
H.D. in Egypt: the Politics of Vision and Mythopoeia

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Abstract

This paper examines the ideological implications of the mythopoeic epiphany that H.D. depicts in "Hesperia", an unpublished short story written after her trip to Egypt in 1923. In this semi-autobiographical piece of fiction, H.D. follows the meanderings of her fictional double's mind as she travels up the Nile. An American expatriate in Europe, like H.D., Margaret Atwood had high hopes for her Egyptian tour, borne by years of reading about ancient Egypt. A dormant visionary, she is however stifled by her parochial traveling companions, a spiritually disappointing encounter with a man and the unexpected sluggishness of the mighty river. She is all but ready to cut the trip short when the boat finally gets to Assuan and she is awestruck by the apparition of Elephantium island in the moonlight. Her epiphany opens up a spiritual passage and she crosses over from sight to vision, realizing that Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony and Cleopatra set foot on that same island. The beauty of the place and its mythopoeic presence lead her to reconsider her whole day. "In that light, [...] she recalled the jumbled bazaars, [...] the poppy-red embroidered marriage-garments, the piled-up wares. Then, they had meant vulgar display ; they fell into shape, took individual form now ; cornelian combs and ear-drops, seemed authentically to matter." Is H.D.'s character's gaze colonial? Her travel through space takes her also through time. In doing so, does she lose sight of the reality of the people and place around her or does she connect more fully with them?

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