

# Dressing Wounds: Considerations on Trauma Theory and Life Writing in Vera Brittain's Testament of Youth

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**Abstract-** This paper aims at analyzing how the trauma inflicted by the First World War is described by Vera Brittain in her autobiographical novel *Testament of Youth* (1933). The author, who shares many features in common with Virginia Woolf – regarding witnessing and writing about trauma – also lost her loved ones to the War: her fiancé, Roland Leighton, her brother, Edward Brittain, and her friend, Victor Richardson.

For Vera Brittain and some of her contemporaries, nursing became a woman's experience of taking part in the male-dominated realm of the First War. From treating wounds to listening to injured soldiers' talks, First War nurses grasped the geographies of men's bodies and minds, something regarded as "improper" by most parents whose daughters were born between the late Victorian and early Edwardian ages. Nursing was the closest a woman could get to the battleground in those days; in Brittain's case, for instance, the only safe way to see Roland again. V.A.D. nursing also allowed many women to evolve from tactile experience to the subjective activity of writing about the War, and Brittain's *Testament of Youth* may be regarded as one of its best examples.

What may account for the title *Testament of Youth* is the thought Brittain kept that writing about the distress she and her contemporaries felt due to war would probably have an impact on coming generations. She leaves a "testament" of a terrible incident that would more likely recede; yet, she acknowledges that, whatever may happen, it would never surpass the impact that the First War had on her generation of young women, who were deprived of the innocence of their youth.

**Keywords-** English Literature; First World War; Trauma Theory; Life Writing; Autobiographical Fiction.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When Woolf read *Testament of Youth* (1933) [1] for the first time, her impressions on Brittain's work and views on war seemed to cause her quite a surprise. Karen Levenback recalls that: "Although she did not review it, Woolf read Brittain's war book with great eagerness ('extreme greed,' she said in her diary) and found it so 'moving' that she neglected other reading."<sup>1</sup>

Writing consciously about the pain caused by the war to a woman may have even inspired Woolf to write "Professions for Women", the first working title for *Three Guineas* (1938), [14] according to Levenback (115) [11] and, somehow, helped Woolf cope with her own distress caused by the war, by writing about it. Levenback explains that:

*Brittain's experience in writing her book anticipated Woolf's in that the pain caused by the war seemed not to be assuaged despite the passage of years and led to pain in writing about it, a circumstance that may explain why it took Woolf herself so long to confront her own*

*experience of the war and to transform it to the stuff of fiction.*<sup>2</sup>

Not only did the two women belong to the same friend's circle<sup>3</sup>, they also had in common the fact of losing their loved ones to war: Woolf lost both her nephew Julian Bell, in Spain, 1937, and her friend Rupert Brooke, in April 1915. Brittain, as she recalls in her autobiography *Testament of Youth*, lost her fiancé, Roland Leighton, her brother, Edward Brittain, and her friend, Victor Richardson. The three men were educated at Uppingham School in Rutland. By the time they left school in the summer of 1914 they had become firm friends, dubbed by Roland's mother, Marie Leighton, 'The Three Musketeers.' Edward's connection with Roland would in some ways be strengthened by the beginning of Roland's relationship with Vera, though it is also clear that Edward was at first mildly jealous of his sister's involvement with his close friend. Linking them is Vera Brittain, passionate and intelligent, who gives up her studies in Somerville, Oxford, so that she can nurse in a military hospital. She served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse in

<sup>2</sup> Levenback 116-7.

<sup>3</sup> Levenback explains that: "Yet the Woolf's friends and colleagues in and around Bloomsbury (Vera Brittain, for example, and Rebecca West, Rose Macaulay, and Beatrice Webb), like the Woolf's themselves had played a part in the effort to keep the war and its experience alive in popular consciousness." (v-vi).

<sup>1</sup> Karen L. Levenback, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War* (New York: Syracuse UP, 1999) 115. (See *Diary* 4, 194).

London, Malta and France, from 1914 until 1918. After the war, she finished her studies in Oxford and made a postwar career as a writer, feminist and pacifist activist.

## 2. WOMEN'S HANDS DRESSING WOUNDS AND WRITING ABOUT TRAUMA

What Woolf and Brittain did not have in common would soon be reconciled after Woolf's reading of *Testament of Youth*, as Levenback explains:

*For Vera Brittain, who had, like returning servicemen, seen the effects of the war on the front, there were no romanticized memories of combat. For Virginia Woolf, who experienced the war on the blacked-out streets of London, reading Brittain's Testament of Youth on 2 September 1933 "lit up a long passage." What Woolf found of special note was that Brittain "told in detail, without reserve, of the war" and that "these facts must be made known." (Diary 4, 177).<sup>4</sup>*

One of the reasons that made Brittain's *Testament of Youth* a unique work, in terms of relevance to the cultural memory of England (it became a television serialization in 1978<sup>5</sup> and was recently made into a film by James Kent in 2014) was its innovative literary aspect: Dorothy Goldman reminds us that, prior to Brittain, "despair and bitterness about the War were not emotions that were often expressed in women's fiction of this era."<sup>6</sup> Addressing questions concerning the reasons and the horror of the War and, particularly, what the boys who went to War had to suffer, made her work unique, in terms of relevance and interest among the British people. Goldman adds that: "One of the reasons for the success of *Testament of Youth* was that for the first time since the beginning of the War 19 years before, a woman had written 600 pages asking these kinds of questions over and over again."<sup>7</sup> Similarly to Woolf, the trauma and the wounds inflicted by the war became part of Brittain's consciousness as a woman. Differently from Woolf, perhaps, Brittain acknowledges the universality of trauma that war caused to both women and men.

Another reason that may have led Vera Brittain to write *Testament of Youth* came with a letter she received from her fiancé, who was having a hard time fighting in the trenches of the First War, which asked the following question: "I wonder if your metamorphosis has been as complete as my own." Roland's defying question had already been answered, just before the letter arrived, in a diary entry: "I feel I shall never be the same person again and wonder if, when the War does end, I shall have forgotten how to laugh."<sup>8</sup>

Felman refers to Brittain's experience as she writes of the "transformation of the subject who partakes of an apprenticeship in history through an apprentice in witnessing."<sup>9</sup>, a recurrent feeling among British women who volunteered to work as V.A.D. nurses, a generation of young, upper-middle-class women who looked up to Florence Nightingale, the legendary nurse who became known as "the Lady of the Lamp", as well as Elsie Inglis and Louisa Garrett Anderson, both military doctors and militant suffragettes. Das compares and contrasts Brittain's "apprenticeship in history", which goes unrecognized by her beloved, and Roland's transformative "direct participation" as follows:

*For the First World War nurse, writing a journal, testament or memoir becomes a ritual in owning experience as much to oneself in the solitude of recollection as to the rest of the world: it is the record of a subjectivity whose trauma and effacement are simultaneously inherent in the act of bearing witness to another's wound, and ignored by a less than empathetic world.<sup>10</sup>*

It should be noted that recording trauma and effacement represented more than a nurse's "duty," it is also a significant part played by nurses on the recollection of cultural memory during wars. Another curiosity is that their writings are more resistant to censorship and deterioration, when compared to soldiers' reports from the battlefield.

For Vera Brittain and some of her contemporaries, nursing became a woman's experience of taking part in the male-dominated realm of the First War. From treating wounds to listening to injured soldiers' talks, First War nurses grasped the geographies of men's bodies and minds, something regarded as "improper" by most parents whose daughters were born between the late Victorian and early Edwardian ages. Nursing was the closest a woman could get to the battleground in those days; in Brittain's case, for instance, the only safe way to see Roland again.

V.A.D. nursing also allowed many women to evolve from tactile experience to the subjective activity of writing about the War, and Brittain's *Testament of Youth* may be regarded as one of its best examples. Das explains that:

*The hand is a recurring trope in the memoirs of the nurses, being the usual point of contact with the injured male body. Hands dress wounds, clean instruments, habitually comfort, may even cause fresh pain, are often disgusted and in rare moments of leisure, the hand writes its varied life.<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> Levenback 114.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Goldman, *Women and World War I: The Written Response* (London: Macmillan, 1993) 3.

<sup>6</sup> Goldman 138.

<sup>7</sup> Goldman 138.

<sup>8</sup> Roland's letter is referred to in *Testament of Youth*, page 216, whereas Brittain's diary entry appears in *Chronicle Of Youth: Great War Diary 1913-1917*. See Bibliography.

<sup>9</sup> Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing In Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992) 109-10.

<sup>10</sup> Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 226.

<sup>11</sup> Das xxvi.

About women's having a hand in war, literary historians Gilbert and Gubar described war as a "climatic episode in some battle of the sexes"<sup>12</sup>, arguing that "women felt liberated, psychologically, financially, and even sexually." It is important to add that such liberation came at a high cost, at the expense of psychological trauma and wounds of the women, similarly to Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as they were recorded in women's diaries, testimonials, and memoirs. Such genres intermingle fact and fiction, and may be described by Anne Whitehead as "trauma fiction", provided that "literary fiction offers the flexibility and the freedom to be able to articulate the resistance and impact of trauma"<sup>13</sup>. Max Saunders coined the term "autobiografiction", regarding those genres and others, a term that "represents a variety of interactions between autobiography and fiction"<sup>14</sup>, a key concept to a better understanding of life writing, that he describes, among other definitions, as "the perpetual weaving and unweaving of the self."<sup>15</sup>

The War, it may be said, charged a high price from Brittain: she had to leave her youth behind. At the age of nineteen, she reflects on the maturity she had quickly acquired in the War years, in contrast to the naiveté her diaries used to express, three years before. She writes:

*By 1916, the optimistic ideals of earlier years had all disappeared from the title-page of my ingenuous journal; they were replaced by a four-line verse from the writings of Paul Verlaine which has always seemed to me to represent more precisely than any other poem the heavy sense of having lived so long and been through so much that descended upon the boys and girls of my generation after a year or two of war.*<sup>16</sup>

The reference to Verlaine's sonnet seems to bring a key element to Brittain's decision to write a book. She quotes the last four verses from Verlaine's sonnet "Sagesse", written in 1881: "Oh, qu'as tu fait, toi que voilà / Pleurant sans cesse? / Dis, qu'as tu fait, toi que voilà / De ta jeunesse?" "Oh, what have you done, / You, who once cried ceaselessly? / Tell me, what have you done, / What have you done about your youth?" (my translation.) Note how quickly the "metamorphosis" took place in Brittain's life, "after a year or two of war."<sup>17</sup>

What may account for the title *Testament of Youth* is the thought Brittain kept that writing about the distress she and her contemporaries felt due to war would

probably have an impact on coming generations. She leaves a "testament" of a terrible incident that would more likely recede; yet, she acknowledges that, whatever may happen, it would never surpass the impact that the First War had on her generation of young women, who were deprived of the innocence of their youth. She explains that:

*The annihilating future Armageddon, of which the terrors are so often portrayed in vivid language by League of Nations Union prophets, could not possibly, I think, cause the Bright Young People of to-day, with their imperturbable realism, their casual, intimate knowledge of sexual facts, their familiarity with the accumulated experiences of us their foredoomed predecessors, one-tenth of the physical and psychological shock that the Great War caused to the Modern Girl of 1914.*<sup>18</sup>

Brittain relates the words "knowledge", "familiarity", and "experience" to the traumatic impact caused by the War. After having her innocence stolen from her, she sees herself performing a new social role, not necessarily a bad thing, but for which she had to pay a high price.<sup>19</sup>

Brittain's secondary motivation for writing her autobiographically inspired book seems to be the urge of sharing, with the reader, her painful "initiation rite" of the War. Authors such as Leigh Gilmore and Paul John Eakin acknowledge the role of autobiographical writing in overcoming traumatic pain. Gilmore argues that:

*For many writers, autobiography's domain of first-person particularities and peculiarities offers an opportunity to describe their lives and their thoughts about it; to offer, in some cases, corrective readings, and to emerge through writing as an agent of self-representation, a figure, textual to be sure but seemingly substantial, who can claim 'I was there' or 'I am here'.*<sup>20</sup>

Gilmore highlights what is perhaps the important function of autobiographical writing, i.e., that of empowering the writer subject with a sense of agency and a new identity. John Paul Eakin also relates autobiographical writing and the possibility of gaining identity, as he argues that "when it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely about the self, but is rather in some profound way a constituent part of self."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Brittain 45.

<sup>19</sup> The same price, perhaps, that women would later pay in World War II, although their direct participation in this event was a highlight for the creation women's military roles. That is not the same as to say that it was less traumatic, though. The point here is, Brittain seems to speak confidently about the reoccurrence of another war and its impact. History proved her right. As a result of the Treaty of Versailles (1919), The League of Nations, the international organization for world peace, was created, later to be known as The United Nations, in 1945, after the Second World War ended.

<sup>20</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 9.

<sup>21</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create identity in Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008) 25.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War." Originally published as part of her book *No Man's Land* (1988) and reprinted by Margaret Higonnet in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (see Bibliography).

<sup>13</sup> Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh UP, 2004) 87.

<sup>14</sup> Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010) 215.

<sup>15</sup> Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010) 215.

<sup>16</sup> Brittain 28.

<sup>17</sup> Brittain 28.



### 3. CONCLUSION

Finally, it may be said that the metamorphosis experienced by Brittain, during the War years, seems to have helped build and reshape her narrative. Hynes alludes to how her views on War evolve with it. He compares a passage from her early diary, where she describes how her brother Edward was wounded in the Battle of the Somme, to the same episode, as it was rewritten in *Testament of Youth*, after the war and the author's youth were over:

*We could neither of us say much... but he smiled & seemed gayer & happier than he had been all through his leave. I think the splendid relief of having the great deed faced & over was uppermost in his mind then, rather than the memory of all he had been through on that day - - hereafter to be regarded as one of the greatest dates in history.*<sup>22</sup>

If we take into consideration that her brother fought at the Somme since the first day of that battle, i.e., July 1 1916,<sup>23</sup> it may be seen that seventeen years had passed when a mature woman and experienced nurse records, in *Testament of Youth*, the following:

*Even then, neither of us could say much. He seemed - to my surprise... gayer and happier than he had been all through his leave. The relief of having the great dread faced and creditability over was uppermost in his mind just then; it was only later, as he gradually remembered all he had been through on July 1<sup>st</sup>, that Victor and Geoffrey and I realized that the Battle of the Somme had profoundly changed him and added ten years to his age.*<sup>24</sup>

Note how the names of her two best friends, who also died at the War, are mentioned, suggesting that her views on the War evolved in cooperation with others. The original phrase "one of the greatest dates in history" is replaced by the acknowledgement of the physical stress that made her brother look older, similarly to what happened to Vera herself, whose youth had been stolen by the War. About the same passage, Hynes adds that: "The older Vera Brittain looks back across the years, no longer with pride but with pity."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Vera Brittain, *Chronicle Of Youth: Great War Diary 1913-1917*. Ed. Alan Bishop. (London: Phoenix, 2000) 327.

<sup>23</sup> The Battle of the Somme, led by British forces under the command of Sir Douglas Haig was, according to Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (see Bibliography) described as "the largest engagement fought since the beginnings of civilization." (12) Fussell reports the disastrous figures: "Out of the 110,000 who attacked, 60,000 were killed or wounded on this one day, the record so far. Over 20,000 lay dead between the lines, and it was days before the wounded in No-Man's-Land stopped crying out." (13). The battle was ended: "On March 17, Bapaume - - one

of the first-day objectives of the Somme jump-off, nine months before - - was finally captured." (14).

<sup>24</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*. (London: Penguin Books, 1994) 282-3.

<sup>25</sup> Hynes 435.

On one hand, writing autobiography, as in Brittain's "testament", may be seen, according to Gilmore, as an attempt to leave something very important behind: "In autobiography, a person, solid and incontestable, testifies to having lived. An autobiography is a monument to the idea of personhood, to the notion that one could leave behind a memorial to oneself."<sup>26</sup> This "monument" may be either dedicated to herself or to the lost lives Brittain refers to on the praise page of her book: "And some there be, which have no memorial", a passage taken from the biblical book of Ecclesiasticus.

On the other hand, pity, testimony, and trauma are built in the legacy transmitted by Brittain, in *Testament of Youth*, to the women of following generations. A mythical reference, to the Greek women weavers (*moiras*), may be noted in Brittain's writing: it sounds as though she knew that war would inevitably reoccur and so would the fate of her women successors, as if her account of pity and trauma would certainly resonate. Das writes about the historical implications of leaving such an inheritance:

*Nursing and narration are integrally related in the project of reclaiming history as well as resisting its recurrence. At the core of each, in spite of the troubled and fractured ideology I have noted, is the impulse of preservation: just as the nurse sews up physical wounds and tries to save life, the narrator seeks to heal her mental wounds through the act of writing and preserve not just her subjectivity and experience but rather the memory and the knowledge of the cost of warfare. "Writing to expose wounds," notes Higounet, "is surely a first step toward healing wounds."*<sup>27</sup>

It may be said that Brittain forecast the relevance of her testimony to the present and the future historical up comings, and how they would affect other women, throughout different generations. And she handed it, in the fashion of a Greek *Moirai*, for other women writers to transmit it. Her hands meet ours as we read about her metamorphosis and try to understand our own.

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<sup>26</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> Two references appear here: the primary source, Das 227, and the cross-reference to Higounet (ed.), *Nurses at the Front*, xxxi. (see Bibliography).

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