

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 5. Issue.1., 2018 (Jan-Mar)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE STRATEGIC ANONYMITY AND UNIVERSALITY IN H.D.'S POEMS

KIRAN YADAV

MA English

Centre for English Studies

Jawaharlal Nehru University



ABSTRACT

H.D. occupies a central position in the tradition of modernist poetry. While some scholarships look at her poetics as the mere aspiration of a woman poet trying to gain popularity by an inadequate imitation of the more famous poets such as Pound, others have been equally, perhaps more, vocal in asserting her original poetics and claiming that most of Pound's notions about poetry came after having read H.D. It is well known that H.D. used several *nom de plume* while publishing her poems, the most commonly known out of which is 'H.D. Imagiste' – a name given to her by Pound. This paper looks at the way in which such conscious attempts at anonymity surface in H.D.'s early and later poems and how it directs her poetics towards personal description at places and universal statement at others. Despite being a central figure of modernist poetry, HD's poetics stands out from the usual breath of modernist poetry as it is also a feminist assertion, a personal cry against betrayals and an attempt at radical 'mythopoeic' revival.

"...H.D. ought to be like!...I say WHO is H.D.? They all think they know more about what and why she should or should not be or do than I." - H.D.

I

Hilda Doolittle was a 20th century American poet belonging to the avant-garde Imagist group. The Imagist movement in poetry with its definite stress on 'preparedness for writing', 'impersonality in written work' and objective treatment of things through the use of images that 'have a variable significance' (Pound, 36) sees its most creative use in H.D.'s poems. Unlike works by Eliot or Pound which follow more of what Albright labels as 'particle nature of poetry'¹, H.D.'s poems make a conscious move away from, and yet adheres to, the Imagist dictum of 'make new'.

As per the modernist poetics, a poem's strongest meaning resides in its smallest elements – symbols, image, vortex have a pre-textual existence (even a universal existence as they have been in existence even before the poet was born) and are seminal to a poem as they endow the finished poem with an electric charge of signification. Modernist poetry is thus a conscious deployment of autonomous meaning-units discovered, not invented, by the poet. Since the meaning of the text is to be decoded through its pre-textual references,

¹ Albright here discusses the two trends in Modernist Poetry – 'the particle nature of poetry' and 'the wave nature of poetry'. Particle nature of poetry stands for the kind of poems constitutive of discrete and often apparently unconnected chains of sentences that are constitutive of each stanza.

the modernist method reduces the poem to an enigma that could be decoded in multiple ways. The reader's response therefore becomes seminal for such poems but, even though the poem invites varied interpretation, the use of specific references tends to narrow down the field of this diversity.

Imagism is essentially a free-verse movement and, in their bid to capture 'reality' the imagists tend to tie the poem to things, sounds, colours and several other inter-textual references dwelling partly outside the charmed circle of speech. Hardly is any semblance to individuality retained in this bid to make the work as one of universal appeal. H.D.'s contribution to this poetics stems from the fact that most of her post-war poems blend the individual with the universal and do not merely aim at objectifying passion in harsh, pointed phrases; they also make an extensive use of myths and images which elevates her work and prevents it from an unhealthy reliance on the mere personal.

This paper rests on a preconceived notion that most of H.D.'s works that would be discussed here follow what Albright labels as the 'wave nature of poetry'. The year 1900 which marks the beginning of the 'Modernist Age' also saw the publication of Max Planck's 'quantum theory', according to this theory, energy exists and travels in discrete packets rather than a continuous wave and could be further divided and subdivided into various units, and hence, its particle nature. In opposition to this view was another where scientists believed that light/energy essentially travels in a wave with specific amplitudes so that any disturbance at one point would lead to its propagation to several others. The two schools of thought have now been reconciled as it is believed that energy sometimes travels in the form of discrete packets called 'quanta' and at others in the form of a wave.

The 'wave nature of poetry' relies on the premise that 'the whole universe of discourse becomes fluid...though literature of this sort is usually subjective, its subjectivity is often indistinct. As its amplitude and frequency increase, the poem-wave loses any sense of a finite subject in a particular historical situation' (Albright, 21). Not specific to H.D, this measure of poetry could also be used to analyze some poems by Eliot and Pound. A central tenant of this kind of poetics is the frequent use of aquatic metaphors where the whole world is described in the form of an ocean – a trope which recurs frequently in Eliot's poems like 'The Wasteland', 'The Hollow Men', 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 'The Four Cantos' and so on- a more specific example being H.D's 'Oread' where she writes:

Whirl up, sea-
Whirl your pointed pines
[...] hurl your green over us,
Cover us with your pools of fir.

The individual subject is displaced in favour of a universal emphasis such that disturbance at one point could, in such a fluid movement, lead to a universal disturbance. This was also the kind of effect that the modernist movement aimed to achieve, as Eliot writes in Tradition and Individual Talent,

'The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with the feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and constitutes of a simultaneous order...no poet or artist has a complete meaning alone' (40)

II

Beginning with 'Edith Gray', Hilda Doolittle has used several pseudonyms such as 'J. Brennan', 'Rhoda Peter', 'Helga Dart', 'Helga Dorn', 'John Helforth', 'D.A. Hell', 'Delia Alton' and more popularly, H.D. While this conscious attempt at trying to hide her personality is in tandem with the major thrust of the modernist movement - to move away from the mushy and to objectify passions or emotions with images which are at once universal and of contemporary appeal; it also forms a part of her poetic strategy. As has been previously argued, H.D is at once a modernist and a deviant from this label. This could be more legitly explained using the fact that she was a woman poet trying to carve a niche for herself in a predominantly masculine world. As Cixous would call it, H.D was writing with 'her feminine body' and it is because of this fact that while her poems form a part of the modernist canon, they are markedly different from that of the other male poets like Eliot and Pound.

H.D.'s first collection of poems 'Sea Garden' was published in 1915. Most of these poems are assuredly impersonal injunctions of a modernist who uses language sparsely and with an austere purity. Objects are used to emote particular feelings or mood and even though dry, the poems speak a language that is at once universal and distant;

[...]The poplar spreads out,
Deep-rooted among trees,
O poplar, you are great,
Among the hill stones [...] [Mid-day]

The difficulty in interpreting Modernist poetry has been attributed to its attempt to capture 'reality', this attempt often leads the poem to abstraction. Likewise, H.D. too moves away from the conventional or the traditional, the rejection of the ripe for the unripe, the lovely for the harsh, the soft for the hard forms a part of her overall poetic strategy. For example, in a demonic reversal of Robert Burns's poem, H.D. writes;

Rose, harsh rose,
Marred and with stint of petals [...] [Mid-day]
Hell must open like a red rose
For the dead to pass. [Sea Rose]

However, one poem that stands out from this collection and which was also revised later is 'Orchard' or 'Priapus – The Keeper of the Garden'. Here one notices a paradoxical tension between cold objectivity and fiery passion. Priapus is the Greek god of fertility, also a protector of livestock, fruit plants, garden and male genitalia. H.D. is one of the few modernist writers who openly acknowledged that Victorian poets – more particularly the Pre-Raphaelites – played a vital role in the development of her aesthetic theory and practice. 'Priapus' too appears to have some things in common with Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'. Both the poems are a confession of feminine passion/desires through the use of fruit-images. Where unlike Rossetti, H.D. rejects any excess of language; the excess of sensuality is brought home more directly through the use of images such as 'quinces untouched', 'berries dripping with wine' and so on. It is here that H.D.'s poetics differs from the often detached poetry of Pound which, even though it masquerades under the label of being a 'free verse' is centrally informed by a mathematical urge for 'preparedness' and is derivative of one or the other kind of a specific form (the *haiku* or the *tanka* for example).

When she felt too constricted – by her identity as an Imagist, the personal trauma she went through during the war years (which resulted in her separation from Richard Aldington) and the dilemma she had to face while coming to terms with her bisexuality, H.D.'s poetic style changed more in favour of myth making or mythopoeia. Unlike other poets, her transformation of myths involved a critique of the classical tradition from a woman's perspective. She reverses the classical myths by giving speech to the silent women of mythology whose stories had been, till then, overwhelmingly told by a male dominated literary and religious tradition.

H.D.'s use of myths lies in consonance with what Phillip Wheelwright says, that 'the object of search[here] is not the primitive...primitivity in its most relevant sense is a character not to be recognized by its *when* but by its *what*' (575). What H.D. 'chooses' to revive and re-present is also a personal statement, a feminist voice, which even though it masquerades under several pseudonyms, could be convincingly read as a reflection of H.D.'s own life.

H.D. has very famously revised Sappho's fragment as 'Fragment 36'. Her identification with the Greek poet – a woman who was also a lover of women – stems from the fact of her bisexuality. The dilemma that Sappho articulated in the 5th BCE, finds a voice with a 20th century woman;

I know not what to do
My mind is divided [...]

Even though there is nothing particularly specific in the poem which could convince one of it being about homosexual love, it is only the fragments of lines that H.D. borrows from Sappho, the known facts about H.D.'s life, her confessions and the epigram dedicated to Sappho which concretizes this view. In 'Cassandra', this passion of a poet is brought out even more firmly when she writes;

O Hymen lord;
Is there none left

Can equal me
In ecstasy, desire?
Is there none left
Can bear with me
The kiss of you white fire?

The poet here demands to be seen as 'I' behind the impersonal veil of writing, that she be recognized and authorized by her muse, the empowering and en-gendering 'she'. Much to the annoyance of the reader who expects her to write like 'H.D', she no longer indulges in indeterminate, disinterested and anonymous imagist lyrics. Her subject is unveiled and insists on the desire of the woman poet or of her self authorizing muse. 'H.D's auto-mythologizing supports her by freeing rather than fixing her desire for self-definition' (Chilsom, 86).

Interestingly, even 'Oread' has references to the mythical past. According to the Greek Mythology, Oreads were the mountain nymphs. However, as the subject of H.D's poem, 'Oread' is nothing, a non-being, a non-entity in the text of the world and its inscriptions of history, ideology and nationality. This stands in contrast with H.D's later mythopoeia where the woman not only occupies a central position, her very role is radically revised, giving her a voice which was previously denied. An example here is H.D's poem 'Eurydice'. Rejecting the familiar myth of Orpheus as the faithful lover whose glancing back at his wife signaled, at once, his aspiration and his human imperfection, here, Eurydice executes an Orphic turn of her own (or a Eurydician turn away from the patriarchal convention) when she suggests that Orpheus's glance backwards is more of a 'gesture of greed'. Rather than lament, Eurydice here cries out even more defiantly against all male oppressions and rejects her image as the passive object of myth who was to be rescued by Orpheus. H.D's poetry weaves the persona and the mythic into a tapestry that recreates, from a woman's perspective, the connections between identity, love and poetry.

As Bergson says, 'in order to define consciousness and therefore freedom, we need to differentiate between time and space, to 'un-mix' them' (qtd Stanford), he defines the immediate data of consciousness as being temporal, as the duration (*la duree*). It is in duration that we can speak of the experience of freedom. Such spatial dislocation forms an essential part of the modernist poetics where time functions on a more abstract plane, not localized and therefore inviting and enabling multiple references and interpretations.

H.D's imagism is more warranted by her instinctive excess that excites her inner poetic personality. It would not be an overstatement to claim that it is for an expression of this instinctive urge that she, paradoxically, resorted to Imagism.

III

Functioning within the Modernist ethos of her own making, H.D's poems still manage to create what Pound refers to as an 'intellectual complex'. Rachel Duplessis says that it is possible that her (H.D's) 'lyrics are coincidentally Greek; the landscapes are American, the emotions are personal, the 'Greek' then becomes a convention' (14). She further argues that 'H.D chooses her characters not because of their capacity for sensual love or savage war but because of their visionary ability to crystallize the dissolved or latent meanings hidden in the former story. The characters act as catalyzing precipitants of non epic material already dissolved in culture' (20).

Pound's mathematical structure of poetry has been further improvised by H.D by bringing together the immediate and the distant, the personal and the detached, and, a feminist assertion along with abstract, universal lyrics. It is through such techniques that, even though she refuses to associate a name with her poems, H.D's anonymity appears to be merely a garb for making statements that are at once universal and subjective/personal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albright, Daniel. *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot and the Science of Modernism*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. UK. 1997. Print.
- Davis, Alex. Lee M. Jenkins ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. UK. 2007. Print.

Vetter, Lara. *Modernist Writing and Religio-Scientific Discourse : H.D, Loy and Toomer*. Palgrave Macmillan. New York. 2010.

Wheelwright, Phillip. "Notes on Mythopoeia" *The Swansee Review* 59.4 (1951): 574-592. Jstor. 19 Nov. 2017.

Duplessis, Rachael. *H.D : The Career of that Struggle*. Harvester Press Limited. Brighton.UK. 1986.

Chisholm, Diana. "H.D's Autoheterography" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 9. No. 1, Women Writing Autobiography (Spring, 1990), pp. 79-106. Jstor. 19 Nov. 2017.

H.D. 'Oread'. <Poetryfoundation.com>

H.D. 'Sea Rose'. <Poetryfoundation.com>

H.D. 'Priapus'. <Poetryfoundation.com>

H.D. 'Fragment 36'. <Poetryfoundation.com>

H.D. 'Eurydice'. <Poetryfoundation.com>
