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# 1

## Autobiography and Ghost Story

Memory is not a constantly accessible copy of the different facts of our life,  
but an oblivion from which, at random moments, present resemblances  
enable us to resuscitate dead recollections.

—Proust, *La Prisonnière*

I don't think anyone should write their autobiography until after they're dead.

—Samuel Goldwyn

The first three chapters of this book look closely at how H.D. creates a new form of novel to represent the un-representable trauma of World War II and its aftershocks—the relentless bombings, the food and fuel rations, the concentration camps, the atomic bomb. The chief focus of these three chapters is the first novel she wrote after the war's end, *The Sword Went Out to Sea: (Synthesis of a Dream)* by Delia Alton (completed in 1947). In *Sword*, her method is to assemble a patchwork of genres or modes of writing that continually destabilize one another. In these chapters, each centered around paired genres or modes, we explore the demand that H.D.'s reader confront central questions about truth and the nature of reality. In successive chapters, the focus on historical accuracy is undercut by the fantastical, ahistorical fairy tale; a scientific approach to time travel rests uncomfortably against notions of astral projection. In this chapter, the autobiographical pact between author and reader in H.D.'s fiction necessitates a paradoxical belief in the impossible. Truth claims are continually erected and dismantled in this, her most postmodern prose experiment.

*Sword* is oddly structured, and this undoubtedly accounts, as I note in

the Introduction, for perceptions of its general inaccessibility and alleged unreadability. *Sword's* first part, "Wintersleep," recounts Delia Alton's engagement with spiritualism in London during World War II and the dreams and memories her sessions induce, and the second part, "Summerdream," portrays a dizzying journey through time that explores the political consequences of these personal reminiscences, delving into the historical layers of a palimpsest of what has been lost and forgotten. We begin with an obvious cognate of H.D., Delia, who is doing the kinds of things that we know H.D. did during World War II. We can accept, then, the flashbacks that increasingly pervade the first half of the book, and Delia invites us to draw connections between the two world wars and between men who had betrayed her at various points in her life. This is enticingly familiar to those of us who have read H.D.'s autobiographical fiction. Indeed, she writes to Aldington of the novel that "[t]here is a great deal of myself in it," and Sir Hugh Dowding was troubled to find the novel's Lord Howell quite recognizable as himself.<sup>1</sup>

As readers, then, we are ill-prepared when the book shifts abruptly to a series of seemingly unfinished historical vignettes in its second half. We are offered little in the way of guideposts, and we lose nearly entirely the presence of Delia to anchor our reading experience. In correspondence with Aldington, H.D. reported her initial struggles with merging the two parts, though she clearly sees them as comprising a whole.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, the focus will be chiefly on the initial chapters of the novel, in which H.D. presents a version of herself engaging in séances during the Second World War. The next chapter picks up the way in which the more realist form fragments midway through the book, and with it the narrator's identity and the London setting of the initial story. Chapter 3 turns to the discrete historical episodes that comprise the second half of the novel.

It is not, of course, surprising to find a chapter on the autobiographical mode in a book about H.D.'s prose.<sup>3</sup> This is a commonplace throughout decades of her career, despite so many modernists' pronounced disdain for the autobiographical, a disdain surprising given their preoccupation with character and interiority. T. S. Eliot's influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" ushers in an era of impersonality and objectivity: "It is not in [the writer's] personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poetry is in any way remarkable or interesting. . . . Poetry . . . is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality."<sup>4</sup> Richard

Aldington was dismissive of women writers in particular on the grounds that they lacked the imagination to write beyond the self; in an essay on H.D.'s friend Violet Hunt, he observes, "Whenever a woman goes to write a novel she first chooses herself as heroine; she then decides that she had better take someone else, and ends up by choosing herself again."<sup>5</sup> A recent collection of essays by Maria DiBattista and Emily Wittman, though, demonstrates that a more flexible definition of autobiography permits a rethinking of autobiographical modernism. Their contention that "modernist autobiography . . . typically challenges the established narrative practices of the genre"<sup>6</sup> can helpfully elucidate H.D.'s own practice. As John Paul Riquelme has pointed out, "the boundaries between fictional and nonfictional life narratives are crossed significantly in major modernist works."<sup>7</sup> Despite their objections, modernists wrote their own lives into their fiction. H.D. was ardently drawn to the autobiographical mode, performing these "cross[ings]" in multiple texts over four decades. Beginning in the late 1910s, it became a mainstay of her prose writing.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, taken as a whole, it is tempting to align H.D.'s long-term autobiographical project (particularly in her later career) with that of Proust's, as described by Roland Barthes: "instead of putting his life into his novel, as is so often said, he made his life itself a work of which his own book was the model."<sup>9</sup>

None of H.D.'s autobiographical writing falls neatly within the formal category of autobiography; her *romans à clef*, her novels and short stories, her memoirs—all highlight the inherently and inevitably fictional nature of the autobiographical enterprise. Louis Renza has detected "a spirit of anarchism" in the autobiographical—a genre "openly defiant" of rules or guidelines, according to Shirley Geok-lin, "a genre in trouble"—and this unruliness is evident throughout H.D.'s prose *oeuvre*.<sup>10</sup> This is rightfully a theme of a great deal of scholarship on H.D.'s autobiography, including a key article by Adalaide Morris, which contends that H.D.'s texts frequently eschew "conventional sequence" in favor of "superimposition, contiguity, repetition, punning, all the orders of association and obsession."<sup>11</sup> Importantly, Dianne Chisholm holds that H.D.'s fiction highlights the otherness of the self, and this is true even in her earliest fiction, as Sarah Dillon notes of "Murex" when she deems the line between the fictive and the autobiographical in that work to be always already "queered."<sup>12</sup> Eileen Gregory writes of the 1920s autobiographical fiction that "H.D. engaged not simply in biographical projection but in a complex mode of historical and cultural analysis," and that "she

comes to detach herself from identification with particular figures in order to reflect upon recurrent patterns of interrelationships.”<sup>13</sup> I am claiming that this detachment is key to her later-career prose writings.

H.D.’s later fiction is perhaps more plainly representative of her faltering faith in the factual. Admitting that she fabricated much of the account, H.D. referred to *The Gift* (completed in 1943), for instance, as “autobiographical, ‘almost’” and as “autobiographical fantasy,” explaining in *Majic Ring* (drafted in 1943–1944) that “I worked the story of myself and Gareth into my own family and made my grandmother reconstruct a strange psychic experience to me, a child.”<sup>14</sup> The “gift” was not, in reality, a psychic one but the gift of music.<sup>15</sup> She tells Pearson that in this novel she was able to place “this phantasy world of child-hood memories, of fact and phantasy into a frame.”<sup>16</sup> Miriam Fuchs has attempted to work through these questions in her multiple examinations of this wartime account of H.D.’s childhood. Fuchs stresses that H.D. problematizes memory, point of view, and narrative voice, and thus the whole concept of autobiography: “For H.D., the autobiographical project is fragile, not durable; a process, not a product; a private, not public, gesture.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as Christopher Gavaler has noted of that text, “factual and fictional information mingle without demarcation.”<sup>18</sup> I argue in this and successive chapters that the line between “factual and fictional” becomes even more fractured in the post-World War II writings, and the constructedness of that binary even more apparent.

Some scholars nonetheless still rely, to differing degrees, on H.D.’s autobiographical fiction as a biographical source. A related strain entails a characterization of H.D.’s autobiographical prose writing as more therapeutic than artistic.<sup>19</sup> This is not an entirely unwarranted approach, of course, as her prose writings are in part autobiographical. But they are also fictional, and this can get lost in an understandable quest for knowledge about a fascinating writer who, during her life, scrupulously guarded her privacy. My own approach to H.D.’s persistent deployment of the autobiographical mode in her fiction was outlined in 2003: the reader must attend vigilantly to *both* elements of her prose: “Even as her protagonists teasingly invite autobiographical readings, they just as frequently call attention to the fictive nature of the text.”<sup>20</sup> In that article, I cite, for instance, her constant reminders in *Paint It To-day* that she is, and is not, the protagonist, Midget, but there are countless other examples I could have added, including that of *HERmione*,

in which she insists that she is at once “Her” and not “Her.” The reader must, moreover, be attuned to shifts in H.D.’s writing over the course of her career.

H.D.’s 1950 reflective essay entitled “H.D. by Delia Alton” is at times consulted as a source of information about the composition and interpretation of her writing. At Norman Holmes Pearson’s request, in the 1940s H.D. began the sometimes-arduous, sometimes-rewarding process of rereading all of her work, and this essay contains her musings, in diary form, on her prose and poetry since 1930. Though much of the essay suggests the compatibility of herself and the various personae she had created over the years, the ending of the essay dramatically reverses itself, deconstructing, in effect, the preceding pages. Of characters she created from the 1920s through the 1940s she ultimately insists, “We are not Margaret, we are not Julia Ashton of the [World] War I *Madrigal*. We are not one or any of those whose lovely names startle and enchant me, as I read them now as if for the first time, in my own prose and poetry, Hipparchia, Heliadora, Hedyle. We are not Hedyle . . . nor the exquisite child of Hedyle, Hedylus. . . . We are not the *Sword* Rose de Beauvais of Normandy and Brittany at the time of England’s conquest, nor the earlier Stella . . . We are not Raymonde of the first ‘contemporary’ ‘Murex’ nor yet the later Raymonde of ‘Narthex.’”<sup>21</sup> It is a statement that warns readers against searching for clues to H.D.’s life in her characters, and implicitly admonishes Pearson himself, whose strategy for establishing H.D.’s canonization relied to a great extent on her biography, specifically her connections to famous men such as Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, and Sigmund Freud.<sup>22</sup> Characters based on H.D.—even the characters that bear the most remarkable resemblance to her, such as Her or Julia Ashton—are her and not her. “I will not let *I* creep into this story,” Midget declares in *Paint It To-day*, and this purposeful avoidance of correlating characters with real-life figures extends beyond protagonists to other characters she has created: in *Helen in Egypt*, she writes that “the child’s name is Hermione, / it is not Hermione.”<sup>23</sup>

While H.D.’s earliest novels of the 1920s are unabashedly self-reflexive, they also cling more closely to historical accuracy than her later books. In the Introduction, I traced a shift from stasis to movement in H.D.’s career, and here I will argue that concomitant with that shift is a movement from recounting the private to chronicling the public in her autobiographical writings. By the 1930s, she was beginning to take generous liberties with autobiographical modes, reflecting in part, I believe, her significant engagement

with film, itself an extension of her lifelong attraction to drama. Her early novellas of the 1930s meld the identities of characters to create composites, while her fiction of the 1940s and 1950s, I will argue in this chapter, makes use of excessive repetition in a way that calls into question her own earlier autobiographical efforts as well as the genre more broadly conceived.<sup>24</sup> Not unlike the late modernist writers John Whittier-Ferguson examines in his recent book, H.D. revisits her past *oeuvre*, “sometimes building upon, sometimes repudiating, often revising, always weighing.”<sup>25</sup>

She performs this critique of her past writings in order to re-center the autobiographical around the public, rather than private, sphere. By this point in her life, H.D. begins to take full advantage of the possibilities offered by what might be termed *fictional memoir*, which focuses on small slices of time rather than encompassing a life; as Helen Buss notes, the memoir is particularly well-equipped to “bridge the typical strategies of historical and literary discourses in order to establish necessary connections between the private and the public, the personal and the political.”<sup>26</sup> Bryony Randall has argued that war drives a reversal of the public and the private for noncombatant writers: “The background has come right up to the foreground.”<sup>27</sup> I would add that the experience of World War II, so much more traumatic for Londoners than the Great War, accounts for the most dramatic shift in H.D.’s autobiographical prose, in which the background of war, history, and politics takes center stage, the autobiographical story primarily a vehicle through which to document the impact of the public sphere on the private. Indeed, this chapter will contend, her post-World War II work critiques the autobiographical, as the trauma of war had shattered her sense of reality and truth.

Certainly, an autobiography that is purely nonfictional is an impossibility: as Paul de Man observes in a key essay on the genre, “just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be.”<sup>28</sup> Shari Benstock suggests that “autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its own construction.”<sup>29</sup> By 1950, H.D. has come to understand, in even more profound ways than her experimental autobiographical fiction of the 1920s reveals, that autobiography is not grounded in any stable sense of truth or reality. To think otherwise is to “assume that ‘fact’ is a valid category of knowledge, that facts have discernible meanings, and that the more facts one has, the more valuable one’s interpretation of a given historical situation