

## Laurence Goldstein

### “CORUSCATING GLAMOUR”: LYNDA HULL AND THE MOVIES

“You wouldn’t try to live on a movie screen. When you understand that, you’ll be on your way to something.”

—Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*

I am

almost invisible. Hands could pass through me effortlessly.

—Lynda Hull, *Ghost Money*

First because of the stage, then because of cinema, spectators (including authors) have long been vulnerable to the amiable delusion of being actors, of performing their personal experience in a self-generated spotlight. In the twentieth century especially, trained by habitual moviegoing from the time of childhood, each of us has imagined a camera positioning us in artful compositions wherever we are—walking the streets, engaging with landscape, making love—until some internal censor shuts down the show. That our lives are movies cast with our selves and others has become a cliché so perdurable it has hardened into one of the few indisputable assumptions of postmodern culture. How, we sometimes ask, can we escape the inauthenticity of seeming unreal shadows of ourselves? One way is by resorting to popular movies that affirm the integrity of the self, thereby compounding our anxiety.

Lynda Hull’s poetry offers one of the most intriguing examples of this syndrome in the canon of contemporary American literature. Even in her more reportorial poems focused on family, the milieux of travel, or figures at the fringes of society, she tends to trope her cast of characters as bit-players on the movie set her imagination has made of the world. For the most part, hers is a poetry carried out in the spirit of voyeuristic self-regard. When she looks backward to frame her younger personae in the memory-scenario of her life, she declares rhapsodically, though not without irony, “Dream time, the inner time/ where towers and battlements erect/ their coruscating glamour &

how we'd glide,/ celebrities among them, the crowds falling back . . ." This preening, retrospective gaze fits the fantasy vehicles of the late 1960s and 1970s that filled the screen with special effects and bravura performances designed to inspire flaming youth with images of bewitching human creatures, glittering cities, ecstatic release: *Midnight Cowboy*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Chinatown*, *The French Connection*, *The Godfather*, *Klute*, *Cabaret*, *American Graffiti*. In the frenzied tempo and garish decor of Hull's poems one feels the presence of such films almost everywhere. And more than this: one senses a certain pathology in her incessant spectatorship upon her own romanticized past, a narcissistic attachment to the "glamour" and "celebrity" she pumped into the innumerable spots of time that arrest her attention in all three volumes of her poetry.

Though Hull insisted on the uniqueness of her experience, formulated from a variety of roles she chose from the repertoire offered to American women of her generation, she is like many obsessive artists in her rhetorical strategies. Just as Joseph Cornell constructed a fetish-box to preserve an image of the 20-year-old Lauren Bacall, Hull as *auteur* falls in love with her leading lady—her youthful self—and draws the reader into the screen after her for stanza after streamlined stanza of supercharged emotion. Since her death in a high-speed car crash in 1994, Hull's work has secured a place in the affections of younger poets, especially the cohort of women leaving their teen and college years. Twenty-somethings are following her lead even as she followed the visionary company of Hart Crane and Sylvia Plath through the urban underworld and across Plath's "substanceless blue/ Pour of tor and distances" toward oblivion. In a society of spectacle alert to visual cues, a poetry as infatuated with the dramaturgy of exhibitionism as Hull's may seem to be an essential expression of the *Zeitgeist*, the pulse and sign system of a new century waiting to be born.

It would be a mistake, though, to read her frequent high-pitched praises of her teen years—"Oh Reader, the wild beauty of it, the whirring rush . . . the buzz-snap of talk blurring hallucinatory fraught avenues . . ."—as some kind of self-hypnosis that rendered her incapable of measuring the dangers of nostalgia. In Hull's poetry the charms of indulgence and the presence of critique cannot be easily distinguished. The past is a guilty pleasure she invites her readers to share with her, as one would gather friends to watch a lurid movie throbbing with unearned sentiment. The poems are laced with verbal gestures close to camp ("Oh Reader") that at the same time move us to sympathetic

identification *and* wink at us for taking them (too) seriously. At their best, the poems both feature and see through the attitudes and behaviors of a *jeunesse dorée*.

I would like to particularize these generalizations by examining three poems, one from each of Hull's books. Each has a movie image at its thematic center. The poems are sufficiently unlike that they suggest an evolution of Hull's sensibility, a trajectory that terminates in a situation of psychic extremity, rather like Plath's career culminating in "the smile of accomplishment" in *Ariel*. One might say that each poem presents a different means of mythologizing the self—for better or worse the overt task of so much postwar poetry. A poetry like hers that glamorizes adolescence, its intense and intuitional joys and sorrows, has undeniable attractions and cautionary messages. Readers are swept along by the enticements of the language, as by the montage of an expertly assembled movie; but there is more than meets the eye in Hull's poetry. She is a moralist too and means to be taken seriously when she warns that self-induced glamour is "chimerical" as well as liberating.

#### I. "1933"

One of the most striking poems of Hull's first volume *Ghost Money* (1986) is this evocation of a memory not her own but her mother's. The poem's title is surely an homage to Philip Levine's volume of 1974, with its heartfelt recollections of mother and grandfather, among other family members. Hull, too, wants to preserve a family legend in the formal amber of elegy. Her mother is seven as the narrative opens, and her grandfather brings the child downstairs late at night to a restaurant in the heart of Cleveland. We follow them in a kind of tracking shot through the kitchen and into a tavern toward the center of interest:

Her mother stops her, holds her shoulders, and whispers  
*This is a famous man. Remember his face.*  
Trotsky—a name like one of her mother's

fond, strange nouns. He looks like the man  
who makes her laugh at Saturday matinees,  
only tired. So tired.

Then the family goes to morning Mass. The child enters a kind of hypnagogic state as the priest undertakes the sacred ceremony; and the poem gradually is amplified in space and time as we see the depressed conditions of the European land her father fled and then fast-forward two years to his self-inflicted death. Then we are back in 1933 for a steady shot of the father shaping the sign of the cross, walking the child back home, where the child expresses a fervent, pathetic desire expressed in the poem's closure that "her father will live forever."

The poem has plenty of vivid detail and its orderly (unrhymed) quatrains full of simple, declarative sentences compose a sustained vignette free of nostalgia. The poem is reminiscent in tone of Delmore Schwartz's short story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," in which a young man on the eve of his twenty-first birthday watches (in a dream) his young parents' courtship on a movie screen and is seized with fear and revulsion thinking of the ill effects of their marriage, including his own birth into the world. To recall Schwartz's classic story even for a moment is to recognize what is missing in Hull's poem: the narrator's commentary on the events in Cleveland, the mother's commentary on their meaning to her. What we get is a fragmented sequence of happenings, a series of stills wrenched from the context of a plausible narrative. This elliptical structure is, of course, the favored mode of contemporary poetry and one is inclined to see it less as a blemish than a lyric device.

The all-important simile in the poem is the one quoted above which compares Trotsky to a film comedian. Who would this be? One stares at photographs of Trotsky and tries to imagine a resemblance to Chaplin or one of the early clowns of the sound era. No, it just isn't there. But the more significant point is that Trotsky is analogized at all to a figure in the realm of film illusion, a phantom who makes people laugh. The effect is to levy an equivalent value upon the historical and the mythical, broadly speaking. Trotsky loses reality by being so lightly apprehended by a child with no sense of his reputation, no recognition of his name. The simile converts the whole memory into a scenario, a specular moment, like those "memories" all of us sometimes have that cannot confidently be assigned either to our own personal experience or someone else's report. Perhaps the mother's recollection of Trotsky is something she really saw at a matinee—some comic scene of dark-coated anarchists around a table?

These radically destabilizing questions press upon the reader with more force because the scene is, in fact, entirely fictitious. The most casual refer-

ence to a biography of Trotsky—and surely Hull consulted one before publishing the poem—reveals that Trotsky spent the first part of 1933 in Turkey, and the rest of it in France. Indeed, Trotsky never visited the U.S. after the Russian Revolution in 1917. (There is an endearing rumor that Trotsky appeared as an extra in one or more American films before 1917, but this is not true, though he did appear in a documentary feature by Max Eastman later.) So, is it Hull's mother who misremembers or prevaricates? Is it Hull who injects this scene into her mother's life in order to make the grandfather's suicide more poignant by linking it to the martyred revolutionary? Is the whole poem a harmless pastiche of the confessional genre? However gladly we grant poetic license or defer to a dramatic persona, we nevertheless feel uneasy in discovering a fiction within a narrative poem of social conscience that seems to solicit our belief and sympathy by its tone of candor and sincere recollection.

“Darling,/ there are no innocents here, only/ dupes, voyeurs.” In the landscape of *film noir* summoned in Hull's poem “Hollywood Jazz,” the speaker inserts herself into the screen scenery, subjecting herself to the sordid assignation she describes in the first part of the poem. She reminds us of artist Cindy Sherman's mimicking poses as a menacing *femme fatale*, a movie-made artifice. Such a metamorphosis can only be wishful thinking, though, for the fictive realm on screen has no place for us; it rejects us forcefully, as modern writers have tried to demonstrate in (for example) the damned figures of Faye Greener in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* and Lee Verger in Robert Stone's *Children of Light*. Hull is her mother's dupe, or duplicate, in her star turn with Trotsky, just as she wills herself to occupy the black-and-white body of some Gloria Grahame or Ava Gardner in “Hollywood Jazz.” She haunts herself in imitation of the “candescent” role models in the movies that reach out to her with their promises of sexual intoxications and certain escape from “the lavish void of tomorrow.”

## 2. “Utopia Parkway”

To say that *Ghost Money* shows the influence of the movies, in its form and content, is not to say very much. What is honorifically called “cinematic” in verse can be connected just as easily back beyond the invention of film to poetry itself. Griffith and Eisenstein, as everyone knows, based their practice of montage on verse models as well as narratives by nineteenth-century nov-

elists. To analyze the structure of a poem in cinematic terminology—traveling shot, jumpcut, lap-dissolve—is simply to acknowledge that the preeminence of film in our culture mandates a new vocabulary of descriptors derived from this mediate technology. All poets use “cinematic form,” and by now we would do well to demystify the term by recognizing its limited usefulness in critical commentary.

And yet, some poets do make an extraordinary effort to mimic the resources of cinema in their poems. Their self-consciousness about being members of a “Film Generation” committed to reshaping perception to fit the fluid possibilities afforded by the movies earns them special consideration. Lynda Hull is one of these poets. When she wrote about the poetry she admired, that of T. S. Eliot and Hart Crane, Jorie Graham and Denis Johnson, she singled out cinematic form as the fundamental grounds of praise. The novelty of montage belonged to the modernist discovery of the movies as an accelerated art form in tune with the dynamic speed-up of twentieth-century life. To write a poem in the 1980s that does nothing but feature a melange of images in quick succession is to write in a mode as outdated, or if you wish, perennial, as the sonnet or ballad. In moving forward from *Ghost Money* to her second book, *Star Ledger* (1991), Hull put more thought into how to update her poetics in keeping with the maturity of post-1960s film itself.

In an unpublished lecture on movies and poetry, she lays out some guidelines on “film’s essentially post-modern nature” for younger poets. The lecture argues that “the movies have thoroughly saturated the culture, have changed the way we perceive experience.” Just as film fragments reality into a shot-structure simulation of reality, so “In post-modern poetry we see a similar demolition of unitary notions of the lyric ‘I’ . . . multiple points-of-view, the poem interrogating its processes as a means of questioning, as a means of unveiling the artifice beneath the illusion.” Film enriches our perception, she argues, by the liquidity of camera movement, the sculptural angles and shadows of expressionist lighting, and the technique of montage. Above all, camera mobility claims her praise: “the fluid shifts between exteriors and interiors” and the “continually changing perspectives on passing objects, as if perceived from continually shifting orientations.” It is clear from her terms of praise that Hull watched a movie as many poets, and non-poets, do, not as a coherent plot unfolding with Aristotelian rigor but as an assemblage of visual effects, the more astonishing the better.

Given this fascination with vertiginous movement, it is a little surprising that one of Hull's most successful meditations on the phenomenology of film is a tribute to a maker of static artworks, Joseph Cornell. Her poem "Utopia Parkway" concerns one of Cornell's best known boxes, "Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall," constructed in 1945-6. Cornell was himself a filmmaker; his oeuvre is surveyed in P. Adams Sitney's essay, "The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell," in the book *Joseph Cornell*, edited by Kynaston McShine. Sitney calls attention to Cornell's association of film magic with the image of glamorous actresses. In an essay on Hedy Lamarr for *View* magazine in 1941-2, for example, Cornell enthuses in this way:

Among the barren wastes of the talking films there occasionally occur passages to remind one again of the profound and suggestive power of silent film to evoke an ideal world of beauty, to release unsuspected floods of music from the gaze of a human countenance in its prison of silver light.

Three years later Cornell noted in his diary that Lauren Bacall possessed such a countenance. As a model before entering films, Bacall developed a seductive poise and gaze that Cornell transfers to the dominating center of his construction, tinted blue—the color of the Virgin Mary, the color of the imagination—and surrounded along the margins with multiple images of Bacall and Manhattan. He imprisons her feminine mystique in his frame, just as the screen frames her dynamic image in "silver light." No wonder that a poet seeking to frame her sentiments about the movies chose this constraining showcase as a point of departure.

Hull's poem puts into motion a carnival's worth of images in order to dramatize by linguistic prestidigitation the origins and what film theorists call "the designative authority" of Cornell's artwork. Proceeding in five-line stanzas, images of Paris where Cornell collected movie stills dissolve to New York's garment district and Public Library; then "a galaxy of signs" in Manhattan metamorphose in skittering jumpcuts to the "hurdy-gurdy cages" of the Penny Arcade. In the fourth stanza the poem pauses to regard Bacall's "lipsticked pout in *Screenplay/ Magazine*" and then charges from riotous exterior shots to the serene interior of Cornell's workshop, the two realms linked by Bacall's unravished still. "Hoagy Carmichael's heard offstage," reminding us that Hull is bringing into play our metapoetic memories of the film *To*

*Have and Have Not* in which Bacall's screen presence first dazzled a national audience of moviegoers. Cornell's artwork was contemporary with the film, but Hull's poem is a window or trapdoor to the past, a nostalgic object that sutures her own love of screen deities with Cornell's, making them co-creators of Bacall's mediated image in an eternal present. Hull is a spectator of his representation as she fashions her own, sharing his deference to Bacall as she mimics his Pygmalion-like power to bring the actress's enchanting presence to momentary life.

Hull thinks of "the lives of countless young women/ who never knew, may never know, any other home// than the plainest of furnished rooms, a drab hotel." But suddenly that drab hotel becomes the one in *To Have and Have Not*, and the reader is made aware of that nagging paradox of the movies: how often actresses portray down-at-the-heels characters, straining our suspension of disbelief as we try to pity the plight of figures we envy offscreen. Isn't that the point of illusion, though, and specifically the kind of illusion served up by memory from what she calls in another poem "that vast hotel, the past"? Hull clearly identifies with the young Bacall in *To Have and Have Not*, both in their respective neon hotels waiting for love, ecstasy, the redemptive kiss of fame. The last stanza:

Fog, the boat scenes, and each compartment becomes  
a silver screen. Offstage music, and now we hear  
the music in Cornell's eternity as the actress  
takes her place among the constellations,  
Cygnum, the Pleiades, one of the Graces.

On one level this is the conventional bow to the power of art, as Cornell immortalizes his subject and Hull overhears the celestial harmony, ditties of no tone audible only at a distance of decades. But does Bacall need Cornell's assistance to rise toward the empyrean? Does Cornell need Lynda Hull's? The poem seems to be a tertiary mechanism whereby Hull hoists herself at two removes into the vault-on-high free from the depredations of Time and Dame Fortune.

The liminal boundary between real life and movie illusion evoked in "1933," then, undergoes a more radical erasure in this poem. "Simply trying like always/ to con our way to some new dimension. And weren't we glamorous?" she writes in another poem, savagely critiquing her infatuation with and

imitation of an art culture's models for self-renewal. Many of the poems in *Star Ledger* perform this transformation, this swift movement from screen to spectatorial position and back again. The title poem observes how the speaker (as a child) and her friends, midget versions of Joseph Cornell, made themselves into "starlets" by pasting stills of movie stars into their albums. "The Real Movie, with Stars" creates a black hole of reality into which the speaker perpetually steps as the determinate not-movie world keeps being subverted by the chimeras familiar to her from matinees. "Counting in Chinese" inserts Hull into the melodrama that seeps down from a screening of Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel* into the speaker's night life after the film. As a photographic medium, film presents us with what is posed before the camera as real; Bacall does exist. But if we spend a lifetime gaping at icons enlarged on a theater screen, are we not always, unremittingly, in Plato's cave, no exit in sight? What is constant is Hull's phantom movement from shadow to shadow in her past. By hitching her poems to the stars, and by transforming herself into the star of her own self-made movie, she tries to make contact with the vicarious experiences of a moviegoing public.

### III. "Fortunate Traveller"

*Star Ledger* is a chronicle of "the savage drifting years" of Lynda Hull's life, the "Bateau Ivre" of her adolescence, with some of the *Illuminations* thrown in as a measure of her bottomless wonder at the garish, costly happiness she achieved. Her posthumous collection, *The Only World* (1995), strikes me as her version of *Un Saison en Enfer*. (A controversy exists among Rimbaud scholars as to whether *Illuminations* was composed after *Saison*, as a triumphant celebration of having passed through the season in hell, or whether *Saison* is the later work, chronicling the harrowing disappointments following the drug-induced experiences of the *Illuminations*. I incline toward the latter view.) In the first poem, "Chiffon," she speaks of herself as a "lucky bitch" who has survived the inferno of psychedelic experiences that has burned up her former lovers and friends. "One's never done with the past," she writes in "Fiat Lux." There are certainly moments of intense nostalgia for the giddy fun of it all, but there is also a new maturity visible in these poems, a sense that the liberatory lifestyle she embraced, in the spirit of the movies, has left her burnt-out, insubstantial, futureless. That is why her poem on *The Misfits* is the central work of this fascinating and poignant volume.

It is the most sustained and serious poem she wrote on a single film. Here she is not scavenging a film or films for discrete images, but gazing with a critic's eye on a narrative she apprehends as vital to her self-definition. This method of interpretation places her poem squarely in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, making it more accessible to public scrutiny, less private, less occult in its rhetorical strategies. The film is not simply exploited for stylistic excess or compelling imagery (as Cornell exploited *To Have and Have Not*) but interrogated, negotiated with, on the way toward a more complete understanding of Hull's own experience. She too might say, "About suffering they were never wrong,/ the Old Masters." Arthur Miller, John Huston, Marilyn Monroe, Montgomery Clift, Clark Gable. These icons of the generation preceding Hull's made a picture of life worth brooding upon, deciphering.

The crucial fact in the poem is that she is seeing *The Misfits* belatedly, "thirty years late," in a Spanish city. So the date is 1989 or 1990, the *fin de siècle*, as she notes in the poem. The century is not the only thing winding down; she watches the film with a sense of watching the flaring-out of her own life enacted in some previous incarnation. These 1950s actors rightly feel themselves to be deep into the fifth act of their own lives. It was the last film for Monroe, Gable, and Clift, and the scenario seemed to know this in advance, surrounding all their anguished and wistful moments with an aura of pathos. The Spanish title for the film is *Los Perdididos*—"the translation skews" but coincidentally hits the mark exactly. Each of the actors is walking on "the trapdoor of time" which will hurry their exit from the mortal world. The challenge to the poet in her retrospective account, then, will be to use their fugitive glamour as a vehicle for her own self-preservation.

One of the chief effects of film technology upon women in this century was the enhancement of spectatorial power it brought them, nourishing their creativity by means of the vicarious identifications they made with the dreamscapes offered on the screen. H. D.'s essay on Garbo's performance in *Joyless Street* emphasizes the rush of gendered power that fills the female spectator watching so much beauty wrestling with so much invincible social oppression. (The character of Helen in H. D.'s long poem *Helen in Egypt* owes much to Garbo's example.) Hull likewise focuses her attention on the degradation of Marilyn Monroe's character in the film, as the basis for the mirrored identification she will make with Marilyn's fate later in the poem. The poem opens, "Dazed and voluptuous, Monroe sways through/ the casino towards Gable." What happens later in the film prompts the poet to a responsive onrush of inspiration:

Tossed dollar bills crisp around her ankles,  
Monroe shimmies, the barroom scene, hair musical, those  
naked humid eyes. Houselights dim, benevolent.  
This morning, the Opera stop's electric  
no-time, then the metro's plunge into the tunnel.

These few lines enact a vertiginous movement from the moment of Monroe's decline into a sex object to the speaker's epiphanic entry into the Spanish metro. The "plunge into the tunnel" is meant on one level as an homage to Hart Crane's passage in *The Bridge* anathematizing the subway tunnel as a ghastly ride through the underworld of Manhattan immediately preceding the apotheosis of the Brooklyn Bridge as a redemptive symbol. Hull too, fresh from watching Monroe's body and soul being probed, dismembered into fleeting shots of body parts (in fact, Monroe's ass receives more attention in the barroom scene than her hair or eyes), turns to the topos of the city, not to seek salvation in any monumental structure like a bridge but to indulge in memories of "the group of friends I had when I was young."

The fulcrum of this turn comes in an earlier quatrain, when she gazes at "this love scene, tender and confused,/ between Clift and Monroe." This movie moment holds tremendous scopic power for her; it is the epistemological center and ultimate meaning of the film. Readers are expected to know that Clift was homosexual so that even beyond the narrative of the film this romance was, though full of longing and full of possibility, never to be erotically fulfilled. After this hinge of the poem Hull turns her attention to her own lost friends, returning twice to images of Monroe's "lovely face" as a means of introjecting the star's charisma into her own sense of being a fated starlet in the bygone community of Bacchantes. Now the title "Fortunate Traveller" takes on some ironic overtones, as we think of the speaker stretched emotionally across the Atlantic Ocean and across two generations, as if she has had to travel to Spain in order to experience with consummate insight the poignant recognition that all signs in her life pointed and still point to some overpowering experience of loss. (Hull is surely thinking of Derek Walcott's title poem in *The Fortunate Traveller*, 1981, in which a European tour replenishes his imagination with specters of the modern world, Dachau and Somalia chief among them.) "I can't recall what we spoke of—it meant so much" is the last line of Hull's poem. The silence of the past, the power of Time to mute her friends in memory, contrasts to the soundtrack of the film which carries the immortal voices of more durable *perdidos*.

The poem's meditative structure, then, follows a trajectory familiar to readers of Hull's other work, including poems in *The Only World* like "Chiffon," "Red Velvet Jacket," "River Bridge" and "At the Westland." The self-regarding movement of mind in "Fortunate Traveller" contrasts interestingly not only to Walcott's history-minded poem of the same title but to the narrative in *The Misfits*, which opens gradually onto a social and political vision of some capaciousness. The male characters in the film are "drifters" in the postwar west who slaughter a rapidly diminishing population of wild horses and sell them for dog food at thirty cents a pound, scarcely enough to keep the men alive till the next hunt. They consider themselves free spirits but their mercenary actions are clearly associated (this is Arthur Miller writing, remember) with the recent genocidal history of the West. Marilyn's character is a figure of resistance to this male aggression, and in the film's climax she persuades Gay, the Clark Gable character, to free the horses he has captured. One direction Hull's poem could have taken, then, would be toward some more generous reflection of the social narrative. That she refuses the opportunity and turns reflexively back to her own history must be read as a knowing confession of failure to transcend the alluring surfaces of a spectatorial culture. (She does engage the Holocaust as a theme in "Street of Crocodiles.") *The Misfits*, one might say, has tried by means of its plot to grant her scopic freedom to escape the ego, but the thematic message embodied in Marilyn Monroe's spoken part cannot compete with the glamour of Monroe's "gone lovely face." Hull's gesture of embrace for her own lost ones is also a refusal of the invitation to think in the national or global terms that mark the great works of contemporary poetry.

I am thinking, in that last sentence, of works like Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and Adrienne Rich's poems in *The Will to Change*, Denise Levertov's *Oblique Prayers*, Robert Pinsky's *An Explanation of America* and "The Shirt," Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*, and many others. Hull's subject position grants abundant and radiant life to the artwork she observes, and to the urban landscapes she describes with such wonder and affection, but ultimately "the cinematic" in her work acts as that trapdoor of time tumbling her into the abyss of narcissistic memory. Once in its deeps she gives up the impulse to make sense of a world larger than the one defined by her own anxiety about becoming invisible. When she looks at *The Misfits* she is moved to remember the rumors of how the actors passed around pills and liquor between takes, an observation that dissolves to the "Crimson Seconals, the Tuinals and canary-yellow//

Nembutals” of her own experience. The film is diminished by such a linkage; the poem too is diminished, as the sculpted diction and sinuous syntax of the opening stanzas—“Each platform’s arched and tiled, columned/ and inscribed, resplendent as memory palaces// monks once constructed, lavish scriptoriums / of the mind for arcane texts, scrolls and histories”—yields to the flattened language and jerky continuity of fond remembrance: “this one with the russet curls blown across a pale forehead,/ this one I loved, rich laughter from a black throat like/ no other, the spark and groan of trains braking at/ the little station.” The poet is putting fewer demands on her language (especially her adjectives) since the satisfactions of the remembered scenes lie outside the resources of poetry.

Lynda Hull turned to the movies not opportunistically because she saw a chance to formulate hard-won truths from their compelling visions, but obsessively because she was a moviegoer who read screen stories back into the scenarios of her own life. Her poems deserve study for their understanding of this ancient binary, this intercourse between life and art, especially in a postmodern culture that needs more than anything to make discriminations between the truth of appearances and the truth beyond appearances. Her poems knowingly alert us to the promises and pitfalls of developing a cinematic imagination, of translating one’s own life into the scenarios of the movies, and thus translating the movies into versions of one’s own life. Caught in the reflecting mirrors of an overpowering popular culture, Hull clung to the sense of self forged in her ecstatic younger years, her “hour of plumage,” and made that identity the measure of all things. She was not the “fortunate traveller,” the happy tourist (or spectator) whose transport brought her always to terrains of satisfaction, and her poem of that title prophesies the termination of the beautiful talent she shared not only with Montgomery Clift and Marilyn Monroe but with her favorite poet, Hart Crane, all part of “the Death Angel’s/ dark familiar company” waiting at the end of the movie to claim their own.