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Electric Railway, 1922, Two Women

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About "Botticelli: from Bryher's imagined notes"

Looking at Botticelli's "Primavera," again, in the summer of 1984, immediately after the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence had cleaned and restored it, I was struck by the entirely new multiplicity of detail, the discrimination present in each petal, leaf, insect antenna and delicacy of color that was suddenly available. We'd been given new access to what had always been there, detailed botanic evidence and stunning brushwork beneath the protective layers of varnish now removed. This project—to delicately move into and through accumulated layers of cultural preservation—made a natural bridge in my mind to the quest shared by H.D. and Bryher. It was their collaboration—their separate and shared attention to visual detail and their receptiveness to the visionary moment, the palimpsest evidence shimmering out of earlier accountings—that helped to make possible, finally, H.D.'s compelling clarity of language and its ability to seize the moment, superimposed on history, and make it matter urgently.

H.D.'s poetry shows us both to trust and mistrust language, that each word must be suspected and tested in the independently governed mind *and* in the ear. It confirms for us that the narrative of female sensibility is not necessarily a "logical" progression nor a single dimension but is experienced in multiplicity of knowledge rather than in its hierarchy.

In this poem, I was also imagining Bryher and H.D. in Italy, on one of their many trips, and thinking that Bryher's financial and emotional support of H.D. may have tended to dominate our sense of Bryher, obscuring her own gifts as witness and "seer." Women often provide this support for each other's sense of "how it is." I wanted to celebrate this struggle for clarity.

ELECTRIC RAILWAY, 1922, TWO WOMEN

—for Susan Gevirtz

Cielo magnifico!

"Az-zu-ro"

"Ce-les-te"

Always cypress floating the dead outside Sicilian towns
(thin blue fabric where her knees press through).

Hair of old railway posters, yellow
helmet, some sort of
gold bracelet
above the elbow one notices
as her left hand appears to make a social gesture.

All is upholstery
extending in fuzzy grey marbled curves
over banquettes and moving walls;

your companion wears the black watchstrap and leans forward and
is pulling at her pearls
with a sentiment you imagine.

This is a story where the lake is expensive water-color paper
erased in the middle to a worn-through impurity.
You are rowing and it does or doesn't matter.

A life is out the window and you are pulled through it.
All you worry about diminishes you. At every moment
a body is being violated,
although the mahogany window frame was designed for safety
when you chose this method of seeing.

You are crowded with anyone
but a train hurtling its weight with uncalculated effort
gives you surcease from personal density and a diminishing will.

The ship presents itself in its decks and white paint
between two trees and you have paid for a view
that will give you those needed glimpses
of other possible solutions.

Styles of speech remain as disembodied prowlers;
when you listen, everybody's talking. They want you
for your attention.

Someone's hesitation is American and feels so comfortable
you alert yourself: You are in a woman's body,
you are expected to act a certain age although
you retain an interior childhood of dread
and being caught at every border.

This randomness changes color when you speed
South, in your mind your body
slowly removing its cotton garments.

About "Electric Railway, 1922, two women"

The point of departure for "Electric Railway, 1922, two women" was an old poster from the Montreux-Bernese Oberland, used as a jacket illustration for Barbara Guest's biography of H.D., *Herself Defined*. The scene depicted on this poster is of two women traveling in luxurious comfort, looking out the window at the Swiss Alps and the lake below where a bit of Montreux or Lucerne can be seen. I imagined this view as a spectacularly common event in the daily life shared by H.D. and Bryher, but also as a frame to break out of via their travels to Italy and warmer Southern climes. In the railway poster, the women seem in a world removed, as though the life they are watching from the window is something like a movie and their imaginations, traveling together, are where the most real events occur.