

H.D.'s "Fortune Teller"

READERS FOLLOWING the track of H.D.'s writings will inevitably move in the direction of New Directions. One might begin with their handsome new edition of H.D.'s *Collected Poems, 1912–1944* and then proceed through their three longstanding editions of H.D.'s late poems: *Trilogy*, *Helen in Egypt*, and *Hermetic Definition*. Or one might move from the novel *HERmione* to the autobiographical *Tribute to Freud* and then to *End to Torment*, her tribute to Ezra Pound. Sooner or later, however, all H.D.'s readers will come upon a slim book with a black cover whose crescent moon shines over the title *The Gift*. Written as the bombs fell over London between 1941 and 1943, this is H.D.'s brilliant autobiographical fantasy—or fantastical autobiography—the story of a childhood which gave her a gift of vision powerful enough to transmute even the dark and random terrors of war.

Prefaced by a snapshot of Hilda Doolittle with her brothers Harold and Gilbert, by a picture of her mother, Helen, to whom the book is dedicated, and by a brief introduction written by her daughter, Perdita Schaffner, H.D.'s book is a clear and compelling account of the growth of a poet's mind. It seems, like all the other New Directions editions, not only imaginatively but impeccably produced. There is no way the ordinary reader could know that at least a third of the typescript H.D. prepared as a final copy has silently disappeared. Though there are no ellipses to signal the cuts and no notes to explain the principles behind them, several brief narrative sections, many lyrical, meditative, and discursive passages, all of H.D.'s notes, and the whole of the second chapter have vanished.¹

"Fortune Teller," which we reprint here, is the missing chapter of *The Gift*. The second of the seven original sections, chapters H.D. visualized as seven rungs on a ladder or seven initiatory stages, this is the oddest. The other chapters pursue the developing consciousness of the child Hilda; this plunges us into the unconscious of the young woman who was to become Hilda's mother. The chapter is neither concise, commonsensical, nor chastely minimal. It would annoy Strunk & White, and it clearly disconcerted the New Directions editor. Despite its oddity, however, it is neither a frivolous excursion nor an unfortunate excrescence. In addition to providing essential background on the Moravian legends that were H.D.'s

inheritance and on the city of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania that was her birthplace, the chapter is integral to the reader's initiation into the text's expanded dynamics of memory and "runic, divinatory" intent.²

Most autobiographers pace the boundaries of private memory, pushing the limits of the conscious mind as far back as possible. Many of *The Gift's* most compelling passages execute just this recovery into consciousness, but H.D. makes a harder, riskier claim. Through dream, myth, and legend, through the dynamics of the unconscious, she believes that it is possible for an individual to tap into the memories of all people throughout all time. In a process that starts with the family then expands to the tribe, the nation, and ultimately the world, the sympathetic memory breaches the boundaries of the single, solitary ego and replaces the competitive individualism that sparks war with the communality that nurtures peace.

As the first chapter of *The Gift* makes clear, this expansion begins with memories inherited within the family. In every family there is a repository of pleasures and pains that belong not to any one individual but to the collective. In *The Gift*, the transmission of these emotions runs through the maternal line, from the grandmother to the mother to Hilda. In a passage with a dizzily vanishing perspective, H.D. recalls the story of her mother crying over her own mother's grief at her child's death. "Mama was crying about Fanny," the grandmother explains to Hilda, but she "couldn't possibly remember Fanny. Fanny died . . . [when] your own mama was just a baby, how could she remember Fanny?"³ She couldn't but, nevertheless, she did: the trick of *The Gift* is precisely this twist of memory, a twist that sets up the narrative in the missing second chapter. In the imaginative excursion of "Fortune Teller," H.D. not only recovers but seems almost to relive events her mother experienced in her girlhood.

If you love people, H.D. believed, you use your sympathetic memory to live back into their lives.⁴ In this sense, the delicate, detailed reminiscences of "Fortune Teller" constitute an extended tribute to her mother. In another sense, however, these memories carry a warning for a daughter whose gifts are, like her mother's, artistic, visionary, and extravagant. Mama is a musician who thinks and feels in a swirl of notes. To her, a sun-struck river was a sheet of music ruled with ripples and glistening with notes, so that when the water caught the light and "flung it back in a million little lines and dots, ta-ta-ta-ta said Mama and not humming but *thinking*, she swung over to the violins in the change-over to the *dolce*

following the *adagio* of the opening movement of the Fifth Symphony.” What will happen to Mama’s odd and lovely gift? As the missing chapter implies, the young girl has already begun to give it up, give it away, give it over to duty, to convention, and to the convenience first of her father, then of her husband.

H.D. positions her mother on the bank of a river swollen with spring floods. Like a fairytale princess at peril, she has lost touch with the rich flow of her imagination, shunned the exuberant sensuality of a suitor, and all but succumbed to the schoolmarmish role of “Miss Helen, the Principal’s daughter.” As fairytale tellers know, however, as myths and legends remind us, and as Freud again and again reasserted, true gifts are never lost: what is buried can be resurrected, what is given will be passed on. This is the fortune told by the gypsy that Mama goes to see and now retold by the daughter who inherits the gift her mother has not been able to use.

But, as always with H.D., there is more. The actual prophecy is this: that Mama will be the mother of a child born under a star in the city of Bethlehem. This audacious claim resonates across the rest of *The Gift*, positioning the reader for some of the runic extravagance lopped from the New Directions edition and anticipating many of the themes that make *The Gift* a story of recurrent mysteries and miracles. In a book that affirms the divinity of all the world’s children, H.D. accepts her own particular inheritance, an imaginative and even prophetic power that she wishes to use to bring the warring nations to peace.

The writing of *The Gift* prepared H.D. for the great visionary poems that were to follow. Though the book has its ungainly moments, it is an important and intricate text, one that deserves to be read in its entirety. With the publication of the missing second chapter, readers unable to consult H.D.’s final typescript at Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library can now reconstruct the opening of the book by turning to the small journals which have published *The Gift*’s first three chapters intact.⁵ *The Iowa Review* gratefully acknowledges the permission of Perdita Schaffner and of New Directions to publish H.D.’s “Fortune Teller.”

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NOTES

1. The complete typescript of *The Gift* is in the Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University. For a concise and powerful discussion of the cuts in the New Directions edition, see Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "A Note on the State of H.D.'s *The Gift*," *Sulphur* 9 (1984): 178–82.
2. "H.D. by *Delia Alton*," *The Iowa Review* 16.3 (1986), p. 193.
3. *The Gift* (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 3.
4. This principle is developed in H.D.'s unpublished novel *The Mystery*, a narrative in which two young researchers imagine their way back into Moravian visionary experience (typescript in the Beinecke).
5. The text and H.D.'s notes to Chapter One, "Dark Room," appear in *Montemora* 8 (1981): 57–72; Chapter Three, "The Dream," appears in *Contemporary Literature* 10 (1969): 605–26.