

## Desire to Capture, Desire to Expose: The Scrapbook of H.D.

“...mad with a single desire: to impress time with all times, at all times, and then furtively in the night, like a thief of fire, archive at the speed of light the speed of light.”

-Jaques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

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December 17, 2014

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, trans. Pascale-Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 67.

Norbert Hanold, the archeologist protagonist of Wilhem Jensen's 1903 novel, *Gradiva*, becomes Freud's literary patient in his essay, *Delusion and Dream*. Freud writes, "Storytellers are valuable allies, and their testimony is to be rated high, for they usually know many things between heaven and earth that are not yet dreamt of in our philosophy. In psychological insights, indeed, they are far ahead of us ordinary people, because they draw from sources that have not yet been made accessible to science."<sup>2</sup> As one such hyper-perceptive storyteller, Jensen describes the fascination (at times an obsession, perhaps even a fetish) Hanold develops for a bas-relief of a young girl walking. He names the figure Gradiva, "the girl splendid in walking," after Mars Gradivus, the god of war.<sup>3</sup> After dreaming her into ancient Pompeii, he then chases her to the modern city where he meets a woman he identifies as his fantasy. Slowly, over the course of the novel, this woman, who he calls Gradiva but who the reader comes to learn is in fact named Zoë, cures him of his delusion, enabling him to recognize her not as the girl from the bas-relief, but as his childhood friend and neighbor.

Her words, of course fiction written by the author, are carefully chosen to reflect the ambiguity of the history between herself and Hanold. They allow both the reader and the protagonist to believe that the time dividing their past encounters encompasses millennia, not simply the intervening years that make childhood seem similarly distant. Freud wonders, "And when Gradiva asks the archaeologist whether it does not seem to him as if they had already shared their luncheon once, two thousand years ago, does not the incomprehensible question suddenly become meaningful if we substitute for the historical past the personal childhood, whose memories persist vividly for the girl, but

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<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Delusion and Dream" in *Delusion and Dream and Other Essays*, ed. Philip Rieff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

seem to have been forgotten by the young man? Does not the idea suddenly dawn upon us that the fantasies of the young man about his Gradiva may be an echo of these forgotten childhood memories?"<sup>4</sup> Jensen's character, treated by Zoë and eventually cured of his delusion, serves as Freud's clinical trial. *Gradiva* describes one man's search for the identity of a specific woman, a woman whose identity has its roots in his childhood, but who resurfaces in antiquity. The psychology underpinning Jensen's writing merges the two women in the present of the novel. Both Hanold and the reader endeavor to answer the twin questions: Who is Zoë? Who is Gradiva?

Like Jensen's book, the album of Hilda Doolittle, better known as H.D., the imagist poet who lived and wrote from 1886 to 1961 asks the question, "Who is she?" on nearly every page. Assembled sometime after 1914 over the course of many years, the scrapbook is part family history, part European grand tour and part Rauschenberg collage. Her scissors traced the outlines of many women, including herself (and a few men), at once affirming and dictating the roles they play in her life. Looking at the scrapbook unaided by historical and biographical information, it is nearly impossible to identify each figure and his or her relationship with the others in the album. First paging through the black spreads of the album in the Beinecke reading room, I tried to match faces, looking for repetition to determine the dominant individuals in the album, presumably the most important figures in its maker's life. This proved challenging. Sometimes, the same image appeared in two places. Sometimes, years divided one photographic event from another, making it difficult to ascertain resemblances with absolute certainty. Occasionally, I found a name scribbled in pencil onto the black page; but, without raking light, these notations were often almost impossible to read, apparent

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 51-52.

only once I viewed the book outside the reading room at one of the round tables behind the staircase. On this occasion, in the different lighting, I could make out the penciled lettering that noted works of art, names and places— Pediment, Brigit, John. The scans of the pages hide these details. They are almost like secret messages written to whoever physically turns the pages of the book.

In the introduction to H.D.'s posthumously published memoir, *The Gift*, Diana Collecott situates the three memoirs H.D. wrote during her lifetime in the context of their central male figures— her husband Richard Aldington, D.H. Lawrence, Sigmund Freud and Ezra Pound.<sup>5</sup> H.D.'s poetry, on the other hand, Collecott describes as “motivated by self-definition, by the need to clear a space for herself and for her relationships with women”.<sup>6</sup> The scrapbook operates in the same way. Though she dedicates one spread to images of Aldington and D.H. Lawrence and frequently includes Kenneth MacPherson, for the most part she fills the pages with her own image and the images of the women most important in her life. H.D. cuts out these individuals, placing them either into new backgrounds, inventing new memories and scenes around them, or leaving them contextless on the black pages of the album.

I dedicated a good deal of the time I spent with the scrapbook on identifying the individuals included and determining their relationships with the creator. The following paragraph briefly lists those who I was able to identify. The women include H.D. herself; Annie Winifred Ellerman, her lover and companion (known as Bryher); Brigit Patmore, H.D.'s friend and later her husband's mistress, and H.D.'s daughter Perdita. Kenneth MacPherson, dressed in drag on one occasion, makes numerous appearances, particularly

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<sup>5</sup> Diana Collecott, Introduction to *The Gift* (London: Virago, 1984), ix.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

in a series of photographs taken in the south of France that become one of the many recurring themes of the album. D.H. Lawrence, Aldington and possibly Norman Douglas were the only men I could identify. The album also contains a monkey, likely named Bill.<sup>7</sup>

Photography, and particularly cinema, were important to H.D., who in 1927 founded the magazine *Close Up* which covered international film.<sup>8</sup> A consequence of this interest, H.D. took many of the photographs in the album and frequently chooses to isolate them from their original context, placing them into a setting assembled from souvenir postcards. In this way, she brings the art of the photography closer to the language of a filmstrip. She employs this technique on one of the early pages of this scrapbook, a page that rhymes with the passage from Freud's essay that began this discussion (appendix A). The spread takes up the left-hand page of the scrapbook and features four images in succession. The leftmost and largest image is of a woman or a girl in bas-relief. Unlike the walking woman of Hanold's fascination, this woman seems to be dancing as she stands on tiptoe, arms placed in a graceful and intentional position, a sheer skirt billowing out around her athletic figure.

A string of three other images run across the page, flush with the bottom of the reproduction of the work of art, but only reaching as high as the dancer's knees. These three sepia toned frames feature three different shots of a toddler-aged Perdita, H.D.'s daughter. The nude body of the female child engaged in freeform play amidst the flowering bushes of a garden stands out in contrast to the highly stylized and formally

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<sup>7</sup> Curator of Poetry for the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke, Nancy Kuhl, generously guided me through the who's-who of the album. Most identifications of specific individuals referenced in this paper are known due to her research and analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Poetry Foundation, "H.D.," <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/h-d>, accessed Dec. 15.

positioned bas-relief. Perdita plays with a clay urn, but the viewer cannot know for certain if the urn is a classical artifact or a modern day garden ornament. Through the act of gluing, H.D. links the image of the child at play with the dancing woman of antiquity highlighting their linked identities. Time in this film strip flows in both directions— just as this woman lost to time was once a small child playing in the garden, Perdita will grow into a young woman who poses and fashions herself. A few pages later, in fact, we see her as an adolescent, holding a monkey perhaps at the Kenwin, the estate of Bryher and Kenneth MacPherson, in Switzerland. On a page near the end of the album featuring ten children with only “John” labeled, we may see unidentified pictures of Perdita’s children.

For H.D., classical tropes and her own life were as close as the images she cuts and pastes together on the pages of her album. H.D.’s 1927 prose poem *Her* takes its name from Hermione. In her 1985 essay, “Remembering Oneself” Diana Collecott writes, “Thus Hermione is both mother and daughter, a doubly female *persona*: her name recalls the silenced wife and banished mother of Perdita in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*; she is also, in Greek myth, the daughter of Helen of Troy. Hilda Doolittle named her own daughter Perdita and was herself daughter to Helen”.<sup>9</sup> Insofar as I was able to ascertain, the album does not contain any pictures of H.D.’s mother Helen, but the collapsing of identity between a classical figure such as Helen and a personal figure such as her mother does occur. Throughout the album, H.D. places herself into the roles of mother, muse and lover. Though we know that Bryher most likely took the nude photographs of H.D. posed in the grass and dancing in the water, there’s a joyfulness and tenderness to them that recalls the nude snapshots H.D. took of Perdita.

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<sup>9</sup> Collecott, “Remembering oneself: the reputation and later poetry of H.D.,” *Critical Quarterly*, 27 (Spring 1985), 13.

The blurring of lines between mother and daughter continue through the album, particularly surrounding the figure of Bryher. Eventually, Bryher and Macpherson will adopt Perdita who is then raised by both the couple and her birth mother. Though we see H.D.'s motherly gaze directed towards her toddler, the album also contains a glimpse at the more complicated relationship between Perdita and two mothers. Toward the middle of the album, there is a page composed with four images (appendix B). Above the small, sepia image of Bryher in the snow there are remnants of glue and the back of a photograph. Who occupied this place on the page— another Bryher? another Perdita? Or did H.D. attempt to insert herself here into this collaged family portrait, a gesture later erased either intentionally or unintentionally by weak glue and time.

The central image features Brhyer, slightly out of focus, her torso turned but her gaze direct. The image remains intact. A photograph from the same sitting, this time one that includes Brhyer's full torso and arm in greater focus, rests overlaid on the right of the larger close up. H.D.'s scissors have skimmed off the background on the left side of the image. Just like this, the page offers an interesting meditation on Bryher— older and younger, up close and distant, out of focus and crisp. Then, tucked in the right corner, H.D. has placed a tiny cut out of Perdita, ghostlike against a sepia background. Her gaze is lifted. Cute is the best word to describe the child, and she looks tenderly toward Bryher, her adopted mother. If H.D. took this photo initially, then Perdita intended this sweet gaze for her, her birth mother. But in cutting and pasting, H.D. transfers this gaze away from her as the mother and toward Bryher as the adopted mother. The doubling of Bryher perhaps speaks to her double role in H.D.'s life, but also alludes to the notion of two mothers to this little child, or the replacement of one mother with another.

Experiencing the album without the knowledge of the living relationships between the women depicted condenses the female figure, reinventing all the women as one woman at once determined, beautiful and mysterious. Through her poetry, H.D. sought to re-appropriate the classical female, writing of an angry Eurydice, a hated Helen and a transcendent Hermione. In *Her* she writes: "I know her. Her. I am Her. She is Her. Knowing her, I know Her... I am a sort of mother, a sort of sister to her."<sup>10</sup> The female figure throughout the scrapbook becomes this "her," whether H.D. is recording herself, her lover Bryher, her husband's mistress Brigit Patmore, Perdita as a child or Perdita as a teenager. The "her" is centered amidst classical ruins, and while it is worth noting that while labels and landmarks enable a viewer to fairly accurately place locate many of the sites in the album, the nudes of Bryher and H.D. defy such easy classifications. Collecott writes that H.D. and Bryher composed nude photographs of each other on the California coast during their visit to the United States in the fall of 1920.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that these photographs are the ones included in this album, juxtaposed so closely with ancient ruins. On this page, we are presented with three images as a serial (appendix C). The central one, columns connected by architraves amidst ruins on an unidentified coast. On the right, H.D. nude against a rocky shoreline. Where the left-hand image meets the central one, there's an incredible moment in which the shorelines align, asking us to read H.D.'s Isadora Duncan-like pose as a film sequence panning toward the ruins. But I know that that the glue lies, that the photographs were likely taken months, if not years apart.

Jensen's novel exposes the delusion underpinning this sort of fictive closeness between the ancient and the modern. In one of her conversations with Hanold, Zoë

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<sup>10</sup> Collecott, "Remembering oneself: the reputation and later poetry of H.D.," *Critical Quarterly*, 27 (Spring 1985), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Poetry Foundation, "H.D.," <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/h-d>, accessed Dec. 15.

attempts to cure him of his delusion by explaining how she could fall away from his conscience and then somehow reenter it. “To think that a person must first die to become alive; but for archeologists that is necessary, I suppose.”<sup>12</sup> Hanold has, in a sense, killed her by dreaming her out of his childhood and into ancient history, burying her beneath the ashes of Vesuvius. Here, we can begin to explore the link that binds together photography, death and antiquity. In the character of Hanold, we have a fascination with the life and form of a deceased girl.

Among the most interesting images are those in which H.D.’s collage technique places her not just alongside, but practically into an ancient work of art. On one page, she (or perhaps Bryher, the image is from the back, so it’s difficult to tell for certain) leans up against an outcropping of rocks set into what appears to be the capital of a column (appendix D). She becomes a part of the bas-relief, making herself a living Gradiva. The figure is sandwiched between the carvings and a label, likely cut from another portion of the postcard, that places the carving at Epidaurus (though I can’t make out all of the writing). By splitting the label from the postcard and including herself within it, she further emphasizes her assimilation into the artwork and into a representation of a no longer living past.

In Jacques Derrida’s *Athens, Still Remains*, he writes the touchstone phrase, “nous nous devons à la mort”— “we owe ourselves to death.”<sup>13</sup> We owe ourselves to death. What can this mean? That in the end, death receives all that there is of us. Or, because we die, because life is finite, we are granted self-hood. Regardless, for a modern viewer this album contains pictures of places built and populated by nameless dead accompanied by

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<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Delusion and Dream” 58.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 1.

portraits of individuals who, though closer to our time, have also passed. The album refuses to be read as a dichotomy between a vibrant modernity and a static antiquity. All those who populate its pages have died. These are the traces they leave. Can they show us what we owe to death?

In the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus, Orpheus journeys to the underworld to retrieve his bride. He is allowed to return with her to the world of the living on the condition that he leads the way without looking back. Of course, he looks back and she returns to death. Does Eurydice owe herself to death, or does Orpheus owe death Eurydice? H.D. writes in the voice of Eurydice, “so for your arrogance/ I am broken at last, / I who had lived unconscious,/ who was almost forgot.”<sup>14</sup> She does not resent death; she resents its disturbance. “[M]y hell is no worse than yours/ though you pass among the flowers and speak/ with the spirits above the earth.”<sup>15</sup> In his arrogance, Orpheus believed he could cancel a debt to death, but death collects on what death is owed. Like Orpheus retrieving Eurydice from the underworld, a photograph disturbs death in a similar way, bringing back the image of the deceased in a state incongruous with the present.

We look and we know, “that is a photograph;” nonetheless, photography preserves an image against the pull of death, and against the forgetting that accompanies it. The very medium of the album reminds us of this. Indeed, the most living thing in the album is a postcard from the Musée Océanographique de Monaco adorned with pressed seaweed. Here, earthy browns, reds and greens remain, unaltered by black and white or sepia film (appendix E). Fingers run over the surface of the card come into contact with the familiar pattern of veins and leaves. Pressed on the page, these specimens are dead,

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<sup>14</sup> H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), *Collected Poems 1912-1944*, (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1982), xx.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

but the page is their literal tomb. The whole plant remains on the page. They have given death potential for growth— what more can be owed to death?

Perhaps Eurydice, or rather H.D.'s Eurydice, can answer the question of what, precisely, is owed: "and my spirit with its loss/knows this;/ though small against the black,/ small against the formless rocks,/ hell must break before I am lost;."<sup>16</sup> Eurydice does not give her whole self to death. She loses something, that thing that makes her alive though she herself is not lost, she stubbornly retorts to Orpheus. It is Orpheus who has truly lost her to death. Orpheus, perhaps, owes death Eurydice, but Eurydice owes death only her loss, not her self. The image in H.D.'s poem of the small figure "against the black," "against the formless rocks" is reminiscent of her collaged images, but like Eurydice in this poem, the black does not consume her figures but preserves them. Orpheus's gaze sends her back to this blackness and H.D.'s scissors and glue suspend her cutouts in a similar state.

The capture of the camera, the looking of a camera and Orpheus instantaneous snapshot gaze share a similar vocabulary. Derrida writes: "Three deaths, three instances, three temporalities of death in the eyes of photography— or if you prefer, since photography makes appear in the light of the *phainesthai*, three "presences" of disappearance, three phenomena of the being that has 'disappeared' or is 'gone': the first *before* the shot, the second *since* the shot was taken, and the last later still, for another day, though it is imminent, *after* the appearance of the print."<sup>17</sup> In looking, Orpheus sends Eurydice back into the underworld. Her "presence" disappears. In H.D.'s poem, Eurydice names this "presence" her "loss." Derrida foregrounds the loss, while H.D.'s

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 27.

Eurydice instead emphasizes the spirit. But the photograph in its violence cannot capture the spirit, but only the loss. Let us delve deeper into our reading of this tripartite loss. The before: what could be lost before the shot is even taken? What is there to take? Perhaps the camera itself kills something. Spontaneity disappears, or time lost to a pose. The second, the since, is easier to parse— with the passing of time, the moment is gone, now only a phantom on film, and an undeveloped, half-existing one. The last presence, and the last death, the after presence is the most permanent. It is the look that sends Eurydice back to Hades, that preserves forever in time a state that was, but will remain forevermore as only a ghost, a spirit, a presence.

The gaze in H.D.'s album is almost omniscient, looking into the album and back at the viewer from a multitude of angles. Often, she is behind the camera. Clippings from newspapers and commercial postcards represent a public sphere, images from photographers unknown produced for the public sphere. Then, we have pictures taken of her— who is the author here? In one instance, we know it is Man Ray. In other places, we can assume it is Bryher. In a way, H.D.'s scissors act as a second exposure. Just as capturing an image points, says "look here," so too does the process of collage, which zooms and crops and orders. It guides the gaze through a series of images.

One of the most striking pages features four images of Brigit Patmore (Appendix F). Though it doesn't appear in the scan, the page carries a small note that reads "Brigit." The far left image, a studio shot left intact in its black frame and draped background, shows Brigit staring straight at the photographer/viewer. In the central two images, cut from whatever larger picture they initially were a part of, Patmore casts her eyes first down, then vaguely up and to the side. Finally, she once again meets the viewer's gaze in

one of the most intense moments of the entire album. Has H.D., who was once friends with Patmore, taken this photograph? Or are these someone else's snapshots? The care of the cut out does not bely any jealousy on the part of the album-maker, though we know that Patmore was engaged in an affair with H.D.'s husband either at the time that this page was crafted or at some point in the history of this album's making. It is a tender and beautiful depiction of the woman that shows her at once to be feminine, pensive and determined. Yet, there's something in this composition that speaks to H.D.'s verses on Helen— "All Greece reviles/ the wan face when she smiles,/ hating it deeper still/ when it grows wan and white,/ remembering past enchantments/ and past ills."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps there is a dark side to the gaze. In the traditional renderings of Helen, she is desirable and beloved, but H.D. peels back this superficial layer.

Derrida begins *Athens, Still Remains* with the "discovery" of the phrase, *nous nous devons à la mort*, and he winds his way back to it over the course of the book. "*Nous nous devons à la mort*, we owe ourselves to death, there is indeed a *nous*, the second one, who owes itself in this way, but we, in the first place, no, the first *we* who looks, observes, and photographs, the other, and who speaks here, is an innocent living being who forever knows nothing of death: in this *we* we are infinite— that is what I might have wanted to say to my friends. We are infinite, and so let's be infinite, eternally".<sup>19</sup> Let us read this passage against H.D.'s album. First, we can establish H.D. as the first *we*, the looker and observer and photographer. She lived, she did these things, she is no longer. The *we* "who speaks here," in this case, me sitting in the Beinecke reading room, opening the box from the archives, turning the pages of the album, I am

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<sup>18</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems 1912-1944*), 154.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 63.

the infinite we. But how can Derrida say to this second we, to me, to whoever next turns the pages of the album that “we are infinite?” Though we do not know death, we still owe ourselves to death. If anything, the album serves as a reminder of this fact. Against a backdrop of antiquity, of places built by hands with names lost to time, we see pictures of H.D. and those she loved aging in an erratic chronology. The photographer proceeds to the fate of the sculptor whose work she captures. And we, the viewer, also proceed to the fate of the photographer and to the fate of the sculptor. *We owe ourselves to death.*

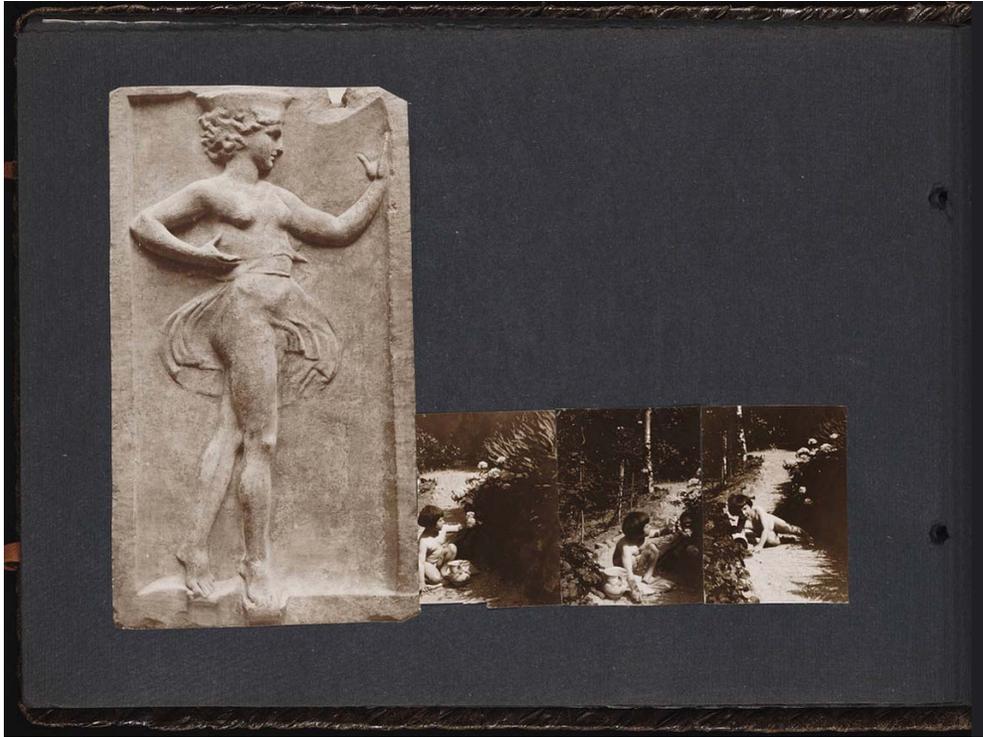
I like to imagine that H.D. worked on this scrapbook throughout her life, returning to it in her later years to consider one of the blank pages left where one does not expect and fill it with the images of past and present life alike. I wonder if she found this exercise sad, or if it she approached it with happy contemplation. I wonder if she shared her collages with her subjects. Derrida writes of Jean-François Bonhomme’s photographs of Athens: “This book thus bears the signature of someone keeping vigil and bearing more than one mourning...”<sup>20</sup> And the same could be said of H.D.’s scrapbook. She watches, she records, she analyzes, she understands. These actions are as much an intellectual exercise, taken up by her thoughts, as a physical one, executed with scissors and glue. She keeps vigil over the many spheres of her life, capturing the sadness, the abandonments and the shortcomings along with the moments of unadulterated joy. Though grounded in a temporal world surrounded by reminders of mortality, her scrapbook refuses to mourn what has passed and will come to pass.

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<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Athens, Still Remains*, 6.

**Appendices:**

**Appendix A:**



**Appendix B:**



Appendix C:



Appendix D:



**Appendix E:**



**Appendix F:**



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