

## H.D. AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RELIGION

The modernist poet Hilda Doolittle, dubbed "H.D." by Ezra Pound, is somewhat of an archaeological artifact herself. Susan Stanford Friedman framed her introduction to the canon as an excavation<sup>1</sup>, figuring the 1980s feminist literary recovery project as "unburying" the obscure author of more than a dozen prose books, numerous critical essays, and some six-hundred pages of collected poems. H.D. was an exemplar of the marginalization and erasure of prolific female authors from the annals of literary history, and studies of the writer's entwined work and life thrived within a critical climate invested in examining how authorial practices are shaped by personal, especially gender and sexual, identity. H.D.'s bisexuality buoyed interpretations of her writing as a feminist response to patriarchal literary and social traditions, and her bohemianism, especially when expressed through lesbianism, fostered a form of identity-poetics resonant within the scholarly frameworks of the late twentieth-century.

Unlike many modernists, in whose literary texts the depiction of interiority is displaced from authorial identity onto invented personae, H.D.'s reliance on the genres of the diary, memoir, and *roman à clef* combine with her proto-confessional poetry to produce texts whose primary subject is the author's self. As identity has become less fashionable as an interpretive technology, so does the author whose aesthetic relies on it. H.D. has been criticized for being narcissistic: isolating herself from the conversation about writing conducted by her peers, frequently eschewing publication in favor of private circulation among close friends, "keeping a diary" instead of "writing literature."<sup>2</sup> The allegations are all true, even if one questions the values by which they constitute a critique. H.D. therefore sits oddly, unflatteringly, within the emerging scholarly environment.

Were identity-poetics still fashionable, however, reading H.D.'s writing as a reflection of experimental individual practices and marginalized conventions becomes more complicated outside the context of gender and sexuality. Her bohemian lifestyle, usually read by scholars who praise her as an extension of the

---

<sup>1</sup> "Who Buried H.D?: A Poet, Her Critics, and Her Place in 'The Literary Tradition.'" *College English* 36. 7 (1975): 801-14.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Rainey alleges all this and more against H.D. in "Canon, Gender, and Text: The Case of H.D." *College Literature* 18.3 (1991): 106-126.

vanguard domesticities pioneered in the Bloomsbury circle, also extended to religious experimentalism. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that for the author raised in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, a Moravian outpost since the eighteenth-century, bohemianism did not also signify the religious practices of Moravianism, the Protestant sect founded in fourteenth-century Bohemia. H.D.'s construction of alternative lifestyles was embedded in the religious connotation bohemianism would have had born for her. Experimental religious identity, however, was never one of the forms of marginality lauded in late twentieth-century academic scholarship.

In 1933-1934, H.D. was a patient of Sigmund Freud in Vienna, where she sought assistance in the analysis of three dreams she had while visiting Corfu in 1920 with her lover, hoping that understanding the dreams would help her to overcome her writer's block. She claims, in her memoir of the analysis, that Freud did not merely see her as a patient but as one who had come, after the sudden death of Freud's apostle J.J. van der Leeuw, to "'take his place'" as the "person who would...carry on the torch" of Freud's ideas.<sup>3</sup> According to H.D., Freud acknowledged that psychoanalysis would look somewhat different in her hands, that she would transmit it, but "not in a stereotypical way." And indeed, like Dora, the patient whose cure eluded Freud, H.D.'s analysis would extend the practice beyond itself, in part because she too declined to be cured. It was during psychoanalysis that H.D. began to give herself license to consider her vivid dreams prophetic visions. She reentered writing by troping Freud's stridently secular "talking cure," which heavily relied upon dream analysis, as a religious discourse of oracular interpretation.

H.D. reinvented herself in the 1940s as an occult priestess. Two biographical novels written but unpublished during that period, *The Sword Went out to Sea* and *Majic Ring*, draw inspiration from a series of spiritualist séances that H.D. conducted throughout and following the Second World War. During this period she believed that she was a medium through which dead Royal Air Force pilots could transmit messages to the living. Here H.D. crosses the line between the inspiring queer sexual identities permitted by secular poetics, and the queer religious identities and practices dismissed as cultish and foolish in an era when intellectual culture is hostile toward religion—a situation that, as Pericles Lewis has recently suggested, may apply more to the era in which H.D. was rediscovered than to the era in which she lived and wrote.<sup>4</sup>

If H.D. is to be taken seriously in an intellectual climate where secularity is the primary context for legitimacy, she has to be divested from the religious contexts in which she is mired. Yet the premise of the articles in this issue is that neither H.D. nor her writing can be divested from them: her construction of writing is fundamentally religious. Drawing from ancient pagan conceptions of poetic utterance, H.D. imagined herself a sibyl, possessed by the mad and cryptic language of the gods. The ancients considered lyrical language to be produced

---

<sup>3</sup> *Tribute to Freud* (NY: Pearson, 1974), 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (NY: Cambridge UP, 2010)

not by a poet's reasoned thought or agency, but by the poet's willing possession by a god who produces art through ventriloquism. To be a poet was, in these traditions, to be literally out of one's own mind, instead inhabited by the mind of the gods.<sup>5</sup> H.D. facilitated "enthusiasm" (from *enthousiasmos*, or demonic possession) by engaging in practices incomprehensible to post-Enlightenment secular poetics. She submitted herself to psychoanalysis, the discourse of neurosis, and adopted neurosis as a useful illness; she cultivated the medium's condition of catatonic receptivity, simulated Dionysian rituals of self-immolation by seeking out emotionally devastating erotic relationships, spoke in the oracle's fragmentary and allusive language, adopted a mysterious iconographic and hieroglyphic mode of representation. Parodying ancient modes of spiritual discourse and practices in twentieth-century London, H.D. brought poetry back into contact with the gods in an era devoted to shaking off the influences of divinity. The epithets of charlatanism, insanity, and intellectual weakness commonly affixed to vestigial religious structures can also be affixed to the poet who associated herself with them.

One means by which scholars of H.D. might rescue her from her discrediting religious practices is to recontextualize them within disciplines more acceptable to post-Enlightenment thinking. For instance, acknowledging and exploring H.D.'s engagement with the science of archaeology can help us to see the way in which H.D. structured her authorial voice using extinct methods. As she studied, along with modernist archaeologists, the missing people, practices, and events of bygone eras, she excavated and reassembled alternative creative contexts to those prominent within her own. Viewing H.D.'s approach to religion as archaeological allows us to see her enacting the kind of rational scientific identity accepted, even hallowed, in our time.

However, H.D. appropriated science, and especially technology, to spiritualism. She was stubbornly anachronistic—like most modernists—but insisted upon resuscitating the "wrong" chronologies. Contrast Eliot's construction of poetic impersonality, easily translated into the language of scientific thinking, with H.D.'s strange take on the concept, one more resonant with Pentecostal *glossolalia* than objectivity. H.D. identifies too strongly with the traditions from which her practices derive, she fails to value, like other modernists, ironic distance above all else: "can we believe," she asks in "Cities," "not in utter disgust,/ in ironical play," that "the city is peopled/ with spirits"? In an era when literature was dispensing with old-fashioned aesthetic values like the notions of aura, originality, and deep meaning within artworks, in preference for new values attendant to the age of mechanical reproduction, H.D.'s understanding of art was medieval, in the sense that her riddles and fragments were designed to be deciphered by a community of readers with a common set of experiences and beliefs forging a contextual and signifying bond between them—and in the sense that the notion of transcendent spirituality is central to them. She also rearticulates mechanical reproduction in the discourse of magic. H.D. seems,

---

<sup>5</sup> For a full account see Susan Stewart's "Lyric Possession" in *Critical Inquiry* 22:1 (1995), 34-63.

unfashionably, more like a believer in the religious practices she excavates than an anthropologist of them. Her enthusiasm, a too-literal take for the twentieth-century on becoming “filled with the gods,” is embarrassing.

For feminists, craving an H.D. who possesses empowered agency, and scholars, craving an H.D. who maintains rational distance from her objects of study, and modernists, craving an H.D. who is ironic and impersonal, and postmodernists, craving an H.D. who eschews faith in meaning, and secularists, craving an H.D. who cannot possibly *really* believe in the spirit-world—this writer gets everything wrong. We could see the Special Issue as an effort to set her right, but it doesn’t work well in that regard: most of the authors herein compiled begin with the premise that H.D. is as neurotic and credulous as she appears to be. Perhaps it will be better to read this Issue as an effort to figure out what to do with a writer who refuses to act (or write) with dignity, and moreover, to figure out the relationship between indignity and religion.

An archaeological approach to religion involves uncovering lost practices and practitioners, and assumes that extant minutiae from the past can serve as material windows to them. Archaeology also hinges, however, on the concept of “ruins.” H.D.’s close association of anachronistic religious experiences with ruin, the disheveled, dismembered state of archaeology’s material remnants, suggests an understanding of religion that returns it to an archaeological, or ruined, condition. H.D. writes in “Sheltered Garden” about a form of beauty that “chokes out life.” “I want wind to break,” she incants, “scatter these pink stalks,/ snap off their spiced heads,/ fling them about with dead leaves--/ spread the paths with twigs,/ limbs broken off.” “O.../ to find a new beauty,” she prays, “in some terrible/ wind-tortured place.” Though the poem’s conceit is the destruction of a neat English garden, H.D.’s diction replicates the scenario of archaeological ruins, describing the scene of a dig as a garden of headless, limbless statuary mixed when buried with twigs and other facts of nature. The archaeological ruins proffer the “new beauty” of violently decapitated, amputated human forms.

The archaeological body evoked in “Sheltered Garden” might allude to the headless, dismembered body of Pentheus, the King of Thebes decapitated by his Maenad mother in Euripides’ “Bacchae,” thus collapsing into a single image the human form produced within an ecstatic religious ritual and archaeological science. In “Disability Aesthetics,” Tobin Siebers argues that regardless of whether we interpret representations of corporeal fragility as aesthetic objects, they “summon images of disability” (64), registering as “wounded or disabled bodies, representations of irrationality or cognitive disability, or effects of warfare, disease, or accidents.”<sup>6</sup> Siebers contends that “‘misshapen cripples’” like those depicted in artworks by “Modigliani, Klee, and Chagall” —not to mention the Venus de Milo—are central to modern conceptions of art. Is disability also central to H.D.’s conception of religion? How might placing her explorations of religious identity in the context of disability studies foster a different kind of

---

<sup>6</sup> *JCRT* 7.2 (2006), 62-72.

conversation about her—and different kinds of conversations within religious studies? In the context of literary modernism, H.D. might be one of those “bad modernists” identified by Doug Mau and Rebecca Walcowitz as revealing what’s “good about bad” (2).<sup>7</sup> Displacing her work from literary modernism to modernist religious studies might help us to excavate something different this time around: religion as an under-scrutinized avant-garde cultural form, the religious function of “bad” art—and new disciplinary homes, within religion and disability studies, for an author whose writing and persona evoke that epithet too readily in the context of literature.

COLBEY EMMERSON REID is an Assistant Professor of English at York College of Pennsylvania. She is writing a book on *Glamour and the Grotesque*, a study of modernist experiments with mistake in the context of design culture.

© Colbey Reid  
Reid, Colbey. “H.D. and the Archaeology of Religion,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 10. no. 2: 1-5.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Bad Modernisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006)