

“Shock Knit Within Terror”: Living Through World War II · *Silvia Dobson*

EARLY IN 1934, I, a young poet recently emerged from suburban London into exotic Chelsea, read H.D.'s poems and fell in love. Was this a man or a woman, alive or dead, to be found in Xanadu, Atlantis, Paris, New York, Lesbos? Receiving my fervent letter of appreciation, H.D. replied, trying to bring me off Cloud Nine:

Come to tea. I live in Sloane Street, above Jaeger's. Use the side door, past the window full of corsets, belts, socks and stockings. I liked the Atlantis touch but this is a prosaic world.

That Easter H.D. took me to Venice. An enchanted friendship lasted until her death in 1961. This article is taken from a collection of over 220 letters. These and my notes are ready to go to some university or museum in exchange for an H.D. scholarship. I have made several copies of the typescript as I feel the material will be important to scholars, research students, and people who love H.D. The war letters, especially, show her spirit during those terrible raids. “Peril, strangely encountered” did mark us. We were granted “strength to endure.”

World War I had proved devastatingly pressured for H.D. Though “flamboyantly ambitious,” she faced desertion by the men she loved. Preparing in a cottage called PEACE “for the child that must be born,” she found release in a lasting relationship with Bryher.

Twenty years later, World War II threatened their security, yet both women and H.D.'s daughter, Perdita, chose to live in England, rather than remain in safe Switzerland or move to safer USA. War came prematurely, in the mid-thirties, to those of us who resisted Hitler's takeover of Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia. As early as 1934, H.D. warned me not to mention Bryher when in Germany. “She is on their blacklist.” In Vienna that year she told of swastikas on Professor Freud's doorstep. Later came other warnings, other revelations. On Oct. 28, 1938, after going

through the Anschluss, the Munich crisis, "Peace with Honour," that assured us neither peace nor honour, H.D. wrote:

I have felt very cut-off, but digging deep and reading politics. Now I feel, D.V.,¹ I have crossed the line, just suffered enough, as much as human can, for the world horror. . . . People just did not write after the first awfulness. . . . Br was deep in rescue work, stimulating but spiritually wearing. You know what I mean— You knew with the Spain lot.

On Sept. 9, after the outbreak of war, as Poland was being overrun, H.D. wrote me from Kenwin, Switzerland, Bryher and Kenneth Macpherson's home:

Thank you for your letter posted end-Aug. It arrived yesterday. We had no letters and yours was in the first post, since the excitement. Now we will feel better with papers and letters coming through, though all much delayed. Br rushed off on a consulate job at Zürich, but fortunately is back again for a week or so, till things get settled. . . . No cars can get off for some weeks. The official train leaves on Wed., 3rd class, and with 1000 or more applicants and only 600 places, so it is considered patriotic to stay for the moment and let the younger people, who have war-work ahead, get off.

On September 25th, 1939 she told me about the death of Bryher's mother, Lady Ellerman, and of Professor Freud. She added that Bryher was unable to get to England because of the French mobilization.

I think I will stay on till about end Oct., as now the Orient Express is running all right and one can get a place, provided one applies at least 3 weeks ahead. At first, there was great difficulty and I thought I would try to return with Bears.² But since Lady E. has passed on, I think Br. would better not feel we were A L L leaving at once. She herself, hopes to come along to London, about end Oct., too, and stay with me, as she will have to go over all the "personal effects" and I think it is going to be a great strain. . . . The shock of Lady E., and now Professor Freud has been a good deal for the combined

UNK,³ as you can imagine, though it is a merciful thing for both to have gone like that in the beginning without undue delay and apparently no suffering. We listen-in to various radios though it is all so terribly nerve-racking.

Above the letter-heading on these notes from Villa Kenwin, she always wrote Hilda Aldington - British Passport. On October 20, 1939 she told me:

You are the only one so far, who has said a good word for the black-out. I am quite home-sick for London but got a spot of flu, so stuck on here. Now I learn the air-service, Paris-London, is on again, so I may be able to simplify the trip with air. Hope to leave in 10 days! It's a long time since I went up, but it seems better than the peril of the deep, these dark days. Pray crab and Water-pot for me.⁴ . . . I will hope that Br follows in a few weeks, too. She has a lot to do with the Lady E business, and I don't want her to feel she has quite lost a crab-home. I have been vegetating and going into jitters of an extreme ps-a sort but the boil bursts and lets one free in the end, I hope. Not ordinary outer jittering but all the UNK phantasies. I feel you are more sane and plante là than most. . . . Everyone is all unstuck, but I do sincerely hope new things and happy new relationships may evolve out of the mess. I was glad you felt old Pup was o.k. I worried much about her.

My first letter from Lowndes Square came about November 17th.

I am here hale and hearty, moving about like a fire-fly. . . . I had a late visit from a most post-MARS ♂ air-warden who found a chink of light. However, it was not from my flat but from a scratched blue bulb in the hall, so after he had inspected here and congratulated me on my curtains, he had to ring again and apologize for having come at all—as he found the “culprit” in the hall. It was rather a shock as I was in dressing-gown having had a bath—but life is like that now. . . . Will write again when I am more myself, whatever that is. I crossed in a life belt—all rather horrible, and it will take me a long time to get over it. Mars in Scorp on the 12th, I think—anyhow that is what it felt like.

We turned our garden at Woodhall, Shipbourne, Kent over to produce during World War II and took eggs, flowers, fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, chickens, etc., up to London, thirty miles away, every week, visiting H.D. and Bryher at Lowndes Square whenever we could. She was able to come down for peace and quiet, until the Nazis overran Europe. Then, seventy miles from France where invasion was being prepared, we found ourselves in “bomb alley.” At Dunkirk-time, sound of gunfire continually reminded us we were in the path of any *blitzkrieg*. In spite of this, H.D., finding the long journey to Bryher’s safe refuge in Cornwall an ordeal, stayed at Woodhall for short periods. As always, moving from one place to another upset her.

Your letter to Br helps me very much, as I have been so worried—a real old-time neurosis—about getting off this year. . . . Also let me know what time you would be here at the flat and what train we would presumably take. We hear such terrible tales of travel and travellers but I imagine things will be better that week after the Bank Holiday. Yes, it would be good to have the local taxi meet us. I am trying to travel, very, very light but will need those extras, as usual, food etc, that make planning so difficult these days. . . . I am so happy once I do get away and have not been out of town, since with you last year—not even for a week-end; it’s a bad way to live as one gets so stuck mentally as well as physically. . . . Thank you for offering to help the poor old cat on the train in its basket.

A few days later, she writes:

Bryher is in the midst of hectic packing—she hopes to get off to Cornwall to-morrow evening, and I am trying to get a few boxes done up with hers, to post on ahead to you/Shipbourne. It will be some of my tins etc., along with masses of the wool that I never worked, so I am trying to get it to Ship., in the hope that I will be inspired to finish up one or two small rugs during my visit. Just stack the boxes somewhere out of the rain and I will collect them and sort out when, D.V., I get there. Do not be alarmed at possible size of boxes, as I have stacks of the wool and it takes up an enormous lot of room, as you know. . . . I am trying to make my bags light and will

not bring type-writer, I think — so if you would give me a hand with accessories, I should be most grateful. It is difficult to think of myself OUT of London — it is high time I left!

These extracts from two letters show signs of the intense strain Londoners suffered during those early war years when we went to bed each night wondering whether we would be alive to greet our friends “Good morning.” Many of these war letters express stress and anxiety:

. . . I was (I am) so cold — numb and can’t seem to manage pen or machine. . . . Are you doing any stars? It seemed so hopeless while the bombs were falling . . . but I dare say, one will get back the feel of it one day, again. . . . It WILL come right, but when? We must hope for better nights now that the Hunter’s Moon is finally past. . . . Such terrible face-aches, thought it was neuralgia or nerves from blitz.

By 1942 we coped more easily. H.D. wrote on a Saturday in spring:

Just a line to thank you for several back-bunches of flowers, and my share in the new lilacs that are so lovely in the front room. . . . Pup is well and now in 40 Markham Street with a friend, she sub-let her flat to a girl, who is on her own, and took over this small house, so as to have a stable-companion, Barbara, who is very clever and they both work hard at their several offices. It’s good that Pup could get this job early. . . . The news seems better, doesn’t it? Robert Herring is in one of the ministries now, so we see him quite often. His little Chelsea house was shaken up but they have made a sort of steel frame for it and he hopes to get back again, sometime. We met Compton Mackenzie who was dynamic and delightful; Norman Douglas is here now, too, but we only see him occasionally. Kenneth writes he is a “bus boy” which means he serves in a canteen for soldiers, collects and empties ash-trays, he also had fire-watching job with his big dog, Rex. I think he is home-sick for us all.

In 1943, four years after our war started, we began to grow weary of continual raids and battle news. H.D., writing in the spring, complained:

We plod along in the mud and mist, everyone just now is down with a sort of germ, flu, or grippe. We are none of us in a “dangerous state,” but spend all our time ringing up invalids. . . . I am much better, but do feel the dark and the mist. . . . We have been terribly upset to learn by way of New York that Sylvia Beach is in an internment camp in the south of France, I believe. We are getting in touch with Red Cross head-quarters here and sending what we can. It has dropped a black curtain over several other black curtains, but we must hope that she is safer there than at large in Paris in these evil days— she is with the Americans, all of them, I suppose, so everything that can be done, is being done. Anyhow, this wretched war M U S T be over before too long.

When we made final arrangements for a visit to Woodhall, she wrote: “I feel like Cinderella with the gold coach, after this long time here. Everyone is thrilled at the idea of my going off in a veg-car.” This, a Morris 8, with roof racks and back seats out, carried us and our garden produce up to customers in Chelsea, Knightsbridge, Kensington, and Mayfair. We made two runs a week. H.D. wrote:

I hope you will not be shocked by my number of bags, but I pack for summer and then it turns winter, and I have one case full of various supplies, cigarettes, matches, etc, etc, soap, etc. Travel is so difficult as one must take the kitchen stove along. However they are small bags, about 4, then gas-mask, machine. It will look a lot—but I imagine you will have room in your empty crates. . . . It is such a pull getting out. I don’t want to miss the benefit of the country.

What good fortune we acquired during World War II: an active life producing food—and flowers—on a besieged island gave extra strength to withstand depression. I did spend nights in London and experienced the horror of being every Nazi plane’s especial target. As many civilians were killed in World War II as fighting personnel. H.D. wrote in April 1944 about “the darks.” By that time, invading bombers came over on moonless nights to avoid the lethal gunfire of experienced fighter defenders.

It is a great comfort to know that I CAN come at any minute. We

hope—*D.V.*—that we may not have TOO bad a time this “darks.” The last time I came to you, I had the full woooof of it before coming and walked straight back into that barrage, so I may, this way, avoid at least one end of it.

Soon after D Day, our gas was rationed so drastically that we could no longer drive up to London. We had already reduced travel to one day a week. Greek friends working at the BBC told me of Civilian Relief Teams about to be mustered. I applied and was accepted for a Medical team, destined for Greece under the Save the Children Fund sponsorship. Perdita, at the same time, trained for service with the OSS, helped by Norman Pearson, even more so by her gift for languages. From Cornwall H.D. wrote:

. . . on the cusp of old Virgo again. How the time has gone, dear Silvia; this is just to wish you luck and happiness in your new work. I was so glad for your letter. We have been urged to stay on a few weeks longer—I don’t want to go back to London though I have had some “broody” (to use Mrs Ash’s⁵ word for the non-laying hens) moments. I JUST seem to begin now to forget all the past horrors. I worry about old Pup but she is with a good crowd and one can only hope and pray the ramps etc. will be burnt out now soon. I am so happy about France—I am standing on my head. The LIBERATION means so much to me and to Br—though to me especially, as it was to France I first went from USA before I saw England. Here, they are excited because it means victory and the war ending soon (*D.V.*) but to me it is something special and regenerating.

Also in that letter from Cornwall was a report of an excursion to St. Michael’s Mount, Penzance, arranged by Vita Sackville-West’s sister, Lady St. Leven.

I left for Greece in October. U-boats abounded, and we zigzagged down the Irish Sea and the Atlantic, a convoy of five troop ships, shepherded by destroyers laying depth charges. Passing through the Straits of Gibraltar at night was an eerie experience. For the first time I sensed North Africa. We sailed along close to those “liberated shores,” sensing we might have to swim if our ship was torpedoed. Reaching Alexandria safely, we found revolution and civil war had broken out in Greece after

the German defeat. So we proceeded to Cairo with about one thousand other Relief Workers, mostly women. Our train took six hours to make one hundred miles through Egypt. All this I told H.D. in letters. It was wonderful getting news from her.

O—I wonder if you have any SUN???? It is so wonderful hearing from Sy. Beach . . . SUCH a relief to know that she is there in Paris. . . . I am having a radio romp, making a collection of Beethoven—*you* are well-represented with violin number—and I got the sonata—Grieg down there, you remember. . . . It is cold and rains and Br is polishing tables in the other room. Br sent off paper, note-books etc. to this same address yesterday. Well, we do follow *all* your wanderings and will think of you especially over the holidays. . . . All “star-of-the-east” blessings.

On November 18, she wrote:

We have been sogged down with rain and muggy mist. This afternoon, we go to Richard III with Robert Herring—lunch at Coquille near the New Theatre but I am terrified of getting some dire poison—however, I will try to be gay and stick out the lunch. . . . Bear rang one day and I saw him about some of my old letters of the Professor’s. I am trying to get those notes done on Vienna and my work there. All very serious yet somehow rewarding work—yet I question—*WHO* will read this???? I suppose that is the way we always do write—unless we are ultra-best sellers. We saw Peer Gynt with Perdita; the last time I saw it was in Philadelphia when I was 18—quite a time ago—and now this brought all the best of the pre-pre-war spirit back—I think things *WILL* be better here with theatre, concerts, etc. Bear asked about you when I saw him about the letters. He looks the same—rather cross as he had had two teeth out—but kind and shaggy.

Her first letter in 1945, January 10, came after I had described a serious desert flood where villages were swept away. The Egyptian authorities forbade any of our medical teams to help with rescue work, though we had been trained to do so.

We were all weeping over you in the tent with the hurricane lamp, but think it is a great triumph that you have done all that writing. I do so look forward to seeing it—and think of the grand “blurb” someone can write up for you—or you can write up for yourself—and the date and the place-name, The Desert in Flood! We are cold enough but your letter makes me feel thankful for bath-tub, for slight purr of central heating, for the rug on the floor and the tea-cups on the table. Thank you so much. We are in a frightful toil and moil of the grumble, G R U M B L E—I think we are all just TIRED!

. . . The Bear is very happy as “Regent’s Park looks like a continental Christmas,” he informed me on the telephone last night. As his heating had entirely gone and the U in his district out of order and busses scarce because of slip-ice and a taxi, a sort of dream or vision . . . he must be keeping up his end.

The U stands for London’s Underground. Bunks were built on the lower levels (the Tube Line) and many Londoners evacuated themselves to sleep in the noisy stations every night, a safe haven—except on one occasion when people panicked on the stairways, piled in, and on, so thousands perished horribly.

As the Greek Civil War accelerated instead of ending, our team was switched to the Yugoslav Mission and shipped to Bari in south Italy. Rome had not yet been liberated, so we were at last in the war zone. Before we left Egypt I was able to take a YMCA three-day tour to Luxor and the Valley of the Kings. Exploring some of the tombs was exciting, but Tut’s tomb, carefully sand-bagged, with the paintings white-washed, reminded me of an air-raid shelter. I also told Cat we had learned to drive heavy trucks round the pyramids and were camped in barbed-wire compounds above the Dead City. Here are her reactions:

I am so happy to hear of Der-el-Bari; that was a high-water mark in my life—but you would have to imagine a huge garden-party atmosphere and all terribly gay—with Lord C. himself pottering around and Weigall and his party—whom I regret so much not to have met as told to be friends there. Also the palms etc., but I know it CAN all look very ordinary and post-card-ish. We had HOT SUN too,

and glorious moon-light, and there were NO cars at the time except the very-great of the Lord C. party—so everyone rode and went in sand-carts and the donkeys were so much a part of the picture.⁶ Here it is cold, cold, cold. I saw the Bear yesterday—he slipped on the ice and dislocated his shoulder—he makes a great fuss about it but I don't think it serious. He showed me his chief land-mark in the street—a house with a cataract down the wall—frozen water from a burst reservoir on the roof, I suppose. It has never been so cold. . . . We hear from Kenneth; Pop went over you know—and now K is screaming that he wants Br to recommend a good ps-a-ist over there. We have laughed and laughed—as Robert H. said, K had six years in which to straighten his UNK and no food or bomb worries—however that is how things happen. He has taken this great place—house and guest house and out-houses, a stream and THREE swimming pools; I thought they were just part of the stream but Br offers me a horrible picture by thinking them Hollywood swimming tank-baths—it would be too dreadful—however there is an avenue of pine-trees, and it is good to think that there is another home there for us—but Br says whatever happens, SHE is going on a TRIP to the east or near-east before settling anywhere. I think she will find Kenwin a white elephant now K has taken this USA place. However, we dream of getting on the loose again, sometime. . . . Good to dream of vast spaces now that we are so shut in.

After I described our move from the desert to Alexandria, driving our trucks, the quite-civilised crossing to Tarranto, then a hair-raising trip from toe to heel of Italy (I drove the huge Ford ambulance), H.D. answered:

Thank you for your good, exciting patchwork letter, on and off ship. I saw Yugo from the deck of a Hellenic Cruise boat—and visited Dubrovnick (spelling)—it was all very unspoiled and primitive. I will be so interested to hear more of your doings out there. I just wrote N, to say I had heard from you, and would hope to get to Woodhall later to see the crocuses—but just at the moment we are standing by as Pup is due to go “abroad”; her foreign boss has already

left, I believe, and she is to be in Paris to await the next move which is to be, D.V., to a HORRID PLACE of which she knows the language. I hope you like my discretion! However, from all we hear, Paris is most dire—extreme of fetid luxury growing like a marsh flower from misery and blackest market. Pup will have US on her collar which amuses us and her. She had made such nice contacts with her office staff. . . . We have had a few bumps and an alert last night—I expect they will try to dump everything on us before the final break-down. I saw Bear who is sad about Dresden, but seems to think it will all soon be over. He always wants news of you. . . . It has been cold but now such a wealth of thick crocuses in the parks. I was going over some old notes we did—on Astrology—all mixed up with Ps-a, 1934, and found some odd notes on the Venice trip, peppered with stars and dreams. What a muddle it all looks now—I think one only SEES one's ps-a years and years after. I finished some notes on the old Professor and L. and L. want to set some of it up in the mag. Also my next book of poems has been set up and I did a 3rd, as to finish "war" trilogy. I think I will spend the rest of my life—IF the Lord spares me—just tidy-ing up.

On March 28, 1945, she wrote:

Your letter makes me happy and frustrated at the same time. I have never been to Assisi, there is so much there I should like to have seen—but that holds true everywhere. I am in the throes of changing my glasses—that may account for the extra-mistakes. . . . I did not get to Woodhall as we were in the throes of getting Pup off. Now we hear from her boss who saw her in "western Europe" that she is happy and looks very well—but we have not heard yet from Pup; I expect with all the enormous push, they kept letters back—but he, her former boss, has a letter for us—not yet delivered. We have had some lovely days, and trips around the parks are really a revelation and when the sun comes out, one might be anywhere. However, that does not prevent us from grouching and feeling frustrated, now when the rain clamps down again. . . . Everything gets so crowded now over Easter, we are almost afraid to answer the telephone—all Bryher's mamma's people who make a duty call once a year—and

Bryher's old Madame Blancquaert who had a huge elephant tusk delivered a day or so ago—much to everyone's shock and surprise. It was part of her dead-husband's effects and Br had kept saying she would not like the risk of keeping it here etc., etc., but it did not work and Bryher's room now is half-tusk, half books and herself completely swamped or barricaded in. . . . Now all Easter blessings though no doubt late—and Birthday wishes very *early!* I think of the Bells in Venice; I got them into my *Tribute to the Angels*, poems which are due out in April. I will try to get a copy to you. They are *planetary* Angels and a planetary *Lady* to bring you joy and peace soon, we trust.

On May 18 came a letter, "A very happy peace to you":

What times—it is only now that I begin to realize it all. I think of that wonderful Holy Year we had in Venice. I have heard no Victory bells to equal those. I think it has something to do with the climate and atmosphere as the bell from Notre Dame in Paris and St. Peter's Rome comes over the radio with all the deep vibration . . . also bells here did not have a very happy war. However, it has been gay though damped down, in a way. Pup wrote that the RAF dropped flares over them, wonderful display—here we had nothing of the sort but they are daily bringing back prisoners and they fly very, very low—it is said so that the returned can have a look at London. I sat with the Bear in Regent's Park on V 3 or 4 day. It was very hot. We sat close to the edge of the river beyond the bridge and Bear took off his coat and we talked about ducks, small boys with boats that got swamped—the boats, the boys just-not-girls returning from the country in companies to school etc., etc. Also of our former crowd—including S.D. He was interested to hear of your work and sent the usual Bear-greetings. Robert H. had a wonderful display of flags, we had some inside the windows, a good idea; Gerald H. stuck them up for us. People are in and out but I am desperately trying to get to Stratford—we had the birthday there. It was wonderful. We all laid our posies on the stone in the church to the sound of Wedding March and peal of bells.

H.D. really found peace at the Swan's Nest Hotel, Stratford-on-Avon. In July she wrote:

It is *lovely* here and I have fallen in love with the young (and old) theatre crowd. There are 8 plays. I have seen all but one and I go to it, "Much Ado," tonight. I go to Chipping Camden on the edge of the Cotswolds on Wed., for a week; then back to Strat. to a room and breakfast place. I am considered very lucky to get in anywhere at all. . . . Bryher is in Cornwall. I think separation is good, in fact a necessity. I suppose we will arrive back in London, D.V., well before our Virgo birthdays. Leo is almost on us—my dear Leo + Venus, I think, makes me at home in this "House of Pleasure," theatre, joy and creative work!

Reaction came later. After Victory celebrations we British realised that we had won a war but lost the peace. Bread rationing, in the autumn of 1945, shattered us. The last time bread had been rationed was in 1670. Too severe a bloodletting, the immense friction of 'going it alone' for so long, left us weak, depleted, dazed, in grievous debt. H.D. along with the rest of us struck the right gestures, giving V signs, playing those thunderous Morse code chords of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Dash, dot,dot,dot . . . No wonder she suffered a serious breakdown early in 1946. By a miracle she recovered and gave us a wealth of fine work until her death. "Pause and give thanks that we rise again from death and live," she wrote in her third *Trilogy* poem, "The Flowering of the Rod."

NOTES

1. H.D.'s abbreviation for *Deo Volente* or God willing, used a great deal by everyone in England. I have retained H.D.'s spelling and punctuation, though obvious typographical errors have been corrected.
2. H.D. and Bryher gave the members of their extended circle of family and friends animal nicknames. The members of the menagerie mentioned here include the Bears, Walter and Melitta Schimideberg; Pup, H.D.'s daughter Perdita; Cat, H.D.
3. H.D. abbreviates much of her psychoanalytic vocabulary. For example, *UNK* or *uc-n* means unconscious and *ps-a*, psychoanalysis.

4. Yet another of H.D.'s vocabularies is astrological. Crab is Cancer; Water-pot, Aquarius; Fish, Pisces; Ram, Aries; Scorp, Scorpio. Virgo, the Virgin, was H.D.'s birth sign.

5. Mrs. Ash was the charwoman who worked for H.D. and Bryher throughout the war.

6. H.D. is recalling her own trip to Egypt in 1923. She, her mother, and Bryher arrived at Lord Carnarvon's opening of King Tutankhamen's tomb. Arthur Weigall is the author of *The Paganism in Our Christianity*, a book that argues that Christianity arose out of a convergence of mystery cults associated with Mithraism and the worship of Isis, and also of *Sappho of Lesbos*, another text H.D. consulted.