

NARTHEX
AND OTHER STORIES

H.D.



WITH AN AFTERWORD BY MICHAEL BOUGHN

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NARTHEX

γάρθηξ: wand carried by initiates ... original plant-stalk by means
of which Prometheus brought fire from heaven.

1

AEONS BRUSHED THROUGH her and made a sort of buzzing ... which is ridiculous. She looked up into parallelogram and straight geometric static upright parallels upholding myriad geometric caryatids; the straight parallels of ceilings, roofs above ceilings, mapped out with T-square, with ruler for king and doge and emperor. Saint Mark's Square stretched side-wise, parallel to Saint Mark's Square stretched side-wise and Saint Mark's Square at her back was perpendicular to Saint Mark's Square at her left, to Saint Mark's Square at her right. Before her, set just there as if carefully placed by some careful child, was Saint Mark's. Saint Mark's, now she faced the thing, was a heap of child blocks and child stone-blocks and child box of building-blocks on obvious child stone arches. Set on top of Saint Mark's was an assortment of odd things pulled off the Christmas tree, oddments discarded as not neat enough, not shiny enough for "next year." Domes, half balls, Christmas-tree balls depleted of bright Christmas-tree gold and half Christmas-tree balls were set carefully so as not to show where and how some careless child had cracked them. Along the front of the preposterous edifice were cones, also tarnished, of prickly undefined ornaments, undefined, not fitting in with the

neatness and the artifice that had invented just that box of building blocks with all its elaboration on the set convention. “Saint Mark’s Cathedral is a sort of Christmas-tree sort of church, built up to be set under the tree, a sort of ten-cent store sort of cathedral” was the formula for Gareth.

Saint Mark’s was that and wasn’t that. The formula must do for Gareth. Gareth for some unprecedented reason had taken a dislike to Venice. Well, not quite unprecedented – Raymonde had said she would meet Gareth in Venice (and Daniel) in order to go on ... Athens half-formulated, to take a boat ... spring cruise, summer cruise, it was all unformulated. Saying “yes, I’ll meet you in Venice” had meant just no thing, just how nice to have an excuse to leave one’s work and tiny pied-a-terre at d’y Vaud and the rather sterile Alpine winter behind one and the still more sterile memory of last London summer, for ... Italy. Mind blurred with thinking, too much work, things half-finished and only just begun, Raymonde had said “Gareth I’ll come with you.” She hadn’t taken into account that X thing, that just wasn’t but so theoretically might have been, Daniel. The X thing wasn’t Daniel. It was Venice.

“Saint Mark’s Cathedral is a sort of Christmas-tree sort of church” ... Raymonde went on mechanically putting the thing into mechanical destructive thought, into mechanical destructive language so that Gareth, sitting stiff and upright in the little tin chair of Florian’s, should get no remotest inkling of what the thing meant (in all its connotations) now, to Raymonde. “Saint Mark’s Square *is* Saint Mark’s Square, the thing *is* Saint Mark’s Square” was safe anyhow and it was rather surprising to see it here, after years, after wars; the same pigeons, rather plumper, the same people, rather funnier; the same come and go and the same three orchestras playing against each other in the separate niches behind

the separate groups of carefully arranged chairs (Florian's carefully differentiated from Aurora and Aurora from whatever the one across the way was) and little tables. All careful and secure as if there had never been wars and revolutions and people coming and going and ships sinking under pillars of sea-salt, swirling, child toys, lead weight, sunk into indefinite leviathan sea water. "There's nothing different about Saint Mark's except the tiny slab" (she had discovered it) "slightly to the right of the middle door-way as you face it" (Raymonde doled out information) "marking the Austrian bomb that didn't go off. Hundreds of bombs dropped mostly in the canals and never killed a pigeon" (common-place now though when that quattro-cento waiter said it, it had sounded quaint; words spoken out of some eighteenth century comedy – these jumbled æons – the right words, maybe it was the stylistic way he had of speaking, *bel paese? caffè nero?* whatever he said became set, stylized with his pointed face, bad teeth and cameo-yellow eye-lids) "odd there being so many pigeons" – she must go on talking, with Saint Mark's Square to right, to left, hedging them in safe, holding them in safe; you may walk here, there, said the Venetian, here, there yet no further; geometric, Parthenon-like design, sparcity, purity, tempted yet restrained one. I hold you in, make confines for the spirit, then spill (wine out of formal goblets) my master-colour for you. This, in all strict consciousness, was pure Greek formula ... then why should Garry plague them with her "Athens"?

Gareth wanted them to take the boat to Athens. Daniel was making thought-curves and spirals in the air. If one could see the thoughts of Daniel they would be gold, rare gold like marks on lilies ... white garden lily, *that* in all consciousness, was notably Athenian but "Athens" as Garry named it became stark, hieratic like some stark unripe pale-greenish lily set against church pews.

Athens wasn't that but Gareth, but Venice was making Athens seem that. Athens as Raymonde visualized it (if Gareth would leave her alone to visualize it simply, not drag her away to go there) was pollen-gold; for all its Parthenon arrangement it smelt of tumbled gardens, not of artificially forced open wax virgin-lilies behind glass in winter garden-suburbs. Gareth would kill Athens for her. How could one leave this just-discovered garden, all this just-apprehended visual sensation, red lilies and small clusters of tiny snake-lilies growing a-symmetrical on tall stems and shades and shades un-named, undifferentiated? Garden reds had to be recalled, little old-fashioned bleeding-heart red, columbine red, things she had forgotten, to bring out, to differentiate red from red. Red brooded (rhododendron and carnation) hatched so to speak new combinations, incredible flamingo beauty. Static mosaic alike and fluid extravagance of drapery flung against polished agate, had reality, took on the oddest attribute; leave the thing at doge-red and be done with it. Cardinal-red, doge-red ... they had their parallels with lilies.

2

INTO THE AIR, climbing up into the air, Daniel's thoughts went in swallow-spirals ... which is ridiculous. Daniel could think T-square and length of parallel lines as well as she could, better than Gareth for all Garry's exquisite pedantry and letters after her ridiculous distinguished little name. Gareth sat ridiculous and exquisite, her small hands struggling with an unfamiliar burnt-brown dog biscuit of an Italian tea-cake, struggling to break it, putting all her intensity into just that thing like a child; as a child one

AFTERWORD: H.D.'S RECITALS

ALTHOUGH H.D. is recognised primarily for the invention of Imagism and her contributions to the creation of modernist poetries, her serious readers have also long known her as a writer of prose. Like her contemporaries, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, Mary Butts, and Djuna Barnes, H.D. saw herself as working to break with the traditional forms of realism in the name of artistic freedom, to reshape fiction toward some active recognition of the terms of life as *she* encountered them. She published four novels and several novellas and short stories during her life. Several more novels including the three post-war novels she called her “Commedia” remained unpublished until recently because they were judged to be commercially unviable.

The stories in this volume were published during a period of intellectual ferment and introspection for H.D. “Narthex” came out in 1928, two years after her novel *Palimpsest*, written during the early years of her relationship with the film-maker, Kenneth McPherson. “Ear-ring” and “Pontikinisi (Mouse Island)” were published in 1932 and 1936, during the years of her analyses with Mary Chadwick, Hans Sachs, and Sigmund Freud. In the same period she published a number of other prose works including

The Usual Star, Nights, Mira-Mare and Kora and Ka, and *The Hedgehog*, a children's story written for her daughter. In her early 40s, she was revisiting and rethinking the events of the first half of her life, especially the three visionary experiences that occurred on her first trip to Greece¹, as well as the unfolding configurations of significant relations that followed on those extraordinary events.

H.D.'s prose has a very specific feel to it. It can be almost claustrophobic at times, especially during this period of her writing, locked into a mode that rarely concerns itself with descriptions of either a natural or social world. Like Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* and Gertrude Stein in *Three Lives*, H.D. was concerned to recreate an experience of mind at work in language. Like Woolf and Stein she approached mind in language through a kind of static dynamic (or dynamic stasis) and in forms of repetition which reinforce that, which is to say, nothing much seems to happen, though it happens with a great deal of energy. There is the unwinding sense of a slowly transforming sentence toward a revelation of deeper meaning, but little in the way of, say, "character development," a key element in the traditional realist novel. In so far as there are events, they are mental. But whereas both Woolf and Stein (and Joyce and Faulkner) located in their writing a social world not unfamiliar to the novel as literary form (even as they transform their vision of it), H.D. never quite did. With Woolf, you get glimpses of an English world full of the faded grandeur of disappearing Empire. With Stein you get glimpses of a young American black girl's physical and social location at the turn of the century. But rarely did H.D. give you even that much, partly because to do so would have been to enter the world of the novel.

The novel (and the short story as an offshoot of that) as a form is tied historically to a mode of perception or understanding that

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itself reflects a mode of being contracted or restricted within the thought of a singular material world. It has been a laboratory for theorizing the Lockean individual and its relation to Comptean “society” within the parameters of a world of matter in motion. Much of the 19th Century was spent grieving that as a terrific loss while revelling in the new forms of self, space, and time brought into play by it. By the 20th Century, the grief gave way to an exploration of the new freedom and an explosion of new forms. But Joyce, Stein, Woolf, and Faulkner, for all their radical deformations, never step out of that cosmology. In some ways, those writers’ freedom with conventions signalled the end of (the authority of) those conventions, their imminent transformation into something completely different. In other ways, though, it endorsed the limits of those forms. *The Waves*, *Ulysses*, *Three Lives*, and *The Sound and the Fury* all push the idea of individuality into contortions of linguistic enactments of mind, but they never abandon the cosmology in which that individual is crucial to its order and the limit of its knowledge. Different senses of psychology, one of the central “human sciences” that theorizes the dynamics of the individual self, dominate the various attempts to present that self in language. And psyche’s defining twin, its perpetual dancing partner, is always something called “society,” which is understood as an existential limit determined by the various tyrannizing opinions and hierarchies of relation that make up a world of individuals.

H.D., even in her most “realist” prose, was never concerned to represent that dimension of experience. Instead she came back to certain events, certain moments, a certain array of selves that she circled around, or in on, as if with each pass she got closer to something that they embodied. These are not “social” lives, “social” selves, or “social” situations. These are powers, active images

of nodes of meaning, unfolding constituents of a cosmos full of meaning, and the writing is a way of returning them to their original meaning where that “origin” is always here. In some sense, the writing takes place outside time, or rather, in terms of H.D.’s own experience, introduces the Image to time, while simultaneously introducing time to the Image. Moving away from the limiting identification of herself as “Imagiste,”² an identification that led to a measure of recognition but quickly became confining, she used prose to loosen the stasis of Image while maintaining the hierophantic intensity of Image to move the sense of time out of some relentless historical progression. This was the extent of her move “away” from Imagism. In the intensifications that arose out of this new arrangement, the world was (re)constituted as textual deferral in the continual reading and rereading of the events and persons that defined the parameters of her life. Events, in other words, were seen as a text with an esoteric, inner meaning that was accessible through exegesis. But reading was inextricably tied up with writing, and so the repeated recitations yearn after a closer and closer relation to the image extension of the moment – exegesis as a return to meaning.

She must say something. The only thing that vied, in clarity, with debit and credit, and the idea of numbers ruled on paper, was a flight of silver, that was yet a violin that, with all its exaggerated and emotionally timed rise and fall, swept over their heads, out to the bluer aether. With it, as she watched it, were those sharply defined impressions of columns, cut against blue, against violet, against deep violet, against purple, as the sun sank beyond Lycabettos. Lycabettos rose like a ship about to set sail, Hymettus rested like a ship in harbour. Only the Acropolis remained static,

COLOPHON

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