

H.D.'S TROY: SOME BEARINGS

David Roessel

H.D.'s Troy, like Schliemann's, is a city of many layers. The purpose of this note is to make some exploratory trenches into levels that have not yet been excavated. The analogy between H.D.'s thought and archaeological objects comes from the poet herself (*TF* 35). This reminds us that we should not search for a single key to open the gate to H.D.'s Troy, but rather a series of finds piled on top of each other.

Schliemann's discovery of Troy, and subsequent excavations in Greece, proved to many that there had once been a Priam, an Agamemnon, and a Nestor. Indeed, every spade of earth seemed to confirm that Homer had provided a surprisingly accurate picture of Bronze Age life.¹ But archaeological investigation did not do much for the existence of Helen. In fact, it was used to diminish her importance in the story of Troy. In the second edition of his *A History of Greece*, published in 1913, J. B. Bury stated that the major change from the first edition was that "the Trojan War is recognized as an historical event."² But Bury envisions a cause of the war which is quite different from the one in Homer. Troy used her strategic location between the Black and Aegean Seas to monopolize trade and grow "fat on the produce of others. It was probably at the beginning of the twelfth century, as the Greek tradition reckoned, that the Achaeans made ready a great expedition to exterminate the parasitic power which preyed on the trade of the world."³ For Bury, Walter Leaf, and many other scholars, the Trojan War became a trade war.⁴ Most recent books on Greek history still suggest that the motivation for the Trojan War was economics. The logic apparently was, and is, that a real war deserves a serious cause. Or, to put it another way, there really was a war, so it could not have been caused by Helen. Ironically, then, at the very time that the men who fought the Trojan War came into focus as real men, the woman who was supposed to have started the war faded off into the world of romance and unreality. Schliemann, after looking at a Mycenaean death mask made of gold, stated that he gazed upon the face of Agamemnon. Guidebooks of Mycenae identify a small red-stuccoed room as the bath where the king was killed. But no such reality was accorded Helen, who was considered the degenerated survival of an ancient tree goddess.

The discovery of Troy and the new thinking about the Trojan War influenced some Modernist authors. The most notable example was Joyce, whose inspiration to

recreate Dublin brick by brick stemmed, at least in part, from Schliemann's work and Victor Berard's subsequent reconstruction of Odysseus' travels.⁵ And in 1915, Ezra Pound employed a geographic and economic analysis similar to one which Leaf had used on Homer to interpret a song by the troubadour Bertran de Born.⁶ H.D. may have become aware of the new trend in Homeric studies while she was part of the Imagist group before the war, since she was in London and studying Greek when both Bury and Leaf appeared. If she had not known about the effect of archaeological discoveries on interpretations of the Trojan War before 1920, she would almost certainly have learned about them from Bryher. Bryher had a keen interest in archaeology and had once observed Arthur Evans, the excavator of Knossos, at work.⁷ And in 1920 and 1922 H.D. and Bryher had visited the Archaeological Museum in Athens, where many of the objects found by Schliemann at Troy and Mycenae were kept.⁸

The historical thinking about the Trojan War may play a role in understanding H.D.'s Troy. For example, in "Winter Love" the poet wrote:

what is left, what is left of Troy? . . .
and what is more desolate
than the breach in the Wall
that sears like a gaping wound—
Troy's gate was here. (*HD* 93)

The lines recall several Euripidean choral passages, but they may also reflect an awareness of the Trojan War as history. What was left of Troy, as well as the placement of its gates, was now known. The reality of Troy adds a pathos to H.D.'s lines that would not be found in references to Troy in English literature written before Schliemann.

The prominence of the trade war theory and the consequent de-emphasis of Helen may be relevant to certain passages of "Winter Love," such as the following question: "There was a Helen before there was a War, / but who remembers her?" (*HD* 91) The question can be read on two levels. It can mean that Helen was alive and had a history before the Trojan War. But, in light of the accepted interpretations of the war based on archaeology, it can also mean that the discovery of a real Troy had signalled the end of interest in Helen. H.D. could be challenging Helen's removal from history by rejecting the notion that Helen had simply been invented as a cause for the war. Since the historians of antiquity who had demoted Helen had been mostly

male, H.D.'s retention of Helen can also be read as a reaction to masculine historical thinking.⁹ H.D. may suggest a revisionist picture of Helen by making it part of a feminist oral tradition. In a later passage of "Winter Love," she repeats the question about remembering Helen and then provides the answer.

but who remembers her? O grandam, you, you, you,
There was a Helen before there was a war,
with faded hair—you answer, you descend,

ascend, from where? it was all over,
I was wrapped in a tight shroud,
but you appear; the death-bands fall away;

you have come, grandam, no toothless grin,
no *corbeau sur une crâne*
"remember," you say, "Helen, remember?" (*HD* 110)

The alternative myth about Helen and the war which H.D. used in *Helen in Egypt* was clearly inspired by literary sources, especially Euripides. But the trade war theory may have colored the way H.D. presented the myth, particularly the poet's depiction of Helen's loss and reclamation of identity. In contemporary writing about the Trojan War, Helen's importance had been called into question. If, as seems likely, H.D. knew of such conjecture, then the opening of *Helen in Egypt* would have striking relevance. Helen's ability to regain her own identity may, on one level, be H.D.'s way of restoring her to the Trojan saga.

There was one element of the new thinking about the Trojan War which H.D. could employ in support of her own view of Helen. If trade had been the real cause of the war, then Helen had been a terribly maligned woman. In both "Helen" and *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. portrayed Helen as someone hated for erroneous reasons.¹⁰ Here again, H.D. operated in a long literary tradition. But it is worth noting that archaeology could also be used as a support for H.D.'s portrayal of Helen.

H.D. made associations between the Trojan War and the Great War, as shown notably in her choice to translate and publish selections from Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Aulis* in the first months of hostilities.¹¹ There are several reasons for this outlook, but one simple, yet basic one has not yet been mentioned. On April 25, the Allies landed

on Gallipoli. Maps of the Dardanelles appeared prominently in London papers in the next weeks. In the first account of the landing, the London *Times* sought information from Walter Leaf about the terrain of the area. Leaf informed the *Times* that one of the objectives, Seddul-Bahr, was also known as the Tomb of Protesilaus. Troy itself was in the news. The French landed on the Asiatic side of the straits and took the hill of Hissarlik, or Troy, on April 30. The *Times* reported that the Turks had used the line of Schliemann's excavations for machine gun emplacements. The naval squadron in the Dardanelles was led by the battleship *Agamemnon*. Here was a palimpsest with an ugly twist. H.D. would certainly have known of the Gallipoli landings. Would she have related it to the assault two millennia before? Others influenced by the Classics did, such as Rupert Brooke, who had begun to write a poem on the subject before his death:

And Priam and his fifty sons
Wake all amazed, and hear the guns
And shake for Troy again.¹²

H.D. could have made a similar connection.

NOTES

1. See, for instance. H. J. Lorimer, *Homer and the Monuments* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1950). Bryher knew of and apparently read Lorimer's book. In *The Heart to Artemis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962), she says of reading Homer in her youth: "What I needed was Lorimer's *Homer and the Monuments*, but that book, alas, was not yet written" (52).

2. *A History of Greece* (London: Macmillan, 1913) v.

3. Bury 48-49.

4. In his introduction, Bury says that Leaf's *Troy: A Study in Homeric Geography* (London: MacMillan, 1912) was one of the things which convinced him the Trojan War was real. Leaf not only held that the war was for trade, but also that the catalogue of Trojan allies was actually a record of trade routes.
5. See H. Kenner, "Homer's Sticks and Stones," *James Joyce Quarterly* 6 (1969): 285-300; and, on Joyce's use of Berard, Michael Seidel, *Epic Geography: James Joyce's Ulysses* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976).
6. See D. Roessel, "'Near Perigord' and a Mycenaean Trade War" *Paiduema* 17.1 (1988): 105-07.
7. *The Heart to Artemis*, 150-51; see also 160, where Bryher considered a career in archaeology.
8. See Louis Silverstein, "Planting the Seeds: Selections from the *H.D. Chronology*," *HDN* 2.2 (Winter 1988): 5, 7.
9. See DuPlessis, *CTS*, 1-30, especially her comments on H.D. and the *Aeneid* at 1-2 and 20.
10. See Susan Friedman's discussion of "Helen" in *PR*, 232-36.
11. See Robinson, *HDR*, 99-107. While I don't agree with all the identifications Robinson makes between living individuals and mythical characters, I agree with the basic framework.
12. *The Poetical Works of Rupert Brooke*, ed. G. Keynes (London: Faber and Faber, 1946) 205.