

The Sword Went Out to Sea: (Synthesis of a Dream), by Delia Alton. By H. D. [Hilda Doolittle]. Edited by Cynthia Hogue and Julie Vandivere. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. lvi + 283 pp. \$55.00 cloth.
The Heart to Artemis: A Writer's Memoirs. By Bryher. [Winifred Ellerman]. 1962. Ashfield, Mass.: Paris Press, 2006. pp. xii + 374 pp. \$19.95 paper.

In the last two years H. D. and Bryher scholars—and indeed, a broad range of readers interested in understanding the complexity of the years between the two wars and during World War II in Europe—have been offered two revealing books either published for the first time or returned to publication after a long period of being unavailable. In the fall of 2007, University Press of Florida brought out the expertly edited manuscript of H. D.'s never-before-published autobiographical novel *The Sword Went Out to Sea: (Synthesis of a Dream), by Delia Alton*, a pseudonymous and partially fictive account of H. D.'s efforts to untangle the narrative threads of her life through the lens of the séances she engaged in during World War II, and the immediate aftermath. In 2006, Paris Press, which under the leadership of Jan Freeman is dedicated to “publishing neglected or

misrepresented work by ground-breaking women writers,” reissued Bryher’s *The Heart to Artemis*, a memoir by H. D.’s partner who herself helped to assure publication of important avant-garde literature between 1920 and 1950. Taken together, these two books offer a cornucopia of information about the cultural conditions from which modernist literature arose during those years.

Much more accessible is Bryher’s concise, plainly-written but polished memoir covering the years from her childhood until her escape from her home in Switzerland to H. D.’s Lowndes Square London flat in the opening days of World War II. This narrative is a splendid place to capture the facts, opportunities, and perils of “the space between,” but it is no place to find an autobiographical confession of personal relations. Assuming a detached narrative persona, Bryher chronicles the cultural events, not the adult personal relations, that made her who she became. Hence we find relatively little description of her feelings for H. D., Robert McAlmon, or Kenneth Macpherson (her partner and two husbands of convenience), but accounts like an illuminating description of interactions with the colonial Other shortly before the modernist period (Chapter 3) and a brilliant survey of “the bunch,” the carousing lost generation, from the reserved perspective of one who chose not to drink (Chapter 15). (In this *The Heart to Artemis* is virtually the antithesis to Robert McAlmon and Kay Boyle’s *Being Geniuses Together*, a back-stabbing, self-aggrandizing memoir that treats many of the same people during those years.) Literary scholars will relish in this chapter precise descriptions of cultural phenomena now seen as constitutive of modernism, and priceless vignettes of several of the period’s chief actors, such as the proprietors of Shakespeare & Company, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier (246-48) and the denizens of 27 rue de Fleurus, Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas (249-51). It may be, as Bryher writes, that “no memory can give us back the intensity of that first moment of the early twenties when the artist, it seemed, was more influential than the politician” (241), but her own memoirs come close.

The volume is particularly effective as it summons up the consequences of World War I and the sense of inevitable cataclysm that marked the years that led up to World War II. “[N]othing,” Bryher reminds, “was left to us of the codes to which our youth had been sacrificed” (242-43), and worse, by November, 1923, she could watch the fascist parades in Florence with Norman Douglas. He told her, she recalls, “*This is the beginning of the next war*” (269, emphasis in original). The book’s last chapters intersperse memories of people and events like Dorothy Richardson (279-85), psychoanalysis and Freud (287-88, 295-302), and the movie-making that went on around the journal *Close Up*, with evidence that documents the oppressiveness of decline into what Bryher recognized as the continuation of world war. Her memoir concludes with a mesmerizing narrative of what it was like to get oneself spirited out of Europe at the beginning of war.

H. D.’s novel is an example of the avant-garde writing whose contexts *The Heart To Artemis* provides. Accordingly, it is a far more difficult text to read. The narrative records an attempt to sort out the tangled narrative lines

of a life (from the late nineteenth century through World War II) and is as deliberately subjective in form as Bryher's is "objective." The first of its two books is a two-part, nine-chapter section called "Wintersleep" which focuses on the period of World War II, and the séances H. D. undertook then, both alone and as part of a group of spiritualists at Walton House under the leadership of Arthur Bhaduri (called Ben Manisi and Stanford House in the novel). These occult activities culminate in H. D. meeting and seeking to transmit messages from the spirit world inhabited by dead airmen to "Lord John Howell" (in life Air Chief Marshall Lord Hugh Dowding, the successful commander of the air force during the Battle of Britain). Despite the fact that Howell/Dowding was himself involved in spiritualist activities, he brusquely rejected H. D.'s attempt to be the medium for spiritual communications with him, and his letter of rejection "had or had not precipitated my illness," H. D. declares on the second page of her narrative (*Sword* 6). Begun shortly before H. D.'s emotional breakdown and hospitalization in a Küsnacht sanatorium in 1946 and completed in 1951, the year before she began *Helen in Egypt* (*Sword* xv), the novel integrates the experience with Dowding into H. D.'s repeated attempts to impose narrative form upon her fictionalized accounts of her tangled personal relations (as in, for example, *Bid Me to Live*, *HERMione*, and *Asphodel*). But whereas accounts like these offer female subjects torn between lesbian and heterosexual desire, *The Sword Went Out to Sea* shows the repeated and parallel efforts of the female subject to come to terms with desire for the phallic other, and for the understanding of a universal pattern of repetition that is a kind of destruction and reincarnation. "Each turn of the spiral brought me a new personification of the lost companion, the twin," the narrator writes (59).

The second book, a fourteen-chapter section entitled "Summerdream," reimagines (*redreams*) the patterns of desire and loss from Book One in terms of surrogate and often composite characters drawn from history and myth—Pheidias, Pericles, Julius Caesar, Iseult, Blanchefleur, to name a few. To the nineteenth- and twentieth-century settings of H. D.'s London, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Venice and Lugano are added historical Athens, Rome, Normandy, and Elizabethan London. The metamorphic narratives are at once palimpsest and spiral, a continuing iteration of inexplicit death and reincarnation through which (as T. S. Eliot in "Little Gidding" also put it) the meaning of past experience becomes clear. Parallels to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* are also clear, for *Sword* shows us an H. D. mesmerized by the patterns which could be identified in what she called the "fold in time" (91):

The spiritual map would contain various layers of experience, different lives, if you will or manifestations of the same life. But as I have said, it was accordion-pleated—it was pleated anyway, yet laid flat. (*Sword* 215)