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## **The Work of Memorial in an Age of War: Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth***

*Christine M. Doran*

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*“Work itself is given a voice. To present it verbally is part of a man’s ability to perform the work.”*

*Walter Benjamin*  
“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”

*“When the Great War broke out, it came to me not as a superlative tragedy, but as an interruption of the most exasperating kind to my personal plans.”*

*Vera Brittain*  
*Testament of Youth*

Vera Brittain is one of a number of women—whom George Gissing called “odd,” whom W. R. Greg called “superfluous,” whom Freud called “psychically rigid,” and whom Virginia Woolf called the “daughters of educated men”—who throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century sought honest, respectable, public, middle-class, nondomestic labor and caused such controversy that we, at the beginning of another new century, still deal with its echoes. Indeed, Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* speaks not simply to the war experience but to the production of a particular discomfort, partly physical and partly mental, around the movement of middle-class women into a professional space. At the end of World War I, the discomfort caused by this movement can be modeled in contrast to the trauma of soldiers. Just as soldiers were wounded and scarred, marked with the trauma of the war, middle-class women were marked by the

trauma of their movement into public space. In some ways, Brittain's search is for a professional identity that will allow her to understand some of what her fiancé, Roland Leighton; her brother, Edward Brittain; and her friends, Geoffrey Thurlow and Victor Nicholson, were experiencing. In that context, Brittain seeks to negotiate "raw" experiences—often presented, at least partially, in stereotypes—into the "known" and thus produce a fitting memorial.

Memorial history is the production of a singular work that stands in for a lost object. Rather than allowing the loss of the object to overwhelm the subject and render her immobile, the creation of a memorial can be seen as one of the final stages of mourning. Through the work of memorial, the lost object has been rendered whole, it has been made sacred, it has entered consciousness, and the energy attached to it has been rendered productive. An aura, as that term is defined by Walter Benjamin, has been created for the lost object. Specifically, for Benjamin, aura is the distance in space and time and the provenance (or history of creation and ownership) which marks a work of art. Memorials as art function to create distance temporally. A visible, constant reminder of the loss, they are nevertheless forgettable because knowable, codified, resolved. They are the healed scar rather than the open wound of trauma—an open wound that cannot heal because it has not yet been worked through into consciousness.

Benjamin's essay on mechanical reproduction and his essay on Baudelaire have become central in discussions of the link between the cultures of war and aesthetics, and are pertinent here in this discussion of work because they have enabled examinations of the shifts in experience and perception that accompany modern, technological culture. Benjamin maps out the central formulations regarding the cultures of war (fascist

aesthetics) and cultures of work (repetitious labor in factory assembly lines). And he demonstrates what he describes as “the sensation of the modern age: the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock” (“On Some Motifs” 176.) In Benjamin’s work, the modern, urban, technologized world produces an “increasing atrophy of experience” (“On Some Motifs” 159). He sets this increasing atrophy in opposition to a previous worldview, which contained a coherency, an explicability. This coherency, however, has been rendered fragmentary, and the belief that events can be known and shared—i.e., through narrative—has been damaged. Where storytellers once created memorial history—not merely conveying happenings (the daily, the factual, *Erlebnis*) but creating and sharing an experience (*Erfahrung*) with their listeners—this transmissibility of experience can no longer be relied upon. Experience, and for my purposes especially memorial experience, is *Erfahrung*, a “convergence in memory of accumulated . . . data” (“On Some Motifs” 157) and thus a story which can be shared.

Creation and transmission of *Erfahrung* is precisely what Vera Brittain promises at the beginning of *Testament of Youth*. That she wants to produce a work which can be a memorial in the traditional sense is clear from her constant invocation of Roland and Edward and her other lost ones. But in the modern, urban, technologized world such a task is rendered increasingly difficult. Experience no longer carries with it the weight and stability it once claimed. Brittain cannot produce a memorial with all its recognized glory because the aura has disintegrated under the shock of experience. The form of the text works against this memorial plan—it is fragmented by poems and extracts from letters. Furthermore, the text does not end with the death of Roland or Edward but instead continues with Brittain’s story at Oxford and the beginnings of her work as a feminist and a

pacifist. The text thus becomes not simply about an ending or a reading of an ending, as we would expect from a memorial—a thing that begins and ends with the loss it represents—but rather a continuing narrative.

This article, then, will be spent considering the work of memorial and how the trauma of the modern age of war renders it different from late-nineteenth-century experiences. Memorialization, particularly for the late Victorians, often involved the physical labor of producing some marker so that an event could be remembered without trauma—statues, placards, songs, poems, and the like. But memorialization is also psychic work—the working through of the trauma of loss. What makes the memorial work I am considering here different is that work during wartime carries different values from work during peacetime: Most work is assumed to be in some way *war work*. For women, for whom war had often been solely a work of keeping the home safe for returning soldiers, World War I resulted in a necessary rethinking of women's roles.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MEMORY**

The genre of autobiography, because of its necessary retrospective component, has much in common with works of memorialization. Autobiography was a genre that received much attention from the Victorians. Massive projects such as the *Dictionary of National Biography* were undertaken; Queen Victoria's *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* (1868) and its successor, *More Leaves* (1884), were bestsellers; and Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, and a host of others produced autobiographies. Indeed, such was the strength of the Victorian association with this genre that when Lytton Strachey, in *Eminent Victorians* (1918), attacked the Victorians, he did so by debunking and radically

revising the form of biography.

Brittain introduces her text by referencing Robert Graves's *Good-Bye to All That* (1929), another text which has long been regarded as generically hybrid. Not straight autobiographies, not really fiction, partly composed of letters and newspaper cuttings, and partly reconstructed through diaries, both texts struggle with traces of memory that refuse to be fully integrated into memorial history.<sup>1</sup> That Brittain and Graves begin with the autobiographical genre only to rewrite it, thus makes the clearest of sense. Both follow classical models of autobiography by beginning with earliest memories and then going on to discuss family histories, upbringing, and education. Graves, in fact, begins his text with: "As proof of my readiness to accept *autobiographical conventions*, let me at once record my two earliest memories" (1; my emphasis).<sup>2</sup> Yet both texts show that the genre of autobiography, as marker of a whole life usually considered retrospectively, no longer holds up under the weight of lived daily experiences. *Erlebnis* pushes past the boundaries imposed by *Erfahrung*, demonstrating the construction of each.

Brittain and Graves initiate their stories with reference to an event that served as a national memorial. They both offer as their first memory Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee of 1897. Graves writes of "being loyally held up at the window to watch a procession of decorated carriages and wagons for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee . . . (this was at Wimbledon, where I had been born)" (1). Brittain notes that she had "the honour of sharing with Robert Graves the subject of my earliest recollection, which is that of watching, as a tiny child, the flags flying in the streets of Macclesfield for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee" (*Testament* 17). Both set up this memory of an empire at the height of its pageantry to contrast more sharply with the trauma and devastation of the war.

They are both careful to tell where they were, Wimbledon and Macclesfield, both to suggest the specific locale and to stress the all-encompassing nature of the celebration and of the Victorian culture that produced it. Brittain aligns herself with Graves's 1929 text to demonstrate both her connection to and difference from the memoirs of male war combatants/survivors. Always clear that she was not a combatant in the same way as these men, Brittain nonetheless insists on drawing our attention to the ways in which her experiences were equally real, equally traumatizing, equally important to theirs.<sup>3</sup> Beginning with an entrance into this space of Jubilee memorial allows Brittain to rethink the memorial form while pleading for a world in which—through the inclusion of educated women in roles of political power—there is never again a need for such (Victorian) memorials to slaughtered innocents.

## **TRAUMA AND TESTIMONIAL**

*“Trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. . . . [A]n event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness.”*

*Cathy Caruth  
Unclaimed Experience*

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimonies*—especially Laub's chapter, “An Event without a Witness,” on the memorials of Holocaust survivors—offers a particularly useful model for my work in this essay. Their work on the testimonies of Holocaust survivors provides a theoretical framework in which to understand trauma.<sup>4</sup>

The traumas of World War I are obviously not the same as the traumas of the Holocaust of World War II. Nonetheless, many historians read the events of World War II

as being connected, one could say made possible by, the events of the World War I. Photographs and other representations of mass graves and atrocities first appear during the Great War as do the technologized forms of warfare and mass destruction—rapid-repeating machine guns, tanks, and chemical weapons. Other points of connection between the two wars can be found in the destabilization of worldviews and the need for some kind of witnessing from survivors that is tied to narration. For Laub, survival itself is tied intimately to narration:

The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life. (79)

Unfortunately, this desire to narrate is complicated by difficulties regarding genre and reception. It becomes impossible to narrate the atrocities accurately. There are no words for the pain, there is no frame of reference in a rational world, and there seems to be nothing one can do to integrate the event of the trauma. The question becomes how to tell the stories without rendering traumatic events banal or trivial. If the most commonly accepted frames of reference are generic ones, how does one make use of generic conventions without becoming trapped in them? Can these conventions be reworked to include the new information of the trauma? Brittain, in fact, uses the conventions of autobiography but marks the failures of the form with her constant interruptions of the narrative voice.

The inability to integrate the trauma, to rework the boundaries of generic



convention, is part of what Laub suggests when he argues that “during its historical occurrence, the *event produced no witnesses*. Not only, in effect, did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims” (80; emphasis in the original). The “inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive” event is one that fits no known pattern. In addition, it makes its participants feel as though their inability to map the event to a pattern reflects an inward flaw rather than being the deliberately imposed structure of the trauma. This precluding of witnessing is important not only for Laub’s reading of Holocaust witnessing but for what Brittain is attempting to do. An historical component in this precluding of Holocaust testimony is to be found in the propaganda structures in place during World War I, which produced a culture unwilling to accept the evidence of its own eyes. The work of Brittain’s autobiography, then, is this self-consciously public telling of her story; a mapping and reworking of the traumatic events so that others can learn from and share in her example. Brittain tells her story so it will not be forgotten. The success of *Testament of Youth*, in fact, led to a series of lectures by Brittain on how she came to write the book. One such lecture was the October 30, 1934, speech to the Empire Club of Canada, entitled “A Personal Confession of Faith.” Over and over in this speech, she negotiates being a woman speaking in public about war to an audience that often contained combatants from that war:

I never expected that any men would read my book. I certainly did not expect that a group of men of such a distinguished Club as this would have the patience to listen to a mere woman hold forth on why she wrote her book. The explanation is just that I think that the book got away from me to the extent that large events always get away from mere individuals and it is the events rather than the person or the

book in which the readers have been interested.

The disingenuousness of her references to the “distinguished Club” aside, Brittain reminds us constantly that she was someone who had personal experiences of the war that deserved as much time and attention as the personal experiences of any other survivor, that, in fact, because she has the ability to narrate her story, her experiences are *Erfahrung* and not just *Erlebnis*.

In many ways, one of the most fascinating aspects of war narratives is the necessity for some kind of retrospective narrativization, as though events can only be described long after the fact. These war stories are told in terms of the narrative strategies learned from novels or through other familiar genres, such as theater, conversion narratives, or letters. The stories are also often justified by recourse to two rationales: the narrator had actually been present at the events and/or other versions of the events have not told the story correctly. As Evelyn Cobley notes, “The main impulse of those who had witnessed the First World War was to set the record straight, to tell it as it had been” (6). Furthermore, there is the necessity of having a witness to make that narration of trauma possible.

Certainly, then, the desire to bear accurate witness to experience is one of the motivating factors for the number of war memoirs written from 1929 to 1933. Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate note that the desire to bear witness for survivors of the First World War carried its own problems, for “how can one bear witness when one’s knowledge is so imperfect? How do people imagine themselves as subjects, or indeed as citizens, in a culture which is mobilized around rumours, lies, and official secrecy?” (43). In this world, then, one cannot bear witness in the old way. The trauma of the war demands the work of witnessing to negotiate one’s place as survivor, but the witnessing must take new forms.

Another way of thinking about such trauma can be found in Sandra Gilbert's "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War,"<sup>5</sup> which suggests a potentially productive space for understanding trauma in its reading of boundary crossings that produce the uncanny—possibly resulting from attempts to transform the "raw" into the "known." The uncanny, or what Freud called "the return of the repressed," is often linked to trauma. Gilbert quotes Eric Leed who

recounts the experience of the young officer, incurably shell shocked when he was flung down "on the distended abdomen of the German several days dead" and realized "before he lost consciousness 'that the substance which filled his mouth . . . was derived from the decomposed entrails of an enemy.' . . . It would be difficult . . . to find a more complete violation of the distinctions which separate the dead from the living, friend from enemy, rotten from edible, than this experience which left a lasting mark of pollution upon the young officer." (265)

Experiences such as this produced a state of paradox and transformed these men into "dead-alive beings" (269). This reading of pollution as one root of trauma is particularly compelling. Pollution, after all, is the "right" stuff in the "wrong" place and the shock of recognition that something is out of place often produces trauma, such as the one Leed describes. Furthermore, the uncanny with its return of the repressed can be read as a marker of such trauma. Trauma is something so outside a frame of reference of the every day, the normal (*Erlebnis*), that it cannot be integrated into the psyche and thus never forgotten. Memorialization, the desire to remember and to render something *Erfahrung*, is tied to the fear of forgetting. But it is only after trauma has been abreacted, or worked through, that memorialization becomes possible. For Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, consciousness is that which protects the organism from stimuli and struggles "to preserve

the special forms of conversion of energy operating in it against the effects of the excessive energies at work in the external world” (608). Benjamin, glossing Freud, notes that the “threat from these energies is one of shocks. The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely are they to have a traumatic effect. Psychoanalytic theory strives to understand the nature of these traumatic shocks ‘on the basis of their breaking through the protective shield against stimuli’” (“On Some Motifs” 161).

### **BRITAIN’S WORK OF MEMORIAL**

*“Between 1919 and 1933, I was handicapped, harassed and oppressed by recurrent memories of the first World War, which had brought me much personal tragedy. But after I had published my autobiographical study of that War, those memories never troubled me again”*

*Vera Brittain  
On Becoming a Writer*

As the lines above suggest, Brittain’s own accounts clearly document the psychic trauma she works through. Indeed, she places the work necessary to survive and negotiate her trauma on a par with the work required of all survivors. Shell-shocked soldiers must reintegrate their selves, often through the creation of narratives that can be told to others; Brittain’s post-war neuroses demand no less.

Her initial efforts to become a nurse so that she might “share” the sufferings of her fiancé are often couched in terms of a masochistic stoicism: “He has to face far worse things that any sight or act I could come across; he can bear it—so can I” and “I never minded these aches and pains, which appeared to me solely as satisfactory attributes to my love for Roland” (*Testament* 154, 164).

Work—not just war—is trauma in Brittain’s memoir. On the one hand, Brittain’s analysis of the attraction of war for her generation demonstrates a keen awareness of its power:

[The] causes of war are always falsely represented; its honour is dishonest and its glory meretricious, but the challenge to spiritual endurance, the intense sharpening of all the senses, the vitalizing consciousness of common peril for a common end, remain to allure those boys and girls who have just reached the age when love and friendship and adventure call. (*Testament* 291-92)

There can be no argument about the devastation of war, but when the choice of war and threat of death seem to include the promise of the most compelling sensations of life, Brittain argues that few can resist. Lynne Layton writes “Brittain’s [early] excitement about the war also reflected her boredom and stifled aspirations. Like many English and European men, she hoped that war would change the order of things and put an end to a long period of stagnation” (72). This stagnation, of course, is as much about “love and friendship” as it is about political, artistic, and social concerns. Although they would probably not have used such terms, war is nothing if not sexy and sexualized, particularly for a generation of late-Victorian, middle-class women.

But if Brittain begins her war work following the rhetoric of patriotism and heroism, trying in her way to live up to the standard of her beloved fiancé and her beloved brother, she later learns to think of herself as “nothing but a thing that work is squeezed out of—a drudge, a time-machine, toiling by the clock along a stereo-typed routine” (*Testament* 173). The movement into a professional space—the space afforded her by nursing—is modified by a movement away from humanity, “a *thing* that *work* is squeezed

out of” (my emphasis). Brittain constantly balances the notion of a kind of progress against the potential loss of humanity: “[I]t is awful to think that the very progress of civilization has made this war what it is. . . . Just to think that we have got to the stage of motors, aeroplanes, telephones, and 17-inch shells, and yet have not passed the stage of killing one another” (*Testament* 138). Even as she becomes a technologized element of the war effort, a “time-machine, toiling by the clock,” so the war is driven by the “motors, aeroplanes, telephones, and 17-inch shells.” And both of these movements, seen in one light as a kind of progression, are linked in that they produce terrifying losses, either of self or of life.

The work that Brittain would eventually undertake would not be the work of the useless, flighty middle-class woman she strives so hard to distance herself from:

At this time a group of super-patriotic Buxton women, who were busily engaged in forming a women’s volunteer corps, provided yet another source of disturbance and interruption. Proudly they drilled and marched about the town in uniform, though none of them know what precisely was the object of all this activity. They were, however, most assiduous in telling me that I ought to join this, or that, or the other, the idea of course being that college was a pleasant and idle occupation which led nowhere. Thoroughly exasperated, I avoided their society, and it was not until two acquaintances outside the volunteer corps left Buxton to join a hospital under the French Red Cross, that the idea occurred to me of combining some nursing with my work for Oxford. (*Testament* 139)

That these women are figures of contempt is clear on a number of levels. All these women provide is “disturbance and interruption.” They march proudly although with no idea why they march. Furthermore, they do not understand the importance of college, which to them is always and only “a pleasant and idle occupation which led nowhere” and not Brittain’s reward for years of struggle. These women are “dressing up” and playacting as opposed to

“joining up” and working. The disdain she feels is very apparent. There can be no greater marker of her contempt for these women than to indicate their silliness and lack of education.

But, as *Testament of Youth* makes clear, college is also not enough for Brittain:

I remember once at the beginning of the war . . . [Roland] described college as “a secluded life of scholastic vegetation.” That is just what it is. It is, for me at least, too soft a job. . . . I want physical endurance; I should welcome the most wearying kinds of bodily toil. (139)

College, which had always been about work, i.e., the production of knowledge in a public space and a chance to be part of her brother’s world of intellectual comradeship, is no longer difficult enough. College should have been a space she could have shared with Roland and Edward. Instead, it becomes a space that separates her further from the men in her life. The chance of even approaching the shared trauma that is the war for Roland, Edward, and the others is nonexistent, and this situation is no longer acceptable to Brittain. Instead, the war will provide the “physical endurance” and public validation of her work. “Physical endurance” also stresses the “wounds-as-signs”<sup>6</sup> that this toil will leave on Brittain’s body. Brittain’s text returns our attention over and over to the toiling body.

Brittain imagines that joining up will put her in the same public space as Roland and Edward, a way of connecting her work to theirs, with few, if any, repercussions:

So closely, at this stage, was active war-work of every type associated in the public mind with the patriotic impulse which sent men into the Army that I never dreamed, amid all my analytical speculations, of inquiring whether “joining up” would not be, for me, a mere emotional antidote involving no real sacrifice. At the time my preoccupation with possible methods of following the persistently beating drum merely provided a blessed temporary relief from philosophical floundering. (*Testament* 140)

If college no longer gives Brittain access to the public world of knowledge/men/real life, perhaps association with another masculine space will give her what she wants. Even as she steps into this masculine space, however, Brittain is careful to distinguish her world from that of real soldiers. Joining up will only be an “emotional antidote involving no real sacrifice.” Of course, joining up does end up involving real sacrifice and the utter transformation of Brittain’s world. This passage is important as a marker of the retrospective space that Brittain inhabits while writing *Testament of Youth*—“little did I know then.” In “A Personal Confession of Faith,” Brittain makes explicit her reasons for writing *Testament of Youth*:

I did this because I thought it was one of the most effective ways of trying to persuade the youth of tomorrow to abstain from war, to try to seek any alternative to war that may be available because if they understood what war did . . . they would know the whole story and wouldn’t be deceived.

That Brittain must endlessly retell, rewrite, rework *Testament of Youth* in such a way speaks very strongly to how difficult it was to negotiate not just the material but the form.

The first work Brittain gets is darning socks—that most prosaic of work—but it still makes her feel that she has advanced closer to “Roland and the War.” Such is the glamour of active war work and the thrill of participation in a public space that Brittain overcomes her dislike of domestic chores. She tells of her introduction to war work:

On Easter Sunday I noticed in church the Matron of the Devonshire Hospital . . . which now took a number of soldiers. Impulsively I tackled her and asked if she had any work to offer which I could undertake in the intervals of



reading. She looked at me skeptically and replied rather drily that if I knew how to darn there were always plenty of stocks to be mended. As this happened to be the only form of elementary needlework that I had ever mastered, I gratefully accepted the somewhat prosaic alternative to my heroic visions; and when, a few days later, I sat surrounded by coloured wools in the hospital's vaccine room and attacked the colossal holes, I felt that I had advanced at least one step nearer to Roland and the War. (*Testament* 140)

Work for women remains domestic labor even as it serves the war effort. Brittain negotiates a complex back-and-forth movement in these few pages. On the one hand, she is not one of the foolish women and yet neither is she one of the soldiers. She belongs in the public space of college but it no longer holds the attractions it once did. Joining up marks her as someone who does something rather than simply watch as things happen. For Brittain, her joining up, resulting work, sacrifices, and trauma should not be equated with Roland's and Edward's. The war work, when she finally starts it, does bring her "one step nearer to Roland" but only by returning her to the feminine and the domestic.

Inhabiting the space of autobiography should place Brittain at the center of the text. Unfortunately, the autobiography as memorial has an empty center, a center of loss, and the form no longer functions as intended. Brittain therefore moves back and forth in an unstable narrative that cannot provide the basis for a monumental history. Another story that Brittain tells about the writing of *Testament of Youth* is that "a young friend of mine, on being told that I was doing an autobiography and not a novel said, very frankly, 'I shouldn't have thought anything in your life was worth recording.'" <sup>7</sup> Part of Brittain's awareness of herself as a writer is her awareness of not being a Victorian writer. No longer writing "Victorian biographies . . . 'monuments of rectitude and mausoleums of humbug'"

(*On Becoming* 88).<sup>8</sup> Brittain is instead writing a book that will appeal to the ordinary man or woman.<sup>9</sup>

## THE BODY AS HUMILIATION

At the end, the war leaves Brittain alone and far from Roland, Edward, Victor, or Geoffrey. Although she had been pleased with her entry into public space and work, by the end of the war, the work has come to mean nothing to her. On hearing the news of the Armistice, Brittain tells us: “I went on automatically washing the dressing bowls” (*Testament* 460). She is once again doing mechanical, domestic labor, but now with the removal of any rationale—no Roland or Edward to tell stories to, thus enabling her to make sense of her work—that labor has become meaningless.

Public spaces, too, have been transformed. Brittain is dragged away from her washing up duties by another VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse) to witness the Armistice celebrations. The description of what happens next could easily be used to sum up Brittain’s first few postwar years as she describes a mechanical being in a fragmented, chaotic, and unintelligible world:

Mechanically, I followed her into the road. As I stood there, stupidly rigid, long after the triumphant explosions from Westminster had turned into a distant crescendo of shouting, I saw a taxicab turn swiftly in from the Embankment towards the hospital. The next moment there was a cry for doctors and nurses from passers-by, for in rounding the corner the taxi had knocked down a small elderly woman who in listening, like myself, to the wild noise of a world released from a nightmare, had failed to observe its approach.

As I hurried to her side I realised that she was all but dead and already past speech. (*Testament* 461)

Brittain is again a mechanical being with no connection to those around her. The “triumphant explosions” that once would have signaled a memorial moment are fragmented and distanced to a “crescendo of shouting” and rendered unintelligible. The taxicab—i.e., the machinery of war—which careens around the corner strikes not only the “small elderly woman” but all the others who have been knocked over by a postwar world whose approach they failed to observe. The “wild noise of a world released from a nightmare” is too much for many to take in, and this experience leaves them “past speech.” Brittain’s mechanized body is rendered the site of trauma with a particular inflection because of its gender.

Her first eighteen months back at Oxford after the war were filled with battles against a breakdown fueled by insomnia, dreams, and hallucinations.<sup>10</sup> She imagined that her face was disfigured by a beard: “I looked one evening into my bedroom glass and thought, with a sense of incommunicable horror, that I detected in my face the signs of some sinister and peculiar change. A dark shadow seemed to lie across my chin; was I beginning to grow a beard, like a witch?” (*Testament* 484). Susan Leonardi reads the beard as a manifestation of Brittain’s survivor guilt.<sup>11</sup> It is certainly compelling to read the beard as a response to the death and injury of all the young men in the war, not just the young men she knew personally but also all the wounded she nursed. In other words, the beard is a way for Brittain to take the place of all her lost young men as well as a site of her anxiety about usurping their roles.

To be sure, the beard is a markedly overdetermined symbol for Brittain and for her critics, almost all of whom mention it at some point. I have space here for only one more example: the beard as manifestation of the bodily fragmentation that proliferated during

and after the war. Over 41,000 men had limbs amputated during the war and another 421,000 suffered other serious bodily damage. The sight of limbless men was to be one of the earliest and one of the longest-lasting images of the war. In response to amputation and wounding on such a massive scale, there were important innovations in prostheses and cosmetic surgery. Joanna Bourke notes that this resulted in a “new constituency of disabled people . . . that fundamentally altered the *whole* experience of disability . . . [and produced] the fit man, the potent man *rendered* impotent” (37-38; emphasis in the original). Although Bourke focuses only on males and their bodies, her insights into the altered status of disability are fruitful. As disabilities begin to be more associated with agency, they also became more connected with fragmentation and fragmented bodies in a variety of discourses. No body was ever completely whole or perfect and prostheses, or extensions/tools, became more and more prevalent and more and more mechanized.

The prosthetic body, in particular, was articulated across a range of cultural sites: war wounded, congenitally disabled, industrial accidents, sex-change operations, glandular rejuvenations, beauty treatments. Tim Armstrong, in *Modernism, Technology, and the Body*, points to the telling space of advertising as one locus for bodily fragmentation and prostheses. During the interwar years, advertisers began to use fragments of bodies to sell their items: “uncovered knees . . . the back of a pair of legs in a hosiery advertisement; the first nude woman in 1936, photographed by Steichen for Woodbury’s Facial Soap. (We do not see her face: she is shown from behind, rendering the body as synecdoche)” (100). Each of these body parts stands in for a lost or inadequate object that can only be replaced through the purchase of a commodity. The widespread rise in cosmetics is also a phenomenon of the interwar years.

Armstrong connects this bodily fragmentation in “the work of women writers in the 1930s: [to] the moment of looking in the mirror and experiencing the body as a humiliation (often cosmetics feature in such scenes)” (100). Brittain’s beard is just such a moment of fragmentation and humiliation. Brittain makes repeated mention of the anxiety produced by mirrors: “I was ashamed, to the point of agony, of the sinister transformation which seemed, every time I looked in the glass, to be impending in my face” (*Testament* 497). Brittain’s anxiety worsens when she moves to new lodgings:

My lodging . . . contained five large mirrors and for this reason had been selected for me by the Bursar, who was amusedly aware of that vain interest in clothes for which my fellow-seniors were accustomed good-humouredly to tease me. . . . [It] soon became for me a place of horror; I avoided it from breakfast till bed-time, and if ever I had to go in to change my clothes or fetch a book, I pressed my hands desperately against my eyes lest five identical witches’ faces should suddenly stare at me from the cold, remorseless mirrors. (*Testament* 499)

The mirrored rooms were chosen for her because of her vanity, her “vain interest in clothes.” Brittain possessed a “chocolate-box” prettiness, and comments are made on her looks throughout *Testament of Youth*. Here, the dreaded masculine beard intrudes on a classic scene of female narcissism, i.e., woman gazing at herself in a mirror. Yet that vanity is also the site of the wound. She ends up hiding from the mirrors and herself by “spending the nights on a couch in Winifred’s attic” (*Testament* 500). Her movement into the public space of the war has resulted in a threat to the private sanctuary of femininity. She can only find safety with Winifred Holtby and through further work in public spaces: “for the fact that [the neurosis] did not quite conquer me, *Oxford Poetry*, 1920, and the objective, triumphant struggle for women’s Degrees were probably, together with Winifred’s eager

and patient understanding, jointly responsible” (*Testament* 500). Work, which has caused the breakdown, is also the thing which cures it.

In the work which *Testament of Youth* attempts—the creation of an appropriate memorial for her lost loved ones—one finds a constant struggle with the anxiety attached to being a woman in public spaces. Brittain never lets us forget that women have not always been allowed freedom of movement and choice of work. Forays into public are almost always tied back to a reminder of the constraints placed upon her by virtue of her gender. A train ride home from St. Monica’s school at the age of fourteen becomes a twofold lesson in the dangers of the world. Brittain is placed in a compartment with a respectable elderly female and a male passenger. The elderly woman departs at the next stop and Brittain is left alone with the man: “a swarthy, black-haired individual of the commercial-traveler class, with rolling eyes and large hairy hands” (46). Although he paws at her, she is stronger and quicker than he realizes, and she pushes past him to escape to another compartment, one that contains safety and a middle-aged woman.

The first lesson, of course, is that one must be wary of strangers, especially swarthy men of a lower class, given contemporary alarms about the white slave trade—stories of which had filled newspapers since W. T. Stead’s “Maiden Tribute” in 1885.<sup>12</sup> Although Brittain cannot articulate at the time why she should be nervous about the commercial traveler, she does know that the rules about young girls traveling said that they must never be left alone with strange men. The second lesson only comes years later with the adult knowledge that this act was an assault. Brittain had begun her work “[supporting] the Six Point Group in urging the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill” which made her “[realize] the existence, as legal conceptions, of indecent assault and the age of consent”

(*Testament* 47). Brittain's autobiographical, memorial work is never only the surface story of potential dangers but always also a reminder to her readers that they live in a time and place where they may read of such stories and not remain in ignorance. Her work is thus always both the "factual" telling of the event and the self-conscious "narration" of the event.

This awareness of gender and space is made clear in another anecdote of Brittain's. As a grown woman, she spoke publicly in such places as "Hyde Park [where] the necessity of resolute vocal competition with taxi-horns, thunderous buses and Salvation Army hymns soon overcame [my] surviving remnants of pre-war squeamishness over such very public discussion of assault and prostitution" (*Testament* 585). Almost as though scripted, speaking about the topic of assault and prostitution in public brings with it advances from a man:

I was walking dreamily back to Bloomsbury along Oxford Street, when a middle-aged man planted himself ingratiatingly in my path. Such a charming young lady, he began without preamble, oughtn't to have to go home by herself; would I allow him to call a taxi and accompany me wherever I should like to be driven? A little disconcerted at being taken into the half-light for exactly the social type against whose existence I had just been arguing, I stammered that I was going home to work, and preferred walking alone. What would the London Council for Promoting Public Morality have thought of this ironic encounter? I asked myself, as I resumed, rather more rapidly, my meditative progress towards Doughty Street. (*Testament* 585)

Speaking in public and doing her work results in unwanted advances that are fended off by a reference to her work.

In her trajectory from sheltered, unmarried middle-class woman to mature rational

adult capable of fending for herself on the streets of London, Brittain marks the power of work, even with its inherent restrictions, to negotiate and survive trauma. Work, the speaking out in public about the issues—the sexual, physical, emotional, and intellectual jeopardy of women sparked by keeping them ignorant—that produced a subject—a girl who had to struggle for an education and still remained abysmally ignorant of much of the world—liable to break under the shocks she experienced, was the only way to break the cycle and integrate the trauma into a survivable narrative. Brittain claimed that the war arrived for her not as a superlative tragedy but as an interruption to her personal plans; by making a profession of being a woman in public, she always made sure to emphasize that the one is not disconnected/disconnectable from the other.

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## Notes

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1. Nietzsche writes of three kinds of history: “a *monumental*, and an *antiquarian* and a *critical* kind of history” when he is describing the uses and problems of history for people (14). Nietzsche imagines that actions are only possible within a narrow range: “All acting requires forgetting as not only light but also darkness is required for life by all organisms” (10). One must remember something of one’s past in order to act, but too much remembering can be paralyzing. History is useful as a science, to Nietzsche, only when it serves a higher power, such as the strength of will of great men who struggle to build a civilization. These great men need the knowledge and inspiration of other great men of the past. Unfortunately, too much knowledge may only serve to remind them of failure and thus prevent action. These are the men who create and need *monumental* history:

That the great moments in the struggle of individuals form a chain, that in them the high points of humanity are linked throughout millennia, that what is highest in such a moment of the distant past be for me still alive, bright and great—this is the fundamental thought of the faith in humanity which is expressed in the demand for a *monumental* history.  
(15; emphasis in the original)

This belief in the power of monumental history underpinned the thinking of Brittain, Graves, and their circles before the war. They saw themselves as connected along an unbroken chain to the heroes of the past. Even Brittain, who knows that, as a woman, her place in this great chain is that of handmaiden or observer, cannot escape the seduction of such rhetoric when she writes tellingly of the “attraction that war holds for youth” (71). The attraction lies in the perceived opportunity to become someone who will leave a mark on this great chain of monumental history.

2. If we remember the Graves of Fussell’s *Great War and Modern Memory*—Graves the liar, Graves the “tongue-in-cheek neurasthenic farceur whose material is ‘facts’” (206)—then we know from this very beginning that Graves’s display of willingness to accept autobiographical conventions is another game, another performance. It is one that we accept unthinkingly at our own risk.

3. Brittain’s “A Personal Confession of Faith” offers a perfect example of this gesture of equivalence: the idea to write the *Testament* first entered “my mind when I came back from an experience that many of you have shared with me and which I cannot pretend that I went through in the way you went through it, although perhaps some of your feelings were reflected in the way I felt about it—I mean the great German Offensive of 1918 in France.” A shared event, yet one that is not quite the same for Brittain as it was for the veterans in her audience, it is used to mark her connection as well as her distance. “A Personal Confession” was a speech Brittain gave to the Empire Club of Canada on October 30, 1934.

4. Writing on trauma studies has become something of a growth industry in recent years. Felman and Laub’s co-authored book is a key text for considering how surviving trauma requires narration; otherwise, they argue, one remains psychically locked in the traumatic space. Although not specifically about Vera Brittain, I found Higonnet useful for how she thinks about the war experience of noncombatants; Winter intriguing for how he interrogates Fussell’s claim that the First World War provoked irony as a suitable response (Winter argues that many of the “old” traditional responses to war and death continued); and Clewell thought-provoking for how she reads Woolf as modeling an “anticonsolatory practice of mourning” (199).

5. Gilbert’s essay has troubled readers, especially other feminist critics, since its first publication in *Signs* in 1983. Gilbert largely treats male and female experiences of the war as completely separate and opposed. She sees women as benefiting from a war that wounded men: by giving women different kinds of work experiences, by allowing women travel and freedoms unknown before the war, by getting women the vote, and by putting men in the place of helpless victims of phallic female power. Gilbert writes: “as young man became increasingly alienated from their prewar selves . . . women seemed to become, as if by some uncanny swing of history’s pendulum, ever more powerful” (262-63). In particular, Gilbert makes much of the War Offices propaganda posters, in particular those such as Alonzo Earl Foringer’s infamous 1918 Red

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Cross War Relief poster, which depicts an enormous female nurse cradling a tiny wounded male on a stretcher with the words “the Greatest Mother in the World.” This poster, for Gilbert, represents masculine sexual fear of the castrating phallic mother. Marcus offers a corrective to some of Gilbert’s claims, especially her historical elisions, when she notes that British women did not get the vote until 1928; the franchise granted in 1918 was only for women over 30 with property. In addition, economic statistics show that thousands of women lost their wartime jobs; in such cases as the Civil Service, women were turned out wholesale. Furthermore, Marcus argues that the war was as destructive to women’s culture and history as to men’s: “At the height of the suffrage movement in 1911 there were twenty-one regular feminist periodicals in England, a women’s press, a feminist book shop, the Fawcett Library, and a bank run by and for women. The war decimated that impressive coalition” (136). With regard to the question of the war posters, Marcus reads them as a response to the

overwhelming powerful public iconography of the women’s suffrage movement, a challenge to the figures of Amazon Joan of Art, the virgin warrior and the professional single woman drawn as the protector of mothers and children. The image of the powerful single woman at work or as the champion of her sex, the great posters of female victimization, the woman being forcibly fed and the Cat and Mouse Act poster which dramatized the Liberal Government’s release of hunger-strikers only to pounce and rearrest them when they spoke in public, had to be wiped out of the public mind by the only images of women allowed by a nation at war, the nurse, the mother, the worker. (140)

Rather than reading the posters as manifestations of some deep psychological anxiety, Marcus sets the posters in a specific historical frame of reference. For more responses to Gilbert, see Ouditt, Goldman, and Raitt and Tate, among others.

6. I owe this term to Scarry’s *Resisting Representation*. British novels, she notes, have always involved the problematic representation of work. Work resists representation, in Scarry’s terms, because description of its repetitive motions sits poorly with plot- or action-driven narratives. Scarry’s analysis explicates the ways in which work is important not just for the products it produces but for the marks it leaves on the worker. Although it is probably easiest to see Scarry’s point in relation to manual labor, it should be understood that all kinds of labor leave marks. Scarry’s formulation is especially useful when brought to a study of women’s work, for cultural anxiety about women’s labor had everything to do with the way that work could shape the worker.

7. The words I’ve used here come from “A Personal Confession,” but Brittain liked this story so much she used it in other places, including *On Becoming a Writer*.

8. The quote within the quote comes from “a daily newspaper.”

9. For a fascinating reading of Brittain’s use and transformation of the autobiographical form, see Stewart.

10. Peterson claims that Brittain began experiencing some of these symptoms as early as 1915. While not a completely convincing argument, her essay does point to the importance of gender in diagnoses of madness.

11. See Leonardi for a reading of the beard as tied to Brittain’s survivor guilt and to anxiety over the nature of her relationship with Winifred Holtby. Holtby writes to Brittain throughout their relationship as though to a lover or sweetheart. Given Brittain’s vehement heterosexuality, it is unlikely that a physical, sexual component to their relationship existed, although this is something about which Brittain and Holtby scholars like to argue. For more on Brittain and Holtby’s friendship, see Clay, who uses their correspondence to make clear the strength and complexity of the bond between the two women. Work becomes the term that legitimates a friendship potentially under scrutiny by a homophobic postwar culture while desire becomes an

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acceptable descriptor for female professional ambitions. The fit between Clay's essay and my concerns about the intellectual, middle-class woman's place in the world is clear.

12. For more on Stead and the Maiden Tribute, see Walkowitz, 96-97.