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## H.D.'S DATING OF ASPHODEL: A REASSESSMENT

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Robert Spoo

Most scholars give 1921-1922 as the date of composition for H.D.'s autobiographical novel *Asphodel*—and with good reason, for H.D. herself pencilled that date on the only typescript that has survived, one of the treasures of the H.D. “shelf” which Norman Holmes Pearson established at Yale University for the safekeeping of her manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> While H.D.'s notation on the typescript must be considered authoritative testimony, certain ambiguities surrounding the composition of *Asphodel* nevertheless exist and should be examined carefully. My work with *Asphodel* and related documents in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library has led me to believe that the novel may have been significantly revised or perhaps even rewritten around 1926-1927.<sup>2</sup> The changes H.D. experienced in her life and work between 1921 and 1927 were profound, and if *Asphodel*, or the version we have of it, can be linked to a later date than the one currently assigned, a whole new set of interpretive strategies might be required to understand the novel. I offer this reassessment as an hypothesis only, one intended to supplement but not to supplant the consensus, in the hope of generating further discussion about the composition of H.D.'s works.<sup>3</sup>

The first ambiguity concerns H.D.'s own dating of *Asphodel*, for what she actually wrote on the cardboard sheet that covers the typescript was not “1921-1922,” as is generally supposed, but rather “1921-1922?”<sup>4</sup> That unobtrusive question mark, while it by no means rules out the commonly cited date, suggests that H.D. felt some uncertainty about the notation. We do not know when she made the jotting on the covering sheet, but it was most likely in the 1940s or perhaps the 1950s, the period in which, at the urging of Pearson, she reviewed much of her earlier writing and attempted to date and comment on it. In the upper right-hand corner of the covering sheet, the date “(1942?)” is shakily written in what may be H.D.'s hand and then sharply struck out. This may have been a later attempt to date the covering sheet and its jottings, or it may indicate the date of this particular typing of *Asphodel* (or some other date connected with the puzzling history of this work). Whatever the meaning of the two sets of dates, it is worth bearing in mind that a degree of undecidability exists at the very source of our considerations.

The covering sheet bears other interesting data as well; the full set of pencilled jottings, apart from the "(1942?)," reads: "Early Edition of MADRIGAL - Fields of Asphodel[.] London 1921-1922? DESTROY[.]" Just above "DESTROY," H.D. has scrawled in red pencil or crayon, "Duplicate." (The *Asphodel* typescript is a carbon copy; no ribbon copy has come to light.) Much of this information coincides with H.D.'s remarks about *Madrigal* in "H.D. by Delia Alton [Notes on Recent Writing]," for in the entry for December 12, 1949, she wrote: "*Madrigal*: this story of War I was roughed out, summer 1939, in Switzerland. . . . I had been writing or trying to write this story, since 1921. I wrote in various styles, simply or elaborately, stream-of-consciousness or straight narrative. I re-wrote this story under various titles, in London and in Switzerland. But after I had corrected and typed out *Madrigal*, last winter, I was able conscientiously to destroy the earlier versions" (HDDA 180). The correspondences between the *Asphodel* covering sheet and the 1949 entry would seem to clinch the matter: *Asphodel*, an "early edition" of the World War I story, was written in or around 1921, then completely recast in 1939 and 1948 as *Madrigal* (later published as *Bid Me To Live: A Madrigal*), after which H.D. consigned the early version to the flames (though one copy that she had marked for destruction survived, by inadvertence or clandestine preservation).<sup>5</sup> One small problem remains: the 1949 entry alludes to *various* versions of the "War I" story and does not explicitly name *Asphodel* as the 1921 version, nor did H.D. refer to it by that name when she returned to the subject of "the Madrigal cycle" in her late memoirs, "Compassionate Friendship" (1955) and "Thorn Thicket" (1960).<sup>6</sup>

At this point we might hope for some enlightenment from "Autobiographical Notes" which was assembled around the same time as "H.D. by Delia Alton," but the entry for 1921 is also tantalizingly vague:

We wrote at St. James Court, unpublished novel, *Paint it To-Day*. At Riant Chateau, we wrote two or three story-sequences, as for the war-experience in London and Cornwall; these, we later, destroyed. This 'novel' was continued through the years; in 1939, it was assembled. But it was not till before Christmas, 1948, Hotel de la Paix, Lausanne, that the MSS [*sic*] was re-read (it had been in Kenwin, during the war years). Two thirds of the MSS was destroyed, but a new end was assembled and the whole, re-typed and now called MADRIGAL.<sup>7</sup>

Again, *Asphodel* is not mentioned by name, and the World War I "novel" is

described as existing at this point in the form of "two or three story-sequences." This does not sound like the *Asphodel* we know, with its two carefully balanced parts depicting pre-war and wartime experiences, but it does seem consistent with some material H.D. described to John Cournos in a letter written from Riant Chateau on September 15, 1922: "I have written two long short stories, a little in the manner (I am told) of the late Henry James. . . . Then I have another 'impressionistic' bit, not a story, not long enough for a novel. But the three would make a moderately solid prose work: 1. Floriel. 2. Behind me a Sword. 3. Beryl."<sup>8</sup> These stories may have had some connection with *Asphodel*—especially as "Beryl" is the Bryher figure in that novel<sup>9</sup>—but, once again, a clear link between the version of *Asphodel* we know and the period 1921-1922 eludes us.<sup>10</sup>

"Autobiographical Notes" does indeed mention *Asphodel* by name, but not until the entry for 1926, which concludes laconically: "Unpublished writing; *Her* and *Asphodel*." This entry certainly does not prove that *Asphodel* was written in 1926—any more than it proves that *Her* was composed in that year, though other evidence strongly suggests that H.D. drafted the latter work in 1926-1927<sup>11</sup>—but it does intriguingly place *Asphodel* alongside *Her* in a period four to five years after its putative composition date. A letter from H.D. to Pearson of October 14, 1959, is more explicit, however: "I dug out two rather long MSS, *Her* & *Asphodel*. . . . These were written in London, 1926-1927."<sup>12</sup> It seems, then, that we have two sets of dates for the composition of *Asphodel*, 1921-1922 and 1926-1927, both authorized by H.D. and both appearing in what should be reliable documents: the covering sheet for the novel itself and a letter to H.D.'s trusted friend and literary confidant/agent. I think that both sets of dates can be accounted for as part of the history of *Asphodel*, but before I attempt to do this I would like to suggest some special reasons for taking the 1926-1927 date seriously.

Certain continuities between *Her* and *Asphodel* are readily apparent to anyone who has read the two works. The central concern of both novels is the development of Hermione Gart (the H.D. figure); both contain the characters George Lowndes (Ezra Pound) and Fayne and Clara Rabb (Frances Gregg and her mother); in both, Hermione's father and mother are Carl and Eugenia Gart; and so on. *Her* telescopes several years of H.D.'s life in Philadelphia (roughly 1906 to 1910 or 1911) into a symbolic nine-month period. *Asphodel* picks up the story with her departure for Europe with Frances Gregg and Frances's mother in the summer of 1911 and concludes with the birth of H.D.'s daughter in 1919 and the establishment of a *ménage* with Bryher and the child. The compression in *Her* of the Philadelphia years into a resonant nine months is balanced by Part I of *Asphodel*, which covers roughly the same number of months in 1911-1912 (though in this

case without such extreme telescoping). Foregrounding events in H.D.'s life from 1915 to 1919, Part II of *Asphodel* covers about the same number of actual years as does the whole of *Her*, and it might be argued that the narrative effect, though punctuated by recognizable events of the War and post-War period, is not unlike the seamless weaving of disparate moments in *Her*.

H.D. herself described *Asphodel* as "a continuation of *HER*" in a 1949 letter to Bryher,<sup>13</sup> and it is probably no coincidence that in her correspondence with Bryher<sup>14</sup> and in her other explicit references to the pair of novels (the letter to Pearson and the entry to "Autobiographical Notes," quoted above) she gave their order as "*Her* and *Asphodel*," as if quietly acknowledging a distinct chronological sequence. Structurally, *Her* and *Asphodel* are both divided into "Part I" and "Part II," the break in each case signalling the transition from one romantic relationship or phase to another (from George Lowndes to Fayne Rabb in the first case, from Fayne to Jerrold Darrington and Beryl in the second). In addition, numerous distinctive words and phrases in *Her*—for example, "Hokusai . . . Fujiyama" (*HER* 126); "But you can't marry George Lowndes" (94); "Hibiscus kisses" (120, 121); "A voice far and far" (154); "things going on and on and on" (206); "you are a poem though your poem's naught" (212)—are repeated and creatively varied in *Asphodel*.

Other similarities between the two novels exist: in both, H.D. makes use of long, intricately rambling paragraphs and expressively congested passages of dialogue, though this fact will be apparent only to those who have seen both typescripts, as H.D.'s paragraphing in *Her* was profoundly altered by her own late revisions (possibly as late as the 1950s) and by the numerous silent changes introduced by New Directions in the published text (*HERmione* [1981]). The paper on which *Asphodel* is typed—an ordinary typing bond with no watermark—appears to be identical with some of the pages in what the Beinecke calls the "first typed draft" of *Her* (this typescript is a composite shuffling of at least two different typings). Also, certain peculiarities of spelling are shared by the two typescripts; for example, "Hermione" and "Lowndes" are frequently spelled "Hermoine" and "Lowdnes," and both texts occasionally alter Hermione's brother's name, Bertrand, to "Bertram." These idiosyncratic similarities by themselves cannot prove that *Her* and *Asphodel* were composed in the same period, and compositional arguments based on verbal echoes must always be heuristic rather than definitive. Yet these examples do reinforce the possibility that H.D. worked on the two novels at roughly the same time.<sup>15</sup>

I want to propose the theory that *Asphodel* was composed in two stages: an early version completed in 1921-1922, and a revision of this text that took place in or around

1926-1927, a revision apparently so extensive that H.D. could later say that *Asphodel* was "written" in this second period. This hypothesis accounts for the two conflicting dates H.D. offered for the composition of the novel, and it helps explain certain additional peculiarities in the *Asphodel* typescript. There are comparatively few authorial revisions in the text: Part I contains several corrections in H.D.'s pencil, while Part II contains none. But a closer examination of the typescript strongly suggests that there was a prior text, now lost, on the basis of which *Asphodel* as we know it was composed or revised. The *Asphodel* typescript reveals a number of clear instances of typist's eyeskip (though eyeskip by itself attests only to a text from which the extant version was typed, not necessarily to a *different* text); more significantly, it contains several inconsistencies in the naming of characters, unexplained variants which point to a version of the novel in which the corresponding characters had markedly different names. Some of these inconsistencies are relatively insignificant, affecting only minor characters (Captain Tim Kent/Captain Ned Trent; Miriam Drake/Marion Drake<sup>16</sup>); these may well have resulted from intratextual rather than intertextual inattention, and do not force us to posit a prior version of *Asphodel*.

At one point in the text, however, Mrs. Rabb, Fayne's mother, appears as "Mrs. Grier," with this name struck out and "Mrs. Rabb" written above it in H.D.'s hand.<sup>17</sup> At another point Fayne's husband refers to Fayne as "Mrs. Walton," though throughout the rest of the text his name is given as Maurice Morrison (the Louis Wilkinson figure).<sup>18</sup> Towards the end of the typescript, the name "Sydney" inexplicably appears in place of "Shirley," the name given to the Margaret Cravens figure; and on the next page, "Elia" mysteriously pops up where "George" (the name of the Ezra Pound figure) should have been typed.<sup>19</sup> The title "*Asphodel*" itself appears to be a revision of an earlier choice. The first page of the typescript bears the typed title "THIS SIDE OF THE GRAVE," with this struck out and "*Asphodel*" written above it in H.D.'s pencil. Both titles are adapted from Walter Savage Landor's imaginary conversation, "Aesop and Rhodope."

Although several explanations are possible for the revised title and the variant names of major characters, I believe these details offer us a privileged and fascinating glimpse of a lost early version of *Asphodel*. It is not unreasonable to suppose, moreover, that this early version was the "War I" story drafted in 1921-1922 (or a descendant of that original text), and that in 1926-1927, with *Her* under way or completed, H.D. decided to rework *Asphodel* in order to render it consistent with *Her*, to convert what was merely a chronological sequel into an aesthetically satisfying companion novel. This would have been typical of H.D.'s ongoing relationship to her prose fictions, her difficulty in severing

her ties to a work once it was drafted; *Her* itself underwent revisions in 1930 and again in 1949 or sometime thereafter.<sup>20</sup> H.D.'s notation of "1921-1922?" on the covering sheet of *Asphodel* may allude to the first complete incarnation of the "War I" novel—whether or not *Asphodel* as we know it is in fact that version—an event so important to her that she referred to it in her literary memoirs and elsewhere. To put it another way, H.D. may have intended the jotting as a kind of memorial to the inaugural avatar of the "War I" novel—an acknowledgment of the parent in the child, as it were—at the expense of obscuring the full history of the composition of *Asphodel* (hence perhaps the question mark after the date). In the same letter to Pearson in which H.D. said that *Her* and *Asphodel* were written in 1926-1927, she also remarked that *Madrigal* (*Bid Me To Live*) "Phoenix-ed out of *Asphodel* that was put far away & deliberately 'forgotten.'"<sup>21</sup> It is quite possible that our version of *Asphodel* likewise "Phoenix-ed" out of a prior text.

There are several advantages to this hypothesis. Susan Friedman has wisely urged us to take a flexible, synthetic view of the texts that make up the *Madrigal* cycle (*Paint It To-Day*, *Asphodel*, and *Madrigal*), to recognize that what H.D. tended to call "the novel" was actually a series of texts forming a creative trajectory that reached satisfactory completion, as far as she was concerned, in the 1939/1948 *Madrigal*.<sup>22</sup> Although several of the texts that made up this trajectory have been lost or destroyed, careful scrutiny of surviving materials and the traces of their compositional history may occasionally, as in the case of *Asphodel*, permit us to glimpse the ghostly lineaments of some of these vanished documents. Furthermore, it is customary now to regard *Asphodel* as an early draft or version of *Madrigal*, a critical approach that has proven especially productive in the work of Friedman.<sup>23</sup> But if H.D. did revise *Asphodel* with *Her* in mind, it is important that we also focus our attention on the formal relationship between those two texts, that we begin to look at them as a consciously crafted sequence with numerous verbal, metaphoric, thematic, and structural parallels and interconnections.

This alternative reading does not, it seems to me, conflict with the notion of *Asphodel* as an early version of *Madrigal*, for the two sets of dates for the composition of *Asphodel*—1921-1922 and 1926-1927—correspond to distinct and equally important dimensions of that complex and complexly achieved novel, the former set of dates signalling its role in the genesis of *Madrigal*, the latter set evoking its special relationship to *Her*. *Asphodel* is, in this regard, an aesthetic hybrid, a palimpsest in its very genetic constitution. Eventually, it will also be necessary to explore the connections between the *Her-Asphodel* sequence and Bryher's autobiographical series, *Development* (1920) and *Two Selves* (1923). The Bryher sequence may have influenced H.D.'s work on *Her* and *Asphodel*

in numerous ways, and it is probably no coincidence that *Asphodel* and *Two Selves* both end with the meeting of H.D. and Bryher and the resolution of the Bryher figure's suicidal obsession in the healthy ambience of a new friendship. When H.D. wrote Bryher in 1949 that *Asphodel* was "a continuation of HER," she may have been echoing Bryher's own explanatory note in *Two Selves*: "This is a continuation of 'Development' published some three years ago."<sup>24</sup> My reassessment of the dating of *Asphodel* will have served its purpose if it stimulates inquiry into new patterns in the lives and writings of H.D. and her friends and contemporaries.

#### NOTES

1. Occasionally the date 1920-1921 is assigned to *Asphodel*, but I can find no justification for this variant and am inclined to think that it originated in someone's miscopying the "1921-1922" jotting on the covering sheet of the typescript.
2. My edition of *Asphodel*, with a critical introduction and biographical notes, is forthcoming from Duke University Press.
3. My work on this topic has been helped enormously by conversations and correspondence with Susan Stanford Friedman, whose "H.D. Chronology: Composition and Publication of Volumes" appeared in *HDN* 1.1 (Spring 1987): 12-16, and in revised form in *Penelope's Web* 360-66. Friedman's "Chronology" is the primary resource for any work in this area. I would also like to thank Louis H. Silverstein for his thoughtful suggestions.
4. Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, 386 fn.5, does include the question mark in her quotation from *Asphodel's* covering sheet, though she omits it from other citations of the date.
5. Although H.D. urged the destruction of *Asphodel* several times, it is not clear that her commands were obeyed or that she herself ever made an all-out effort to dispose of all copies. As late as 1959, two years before her death, H.D. wrote Pearson in regard to *Her* and *Asphodel*, "If carbons ever turn up, please destroy them," indicating at the same time that "MSS." of these works were in her possession (unpublished letter, October 14, 1959, Beinecke Library). I believe that her instruction to "destroy" applied to extra carbons and obsolete versions.



6. For a discussion of "Thorn Thicket" and its relationship to the texts of "the Madrigal Cycle," see Friedman, *Penelope's Web* Ch. 3 ("Madrigals: Love, War, and the Return of the Repressed"), as well as the notes keyed to that chapter.
7. "Autobiographical Notes" (unpublished manuscript). The author would like to thank Perdita Schaffner and the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, for permission to quote from "Autobiographical Notes" and from other unpublished material in H.D.'s papers.
8. "Art and Ardor in World War One: Selected Letters from H.D. to John Cournos," ed. Donna Krolik Hollenberg, *The Iowa Review* 16.3 (Fall 1986): 150-51. Hollenberg suggests that H.D. may be referring to the three stories of *Palimpsest* (1926), but I think this is unlikely. Friedman, *Penelope's Web* 362, gives this story-sequence as a separate entry for 1922, distinct from *Asphodel*, in her chronology of H.D.'s writing. In a letter to Cournos of July 4, 1922, H.D. writes of being "neck deep in a novel—I mean a prose-poem the length of a novel" (quoted in Friedman, *Penelope's Web* 358). It is not clear whether this is related to the "long short stories" she mentioned in the letter to Cournos of September 15, 1922; Friedman, *Penelope's Web* 358, believes it refers to *Asphodel*.
9. Friedman, *Penelope's Web* 22, also suggests a connection between this sequence and *Asphodel*.
10. Other letters by H.D. from this period are equally unhelpful about *Asphodel*. Correspondence between H.D. and Marianne Moore from 1921 clearly relates to *Paint It To-Day*. On April 11, 1921, for example, H.D. wrote Moore about "a sort of prose-poem novel . . . a sort of criticism of the Anglo-American" (quoted by courtesy of Perdita Schaffner and the Rosenbach Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). The rest of this letter and subsequent ones make it clear that they are discussing *Paint It To-Day*. A letter from H.D. to Amy Lowell (at the Houghton Library, Harvard University), probably from March 1921, contains a similar description and is also clearly about *Paint It To-Day*.
11. See Friedman, *Penelope's Web* 102, for a discussion of what is known of the compositional history of *Her*. Though less ambiguous than *Asphodel's* covering sheet, the corresponding page of *Her* has its own puzzles. See *Penelope's Web* xvii for a photo-reproduction of the latter.
12. H.D. to Pearson, October 14, 1959, unpublished letter, Beinecke Library. Curiously, in a letter to Bryher written two days before this (October 12, 1959), H.D. refers to "'Her' (1926-1927) & 'Asphodel,'" a phrase that seems to reinforce the consensus on the dating of *Asphodel*. Yet the next day, October 13, H.D. wrote Bryher that "all energy goes into amazing time-sequence of 1926-1927." Here, both novels appear to be associated with the 1926-1927 date, as in the letter

to Pearson written the following day. (The two unpublished letters to Bryher are at the Beinecke Library.)

13. Unpublished letter to Bryher, written from Lausanne and dated April 18, 1949, Beinecke Library.

14. H.D.'s letters to Bryher of April 18, 1949; April 19, 1949; and October 12, 1959 all refer to "Her and *Asphodel*." The one exception is her letter of April 26, 1949, where the order is reversed.

15. One could conceivably enlarge the scope of this argument to include other texts by H.D. published (though not necessarily written) in and around 1926-1927. For example, the words "opposite" and "inopposite," together with their adverbial forms, occur in especially high incidence in *Her*, *Asphodel*, *Palimpsest* (1926), *Hedylus* (1928), and *Narthex* (1928). Both *Asphodel* and the dedicatory poem in *Palimpsest* associate stars, in particular "bright Aldeberan" (*sic*; P dedication page; cf. "Aldeberon" [*sic*] in *Asphodel*, II, 184), with the steadfastness of Bryher. In *Hippolytus Temporizes* (composed over a period of several years but published in 1927), Phaedra desires to "turn and turn and turn" a "little steel" in the heart of her aged lover Theseus, exactly the action Mary Dalton imagines performing on Walter Dowel in *Asphodel* (I, 82, 91). Again, it must be said that these examples are not conclusive, but they are suggestive, and many more could be brought forward.

16. *Asphodel*, II, 25 ff., 115 ff.

17. *Asphodel*, Part I, 22.

18. *Asphodel*, I, 147. Interestingly, there are two versions of this page in the typescript; both are carbons typed on the same paper and are nearly identical textually except that one page contains a sentence which the other omits. "Mrs. Walton" appears on both pages.

19. *Asphodel*, Part II, 163, 164. H.D.'s revising of names seems to have been in the direction of less historical recognizability and greater typicality and whimsicality: "Grier" became the grating "Rabb" (for Gregg); "Elia" became the conventional "George" (for Ezra); "Sydney" became the bland "Shirley." In the case of "Sydney," H.D. was probably remembering that Margaret Lanier Cravens (1881-1912) was related to the Southern poet Sidney Lanier, a fact H.D. mentioned in a letter to Bryher of October 15, 1948 (at the Beinecke). In this letter she misspells "Sidney" as "Sydney."

20. In a letter to Bryher of May 14, 1930, H.D. remarked that "I have pages of HER back and am working on that" (quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman, "Dating H.D.'s Writing," in *Signets: Reading H.D.*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990] 51 fn.3). In a letter to Bryher of April 18, 1949, H.D. indicated that she "will later, perhaps re-work some of HER" (Beinecke Library).
21. Unpublished letter to Norman Holmes Pearson, October 14, 1959, Beinecke Library. Another letter to him, dated September 14, 1959, states that a "rough sketch" of *Madrigal* "was really begun *in situ*, Cornwall, 1918." This further suggests that H.D.'s usual date for the inaugural version of *Madrigal*—1921—may have had more of a symbolic than a factual significance for her in her compositional retrospections.
22. See, for example, Friedman, *Penelope's Web* 141: "Each text flowed into the other, becoming what [H.D.] frequently called simply 'the novel.'"
23. See *Penelope's Web* Ch. 3, for a reading of the *Madrigal* texts in terms of the textual unconscious which they collectively form, an unconscious that is both concealed and revealed in successive rescriptions of the War I story.
24. Bryher, *Two Selves* (Paris: Contact Editions, 1923), note placed opposite the title page.

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