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H. D. and Poets After

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Long known mainly as the author of tiny Imagist poems, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) has been increasingly recognized as a major Modernist writer. A classmate of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams at Penn State, later married to British writer Richard Aldington, famously analyzed by Freud himself, H. D. determined to assert her independence from such powerful men. The success of that struggle is apparent both in her major late works, including “Helen in Egypt” and the long World War II sequence “Trilogy”, and in her continuing influence on a wide range of later poets.

This innovative volume is not a conventional collection of essays on H. D.’s work. Its twenty paired essays include ten by American poets writing about their own literary engagements with H. D., and a second ten in which critics write about those same poets in relation to H. D. The poets and their responses to H. D. are quite diverse; Alicia Ostriker finds a connection with H. D.’s feminism, Carolyn Forche with her confrontation with the extremity of modern warfare, Brenda Hillman with her hermetic, heterodox imagination and Robert Kelly with her “honest humanity” and musical sensuality.

The influence and relations traced here are not of the agonistic, Oedipal sort Harold Bloom found in his study of literary precursors. That poets may serve as resources for each other, rather than rivals, may be news to some critics, but there is more admiration and cherishing than hostility here, more interest in following out possibilities suggested by H. D.‘s work than in competing with her. Various but accessible and relatively jargon-free, these essays offer a fascinating case study in the complex nature of poetic influence and the many ways that a single poet’s work can speak to very diverse audiences.

Poet Robert Duncan, younger than H. D. but older than most of the other poets in this volume, serves as a kind of intermediary here. His own mystical, adventurous work and fascination with H. D. provided a number of these poets with a way into H. D. If both Duncan and H. D. are still sometimes dismissed as “poets’ poets,” this book may help to erase that unfair designation.
JEFF GUNDY (May / June 2000)

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