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First World War Diaries: Making the Private Public

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First World War Diaries. Making the Private Public

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In the introduction to her book on diaries, whose subtitle reads “literary genre and ordinary writing”, ⁽¹⁾ Françoise Simonet-Tenant stresses how paradoxical diaries are, since they resist any attempt at definition while being easily recognizable once held in the hand. Attempts to define the genre are made more complex by the fact that these texts can range from utterly factual accounts to very subjective, personal reflexions, fulfilling different and sometimes contradictory functions. The diary traditionally stands between history and literature, be it considered as an “ego-document” or as a way of groping towards self-expression, what Lejeune calls “drafts of oneself”, ⁽²⁾ whether the focus is on the text as documenting a historical event or as a tool of self-expression. In the case of World War I diaries written on the front, one cannot ignore the historical dimension or the reality of the war that surrounds the soldiers as they jot down a few words in their diary between two attacks. If it can be said that one of the aims of diary writing is to find peace within oneself, the frontline in a war like the First World War hardly seems the best place to start concentrating on one’s thoughts and emotions, since the focus has to be on action more than on reflection, on physical survival more than on spiritual well-being. Even keeping track of passing time demands effort for soldiers – some of whom are unused to writing – whose daily life alternates between boredom, acute discomfort, and fear.

This article puts forward analyses based on published diaries, so as to take into account the changes to the status of a private diary brought about by the publication process, and to tackle another paradox: an essentially private text can only be known to us thanks to publication, which, as I will argue, always changes the status and even the nature of the text. I will refer to five soldiers’ diaries in the course of this analysis. William Brooks was a Manchester tramway driver whose diary was self-published in 2013 by his son-in-law. Stuart Chapman was a greengrocer, and the title of his diary *Home in Time for Breakfast* was chosen by his daughter, who edited the diary and had it published in 2007. Jack Martin was a clerk whose diary was edited by Richard Van Emden and published in 2009, and Charlie May was a writer whose diaries were published in 2014, edited by his great-nephew, Gerry Harrison, and published with a foreword by historian David Crane. Finally, Siegfried Sassoon needs no introduction; besides his poems, he also wrote a volume of *Memoirs* drawn from his diary. In fact, Sassoon kept his diaries, which were

(1) SIMONET-TENANT (Françoise): 2004, *Le Journal intime. Genre littéraire et écriture ordinaire* (Paris: Téraèdre), p. 12.

(2) LEJEUNE (Philippe): 1998, *Les brouillons de soi* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).

subsequently published in a scholarly edition, as a personal primary source from which he took the material which allowed him to write his memoirs.

These are all men's diaries, because for reasons of space the issue of gender will not be tackled here. The diaries that have been preserved from World War I were mostly written by men, soldiers at the front, even though a few nurses also left war diaries behind, including the now famous Vera Brittain. ⁽³⁾ This is not surprising since war was waged mostly by men, but it adds to the specificity of war diaries within the wider field of private diaries. Since the 19th century, diary writing has been consistently associated with women, both as a tool used to control their thoughts and as a private form of writing considered less serious than other literary genres. ⁽⁴⁾

In this article I will argue that more than any ordinary diary written in peacetime, war diaries enhance a series of paradoxes attached to the issues of publication, of writing and of creation. What interests me here is how the genre of the diary, already flexible by nature, ⁽⁵⁾ is adopted – and adapted ! – by these “ordinary” writers so as to help them cope with the horror of the war, and how their use of the genre at times transmutes their daily experience into more literary material. I here use the word “literary” to refer to what Roman Jakobson calls the “poetic” function of language, a concept I find useful when studying diaries because it makes it possible to analyse the way in which a text sometimes hovers between referentiality and comment on itself. “The focus on the message for its own sake”, to quote Jakobson's words, ⁽⁶⁾ often leads to the construction of a diarist's individual style and makes it possible for later readers to identify this diarist as a specific, private person, whose testimony deals with a public event. In the case of World War I, in which millions of men were sent to the trenches, the individual voice brings a subjective point of view, and this private angle provides interest for 21st-century readers. Not all the texts studied here are literary, but Jakobson's theory of “functions of language” makes it possible to consider them as potentially literary, the literary dimension being one function among others.

Turning a Private Text into Public Material

Although there is no full-length study of war diaries as a specific genre or sub-genre, ⁽⁷⁾ a reference to these texts may be found in Margaretta Jolly's *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, where Andrea Peterson's entry provides a historical background: “Since at least the 16th century, all wars seem to have produced war diaries; but very few diaries were published anywhere near

(3) Brittain kept a diary that was published after her death under the title *Chronicle of Youth*. She drew on her diaries to write her autobiography, *Testament of Youth*, published in 1933. See also *The Diaries of a First World War Nurse. Dorothea's War*, published in 2013.

(4) LEJEUNE (Philippe): 1993, *Le Moi des Demoiselles. Enquête sur le journal de jeunes filles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).

(5) SIMONET-TENANT (Françoise), *op. cit.*, p. 12.

(6) JAKOBSON (Roman): 1960, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics”, in SEBEOK (Thomas A.), ed. *Style in Language*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), p. 356.

(7) See ARTICO (Tancredi), ed.: 2017, *From the Front. Zibaldone della Grande Guerra* (Canterano: Aracne).

their time of writing, only a selection have been recovered and published retrospectively, and even fewer have been translated into other languages for world-wide circulation.”⁽⁸⁾ She adds that unlike what Lejeune calls “personal journals”, these diaries do not originally focus on private experience, and that the shift to personal experience only begins in the 19th century when non-combatants start writing about war.⁽⁹⁾ Thus the 19th century, often considered as the century of autobiographical writings, also plays a significant part in the field of war diaries.

Today we can still note the distinction between a technical log, comparable to a sailor’s log, meant to record the movements of troops and the tactical decisions made by the leadership, and a more subjective account of soldiers’ feelings and reactions when at war. Indeed, The National Archives of Britain clearly makes the distinction on its website: “This series consists of war diaries for British and colonial units serving in theatres of operations between 1914 and 1922, including Russia, at home, and in the colonies, and British military missions, and Armies of Occupation between 1919 and 1922. [...] The diaries contain daily reports on operations, intelligence summaries and other pertinent material”.⁽¹⁰⁾ In the present article only private diaries are considered, even though the study of official reports might also be worthy of notice; what I am interested in is the emergence of a diarist’s personal thoughts and reactions when confronted with the war and the potential dissolution of his own existence,⁽¹¹⁾ not the institutional recording of official events. Moreover, studying private texts that were later published also makes it possible to analyse the subtle shift between mere recording of experience and awareness of Jakobson’s “poetic function of language”.

The choice of a corpus based on published private diaries makes it possible to analyse the diary’s journey from the time of its composition by its creator to its availability for a reading public. This journey, and its variations, will benefit from analysis because it affects the very nature of the text under scrutiny. In other words, the published text which has made these diaries available to a large audience differs from the text that was originally written by the soldier at the front, given that a diary, contrary to a novel, was usually not meant for publication.⁽¹²⁾

An unpublished diary is first and foremost an object that can be kept and passed down from generation to generation as an heirloom. At one point in

(8) PETERSON (Andrea): 2001, “War Diaries and Journals”, in JOLLY (Margaretta), ed. *Encyclopedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn), p. 925.

(9) “Some of the earliest known examples of war diaries in English are impersonal military diaries that detail campaigns, strategies, and maneuvers, such as Captain Henry Hexham’s *Journal of the Taking of Venlo* (1633).” (PETERSON (Andrea), op. cit., p. 925).

(10) See <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14303> (last consulted on January 23, 2020). The site then provides a link to the Imperial War Museum website for anyone interested in private documents including unpublished private diaries. See <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/documents> (last consulted on January 23, 2020). On this website is a list of “private documents” available for consultation; most of them are only described on the website, which specifies that they include microfilm versions of unpublished letters and diaries.

(11) SIMONET-TENANT (Françoise), op. cit., p. 95.

(12) See LEJEUNE (Philippe): 1997, “Au Pays du journal”, *NRF*, 531, pp. 53-63.

his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Sassoon decides to quote directly from his diary: “A small shiny black notebook contains my pencilled particulars, and nothing will be gained by embroidering them with afterthoughts”.⁽¹³⁾ The mention of the “small shiny black notebook” conveys how essential the very appearance of the diary is; many diarists are particular about the kind of notebook they use for their diaries, and they sometimes use this appearance as a way of naming their diary.⁽¹⁴⁾ Soldiers did not have the choice of a certain make of notebook, but Sassoon’s sentence also reminds us that the contents of the small notebook was often written in pencil during the war, hence not particularly easy to read, especially as a small notebook often means cramped handwriting. Thus there is a significant difference between trying to decipher a handwritten manuscript, with some words blurred or crossed out, and leafing through a typewritten volume which outwardly looks very much like a novel. That is not only true of war diaries, and these issues about editing and publication have also been studied in the field of letter-writing for example; they are an essential part of studies in life writing.

The material aspect of diaries is often referred to by editors in their prefaces, especially when the diarist is dead at the time of publication; in that case the editor often describes the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the diary and explains why and how the diary was published. I see this as a form of traceability of the text, a manner of vouching for its genuineness. Such details about the fate of the diary after the soldier’s death (either at war or later from natural causes) also show that the text has acquired a symbolic, emotional value for its readers, as the verbal embodiment of the dead soldier. A significant number of soldiers’ diaries are transcribed and first edited by descendants or relatives, most often daughters and granddaughters, and a no less significant number by the diarists themselves. That is what happened to Martin’s diary, as Richard Van Emden explains in his introduction:

From the date that he transcribed his diaries (probably in 1922) until his death, the diaries remained hidden and were never mentioned to family or friends. In fact, even after Jack Martin’s death nearly forty years ago, the diaries did not immediately come to light. Bundled up with a heap of odds and ends, they were kept in a large black plastic bin bag, undiscovered until a decade ago when Peter found and read them.⁽¹⁵⁾

With the exception of Siegfried Sassoon, the writers of these diaries were “ordinary” men; I use the word as a reference to Daniel Fabre’s concept of “ordinary writing”,⁽¹⁶⁾ which qualifies the non-literary texts produced on a daily basis by human beings in the course of their lives. Fabre’s concept aims to find a way of defining texts written by non-professional writers in positive terms, and not by listing what they are not, and although we may discuss his choice of the word “ordinary”, I find it quite apposite in the context of soldiers’ diaries. The status of these diarists also explains some of the issues relating

(13) SASSOON (Siegfried): 2000 [1930], *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber & Faber), pp. 50-51.

(14) SIMONET-TENANT (Françoise), *op. cit.*, p. 29.

(15) VAN EMDEN, in MARTIN (Jack): 2009, *Sapper Martin. The Secret Great War Diary of Jack Martin*, VAN EMDEN (Richard), ed. (London: Bloomsbury), p. 2.

(16) FABRE (Daniel), éd.: 1993, *Écritures ordinaires* (Paris: P.O.L.).

to publication for their diaries, and here too Sassoon's case is interesting. He published *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, based on his diaries, in 1930, and Rupert Hart-Davis edited and published them in 1983 in a scholarly edition which does not include the poet's drawings. The originals, complete with drawings, are now available online thanks to the Cambridge University Library.⁽¹⁷⁾ In his case the diaries were preserved and published after his death because he was a famous poet and autobiographer. His memoirs were a success when they came out, and as is often the case with people in the public eye, his private papers were published later on, to complete the material available for scholars studying his work.

As for the other soldiers studied in this article, their diaries would probably never have been published were it not for the personal experience of war they record; their writers never became famous and yet their words have been preserved to honor their memory as defenders of the community.⁽¹⁸⁾ As Peter Boshoff writes at the end of Private William Brooks' diary (published by Amazon): "His son, John Brooks, a veteran of WW2, in the Royal Air Force, wanted to publish his diaries so that his father's memory could live on, but due to lack of interested publishers, could not achieve this".⁽¹⁹⁾ Hence the self-publication. With the commemoration of the centenary of World War I, many diaries have been made public in the past few years, either by being digitized and made available online on various websites, or by being published as books, edited with unequal degrees of scientific expertise, some being self-published by relatives, others by better-known publishers.

This last point raises the issue of the editor's reliability. When the editor is a historian or a literature scholar, academic norms are respected, and any transformation of the original text is clearly accounted for. But when the editor is a member of the family with no experience in editing, things are not always as orthodox. For instance, William Bennett's war diaries were edited by his granddaughter, who had them published in 2014, a year after finding the diaries on her mother's death.⁽²⁰⁾ In her introduction, she explains how she has set about editing the diaries, and she specifies that the diaries had already been transcribed and edited by her grandfather.⁽²¹⁾ Part of the volume shows the manuscript side by side with her transcription, which enables the reader to experience the handwriting and at the same time to check that

(17) See <http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/sassoon/1> (last consulted on January 27, 2020).

(18) That is why the picture of the writer wearing his uniform is to be found on most book covers as a way of defining him, and the writer is introduced early on with his rank in the army: "Sapper Martin, Private Brooks, Captain Charlie May", whereas Sassoon just remains Sassoon, describing himself as "an Infantry Officer" in his memoirs.

(19) BROOKS (William): 2013, *World War I Diary of Private Brooks on the Western Front*, BOSHOFF (William), ed. (Driffield: peterPJD Publishing), p. 282.

(20) "My mother died last year and I found in her possessions two good-sized notebooks, looseleaf and bound together with string and a bootlace, largely handwritten, with some printed pages pasted in and with a few drawings and photographs" (BENNETT (William C.): 2014, *1914-1919: The War Diaries of a Norfolk Man* (Norwich: Arcade Publishers, p. vii)).

(21) "The notebooks are mainly in William Bennett's handwriting, with one or two annotations by his daughter Gwendolyn. The text is an expanded fair copy made in 1974, when William would have been 84, based to some extent on a rough draft of his experiences he made in 1922" (BENNETT, op. cit., p. ix).

the transcription is right. However, the volume is entitled *1914-1919: The War Diaries of a Norfolk Man*, which was not the original title and which is slightly misleading. Immediacy is an essential part of diaries, and in this case, the diary, first edited by the author himself, is written in the past tense by a writer looking back, the text being closer to an autobiography than to a journal. ⁽²²⁾ The editor's work sometimes modifies the original, here in good faith and in a transparent manner, sometimes less openly. In most cases, the title reveals the editor's presence – as well as the publisher's – either through the choice of a quotation taken from the diary itself as in *Home in Time for Breakfast*, clearly meant to stress the diarist's stiff upper lip, or thanks to a few catchwords designed to interest potential buyers (*The Secret Great War Diary of Jack Martin*, emphasis mine). These titles suggest the beginning of an interpretation, however, and contribute to making the diary look more like a novel.

Peter Boshoff, who edited Private William Brooks' diary, introduces himself as a doctor who has developed writing as a hobby after retirement, and incidentally specifies that he is Brooks' son-in-law. Like other editors, he has added material to clarify some entries, and his additions to the original text are identified as such in italics. References are not always provided, and he sometimes quotes what he calls "The Official History" without making it clear what that refers to. In the diary itself, we find the mention "No entry made" ⁽²³⁾ in front of certain dates, which becomes "No record made" ⁽²⁴⁾ later; these entries are obviously provided by the editor, who has changed the text without clearly indicating the change to the readers. ⁽²⁵⁾ Such intrusions within the diary by the editor are not always consequential, but they do modify the nature of the text, even more than an accurate transcription of the diary, with clearly argued principles, does when it is being published. ⁽²⁶⁾

The paradox of diaries – a paradox which also affects private letters – resides in the fact that without publication they would not be available to readers and some precious testimonies would be lost, but publication does not come without its side effects, which transform the very nature of the text.

Writing the War... or Not

This paradoxical nature also characterizes the functions of these diaries for the soldiers writing them. On the British Library website, a curator from the Imperial War Museum writes that "the British Army Postal Service alone despatched two billion letters and 114 million parcels over four years". ⁽²⁷⁾ The number of diaries is harder to assess since these had to be kept hidden during

(22) For these reasons, I have decided not to include this text within the present corpus.

(23) BROOKS (William), op. cit., p. 58, entry from July 27, 1915.

(24) BROOKS (William), op. cit., p. 122, entry from August 23 to 25, 1916.

(25) At the end of the diary, Peter Boshoff adds a few comments, calling himself "Final Editor", and he specifies that "In periods of crises, or rest, the dates are clumped together and during leave he made very few entries" (BOSHOFF (Peter), op. cit., p. 282).

(26) SIMONET-TENANT (Françoise), op. cit. p. 140f.

(27) CORNISH (Paul): 2014, "The Daily Life of Soldiers", <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-daily-life-of-soldiers> (last consulted on January 27, 2020).

the war itself, being prohibited; ⁽²⁸⁾ after the war, as some of their editors have made clear, they were kept out of sight by soldiers who mostly wanted to forget about their time on the Front. The consequences of this prohibition on the contents of the diaries are hard to gauge, since the writers made sure their journals would not be found. I have found, for instance, no mention in any diary about the fear of being read. Yet the number of diaries found and made public at the time of the centenary of World War I proves that they were very numerous as well. These diaries therefore have to be set against the letters sent home, letters which the soldier knew would be censored, and which were often self-censored as a result. In theory, the diary appears to offer a safer place, where no external censorship applies; however self-censorship often comes into play as in many other forms of life writing. The letters sent and received are often mentioned in the diaries, and Martin even comments on the fact that he is trying to set up a code with his fiancée Elsie to give her information about his whereabouts. ⁽²⁹⁾ In his case, the difference between diary and letter is made clearer by the fact that he does not address Elsie in the diary, and the diary is clearly meant to fill the gaps left in the letters.

Historians have reminded us that contrary to what may be expected, war was characterized by boredom as much as by danger and the discomfort of life in the trenches. ⁽³⁰⁾ In this respect, the diary first and foremost provides a timed space, if I may coin this phrase, where each day is named and gives rise to at least one sentence in the entry. During rest days or days on leave, the diary is left aside by some of these soldiers, ⁽³¹⁾ and Stuart Chapman occasionally merely writes “Same as yesterday”, ⁽³²⁾ which becomes in a more military style “Nothing to report today” on another occasion, ⁽³³⁾ thus conveying his feeling of boredom. In this context, keeping track of days passing thanks to the diary must have provided some kind of focus, the notebook itself acting as a form of anchor into sanity.

What strikes the reader on opening some of these diaries at random, leafing through them, is the kind of material that is considered significant at the end of every day by these soldiers, and here again these war diaries appear paradoxical, since some of their entries manage to avoid mention of the war altogether. For example, both Chapman and Martin occasionally write as if they were tourists discovering a new country and assessing the sights, their diaries sometimes reading like travel literature. This is particularly perceptible at the beginning of their diaries, when they arrive in France, which might appear predictable since the worst horrors of life in the trenches are

(28) “Like all diaries illicitly kept by both officers and soldiers during the war (for they were, like cameras, banned), it was not meant for public consumption but was left as a meticulous record of one man’s service” (Van Emden, in MARTIN (Jack), *op. cit.*, p. 2).

(29) MARTIN (Jack), *op. cit.*, p. 27, entry from November 7, 1916.

(30) This is confirmed by Sassoon: “Although the War has been described as the greatest event in history, it could be tedious and repetitional for an ordinary Infantry Officer like myself” (SASSOON (Siegfried), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, *op. cit.*, p. 131).

(31) Here the diarists differ: those of them who use the diary as a tool of self-analysis make use of their free time to write longer entries, while those who only want to keep track of action are not inspired by days they are on leave.

(32) CHAPMAN (Stuart): 2007, *Home in Time for Breakfast. A First World War Diary* (London: Athena Press), p. 84, entry from August 13, 1917.

(33) CHAPMAN (Stuart), *op. cit.*, p. 79, entry from July 22, 1917.

still to come. Still, remarks that might be considered as coming from tourists persist until the end of the war. Perhaps this is a way of trying to ground their experience into another kind of literature, another kind of experience already familiar to them: that of discovering a foreign country, which triggers comments about the beauty of the landscape, the local traditions, the food.... Another possible reason for these tourist-like notes is to allow them to forget the war for a while, by concentrating on their conditions of life in an alien land. In this case, the diary can be seen as a place of escape, a traditional function of teenagers' diaries. In the latter, the notebook itself is sometimes considered as a friend, as is the case in Anne Frank's journal. In the texts I have read, no soldier actually addresses his diary directly, but it sometimes does function as a confidant to whom one may reveal discoveries as well as boredom and weariness.

That is how on October 14, 1918, a few days before interrupting his diary, Martin records his impressions of Calais: "This is the first time I have been to Calais and the little bit I saw of it did not impress me with its beauty. All the streets we passed through were narrow and almost squalid".⁽³⁴⁾ He echoes Chapman, who on May 20, 1917, has this account of St-Pol: "Another chap and I visited a place by the name of St-Pol, a nice little town six kilometres from here and thirty-five from Arras. We spent a very pleasant evening".⁽³⁵⁾ In these entries, the diaries evoke travelers' notes, meant to reflect the writers' impressions on discovering foreign places and customs, sometimes with astonishment, sometimes with repulsion, but always with interest. This stance turns the diarist into an observer, neither an actor nor a victim of all the destruction around him, and in itself creates a form of distance from the daily experience of war, since the discovery of the foreign country sometimes appears more worthy of notice than the war itself.

Moreover, in both these diaries, combat itself, especially when it takes place in the distance, is treated and described as a theatrical performance to be watched and appreciated as such. Even the harsh reality of bombardments is presented as a new experience, treasured by the observer as an opportunity. Consider the following entry from Chapman's diary:

I woke up at 4:30 a.m. to hear the most terrific bombardment I have ever yet heard. From our billet we could look along the horizon for miles and see nothing but a mass of flames. Our boys were going over the top at 5:30 a.m. The talk about 'the Great Offensive' had started. We could see villages on fire and mines going up and what not. A never to be forgotten sight, which I would not have missed. Could see heaps of wounded going by. Some awful sights.⁽³⁶⁾

This excerpt conveys Chapman's mixture of fascination and fear when confronted with the bombardment, and this is where the protean quality of the diary most clearly comes into play; a feeling of awe colors the account; in fact, the older meaning of "awful" (awe-inspiring) comes to mind, connoting the sublime. Chapman alternates visions of the distant spectacle with more subdued sentences about his fellow-soldiers, but the two seem to coexist

(34) MARTIN (Jack), *op. cit.*, p. 245, entry from October 14, 1918.

(35) CHAPMAN (Stuart), *op. cit.* p. 62, from May 20, 1917.

(36) CHAPMAN (Stuart), *op. cit.*, p. 52, entry from April 9, 1917.

easily, especially thanks to the repetition of the word “sight”, which qualifies both the distant bombardment – not to be missed – and the wounded walking past him – an unfortunately common vision. With the last two sentences the tone changes, the diarist stops being the spectator of an impressive show to become a potential victim, and this is marked by the disappearance of the first-person pronoun as well as by a simplification of the style, which becomes more telegraphic. The excerpt comes from Chapman’s diary, but there are similar examples in his contemporaries’ accounts.

Side by side with these evocations of distant fireworks, we can also find descriptions of wounded men and of physical pain that appear closer to our vision of the war today. These descriptions often come without any comment and without any syntactical organization: the telegraphic style often associated with the diary is fully used by World War I diarists as a way of recording facts without engaging with them. In this respect, these diaries provide interesting material for anyone interested in the writing of trauma.⁽³⁷⁾ As David Crane observes in his introduction to Charlie May’s diaries, “There is a visceral immediacy about a war diary – a question mark hanging over each entry, the unspoken possibility that it might be the last – that no retrospective account can quite match”.⁽³⁸⁾ One of the side effects of this immediacy is that it encourages the lack of logical links even within the same entry, and this syntactical feature symbolically underlines how senseless the war is. It does not seem possible for any meaning to emerge from the diary, since each entry corresponds to a new day, with its mixture of tragedy and a few good times. The effect, as in all diaries, is accumulative, repetitive, and no overall movement emerges, which probably conveys these diarists’ feelings that the war is endless and has no finality. Thus, several stylistic features prevent these diaries from ever turning into narrative, because a narrative would lead the text towards an outcome, and that is precisely what these diaries cannot and will not provide.

The first of these characteristics is the disappearance of the subject, as in the last excerpt from Chapman’s diary. When the diarist uses a pronoun, it tends to refer to other people, and the pronoun “I” appears to have been swallowed up by its surroundings or transformed into a mere watching eye. Although this is characteristic of diaries as a genre, in war diaries the absence of a subject always occurs at significant times, when the diarist tries to avoid facing some unbearable aspects of reality:

We then took trucks back to the dump and on coming back saw an awful sight. About six bodies all heaped on a truck, all mangled by shells and some parts were hanging. It made one almost feel faint to look at them. Our 5 o’clock meal consisted of a little tea and nothing at all to eat. Only had bread and cheese for breakfast. We had a good day’s hard work on starvation rations. Felt as if I could have eaten a horse. Saw a French aeroplane brought down today only a few yards from the battery; the machine was all smashed. On going

(37) See for instance CHIANTARETTO (Jean-François) and ALTOUNIAN (Janine), éd.s.: 1999, *Écriture de soi et trauma* (Paris: Anthropos Psychanalyse) for an analysis of the way in which Freud’s theories can be used to analyse life writing trying to come to terms with trauma.

(38) Crane, in MAY (Charlie): 2014, *To Fight Alongside Friends. The First World War Diaries of Charlie May*, HARRISON (Gerry), ed. (London: William Collins), p. xix.

to Bazentin yesterday I saw some infantrymen dig up one of our chaps by accident. He was placed in a waterproof sheet and they were going to bury him just as I left. The smell was unbearable. Evidently, when he was killed there was no time to dig a grave so, like many more under these circumstances; just a thin layer of earth was put over him. He had no head so expect it had been blown off. ⁽³⁹⁾

In Chapman's diary "I" frequently gives way to a collective "we" or even to "one", as in this excerpt. He almost always favors "one" when evoking the risk of death or his emotions. Here using "one" to express his faintness in front of the dead bodies allows him to distance himself from his own feelings, projecting his weakness onto a larger, more collective consciousness within which he belongs. Thus, "I" also turns into a collective "we", where all the soldiers stand undifferentiated, which echoes their emotion when they find a mass grave and are unable to guess the nationality of the dead or when they sleep together to keep warm. ⁽⁴⁰⁾

Occasionally, "one" is even transferred to the potential spectator as though by a contamination process: "The mud is terrible now, in fact it is heartbreaking to try and get about and puts years on one's life. Any little spirit that is left in one is almost lost. To see me trudging along one would take me for an old man of sixty". ⁽⁴¹⁾ Thus writer and reader share the same pronoun, a vague one at that. "One" refers to everyone and no-one in particular; the diarist's identity has become blurred.

Moreover, to go back to the previous entry, there is no logical connecting word between any of these sentences. The diarist writes down facts, impressions, sometimes unrelated to each other, and never tries to clarify the meaning. Again, this is characteristic of diaries: a diary is not constructed as an essay or a narrative, and if the diarist wants to jump from one idea to the next, he may do so without breaking any stylistic rule. However, in war diaries the juxtaposition of different themes highlights the feeling of absurdity that prevails. Private Brooks usually writes short sentences, and in the following entry we can see the effect his lack of transitions creates:

Saturday 14th Artillery duels and plenty of aircraft about all day. Harry Revel was killed going on patrol, by the German salient.

I'm smoking a nice cigar which Ginger gave me. He is on sentry duty.

No luck with the rat trap today. ⁽⁴²⁾

(39) CHAPMAN (Stuart), op. cit., p. 16, entry from November 17, 1916.

(40) "Passed by a dead body in a shell hole that must have been laid there for weeks – couldn't tell if it were British or German" (MARTIN (Jack), op. cit., p. 22, entry from October 8, 1916). "We curled ourselves up as well as we could, legs and feet and heads and arms were all mixed up in a horrible jumble and every now and then there was a hearty cursing when somebody got another man's boot in his eye. It would have been impossible to tell which legs belonged to which head or which head was the owner of a certain pair of arms" (MARTIN (Jack), op. cit., p. 24, entry from October 16, 1916). This blurring of identities symbolically echoes the disappearing frontier between friend and foe, as beautifully expressed in Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting": "I am the enemy you killed, my friend".

(41) CHAPMAN (Stuart), op. cit., p. 19, entry from November 23, 1916.

(42) BROOKS (William), op. cit., p. 80, entry from January 14, 1916.

Thus, the death of his friend is put on the same level as the pleasure procured by the cigar and the mention of the rat trap, which incidentally reminds the readers of the unhealthy conditions of life the soldiers have to cope with. This absence of hierarchy between events is frequent and heightens the feeling of immediacy of the diary.

The factual tone of most of these diaries also contributes to leveling out events: occasionally the soldiers use intensifying adjectives, but when a potentially traumatic event is mentioned, the tone is usually flat, no mention being made of the diarists' feelings. Their emotions paradoxically appear more intense when talking about the lice and the mud or the leadership than when thinking about getting killed. The following entry taken from Martin's diary is revealing and could be found in other diaries of his contemporaries: "Our dugout is filthy – lice and flies by the million and the stench of dead bodies makes one sick. One of our orderlies started to dig a hole in the bank to put his equipment in and came across a boot. He pulled it and a leg came with it".⁽⁴³⁾ The entry ends on this note, without any comment. Mentioning the presence of a leg in the dugout needs no comment and even Martin, who is more given to self-analysis than others, here keeps quiet about his feelings. This shows how the soldiers use dissociation to keep their emotions at a distance. In one of his entries, Brooks describes an attack in very factual terms, merely stating at the end:

Some of the Huns put up their hands in surrender, our chap went over to fetch them in. One of them threw a grenade at him, killing him on the spot.

Seeing this, one of our Sergeants gave the word to charge and we bayoneted every one of them.

I believe our losses are one hundred and six.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Virginia Woolf considered her diary as a "capacious holdall", and nowhere is the phrase more accurate than in war diaries. This openness of the diary, a genre able to accommodate contradictory feelings or thoughts, to move from a factual account to a more subjective outpouring within the same entry, may be one of the reasons for writing these diaries in the first place, as a manner of keeping track of the good times as well as of documenting the harshness of the war, of consigning to memory all the variegated aspects of the strange situation these soldiers find themselves in. In this respect their diaries act as a therapeutic space, where anything might be said, although in reality few soldiers make use of that freedom and most refrain from expressing their darkest emotions. That is why these texts thrive on paradox, their content full of contradictory emotions and impressions, helping the soldiers who write them to hold on to some form of sanity while keeping track of their lives in the trenches.

However, what is most private to them is usually kept silent, and as in all texts written about trauma, the interpreter has to notice the blanks as much as the actual words on the page, and this leads me to finally discuss the status of the readers of these diaries.

(43) MARTIN (Jack), *op. cit.*, p. 19, entry from October 3, 1916.

(44) MARTIN (Jack), *op. cit.*, p. 132, entry from October 23, 1916.

Creating Some Distance

I mentioned “ordinary” people earlier, and indeed the number of diaries that have been preserved and handed down to us also reflects the development of education in most European countries. In Britain, thanks to the Education Act which made primary education compulsory in 1880, even “ordinary” privates knew how to write and could thus send letters home and keep a diary during the First World War. Not all of them had any further education though, and if we compare May or Martin, who share a literary culture, with Chapman or Williams, we can see that their knowledge of literature helps them try to make sense of events in their diaries, by providing references to which they can turn when they fail to find the right words to express their own feelings. ⁽⁴⁵⁾ This leads me to finally consider the way in which these diaries, while offering a place where to write down their authors’ experience of war as a form of preliminary therapy, can also begin to transmute this raw experience thanks to their use of language; thus, paradoxically again, the destruction of war turns into creation, sometimes elusively in part of an entry, sometimes more deliberately in others.

Martin borrows Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* to react to the lack of drinkable water on November 13, 1916: “This is a pretty wet part of the globe – ‘water, water everywhere, but never a drop to drink’ until it has been boiled...”. ⁽⁴⁶⁾ The quotation is quite famous, and does not require an outstanding knowledge of English poetry, but the fact that Martin should summon it to express both his weariness as the rain keeps falling and the paradoxical lack of drinkable water reveals a way of writing down his experience that differs from Brooks’, who entry after entry, laconically writes in June 1916: “Getting plenty of rain” (June 6 to 8), “Still raining hard” (June 9), “It is still raining” (June 10), “Still raining” (June 11), and “We are wet through because it is still raining” (June 12). ⁽⁴⁷⁾ In Martin’s case the quotation allows the diarist to comment on the persistence of the rain, which was indeed a major problem in the trenches, but also to hint that his life here may be as hellish as that of the Ancient Mariner wandering on the sea to expiate his sin. Using a quotation or a reference is a more intense way of conveying meaning, while enabling the soldier to avoid expressing his own feelings too directly. This also shows how a writer is first and foremost a reader.

(45) The French neuro-psychiatrist, Boris Cyrulnik, recently analysed the differences in people’s reactions to the trauma of lockdown; he considers “a rich language” to be “a protecting factor”. CYRULNIK (Boris): “Réflexions d’un confiné”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brmFIuXGbhc&feature=youtu.be> (last consulted on May 20, 2020).

(46) MARTIN (Jack), op. cit., p. 29, entry from November 13, 1916.

(47) BROOKS (William), op. cit., p. 104. One might write an article on these soldiers’ ways of recording the rain, each one of them having his own manner. Mentioning the rain was more than a reference to the weather, since it flooded the trenches and caused trench foot. Here is May’s version: “It is raining again. It always rains here. For that reason I can never understand why they haven’t a river or two knocking around. But they haven’t, nor even a decent stream. I haven’t seen running water, save the Somme, since we landed” (MAY (Charlie), op. cit., p. 37, entry from December 9, 1915).

Thus, the writer tries to distance himself from his experience. Another way to do so is by using wry humor, the English stiff upper lip obvious, as when May writes “It is exciting work, sniping. In fact one must curb the tendency lest it should become a fascination”.⁽⁴⁸⁾ His diary is explicitly addressed to his wife, and this self-derision might also be a manner of playing down the danger he undergoes, as he would do if he were writing an actual letter to her. But he also proves ironical when talking about the military: “The Army is wonderful. One day it strains and strives and fights with blood and noise and dirt predominant, the next it returns to all its old starch and buckram and curses a man for a dirty boot whom the day before it had loved though he was mud-caked to his eyebrows in the trenches”.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Irony is mostly used in such contexts to express the anger the soldiers feel when confronted with the failings of the leadership. But we can also find some humorous passages in Martin’s diary, like this remark about his watch: “Haven’t been able to get my wristwatch to go ever since that turn on the Somme. Think it’s got shell shock”.⁽⁵⁰⁾

If we consider that transferring shell shock to the watch is an indirect manner of confessing that he may have experienced that particular trauma himself, these attempts to adopt a lighter tone also try to play down the harshness of the experience and the pain endured by the writer. Like his contemporaries, Martin mentions the rats which plague them, but instead of Brooks’ rat trap, he has found a system to get rid of them and devotes a few lines to detailing it:

In the huts here at Reninghelst they jump up from the floor and sit on our bodies or legs. They come with a ‘plop’ which is sufficient to wake me up and then with a violent kick upwards I send them flying, but they are slow at taking lessons and I generally have this exercise two or three times each night.⁽⁵¹⁾

The tone says it all here, and with the move to ironical distance we also gradually move away from mere recording of facts towards the construction of a narrative, complete with anecdotes and effects, and as a result meant for an audience.

Like all diaries, war diaries play with a range of potential addressees from the diarist himself to a wider reading public.⁽⁵²⁾ As we have just seen, May starts his diary by addressing his wife,⁽⁵³⁾ and in his introduction, David Crane describes it as a love letter to her and to their daughter.⁽⁵⁴⁾ However, later on in the journal, the journalist in him takes over and he begins the entry of March 27, 1916, with the following sentences:

One really does not want to record too much of one’s own personal experiences because a diary to be of any interest later must more or less hold news of

(48) MAY (Charlie), *op. cit.*, p. 30, entry from December 1, 1915.

(49) MAY (Charlie), *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36, entry from December 7, 1915.

(50) MARTIN (Jack), *op. cit.*, p. 30, entry from December 11, 1916.

(51) MARTIN (Jack), *op. cit.*, p. 38, entry from December 28, 1916.

(52) SIMONET-TENANT (Françoise), *op. cit.* p. 131f.

(53) The first entry starts with “I am going to commence this book this evening because now I have seen you for the last time before going abroad...” (MAY (Charlie), *op. cit.*, p. 1, entry from November 7, 1915).

(54) Crane, in MAY (Charlie), *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

greater moment. But I just can't help putting in about that damn trench mortar this afternoon. It made too big an impression on me for it to go entirely unrecorded. ⁽⁵⁵⁾

Thus, after keeping his diary for a few months, May reflects on the genre and conveys his awareness of a form of conflict between the collective and the particular, between “one” and “I”, which is all the more striking as his diary is far from impersonal. The tension between private and public characterizes war diaries, since a private individual is recording his perceptions of a very public event. As I argued in the second part of this article, individual subjects find it difficult to express themselves as they are subjected to traumatic events, but ultimately, the difference between their accounts and the official war diaries detailing the movement of troops comes precisely from the soldiers' subjective perception of events, a perception May almost apologizes for in this entry. The few lines I have just quoted, however, testify to his awareness of having readers for whom he must adapt his story.

This awareness is also very perceptible in Martin's diary; when he tells anecdotes he is always careful to clarify the meaning of technical words for his readers. ⁽⁵⁶⁾ Even Chapman, whose diary at first reads very much like a factual log, gradually makes room for a reader with phatic phrases such as “I can tell you” or “Mind you”. Interestingly enough, this implied reader helps the diarist construct an “I”, if only as the subject of discourse.

Thus an implied reader is gradually superimposed upon the relative to whom the diary is implicitly or explicitly addressed. The need to provide keys to avoid any misinterpretations reveals the presence of this implied reader, who is entrusted with making sense of the text. In other words, the present-day reader has been left in charge of connecting what has been written as disjointed, of filling the blanks, of restoring missing logical links, of playing an active role. In a way, that is what some editors of the diaries have done, by including historical comments and references.

As a journalist, May perhaps expected to use his diary as material for an article or even a book on his return, but he was killed in 1916. Unlike him, Siegfried Sassoon came back from the war and based his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* on his diaries. In this case the diary acts as a form of sketch book, collecting material and ideas which will be transformed later into literature. I have already mentioned the passage where Sassoon interrupts his memoirs to quote from his diaries. The text then looks like a diary, with an entry which begins with the time of day. However, the memoirs are not an exact transcription of the diary, as the following excerpts show:

7.45 a. m. The artillery barrage is now working to the right of Fricourt and beyond. I have seen the 21st Division advancing on the left of Fricourt; and some Huns apparently surrendering – about three-quarters of a mile away. Our men advancing steadily to the first line. A haze of smoke drifting across the landscape – brilliant sunshine. ⁽⁵⁷⁾

(55) MAY (Charlie), op. cit., p. 139, entry from March 27, 1916.

(56) See MARTIN (Jack), op. cit., pp. 28-29 for a description of a German bomb or MARTIN (Jack), op. cit., p. 67 for his definition of a day of rest.

(57) SASSOON (Siegfried): 1983, *Diaries 1915-1918*, HART-DAVIS (Rupert), ed. (London: Book Club Associates), p. 82, entry from July 1, 1916.

7.45. The barrage is now working to the right of Fricourt and beyond. I can see the 21st Division advancing about three-quarters of a mile away on the left and a few Germans coming to meet them, apparently surrendering. Our men in small parties (not extended in line) go steadily on to the German front-line. Brilliant sunshine and a haze of smoke drifting along the landscape. ⁽⁵⁸⁾

The *Memoirs* try to improve on the diary, by avoiding repetition, changing the order of words to create poetic effects and also by getting rid of the insulting nickname, no longer as acceptable a few years after the war. Interestingly enough, the text from the *Memoirs* is slightly longer than the entry from the diary; in constructing a fully narrated autobiographical text, Sassoon has drawn from what he considers to be notes, impressions, and even when he announces that he is quoting from his diary, he rewrites it in order to make it more effective.

With Sassoon we have moved away from “ordinary” writing, as when he went to war he had already written and published poems. When he sits down to write a few entries in his diary, he is always careful about his impressions and his way of transcribing them onto paper, because that is his job as an artist. The modifications he makes to his early diary bear witness to a writer’s craft, whereby the text is revised in order to achieve a better effect.

Conclusion

Sassoon’s *Memoirs* take us to the end of the journey of a published diary. As a poet interested in words, he invests his diary with even more significance than some of his contemporaries, but their diaries, like his, offer us the opportunity to better understand the human dimension of war. Some of these war diaries act as the beginning of a difficult, though essential, process of writing down what happened, the verbal equivalent of a painter’s sketchbook. Some entries in these diaries play the part of sketches, meant to keep track of the moment so as to be able to recall it in an undefined future. Not all these texts are literary, not all the diarists are poets, but the value of their journals lies elsewhere, in the human vision of war they convey.

Indeed, keeping a war diary is also a manner of expressing trust in a future time when readers will be able to construct the significance of what has been preserved by the diarist’s words. Meaningfulness is thus projected into a future when the private has been made public and transformed into part of collective memory. Thus, the issue of time, which characterizes the difference between a diary and an autobiography, also affects the reading of these texts. A diary is written day by day, immediacy being one of its features, and this entails a lack of direction and organization other than chronological, thus making the feeling of senselessness quite potent in some of the diaries. I believe that inscribing future readers into the text enables these soldiers to write words that will be preserved so that the baton may be handed down to the next generations. Such commemorations as the centenary of World War I achieve that goal, partly thanks to the digitization of private, “ordinary” texts, written by “ordinary” men in extraordinary circumstances.

(58) SASSOON (Siegfried), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, op. cit., p. 51.

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ABSTRACT

Sylvie CRINQUAND, *First World War Diaries. Making the Private Public*

This article analyses several World War I Diaries written by soldiers on the Front. Starting with the circumstances of publication and their effects on the text, the article addresses the passage of these very private texts into public life, before turning to the role played by the diaries for the soldiers who write them. Studies of the diary as a genre are used to show how war diaries fit into the more general genre. Finally the article turns to the reception of these works, by studying what part literary distance may play for the soldiers keeping a diary, and by arguing that the task of making sense of these texts has been transferred to present-day readers.

Diaries – World War I – private – public – writing – editing and publishing

RÉSUMÉ

Sylvie CRINQUAND, *Journaux intimes de la Première Guerre mondiale. L'intime devenu public*

Cet article analyse plusieurs journaux de la Première Guerre mondiale tenus par des soldats au Front. En partant des circonstances dans lesquelles ces journaux ont été publiés, et de leurs effets sur le texte lui-même, l'article s'intéresse au passage de ces textes très privés dans la vie publique, avant de se tourner vers le rôle joué par ces journaux pour leurs auteurs. Les études contemporaines du journal comme genre littéraire sont mises à contribution pour montrer la place des journaux de guerre dans le genre plus global des journaux personnels. Enfin l'article s'intéresse à la réception de ces textes, en mettant en évidence le rôle joué par la distance littéraire pour les soldats qui tiennent un journal, et en arguant que ces soldats ont transféré aux lecteurs d'aujourd'hui la tâche de faire sens de leurs journaux.

Journal personnel – Première Guerre mondiale – intime – publique – écriture – édition

SAMENVATTING

Sylvie CRINQUAND, *Dagboeken uit de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Het private als het publieke*

Deze bijdrage analyseert verscheidene dagboeken uit de Eerste Wereldoorlog die door soldaten aan het front bijgehouden werden. Uitgaand van de omstandigheden waarin die dagboeken werden gepubliceerd en van het effect daarvan op de tekst, bekijkt dit artikel eerst wat er gebeurt wanneer deze zeer persoonlijke teksten een publiek leven gaan leiden en daarna welke rol die dagboeken voor hun auteurs spelen. Recente studies over het dagboek worden gebruikt om te tonen welke plaats oorlogsdagboeken innemen in het algemene genre van het dagboek. Ten slotte interesseert het artikel zich voor de receptie van die teksten door te onderzoeken welke rol de literaire afstand speelt voor de soldaten die een dagboek bijhouden. De bijdrage argumenteert dat deze soldaten de taak om zin te geven aan hun dagboeken hebben doorgegeven aan de lezers van vandaag.

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