

Women's Counter-Memories of the First War World: two emblematic case-studies Vera Brittain, Mary Borden

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Abstract: The tradition of canonical war writing has long been seen as something belonging to men, on the contrary, for many women the First World War was a sort of catalyst for developing a public voice while at the same time creating a different gender perspective on the same historical event. This aspect has become evident since the last two decades of the Twentieth Century when cultural historians, Memory Studies and Gender Studies pointed out not only the inadequacy of a monolithic memory but also the many traces left by women's controversial memories of the same event in the collective consciousness. In this perspective the numerous European female writings (especially memoirs and autobiographies) show the extent to which First World War turned upside down the relationships of individuals with the 'symbolic order' in which they have grown up. The outpouring of European female writing reveals both the impact war had on women in finding new social roles and their different political positions in European woman's suffrage movement. For instance in England in the women's movement for the vote, First World War provoked the break between the pacifist Sylvia Pankhurst and her mother, the well-known leader of the *Women's Social and Political Union*. Particularly interesting, as Vera Brittain shows in her moving autobiography *Testament of Youth*, is the way the danger threatening the homeland led to the apparent negation of the traditional view of opposing male and female roles and positions in the society, resumed, nevertheless, later at the end of the war. Our paper will highlight some of the many thorny issues war female writings arise with particular regards to English historical context and to same case-studies such as Vera Brittain and Mary Borden's works.

Keywords: First War World, memories, Vera Brittain, Mary Borden

Before starting my contribution, I would like to make a few points about the meaning that, according to my opinion, celebrations of the First World War should have, in a moment when savage and meaningless wars are raging. As Pope Francis was saying in these days, “War is folly, brought about and wanted by military industries and arms merchants”. Celebrations, to have a meaning, must not sacralise the memory of the absurd and paradoxical event the Great War was, but rather to focus a critical memory on it, to highlight aspects that have been neglected and censured far too long. Indeed, one of the pivotal points of feminist theoretical thought is the concept of Re-vision of tradition, which calls for critical memory (Rich 1972). In the title of my paper, the important term is “*counter-memories*”, which purports to highlight how memories of women taking part in the conflict struggled to enter the collective memory of the First World War and how it deviates from the canon and the traditions of official remembrances. Women’s memory is a “controversial memory”, for it is in constant tension between a tradition to be “Re-visioned” and the construction of a new collective identity of women that cannot avoid being undertaken via an individual one (Monticelli 2007). Silence on the part of official history, as I shall try to demonstrate, is all the more paradoxical, because not only was the mobilisation of women at a European level imposing, but it also produced radical changes in their habits, and brought about new legislation in their favour, foremost female suffrage in Great Britain. This oblivion is thus a paradox that can only be explained by keeping in mind that the historical research for centuries have continuously pushed female presence out of the official picture. To allow these “counter-memories” to re-emerge, from the 1980s gender studies on the part of female historians (Theobaud 1986; Bravo 1980) together women literary critics (Higonnet, Jenson, Michel and Collins Weitz, eds. 1987) have been fundamental. These female scholars patiently and tenaciously made the effort of recomposing and reconstructing the presence of women in the First World War, a presence that must be part of every country’s history. This reconstruction has also entailed investigating about the reasons for certain silences, certain forgetfulness, reinforcing the process of gender identity. Indeed, for a long time Cultural historians (Fussell and others) carrying out important studies on the First World War did not consider sources, novels,

diaries written by women and did not ask themselves fundamental questions, such as: what did women do during the war in belligerent countries? How did women feel about this war? Is there a difference between the way women bear testimony and the way men do? Does war involve the two sexes differently?

It is only recently that cultural historians have started dealing with these problems, I am thinking of the new edition of Antonio Gibelli's book (*La grande guerra degli Italiani*, 2014) that dedicates a whole chapter of the book to the significance of women's presence in the Italian Great War, using interesting sources, not just the what was reported in the press at the time, but also the letters and the postcards that women of all social walks of life wrote to their husbands and fiancés at the front, the archives of military industries (see for instance the archives of industrial society Ansaldo in Genoa). A study that would be interesting to carry out and that has not as yet been done is comparing the differences between women's memoirs of this world shattering event at a European level. In fact, from a methodological point of view, generalisations are dangerous, because in studying the part played by women and their participation in the war, one has to account for not just the different geographical historical and political aspects, but also the distinct social classes the women belonged to and the different phases of the war. I have chosen two case-studies Vera Brittain, and Mary Borden belonging to the Anglo-Saxon world because a few differences emerge respecting the Italian ones. In particular this is true for the interlinking between women's participation to the war and the movement for the emancipation of women. If it is true that the English suffragist movement split in regard to taking part in the war, it is also true that it was the mobilization of women into the war effort that furthered the cause of women's right to vote which in Britain was granted in 1920 to women over 30, and in 1928 to women over 21, thus bringing their voting age to that of men. While in Italy, despite there being proposals in this sense, female suffrage was achieved only in 1945, at the end of the Second World War. In the introduction to the volume *Donne nella grande guerra* Dacia Maraini (2014) draws attention to Italian exemplary stories of women belonging to different social classes that bring to light "(...) il coraggio, la tenacia, la forza di corpi femminili in azione..." [... the bravery, the perseverance, the strength of the female

bodies in action], during and after the war that devastated Italy. Women who played an important part in the chronicles at the time and that sometimes were recognised and admired by their contemporaries. However, later on, when collective memory started being arranged: “(...) con un processo che potremmo paragonare alla scomparsa carsica dei corsi d’acqua, che pure alimentano importanti sorgenti, sono passate nel silenzio di una sepoltura che viene considerate ‘naturale’” [... with a process we could compare to the disappearance of waterways in the Carsican ranges, despite their feeding important springs, they have passed in silence to a burial that is considered «natural» despite not being so at all] (Maraini 2014: 8).

Studying the memories and memoirs of women at a European level the first element that must be stressed is that they have a tone and pitch that is very different from their masculine counterparts. This can be explained by the fact that the war effected a radical change in women’s daily lives, and that they underwent different experiences from those of men, during the years in which war raged. Their testimonies are not characterised by the sense of mourning, suffering and frustration that are to be found in the novels and the diaries of writers who endured trench warfare. Indeed, women during the first world war started to carry out tasks that before had been prevalently masculine: they became “munitions workers” for the production of artillery, they drove buses, became white collar workers in banks and public offices, they drove ambulances and above all, entered field hospitals as nurses in massive numbers. In the photos collected in the Imperial War Museum in London women appear smiling, proud of their new uniforms, some of them wearing trousers to drive cars and sidecar carrying motorcycles. This mass admission of women in the working part of civilian society caused a deep crisis in the mesh of patriarchal order, a breaking of some taboos (an example was the new role of lesbian women in the war effort as Radclyffe Hall pointed out in her novel *The Well of Loneliness* and her short story *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*) and of some pre-existing limitations between roles and tasks, women are aware of, to the point of saying they found themselves facing a topsy-turvy world, as Nina McDonald in one of her poems states: “Girls are doing things/They’ve

never done before/.../ All the world is topsy-turvy/ Since the war began" (Macdonald 1981:69).

This upheaval of roles causes a different attitude in women regarding the War: in women's testimonies a sort of excitement, a sense of liberation, of increased self-confidence can be perceived. "Outside the cage" was the expression sometimes used to articulate this new frame of mind, while instead many male heroes of modernist novels express a sense of impotence, of frustration and feel the war as a deep, sexual wound. The disillusion and the weariness of men forced to passivity and immobilised in the trenches contrasts with the coeval powerful "release of female libidinal energies" (Gilbert 1987: 212). Cultural historian Eric Leed, on this feeling, states: "women in particular reacted to the war experience with a powerful increase in libido" (Leed 1979: 47) vigorous hostility between "the front" and "the home front" arose, creating a harsh misogyny amongst the men fighting in the trenches. Vera Brittain described this state of things perfectly when she said that: "the war posed a barrier of indescribable experience between men and women they loved, thrusting horror deeper and deeper inward (...) Quite early I realized the possibility of a permanent impediment to understanding" (Brittain 1971: 122).

It is well known that the excessive enthusiasm some women felt towards the war participation has been strongly criticised by Karl Kraus who defined the journalist Alice Shaleck "the quintessence of the perverse Amazon" because in her war reportages on the Eastern front she portrayed it heroically and optimistically, giving the readers "an appetite" for war. It is also true, however, that in many testimonies by women, especially those drafted at the end of the war, or in its aftermath, there appears a great feeling of guilt for not having been in the trenches, a painful awareness that the war devastated an entire generation of men and women. This feeling can be found reading the war reportages of two American women, Edith Wharton (*Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort*), e Nellie Bly, who worked as journalists on two opposing fronts, – Edith on the French front, Nellie on the Austro-Hungarian one. They both brought to light the enormous massacre and devastation the war had provoked. In their running chronicles sent during the first months of war they did not give the conflict a heroic and optimistic portrayal, erasing its devastation and pain.

Instead, their recounted the horrors and throw the same, lost yet lucid look on the absurd violence, the waste of human lives and the useless devastation of the land itself. An example can be found in Wharton's terrible descriptions of the walking wounded *elopeés* "traumatised, destroyed, frozen, deafened and half paralysed" (Cetti 2010: 16).

In this sense, without forgetting the already mentioned upheaval of roles that war produce in patriarchal society, I would like to briefly recall, before passing on to my last point, Virginia Woolf's important pacifist message in *Three Guineas*, written in the inter war period, in which she not only recommends the establishment of the "Society of Outsiders" but also a passive resistance to patriarchal militarism similar to that advocated by many other women pacifists.

I have chosen to talk about the position of women as nurses and as Voluntary Aid Detachment field nurses (VAD), because it seems to me that it effectively reflects the sometimes contradictory and paradoxical aspects that this role caused both at an individual and a collective level. European women, in their role as nurses, have had great weight in the Great War. For the first time women belonging to the middle and upper classes entered hospitals to care for the wounded and came into contact with the male body at a public level. Society immediately realised the possible erotic-sexual risks women could encounter, and reacted by imposing strict regulations. Gibelli, on Italian nurses, states that their regulations obliged them to respect the wounded soldier's rank and hierarchy in order not to risk sexual intercourse. Nurses were not allowed to care for Generals (who were usually from their own social extraction) except in emergencies. Voluntary nurses were charged with privates, who, being from humble origins, would not have dared conceive, and even less manifest, erotic inclinations towards them. Moreover, propaganda tried to idealise their image, bringing it back to traditional figures. Nurses were compared to mothers, the great mother taking care of the sick. The nursing figure promoted female involvement without contradicting, indeed, reinforcing the stereotype of woman as the ministering angel entrusted with taking care of a man's body, with relieving his pain. Thus, what is emphasised is the maternal role, or "maternage", to use an effective French expression, a symbolic maternity extended from the private to the public sphere. In this sense, both the

maternal attitude and the social distance between nurses and patients was to be an antidote to proximity, by setting down clear cut boundaries

Despite these strict regulations, their commitment to nursing activities gave further occasion to women, especially unmarried ones, to leave the close confines of the family and take on public relevance and social usefulness. In the memoirs of women who became nurses, in their letters, there emerges the coexistence of feeling of compassion and pain for the torment of the wounded, mingled, however, with a sense of elation, exhilaration for the chance offered to show their worth. Although the war scenery was painful, nurses feel they are appreciated for their work and this has the effect of strengthening their identity as women. On the other hand, despite the regulations imposed on nurses, it appears evident, as Gilbert states, that the representation of nurses in novels both by male (see for instance Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*) and by female authors: "takes on a majesty which hints that she is mistress rather than slave, goddess rather than suppliant" (Gilbert 198: 14). The position of nurse possesses, according to Vera Brittain "a sacred glamour", because, thanks to the cures they minister to the bodies of wounded soldiers, for the first time they learn "the masculine functioning", an aspect that the previous Victorian rules and education had repressed and censured. Brittain declares: "Towards the men I came to feel an almost adoring gratitude for their simple and natural acceptance of my ministrations... for the knowledge of masculine functioning which the care of them gave me, and for my early release from the sex-inhibitions that even today beset many of my female contemporaries both married and single" (Brittain 1971: 143). The ambiguous and contradictory aspects of the figure of the nurse are also evident in the iconography of posters of the first World War: emblematic in this sense is the Red Cross War Relief Poster painted by Alonzo Earl Foringer in 1918 where an enormous nurse ("The Greatest Mother in the World") holds in her arms a small stretcher whereon lies an immobilised wounded soldier: an image blending the sacred (Madonna "The Pietà") with the erotic element.

Mary Borden's 1929 novel *The Forbidden Zone* brings to light not only the complexity of the nurse's role, but also how difficult it is to describe the horrors of war without incurring in aesthetic complacency. Mary Borden was a successful novelist, and a

literary hostess, and is remarkable for having served in both wars, in each establishing and running mobile hospitals in conjunction with French authorities. Her experiences in the world wars were at the basis of *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), and *Journey Down a Blind Alley* (1946).

The Forbidden Zone is to be considered a modernist novel, due to the narrative technique used by Borden: a series “of intense sketches and vignettes” describing, in a highly metaphorical style her war experiences, followed by a few poems. In *The Preface* Borden explains the motivations that brought her to write this book, but also the difficulties she encountered. As in other modernist novels about the Great War Borden declares she faces the memory of confused experiences that are difficult to put in order because the experience of war is inexpressible: “To those who find these impressions confused, I would say that they are fragments of a great confusion. Any attempt to reduce them to order would require artifice on my part and would falsify them” (Mary Borden 1929).

In the sketch “Moonlight”, like in the other “Blind a Story” the heroine is a nurse who has had to suppress all her womanly characteristics to bear the atrocities she sees and to be able to carry out her work:

She is no longer a woman. She is dead already, just as I am – really dead, past resurrection. Her heart is dead. She killed it. She couldn’t bear to feel it jumping in her side when Life, the sick animal, choked and rattled in her arms. Her ears are deaf; she deafened them. She could not bear to hear Life crying and mewling. She is blind so that she cannot see the torn parts of men she must handle. Blind, deaf, dead – she is strong, efficient, fit to consort with gods and demons – a machine inhabited by the ghost of a woman ... (Borden 1929: 59-60)

Borden, like other women who volunteered as nurses, describes her sense of loneliness, the lack of female solidarity with the other women at the hospital, the fact of having to suffer alone “the sense of guilt for surviving”. But perhaps the most disquieting and sometimes disturbing aspect, as Max Saunders (2008) has well spotlighted, is when Borden, to describe Pain personifies it as a mistress and insists in its sexualisation. As Max Saunders claims, “to personify Pain as a mistress is to aestheticize it”.

"Once they were fathers and husbands and sons and the lovers of women. Now they scarcely remember. Sometimes they call to me "Sister, Sister!" in the faint voices of far-away men, but when I go near them and bend over them, I am a ghost woman leaning over a thing that is mewing; and it turns away its face and flings itself back into the arms of Pain, its monster bedfellow. Each one lies in the arms of this creature. **Pain is the mistress of each one of them.**

Not one can escape her. Neither the very old ones nor the slender ones. Their weariness does not protect them, nor their loathing, nor their struggling, nor their cursing. Their hideous wounds are no protection, nor the blood that leaks from their wounds on to the bedclothes, nor the foul odour of their festering flesh. **Pain is attracted by these things. She is a harlot in the pay of War**, and she amuses herself with the wreckage of men. **She consorts with decay**, is addicted to blood, cohabits with mutilations, and her delight is the refuse of suffering bodies. . . . In the dark she wakes them and tightens her arms round their shrivelled bodies. She strangles their cries. She pours her poisoned breath into their panting mouths. She squeezes their throbbing hearts in their sides. . . This is true. I know. I have seen. (Borden 1929: 61-63)

In this fragment both pain and pleasure are blended in a perturbing way: the horror of war distresses, but at the same time attracts. Borden brings to the foreground what Walter Benjamin ("The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 1936) had clearly claimed, that it is the danger of rendering the tragic experience of war aesthetic, of sacralising it, making it metaphorical, of reading it not as history, but as mystery. Borden herself realised this danger, when she mentions in her preface the risk of falsifying reality and claiming she herself has only managed to give a blurry image of it "... I have blurred the bare horror of facts and softened the reality in spite of myself, not because I wished to do so. But because I was incapable of a nearer approach to the truth".

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