

The H.D. Book: The Collected Writings of Robert Duncan

Robert Duncan

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“H.D.,” in this context, stands not for high-definition television, but for Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961); that is, H.D. the poet, who was associated with Imagism, a literary movement often said to espouse crisp visual objectivity. This book is the lifelong project of Robert Duncan (1919-1988), himself a major American poet, as he seeks not only to recover H.D. from obscurity, but also to reveal the hidden layers beneath her work’s surfaces.

The result, *The H.D. Book*, is far removed from conventional literary criticism. This is partly because Duncan insists that he cannot approach his subject without first understanding his own poetics, yet cannot understand these apart from his early reading of H.D., or the friendship of those who introduced him to her work. Formative scenes out of personal memory—childhood nights in Bakersfield, student afternoons at Berkeley—thus become essential to Duncan’s story. In a deeper sense, however, the book’s claim is that no poet can be understood except as an actor in an unfolding drama stretching back through history to primitive myths, here primarily the myth of Eros and Psyche. Exploring these disparate strands becomes a potentially endless quest-romance, in which Duncan must always “keep many threads and many figures so that every thread is central and every figure central to threads and figures, with none coming to its conclusion but leading further into the process.” Like any skilled weaver of romances, Duncan refrains from confronting the reader, at any given moment, with the full complexity of the work’s organization, instead letting the accretion of echoes slowly transform the strange into the strangely familiar. The guiding light throughout is Duncan’s clear, though subtly resonant prose, which lets even lengthy sentences carry the reader smoothly along from beginning to end.

For bringing this major work out of its own obscurity, full credit is due to the editors of *The H.D. Book*, who compiled and sometimes collated the disparate drafts and previously published versions of Duncan’s endlessly expanding, and hence necessarily unfinished, project. Thanks to their painstaking work, these scattered elements have now been integrated into a whole of sufficient fixity to permit the next phase of their ongoing elaboration—in readers’ minds.

PAUL FRANZ (January / February 2011)

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