

Ancient Greek Influence and Imagism In H.D.'s Early Poems

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1. Introduction

In 1912 in the Museum-Street-Tea Shop Ezra Pound edited H.D.'s poem "Hermes of the Ways," signing it "H.D. Imagiste," and by this gesture the Imagist movement exists in the literary world. This often quoted information indicates that there is a significant influence of ancient Greek Literature On Imagist poets, particularly on H.D.; for example, one might note that the first two poems that appeared bearing the name Imagist, namely "Hermes of The Ways" and "Priapus" were based on Greek dedicatory epigrams.

The purpose of the paper is to trace the ancient Greek influence on H.D.'s works, especially her purest Imagist poems. Though the discussion focuses on H.D.'s poetry, it also touches upon the works of two other Imagists, namely Ezra Pound's and Aldington's. These poets were two of the most important people in H.D.'s life as well as in her poetry. Pound came early in her life, and sparked her interest in Greek literature, while Aldington appeared in her London period, contributing a share in her intensive study of ancient Greek works.

Accordingly, the paper falls into two main parts of discussion: first, on the personal and literary relationships between Ezra Pound, Aldington, and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle); second, the influence of Greek literature especially that of Sappho on H.D. as the main focus.

2. Literary and Personal Bond : Pound-H.D.-Aldington

As mentioned earlier, H.D. has a close relationship with Pound and Aldington, both in her life and in her poetry. It has been mentioned too that among other things that bond them together other in the first place is the mutual interest in

Greek literature. One might not necessarily be surprised, though, knowing that the three poets have mutual interest in Greek works which gives them the most significant influence in their writings, namely discipline, the basic key to Imagist writings.

The prominent influence Pound had on H.D. which later became the core of her Imagist writings was in the belief that poetry is a unique expression of subjective perception on reality. In order to objectify an intense subjective experience a poet has to separate him or herself from his or her emotion by employing a poetic mask or image. And to comprehend the poet's expression, a reader will have to unmask the image and complete any missing details. Pound's intensive study of Greek literature has some influence in the formation of this view.

Pound's interest in Greek literature began in his student days in Pennsylvania University, and his interest was made public for the first time with his participation in the performance of Euripides' *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* in 1903 when he was still an undergraduate student. H.D. was in the audience, and presumably it gave a memorable impact on her, as later in 1916 she published her famous choruses from the *Iphigenia* in *Aulis* which will be discussed later in more detail.

In 1916 Pound published his *Lustra*, a collection of his translation and his original works written between 1912-1916. The Greek classical myth of the celebration of spring, fertility, and rebirth, occurs several times in this collection, in poems, such as "Coitus," "April," "The Faun," "The Spring," and "Papyrus." In these poems one can see Pound's belief in the fact that the strength of Greek beauty rests in the earliest stages of consciousness and in the interpretation of the vibrant cosmos by the signs of the gods and orads. These gods are the vision of the force of life, without which mankind will

be just like animals, or in other words, without gods there is no art nor culture. The shorter poems in the collection are lyrical and satirical. One of the lyrics, a poem titled "Surgit Fama" shows the fusion of the principle of Imagist poetry with some elements of the early Greek lyric, namely the vivid relation between feeling and expression, between substance and form. According to Pound, the subject matter of Imagist poetry is associated with gods and natural phenomenon such as winds, rains, air, the sun, and the sea. In "Surgit Fama" one sees the goddesses of fertility and of rebirth --Kore and Leuconoe-- giving the sign of spring for mankind to celebrate and enjoy. Witemeyer in *The Poetry of Ezra Pound, 1908-1920* calls "Surgit Fama" "paradigm of Imagist composition," calling the three stanzas "strophe;" they illustrate the genesis of Imagist lyrics, namely the initial inspiration, the arduous search for absolute equation, and the finished product (Witemeyer, 1969:124-125). The poet's initial inspiration -set forth in the first stanza-are evoked by the visionary glimpse of the goddess "skirting the blue-gray sea/In gilded and russet mantle." (Pound, 1968: 99)

Then the image of Hermes, the god of messenger and crossroads, appears in the second stanza, representing the urge to write without restraint every emotion brought out by the vision in the first stanza.

The tricksome Hermes is here;
He moves behind me
Eager to catch my words,
Eager to spread them with rumor;
To set upon them his change
Crafty and subtle;
To alter them to his purpose;
(Pound, 1969: 9)

The poet, however, refuses to fall into Hermes' hands: instead of writing on Hermes' terms, he makes an effort to "speak true, even to the letter" (Pound, 1969:9). Here one sees Pound's struggle against the urge to write "vague pouring of emotion," endeavoring to hold to the Imagist technique of precision and absolute equation of subject and object. Finally, in the third stanza one sees Pound's triumph over the temptation to indulge overflowed emotions. As Witemeyer puts it, "The poet triumphs in the third strophe, which represents the finished Imagist lyric and is appropriately set off in quotation

marks. The classical myths, of which he had only a glimpse at the beginning, are fully reborn in a swelling chorus." (Witemeyer, 1969: 125)

Besides Pound, Aldington had helped to intensify H.D.'s studies and interest in Greek literature. However, as their works developed, their attitude toward Greek works differs quite distinctively. While H.D. regards Greek works as a source or an instrument to express her experience, or in other words to objectify her subjectivity, Aldington sees Greek ideal as an escapism. As Norman T. Gates, in *The Poetry of Richard Aldington: A Critical Evaluation and An Anthology of Uncollected Poems*, noted, Aldington "recognizes the tension between the ideal of the Greek world of his imagination and the real sordid modern life around him." Gates noted further, that in facing the "sordid real life," especially that of World War I, Aldington depends on his Greek ideal for "emotional survival" (Gates, 1974: 55). To him the idealic Greek world of his imagination is "things sacred" sent to him from heaven, and it gives him "the grace of solitude" among the chaotic and rude life of the real world. It is to him "an honest friend" who helps keep his "proud spirit uncurbed" and keep him "free" from the care of the real world. In his poem titled "A Winter Night" he insisted that he would never give his idealic Greek world away:

What! give again, as I have given,
Things sacred sent to me from heaven?
No! though my outward life be rude
It keeps the grace of solitude;
(Aldington, 1928: 174-176)

Another similarity in the works of Pound-H.D.-Aldington lies in their use of cadence, producing a staccato impact which makes their poetry sound harsh and curt to some critics. From the three poets', however, Aldington's poetry is the least harsh and curt, which might be because of the romantic quality in his work. Even when we detect a bitterness in his poems, the tone is still melodious and less abrupt than H.D.'s As an illustration, let us look at an excerpt of Aldington's "To a Greek Marble," and H.D.'s "Sheltered Garden." In both poems one detects the bitterness and exasperation of a person who experienced an unreciprocated love:

I have whispered thee in thy solitudes	I have had enough
Of our loves in Phrygia,	I gasp for breath

The far ecstasy of burning
 noons When the fragile pipes
 eased in the cypress shade,
 And the brown fingers of the
 shepherd
 Moved over slim shoulders,
 And only the cicada sang

I have told thee of the hills
 And the lisp of reeds
 And the sun upon thy breasts
 And thou hearest me not,

Every way ends, every road
 every foot-path leads at last
 to the hill-crest-
 then you retrace your steps,
 Or find the same slope on the
 other side,
 precipitate

(H.D.'s "Sheltered Garden,"
 Ll. 1-8)

Potnia, Potnia,
 Thou hearest me not
 (Aldington's "To A Greek Marble", Ll. 10-23)

3. H.D. and Imagism

Before examining the ancient Greek elements in the poetry of H.D. the "perfect Imagist," one should first look at the Imagist doctrine of poetry which constitutes the fundamental characteristics of her works. The idea of the Imagism was founded by T.E. Hulme through his informal lectures in the "Poet's Club" meeting where the first experimental Imagist poems were read and discussed. T.E. Hulme's great contribution to the movement is his belief that speech is essentially inaccurate. It is only by new metaphor, in other words by Image, that visual meaning can be made precise. He insisted that the chief purpose of poetry is to present accurate, precise, and definite description. Hulme's ideas are realized in most of the Imagist works, especially those of H.D.'s. His famous doctrine containing the three rules of poetry writing for the Imagist appeared in 1913 in *Poetry*. The first rule is to have a direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective. Second, to use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation. Third, to compose rhythm in sequence of musical phrase instead of that of a metronome. Hulme's theory is made concrete in the 1915 anthology entitled *Some Imagist Poets*, where the Imagists reaffirmed their principle: believing that concentration is the essence of poetry, they contrive to use the exact word of common speech, to create new rhythms and cadence; to have absolute freedom in choice of subject, and to present an image so that their poetry should render exact particulars instead of vague generalities. This last statement derived from Hulme's wish to deal with the microcosm, the small world of individuals, such as a person's experi-

ence and mood, avoiding, though, vague emotions. This aspect is very prominent in H.D.'s works, especially in her early poems such as "Priapus" and "Hermes of The Ways," to the extent that critics such as Harold Monroe in "The Imagists Discussed" (1915) and Coffman in *Imagism* (1951) regard her verse as intensely personal, inflexible and very limited. As an illustration, one might look at her famous short poem "Oread," a whole poem consisting only of six unrhymed lines which critics regard as the perfect sample of an imagist work:

Oread
 Whirl up, sea-
 whirl your pined pines,
 splash your great pines
 on our rocks,
 hurl your green over us,
 cover us with your pools of fir.
 (Martz, 1983: 21)

The poem's controversial shortness and form brought diverse reactions from the literary critics. Harold Monroe labeled it as "petty poetry;" her economy in words was criticized as "needlessly excessive restraint," describing her as lacking imagination. He discarded "Oread" as a poem that can be said in the one minute before lunch. Flint, on the other hand, stated that the form of "Oread" is inevitably Imagist with its word economy, its accuracy of observation, swiftness of comparison and beauty of image. He said further that with "Oread" H.D. created poetry that was "original in form, spirit, and imagery" (Flint, 1915: 82). Glen Hughes in *Imagism and the Imagists* (1931) called "Oread" a delightful miniature, which to him "seems complete as it stands."

Through a single but appropriate image H.D. managed to obtain a force for the expression of the personal emotion when other poets achieved it by elaboration. Another element in "Oread" that illustrates H.D.'s Imagism is the use of metaphor to convey a complex of impressions embodied in the whole poem instead of a single sensation set forth in a couple of phrases. As Coffman pointed out, the analogy of the waves with the fir trees evoked not only pictorial outline and color but also a suggestion of coolness, softness, hushed sound, and even of fragrance. With a single image she united three forceful elements of nature - sea, land, and human being-into one: "cover

us with your pools of fir" (Martz, 1983: 21).

To conclude this section of the study, one might point out that the thematic union of land, sea, and human beings, occurs frequently in H.D.'s poems. Sometimes the three forces become entangled in a blissful union such as in "Oread," but at times the human being -the poet-watches as an outsider, as the two elements of nature mingled together: in the "Sea Poppies," for instance, the poet observes the flowers as they were entangled on the cliff and eventually were flung by the sea to land "Beautiful, widespread" on a meadow. In "Sea Rose," meanwhile, though the poet is still a spectator, in viewing the natural phenomenon she lets her emotion interfere, judging the rose a harsh, "dripping acrid fragrance." Characteristically Imagist, H.D. brings her theme out in a clear tinkling cadence, with the diction of everyday language, but at the same time, with the beauty of the image, she manages to keep the lofty and poetic nature from becoming trivial: "Rose, harsh rose,/marred and with stint of petals,/ meagre flower, thin,/sparse of leaf,//more precious/than a wet rose/single on a stem-/you are caught in the drift.

4. The Greek Influence

Janice Robinson pointed out that H.D. repeatedly said that Moravianism has Greek origins, and it is likely that her affinity to Greek culture derived in part from her Moravian background (Robinson, 1982: 85). Though one might doubt the validity of the assumption, one thing is true, though, that there is a strong bond between her poems and Greek Poetry, especially Sappho's works. In *The Wise Sappho*, H.D. wrote that "Sappho has become for us a name, an abstraction as well as a pseudonym for poignant human feeling, she is indeed rocks set in a blue sea, she is the sea itself, breaking and tortured and torturing, but never broken" (H.D., 1982: 67). Her description of Sappho might as well be applied to H.D. herself. In her turbulent relationship with Pound, Aldington, and later on with DH Lawrence, H.D. -like the Sappho she describes-had been tortured and torturing, had been broken yet "never broken." Though it might seem too far fetched, there is an interesting parallel line that could be drawn between H.D.'s life and Sappho's. For example, both poets were

married but were emotionally involved with other men, and both had one daughter who appeared in their poems. Both had had a breakdown which almost took their lives: Sappho tried to commit suicide because of her unrequited love for Phaon, and H.D. in 1915 almost lost the will to live when she gave birth to a stillborn baby, yet both survived and died at old age. Further more, there are distinctive similarities in the features of their poetry as well as their career as poets. First of all, both were the 'chief muse' of a literary circle they had 'created'. With the publication of her Imagist poems, H.D. in a way created a literary circle, the Imagists, with herself as the chief and perfect muse of the "school". In 1930 Ford Madox Ford, a fervent Imagist, described H.D. as "our gracious muse, our cynosure and the peak of our achievement." (Ford, 1930: xv-xvi). Before Sappho's time, the chief form of ancient Greek poetry was the Homeric epic. When Sappho set up her literary school for girls, she made popular the relatively new form of verse, called the lyrics. J.W. Mackail in his *Lecture on Greek Poetry*, outlined the Ancient Greek literature into three genres, namely the epic, the dramatic and the lyrical. The first was the product of medieval or pre-Hellenic Greece, the second was that of poetry which is "concentrated to civic function," and the third was the lyrical poetry in Hellenic era, consisting of height 427 and perfect muse of the "school". In 1930 Ford Madox Ford, a fervent Imagist, described H.D. as "our gracious muse, our cynosure and the peak of our achievement." (Ford, 1930: xv-xvi). Before Sappho's time, the chief form of ancient Greek poetry was the Homeric epic. When Sappho set up her literary school for girls, she made popular the relatively new form of verse, called the lyrics. J.W. Mackail in his *Lecture on Greek Poetry*, outlined the Ancient Greek literature into three iambic, elegiac, and melic. The iambic poetry became absorbed into the drama such as *Euripides' Iphigeneia at Aulis*, and the elegiac poetry developed toward the epigram, whereas the melic poetry constituted the lyric proper (Mackail, 1966: ix-xviii). In Sappho's hands and with the literary circle she inspired, the lyric proper flourished into superb lines, producing poetry that was simple yet full of meaning such as her plea to Aphrodite which will be discussed and quote in full in the following

paragraph. As H.D. -with her Imagist quality-brought a new breath to English Poetry, Sappho brought a new scope in Greek literature with her lyrical quality: the old form and spirit of medieval homeric epic became superseded by new lyrical structure.

One of Sappho's distinctive influence upon H.D. is her microcosmic aspect, believing that human as well as non human nature is an epitome of the world and even the whole universe. Consequently both poets deal with the small world of individuals, and thus their poems are often concerned with personal events in their lives. Sappho's poem to Aphrodite quoted below is an example of an expression of her personal disappointment and dejection. In her frustration of being rejected by her lover she consoled herself by imagining that Aphrodite responded to her plea:

..... O goddess,
Smiling, with face immortal in its beauty,
Asking why I grieved, and why in utter longing
I had dared call thee;

Asking what I sought, thus hopeless in desiring,
Wildered in brain, and spreading nets of passion-
Alas, for whom? And saidst thou, "Who has
hamed thee?"

O my poor Sappho!
Though now he flies, ere long he shall pursue thee;
Fearing thy gifts, he too, in turn shall bring them;
Loveless today, to-morrow he shall woo thee,
Though thou shouldst spurn him."

(Sappho, 1942: 12)

In the imaginative response, Aphrodite was made to say that though the person spurned her at present, soon he will come to woo her, and then, in her turn, she can reject and hurt him. Though the problem seemed to be personal, it is the epitome of a universal psychological reaction of a rejected person, dreaming of a victory in the love affair.

This aspect of microcosmic trend of Greek literature is one of the distinctive features of the poetry of the Imagists. A mentioned previously, Hulme's wish to deal with the microcosm, the small world of a particular being, is most prominent in H.D.'s work, especially in her earlier poems. In most of them, she deals with the world of an individual "thing" such as a sea rose, a pear tree, a storm, a sheltered garden or an evening. At times she would portray a personal emotional conflict in a seemingly simple poem, but H.D.'s poetry

offers the readers the potential for perceiving it as impersonal and objective. To illustrate, let us look at one of the first published poems of H.D.'s, entitled "Priapus." When the poem was composed, H.D. was emotionally confused with Ezra Pound's behavior: unofficially engaged to him, she went to London to join Pound only to find him being "engaged" to several other girls, including Dorothy Shakespeare, who later became his wife. Obviously, Priapus is the Image of Pound, who -as the subtitle suggests- was the keeper of many "trees," meaning girls. Considering her religious upbringing, her moving to England to follow a boy friend and her living on her own as a single woman had proved to be a much greater step for her than what she might have anticipated. Presumably her family had opposed to her going, and it had aroused gossip in her Moravian community. Though outwardly she never acknowledged that the Moravian community's harsh judgement disturbed her, in "Priapus" one can see the poignant expression of her personal experience, e.g. the feeling of being let down, or to put it more strongly, of being abandoned by one's first love as well as being the object of gossip. The image of herself as a courtesan was a reflection of what the Moravian relatives and friends must have thought of her. She had sacrificed her reputation, doing it all as an "offering" to Pound:

these fallen hazel-nuts,
stripped late of their green sheaths,
grapes, red - purple,
their berries
dripping with wine,
pomegranates already broken,
and shrunken figs
and quinces untouched
I bring you as offering

(Martz, 1983: 29)

Instead of rewarding her with "the beauty/of fruit trees," in other words marriage and the promise of bearing children, Pound -"the honey-seeking"-paused not, but left her alone and "prostrated." Although "Priapus" is very personal, H.D. managed to avoid being at all emotional by approaching the biographical elements in a very impersonal and objective way. For instance, by using an impersonal name "Priapus" to denote a real person, H.D. succeeded in presenting her personal dilemma subtly, giving to it a uni-

versal quality, rather than merely describing a faithful record of her sentiments.

H.D. admired Sappho, among other things, for her "artistic wisdom" and her scientific precision of metre and musical notation tempered with fine intellect, producing a poetry full of accurate and precise description of reality. In "The Wise Sappho" H.D. described Sappho as "the island of artistic perfection where the lover of ancient beauty (shipwrecked in modern world) may yet find foothold and take breath and gain courage for new adventure and dream of yet unexplored continents and realms of future artistic achievement" (H.D., 1982: 67). With "Hermes of The Ways" H.D. gained the courage for taking this new adventure and fulfilled the dream of new "artistic achievement." The poem had helped established the Imagism, a new artistic achievement in the English literary world. As Pound had implied, with the publication of H.D.'s "Hermes of The Ways," the Imagist movement became a realization. The poem fulfills Hulme's requirements of an Imagist poem in that it has clear details, it presents an "accurate, precise, and definite description" of the "thing," namely a coastal scenery. The first two "stanzas" give us a concrete, accurate observation of nature: how the hard rock and earth broke into small particles of sand and how the wind blew the sand and piled it up into a dune on the shore:

The hard sand breaks,
and the grains of it
are clear as wine.

Far off over the leagues of it,
the wind,
playing on the wide shore,
pile little ridges,
and the great waves
break over it.

(Martz, 1983: 37)

Up to this point H.D. seems only to give a simple description of a coastal scenery, but then the image of Hermes transforms the seemingly familiar sea shore into a world of imagination. In Greek mythology, Hermes is a complex personality: he is a god of fertility as well as a messenger who brings the news of death, parting beloved ones from each other, conducting soul to hell. At the same time he is both the god of boundary --his name derived from "herma", mean-

ing heap of stones--and the god of roads and doorways, protecting and helping travellers. In H.D.'s poem Hermes is the presentation of Pound, who had been to her both the patient teacher and helper who showed her the ways to her literary career, but at the same time he is the one who could lead her soul to hell. Here we see how H.D. masked the autobiographical element and her personal experience in an image which presents a fusion of emotion and intellect: her "artistic wisdom" has tempered the flow of emotion, producing an impersonal and objective work of poetry. The Greek deities are the image from which the visual meanings of her experience "can be made precise," in other words, the deities are the manifestation of the implied reality.

Another interesting point is Sappho's and H.D.'s approach to nature. Sappho's complete poems as well as her fragmentary pieces show how she enjoys portraying the finest sense of beauty in nature such as the "the sweet shrill song" of a cricket, the beauty of hyacinth blooming purple on the ground even after it has been trampled on by shepherd and the murmur of the breeze "rustling through apple branches," bringing sweet slumber:

And by the cool stream the breeze murmurs through
apple branches and slumber pours down from quivering
leaves.

(Sappho, 1942: 20)

From beneath her wings she pours forth a clear
shrill song, when she shouts down the outspread
perpendicular blaze of the noonday sun.

(Sappho, 1942: 76)

As indicated earlier, H.D. also admires natural beauty, yet there is a difference in Sappho's and H.D.'s approach in dealing with nature: in the former's works one feels the poet's detachment from her object, whereas in the latter's, one gets the impression of witnessing a close relationship between the poet and her object. H.D. almost always addresses nature in the second person *you*, e.g. to the Sea Poppies she says: "your stalk has caught root," or to the Sea Lily: "but you are shattered/in the wind," or she would address The Pool with "Are you alive?/I touch you." The conversational tone she adopts in addressing her object directly renders a feeling of closeness between her and the sea lily, the poppies, the pool, or whatever her object is. Sometimes the

relationship is that of camaraderie such as when she playfully asks the cliff temple: "shall I hurt myself from here, / shall I leap and be near you?" In "Dread"-a perfect example of an imagist work-with a stultic image she united three forceful elements of nature -sea, land, and human beings-into one: "cover us with your pools of fir."

Sappho, on the other hand, almost never addresses nature in a direct nor intimate conversational tone. She uses the third person it or they, giving an impression of a distance even between her and nature:

Like the hyacinth which the shepherd tramples underfoot
on the mountain, and it still blooms purple on the ground.

(Sappho, 1942: 110)

I could not expect to touch the sky with my two arms.

(Sappho, 1942: 45)

and of the doves she says:
But their heart turned cold and they dropped their wings."

(Sappho, 1942: 25)

To illustrate further the contrast between Sappho's and H.D.'s approach toward natural objects, here are a fragment of two poems written by each on the same object:

Sappho's MOONLIGHT

The stars around the fair moon fade
Against the night,
When gazing full she fills the glade
And spreads the seas with silvery light.

(Sappho, 1942: 19)

H.D.'s MOONRISE

Will you glimmer on the sea/
will you fling-your spear-head
on the shore?

(Martz, 1983: 56)

Aside from the difference in approach, both poets have similar fine touch in expressing the loveliness of nature, producing a vivid picture of the full moon shining on the sea, the breeze that brings slumber in the apple orchards, and the purity of "white stream" which run through the apple trees.

5. Conclusion

In talking about Imagism, one observes that an Imagist poet tries to create a scene so vividly that the reader would

feel the same emotions that the poet did when he saw it in actuality or in his mind. H.D. indeed does all this and more. She recreates the scene without any overflowing sentimentality instead, she does it in an exact and precise manner of Sappho's style, producing a work of literature which constitutes an embryo of what the modernist Elliot would later term as "objective correlative."

Besides the 'embryo', H.D.'s contribution to Imagism in particular and Modern English Poetry in general lies in her use of the diction of everyday language presented in the new rhythm of cadence such as seen in "Orchard", "Oread", "Moonrise", and "the Pool". Also, it lies in her sense of discipline of excluding unnecessary details such as seen vividly in "Oread".

To conclude this short essay, I would like to point out that though Imagism -with H.D. as one of the 'perfect muses'-is regarded by some critics as too "limited in its ideal" to be called a movement, no one can argue that its poets such as Pound-H.D.- Aldington have paved the way for modernism to flourish in the English literary world, constituting a chapter in the history of modern poetry.

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