

The Intimacy of Biography · *Barbara Guest*

SINCE THE COMPLETION and publication of my biography of H.D., I now realize that I have been seeking that special state of grace I had experienced while writing this book, and this has departed with the disappearance of H.D. and her companions from my immediate life. I reach out in search of that powerful light, or that sombre candle that lit the landscape of my own life as I struggled through the successive vales of a heretofore uncharted realm.

In 1977 I was quite innocent of those plans and charts a biographer must consult. To speak plainly I did not know how to write a biography. I had no training as a graduate student or an academic attached to research. One day travelling with the biographer of Margaret Mead on a bus to our country retreats, indeed they were retreats as I shall attempt to explain, Jane Howard and I compared the difficulties of our separate endeavors. "How did you get into this?" asked Jane. My answer was as simple as her blunt question, and we found ourselves in complete agreement with it: "I didn't know any better."

I had commenced with a memory of a conversation in which H.D. had been the subject. That was the root, long neglected. The conversation had taken place many years ago, yet it echoed in my unconscious. This person who had talked so lovingly of H.D. was the only one I had met who had ever known the poet whom I had read while at the university. An intimate detail related of H.D. was the first literary gossip of her past that brushed me. I withheld that memory, stored it for years. And one fine day that memory came alive when for all those reasons so precious and secret to the unconscious the idea of writing a biography of H.D. presented itself to me. The idea had arrived and taken me unawares as if from the shadows of a dream. H.D. would have understood and welcomed this phantom arrival of herself. Even now, more experienced and alert to providence and its mercurial bounty that both gives and takes away, I am convinced that what occurred was "meant to be." From the start I was most fortunate. The private papers of H.D. were placed at my disposal. Events and people suddenly and obligingly presented themselves from out of the vast mystery that was the life of H.D. They beckoned to me and made themselves available. I began as a "shy" researcher. I became a "greedy," a "feasting"

one, a voyeur of sights and sounds I had never expected. I was an intruder often exhausted, many times jubilant, and finally after several years I permitted myself to acknowledge that I had become a biographer. I knew too many secrets of the court not to be given that title.

The biographer's path is perilous. Victoria Glendinning, whose progress as a biographer has turned her into one of the wisest and most assured, has written that the biographer is expected to walk between the daily littleness of a subject's life and the inflation of a writer's life into myth. She asks if the task of the biographer is to be the selector of elements significant and fabulous upon which ancestor-worship is based. That is to say that the subject of a biographer for many persons is like a classical god who has left traces on earth. Is the biographer one who leads these people to the sacred shrine? Does the biography provide a role-model for aspiring modern women who believe that a dead but immortal author holds the key to the mystery of life, and is this biographer expected to allow them a closer view of the sources of creativity? I asked myself was I expected to lead the chosen, as Glendinning had termed them, to the pantheon? Is a biographer the sacred keeper of a mythology? A more modest view presented itself. Is not a biography read, as Glendinning proposes, by a person who habitually reads biography rather than fiction because of a hunger for the pattern and texture of lives simply as lives, just as much as from a need to move closer to the flames of creativity?

Virgil Thompson said to me when I questioned him about H.D., whom he had briefly known in Paris in the 1920s: "The important thing is that you must tell the truth." That answer might mean ascribing to the school of "warts and all." Searching among the paraphernalia of what became a biographer's lumber room, it was forced upon me that I was living not exactly with a goddess, or even always a heroine, but with a human being who was rooted also deeply in what is known as "the little life," that of clothes, money, meals, family, love affairs. I recognized then that it was entirely possible that I might write the sort of book which makes some critics cringe and scream (particularly among the male critics) "don't tell me what kind of tea cups H.D. used, I want to know why and how she wrote! I want meaning! The devil with the woman!"

I desired, I say this now somewhat sadly, everything. I wanted meaning, but I also wanted to see my subject plain. All I knew was that I definitely did not subscribe to the mythology school. I knew that I was going

to eschew textual criticism. That is not a biographer's job. I was in search of intimacy, not ancestor worship.

Let us leave me and my dilemma and return to the originally described state of grace. I have written a poem I called "Biography" in which I give indications of what the atmosphere of the Beinecke Library at Yale was like during my tenure there among the H.D. papers. It was a region I inhabited for what often seemed an eternity. It is there that the papers, letters, journals of H.D. repose. It is there that the correspondence between H.D. and her companion of a lifetime, Bryher, is deposited. Those precious letters were, before my time, unheard from, unseen, slumbering, unread. They were given into my sole safekeeping. I trembled sometimes as I turned over those intimate pages. I was informed by the strict ruling of the library that my notations from the letters must be in pencil. Then as I graduated into the confidence of the library I was permitted to type my notes. On no occasion was I permitted to xerox these letters.

I lived during the antediluvian state of H.D. scholarship. Today under a more lenient administration, eager students and researchers are permitted to rush in and xerox willfully those once sacrosanct pages. They may even photograph. Under this more relaxed regime, amid their xeroxed pages, I wonder if they realize they are missing the pungent smell of pen or personal typewriter on the author's page. The lovely, secret wall the researcher and subject begin to build, a wall so intimate, so private, it is made to exclude the outside world. Because time is so important you must be chary of your notetaking and extremely selective. You must catch the original writer off guard. This would be impossible if another machine interposed. The writer would retreat; an ugly xeroxed blur would send her rushing off, back to her closet. The moment once announced would never return. How could it, lost as it would be amid the jumble of hundreds of unreflected words?

I am of the blasphemous opinion that the word processor, however necessary, can be also a falsifier of memory. I cherish those moments in my cottage, what Perdita dotingly called my "shack," and what I named "the Villa of H.D.," when I would call to the next room to my visiting assistant — and I must add there are too few days when answers come from the next room — "On what page did I write such and such?" And the reassuring voice would answer with the page number. It is the reassurance of another's presence that one needs during the lonely work. Can such

warmth and human frailty be returned from a machine? Perhaps so, and perhaps the "frailty" I have mentioned is mine solely. I know, however, I would miss the trappings of an atmosphere I have described.

I have indulged myself in such revelations of research with their scenic backdrops, because I believe these costumes, these trappings, curtains, windows, make the beginnings of what is known as the "identification with the subject." Blanche Wiesen Cook wrote about this identification in "Biographer and Subject: A Critical Connection." According to Dr. Cook the best biographies come out of an intense identification between biographer and subject.

Dr. Cook and I have discussed this situation. She recently confided to me that, among others, she was also referring to me when she wrote of the intensity of this identification. Near neighbor, she had watched my various psychic crises and compared them with her own experience as a biographer. While writing about Crystal Eastman, who died of nephritis, Blanche suffered a psychic nephritis as intense and painful as if it were not false. In my own absorption with H.D., I too had begun to assume some of her characteristics. A more deliberate association was made when a person quite close to H.D. told me that she was the most selfish person he had ever known. I decided to practice my own brand of selfishness. I knew that selfishness is not necessarily a pejorative term when used in the context of a creative person. A hearty selfishness is needed to complete as much work as H.D. had undertaken. Divine selfishness accompanies the act of divine creativity. Such a wart viewed in a biography can be a sign of distinction. Failure in personal relationships sometimes indicates a growth in a creative relationship between pen and page. Distance can denote concentration, not necessarily always a self-centered retreat into the ephemeral.

H.D. lived constantly as witness to the variability of her mental weather. She watched the fluctuations of her private barometer. She concentrated so consistently on her hourly weathervane that I came to realize that her biographer must also permit this concentrated observance to enter into the biography. She was exceedingly brave for all this self-imposed suffering. A nosebleed caused her agonies of apprehension, and I believed that in order to chart her course one must also chart her complaints. I suffered along with her. More amusingly, H.D. was a bad speller and a worse punctuator. My punctuation had never been a fine point, but in the process I lost a natural ability to spell.

Now what were the joys of a biographer? I mentioned the state of grace. For me, after the primary research had been completed, I was enriched by an oddly related, if peripheral, reading of books—what some would call unnecessary reading, “plowing through,” as one reviewer remarked, “all those tedious books.” I never found them tedious. They were the markers lying on a detective’s trail. There was the thrill of catching the unexpected scent. As everyone who writes biography learns, part of the work is detection. There is research, detection, introspection, intuition, identification; there is much mulling. One is also a haunted being. I woke up one night and saw H.D. standing at the foot of my bed. I still believe this. Another night in a dream I heard Bryher say, “Beware the Jester.” The next morning, like an obedient Freudian, indeed as H.D. had taught me, and remembering her mornings at Kusnacht after her night dreams, I listened to what might have been the association or the play on words of “jester.” In this replay I heard “Guest-her.” Ever the guardian, Bryher was still up to her tricks of keeping H.D. safe.

There is a passionate absorption, more passionate and more sensitive because one knows—although sometimes in the midst of the welter when indecision and fatigue wave their banners and then the nudging doubts—there awaits the delicacy of the leave-taking. How one fears both its arrival and the suggestion that it might never take place. A physician said to me, “I know what the letters H.D. stand for. They stand for Have Done.” Everyone wanted me to make haste to finish my task. You’ve spent years! they would shout.

And there I remained with all my correspondents. My new pen pals. Few I would ever meet. Some, blessedly, I would come to know. These people, along with such a major literary personage as Ezra Pound, formed a world that was more real to me than my so-called real life. One has to live in isolation, ideally in the country, ideally weather-bound with a good fire in winter, or a shy air-conditioner in summer, then a few considerate friends, to be able to endure the hazards of biography. One needs home comforts to outweigh the physical and emotional constraints. These are ideal circumstances I admit, and they are what I remember as the goodness of life and for which I helplessly seek, now that Persephone has gone underground.

While I was writing this biography I was living with other generations than mine, among memorabilia, furniture, clothes, conversations, affec-

tions, even continents that had existed in the past. I was discovering that in a biography everything you find or touch or see out of the corner of your eye is new to you. Because it is new, you must continually be sorting, finding new uses for your discoveries within the pattern which you are weaving. And just as the material was new to me, so did my days have a freshness to them. During my first year of euphoria, and I will confess that this euphoria did not last out my final chapter, the weather had a special sparkle. I looked at nature, birds, the sand on the beach with the eye of rejuvenescence. Wasn't I, after all, in search of a form of rejuvenation? The lost youth, the lost womanhood of the writer, H.D.

Another photograph would arrive, this from a friend of the son of Frances Gregg, the early love of H.D., and as her life remained so fixed in time for H.D., perhaps her only love. And there was Frances who appeared in H.D.'s books and letters. That is what she looked like! The Beinecke Library had no photograph of her. Later I received a revealing and interesting letter from Frances' son bringing his mother back to life. Frances who had been such a mystery. It has been remarked that in my book the photographs of H.D. are eclipsed by those of the people who surrounded her. I displayed her beauty through the successive stages of her life. I may have believed wrongly that it was the turn of others, that those who had revelled in her life should also be given their turn to reveal themselves. I wished to be cinematic rather than schematic. H.D.'s was a face that once seen cannot be forgotten. I can see her reflection today in the visages of her grandchildren, and suddenly a bend of the head, an eye cast downward in that of her daughter, Perdita, and when I listen to her I believe I hear H.D.'s voice.

Frances had showed up circumlocutiously, even as she does in H.D.'s novel *The Usual Star*, where she rings the bell, uninvited, in the late evening. She came via a bookseller in London who put me in touch with Kenneth Hopkins, the biographer of John Cowper Powys (an author now seeing a revival here and in Britain, and a man who had remained close to Frances), who put me in touch with Frances' son, Oliver Wilkinson. That is how it goes. I had originally picked up the scent of Powys when Donald Gallup, then Curator of the American Collection at the Beinecke, in the midst of a conversation in his office suddenly, and with a casualness suggestive of his perspicacity, asked me what I thought of the writing of Powys. I picked up the scent there, but I only acted on it weeks later in a

New York library when I began to read the Hopkins biography of Powys, the letters, etc., the so-called "tedious" reading. Detection. Any biographer's tale. Not only was I rewarded with the fresh story of Frances and her portrait, there is now a friendship with her son. And then it continues to the agent, Gerald Pollinger, D.H. Lawrence's agent, with whom I had much entertaining correspondence, with whom I shared Lawrence gossip when in London and the ridiculous notion of Lawrence as the father of Perdita. And so it continues. One day at the Beinecke.

A biographer's nights are lonely even in the land of euphoria. I sometimes wrote in the evenings to James Laughlin of New Directions, and he would answer me throughout the writing of the book with his immense knowledge of Pound and his interest in H.D. as her publisher. Then I would follow Perdita back and forth in her large country house with my wispy necessary questionings, days as well as evenings. I was not trained as a journalist. With Perdita, I understood that I should catch a tone of voice, a sudden allusion, I should listen to her laughter and her confessional, shy answers. And always the subtle irony, the bits of gossipy human talk, dressed at times in exceptional sophistication. There was Silvia Dobson, whose name I kept finding at one point in the H.D.-Bryher correspondence and who I finally located outside of Santa Barbara. We met only once, yet we corresponded for the duration of the book and even thereafter. She became an invaluable ally. She posted me much of her collection of H.D. letters. Yet she would never have arrived on my horizon had I not idly wondered while reading the letters, who is Silvia? Such are the mysteries, the suppers and wines enjoyed by a biographer. Far different from the life of a poet or novelist. All those real people! Life. Not made-up invented life. Real life.

H.D. reflected much on her youth in America when she was an expatriate living in Switzerland and London. The Pennsylvania countryside repeats itself in her letters. And in her poetry. Her early poems, the poems of Imagism and the ones that made her famous as *H.D.*, *Imagiste*, are often located in the Pennsylvania of her youth, even though she lends these poems a classical air.

During World War II, she wrote *The Gift*, a book about her childhood in the Moravian community at Bethlehem, and later in Upper Darby where her father was Professor of Astronomy at the University of Pennsylvania. Her novelette *HERmione* is about H.D. and Ezra and Frances,

but it is also about Philadelphia and its houses, and it reconstructs Philadelphia before the first World War. Although she lived in a house in which there were brothers and a married brother and wife, a preoccupied father and harried mother, there is still in this house time for thought, for consideration of herself, her dreams, her relationship with the household, and there are always moments to look out the window. Also time for H.D. to be a bit spoiled, the only girl in a household of brothers. And there was the leisurely, if unusual, courtship with Ezra and rides over the countryside, pauses in which she listened to Ezra Pound explain literature and life.

It was Pound who separated her from Bryn Mawr. Those are H.D.'s words, but they are the words a biographer would have chosen. She was grateful to Pound in many ways, but she never forgave herself or, as a consequence, Pound, for separating her from Bryn Mawr. She was grateful to Pound for taking her away from what might have become a more ordinary, a more domestic life among friends and kin, for the part he played in her decision to transplant herself to Europe. She was grateful to him for discovering her as a poet, for introducing her to the applause of a public. But she admitted that she paid a heavy price for this. After her abrupt departure from Bryn Mawr—and we have to face it, she did not go on to graduate from that college—H.D. considered herself a failure. She wrote that she became an “outcast” in the eyes of her family, and in her own eyes. I don't believe she ever got over this early sense of having failed family and college, for her upbringing had a puritanical form.

When she was despondent and lonely in London, she realized that she had led a sheltered life in Upper Darby and at a “select,” her word, college. A life she had deliberately discarded. When she was triumphant, she congratulated herself for having had the courage to leave home. And in those days it did take courage to cross the ocean to an alien country. The Atlantic was an estranging sea, and in a physical sense it estranged her forever. Yet not in an interior sense. She held onto every scrap of her memory of America.

“The Philadelphia Academy of Music is pure Vienna,” she wrote to Bryher. When describing someone rather upper-class, proper, informed, H.D. would abbreviate, “She is very Bryn Mawr.” Into her late life she would make this sort of comment, sometimes even in a pejorative sense. And during the early days of their life together, when Bryher would discuss with authority an unknown America, H.D.'s eyes would flash and

she would shout to Bryher to remember: "I am the Statue of Liberty. I set you free . . . free." In turn, like the early Ezra, she would succeed in breaking the chains that bound Bryher to her family and would free her to travel to America.

Her friendship with Marianne Moore, which continued throughout H.D.'s lifetime, was based certainly on a regard for Moore's poetry, but I suspect that there was also a need for the Marianne Moore she had first known at Bryn Mawr as a tie to bind H.D. to her native land. In her letters to Moore, H.D. allows much of herself and her girlish self to escape; she is frank, friendly, respectful, sometimes excited in proffering her knowledge of Europe, her familiarity with its magic to be shared with Moore, even advising her to come to Europe to benefit from its culture. Advice Moore wisely refused.

I have written in the introduction to H.D.'s biography that I realized in writing of H.D. I must also take a considered look at her companion. I think that is an accurate word, for each set aside a special part of her life and thought for the other. I think Bryher idolized H.D., came to love her with a loyalty that is rare, and later assumed the role of a guardian, a sort of capable relative who took care of the messy, obligatory details of life. Of course in such a definition, I am restricting myself to a brief explanation of two complicated people. I think H.D. chafed under this regime, depended on it, and respected Bryher with the kind of fury one feels towards a person who interferes continually. An ambivalence arises in an area of mutual dependence until it finally resolves into a willing, not grudging respect. A biographer cannot consider H.D. without Bryher.

I have also described Bryher's kingdom of "Kenwin" in Vevey, Switzerland on Lake Geneva where H.D. jointly ruled as the "lady of the lake." I interviewed a reluctant Bryher who refused to come to my assistance in my exploration of H.D.'s life, fending off my questions with extraneous remarks. I hope I conveyed a kind of despotic magnetism I experienced in Bryher's presence. I now remember the "bright blue eyes of a child" H.D. has described. I remember Kenwin's lonely, even desolate majesty. The room so frighteningly empty in which H.D. had written her poetry and fiction. Rooms where H.D. had passed her own difficult hours. Absent, indeed, were Bryher's menagerie of house guests and animals.

Today I look at the photographs, Kenwin, once so bravely new in the Bauhaus style as suited writers and their court who were devoted to what

Pound has called “making it new.” I see the shadow of Bryher in her staunch tailored suit, viewing me from the doorway where she must have admitted those famous ghosts. The tousled shabby furniture of the house. The many, many books.

I dwell on Bryher, because she had been alive and I attempted to speak to her, even if in a meagre fashion. The details of H.D.’s life were not presented, but there is the minor ear and it was busy. H.D.’s ghost was at Kenwin, if not her vibrating presence.

Today Bryher has departed from Kenwin, and her own ghost, separated so long from England for tax purposes, may for all we know be in the Scilly Isles, or Cornwall. The kingdom is emptied. There is no one there to look down from the terrace onto the lake. F. Scott Fitzgerald had found Switzerland a triste place where “there were few beginnings and many endings.” In the eighteenth century, it had been popular and Voltaire and Rousseau and Madame de Staël in their varying decades had lived there. Byron and Shelley. I think H.D., and this may be impertinent of me, with her taste for the bizarre, the lively, with dashes of solitude, might have been happier somewhere other than at Kenwin. She found a form of contentment and tranquility in other Swiss environments—Lugano, Lausanne, finally a sanatorium outside Zurich. She was never too venturesome in her locales, yet once she departed Kenwin, she did not choose to return. I hazard that she may have needed a more robust, or a more ordinary abode; she, herself, was extraordinary enough.

Bryher’s books have themselves found a new abode. They are now in East Hampton, New York, on Long Island where Perdita has constructed a house for them. It will be a library containing many of the thousands of books that populated Kenwin, a remarkable library with one of its emphases on the twentieth-century novel, others on travel, on history.

Seeking more “biographical” material about H.D., more presences, oddments which I might add to this evocation of H.D., I went to my own boxes, indexes, letters, material I had collected on the H.D. path. They are in my cellar. Standing there in the early spring light of Long Island, I looked at their crisping pages realizing that these boxes had been my companions through the days and nights of writing a biography. They once were as real as human voices. Now they appeared to be waiting. What could they now tell me? What aroma would they give off of their subject? What was there about H.D. I had not succeeded in defining? Why had a

few critics called her presence in her own books and mine, elusive? I would be the person who should be able to answer that. On this first day of spring, 1985, one year from her hundredth birthday, could I define her more fully?

Searching my conscience, the answer is no. A poet's life, like Fitzgerald's rich, is not like that of any other. It is complex where one least expects it, and takes one unawares by its awesome simplicity. A poet's life is built out of the imagination. H.D. was gifted with a strong imagination. How else could she have constructed her Greece, her Egypt, fabrications of the spirit? She imagined herself in many roles. She was temptress, goddess, mother, artist, she was ripe with personalities. There wasn't one line that might draw with ease the entire profile. She was not, as they say, "of a piece."

She did not possess the kind of "humanness" of say a poet like Louise Bogan. H.D. lived a life of many colors. Her companion, Bryher, was unique, was she not? You would have to go far to find someone like Bryher. And H.D.'s personality was fragmented as an expatriate in a way that resembled the dualities of other expatriates, Djuna Barnes or Ezra Pound. H.D. was never forced into the world to earn her own living. We must remember this. She evaded that sort of reality. She never kept a domestic hearth. She produced a child, but in the usual definition she never raised this child. After the 1920s, she had little personal contact with literary people of her own generation. She never belonged to a coterie. She never joined a literary set. She did not sign petitions, make contracts. With two major exceptions—a wartime "Reading of Famous Poets" in London, attended by royalty; and in 1960, when she was presented the Gold Medal by the American Academy of Arts and Letters—she did not appear on a public platform. She did not attend, in the same year, unable to make two trans-Atlantic trips, the Bryn Mawr presentation of a Citation for her contribution to Letters. Nor did she engage in literary politics. Her adjunct, Bryher, may have been helpful in that area. Her correspondence, with a few exceptions such as Marianne Moore and Pound, had been with private friends, not literary peers. Horace Gregory, the late noted critic and poet whom I was able fortunately to interview, said that H.D. could never have become a member of an "establishment," literary or otherwise.

And she preferred it that way. She wanted to be left alone to weave her private web, just as she made her tapestries in her own room with their

isolated romantic echoes. She wished to live in an imagination peopled mostly with figures of the past, reliving her memories as fiction. She never swigged away at a bottle or got drunk in a pub; she seldom went to little dinner parties or gossiped with literary pals, although she had a willing ear for gossip. She did not write sad letters to vanished lovers. She does not fit into the pattern of a modern literary lady.

As might be expected of her, the people in whom she most closely confided were her psychiatrists, with whom she shared, with the exception of Freud, relationships that bordered on close friendship. In my book, I emphasized her need for psychiatrists, and it is a pity we do not have their files, because they loom so frequently in her life and in her work and in her letters to Bryher. These were the ones whom she may have visited, let us suppose, propelled by a persistent need to talk about herself, and because she could not communicate so privately with others, including the cosmopolitan group with whom from time to time she consorted.

Now to return to my role as a biographer. I decided not to take the usual tack of biography. I would follow the wind where it went or where it lay. As my character practiced an indirection, so would my method. Instead of a privileged narrative, I decided to present material in a form which asked each reader to participate actively by synthesizing the narrative according to the personal determinant of the reader. I was not going to present a formal narrative line. The line would be moving and interchangeable, hopefully, within time. I wanted a chronology to be a viable aid, the way I believed it to be "in real life." I was at risk. I knew that a moveable chronology goes against a consistently taught and expected formula. But life is not linear. It shoots about, takes unexpected turns, goes the other way with its own firmness.

My problem, if one wants to call it a problem, my delight, my challenge, was to write a book about a woman who was not a heroine, a figure of hieratic measure, but a poet. As I have written, early on I made the decision as much as possible to avoid tactical literary criticism. Yet I recognized that my reader would want to know about a writer's life as a writer. I decided to involve this reader in the conditions that prompted the work. Thus I would set a stage. There is the writer up bright and early, at her desk, as was H.D.'s habit (after a thoughtful, lingering breakfast). Robert McAlmon called her a "workhorse." Well, what happens now? Do I say, there is Hilda writing furiously at her new poems? Does she stride around

the room? Does she shout at Bryher to be quiet? Do I comment: "Here is the remarkable old workhorse out eating her oats and climbing into harness before that delightful colt has stretched his legs?" You simply do not have in the case of H.D. enough definitive information, such as that supplied by the journals of Woolf in which each working day is related with all its struggles. "The Hirslanden Notebooks," written in later life, are the nearest we come to a journal, and these I employed. I found throughout my writing that, for reconstruction, I needed to rely on invention and intuition.

What I attempted to convey were the mental processes of H.D. Flowing above and underneath, emerging in sudden streams of the unconscious, they set the circumstances of her work. Then I viewed the physical circumstances under which she wrote. This category was alive with people, travel, housing, etc. I even gave the reader a real picture of her little desk, a picture rescued from oblivion in a house in England. I wanted the H.D. of my book to shiver and exult and celebrate as I believed she did. After which, given the largely hypothetical concept of the unconscious of H.D. together with the factual circumstances of her life, the reader could then synthesize another model conformative to that reader's own conception of H.D. That is what readers do anyway, regardless of my "structuralist" modelling.

Now that I reconsider books about poets, *The Stricken Deer*, a life of William Cowper by Lord David Cecil, the utter charm and poetic investment of that book—what do we see and hear finally: Cowper spitting grapes, his nurse knitting, madness approaching. Or the immense economy with which Dr. Johnson manoeuvres his *Lives of the Poets*, his great intelligence letting nothing slip through his fingers, what do we have? A sense of the past, major and minor poets moving against a background in which social and economic attitudes finally emerge stronger than the poetic line.

I have learned through a process of grievous enterprise that although the biography is published, the poet's private chamber remains securely fastened. The muse, the sacred muse is permitted to hover, yet her classic beauty can only be glimpsed; her garments float, they do not rest.

To return to the mundane world of my cellar where rest the H.D. boxes. I was looking for an admirable essay on the art of biography written by James Atlas about 1978 when I began my fledgling writing on H.D. As

I recall, I tacked his words to my forehead and convinced myself that I would adhere to his principles. He wrote about the ideal biography. It was so ideal that I don't believe it ever existed. I certainly never achieved this method nor did I punish its vicinity. But I believed at the time in what Mr. Atlas wrote and I do to this day, but I can't find his article and regrettably I have forgotten his words.

The biographer in the intimacy of the study, or on a rushing vehicle, in the middle of anywhere, anything, receives very little help from the outside. I do not mean there are no judicious editors or homeside critics or thoughtful assistants. I mean that despite the vast amount of biographies of the past, or immediate present, no matter how many one had read, admired, and attempted to emulate, alas, one does not succeed in copying or even adapting the style or the content to one's personal method. (I read evening after evening the biographies in my local library and a few made me weep in admiration.) Biography is intimate. It exists between you and your subject. It is an intimate conspiracy, and beware the door to that locked chamber. It is not going to open to a persistent knock. There is no password; there is no final answering voice. You must climb in the window.