



The H.D. Book

Robert Duncan

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This magisterial work, long awaited and long the subject of passionate speculation, is an unprecedented exploration of modern poetry and poetics by one of America's most acclaimed and influential postwar poets. What began in 1959 as a simple homage to the modernist poet H.D. developed into an expansive and unique quest to arrive at a poetics that would fuel Duncan's great work in the 1970s. A meditation on both the roots of modernism and its manifestation in the work of H.D., Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Edith Sitwell, and many others, Duncan's wide-ranging book is especially notable for its illumination of the role women played in creation of literary modernism. Until now, *The H.D. Book* existed only in mostly out-of-print little magazines in which its chapters first appeared. Now, for the first time published in its entirety, as its author intended, this monumental work--at once an encyclopedia of modernism, a reinterpretation of its key players and texts, and a record of Duncan's quest toward a new poetics--is at last complete and available to a wide audience.

The H.D. Book Details

Date : Published 1984 by Frontier Press

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Author : Robert Duncan

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Genre : Poetry, Criticism, Literary Criticism, Writing, Essays, Nonfiction

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From Reader Review *The H.D. Book* for online ebook

Rodney says

I read this to treat my Duncan allergy. Like with most remedies, it brought some relief but not really a cure. I appreciate Duncan's championing of the suppressed and heterodox wherever they appear, in fairy tales or Madame Blavatsky (his discussion of her struck me as one of the book's highlights) or Freudian psychology or Modernist poets like H.D. who get airbrushed out of the pictures they complicate. He's insightful too about how repressed ideas tend to camouflage themselves in the child-like and silly, so that "not only the City of God, but also Alice's 'Wonderland'" carries along the Gnostic light from Alexandria to Albigensian troubadours to European folklores and Victorian children's lit in order to dodge the eye of imperial Christianity and its grandchild, accredited academia.

What bugs me about Duncan is his utter faith in open form, where "to follow the lead of the immediate particular"—any particular that happens to glitter for the poet—is assumed to lift the work "towards an open invention," until "what seemed incidental proves to be the key to the realization of a larger picture." I don't always trust that Duncan's incidentals, which he amasses with such supreme confidence they'll add up to something worth seeing, quite reveal the grand design he imagines for them. I guess for me the Duncan of *The H.D. Book* represents the limit case of open form, in its full sense of possibility and risk of failure. If there really is a Great Pattern that emerges only in the poet's weaving of it, then every squiggle serves the composition, any pebble belongs to an architecture, all threads are part of the rug. As a formal principle, this throws over the "dichtung=condensare" that slimmed Victorian verse down to its flapper dress, and while there's a lot to be gained in knocking over that orthodoxy, I kept wishing *The H.D. Book* would drop a little weight, be a little less in love with the adventure of its own meandering.

Ellen Roberts Young says

This is a wonderful, thick, dense book. It took me months to finish, but it was worth the trip. It was like a whole course in the work and era of H.D., Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Then in the final sections it becomes highly personal, Duncan working out from his own dreams and imagination.

Kelly Neal says

So far it is an amazing enthralling bit of poetics from Duncan. Took me forever to finish. But every page had something interesting.

Shelley says

Robert Duncan is an amazing writer and if he can write poetry as well as he can analyse it then he is quickly going to become one of my faves.

Megan says

Duncan gives a wild ride into the poetics of H.D. and her contemporaries; this is not your dull academic presentation but a personal quest by a great poetic mind.

Derek Fenner says

I'll never stop reading this book.

Jeff says

I first started collecting a bootleg copy of Robert Duncan's *The H.D. Book* in the mid-Eighties, reading in it here and there, until Steven Meyer, putting together his own (and whole) samizdat from the individual little magazine publications, in 1998 for a class he was teaching, let me have one, and so I read it entire then. The new University of California edition is published in the aftermath of a lawsuit to settle the Duncan estate; Robert Bertholf, who for many years guided the estate, relinquished editorial control of the text, and Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman, who had apparently been involved in an on-line pirate edition that began appearing in the early 2000s, based their text, not on Bertholf's work, but the on-line pirate. All I can add about these textual issues is that the editors' introduction hasn't exactly clarified the situation, but nonetheless they have made myriad little corrections to the bootleg in my possession, for instance: in the second chapter's reference to Antoinette Louise Krause and Robert Haas, this new trade edition removes reference to these figures in RD's scene -- in my bootleg, Duncan, probably fondly, refers to "Bobby Haas" as Kraus' "paramour." A silent correction removes both names from the text, considerably altering the tone. There are no footnotes here. (Nor are Krauss/Haas referred to in the Index -- I frequently find myself supplementing the UC Press indices.) It is not the scholarly edition Bertholf had planned. But it does give us a clean text, and in the uniform print, some patterns do begin to stand out. The first "Book" is poetics; the second "a Study" of H.D.'s poems. In Chapter 1 RD situates his own modernism in relation to what he takes to be the heart of the modernist project in poetry; Chapter 2 is a footnote to this argument. Chapter 3 reads, or redacts, in a sense, Apuleius' Psychic image as this moves through the Judeo-Greek poetic tradition. Chapter 4 takes up the dramatic claims of persons in H.D.'s *Palimpsest* (1926), the form of dramatic action in her own modernist take on the image, or figure of the person. Chapter 5 connects RD's parents' occult or heretical studies with Blavatsky, Crowley, Mead, Yeats and the Golden Dawn. Chapter 6 takes up the West African epic poem Gassire's Lute -- subsequently the subject of Nathaniel Mackey's excellent book on RD. That's Book One.

vi macdonald says

It's no secret that the ultimate thing that I am a big ol' sucker for is "books about books". This book is possibly one of the definitive entries into that subgenre, in which we find one of the 20th Century's most fascinating and wonderful poets devoting a sprawling and magnificent (and until quite recently, thought to be lost) book to another of 20th Century's most wonderful poets.

I don't know what else to say, really.

Duncan's great, H.D. is fucking marvellous: bring the two together and you've got literary nirvana.

Carrie says

Finally finished, was reading so slowly to delay the process but eventually it has to happen. Start over?

Derek Fenner says

Always consulting The H.D. Book for bibliomancy. Always more pages within these pages.

Scott says

I find HD a little too crafted, too pristine, too precious. I'm more for Marianne Moore myself! But Duncan uses HD as a point of departure to reflect upon high modernism altogether. He summons something seldom touched upon (although a Devin Johnston has written a book on the topic): Imagism's indebtedness to the spiritualism of the likes of Madame Blavatsky. His characterization of Ransom (as a minister's son from a small town) is a hoot also.
