

THE CHALLENGES OF EDITING THE H.D.-PEARSON CORRESPONDENCE

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In 1955, while writing the memoir/journal *Compassionate Friendship*, H.D. responds to the gift of a new book on D.H. Lawrence,¹ by reflecting upon where Lawrence would come in the list of men she calls her “initiators.”² “He would come in the middle, if I count them as seven,” she writes, listing them as Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, John Cournos, Lawrence, Cecil Gray, Kenneth Macpherson, Walter Schmideberg, and finally Erich Heydt, whom she calls the “inheritor . . . of the whole group.” Most of these men were former friends or lovers, and co-creators. Or, in the cases of Schmideberg and Heydt, they were psychoanalysts who, like Freud, helped H.D. understand her relationships with these intimates. Most were also “agents of destruction,” as she says of John Cournos; that is, H.D.’s relationship with them was charged with ambivalence. Most noticeably missing from the list (besides Freud) is the man who sent her the book which prompted the meditation in the first place: Professor Norman Holmes Pearson.³ Given the extent to which he championed H.D.’s work, we may well ask, “why isn’t Pearson on this list of ‘initiators’?”

For from their first meeting in 1937, when H.D. and Bryher were visiting America and Pearson was a graduate student at Yale, until his death in 1975, Pearson’s interest and belief in H.D.’s work, as well as his willingness to take responsibility for the business details of its collection and publication, made him invaluable to H.D. as a literary advisor and agent. Always alert both to what would enhance H.D.’s artistic growth and to what would benefit her future readers, Pearson established the H.D. archive at Yale, prompted her to write the retrospective commentary *H.D. by Delia Alton*, elicited from her various autobiographical notes, and encouraged her to write her memoir of Pound, *End To Torment*. Also, in the thousand or so letters that passed between them from 1937 until H.D.’s death in 1961—which fill five thick binders—Pearson responded to drafts of her poems and novels with comments that helped shape her work. In many of these letters Pearson signed himself “C” or “Chevalier,” engaging in romantic role-playing with H.D. as a gesture of affection and devotion, when in reality he played a more serious and

unique part. As the years passed he became the only person H.D. consistently allowed into the workshop of her creative process. Not only did he spark and shape the conception and form of specific works, he also guided their reception by reviewers and critics. In turn, H.D. entrusted him with more and more responsibility. By 1948 she considered giving him power of attorney for her work; gradually she assigned him the copyrights, and named him her literary executor.

The selection and editing of these letters is our concern here. Because Pearson was H.D.'s close friend as well as her trusted advisor, they also contain much other information about their lives beyond their mutual interest in H.D.'s work. For example, H.D. and Pearson write about their travels, about their families and friends, about other literary projects Pearson is working on. In addition, because they were both involved in the literary life of their time to an unusual extent, their letters refer to and gossip about many writers in England, America, and Europe. To mention a few of these figures—Bryher, the Sitwells, Sylvia Beach, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska, Robert Herring, Robert Duncan, Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud—brings into focus international circles of literature, publishing, and psychology. Also, through H.D.'s wide-ranging reminiscences to Pearson, the letters illuminate literary events prior to 1937. How should we organize and present this mass of important material?

Enthusiasts that we are, our first impulse was to edit the whole correspondence. However, since there are so many letters, the result would have been several volumes, and neither granting institutions nor publishers were interested in such a large project at this time. So we decided to edit a selection, the scope of which we have defined in the following way. First, despite Pearson's lesser fame, we will include both sides of the correspondence, a decision which challenges certain romantic ideas about the solitary nature of creativity by acknowledging the importance of dialogue in an artist's development. Second, we have given the highest priority to letters about H.D.'s creative process and the publication of her work. In addition, we will include letters containing information about other writers, and letters containing important information relevant to H.D.'s or Pearson's biography. We leave other letters—with information about their travels, general reading, and the details of daily life—to future editors.

Our third editorial decision has to do with preserving the integrity of the correspondence. We have decided to include all chosen letters by H.D. in their entirety, but to elide passages from Pearson's letters if they are not germane to the context as we have defined it. Aside from the fact that Pearson's letters tend to be longer, this decision

reflects our concern about the misrepresentation and distortion that has already occurred in editions of H.D.'s work. Also, to preserve the coherence of the correspondence, we have decided that, in addition to annotating the letters we have selected, we will provide commentary summarizing germane portions of unselected letters. Taken in its entirety, then, our edition involves an act of interpretation; it attempts to provide a biography of the working relationship between H.D. and Norman Holmes Pearson.

To elucidate further the importance of this relationship, in the remainder of this paper we will explore Pearson's role as an advisor and respondent more specifically. From the outset, Pearson was particularly interested in the connection between H.D.'s poetry and her life. Her first letter to him (Dec. 12, 1937), which became the "Note on Poetry" included in the *Oxford Anthology of American Literature* (1938), sets the tone for the whole correspondence. It was written in response to Pearson's request that H.D. comment on her creative process, on "why" and "when" and "how" her poems were written.⁴ From then on, H.D.'s letters to him contain language that resonates for those who know the autobiographical sources of her poetry and prose. These informal documents, addressed, nevertheless, to one whom she suspected was keeping a record, raise questions about the gradations of control and artifice inherent in different forms of writing. How do H.D.'s descriptions of herself and her purposes as a writer in these letters compare with those in other letters, in her memoirs, her prose fiction, and her poetry? What do these letters tell us about how she brought the details of her life into the vision of her poetry?

Further, the letters raise questions about how articulating her purposes as a writer to Pearson affected H.D.'s poetic embodiment of events and feelings. Pearson entered H.D.'s life towards the end of an interesting hiatus. Already an established poet by 1937, she had nevertheless, just three years earlier, undergone analysis with Freud, at least partially to stave off incipient artistic paralysis. A few years later, 1943-45, while Pearson was stationed in London with the OSS, one of the most intense phases of their relationship occurred; in addition to spending frequent evenings together they exchanged fifty letters. Always interested in the evolution of her work as a whole, Pearson pressed H.D. to explain its purposes and goals, and its underlying themes. By encouraging her to write about her writing, and later using what she wrote to make suggestions about the meaning and form of her on-going work, Pearson served as a catalyst. He helped H.D. to engage in a particular kind of self-analysis which complimented the psychological integration she had achieved with Freud. Shortly before Pearson's arrival in London, H.D. had completed her memoir *The Gift* (1941-1943); during his sojourn there she was writing the watershed poem *Trilogy*, and her Freud memoir *Writing on the Wall*. These

major works would lead to one of the most productive phases of her career, during which she would go on to write, among other things, the epic poem *Helen in Egypt* and the poems of *Hermetic Definition*. To what extent was this self-analysis-by-writing crucial to her artistic development and mature vision, to that sense of “a life out-lived, / another life relived,” which she would ultimately articulate in “Winter Love”?

We can best see the dynamic between H.D. and Pearson and the effects of their exchange upon her work in the sequence of letters themselves. In this presentation we will use the first letter as a springboard, and then confine our discussion to letters written during the composition of *Trilogy*. In her first letter to Pearson, in response to his request that she explain the genesis of her poetry to unsympathetic readers who find it out of touch with contemporary life, H.D.'s apologia contains stimulating remarks about the link between the restorative goals of her art and the healing power of memory.⁵ A basic question for her and for the “whole deracinated epoch” of those who lived through the First World War, she writes, is “What does that sort of shock do to the mind, the imagination . . .?” (72) She has answered this question earlier in the same letter by drawing upon the life-line she finds in the literary tradition, which she describes as a record of “the inner world of imagination, the ivory tower, where poets presumably do live, in memory”; a record of something more eternal than “battle and din of battle and the whole dreary, tragic spectacle of our times” (71). For H.D., then, the existence and survival of the poetry of the past affirms the reality of “another space, another dimension” that is inviolable. More personally, she continues, *her* poetry has to do with the desire to recover the “first island of memory,” which she calls “Hellas,” and which she associates with her mother Helen, and her childhood vacations on islands off the coast of Maine (72). The Greek islands and themes in her work, “the ‘lost world’ of the classics and the neo-classics,” are connected to her lost homeland, “the world of childhood.” The sources of her poetry are, in her words, “actual memory, suppressed memory, desire to escape, desire to create (music), intellectual curiosity, a wish to make real to myself what is most real” (73).

By the distinction between “actual memory” and “suppressed memory” H.D. suggests a link between one's customary recall of fact, events, people, or feelings, and the poet's ability to access something deeper. She elaborates upon this concept in further comments sprinkled throughout her letters to Pearson in the next decade, in her discussion of particular works. He then selects from these insights, helping her shape the conception and development of *Trilogy*, both through his letters themselves and through the jacket-copy he wrote and sent for her approval.

Probably in response to conversations she and Pearson were having at dinner about the genesis of her work, H.D. takes up the motif of “suppressed memory” most energetically again in letters written during 1943 and 1944. In August, 1943, having posted him a manuscript copy of *The Gift*, she explains that she worked on it off and on for twenty years, but it only “snapped into shape” when she worked it out “through the minds of the children or the child.”⁶ Here she suggests a form of psychological regression in the service of art that reminds us of the method of free association she later demonstrates in *Writing on the Wall*. She continues later in that month,⁷ speaking now of the meaning of *The Walls Do Not Fall*, to explain that she needs to “shed a skin, or husk, once in so often,” a psychological phenomenon, particular to her artist-peers (“the latter-day twice born”), from which the “whole race” would benefit.

Also in 1943,⁸ H.D. connects this psychological regression with the literary concept of “home” which lies behind her vindication of the writer in *The Walls Do Not Fall*. In the course of thanking Pearson for having allayed some of her homesickness, because he, a fellow American, reminds her, literally, of home, she differentiates between this literal home, and the embodiment of “home” in her poems, where she is concerned with the role of the writer in Anglo-American history. Referring to the first line of *The Walls Do Not Fall* as evidence, she explains that “outer violence touching the deepest hidden sub-conscious terrors” has allowed her to “see so much of the past ‘on show,’” phrases that Pearson will use in writing the jacket-copy of the Oxford University Press edition of that poem, in which he will also claim that H.D. is writing a new kind of “civilian war poetry.”⁹

In this letter, H.D. also indulges in associative word-play around American place-names, inviting Pearson to come and talk about “rivers” with her another time. She thus indicates that she has brain-stormed with him on other occasions, allowing him to participate in her linguistic experimentation. Perhaps this participation is the source of the entitlement evident in some of Pearson’s next letters, where he plays a more decisive role in shaping the direction of H.D.’s work. For example, on August 31, 1944, after having read the manuscript of *Tribute to the Angels*, which H.D. described earlier as “the peace poem,” Pearson cautions her to “wait until a third set can complete what is so very much a war trilogy,” advising further that “these are ‘relief’ poems, not quite either victory or peace poems.” Grateful for his encouragement, though temporarily at a loss for inspiration, she replies eleven days later that if she does do a third section, “it should be dedicated to Norman Holmes Pearson.”¹⁰ Moreover, since she wrote the second “under compulsion,” and hasn’t “the foggiest of what the 3d is to be about,” she asks if he has

“any inspirational ideas.”

That H.D.’s description of the psychological strain under which she wrote *Tribute to the Angels* belied her earlier description of it as a “peace poem” was a discrepancy not lost on Pearson. Although he asked her to describe the genesis of the poem in December, probably in preparation for the jacket-copy he was again writing, his comments this time do not use her words at all. She had responded to his request anxiously, commenting that she wrote the poem “at odd moments,”¹¹ starting the first section “while on a bus to Putney,” and she had described the intellectual and emotional derivation of “the lady” in the poem rather defensively. Pearson’s jacket note uses only the gist of her explanation. Instead of phrases from her letter, he alludes to key images in the poem itself to describe “the new life springing from . . . the shattered fragments of a soul”; “out of the alchemist’s crucible comes the jewel, out of the charred tree the blossom.”¹²

Some might criticize Pearson’s choices here, arguing that his decision to smooth over the rough edges and particularity of what she wrote in her letter was yet another example of a kind of editorial silencing—the same kind of thing that Pound and Lawrence did to H.D.’s poetry several decades earlier. We would defend Pearson’s actions on two grounds: first, in the process of writing this jacket-copy Pearson was encouraging H.D. to write the third series of the poem by developing motifs that she had already initiated in the first two series; second, he later included the details of her letter in his “Foreword” to the first printing of all three series as one poem in a single edition by New Directions in 1973, under the title *Trilogy*.

After completing *Tribute to the Angels*, H.D. assembled the diary/memoir *Writing on the Walls* about her sessions with Freud. As Susan Friedman and Rachel DuPlessis have written, the subtext of this tribute is a subtle criticism of Freud’s judgment that her visions at Corfu were the product of megalomania.¹³ In H.D.’s words, “the Professor was not always right.” In *The Flowering of the Rod*, which was written immediately after, this subtext becomes the main story of the poem. By means of the “tale of a jar or jars” the Mage of the first series, now called Kaspar (and based on Freud) is granted a vision which complements the poet’s own. Evidence from the jacket-copy on the Oxford University Press edition and from his later “Foreword” to *Trilogy* suggests that Pearson may have influenced this new perspective.

Moreover, in *The Flowering of the Rod* we get a direct sense of how much H.D. has begun to draw from her contact with Pearson. Here she introduces him as a role model, both in the dedication to the poem and in the first twelve sections which serve as a prelude or frame to the “tale.” In an undated letter, deduced to have been written

October 6, 1943, Pearson had indulged in another bit of associative word-play around the word "Puritan"—a bit of word-play which is meaningless until we learn from Robin Winks' *Cloak and Gown*¹⁴ that Pearson's cover name in the OSS was "Puritan." Clearly, Pearson and H.D. often discussed his activities in the OSS. *The Flowering of the Rod* was written between December 18th and 30th, 1944, following a period of Pearson's intensely secretive comings and goings when, according to Winks, he played "a small but key role in the work of the OSS Art Looting Project."¹⁵ In addition, Professor Winks paints a portrait of Pearson as a man determined to overcome his handicap ("an open, sometimes suppurating, sore on his left hip") and to demonstrate his leadership qualities.¹⁶ That H.D. knew of Pearson's activities and ambitions and admired them is apparent in section 3 of *The Flowering of the Rod* where she casts him as a paradigmatic figure of resurrection: "in resurrection there is simple affirmation, / but do not delay to round up the others, / up and down the street; your going / in a moment like this, is the best proof / that you know the way" (CP 579). Further proof that H.D. views Pearson as a figure of resurrection appears in the quotation following her dedication to him of the poem: ". . . pause to give / thanks that we rise again from death and live" (CP 577).

The words of this dedication become particularly poignant in the aftermath of the war, when instead of teaching a seminar at Bryn Mawr, H.D. had to be flown to Privat Klinik Brunner, Kusnacht, for psychiatric treatment. From there she wrote to Pearson,¹⁷ after having received a copy of *The Flowering of the Rod*, commenting that she hoped that he liked the dedication as much as she did and thanking him for having given her the title for the poem—a poem which she had earlier referred to as "our rod."¹⁸ Coincidentally enough, Pearson responds,¹⁹ from the hospital where he has had his hip bone scraped, that the poem's dedication means more to him than any other tribute to his war effort, and that now he is "only anxious to have the three parts appear together."

Although it took Pearson seventeen years to achieve this publishing feat, H.D. continued to use the tri-partite structure he had suggested in such major poems as *Helen in Egypt* and "Hermetic Definition." Thus Pearson helped her to shape the inner tempo that would dominate the latter part of her creative life: the interplay between historical time and the timeless moment of "suppressed memory" that would become central to her sense of renewal. As her heroine Helen tells us in "Winter Love": "a life out-lived, / another life re-lived, / till I came back, came back . . ." (HD 86).

NOTES

1. Harry T. Moore, *The Intelligent Heart: The Story of D.H. Lawrence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954).
2. H.D., *Compassionate Friendship*, unpublished typescript, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, p. 35. For permission to quote from this material, the authors wish to thank the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Yale University.
3. *Compassionate Friendship* 34.
4. Letter dated Dec. 12, 1927 [i.e. 1937]. All known extant letters between H.D. and Pearson are at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. For permission to quote from the H.D.-Pearson correspondence, the authors wish to thank the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
5. H.D.'s original letter to Pearson, edited by Diana Collecott, is published in *Agenda* 25. 3/4 (Autumn/Winter 1987/8): 71-76. References in the text will refer to this publication,
6. Letter dated August 9 [1943].
7. Letter dated August 26 [1943].
8. Undated letter, probably written in November 1943.
9. H.D., *The Walls Do Not Fall* (London: Oxford UP, 1944).
10. Letter dated September 11 [1944].
11. Letter dated December 5 [1944].
12. H.D., *Tribute to the Angels* (London: Oxford UP, 1945).
13. "'Woman Is Perfect': H.D.'s Debate with Freud," *Feminist Studies* 7.3 (Fall 1981): 418.
14. Robin W. Winks, *Cloak & Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-1961* (New York: Morrow, 1987), p. 249.

15. Winks 303.
16. Winks 251.
17. Letter dated June 11, 1946.
18. Letter dated July 29 [1945].
19. Letter dated August 28, 1946.