nature created by the repeated syllable in ‘dubious’ and ‘dunes’ is supported through its internal rhythm. Complex repetition creates fluidity through the alternating alliterative use of the ‘w’, ‘f’ and ‘s’ sounds. However, by placing certain sounds in opposition through this repetition, for example the implicit reversal of: ‘sea’, ‘east’, ‘sea’ and the progressive variation of recurring syllables in: ‘west’, ‘east’, ‘weathers’, this flow is disrupted by rhythmic ‘jerks’ which parallel the cyclical process of breaking waves.²⁰ The internal oppositions within this rhythm are placed in further conflict through their layered nature described by Lowell. By reflecting another level of H.D.’s palimpsest form, this ‘cadence’ contributes to the tensions described earlier as reflective of the internal conflicts of female subjectivity.

By comparing this rhythm to the theory of Kristeva, the innovative nature of H.D.’s aesthetic is once again revealed. The ‘innately maternal’²¹ nature of female subjectivity which Kristeva theorises is further anticipated in H.D.’s evocation of the internal ‘drives’ which make up the ‘chora’ of the pre-oedipal state.²² These ‘disunited or contradictory structures’ are described by Kristeva as ‘energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother’ and are paralleled in the conflict between the images, rhythms and temporalities of H.D.’s palimpsest form. The ‘waves of attack against stases’ which underlie these ‘drives’ has much significance in ‘The Wind Sleepers’ (*Collected Poems*: 18) where the repeated image ‘We no longer sleep in the wind’ presents an explicit opposition between the movement of the wind and the stasis of sleep. These ‘stases’ are said by Kristeva to result from the ‘constraints of biological and social structures’ imposed upon this ‘semiotic’ experience through the enforcement of patriarchal ‘symbolic order’. When applying this theory, the breaking of these constraints through the awakening described: ‘we awoke and fled’ can be seen to reflect the victory of these semiotic drives over the symbolic order hence revealing a radical feminist portrayal of liberation from masculine authority. H.D.’s appropriation of the mythical battle described as taking place close to the ‘Peiraic gate’ in *Plutarch’s Lives*, as a means of portraying this feminist perspective reflects the personal

¹⁹ Lowell, ‘Preface to *Some Imagist Poets 1916*’, p.139

²⁰ Ibid., p.138

²¹ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, p.352

²² Kristeva, ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’ (1974) in *The Portable Kristeva Reader*, p 37

adaptation of mythical references to meet her own needs discussed earlier in relation to Riddel.²³ By describing this battle between the sexes from the female perspective of the Amazonians rather than the male Athenian perspective of its classical source, H.D. is said by Ostriker to assert 'the primacy of female experience against traditions that purport to explain it'.²⁴ H.D.'s revisionary use of myth can be seen as the rewriting of the symbolic order represented by this male-dominated cultural authority as a means of capturing the 'primacy of female experience' represented within the 'semiotic' and achieving the liberation represented through the alternative symbolic order of Goddess worship evoked in its place: 'Tear us an altar'.

This opposition between the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic' can be applied to H.D.'s overall aesthetic. By opposing the restrictions of syntax, linear temporality and the traditional symbolic system, H.D.'s poetry therefore privileges the semiotic modality of signification; described by Kristeva as 'rhythmic, unfettered [...] musical, anterior to judgement'; to which her poetry's distinctive 'cadence' can be attributed. By relating many features of the individual aesthetic achieved in her imagist poetry to the resistance of an oppressive 'symbolic order' in this way, the search for a language suitable for the expression of female subjectivity seen explicitly in her later work can thus be shown to have originated within her very first poems. Therefore, by anticipating the 'second-phase of feminism' over fifty years before its recognition, this poet's importance within the development of a feminist aesthetic is in my opinion unquestionable.

²³ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives, Volume 1 (of 4)*, ([The Echo Library, LLC](#), 2006), p.33

²⁴ Alicia Ostriker, *Writing Like a Woman*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), p.24

Bibliography

Bergson, Henri, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by T. E. Hulme (London, 1913)
 Michael Roberts, *T. E. Hulme* (Faber & Faber, 1938)

Davidson, Gustav, *A Dictionary of Angels* (New York: Free Press, 1967) pp. 240

H.D., *The Collected Poems of H.D.* 6th ed. (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1940)

Hulme, T. E., *Speculations*, ed. by Herbert Read, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960)

Kristeva, Julia, 'Revolution in Poetic Language' (1974) in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) pp. 27-93

-----'Women's Time' (1977), in *The Portable Kristeva Reader*, pp. 349-369

Lowell, Amy, 'Preface to *Some Imagist Poets 1916*' in *Imagist Poetry*, ed. Peter Jones (Penguin, 2001) pp. 136-140.

Monroe, Harriett, 'Book Revie: Two Anthologies', *Poetry A Magazine of Verse*, 8, 5 (August 1916) <<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1210698784718750.pdf>> [accessed 9th January 2009] pp. 255-259

Ostriker, Alicia. *Writing Like a Woman*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983)

Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives, Volume 1 (of 4)*, (The Echo Library, LLC, 2006)

Pound, Ezra, 'As for Imagisme' in *The New Age*, XVI, (28th January 1915)
<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1140814350421165.pdf>> [accessed 9th December 2009]

Riddel, Joseph N., 'H.D. and the Poetics of "Spiritual Realism"', *Contemporary Literature: Special Number on H.D.*, 10, 4 (University of Wisconsin Press: Autumn 1969) pp. 447-474

Robinson, Janice S., *H.D.: The Life and Work of An American Poet* (Boston: Haughton Mifflin Company, 1982)

Stanford Friedman, Susan, 'H.D. (1886-1961)' in *The Gender of Modernism : a critical anthology*, ed. by Bonnie Kime Scott (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990)