THE RENEWAL OF THE SENSE OF PLACE IN THE POEMS OF DOOLITTLE AND LEVERTOV

Evangelia Sakelliou

The Department of English Language and Literature,
The National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Zografou, Athens, Greece

Abstract

Hilda Doolittle and Denise Levertov, two twentieth-century women poets, have helped to preserve our sense of place – endangered as it is by globalization, new technologies, and the internet -- by giving our feeling of belonging somewhere new meanings through their poetry. Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961), or H.D., was an American poet whose career reflects a changing sense of place, from the physical to one more colored by the social concerns of feminism. An example of her poetic technique for presenting a place, for uniting details from the environment to show us how we feel inside, is "Oread," which comes from the famous collection Sea Garden (1916). The way she first wrote changes during the next twenty years to include a new feminist sense of place, or the new sense of women in the world. As a second example of a twentieth-century poet whose work starts with a close concern with the immediate physical environment and then expands to the political, social, and religious context of human life is Denise Levertov (1923-1997). In her early work she uses places to show us the feelings we have inside us – the feelings we might have known that we had. This technique of externalization of inner feelings or the inner landscape so that it can be known clearly comes as a surprise and revelation. In her later life Levertov writes primarily religious poems; some of them transform her characteristic non-religious revelation of wonder in the physical place around her found in her early poems into ones having religious feeling.

Keywords: *H.D., Hilda Doolittle, Denise Levertov, imagist*

1. THE RENEWAL OF PLACE BY HILDA DOOLITTLE

In the course of human civilizations, poetry has often been concerned with place – with the physical landscape and the related inner landscape of feelings, the imagination, and the cultural heritage giving the environment meaning.

Poetry is essentially concerned with place for other, less obvious reasons. An analogy can make this clear; a poet is a little like a clam on the sea floor. The clam acts as a filter for the sea water, which becomes part of the fleshy body inside the shell. If the water is dirty, the clam keeps some of the bacteria in itself, or if a particle of sand gets inside, the clam may create a beautiful, precious pearl. Poets filter their environment, allowing the social climate of the times to become a part of them and their poetry. And sometimes, their poems are beautiful like pearls. I use these images because we can understand our world through images, sometimes better than through abstract concepts, and poetry can be a way of knowing, and beyond that, a way of starting with the materials we find in our places, and making something beautiful.

In today's world, as a result of omnipresent technology, media, the internet, and globalization, writers are confronted with new social attitudes toward place, through feminism, as in the case of Hilda Doolittle, and through politics and religion, in the work of Denise Levertov. I would like to explore with you the way these two twentieth-century women poets have presented the feeling of place.

Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961), often referred to as H.D., as she signed some of her writings, was an American poet whose career reflects a changing sense of place, from the physical to one more colored by the social concerns of feminism. She started to become famous as a result of her association with the great poet Ezra Pound when she was categorized as an "imagist" poet; she signed with the name "H.D. Imagiste" [1]. Imagists let images speak for themselves. They did not want to write poetry in which the poet "editorialized" or inserted opinions about the topic along with the images. Instead, they put images

in a sequence such that the reader's mind interpreted one in relation to another. In this way, it seems as if the images are superimposed one on another. Another word for this is called a "palimpsest" something like transparent sheets of plastic with images on them that are put on top of each other. The Imagists tried to make images of place say something more than the places could by themselves. Perhaps the main idea of this literary movement is expressed by Ezra Pound when he states the definition of a poetic "image": some details present "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" [2].

An example of this poetic technique for presenting a place, for uniting details from the environment to show us how we feel inside is her early poem "Oread":

> Whirl up, sea—
>
> Whirl your pointed pines,
>
> Splash your great pines
>
> on our rocks,
>
> hurl your green over us,
>
> cover us with your pools of fir. [3]

The reader is engaged or drawn into the process of recreating H.D.'s perception by the need to relate the sea and the pines in some overall meaning. The poem is only completed by the participation of the reader, who re-enacts the process of writing the poem while reading. The title is not directly in the poem but the mountain nymph or spirit by that name is very much present. She is the total impression evoked by the poet: the total feeling of trees moving in synchronization and having a single spirit in them—Oread. Although the title would indicate that the poet is experiencing trees waving together in unison as the surface of the sea seems to be one motion, the pines could equally be a metaphor for the sea, often some shade of green as pines are, and I suggest both interpretations would lead to the most important effect of a single and total feeling of the self. In so doing, the poem awakens me; it energizes me; it heightens the sense of my inner feeling.

"Oread" makes its readers feel more strongly about a place than most people would on a daily basis. The pines are pointed and so large as to be great. Forcefully, passionately, the persona feels the pines' impact and is covered until the relief comes when his or her body feels soft like animal fur, which sounds like the word H.D. used in the last line for a type of pine tree, the fir. For this reason, there is the sense that the persona is female, as woman is traditionally represented as being the earth mother from which life originates and as being below the sky, representative of man. The sequence of images, as if they were superimposed, the palimpsest of the poem, makes the total feeling with the help of the word choices, their sound qualities, and their rhythm. The total impression is aesthetic in both senses: readers feel something created by the poet, and it gives pleasure.

In just a few lines, H.D. uses many poetic techniques. The main skill is the active union of sea, pines, rocks, and waves – to evoke a single feeling, a strong mood arousing the sense of touch. The language is made active by the short quick lines racing toward the end of the sentence; by the monosyllabic, forceful verbs for actions pounding harder and coming closer; by the fact that Oread, we suppose, is commanding or passionately inviting the sea with the related elements to do something until she (and we) feel the fir on us; and by the minimal syntax of subject, verb, object, and indirect object makes the single sentence very active, not contemplative. The poem is one sentence with a sequence of five active verbs; it activates readers. Just as Gothic tales created an overall tone of horror by making many words work together, this poem is special for the single expressive quality it evokes so economically and strongly.

The lines of "Oread" have a cadence of mounting passion followed by its relief, and this rhythm is matched by the tone of the words, the initially forceful ones leading to ones less forcefully pronounced. It is not clear that this poem is about an experience of human love. Such an interpretation may read too much into the poem. It is clear that it awakens us: we feel how wonderful the sea is and how alive we are when we are at the sea side. Just as we can feel music in our bodies -- whether sad, happy, romantic, or whatever kind of music – this poem gives us a feeling strong enough that it seems to cause a reaction

in our bodies. H.D. in her imagist poems teaches us how the place where we live creates feelings in our bodies; the place enters us and makes us have some feelings, some attitudes.

This sensual style is generally evident in her early Imagist poems, primarily *Sea Garden.* It is the mere juxtaposition and thus fusion of images that makes ordinary things become metaphorical. H.D. makes the poem a palimpsest of types of imagery, one layer over the other with the aim in mind of presenting a total impression or presenting an inner state. This layering of images, claims Morris, is a way H.D. can create the technique named by Pound, *phanopoeia*, or throwing "a visual image on the reader's imagination" in a kind of projection, [4]. As a result, H.D.'s poetry can be very moving and beautiful when it leads readers to undergo an imaginative action analogous to the creation of the poem in the first place. Her poems seem to whisper, "Follow me and feel as I feel, create as I create." As H.D.'s career progresses the palimpsest can range over millennia of myth and culture and personal experiences. Not coincidentally, *Palimpsest* is a novel she wrote in 1926 midway through her career. As one example of the layering of images, she makes the poem "Sea Iris" suggestive, as Robinson points out, by playing on words, such as "prow" suggesting "prowl" to evoke a sexual and feminist undercurrent of meaning [5].

"Oread" is a remarkable poem in the context of her life work insofar as, more than other early poems, it leaves readers with the feeling that something eluded them, perhaps is still eluding the poet's self. Oread, a mountain spirit or nymph, is a perfect symbol of this sense evoked in the readers. To use an analogy of my feeling, I get the sense that the poem is the line of tracks and other signs left by an animal that is still ahead of me and leading me on.

The elusiveness in her poetry is not a negative feature such as the lack of concreteness or the vagueness of literary effect; rather, it casts a somewhat charming spell as if an aroma in the air is left behind by a beautiful woman who was just there. This quality indicates a feature of H.D.'s early style, of her poetic signature and of her personality that she did not fully understand. She herself was elusive in much of her life. In some periods of her life and career she was almost secluded by choice, with only one or two people acting as intermediaries between her and the world. Not exactly aloof, H.D. was a person who was very much directed toward her inner self—a kind of spirit, nymph, or Oread in her own behavior. This style is explained in psychoanalytic terms by Holland: H.D. has the "remarkable ability (and defensive need) to recreate the touch and feel of various objects. She is much less able to recreate people. H.D. was above all a poet of the thingness of things" [6].

It is only after the life work was written that critics could explain clearly the direction her poetry would take but which she did not know in the early work. According to the well-known feminist literary critic, Ostriker, *Sea Garden* starts an entire program for the feminist revision of poetry [7] and I might add the poetic revision of female experience.

Ostriker reads H.D.'s poems as contributions toward a feminist manifesto. It is unlikely that H.D. could have intended to do so in the way Ostriker means. Nevertheless, whether H.D. intended those early poems to be so oriented toward gender and feminist themes, they do prepare the way for poems that definitely are. I think H.D.'s Imagist poetry is the call of a feminist muse from her own future, as if she had the uncanny sense of the direction the future would or should take. Her life and work did in fact move toward increasing concern with what we now call feminist issues.

After World War I, H.D.'s life and art undergo what is often called a sea change. H.D. understood her new self partly through a theory she formulated. The theory of poetry in "Notes on Thought and Vision" is also a theory of life and does not sound much like Imagism at all: it is through and through a feminist doctrine [8]. A poem is said to be born whole as a "matrix" after a visionary experience out of the ordinary—called "overmind"—involving the brain and a region of feeling in the womb-area [9]. Acquired, conscious knowledge of poetry helps shape the vision into the actual poem. "I first realized this state of consciousness in my head," writes H.D. "I visualize it just as well now …placed like a fetus in the body" [10]. The whole person is affected. The idea that a poem is a matrix in which individual experiences gain a new deeper meaning is ahead of its time, being discussed today by some postmodernists. It is praised by feminists for being an early defense of the creative power of women. H.D. created a theory that is feminist in two ways: it supports the values of women and it is done in the

way that a woman would do it. Traditionally, women were not thought to be theoretical but practical and emotional.

During World War II, H.D. lived in London which was heavily bombed by the Germans. In this horrific wasteland she wrote a large poetic work called *The Trilogy*. It was therapeutic in two ways: it allowed her to endure the air raids, the shaking buildings as if from an earthquake, and it helped her to create a new definition of woman in her poetry: woman that was intelligent and that could be the cause of progress. The way she wrote more than twenty years earlier is expanded to include a new feminist sense of place, or the new sense of women in the world.

The fertility of woman is no longer only a biological fact but also a cultural potentiality. According to H.D. in "Notes on Recent Writing," the overall purpose of this major collection is to gather the fragments of female identity in the "drowned or submerged Isis," the woman of the traditional patriarchal society introduced in book one [11].

An experience helped to start the writing process of Book II, *Tribute to the Angels*. While on a London bus riding past bombed buildings H.D. saw a charred apple tree blossoming again in the ruins of a burnt square [12]. Not only did the tree survive, as the first book shows, it begins to thrive again: "We see her visible and actual,/beauty incarnate…then she set a charred tree before us…" [13]. "Invisible, indivisible Spirit,/ how is it you come so near…" [14]. The imagery of the tree is repeated several times. The rebirth is a new metamorphosis of previous feminine figures into a Lady bearing a book, "a new Eve" in the most quoted passages from *Tribute to the Angels*:

> Ah (you say), this is Holy Wisdom,
>
> *Santa Sophia*, the SS of the *Sanctus Spiritus*,
>
> So by facile reasoning, logically
>
> The incarnate symbol of the Holy Ghost;
>
> Your Holy Ghost was an apple-tree
>
> Smouldering—or rather now bourgeoning
>
> With flowers; the fruit of the Tree?
>
> This is the new Eve who comes
>
> Clearly to return, to retrieve
>
> What she lost the race,
>
> Given over to sin, to death;
>
> She brings the Book of Life, obviously, [15]

H.D.'s image of the blossom on the partially burnt apple tree shows how her poetry is therapeutic, how it transforms the place of London during the war. Through her art, the physical place gives inspiration for her to keep writing, to survive, and to imagine a new definition of women. Place becomes less physical than in her early poetry and is generalized to convey symbolic meanings of new social attitudes toward women.

This change in H.D.'s poetic sense of place resembles the psychological concept of sublimation, according to which an emotion that someone has is rejected when someone attempts to explain it intellectually. Something specific, somewhat physical, such as a place, is re-interpreted in a more general

way, somewhat symbolically. Poetry can transform a place to show the greater or more general meaning for our inner landscape, feeling, character, imagination, and culture.

2. THE RENEWAL OF THE SENSE OF PLACE BY DENISE LEVERTOV

As a second example of a twentieth-century poet whose work starts with a close concern with the immediate physical environment and then expands to the political, social, and religious context of human life is Denise Levertov (1923-1997). In her early work she uses places to show us the feelings we have inside us – the feelings we might not have known that we had. This technique of externalization of inner feelings or the inner landscape so that it can be known clearly comes as a surprise and revelation.

This technique has its origin at least two centuries earlier in the autobiographical poem called *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth, the British poet in the movement called Romanticism. Wordsworth makes landscapes poetic by "coloring them with the imagination," in his own words [16]. The moments of inspiration are called "spots of time" an inspiration most noticeable in memories of childhood, when the more developed adult can reflect on the growth of the imagination [17].

In one brilliant spot of time, the British poet describes the events after an adolescent boy takes a boat without permission. While he was rowing away from a high hill, he began to see a peak behind it rising higher and higher as if the peak were angrily rising up to chase him [18]. The inner life is expressed powerfully when it is put into an outer physical representation: the adult poet expresses the young boy's fear very strongly in the angry cliff starting to chase him. He puts into the outer physical landscape his inner feeling. This figurative description is not naïve personification common in poetry prior to Wordsworth because he does not simply ascribe a human trait to the rising peak, like a label added to the already manufactured clothes. Instead, he designs the rising peak to be the outer form of the inner fear. In this way, the inner feeling becomes known through the outer physical landscape. The boy sees his own fear reflected by the angry rising peak. The anger is the inverted or obverse image of the fear, as when mirrors reflect images by inverting them like the sign on the front of an ambulance with inverted letters so drivers can identify it.

Wordsworth believes the spots of time give the poet a stronger sense of the mind [19]. Not only do we know it better but it increases in power when we develop our poetic sense. Levertov uses this poetic technique in her early poetry. She uses a kinesthetic sense, a feeling of the position or motion of our body to help represent the inner emotions in an outward form. Poets sometimes use the kinesthetic sense as a kind of sixth sense. It means a feeling we have when we are moving, such as falling, or when we are in a certain position, such as very high up. A clear example occurs in Levertov's poem "Leaving Forever."

> He says the waves in the ship's wake
>
> are like stones rolling away.
>
> I don't see it that way.
>
> But I see the mountain turning,
>
> turning away its face as the ship
>
> takes us away. [20]

The feeling of the man and the feeling of the woman are externalized in the place around them. Doing so allows us to see the feelings and to contrast them. The man feels free, like stones rolling away. The mountain cannot actually turn away but when someone is on a boat his or her body feels stationary although the eyes present the fixed land as moving. This is a kinesthetic sense of motion. The apparent movement of the mountain reveals her inner feeling. The woman feels an end to a chapter in her life, perhaps an end in a relationship, or just the loss when leaving a place. Place acts as a mirror for feelings she may not have known she had.

In her later life Levertov writes primarily religious poems; some of them are didactic or evangelical but others transform her characteristic non-religious revelation of wonder in the physical place around her found in her early poems into ones having the religious feeling of the appreciation of God's earthly creations. The last four lines of "The Glittering Noise" show her poetic signature.

And the noise of the herrings,

Which passed us

In immense shoals, glittering

In the Sea, like fire … [21]

The herrings present the beauty of God's creation in the large background of the sea. The title presents a riddle to be solved: what is a glittering noise? A sound cannot glitter. This is a confusion of two senses, sight and sound, or the lack of distinction between senses is called synesthesia. This technique operates somewhat subliminally even in cases of obvious, dominant synesthesia. As our experience instinctively or through socialization has built into it correspondences between the senses, so too poems relate images gathered from all the senses to fit together to form a whole. In this way, synesthesia is a kind of metaphor for the coherence in a complex poem.

Certainly this poem does not de-emphasize sensations as might be encountered in literature with a less bodily and more spiritual theme. It is so rich in sensory effect it is as if the poem is a three-dimensional object being touched as it is read.

The title "Glittering Noise" forces one to make sense of its synesthesia – the suspense artfully sustained through the poem. A secret of this technique is that the apparent confusion of the senses serves to evoke a feeling deeper than any from the five senses; a distinctly poetic apprehension of the whole subject's imagination.

Finally, we see what a "glittering noise" might be: thousands of silvery herrings splashing in the night under the light from the stars accented by the streak of a comet. The comet's light makes the many brief appearances of the herrings above water flicker like flames of fire while at the same time the splashings could be heard more clearly than in daytime. To connect the comet in the night sky to the herrings playing on the sea's surface makes the scene cosmic, and archetypal, not in the sense of repeated but in the sense of presenting a frame of particular conceptions in this case a kind of frame of nature.

The synesthesia in this poem evokes a state of the persona's being: the persona experiences a vividness, a feeling of life, when in the presence of the comet and the herrings in mutual relation. The apparent confusion of the visual and aural aspects of the glittering noise serves to help evoke the moment by which the feeling toward the entire experience could be recreated by the reader in the imagination. The confusion conceived in non-poetic terms calls upon the total human being to make sense by recreating the total scene: it makes the imagination more active. In the poem, the glittering noise is not a confusion of meaning but a beautiful concert of meanings.

Synesthesia helps Levertov create a revelation in the physical place around her. According to her, what moves us the most in a poem is the concerted effects of all the elements: "the more elements common to us all that a work of art draws upon the more totally it can move us. And that term 'move' should be thought of very literally – i.e., parts, or all, or our being are set in motion by works of art" [22]. What moves the reader parallels, by the strange magic of the poem, what first moved the poet. In other words, the processes of the creation of the poem are presented in the poem such that they force the reader's imagination to complete the images, to make them cohere, and then to arrive at the same discovery of the imagination which the poet had.

These two American women poets help us to overcome an emerging problem of contemporary society. Increasingly, people lose their sense of belonging to a particular place and instead have a global sense of belonging everywhere but nowhere in particular. The media and globalization helped to make people feel this way. To counter this loss, Hilda Doolittle and Denise Levertov renew our sense of place beautifully by coloring it with feminist and religious perspectives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens for partially funding my participation in this conference.

REFERENCES

1. Doolittle, Hilda. (1915) "Oread." *Some Imagist Poets*. Aldington, Richard; H.D.; Fletcher, John Gould; Flint, F.S.; Lawrence, D.H.; and Lowell, Amy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. p. 28. First published in *BLAST*. (20 June 1914). No. 1. She used the name "H.D. Imagiste."
2. Pound, Ezra. (March 1913, first paragraph). "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Available from: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/58900/a-few-donts-by-an-imagiste. [Accessed: April 18, 2019].
3. Aldington, Richard; H.D.; Fletcher, John Gould; Flint, F.S.; Lawrence, D.H.; and Lowell, Amy. (1915) *Some Imagist Poets*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. p. 28. First published in *BLAST*. (20 June 1914). No. 1.
4. Morris, Adalaide. (1990) "The Concept of Projection: H.D.'s Visionary Powers." In: *Signets: Reading H.D.* Ed. Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. Chapter 15, pp. 273-296. Also published in *Contemporary Literature.* Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter 1984), pp. 411-436.
5. Robinson, Janice S. (1982) *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, p. 61.
6. Holland, Norman N. (1969, p. 310) "Freud and H.D." *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* No. 50, pp. 309-315. Also cited in Peter Jones' anthology *Imagist Poetry*. London: Penguin. 1972, p. 37.
7. Ostriker, Alicia. (1986) *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America.* Boston: Beacon Press, p. 13.
8. Doolittle, Hilda. (written in 1919, published 2001) "Notes on Thought and Vision." San Francisco: City Lights.
9. Doolittle, Hilda. (written in 1919, published 2001) "Notes on Thought and Vision." San Francisco: City Lights.
10. Robinson, Janice S. (1982) *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, p. 231. Doolittle, Hilda. (written in 1919, published 2001) "Notes on Thought and Vision." San Francisco: City Lights, p. 4.
11. Buck, Claire. (1991) *Bisexuality and a Feminine Discourse*. London: St. Martin's Press, p. 131. An article with this title was first published in *M/F*, No. 8, 1983, pp. 52-65.
12. Gelpi, Albert. (1986) "Re-membering the Mother: A Reading of H.D.'s *Trilogy* , in *H.D.: Woman and Poet.* Ed. Michael King, Orono, Me.: National Poetry Foundation, p. 182.
13. Gelpi, Albert. (1986) "Re-membering the Mother: A Reading of H.D.'s *Trilogy* , in *H.D.: Woman and Poet.* Ed. Michael King, Orono, Me.: National Poetry Foundation, p. 20.
14. Doolittle, Hilda. (1998) *Trilogy: The Walls Do Not Fall; Tribute to the Angels; The Flowering of the Rod.* Introduction and Readers' Notes by Aliki Barnstone. The three books of the *Trilogy* were published from 1944 to 1946, pp. 82-83, Sections 19-20.
15. Doolittle, Hilda. (1998) *Trilogy: The Walls Do Not Fall; Tribute to the Angels; The Flowering of the Rod.* Introduction and Readers' Notes by Aliki Barnstone. The three books of the *Trilogy* were published from 1944 to 1946, p. 101.

16. Wordsworth, William. (1802; 2014, p. 78) *Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems*. In: *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. By Nicholas Halmi. N.Y.: Norton Critical Edition. Pp. 75-96.
17. Wordsworth, William. (1849 first published; 2014) *The Prelude*. In: *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, Ed. Nicholas Halmi, N.Y.: Norton Critical Edition, Book 11, ll. 258-279, p. 353.
18. Wordsworth, William. (1849 first published; 2014) *The Prelude*. In: *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, Ed. Nicholas Halmi, N.Y.: Norton Critical Edition, Book I, ll. 375-421.
19. Wordsworth, William. (1849 first published; 2014) *The Prelude*. In: *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, Ed. Nicholas Halmi, N.Y.: Norton Critical Edition, Book 1, ll. 271-273.
20. Levertov, Denise. (1964) "Leaving Forever." *O Taste and See*. N.Y.: New Directions, p. 24.
21. Levertov, Denise. (1996) *Sands of the Well*. N.Y.: New Directions, p. 14.
22. Levertov, Denise. (1973) *The Poet in the World*. N.Y.: New Directions, p. 98.