HIEROGLYPHS OF LANDSCAPE IN H.D.'S EARLY WORK (1916-1922)

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In a recent article, I suggested that H.D.'s early poetry should be read as a single text, an essentially Modernist text, both in its formal features and in its innovative socio-political and cultural ideology, closely associated with that of D. H. Lawrence and Ezra Pound. I also proposed that *Sea Garden* and contemporaneous poems (assembled in *Collected Poems* under the title *The God*) should be read as a hermetic text, profoundly influenced by the Neoplatonic and theosophical ideas current at the beginning of the twentieth century.[1] This note is really a postscript, an elaboration of one or two of the readings proposed there, principally in the light of a re-reading of *Notes on Thought and Vision*. I will be attempting to illustrate how H.D.'s concern with the vatic nature of poetry and her perception of her career as poet may be interpreted by tracing the evolution of some of her central images between 1916 and 1922.

The Platonism of *Notes on Thought and Vision* is eccentric but pervasive. The definition of vision as a Socratic fusion of intelligence and love confirms H.D. in the Platonic tradition, as do her hierarchies of being: individual, psychic, cosmic. Her terminology is idiosyncratic. Individual states—or "manifestations of life"—she defines as "overmind," "mind," and "body." On a psychological level these become overconscious, conscious, and sub-conscious mind. In cosmic terms they are worlds: the World of abstraction (Helios, Athene), the Intermediate or Nature world (Pan, the Naiads), and the world of the uninitiate men and women.

The three worlds are perhaps closer to Neoplatonic commentaries, Plotinian hypostases; but some of the explicatory details suggest Plato as an immediate source. H.D.'s concept of Eros as intermediary between gods and mortals, "that special angel," "our own familiar daemon," reflect Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*; and the association of the highest cultural achievement with love—"there is no great art period without great lovers"—indicates the influence of the *Phaedrus*. Reading her evocation of the Delphic charioteer, I am unsure whether she also has in mind the myth of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*; but when she writes of the "electric force of the lines and angles of the priest-like body" in the context of discussing its potential to renew the world with its power, and

within the context of Christian and Eleusinian resurrection and initiations, the charioteer becomes a hieratic figure similar to that in "The Contest." For in that poem the emergent god–hero would seem to be a charioteer: "With the turn and grasp of your wrist / and the chords' stretch / there is a glint like worn brass" (*CP* 12). Although the title suggests competition, there is no obvious race as in "Charioteer": the emphasis in the poem is on beauty undergoing elemental transformation before awestruck eyes. Plato's myth of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus* recounts, in the words on one commentator, that "in a soul fresh from deep contemplation of spiritual beauty, the sight of earthly beauty arouses religious awe and worship."[2] The love–inspired soul grows spiritual wings, and joins the cavalcade of the gods. In this flight of the soul, the gods translate matter to idea with ease, but for the human, there is an internal contest, a psychomachia between the white and black horses of heavenly and earthly impulse. The Olympic victory sought by the charioteer is a glimpse of the supercelestial plateau which eventually releases mortals from the flesh. Souls most likely to achieve their goal are philosopher–lovers under the influence of divine frenzy. H.D.'s "The Contest" could thus be read as presenting both the soul–flight of the beloved and the impression of his beauty on the lover; the mysterious ride up a mountainous landscape, indeed the superscription of beloved upon mountainous landscape, could be read as the steep ascent of the subcelestial arch in the plain of reality, true home of souls: "you have entered the hill straits– / a sea treads upon the hill slopes" (*CP* 13).

Notes on Thought and Vision, and its gloss on the three worlds, may also help to elucidate another poem, "The Helmsman." The *Phaedrus* describes the plain of truth as "the shade of reality with which knowledge is concerned, a reality without color or shape, intangible but utterly real, apprehensible only by intellect which is the pilot of the soul."[3] But the soul forgets its origins in the delights of the material world. Similarly, "The Helmsman" narrates a retreat from the sea, from arduous voyage, into the delights of a green hinterland:

> We worshipped inland–
> we stepped past wood–flowers,
> we forgot your tang,
> we brushed wood–grass . . .
>
> we forgot–we worshipped,
> we parted green from green . . .

and wood and wood-bank enchanted us– (*CP* 6)

It is possible to read a sexual agenda into this poem: a relieved delight from the rigors of "romantic thralldom" to a male god-lover[4] into the pastoral world of the feminine.[5] But it is also possible to read into this poem a falling-away of the soul from a striving towards achieved spirituality, and delight at being re-summoned by the soul's helmsman, the Demiurge: "O be swift– / we have always known you wanted us."[6] The unexplained transition from the "enchanting" pastoral inland to a boat "climbing, hesitating" could be read as encoding both a social program of renewal–a program H.D. arguably shared at this time with Ezra Pound and D. H. Lawrence–and as a personal intimation of emergent poetic power that will place the poet among the immortals.

Interaction with Lawrence may be more important than with Pound at this juncture. A distinctive feature of Lawrence's work is his rewriting of the myth of Plato's charioteer; moreover, Lawrence had become intensely interested in pre-Platonic philosophers, and it seems likely that H.D. was also reading pre-Platonic philosophers at this time, and that her reading influenced her early poetry. If this is so, then "The Contest," "The Helmsman," and other early poetry might be indebted to earlier versions of Platonic myth, such as Parmenides' chariot ride to the Region of Light, where he is received by Wisdom.

The question of these contexts is more important that the marginal one of sources. As Jane Marcus and others have remarked concerning Virginia Woolf, at the beginning of the twentieth century Greek symbolized for women the conquest of an intellectual world from which they had hitherto been excluded.[7] The construction of H.D.'s personal mythologies merits as much serious interpretative effort as those of Yeats, Pound, or Eliot; and in this regard it is salutary to recall her comment on the Delphic charioteer: "All this was no 'inspiration,' it was sheer hard brain work" (*NTV* 26). The myths of Neoplatonism offer a cultural context within which to interpret the conflicts centered on artistic and sexual identity that characterize H.D.'s early work.

An informing characteristic of H.D.'s early poetry is her introjection of, and attempted repudiation of, Platonic symbolic formulations of dualism, the split between soul and body, as gender divisions: male soul, female matter. The symbol of the androgyne as unification of soul and body, male and female, is a commonplace of esoteric writing of the late nineteenth century, adapted from the French tradition into the English by Walter Pater, and still present in Lawrence's early writing, as in the poem "Narcissus." Since writing about H.D.'s classical and occult sources, I have come across an article which, by

analyzing pictures exhibited in the Paris salons of the 1890s and their interest in the figure of the androgyne, accentuate the intrinsic misogyny of that figure.[8] In Deville's *Symbolization of the Flesh and Spirit*, for example, "the feminine force, symbolic of grossness and materialism, attempts to hinder the creative force, symbolized by the straining male torso." An inherited tradition of identification of the creative force with the masculine obviously creates problems for the woman artist. Yet H.D.'s personal need for the symbol of the androgyne, her seizing of it as metaphor for her sexual ambivalence, led to the conflict between aspiration towards feminine artistic autonomy and idealization of male creative power that informs H.D.'s early poetry.

This conflict appears to underlie H.D.'s series of reworkings of an apparently insignificant passage of Balzac's *Seraphitâ*, a mystic tale of human love for an angelic androgyne. In formulating my reading of *Sea Garden* and contemporaneous poems, I argued that *Seraphitâ* was to H.D. a crucial source of Neoplatonic ideas and symbols. The opening, an evocative description of the coastline of Norway, prelude to a mountainous hinterland of apocalyptic brilliance, was particularly influential, offering as it does an emblematic setting for an encounter with occult revelation, a fictive account of Swedenborg's angelology. The description of Norway commences by likening the outline of Norway on the map to the hieroglyph of a giant fish:

> A voir sur une carte les côtes de la Norvége, quelle imagination ne serait émerveillée de leurs fantasques découpures, longue dentelle de granit où mugissent incessamment les flots de la mer du Nord? qui n'a rêvé les majestueux spectacles offerts par ces rivages sans grèves, par cette multitude de criques, d'anses, de petites baies dont aucune ne ressemble aux autres, et qui toutes sont les abîmes sans chemins? Ne dirait-on pas que la nature s'est plu à dessiner par d'ineffaçables hiéroglyphes le symbole de la vie norvégienne, en donnant à ces côtes la configuration des arêtes d'un immense poisson?[9]
>
> [On seeing the Norwegian coast as outlined on the map, what imagination could not fail to be amazed at its fantastic contour—long tongues of granite, round which the surges of the North Sea are for ever moaning? Who has not dreamed of the majestic spectacle of these beachless shores, these endless creeks, and inlets, and little bays, no two of which are alike, and each a pathless gulf? Would it not seem as though Nature had amused

> herself by representing, in an indestructible hieroglyphic, the symbol of life in Norway, by giving its coast the configuration of the bones of an enormous fish?][10]

Balzac's banal conclusion that the map of Norway is a hieroglyph of its principal commercial activity, fishing, did not deter H.D. from returning again and again to this passage. H.D.'s obsession with the coastline from girlhood, and her creative method of repeatedly reworking her own and others' texts, make the appeal of Balzac's text readily understandable. The evocation of an incessantly evolving coastline, of innumerable intricate inlets similar but never the same, each to be charted, decoded as an arcane text, could in itself offer an appropriate hieroglyph of H.D.'s imagination. Already prepared as she was to read the world as emblematic code (perhaps this was the trait that attracted Pound; it was Pound who gave her *Seraphità*), the conceit became a seminal one. I have so far come across two direct reworkings of the Balzac passage. The first occurs in "The Wise Sappho," as H.D. meditates upon Meleager's epigrammatic definition of Sappho's work, "little, but all roses":

> Yet not all roses—not roses at all, nor orange blossoms even, but reading deeper we are inclined to visualize these broken sentences and unfinished rhythms as rocks—perfect rock shelves and layers of rock between which flowers by some chance may grow but which endure when the staunch blossoms have perished.
>
> Not flowers at all, but an island of innumerable, tiny irregular bays and fjords and little straits between which the sun lies clear (fragments cut from a perfect mirror of iridescent silver or of bronze reflecting richer tints) or breaks, wave upon destructive passionate wave.
>
> Not roses but an island, a country, a continent, a planet, a world of emotion, differing entirely from any present day imaginable world of emotion; a world of emotion that could only be imagined by the greatest of her own countrymen in the greatest period of that country's glamour, who themselves confessed her beyond their reach, beyond their song, not a woman, not a goddess even, but a song or a spirit of song.
>
> A song, a spirit, a white star that moves across heaven to mark the end of a world epoch or to presage some coming glory. (*NTV* 58–59)

The seascape of fjords and rocks is recognizably that of *Seraphitâ*; of Pound's early verse, the "swelling and turbid sea" and "rocky shore" of "Li Bel Chasteus"; of the Cornish coast of H.D.'s *Bid Me to Live*; most notably, of her early verse. There is a striking difference, however; for at an earlier stage in her career, her ambition was projected onto the male poets who so readily identified themselves with gods, and who are transformed in her poems from ideas to substance by their emergence from their symbol, the rock island. *The Sea Garden* poems give an account of a desperate search over an often desolatingly uninhabited landscape for an unseen God or gods. The poems tell of mysterious hunts over a wind–swept terrain, following clues of a previous presence, a trail, a vertiginous, and frequently wounding and dangerous, scramble to mountain heights above the sea. It would seem significant that when god or hero manifests, it is in the form of a landscape that was previously empty. For instance, the seeker/speaker of "The Cliff Temple" complains, "forever and forever, must I follow you / through the stones?"; and the stones are described as colored rocks modulating from dark to silver to white:

> Great bright portal,
> shelf of rock,
> rocks fitted in long ledges,
> rocks fitted to dark, to silver granite,
> to lighter rock–
> clean cut, white against white. (CP 26)

In "The Contest," surely a complementary poem, the male presences is depicted as sculpted rock:

> You stand rigid and mighty–
> granite and ore in rocks . . .
> You are white . . .
> You are splendid,
> your arms are fire . . . (CP 13)

And in "The God," the face of the sought deity is the temple portal incarnate, a stony Bacchus, "Set beneath heavy locks, / circled with stiff ivy–fruit, / clear, / cut with great hammer–stroke" (CP 46).

It is difficult not to read into these poems a hieroglyph of England, its white cliffs

inhabited by literary heroes, an essentially male landscape. (Indeed the metaphor for poetry of hardness, of rock, the Platonic myth of the struggle of idea to emerge from matter as Michelangelesque statues, is a sign of the influence of Pound's aesthetic discourse on H.D.). However, the central narrative is marginally subverted by one of feminine infiltration: for *Sea Garden* is also characterized by the precarious emergence of scarcely articulated flowers from the sea. A major note is fear, fear of failed encounter, of falling, of failing to take root: "I perish on the path / among the crevices of the rock" ("Mid–Day," *CP* 10). But although diffidently presented, H.D.'s program to infiltrate the rocky terrain of poetic greatness, to "catch fire," is already clear:

> Beautiful, wide–spread
> fire upon leaf,
> what meadow yields
> so fragrant a leaf
> as your bright leaf? ("Sea Poppies," *CP* 21)

> Violent
> your grasp is frail
> on the edge of the sand–hill,
> but you catch the light–
> frost, a star edges with its fire. ("Sea Violet," *CP* 25)

Thus the meditations in "The Wise Sappho" mark an important change: the rock now confidently encodes monuments of a woman's poetic achievement. If the "broken sentences and unfinished rhythms," "fragments cut from a silver mirror," are characteristic of Sappho, they also accurately delineate H.D.'s own Imagist style, and describe a realized strategy. By 1920, subconsciously at least, she realized the magnitude of her achievement.

The second reworking of the Balzac hieroglyph is in "Notes on Euripides, Pausanius, and Greek Lyric Poets":

> Look at the map of Greece. Then go away and come back and look and look and look at it. The jagged contours stir and inflame the imagination, time riddled banner of freedom and fiery independence, a rag of a country all irregular, with little torn off bits, petals drifting, those islands, "lily on lily that o'er lap the sea." Look at the map of Greece. You will be unable

> to read it and go away and come back after years and just begin to spell out the meaning of its outline. Then you will realize that you know nothing at all about its meaning and begin all over, learning a cryptic language.[11]

Here, the coastal borderline as emblem of "fiery independence" has, by 1922, been significantly modified from rock to flower, drifting petals, as if Greece and its islands constituted a hieroglyph of poetic fragments, posies/poesies, a Greek anthology. This transformation of the terrain of creativity would seem to be as inevitable as it is significant. After the agonized questioning of poetic identity and autonomy in "Pygmalion" (where the feminine falters before masculine aspiration and abandonment), and the answering self–relegation to the rock of hell in "Eurydice" (flowerless except for the flowers of the self), the marginal, tenuous blossoms of *Sea Garden* occupy a central position. The map of Greece has come to signify, it would seem, a text liberated from patriarchal constraints and introjections, a script of mysterious (feminine) hieroglyphs to be decoded. This interpretation depends upon a possible reading of "fiery independence" and "independent fire." But it is difficult to dissociate "fire," "fiery," from poetic inspiration in H.D.'s writing. Indeed, at this stage of her career (and in her subsequent fiction concerning her early years in England) it is difficult not to associate the metaphor of fire with H.D.'s debate with D. H. Lawrence about sexual and poetic autonomy. Certainly, the imagery of blue fire indicates an ongoing intertextul exchange between H.D. and Lawrence. It occurs early in Lawrence's work, within his theosophically–influenced Helen poems, written around 1914. The Helen figure is hierophant of a godhead of the flesh, and is celebrated in verse ablaze with dusky blue fire. Poems connected with this group are "The Shadow of Death" and "Blueness," which share the blue fire, the glittering dolphins, of H.D.'s "Thetis" (and, significantly, her vision or hallucination of leaping dolphins on the boat to Corfu):

> Jets of sparks in fountains of blue come leaping . . .
> All these pure things come from the foam and spray of the sea
> Of Darkness abundant, which shaken mysteriously
> Breaks into dazzle of living, a dolphins leap from the sea
> Of midnight and shake it to fire, till the flame of the shadow we see.[12]

Blue fire in Lawrence is a signifier of immanence, of a hidden god shimmering in the

world to proclaim "another day," and "undawning" (*DHL* 132, 133). Later on, the god himself is born:

> When sapphires cooled out of molten chaos:
> See, God is born! He is blue, he is deep blue,
> he is forever blue! (*DHL* 682)

H.D. associates Rico/Lawrence continuously with Orphic blue fire in *Bid Me to Live*, and in that text there is reiterated emphasis on the blue fire of Rico's eyes:

> It was Rico's pale face and the archaic Greek beard and fire-blue eyes in the burnt out face that she had seen, an Orpheus head . . . "I didn't particularly write it for Rico," she repeated, seeing the pale face, the burnt eyes, hearing the words that flame alive, blue serpents on the page that Rico wrote her, that were just ordinary letters that you could chuck across a breakfast-tray to any husband, but that yet held the flame and the fire, the burning, the believing. (51,52)

In this context it is difficult not to read into "Eurydice" the rejection of the role of Lawrence's acolyte:

> what was it you saw in my face?
> the light of your own face,
> the fire of your own presence? (*CP* 53)

The speaking subject of "Eurydice" surrenders "fringe upon fringe / of blue crocuses," "Blue of that upper earth," to the (implicitly male) addressee in order to occupy her own space, hell. In doing so—if Lawrence is indeed the addressee (or one of the addressees) of the poem—she displaces Lawrence from his own imaginary terrain of the underworld kingdom of the dark god:

> I say, wonderful are the hellish experiences,
> Orphic, delicate
> Dionysos of the Underworld.

A kiss, and a spasm of farewell, a moment's orgasm of rupture,
Then along the damp road alone, till the next turning.
And there, a new partner, a new parting, a new unfusing into twain,

A new gasp of further isolation,
A new intoxication of loneliness, among decaying, frost-cold leaves. (*DHL* 280-81)

Woman as serial sexual object, a disposable other defining the autonomous self, would seem to be close to the role rejected in "Eurydice." "Meldars and Sorb-Apples" was written in the autumn of 1920; and I find it increasingly difficult to dissociate Lawrence's urgent reconstruction of the Persephone and Phaedrus myths from H.D. Her disputed connection with *Lady Chatterly's Lover* has been argued on biographical grounds. Curiously, neither Robinson nor Delaney discuss *The Ladybird*, although Robinson identifies the Basil of *Paint It To-Day* as Aldington. (The husband in *The Ladybird* is called Basil). The tale is an obvious precursor to *The Escaped Cock* and *Lady Chatterly's Lover*: the heroine, Lady Daphne, oscillates between the deadly white worship of her husband and the dark wooing of the chthonic Count Dionys, prophet of the dark sun and the god of destruction. Lady Daphne is a hieratic, lunar character, physically more like H.D. than Lady Chatterly: she is tall, thin, ill, with languid eyes; her baby has been born dead. She is described as "Artemis or Atalanta," "a long limber Isis" with "wonderful Persephone fingers." Daphne remembers her husband as Dionysos, "full of sap, milk and honey, and northern golden wine."[13] But he returns from the war emitting a hard white radiance like risen death. The imagery is that of Platonic radiance, of *Seraphità*, of H.D.'s imagination: her intolerable radium. The first of Lawrence's Plutonic fictions, *The Ladybird*, argues passionately against the Platonic values he believes were life-destroying, and which he may have feared would destroy H.D.: "You will know all you life, that I know where your root is buried, with its sad, sad quick of life."

These are only notes from an ongoing project, and there is no space here to investigate fully the Platonic/Plutonic dialogue between Lawrence and H.D. But by 1922 H.D. had—for the time being—abandoned the Eleusinian landscape that is such a dominant feature of English Modernism, and which she had in her early poems helped to formulate, for a Greek one of "fiery independence"; for she was learning a totally other "cryptic language."

NOTES

"The Fiery Moment': H.D.'s Early Poetry and the Eleusinian Landscape of English Modernism." *Agenda* 25.3/4 (Autumn/Winter 1987/8): 97-112.

2. E. E. Taylor, *Plato: the Man and His Work* (London: Methuen, 1926) 308. I have worked mainly from this commentary and that of J.D. Stuart, *The Myth of Plato* (London: Macmillan, 1905).

3. *The Phaedrus*, trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 52.

4. See Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Romantic Thralldom in H.D.," *Signets: Reading H.D.*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991) 406-29.

5. In *Her* the "Eleusinian" mother is "almost" encountered as a "wood-goddess on a woodpath" (67).

6. I have already suggested that H.D. knew that the Helmsman was Neoplatonic symbol of the Demiurge ("Eleusinian Landscapes" 98). There is a useful summary of the demiurge as pilot in *Bright Essences: Studies in Milton's Theology*, ed. Hunter, Patrides, and Adamson (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1973) 105 ff.

7. Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987), especially chapter 2. See also, for example, Phyllis Rose, *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 36-37.

8. Laurinda Dixon, "Carlos Schwabe's *Spleen et Ideal*: A Study in 19th-Century Alchemical Revivalism," *Cauda Pavonis* (The Hermetic Text Society Newspaper) n.s. 6.1 (Spring 1987): 5-9.

9. Honore de Balzac, *Seraphità* (Paris: Calmann Levy, 1900), *Oeuvres completes*, vol. 1, 179.

10. Trans. Clara Bell (London: Dent, 1897) 2.

11. Quoted by Diana Collecott in "Images at the Crossroads" and by Dale Davis in "Heliodora's Greece," both published in Michael King, *H.D.: Woman and Poet* (Orono, Me.: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), 143, 358.

12. *D. H. Lawrence: The Complete Poems*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 136. Subsequent references to this edition, abbreviated *DHL*, will be given parenthetically in the text.

13. D. H. Lawrence, *Three Novellas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 38.