

“They that have power to hurt but will do none” Lying in the Literature of the Great War

It may be the second most memorable scene in that unforgettable book. At the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow visits Kurtz's Intended to give her a packet of his letters. Marlow identifies her “mature capacity for fidelity” and her essential “guileless” and “trustful” (73) nature as she grieves for Kurtz's lost idealism. Her enduring love for him conflicts with Marlow's memory of Kurtz's last words, “The horror! The horror!” (75), and the total destruction of the ideals Kurtz represented, which his Intended still cherishes. Consequently, his replies to her questions and comments convey profound double meanings and ironies as he struggles with telling the truth. Marlow succeeds in comforting the Intended and being honest until she asks him to repeat Kurtz's final words and as she pleads to hear, “His last word—to live with.... Don't you understand I loved him—I loved him—I loved him” (75). In his mind, Marlow hears “The horror! The horror!” but he remembers how, “I pulled myself together and spoke slowly. ‘The last word he pronounced was—your name’” (75). “I knew it — I was sure!” exclaims the Intended, her romantic hope confirmed, and she weeps with grief and joy. Reflecting later on the lie he told her, Marlow explains, “I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether” (76).

That darkness, and similar black lies, would be repeated to countless other grieving women and loved ones twelve years after *Heart of Darkness* was published in 1902, when the Great War would bring other messengers who would not tell the truth about the war and its dead. Lying about the war is the subject of my paper.

In examples of texts from the First World War, I find such lying to be insolubly perplexing, caught in the complex conflicts of individual and group needs, of national ideals and powerful personal feelings. By telling the truth about lying, the writers I have selected do what is extraordinary: they realize in their texts the conflict between not hurting the feelings of the bereaved and perpetuating a popular heroic idealism about the war that they know is false. They also know they cannot admit that the death has been useless and wasted.

Lies about the Great War in literature fall into two broad categories, the big and small. Rudyard Kipling, poet laureate of empire and patriotism, and Director of Propaganda for the British Colonies, summed up the big lie in his *Epitaphs of the War 1914-1918*: “If they question why we died,/ Tell them, because our fathers lied.” As a father, Kipling pressed his severely short-sighted only son to enlist, and endured his death on the front in July 1915, aged 18. Kipling’s epitaph, voiced by the dead, may be the reproach of his dead son. The spokesman for the trench poets of the big lie is Wilfred Owen. In the famous passage from *Dulce et decorum est*, he evokes the nightmare of a soldier dying of poison gas, “the blood/ Come gargling from froth-corrupted lungs,/ Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud/ Of vile, incurable sore on innocent tongues” (20-24). He ends the poem with a warning to those who tell “with such high zest/ To children ardent for some desperate glory,/ The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est/ Pro patria mori” (26-27). In the unpublished *Preface* to his war poems, Owen wrote, “All a poet can do today is warn. That is why all true Poets must be truthful.”

Kipling and Owen identify the big lies about the war, which are based on countless little lies told at the personal level. One of these is revealed in Siegfried Sassoon’s poem, *The Hero*. It begins with the words of “the Mother” (1) — the word is capitalized to represent all mothers — who has read the letter from her son’s Colonel about his death at the front. She comforts herself with the heroic ideal that “Jack fell as he’d have wished” (1), in the opening line of the poem. Her “tired voice ... quavered to a choke” (4) as she consoles herself with, “We mothers are so proud/ Of our dead soldiers” (5-6).

The second stanza turns attention to her son’s “Brother Officer,” like “the Mother” a representative type, in this case of all such messengers. Like Marlow with Kurtz’s Intended, the officer brought the news of Jack’s death and had “told the poor dear some gallant lies/ That she would nourish all her days, no doubt” (8-9). The phrase “no doubt” is loaded with irony, for the poem will end with no doubts in the officer’s mind—and in the reader’s — about Jack’s death. Sassoon’s descriptive posing of the “Brother Officer” and “the Mother” adds to this irony. Their body language stresses

the lie that separates their responses to the death: he “coughed and mumbled” (10) for his duplicity; her “weak eyes/ Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,/ Because he’d been so brave, her glorious boy” (10-12).

This contrast, and its source in the truth about Jack the soldier, is devastatingly confirmed in the poem’s last stanza, which takes us into the memory of the messenger officer:

He thought how “Jack,” cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he’d tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair. (13-18)

Sassoon appends a note to his poem, “Does not refer to anyone I have known. But it is pathetically true. And of course the ‘average Englishman’ will hate it.” His poetic truth-telling reveals what he believes the general public will “hate,” that soldiers will lie about the war and the dead to avoid hurting grieving loved ones, or because the truths of the war are too terrible to reveal. But what Sassoon calls “pathetically true” about such lies perpetuates the falsehood that every soldier is a hero and dies an heroic death, which in turn perpetuates public illusions about the war. It is such illusions that he must reveal in his poem.

Combat veterans lying to the public about life at the front find dramatic expression at the end of Henri Barbusse’s bestselling novel, *Under Fire*. Published in France in January 1917 and winner of the Prix Goncourt, the novel also was widely read in Britain, including by Sassoon, who cites a quotation from it as an epigram for his 1918 volume of war poetry. Barbusse writes of his fellow *poilu*, the pejorative nickname for the “hairy ones,” the frontline French soldiers. After the battle that is the climax of the novel, the survivors are on leave in Paris, where they stop among a crowd of civilians in front of a window display about the war. Barbusse describes it as,

a ridiculous group scene with the aid of wood and wax puppets: on a piece of ground dotted with little pebbles, such as the ones you find in an aquarium, a German is kneeling in a new uniform, with sharp creases, and even wearing a cardboard Iron Cross, holding his pink wooden hands out to a French officer, whose curly wig forms a cushion for a child’s kepi. His

cheeks are plump and pink, and his unbreakable baby eyes are looking into the distance. Beside the two figures is a gun borrowed from the stock of some toyshop. A board carries the title of this lively composition: '*Komarad!*' (273).

This publicly staged tableau of civilian impressions of the front evokes an immediate response from the soldier narrator and his comrades: "Faced with this childish assemblage, the only thing here to remind one of the immense war that is raging somewhere under the sky, we shrug our shoulders and start to laugh bitterly, offended and deeply wounded in our memories" (273). The window display gives the lie to the life and death in the trenches experienced by the soldiers, and which has been the subject the novel. The disgust of the *poilu* is interrupted by a "very elegant lady," who is among the group of civilians stopped to look at the shop window. Barbusse describes her as an "enchantress," who touches two of the men with her gloved hand to ask: "Tell me gentlemen, you who are real soldiers from the front, you've seen this in the trenches, haven't you?" 'Eh ... yes ... yes' the two men reply, intimidated and flattered to the depths of their being. 'Ah! You see! And they've been there!' people are uttering in the crowd" (273). Retreating from the scene, the men try to rationalize their response, but the narrator concludes the episode with the comment, "That day, those were their first words of false witness" (274).

Barbusse was 41 years old when he joined the army in 1914. His maturity contrasts with the youth of most of the other war poets and colours his writing with deep shades of sympathy rather than irony. He uses his fictional memoir to shape his experience in the trenches to dramatize the truth of the soldiers' war, which contrasts to the sentimentally idealized lie in the Parisian window display. Barbusse also shows the overwhelming popular power and force of this lie, which even his *poilus* are powerless to contradict, but which he must in his novel.

The *poilus*, Sassoon's "Brother Officer," and Marlow tell their lies to women, who could not be combatants and see battle for themselves. And as the conventional "weaker sex," women had to be protected by men from being hurt by the truths of war. This male gender bias is explained by Marlow: "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are!" (16). He concludes this after commenting about how the Belgian activities in the Congo are not, as his aunt thinks of them, civilizing "ignorant millions" but about the company's drive for profit. Later he declares, "the women I mean—are out of it— should be out of it ["it" meaning the ugly truths of the imperialist enterprise]. We must help them stay in that beautiful world of their own lest ours gets worse" (49). And in a following sentence he cut from the novel,

he explained, “That’s a monster-truth ... no sacrifice is too great—a ransom of petty, shining lies” (49n). In the coming war, men will also lie to protect women’s false heroic myths from the reality of the war.

Yet it is a woman who is my final example of a Great War writer who does not flinch from the truth. Vera Brittain published her memoir, *Testament of Youth*, in 1933 with the stated intention in her *Forward*, “to write the exact truth as I saw and see it about myself and other people, since a book of this kind has no value unless it is honest” (12). “When the Vision dies...” is the title of Part II of her book, where she writes of how she coped with the news of her fiancé’s death in France and later relentlessly searched until she found out how he died. In a heartbreaking chapter, Brittain recalls how she received news of his death the day after Christmas, when she had waited for two days for news of his arrival at home on leave. A feminist and tough-minded in describing her memoir as “the indictment of a civilization” (12), Brittain has the courage to quote from her Christmas Eve diary, perhaps to show how the war swept her up in conventional sentiment: “Oh, God! Do let us get married and let me have a baby—something that is Roland’s very own, something of himself to remember him by if he goes” (234). Shattered by his death, she writes how, “[g]radually the circumstances of Roland’s death, which at first I was totally unable to grasp, began to acquire coherence in my mind” (241). From letters solicited from his colonel, fellow officers, the padre who buried him, and his servant, she concludes that his death was “so painful, so unnecessary, so grimly devoid of the heroic limelight which Roland had always regarded as ample compensation for those who were slain” (241). She then details how he died in France, and contrasts the circumstances of his death with her eager anticipation in London of his homecoming.

Analyzing the events in France, she reflects that, “[n]ot even a military purpose seemed to have been served by his death” (243). She asks herself repeatedly if his death was “heroism or folly,” and quotes from her diary, “Oh, my love!—so proud, so confident, so contemptuous of humiliation, you who were meant to lead a forlorn hope, to fall in a great fight—just to be shot like a rat in the dark! Why did you go so boldly, so heedlessly, into No Man’s Land when you knew that your leave was so near?” (243). Brittain’s despair is compounded — in painful contrast to Kurtz’s *Intended*’s wish to know his last words—by her certainty “of having no word to cherish through the empty years.... he had never mentioned to anyone his mother or me, nor the fact that he expected to see us soon.... that in his last hour I had been quite forgotten” (244).

Possessed of these hard truths, Vera Brittain became a pacifist after the war—although, ironically, the publication of her memoir in 1933 coincides with Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the march to the Second World War. Her example begs the question: If others had been told the truth about the war, and how their loved ones died, instead of having their feelings spared with lies, would they have opposed or even protested the war?

It is difficult to answer that question in the complex conflict of personal and the social forces in my selected texts. I think Shakespeare's Sonnet 94 points to a difficult resolution. The quotation in my paper's title is the opening line of the poem, "They that have power to hurt but will do none." The soldiers certainly have the power to hurt and must use that power to survive in the war. Back in the civilian world, they can decide not to use their power to hurt others by telling the terrible truths of the war they have lived. As a result of this duplicity, they perpetuate the comforting and rationalizing lies about the war, and, by maintaining false public opinion, may even prolong the suffering. Rife with the duplicity between showing and telling, between keeping up false appearance and hiding honest reality, the speaker in Shakespeare's sonnet, concludes, "For sweetest things turn sour by their deeds;/ Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds" (13-14).

The writers of the Great War I have discussed in my paper must expose the festering lies to remain true to their experience of the war. They *must* use their power to hurt with the truth. They know they will do far worse hurt if they perpetuate what Owen calls the "old Lie" about war.

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