

ABSTRACT

In this article, the autobiography of Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: an Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (1933), as a example of how a author may constitute a identity through writing about her life in the context of her time, the period before and during the Great War of 1914-1918. Brittain tells how her inexperience and the restrictive environment in which she lived left her completely unprepared for the horrors of the war, in which she lost several people who were closest to her. Her transformation came about through her direct participation in the war, as a nurse, as well as her humanitarian and political work afterwards. Finally, this autobiographical work is contrasted with those about war written by men.

KEY WORDS: autobiography, literature of war, the Great War.

SELF-TRANSFORMATION AND THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF VERA BRITTAIN

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RESUMO

Neste artigo, discute-se a autobiografia de Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: an autobiographical study of the years 1900-1925* (1933), como exemplo de como uma autora pode constituir uma identidade por meio da escritura de sua vida no contexto de seu tempo, o período antes e durante a Grande Guerra de 1914-1918. Brittain relata como sua in experiência e o ambiente restritivo em que vivia a deixaram totalmente despreparada para os horrores da guerra, quando perdeu diversas das pessoas que lhe eram mais próximas. Sua transformação advém de sua participação direta na guerra, como enfermeira, e de seu trabalho político e humanitário posterior. A autobiografia é contrastada com trabalhos sobre a guerra escritos por homens.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: autobiografia, literatura de guerra, a Grande Guerra.

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Autobiography is a process of self-invention, or reinvention, and for that reason there has been a theoretical tendency to articulate the complex relations between memory, forgetfulness, imagination, and invention in fiction and autobiography (OLNEY, 1980). In an autobiography, memory is given over to “the recovery of the cognitive content of fantasy,” giving the text “a dimension that goes beyond the merely documentary or testimonial” (MIRANDA, 1992, p. 128-129; my translation). Autobiographical narrators are self-conscious in ways that recorders of facts may not be. While the diary and on-the-spot documentary are pre-literary forms, the memoir or autobiography takes shape in retrospect. The events recorded at a present time are now seen and reflected on from the viewpoint of the past and therefore take on different, often more complex, meanings. In this formulation, memory in autobiographical narrative is given form; it is constructed or “narrativized.” The author, in a retrospective view, perceives or delineates a meaningful narrative arc in his/her life that may constitute an identity heretofore unperceived.

In autobiographical accounts of war, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction would seem to be clear-cut: there are restraints on invention about historical events, namely, the large body of documentation. The difference in method between the archival research done and interviews conducted by a historian or biographer to illuminate a subject, however, and the kind of text produced by one who attempts to write about himself as a participant in war proves, with respect to point-of-view, to be crucial. In biographies and histories, there is usually a “consistent” third-person, omniscient narrator, while memoirs and autobiographies employ a consistent first-person narrator, but both types enjoy the perspective of hindsight, what was referred to above as the retrospective view. In autobiography, furthermore, the narrator presents the “narrating, as opposed to the experiencing ‘I’” (KLEIN, 1984, p. 17). An attempt at representing the experiencing-I may be made in fictional and non-fictional narratives—especially in combat narratives—for the purpose of increased tension and psychological concentration.

In narratives of war, statesmen or generals to celebrate their triumphs or to justify their strategic mistakes often write autobiographies classified as non-fiction. In their case, of course, there are documented historical facts that cannot be ignored. By contrast, the war narratives written by less exalted personages—line officers and men of the lower ranks—did not need to be confronted by this established body of fact, since their accounts were necessarily of events at a purely local level, that which has been witnessed first-hand and does not necessarily have—or is even likely not to have—official documentation. The former type of narrative are more or less “official” accounts of battles that construct an overall narrative of the events, giving

background and context, facts and figures, even while they also depend on the individual perceptions, observations, and memories of actual participants. In the latter type of narrative, by contrast, an account of a battle by a company-grade officer (lieutenant or captain) or enlisted man (private, corporal, sergeant, etc.) need only give his individual perceptions. This circumstance leaves the imagination a certain amount of free play so that events may be interpreted, or even as in fiction invented, whether consciously or not.

The autobiographical work, therefore, just like its fictional counterpart—the “first novel” of the young writer—tends to be a personal narrative of one man’s experience of war. The autobiography is written for much the same reason and with much the same content as an autobiographical war novel. The obvious difference between the two is that, in the former, the author and the narrator make an explicit claim to be the same person, while the fictional work has a character who functions as an alter-ego for the author. There is another difference as well: in autobiography presented as non-fiction, there is an implied truth-claim, “continuous implicit attestations of veracity or appeals to documented historical fact” (FUSSELL, 1975, p. 310). The author of the autobiographical text says something like: “I was there, this is the way it was, it is not made up, and my account can be checked against the record.” Robert Graves, in what is perhaps the most well-known autobiography of the First World War, *Goodbye to All That* (1929), is referring to this distinction between fact and fiction when he tells the reader that he “stupidly” began his account of the war as a novel and then decided to “re-translate it into history” (GRAVES, 1960, p. 79).

The distinction between autobiography and fiction, however, is particularly difficult to maintain in reference to the prose literary production of the Great War, as can be seen in both the categories and the discussions of Bernard Bergonzi’s comprehensive critical history of Great War literature, *Heroes’ Twilight* (first edition, 1963). Bergonzi treats autobiographies and memoirs, as opposed to the fiction, in separate chapters (denominated “Retrospect I” and “Retrospect II”), but even in this apparently straightforward division there is considerable overlap. As he admits, the war novels of 1928-29 are “autobiographical,” and one or two of them could be put in either category (BERGONZI, 1996, p. 163). Moreover, his comments on Siegfried Sassoon’s trilogy, *The Memoirs of George Sherston* (combined edition 1936), an ostensibly fictional work, are found in the chapter Retrospect I, although the presence of the word “memoirs” in Sassoon’s title admittedly invites confusion.

Other works contribute to the blurring of distinctions. Bergonzi characterizes George Winterbourne, the protagonist of Richard Aldington’s autobiographical novel, *Death of a Hero* (1929), as a “briskly manipulated

puppet" (BERGONZI, 1996, p. 173), a barely disguised voice for the author's personal tirades against the British Establishment, a critical assessment that emphasizes the autobiographical over the fictional elements of the novel, since rhetorical passages are much more acceptable to readers in autobiographies. Furthermore, an explicit formal structure is expected in a novel, while the naïve reader, at least, expects the autobiographer to tell his story according to "how it happened." Aldington's novel, according to Bergonzi, however, is "willfully formless" (BERGONZI, 1996, p. 172). It may be proposed that the flashbacks supplying the background to Winterbourne's apparent suicide build a necessary context for madness, which may explain the apparent formlessness.

There is even a kind of official confusion between the two kinds of text. Several books on the war were catalogued as "personal narrative," or non-fiction, by the British National Union Catalog and other bibliographical works, but were later reclassified by the New York Public Library as novels. Hager and Taylor give the example of the anonymous work *The Fighting Mascot, The True Story of a Boy Soldier, by the Boy Soldier Himself* (1918). The author turned out to be one Thomas Kehoe, but the anonymous status of the author-narrator and his admission that he had had professional aid in writing the book may well have contributed to its being listed as non-fictional. In any case, it should be recalled that the converse situation, fiction presented as fact, has been part of the history of the English novel since Daniel Defoe

Another possible criterion of distinction – that autobiography is more comprehensive (by attempting to give a complete account) while fiction is more selective (by giving a more dramatic account) – holds up no better. Compared to Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, which encompasses the author's childhood and post-war life as well as his military experience, T.E. Lawrence's autobiographical work, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935), confines itself to a few continuous years of a military campaign. In both narratives, events go beyond the mere recollection-aspect of autobiography: they are selected, shaped, and styled like narrative fictions. In the case of Lawrence, the oft-noted self-aggrandizing tendency of the autobiographical author might also make his work "fictional" in another sense. What is important for this article, however, is that both authors, Graves and Lawrence, "invent" themselves through the experience of war. The upper-class Graves establishes himself through irony as a critic of the British class-system, and Lawrence, popularly known as "Lawrence of Arabia," puts himself at the center of the Arab independence movement.

Along with these accounts of the war, in which Graves relates the "troglydote world" of the trenches on the western front, and Lawrence, who offers a more unaccustomed view (in his case, guerrilla war in the Middle

East), non-combatants also offer perceptions of the war that complement both of these types. The autobiographical memoir of Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the years 1900-1925*, which was first published in 1933, a popular work that would often be reprinted and eventually adapted for television as a BBC serial in 1979, is valuable for its treatment of familiar war themes from the viewpoint of a woman who, though necessarily a non-combatant, was an active participant in the war. Her work also illustrates how a subject may be transformed by war through the recording of personal thoughts and experiences.

The theme of pre-war innocence versus wartime experience portrayed in Brittain's work is also central to the war memoirs and autobiographical novels written by men. Siegfried Sassoon's trilogy, for example, goes from the idyllic, fox-hunting youth of the protagonist George Sherston to his initiation into the army and eventual service in the trenches, in which the contrast between beauty and comfort with ugliness and suffering are symbolic of pre-war and wartime England, evoking the nostalgia resulting from the realization that the former is gone forever.

Richard Aldington's autobiographical novel *All Men Are Enemies* (1933) has a similar treatment but with a more romantic conclusion. The protagonist, Antony Clarendon (the first name suggests Cleopatra's lover), who also comes of age in the lush rural environment of pre-war England complete with a seventeenth century house and protective society, is sent to Italy, where he falls in love with an Austrian girl whom he loses when the war intervenes. After serving as an infantry officer on the Western Front (the war itself is here eclipsed), his loss of faith in life (meant to be exemplary) brings a dull and purposeless existence that can only be revitalized by tracking down Katharina, who is under a cloud because of disgrace befallen her family during the war. Despite the bitter memories of both young people, the couple embark upon a more hopeful future together, but it is clear that Antony, in his rejection of the present, is trying to recover a world ("everything he had known and loved") that has since vanished. Aldington's theme of personal love as a refuge from the troubled present (as well as with a woman who is somewhat of an earlier male fantasy of compliant female passivity) was taken up in a much better known American novel, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), in which the "personal option" of taking refuge in love is only destroyed by the death of the heroine. The flight into the arms of the other, however, was not invented in the literature of the war, since Matthew Arnold expresses such sentiments in his famous poem "Dover Beach":

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So Various, so beautiful, so new
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

It is noteworthy as well how these lines, published in 1851, seem to anticipate the 1914 war in their recognition of doubt and nullity and the meaningless mass violence of Great War battles in the image of the last two lines.

In the case of Brittain, love seemed to be a solution only to her prewar innocence. In the course of the conflict, she lost nearly everyone she loved – her fiancé, her brother, and their two close friends – and was emotionally devastated by the experience. She does not, however, submit to the typical (and, in the Twenties, fashionable) malaise of so many young men who renounced their participation in life after the war was over. This refusal to succumb to the failure of the personal option is therefore untypical, but a part of her ameliorative narrative. In fact, her work as a nurse and her political convictions as a feminist and internationalist turn her autobiographical account in an “inspirational” direction. The double current of the historico-cultural, on one hand, and the political sustaining the personal, on the other, form the basis for an individual concerned to tell her own life-story, one of transformation through experience, and at the same time a “typical” life-story, a narrative of suffering and loss undergone by many others, but with an increasingly uplifting and transforming message of hope.

These aspects can be perceived, for example, in the Foreword, when Brittain says that she felt an urgent need to give “an impression of the changes” that the period brought to the middle-class society of her time: “Only, I felt, by some such attempt to write history in terms of personal life could I rescue something that might be of value, some element of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth by the War” (BRITTAİN, 1994, p. 11). She means to delineate the social context of the middle-class (“its interests, its morals, its social ideals, its politics”) within which her personal story can be best understood, but her purpose is not only personal and historical but political: “...what I have written constitutes, in effect, an indictment of a civilisation” (p. 12).

The emphasis on prewar and postwar difference in mentality and behavior is a constant theme, as “innocence” takes on a number of meanings less familiar to men. Looking back at her time in school, she claims: “It would not, I think, be possible for any present-day girl of the same age even to

imagine how abysmally ignorant, how romantically idealistic and how utterly unsophisticated my more sensitive contemporaries and I were at that time" (p. 42). By contrast, the "Bright Young People of Today, with their imperturbable realism, their casual, intimate knowledge of sexual facts" could not understand the "physical and psychological shock that the Great War caused to the Modern Girl of 1914" (p. 45). There are compensations, however, both in language and behavior: "'Where we had once spoken with polite evasion of 'a certain condition,' 'a certain profession,' we now unblushingly used the words 'pregnancy' and 'prostitution'" (p. 578). Along with greater freedom, a certain relaxation of male oppression was also gained: "The War has little enough to its credit, but it did break the tradition that venereal disease or sexual brutality in a husband was amply compensated by an elegant bank-balance" (p. 182).

Like Graves, Brittain says she originally planned to tell her story in a novel, but gave that up as inadequately "detached" for events that were still too close to her. She seems to be referring to the autobiographical "pact" discussed by Philippe Lejeune, in which a truth-telling pact is made between author and reader, a truth that is not guaranteed by a fictional narrative (NORONHA, 2002, p. 22). Brittain's next strategy was to publish sections of her diary, with fictitious names substituting the real ones, but this too seemed to her "spurious," and the diary, which covered only the war years, she felt was too short for the comprehensive treatment of a whole period that she wanted to write. The only course left, she writes, was to tell her story as an autobiography, with its typical truth claims ("tell my own story as truthfully as I could against the larger background") and its classic *apologia* of the personal as illustrative of the collective: "In no other fashion, it seemed, could I carry out my endeavor to put the life of an ordinary individual into its niche in contemporary history, and thus illustrate the influence of world-wide events and movements upon the personal destinies of men and women" (BRITAIN, 1994, p. 12). In this autobiographical move, the personal experience becomes an exemplary narrative for an entire generation.

A methodological consequence of the desire to insert the personal within the larger social context is her use of extensive quotations from her own letters and diaries (the 1913-1918 diaries were published, posthumously, in 1981). Inserting these passages in the final text gives a greater impression of candor but also goes beyond it, for, as she points out, this method conveys the fresh impressions of "contemporary opinion," even when these may appear in retrospect as naïve or wrong. In diaries, the "moment" is valued, although it may later prove embarrassing to the writer, as anyone who has kept a diary in their extreme youth to read over later often discovers to his or her dismay.

The cost of emotional excess is paid for, however, by the candid opinion or expressed emotion of the moment, compared with the atemporal wisdom of some autobiographies, which are often (as Brittain accurately puts it) “restrospective reflections heavy with knowledge,” for it is much easier, because it is less honest, to be wise after the fact. Brittain is therefore concerned, as the male narratives rarely are, with recording these feelings and impressions as, or soon after, they occur, in all their naiveté. This procedure is also thematically appropriate, for the innocence/experience dichotomy, as suggested in some lines from Philip Larkin’s poem “MCMXIV”:

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word...

Through a title that situates the poem in the period of the war, these lines suggest that the world was transformed while people hardly noticed how it had happened in their lived experience. The recognition of transformation could only take place in retrospect. Similarly, in her autobiography, Brittain, wants to record this transformation using the “word” that in the poem was not spoken, record how such changes took place in the mind of a particular and yet representative young woman

The first part of Brittain’s account tells of her privileged Edwardian childhood and “young-ladyhood” as the daughter of a bourgeois industrialist in the provinces, a life that left her singularly unprepared for the great events that would follow, but a life that had, like Sassoon’s early memoir, the charm of a vanished idyll, and, like Graves’ (although at a lower social level), the complacent snobbery and classism that the author (more unambiguously than Graves) repudiates. Unlike these two men, also, Brittain had to undergo the restrictions of movement and the educational limitations to which all young women of her class were subject. As a superior student, for example, she was not envied by her classmates for her intellectual assets, which they felt to be mere “second-rate compensations” for what really counted: marriage.

Unsurprisingly, her thoroughly conventional family takes offense at her determination to resist predictable young-ladyhood, as manifest, for example, in her desire to go to Oxford, where in those days there were a few women’s colleges with a small number of women students. At Somerville College, which she succeeds in entering after arduous preparation, there is some comedy at the contrast between the discomfort of the shabby physical conditions of academic life and the comfort of her bourgeois home life. Throughout her account, in fact, she will shuttle back and forth from the simplicity of her chosen surroundings to her family’s series of comfortable

homes with far less consciousness of special privilege (she even breaks her contract at one point because her mother has taken ill and cannot run the household). She is not, however, unaware of the egoism of youth even in ominous times: "My diary for August 3rd, 1914, contains a most incongruous mixture of war and tennis" (BRITAIN, 1994, p. 94).

The war has not yet shaken her youthful ambitions to become a useful, independent woman despite her provincial background: "War was something remote, unimaginable, its monstrous destructions and distresses safely shut up, like the Black Death and the Great Fire, between the covers of history books" (p. 98). Roland (the heroic name is appropriate), the young man to whom she forms an attachment and to whom she eventually becomes engaged, although sensitive and intelligent, is typically fascinated by the possibility of war in fulfilling romantic dreams: "I feel [he writes] that I am meant to take an active part in this War. It is to me a very fascinating thing – something, if often horrible, yet very ennobling and very beautiful, something whose elemental reality raises it above the reach of cold theorising" (p. 104). Their courtship is also typical of their time and class – an intensely literary relationship. There is no physical contact or any relief from the constant chaperoning and observations of their movements. The couple constantly exchanges and discusses books and letters. He sends her poems; she makes romantic entries in her diary.

The war, however, proves importunate. Her fiancé and his close friends from school are commissioned and sent to France, and Britain gradually comes to realize that Oxford and academic life are become increasingly irrelevant. Letters from Roland at the front are interspersed with the increasingly desperate news in the newspapers. She begins her career as a nurse June, 1915, at a civilian hospital, where she becomes immediately aware of basic domestic skills for which her background and education had not prepared her (she literally did not know how to boil an egg). On the other hand, the nursing of young men free her from the inhibitions about sex and bodily functions that beset her contemporaries. Her romantic motive for going into nursing, as "tribute" to her love for Roland, becomes more down-to-earth as she becomes more aware of the secrets of the male body: "Since it was always Roland whom I was nursing by proxy, my attitude towards him imperceptibly changed" (p. 166).

At this point, one might consider the introduction of romance into the war narrative, since it plays an important role in Britain's work. Most war narratives by males leave out love relationships, either because the narrators are isolated from women by the circumstances of war or because women are a part of the whole civilian contingent, which is perceived unsympathetically by combatants. Owing to the separation from women

during long periods of time, emotional attachments, which are usually unacknowledged, are formed between men in war, which is further cemented by sharing common suffering and danger (a theme developed in Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration*, 1991). The autobiographical works by Graves and Sassoon, for example, have no such relationships, and examples could be multiplied. Those that do include this emotionally laden element between men and women, tend to be works of fiction, in which such involvement may conveniently be disguised.

The experiences that Brittain communicates to Roland as well as those he undergoes himself inevitably change his attitude toward the war, introducing an alienation between the two lovers that she cannot explain but has an intuitive understanding of in her speculation about the special experience of the combat veteran: "... was the explanation to be found in that terrible barrier of knowledge by which War cut off the men who possessed it from the women who, in spite of the love that they gave and received, remained in ignorance?" (p. 215). Although she professes not to know the answer, her own experience of intense suffering will eventually help her to understand: "I had not yet realized—as I was later to realize through my own mental surrender—that only a process of deep adaptation, blotting out tastes and talents and even one's memories, made life sufferable for someone face to face with war at its worst" (p. 217).

This experience she attains in her nursing work of four years as a V.A.D. nurse, or member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment, in a series of hospitals in London, the island of Malta, and eventually France, even at one point tending to wounded German prisoners ("a regular baptism of blood and pus"). The hard life of tedious, often disgusting work ("After the Somme I had seen men without faces, without eyes, without limbs, men almost disemboweled, men with hideous truncated stumps of bodies..." (p. 339)), with long hours and few pleasures other than an early realization that she was "at last seeing life," becomes even a sort of a compensation for the loss in battle of Roland and two of their close friends, Geoffrey and Victor. Victor, who is at first blinded and sent home, she volunteers to marry as a kind of compensatory sacrifice, but when he too dies she admits that "...his death had probably saved us both from a relationship of which the serenity might have proved increasingly difficult to maintain..." (p. 359). Eventually, even her beloved brother Edward, a peaceful violinist, who against all odds survives the Somme, the Ypres salient, and other terrible battles, is wounded and receives a Military Cross, eventually succumbs in Italy in the final year of the war. The emotional devastation caused by the deaths of the people she most cared for can only be contained by a dedication to work, which now, however, seems pointless, since she had begun nursing out of empathy with Roland,

and now finds it difficult if necessary to forget herself in it. After Edward's death, she writes: "My only hope was to become the complete automaton, working mechanically and no longer even pretending to be animated by ideals" (p. 450). Like the combat soldiers themselves, she can only feel "a deep, nullifying blankness."

Brittain's romantic imagination and desire for a better world often conflict in her memoirs with the reality she must deal with on a daily basis. After Roland's death, she muses: "Since Roland had to die...I have often wondered whether really I would not have been glad for him to have been to Gallipoli [a military disaster for the Allies]...He was such a person for forlorn hope" (p. 334). Back in England after nursing in France, she observes of civilians: "I returned to a society where no one discussed anything but the price of butter and the incompetence of the latest 'temporary'" (p. 429). At the same time, she does not disguise positive feelings inspired by the war, even during its darkest moments. She reports her feeling on Malta, for example, of "the intense sharpening" of the senses and the "enlarged vitality" caused in her by the experience of war. At the final German offensive, when it looked as if the British army would be cut off and demolished, Haig's "back to the wall" speech does not disgust her. In fact, she is unable to think of the Field Marshall as the "colossal blunderer" of the Somme, since his fight-to-the-last-man rhetoric inspires her. Such passages, as she herself insists in the forward, are cited unaltered from her personal documents to display what she was feeling at the time.

The third and final part of Brittain's autobiography inevitably falls off in intensity with the end of the war. It details her busy postwar life: her return to Oxford, where she exchanges the study of English for history and international relations in an attempt to understand the world that made the war; her visits to the graves of Roland and Edward in France and Italy, which seems to have been a way of putting her grief behind her; her dedication through speech-making to the League of Nations and women's rights; her publishing of a novel. It is during this period of her life that she befriends Winifred Holtby, who would become her lifelong companion, and the two women embark on literary projects and become active in feminist and pacifist groups (later, she felt it necessary to deny rumors of a lesbian liaison with Holtby while criticizing those suspicious of any close relationship between women). Holtby continued to live with her after Brittain was married to the man coyly identified in the text only as "G." (George Caitlin, a philosopher, with whom she had two children), and she carries on with her life, each part of which would receive additional autobiographical treatment: thus, a second volume (1940), was dedicated to her intense relationship with Holtby and a third (1957) to her work for pacifism and women's rights. The narration of

these episodes effectively closes the narrative arc of melioration given from the retrospective point-of-view. They are essential to her “inspirational” project of offering her own life as a model: to show how a woman can transform herself despite, or through, suffering, can go from innocence to experience, from illusion to despair, to create a new, if unexpected, life without being paralyzed by grief.

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