

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ENGLISH AUTOBIOGRAPHY – 20th Century

Virginia Woolf

In 1940 Virginia Woolf remarked to her friend Ethel Smyth, “There has never been a woman’s autobiography.” The remark has puzzled and provoked many readers, since in the simplest sense it is historically wrong but also because it is strictly true of Woolf herself. She never wrote an autobiography. And yet she was often very close to it, in her novels, her approximately 4,000 letters (six volumes of them published in 1975-80), and her powerful personal essays. Moreover, her father was Leslie Stephen, author of biographies of major English authors and editor of twenty-six volumes of the highly respected *Dictionary of National Biography*. Life-writing was keenly interesting to her, as was all writing and women’s writing in particular.

All this comes together in her brilliant personal essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, which is based upon two lectures Woolf gave at Newnham and Girton colleges in Cambridge University in October, 1928. She had been asked, she says, “to speak about women and fiction”), and the title comes from her basic argument that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” (Ch. 1) So in the six chapters she expands on these two needs: the humiliations women have been subjected to historically, partially as a result of lacking them; how women have been portrayed in literature by men; how women have written about themselves; and how women can now use the greater opportunities they have today.

The first chapter focuses on women’s lack of access to money, when their property, if any, was managed by their husbands, who therefore used it mainly for themselves and their sons. Universities such as Cambridge and Oxford, which she lumps together as “Oxbridge,” were endowed with rivers of gold and silver and were only for sons. Without directly mentioning her own family, she could be referring to how her brothers were sent to fine schools and colleges, while she and her sisters were not. Her father thought education was for men. In one heart-breaking incident she tells of how she wished to see Milton’s manuscript of “Lycidas” in an “Oxbridge” library, but could not. Women could enter only with men.

In the second chapter she, as a representative woman, goes to the British Museum in London and looks up subjects like “Women and Poverty,” only to find a long list of sub-topics leading to books written by men. For an explanation, she turns to men’s anger at women and the men’s egos. The paradox, developed in chapter three, is that for centuries male writers, from dramatists like Sophocles, Shakespeare and Racine, to great novelists like Tolstoy have nevertheless created very great female characters. But what women characters might women have created if they had ever had the opportunity? What, she asks, would Shakespeare’s sister have written?

Chapter four is more like a critical essay on the great women writers of the past and surveys of women writers today. But the critical comments are still very personal because of the profoundly immediate importance of these writers to Woolf. In chapter five she opens saying that women’s writing has become much more various, on archaeology, aesthetics, travel and diplomacy, and is becoming more artful and subtle. “The impulse towards autobiography may be spent,” she writes, thus admitting the opposite of her remark in 1940, but also implying that autobiography as such is primitive and artless. So she metaphorically pulls a new novel off the shelf, “*Life’s Adventure*,” by a “Mary Carmichael” to see how it advances the cause. (There was indeed a Marie Carmichael Stopes (1880-1958), an advocate of birth control, who published a novel called *Love’s Creation* in 1928, using only her first and middle names.) In it Woolf finds (or imagines) the sentence “Chloe liked Olivia,” which leads her to the heretofore forbidden, but to Woolf very

immediate, topic of lesbianism. "Sometimes women do like women," she says frankly and rather disingenuously, going on to argue that women should now write about this and other once suppressed topics.

In these ways Woolf clearly writes about herself and intimate, important issues in her life without writing long, full-size autobiography. At other times, she is also more outspoken than in the quasi-invention of *Life's Adventure*. At the end she returns to her basic argument that to write a woman needs money (500 Pounds a year, which she says she has been willed by an aunt, as the minimum) and a room of her own. She then quotes from the famous anthologist Arthur Quiller Couch, editor of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, writing that most of the great English poets of the Nineteenth Century had had enough money to go to universities and obtain the leisure to write. For this Woolf has sometimes been attacked as an elitist. Alice Waters, for instance, has pointed out that Harriet Jacobs ("Linda Brent"), author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, had no such middleclass security and privacy. But Quiller Couch acknowledged a few exceptions to his generalization, e.g. John Keats, and so implicitly does Woolf. Woolf was writing an artful personal essay, about the primary conditions of her own life, and for women essentially like herself. Simultaneously, she was arguing for all women's rights and their equality with men – economic, political, and literary.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Quentin Bell says in *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* that "in *A Room of One's Own* one hears Virginia speaking," that in it "she gets very close to her conversational style...the conversational voice is there." Select several passages that seem to you to illustrate this and explain why you think so.
2. In the beginning of Chapter 6 Woolf muses that on an ordinary day in London, "Nobody cared a straw" for "the development by the average woman of a prose style completely expressive of her mind," and that she didn't blame them. But she herself obviously does care. Why is this so important?
3. Woolf and her husband Leonard were the founders of the Hogarth Press, which they ran out of their own house and which published books by themselves and many of their very talented friends. It took a lot of work and distracted them from many other projects. But she once wrote in her diary, after turning down a book she did not think was very good, that she could write a better book on the same subject herself, "off my own bat, for the Press if I wish!" "Yes," she concluded, "I'm the only woman in England free to write what I like." How does *A Room...* possibly fulfill that freedom?

Robert Graves

World War I (or The Great War, as it was first called) not only brought new freedom and opportunity for British women, as Virginia Woolf wrote, it was a watershed event for the whole country, and Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* is the literary testimonial that shows why. His gruesome descriptions of the trenches, poison gas, military arrogance and bungling, atrocities, and occasional heroism and sacrifice, preceded by his critical descriptions of Charterhouse, his boarding school, and upperclass snobbery, gave English readers a new image of the war and the moral failures of the dominant Edwardian culture. It has been called one of the 100 most important non-fiction books of the Twentieth Century.

But it is also unusual for many more reasons. Graves's mother was German, and his memories of his five summers with her relatives in Bavaria are sensuous and colorful. His German ancestry did not make him sympathetic to the German enemy, but it did make him sometimes an outsider at Charterhouse School, and make some people suspicious of his loyalty. He was also an outsider because of his interest in poetry and literature and because he did not play football or rugby, the most popular sports. Instead, he became a

skilled boxer. But a source of relief from school was mountain climbing in Wales, with his teacher George Mallory, who later died climbing Mt. Everest. (By Graves' time mountaineering had become more of a dangerous and challenging upperclass sport than the spiritual experience it was for Wordsworth.)

His love of Wales and the Welsh continued with his volunteering in the summer of 1914 for the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and he became very proud of the regiment's traditions (expressed even in the distinctive spelling of the name). But how ironic it was, he notes at the end of chapter eleven, that the men knew more about regimental history "then they did about the fighting on the other fronts or the official causes of the war." (p. 89) They were therefore unprepared for the horrors of the front. The heart of the book is Graves' stories of battles, deaths, suicides, desertion, pettiness, lying, shooting of prisoners, and wounds, ending with Graves' own last wound in 1917, when a piece of shrapnel penetrated his lung. He was hospitalized in England, and in January, 1918, he was married to Nancy Nicholson, the daughter of a painter.

He did not go back to the war. But he remained haunted by it. On Armistice night in 1918 he did not join the hysterical celebrations but went "walking alone along the dyke above the marshes of Rhuddlan (an ancient battlefield, the Flodden of Wales) cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead." For years he could not use a telephone because of an electric shock he had had from a trench phone. The smell of flowers could bring back his fears of poison gas. He also had difficulties adjusting to postwar university life (difficulties that he shared with his new friend T.E. Lawrence and his fellow war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen) and supporting his wife and family. When he gave a reading of his and their war poetry at a village church near Oxford, poems that were not about "the glorious dead" but "about men dying of gas-poisoning and about buttocks of corpses bulging from the mud," the villagers were "scandalized." (pp. 289-90)

His "war horror" continued all through the 1920s, though he tried to cure himself by studying psychology and in many kinds of writing. Finally, he and his wife were divorced, and he began an affair with the American poet Laura Riding. He also wrote a popular biography of T.E. Lawrence.

Readers should also know a little of the publishing history of *Goodbye to All That*. The first edition came out in 1929 and became an instant success. In April, 1929, Laura Riding had tried to commit suicide, and Graves wrote the book in only three months, hoping to earn enough money for them to move to Majorca, Spain, which they did. He then began a successful literary career, writing the historical novel *I, Claudius* (1934), *The White Goddess* (1948), and over a hundred other books. But having been written so hastily, *Goodbye to All That* had many inaccuracies which he tried to correct in a second edition published in 1957. That edition so softened his criticisms of the war and British society, however, that the book lost the qualities that had made the 1929 edition so powerful. Therefore his grandson, Richard Percival Graves published a third edition in 1995, using the 1929 text but with 56 pages of annotations that note its errors and many of the differences between it and the 1957 text. Reading all the annotations and the text at the same time is complicated and, for most people, not necessary. But reading some of them is instructive. It is rare for some one to write an autobiography when he is only age 34, as Graves was in 1929. It is also rare, but understandable, for some one to then "correct" it at age 62. But his grandson gives readers to opportunity to study the results.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Graves returned from World War I with what was then called "shell-shock." Veterans of World War II were said to suffer from "battle fatigue." Today the more scientific-sounding term is "post traumatic stress syndrome." The condition is not easy to diagnose precisely and treat. How would you describe Graves' condition?
2. On p. 172 (ch. 17), Graves says, "There was no patriotism in the trenches." Earlier, however, in chapter 11 and elsewhere, he describes soldiers' great pride in their regiments.

What is the difference? How does Graves himself show his own regimental pride and scorn for patriotism?

3. Graves' portrait of Charterhouse school and his fellow students must have been especially shocking to his British readers in 1929 because it was so different from the images of British schools that they knew from books like *Tom Brown's School Days*. (Americans of the 1920s and '30s had blythely acquired comparable positive images from books like *Dink Stover at Yale*.) Contrast Graves' "school days" with what you know or can imagine are the opposite.

4. Despite Graves' rejection of schoolboy snobbery and upperclass elitism, he still has many upperclass traits and manners. What are they and how do you sense them in him?

Vera Brittain

Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) is a much longer autobiography than Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* but it too is dominated by the Great War. "When the Great War broke out," it begins, and the next two chapters, describing her sheltered life as the daughter of a prosperous paper manufacturer in Buxton, in England's midlands, are essentially just a preface to the long middle of the book which describes her wartime activity. She left Oxford, where she had started as a promising poet and student of literature, to become a nurse-assistant in the Voluntary Aid Detachment, or "V.A.D." She could not bear to be cloistered in St. Mary Hall, the University's small women's college, while her brother was training for the army and her boyfriend, Roland A. Leighton, was at the front. She served from the summer of 1915 in various military hospitals in London, Malta, and France, and finally in a civilian hospital back in London until the War's end. But meanwhile her boyfriend Roland, who had become her fiancé, was killed in France, and later her brother Edward, to whom she was devoted, was killed in Italy. These two devastating losses left her so broken and depressed that it was very difficult for her to go back to Oxford and start a post-war life.

In fact, the War changed her whole life. At Oxford she changed her subject from literature to history, hoping to understand the origins of the War. After Oxford she and her close feminist friend Winifred Holtby became aspiring journalists and novelists in London, but her keener interest was as a volunteer lecturer for the League of Nations Union. She also attended League conferences in Geneva. Still later, after *Testament* was published, she became a leading pacifist, though she did support World War II to the extent of leading food drives and serving as an air raid warden. But her dedication to pacifism was proven by the discovery in 1945 of her name on a German list of the 2,000 people the Germans would execute if they occupied England. She died in 1970. Her life, as represented in *Testament* and her other volumes of autobiography, has since been made into a film and a Masterpiece Theater series.

What further distinguishes *Testament of Youth* is its immediacy and her passion for life. Although she presents herself as just a bright middleclass girl from the provinces who loves her family and sports (especially tennis), she clearly had an exceptional interest in preserving every possible record of her life, her times, and her friends. Most notably, she kept a diary. She also saved her friends' letters and sometimes copies of her own letters to them. Thus she can, and does, quote from all these at length, as well as from her and her friends' poetry. The result is a very long book, but such detailed documentation lets the reader know exactly what she said and felt. Brittain is not quite Tolstoian, but she wants to be.

Somewhat paradoxically, she is also sometimes shy. While frankly saying of her work nursing that she became quite unashamed of seeing and touching all parts of the naked male body, she never describes her intimacy with her fiancé Roland. Carefully chaperoned, as proper young girls and boys then were, they never even seem to kiss. Brittain's admirers have been still more curious to know of her relationship with Winifred Holtby. Were they lesbian lovers? During college they became very close, as two very

talented older students who had little to do with either men or the younger women who had not served in the War. Afterwards, they lived together for long periods, until Holtby's death in 1935. The man Brittain did marry is coyly referred to only as "G." But he too was unusually talented. His name was George Catlin, and he was born in England, but moved to the United States after serving in the War and became a professor of Political Science at Cornell University. They were married in 1925 and had two children, but had a trans-Atlantic marriage. She did not like the isolation of Ithaca, New York, and so lived mostly in London, where Winifred helped raise the children. He divided his time between the United States, Canada, England, and extensive travels. He was reportedly very jealous of Vera's close relationship with Winifred.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Compare Brittain's and Graves' experiences in the War and after. Which is the more vivid writer? Who presents the more sympathetic picture of the problems they had readjusting to civilian life and at college?
2. Study the poems that Brittain quotes. Some are chapter epigraphs; many more are included in the text. Who are they by? How do they add to the autobiography?
3. What are the possible reasons for Brittain's not giving "G.'s" full name and background?

George Orwell

Although Orwell is best known for his political fable *Animal Farm* and his dystopian satire *1984*, his first books were autobiographical essays, journalism and fiction.

He was born Eric Blair, the son of an minor official in the Indian Civil Service, but after age four he was raised and educated in England. "George Orwell" was a pen name that he used on his first book, *Down and Out in London and Paris*. It was about his experiences as a dishwasher and in other menial jobs, and at the time it came out (1933) he had become a school teacher. It was followed by two novels and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), his personal examination of working class living conditions in depression-era England. *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) is based on his experience fighting for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. He was there only from late December, 1936, until being shot in the neck in June, 1937, and returning to England, but *Homage* is one of the most vivid and realistic books on that war.

What makes it so good is Orwell's very direct and unpretentious account of his own experiences and feelings. He did not go to Spain as just a reporter, as a great many other writers from America, England, and the rest of Europe did. He went to fight. He became a private and then corporal in the P.O.U.M. (Workers Party of Marxist Unification), which was one of the left-wing factions supporting the Spanish Republic against the Fascists and Colonel Franco, who eventually became the winner and dictator. So, although he was a reporter and kept a diary, he wrote not only as an eye-witness but as a human participant, registering his own aches and pains and frustrations.

The language is simple and frank. "We were near the front line now, near enough to smell the characteristic smell of war—in my experience a smell of excrement and decaying food." (p.16) It is lucid. The first Fascists that he saw were far in the distance, "tiny as ants, dodging to and fro behind their parapet." And it is shockingly honest, as when eventually he shoots at one of the dot-like "ants." "The dot disappeared. I hoped it [the bullet] went near enough to make him jump. It was the first time in my life that I had fired a gun at a human being." (p. 21)

But he can also be very clear and impersonal in describing the many political factions which made up the rag-tag, badly armed and poorly organized Republican army. He must do this frequently, because they change and he moves among different units, but an example is the long introduction to them in the beginning of Chapter V. After ten or eleven pages of it, however, the first person "I" returns, as in "I found myself in the middle

of a political discussion that practically never ended.” The readers can now understand-- and sympathize. They have had enough too! But Orwell is still objective. He does not take sides—until, a couple of pages later, he comes out. “It is easy to see why, at this time, I preferred the Communist viewpoint to that of the P.O.U.M....What clinched everything was that the Communists—so it seemed to me—were getting on with the war while we and the Anarchists were standing still.” Later yet, he really speaks his mind, in attacking the propagandists back in England. “The people who write that kind of stuff never fight;... It is the same in all wars; the soldiers do the fighting, the journalists do the shouting, and no true patriot ever gets near the front-line trench, except on the briefest of propagandist-tours.” (p. 66)

Even so, simple and direct as this seems, one must also keep in mind that Orwell was a kind of propagandist himself. He had a political position—anti-Stalinist Communist in Spain but working-class Laborite or Social Democrat in England—that he wanted to persuade his readers to support too, and to realize that Fascism must be defeated in Spain or it will have to be fought everywhere. Thus the voice or persona that he repeatedly returns to is a friendly, familiar one that for many of his readers would have brought back memories of the Great War, as when he describes life in the trenches –

In trench warfare five things are important: firewood, food, tobacco, candles and the enemy. In winter...they are important in that order, with the enemy a bad last. Except at night, when a surprise-attack was always conceivable,... (p. 23)

Or when he quotes old army songs—

There are rats, rats,
Rats as big as cats,
In the quartermaster’s store! (p. 78)

This author may not be “George Orwell” but the underlying Eric Blair. Or, conversely, it may be the most persuasive George Orwell, who liked his pseudonym for the very reason that it sounded really round and English.

In any case, we hear this voice again and again when he refers to English stereotypes of Spain and Spanish culture – trains that don’t run on time and a people who can’t be disciplined. And we hear it loud and clear in the final chapters of *Homage to Catalonia* when, weary and recovering from the bullet in his neck, he is returning to England and “the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen—all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs.” (p. 232)

Questions for Further Study:

1. Do you think Orwell had read *Goodbye to All That*? Why or why not? In what ways is his book like Graves’?
2. Virginia Woolf and George Orwell both wrote with definite rhetorical purposes: they wanted to persuade readers of a cause. How are their techniques both similar and radically different?

Final Paper

1. How are the structures of conversion narratives and autobiographies of education similar to war stories? How are they not? Answer by writing about at least one religious conversion narrative (Kempe, Bunyan, or Newman), one "education" (Wordsworth, Mill, or Gosse) and one war autobiography (Graves, Brittain, or Orwell).
2. What are the uses of autobiography to the writer's own psychological health, education, or development? Choose four of the following autobiographers (Pepys, Boswell, Wordsworth, Graves, Woolf, and Brittain) and consider such matters as why they wrote, whether they published their books, and how they were or were not changed by the experience.
3. Several of the autobiographers you have read were already famous public figures at the time they wrote. For example: Kempe, Gibbon, Newman, Mill, and Gosse. Why did they write and what else do they have in common? Consider such matters as style, their self-images, and techniques of self-presentation.
4. Vera Brittain's title, *Testament of Youth*, is unusual. It has obvious biblical echoes, and also legal ones as in "my last will and testament." Are there others? But youths do not write the latter, although the subject of youth has been an important subject of many autobiographies. Compare her tone and selfhood in her "testament" with the treatment of youth in three other autobiographies.