

H.D.'S PROSODIE À CLEF: SAINT-JOHN PERSE AND HERMETIC DEFINITION

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To show how H.D. shapes into meaning her sense of the way hard and soft sounds in the poetic line produce subliminal heft, I have just written a clause which, while more or less intelligible on the conscious level, also embeds the thesis of this essay by the more subtle means of alliteration. Bear with me: in the twenty-three word clause, four words begin with *h*, the first letter of H.D.'s first name and of my last name; six words begin with *s*, the first letter of my first name and of Saint-John Perse, the French poet who was among H.D.'s last male beloveds and whose *Exil* she was reading when composing *Hermetic Definition*; and indeed two words ("show" and "shape") begin with a combination of H.D.'s *and* my first initials; two words begin with *p*, Saint-John's last initial. By embedding in my opening clause H.D.'s, Saint-John Perse's, and my own initials, I introduce the argument that H.D. in this manner uses a kind of *prosodie à clef* in her last book of poems, including as she does reference to Saint-John Perse through repetition of the consonants *s* and *p*, his initials, in the opening sequence of *Hermetic Definition*.

To the poet's double burden of matching sense and sound, H.D. adds a third task, not only to use appropriate acoustical techniques within linguistic contexts but also, in fact, to reproduce her beloved's initials in poems dedicated to him in her last published volume. The title of the book itself embeds her own initials to link her intimately, by virtue of the history a name carries, with Saint-John Perse and with all others whose names appear explicitly or implicitly throughout the volume. Lest such a technique of acoustical echoing seem "over-intense,"¹ I suggest you try it, as I have rather feebly done, in order to experience the peculiarly intimate connections among writers, and between writer and word, which such hermetic definition achieves.

Very simply, then, H.D. refines her consummate skill with the rudiments of poetic sound—onomatopoeia, alliteration, acronym, among them—by creating in her final poems a *prosodie à clef* at the acoustical level. First, I will briefly scan two representative poems from her initial volume, *Sea Garden* (as quoted in *CP*), to show her earliest work with

alliteration and onomatopoeia, thus providing a milieu for reading her last, quasi-acronymic work. For H.D.'s exceptionally acute sense of sound remains a largely unexplored, yet a defining characteristic of her work.

In reading or re-reading *Sea Garden*, we can be impressed with its urgent tone, rendered in part by the abrupt verse lines and by the play with euphony and cacophony. Listen closely to her "Huntress," for example, who cries, "Come, blunt your spear with us, / our pace is hot" (23). In the second stanza she describes that pressing action while employing the two central phonetic techniques of her earliest poetry:

We lead the pace
for the wind on the hills,
the low hill is spattered
with loose earth—
our feet cut into the crust
as with spears. (24)

The first four lines of this passage contain seven *l* or *r* sounds and four *s* or *th* sounds which as sonorants and spirants create the effect of smooth and easy movement, or euphony. But the word "spattered" at the end of the third line is made prominent by its trio of stop consonants—*p*, *t*, and *d*—in contrast to the sonorants and spirants surrounding it. The final two lines of the passage recall the word "spattered" in that seven stop consonant sounds appear (*t*, *c*, *p*) to reinforce, through cacophony, an effect of thematic change. This repeated use of dissonance and assonance, with the truncated line, combine to produce an unmistakable poetic signature for H.D.'s early work.

The exasperated and challenging voice in "Sheltered Garden," then, demands at the end of the poem "a new beauty / in some terrible / wind-tortured place" (21); earlier in the same poem, "I have had enough. / I gasp for breath" (19). In the fourth of nine stanzas, contrastive sounds point back to the stasis of the opening lines and forward to a strategy of release:

O for some sharp swish of a branch—
there is no scent of resin
in this place,
no taste of bark, of coarse weeds,
aromatic, astringent—

only border on border of scented pinks. (19)

In a medial position, the consonant and spondaic phrase “in this place” recalls the stasis of “I have had enough.” The line, “no taste of bark, of coarse weeds,” quickens the movement such that “aromatic” and particularly “astringent” in the penultimate line gain prominence; indeed, the peculiar combination in “astringent” of a spirant (*s*), a sonorant (*r*), and the nasal (*n*) appearing twice, in contrast to the stop (*t*) and affricate (*g*), render this word onomatopoeic. An “astringent” or caustic beauty must rescue the desperate persona, and that “new beauty” is suggested in a word which, through its contrastive acoustics, recalls but finally eludes the oppressively “scented pink[]” aesthetic which the persona fears.

By the end of her life, H.D. extended the onomatopoeic technique in her references to Saint-John Perse (Alexis St.-Leger), references which become acronymic; thereby her admiration for him appears in explicit and implicit tributes. In the middle part of the “Hermetic Definition” section of *Hermetic Definition*, H.D. returns to and comments upon the “Grove of Academe” where she met Saint-John Perse, during the ceremony in which she accepted the gold medal for poetry from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.² Noting his volume entitled *Exil* directly in the eleventh of the eighteen cantos of “Grove of Academe” (*HD* 36), H.D. also often strategically embeds her beloved’s initials in cantos five through thirteen. And the repetition of consonantal patterns reminds us of H.D.’s earliest female voices: we imagine that she recollects her own poetic career in celebrating his.

Striking repetition of the *s* and *p* sounds of Saint-John Perse’s name appear in this excerpt from canto five, for example:

May Athene Hygeia be our near,
 personal patroness;
 I scrape a small pine-cone
 from the sparse sea-grass
 that shows separate salt-spikes
 in the dry sand-drift. (29)

In the second line of this passage, we see *p* alliteration and *s* consonance (“personal patroness”); in the third line, *s* alliteration (“scrape,” “small”), and *p* consonance (“scrape,” “pine-cone”); in lines four and five, the words “sparse” and “spikes” conflate

the consonantal pair which forms the male poet's initials.

In this passage from canto twelve, we see two lines of *s* alliteration followed by two of *p* alliteration, while the last two also link *Perse* with *Perseus*:

I am conscious of my exquisite spine
(God's work) as I slip and swing;

go *Perseus*, man and hero,
your perfection permits this. (37)

Other instances of *s* and *p* repetitions occur in the middle nine cantos, while the opening four and the closing five cantos of this section remain comparatively free of the technique. Consider such phrases as these: "no such place as this" (30); "I am perfectly supple and silent" and "I am part of it / as I am part of the spiked / or smooth or lacquered sea-grass" (32); "his speech is the poet's speech" (34); and, "my spine's rapture" (38). While subtly underscoring the male poet's importance, these instances appear too infrequently to seem obsessive; they merely confirm H.D.'s artistry.

Despite her persistent attention to the elements of sound, H.D.'s critics have granted it little recognition. Bernard F. Engel's early work treats her use of assonance and consonance in the first poems, and Michael Boughn's more recent essay treats rhyme, metre, and syntax in *Sea Garden*. John Peck's piece touches upon rhythm in the last poems, and Alicia Ostriker's study begins to explore the formal complexity of *Trilogy* (briefly treating continuous form, punctuation, cadence, rhyme, "lightness," "openness," and repetition).³ But a sustained reading of the development and significance of H.D.'s fundamental poetics remains to be accomplished. If my understanding of the relatively brief segment of *Hermetic Definition* dedicated to her beloved is deepened by knowledge of her play with consonants, then surely her greater texts would be further enriched by our increased sensitivity to H.D.'s lifelong fascination with not only the etymology but also the acoustics of words.

NOTES

1. H.D., "Speech of Acceptance to the American Academy of Arts and Letters," *H.D. Newsletter* 3.1 (1990): 6.
2. Norman Holmes Pearson briefly details the meeting in his "Foreword" to *Hermetic Definition* (vi-vii).
3. Bernard F. Engel, "H.D.: Poems that Matter and Dilutions," *Contemporary Literature* 10.4 (1969): 507-22; Michael Boughn, "Elements of the Sounding: H.D. and the Origins of Modernist Prosodies," *Sagetrieb* 6.2 (1987): 101-22; John Peck, "Passio Perpetuae H.D.," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 3.2 (1975): 42-74; Alicia Ostriker, "No Rule of Procedure: The Open Poetics of H.D.," *Agenda* 25.3-4 (1987-1988): 145-54.