Two Novels

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“IF YOU’RE cold there’s a spare blanket at the bottom of the bed.”

“Thanks but I’ll be all right. I’ve got on woolly pyjamas.”

Nancy lay watching the stars set overhead like a thousand stamens in some purple daisy. The tall silver leaves of a eucalyptus tree fell over the parapet about the flat roof. She had always wanted to sleep out of doors. And this was like being on the deck of a ship with the Newlyn lights, tiny flashes of gold, cutting between the branches. If one raised one’s self, one saw the black masts of boats.

“What fun,” said Doreen.

“I should have thought it would be colder.”

“The roof is dry. That helps.”

Over the trees behind them day fell, a wild rose dropping on dark brambles. There was the hoot of an owl. The bark of a dog. Footsteps. Sounds were silver in this night that had hardly faded from twilight. Strange how right poets were; if only one had a chance
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to test them. Nice word of Middleton’s, “twitterlight.” It suggested the movement of shadows. America lay over the water, China. The black convoy. The same convoy as two years ago, sailing past. Beautiful light of boats, beautiful stars. “Can’t help seeing the stars as beauty, to-night. If the way I say it is a cliché.” Stars, stamens of wild rose, sky. One thought of the night as that, automatically. Hoot of another owl. Dark grey against the silver.

Owls are soft and warm, like baby gulls. Like Greek words.

“Strange she should be so near,” said Nancy, thinking of the letter she had just posted.

“Oh, Cornwall’s a great place for poets,” Doreen said, too calmly.

“If she doesn’t answer, I’m going to fall into the cove and she can hardly refuse to let me sit by her fire and dry my clothes.”

“Yes, you could say you had seen a spy signalling from the cliffs and would she mind if you watched from her garden.”

“I might offer to sell her a pot of jam.”

“If she eats it.”

“True. She may not worry about such matters. I should think she would though. Most poets are interested in food. There’s hardly an Elizabethan play without a banquet in it and the Greeks must have been frightfully particular about their meals to judge from the times fat roast kid is mentioned. Anyhow I’ll get
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there some way. The cove sounds the best idea. I could
hide some dry clothes in a furze bush and dip the
others in the sea. She may have a cook though. That
would be awkward.”

“She may answer your letter.”

“From a stranger? I doubt it. I could always say a
bull was chasing me. Funny she should be so near.”

“There’s another owl. Hear it?”

“Yes. I’m worried about those stars. They’re really
yellow, you know, or primrose. But that’s been said too
often. Must say things a new way or cut them out.
Do you think anyone’s had ‘moon-green?’ No, that’s
too clumsy even if they haven’t. They’re not yellow
enough for honey. Too cold for honeysuckle. Tell you
what they’re a little like . . . the phosphorescence in the
Naples bay.”

“Let the stars alone. What happened to your
novel?”

“Oh, that. I dropped it on some publisher’s.”

“Did they take it?”

“No. Wrote me after they’d had the thing two
months to go and see them. They were more interested
than I was. Asked me to give it a romantic ending and
take it back to them.”

“Are you going to?”

“No. I don’t feel romantic. And I have to feel
things before I can write them. It would be much more
fun to write a book on modern American poetry.”

“Those eucalyptus leaves keep away the flies.”

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“What nights we’ve wasted. If only we had slept out other summers.”

Scent of lavender and beans blew up . . . cool . . . cool . . . under the wide blue-purple sky. Knife of salt the air. Bees in the garden. The gold hive. World was poetry if one were let alone. Free. A poet near. Would she answer? It was too late anyhow. Too late to have a friend. To see, speak once or twice. Why live if one could not be free? Speak one’s own thoughts. Be answered. Too late. Hylas, “a shooting star headlong in the sea.” Why the salt wind stealing through the pansies? Calling. Silly to feel the sea call still. Not to go back to London . . . to the same thoughts . . . eating one’s own mind in a narrow room. Oh, the wild rose of the sky. Darkness, darkness, not to sleep, to be . . . adventure.

“What? grunted a voice sleepily.

“I’ve got it. Cowslip buds . . . they’re cowslip yellow.”

The tide surged between the moving leaves, out to the far ships, called, crept in again. Night was anchored to the branches. Birds were still.

“What do you want, Nancy?” Doreen grumbled. They were lying out on the sand opposite a large white gull. There was a tiny crust of foam beyond them where the tide crept gradually out. “How would it be
different if you went away? You don’t seem to want . . . what most girls want.”

“I don’t know what most girls want. They bewilder me. If I went away it would be different. It would be action. I would stop in England but I’d clash with people I had known. I could be myself better in another country.”

“But how aren’t you, yourself, now?” Doreen was a little peevish.

“I am, lying here by this sea.” Nancy assured her.

But she wasn’t herself really. Only she could not explain this to Doreen. She could not tell her bluntly . . . if I did what I felt and shouted poems to the waves, to the gulls, you’d think I’d gone mad and you’d say, “stop being soft.” Eleanor would understand my shouting stuff but she would not get why I would rather lie here thinking about a word than climb that cliff with her. You can’t explain yourself to people when they don’t know what you feel.

The gull flecked some sand specks from its wings. Spread the tips of them, met a wave. And then flew out of the water across the silver crests running to the shore, straight toward the open sky.

Schools ought not to do things suddenly to children. It was all that day at Downwood. Something had cleft her from herself. She was two personalities now, sitting on the sand. Something, like an axe, had hit her and taught her to keep hidden in herself. Because
people found out what you cared about and hurt you through it, when you would not agree with them.

Keep the mind straight. Nothing else mattered. It was very funny. Only they had shut the girl round the corner up. Easy enough to call anyone queer. Good thing perhaps—this disassociation trick. If you spoke straight out your thought they called you queer and shut you up. That was if you were rich. If you were poor and spoke your mind you lost your job. Then you starved. So it came to the same thing in the end.

Civilization . . . fighting for civilization! Had anyone stopped to think what a rotten substance it was?

With Carthage a flame and with Troy broken there was one way out.

Ah, not to live a slave, not that.

Shrug one’s shoulders and watch the sea. If there were no other way, walk forward. Into the waves. Life was straight and death was straight but between them was a lie. Life one loved. The gulls, the wind. But if it were impossible to have truth otherwise, go forward. Till the water clashed into the ears. Arms at the sides, the Viking way.

All the wisdom that one had not learned. Curious insistent memory. The sea below Corinth.

It would have to be decided soon. It was a pity to throw life away, yes. But if one didn’t have life?

“Perhaps you’ll be able to make this writer you’ve written to, understand what you mean,” Doreen suggested grimly.
She must not be eager. She must not expect. Could she stay longer than an hour? To meet poets, people said, was always disappointing. Especially if one liked their work. But a writer would know about books. One could forgive much to a mind that felt as one’s own mind. That could write in words the beauty that left one dumb. Only she, Nancy, had nothing to offer to a poet in exchange for life or words.

She had never heard words spoken. Real words. Only the headlines of the papers repeated over and over again. Or the phrases of an older generation that had no link with her thought. Never words leaping, shining with meaning, saying a fact.

A brown calf trotted toward the sea. Foxgloves, wet with rain, spiked the bracken with their Tyrian bells. It was an old Phœnician path that curved, black earth between grey stones, along the line of the hill.

Beauty was escape; beauty was another world. Greek chariots, the rainbow of the ships. That childhood in Sicily long ago. (Almond blossoms, you are soft, you are the dove white rain.) The mad rough
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world of Middleton. Knossos of the scarlet poppies. I understand her mind. Thoughts, thoughts.

“What have you read?” That would be sure to be the first question. She knew the Elizabethans backward. “No, I never got through the Arcadia but I like Euphues.” She ought to be all right on the French stuff. Twenty four. And she had read everything she could in preparation for this day since she was ten.

There was a noise of bird songs. The brown butterfly speckled wings of a hawk fluttered from the cliff. Was something going to happen to her at last? It was too late to care.

If she found a friend they might shut her up. Everyone, Eleanor, Doreen, Downwood. Because if she had a friend something would burst and she would shoot ahead, be the thing she wanted and disgrace them by her knowledge. Because she would care for no laws, only for happiness.

If she found a friend, an answer, the past years would vanish utterly from her mind.

At all costs they would fight to break this; everyone she had known. They tried already when she had no friend.

“Why do you want to go to America, Nancy?”
“Why can’t you settle down?”
“Why can’t you behave like other girls?”
“The trouble is, you’ve had your own way too much.”
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An eye for an eye. A school for a school. Something deep and slow and vengeful had grown in her. She wanted her experience to triumph, her sense of truth. To sow beauty, to sow happiness, where Miss Sampson sowed acquiescence and a nation sowed brutality.

Better not try to find a friend. Better drown under the cliffs. One stab of water and no fear more. “Dying is ceasing to be afraid . . . dying . . . is ceasing to be afraid.” Wycherley was a moralist and they put him in prison. Wycherley laughed at the horde; they broke him. “Ceasing to be afraid,” he said. Better be done with it, under the cliff, forget the anemones, the sea call, the adventures. One choke of water and no fight more. Better not try to find . . .

But the Phœnician path stopped at a grey cottage that faced the south-blue sea. Familiar yellow covers, French books, were piled at an open window. Better not try to find . . . oh, take a chance on adventure.

This was the place. She knocked.

She was too old to be disappointed if an elderly woman in glasses bustled out. Poets, of course, were not what they wrote about. It was the mind that mattered.

A tall figure opened the door. Young. A spear flower if a spear could bloom. She looked up into eyes that had the sea in them, the fire and colour and the splendour of it. A voice all wind and gull notes said:

“I was waiting for you to come.”
Bryher (born Annie Winifred Ellerman) is perhaps best known today as the lifelong partner of the poet H.D. She was, however, a central figure in modernist and avant-garde cultural experimentation in the early twentieth century; a prolific producer of poetry, novels, autobiography, and criticism; and an intimate and patron of such modernist artists as Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, and Dorothy Richardson. Bryher’s own path-breaking writing has remained largely neglected, long out of print, and inaccessible to those interested in her oeuvre. Now, for the first time since their original publication in the early 1920s, two of Bryher’s pioneering works of fictionalized autobiography, titled Development and Two Selves, are reprinted in one volume for a new audience of readers, scholars, and critics.

Blending poetry, prose, and autobiographical details, Development and Two Selves together constitute a compelling bildungsroman that is among the first ever to follow a young woman’s process of coming out. Through the fictionalized character Nancy, the novels trace Bryher’s life through her childhood and young adulthood, giving the reader an account of the development of a unique lesbian, feminist, and modernist consciousness. Development and Two Selves recover significant work by one of the first experimenters of the modernist movement and are a welcome reintroduction of the enigmatic Bryher.

“Bryher’s novels have a strong place in the history of lesbian and transgendered writing. This volume is sure to be a useful tool for modernist studies, women’s studies, and queer, gay, and lesbian studies.” —Susan Stanford Friedman, University of Wisconsin–Madison, author of Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter

Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman) was a poet, novelist, critic, patron, and editor of the film journal Close Up and the literary magazine Life and Letters Today. Joanne Winning is lecturer in twentieth-century literature at the School of Humanities and Cultural Studies, Middlesex University, London.