Correspondence, Constructs and Qualification in World War I

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Abstract: This paper examines the archival correspondence of Vera Brittain and three companions to demonstrate the workings of censorship and self-censorship in wartime. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, I replace the traditional active soldier-writer/passive civilian-reader model with a model that envisions both reader and writer as active and influential, and as shaped by past and future discussions and “worldviews.” Censorship thus becomes a site of active subversion, and self-censorship becomes a site of complexity, both subject to the construction of the audience and the relationship between the writer and reader. Finally, this exploration demonstrates the importance of archival work, where signatures, stamps, handwriting, enclosures, and corrections become significant clues to the writers’ and readers’ intentions.

Résumé: L'analyse de la correspondance de Vera Brittain permet d'expliquer le fonctionnement de la censure et de l'autocensure en temps de guerre. La notion de dialogisme de Mikhaïl Bakhtine permet de remplacer la conception traditionnelle du « soldat-rédacteur actif » et du « civil-lecteur passif » par un modèle qui accorde à chacun des correspondants un rôle actif et influent. En outre, le modèle proposé de la correspondance de guerre reconnaît l'importance des discussions antérieures et futures, ainsi que des visions du monde de chacun des participants. Cela permet de considérer la censure comme lieu de subversion active et l’autocensure comme un lieu de complexité, toutes deux sujettes à la construction d’un public et à la relation entre rédacteur et lecteur. Enfin, cette étude témoigne de l'importance de l'analyse de textes d'archives, en ce sens où les signatures, les timbres, le texte manuscrit, les pièces jointes et les ratures constituent autant d’indices quant aux intentions des auteurs et de leurs lecteurs.

Despite the recognition of women’s active participation in World War I, driven by scholars such as Clare Tylee, Margaret Higgonet, and others, a still prevalent myth entrenched in war scholarship is the polarization of men and women, soldiers and civilians. As Higgonet (1993) argues, scholarly examinations of war literature still embed the notion of “soldier’s truth” versus “civilian propaganda” (p. 209); male soldiers, due to their active service, are perceived as knowledgeable about the real conditions of war, while civilians, especially women, are seen as ignorant of them.

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References

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Propaganda and censorship have been acknowledged as two of the significant reasons for the seeming gap in awareness. For instance, in *The Great War of Words* Peter Buitenhuis (1987) says that “Most people showed little awareness of what conditions were really like … The curtain of evasions and misconceptions was so thick that few serving soldiers could pierce it with the accounts of their own experiences” (p. 101). Paul Fussell, author of the seminal work *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), attributes the polarization as the result of three types of censorship: self-censorship, or the qualification of danger; correspondence censorship; and press censorship:

The causes of civilian incomprehension were numerous. Few soldiers wrote the truth in letters home for fear of causing needless uneasiness. If they did ever write the truth, it was excised by company officers, who censored all outgoing mail. The press was under rigid censorship throughout the war. Only correspondents willing to file wholesome, optimistic copy were permitted to visit France, and even these were seldom allowed near the line. (p. 87)

Despite excellent and extensive discussions of press censorship and propaganda in World War I by Buitenhuis (1987) and others, such as Cate Haste (1977), in-depth discussions of censorship and self-censorship based on an examination of wartime correspondence are lacking. As a result, to assume that censorship of correspondence and self-censorship were significant factors in male–female polarization without further study of both sides of the correspondence is problematic.

Fussell (1975), basing his examination of the War on Northrop Frye’s archetypal theory, perceives irony as the recurring theme throughout contemporary and postwar literature and letters. His admitted focus is on the soldier’s trench experience on the Western Front, and he thus omits, as Clare Tylee (1990) has remarked, the female and civilian experiences of and responses to the War. More recent works, including explorations of women’s war literature, still highlight the separation of perspectives and experience; as Carol Acton (1999) notes, the “shared male and female experience [of war] has still been neglected” (p. 56).

In this paper, I use World War I correspondence from the Vera Brittain Archive to demonstrate the actual workings of correspondence censorship and its subversion, then explore the influence of self-censorship on writing and reading in exchanged wartime correspondence. When read through Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1986) theories of dialogism and addressivity, negotiating meaning in World War I meant a complex positioning of writer and potentially multiple readers; in my analysis, both writer and reader play an active role in the negotiations.

**A community of correspondents**

The Vera Brittain Archive contains the lifetime writings of Vera Brittain, internationally renowned feminist, journalist, and peace activist. The World War I correspondence includes the letters exchanged among Vera Brittain, her fiancé Roland Leighton, her brother Edward Brittain, and their two close friends, Geoffrey Thurlow and Victor Richardson. This collection is perhaps unique
among World War I archives, for it contains the letters, tokens, postcards, and photographs of five young British people, all of the same class and background, three of whom attended the same English public school. Although not all the sequences are complete, the extant correspondence contains extensive exchanged sequences dating from mid-1913 to June 1918, plus additional sequences containing only one side of the correspondence. Because of these extensive sequences, we are able to trace the changes in thoughts, values, and ideals that took place as the result of war experience and loss from the War’s beginning until shortly before its ending. In addition to letters, the collection contains Vera’s and Edward’s diaries, photographs and newspaper clippings exchanged, the flowers that Roland sent Vera from the trenches, cables, and Edward’s personal effects.

In the summer of 1914, all four young men were finishing their last terms at eminent public schools in preparation for entering Oxford or Cambridge in the fall term. Vera, who had rebelled against her life as a provincial debutante, had successfully passed the entrance examinations for Somerville College and was supposed to join her brother and Roland at Oxford. When War was declared, all four young men enlisted as second lieutenants. Roland, an outstanding Classics scholar and promising writer, went to France in April 1915, became engaged to Vera in August, and was killed in December 1915, the day before he was to come home on leave. Geoffrey Thurlow, who became Edward’s close friend when they trained together, went overseas in the fall of 1915, was wounded in early 1916, returned overseas, and was killed in April 1917. Victor Richardson almost died from cerebro-spinal meningitis in 1915, but recovered to go to France in late 1916. He was blinded in action in March 1917, awarded the Military Cross, and died of his wounds in June 1917. Edward Brittain, Vera’s brother, was posted to France in February 1916, wounded in the Battle of the Somme on July 1 and awarded the Military Cross, returned overseas in June 1917, and was killed in action in Italy on June 15, 1918.

Vera Brittain spent a year at Oxford, then left her studies to become a volunteer nurse for the rest of the War. She served first at the Devonshire Hospital in Buxton, was transferred to London in October 1915, posted to Malta in October 1916, and served in France and England during the later stages of the War. In 1919, she returned to Oxford to complete her degree. Fourteen years later, she published the bestseller Testament of Youth, in which she quoted extensively from her wartime diary and correspondence. In Testament of Youth, Brittain established a memorial to the young men who died, a strong anti-war argument, and a feminist perspective on the War and women’s participation in it.

Models of reading
The polarization of men and women that is still seen in war scholarship was prevalent when the War began: soldiers, like their pre-war male counterparts, were perceived as playing an active role in events; civilians, especially women, were depicted as active only through their discourse, by urging their men to enlist. The scholarship surrounding wartime correspondence emulates these attitudes; the soldier-writer is seen as active and the civilian-reader as passive. Fussell (1975),
for instance, depicts the relationship as: “Few soldiers wrote the truth in letters home for fear of causing needless uneasiness. If they did ever write the truth, it was excised by company officers …” (p. 87). In this model, as with other scholars, correspondence is assumed to be a straightforward conduit of information from the knowledgeable soldier to the ignorant civilian. The soldier controls the information; the civilian passively accepts it, without influencing or questioning the end result. The civilian’s response to “truth” is assumed to be “uneasiness”; no other type of response is assumed. In addition, censorship is simplified, seemingly accepted by soldier and civilian alike; officers merely delete any unacceptable information. Finally, the civilian side of the correspondence is omitted.

The active-passive model of correspondence fails to take into account the complexities of reader and writer, especially in wartime. Distance during wartime often meant having to write around or obliquely of events that might be crucial to life or death. Censorship meant having multiple layers of readers; it also meant that, as with any system of surveillance, both writers and readers actively worked to subvert or ignore the “official” rules, openly or covertly. In addition, self-censorship complicated the relationship further.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1986) theories of dialogism and addressivity provide a fitting method of examining correspondence as a complex exchange, instead of as a straightforward, seemingly one-sided conduit. According to Bakhtin (1986), language and communications are based on utterances, which are themselves defined by a “change in speaking subject”:

> Each individual utterance is a link in the chain of speech communion. It has clear-cut boundaries that are determined by the change of speech subjects (speakers), but within these boundaries the utterance … reflects the speech process, others’ utterances, and, above all, preceding links in the chain ….

(p. 93)

In essence, any utterance is always set in the context of previous discussions and worldviews, and projected discussions and viewpoints; the audience is not passive, but actively responds to the specific utterance, those that have come before, and those that he or she projects on the part of the other. In addition, Bakhtin theorizes that the addressee—the person addressed—of an utterance can range from a concrete addressee, or the real person, to an abstract addressee, or an imagined concept of a person. A single utterance, while addressed, like a letter, to a concrete addressee, can contain within it a range of addressees, and also a range of writers, as the writer responds to and anticipates the response of conceptions of the reader, and also moves him or herself through a series of roles. The reader can accept or reject the roles imposed by the writer in various degrees in what Bakhtin (1986) calls “an active responsive understanding” (p. 94)—which itself can misfire. In addition, both the “style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his [or her] addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance” (p. 95).

If we use this model to explore the concept of censorship during the War, then correspondence becomes a complex issue because the various censors become, in
Bakhtinian terms, both “immediate participant-interlocutor[s]” and “indefinite, concretized other[s]” (p. 95) as the writer attempts to make the discourse contained in a letter home meet the “legitimate” standards of direct regimental censorship and the vague, all-encompassing threat of the unknown Base censor who represents military law and national standards. This distortion, writing around, or omission is further complicated by self-censorship, which is the strategy of omitting or mediating threat through the language used.

Censorship and subversion

But how, exactly, did censorship work, and are scholarly assumptions about its effects correct? Did soldiers and other participants abide by censorship’s restrictions, and were those overseas as influential as has been assumed?

Censorship and the transmission of military information in the British Army were controlled by the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), ostensibly to prevent Germany from learning information of military value through obtaining letters, diaries, photographs, or published reports that would allow them to predict what the British were planning. What began as a simple, one-page document was “endlessly amended and elaborated right through to the war’s end and beyond” (Hynes, 1990, p. 78), and was eventually so extensive that it was used to repress works of art that the military considered prejudicial to the war effort, including plays and literature touching on subjects such as homosexuality. As Hynes (1990) demonstrates, the Act was used, in essence, as a straitjacket of conformity to current mores, both perpetuating and reflecting the image of a “manly” soldier. By 1915, sending any communication to or from the U.K. except through the postal system was forbidden, thus preventing first-hand accounts of experiences from being carried to friends and relatives by participants going on leave. By 1916, “any expression of opposition to, or criticism of, the war in any art form, and any communication of such opinions to persons in other countries, had become a criminal offence” (Hynes, 1990, p. 80). As a result of this new legislation, writing negative opinions about the war to those serving overseas was considered treasonous.

To understand the influence and effects of censorship on correspondence, we must examine the original correspondence. Here, we find the workings of censorship, and are able to tell which letters were regimentally censored, and which were not. We can also tell which information was inked out by censors as unsuitable, and what information was not caught.

To give an example of how censorship worked, Roland Leighton’s letters home from France were censored twice: once by a more senior officer in his regiment, and a second time by an unknown censor at the Base in England. Although the Base Censor did not read every letter, the possibility was always present. Roland’s letters had to go through the military post, since sending letters home via either the civilian postal system or officers going on leave contravened the regulations. He, in turn, censored his men’s letters. Edward, Geoffrey, and Victor underwent the same process, and Vera was subject to it when she was posted in Malta and France.
We can tell which of Roland’s letters were censored regimentally because his senior officer’s signature, W. Adam, appears at the bottom of the letter’s last sheet and on the envelope. The Base censor officially stamped each envelope, regardless of whether or not the letter was read, to show that the letter had passed the censor.

Only one deletion by a censor occurs in the wartime correspondence; in one of Roland’s first letters, the name of a town has been inked out (Roland to Vera, April 7-8, 1915). Identifying place information was definitely forbidden, but the location of participants was a particular site of anxiety for those at home and abroad. The will to know where a participant was located was so powerful that correspondents conspired to subvert the regulations by using codes, anagrams, and allusions that would be known only to those who had shared (in person or through letters) the experience. In the case of codes, Vera actively urged Roland to send his location via a code, and urged Edward to do so, too. In Roland’s case, several letters are extant that show this simple code; he placed a pencilled dot under individual letters of words that would spell out his location: “Courcelles” shows up in one letter, and “Armentières” in another case.

Surprisingly, the obvious sometimes worked: postcards with clear identifying information seemed to pass without hindrance. Roland, for instance, sent a postcard clearly labelled “Cassell” (the name of the town) when he first arrived in France (April 4, 1915), and Vera sent Edward an entire set enclosed in a letter, using some as a means of telling him that she stopped in Naples on her way to Malta (October 20, 1916).

Impending actions were another site of anxiety, for writers were not supposed to inform their correspondents of events that were about to take place. Here again, however, correspondents developed code phrases that revealed a great deal about the relationship to signal that battles were about to begin. Roland and Vera agreed on the code phrase “Hinc illae lacrimae” as a signal that Roland was about to go into action. The choice of Latin points to their shared scholarly background and the Classics; the translation, “The cause of grief is now clear” (Roland to Vera, September 13, 1915; translation in Bishop & Smart, 1981, p. 365), shows the quality of romanticized drama that both feel, especially given their engagement. Vera and Edward’s code phrase is considerably more prosaic, pointing to a lowering of the glamour of the situation now that Roland has been killed. Before the July 1 attack on the Somme, Edward writes:

My return was not particularly eventful, but remembering how fond you are of gardening I am sure you will be interested to hear that we have quite a lot of celery growing near our present position. It is ripening quickly although it is being somewhat delayed by this cold and wet weather we have been having lately, and if the weather continues better I expect it will be ready in about a week. (June 15, 1916)

These couple of sentences would appear odd in a letter unless the reader is aware that their code phrase for an impending attack was, “The celery is ripe” (Brittain, 1934, p. 274).
As the war continued, allusions to common points of war reference became more prevalent, especially to previously described phenomena such as the Virgin and Child figure on the Cathedral in Albert, which had been knocked to a horizontal position and was therefore easily recognizable as “the town with the leaning figure on the Church” (Geoffrey to Vera, November 18, 1916). Knowledge of friends’ whereabouts could also provide clues; when Vera is en route to Malta, she tells Edward that “we shall not be so far from where George Drewry spent some time” (October 3, 1916), and she uses similar tactics to inform her family that she has been posted to Etaples in 1917.

Perhaps the most surprising “leak” of information about troop movements to pass the censor occurred when Edward Brittain’s regiment was transferred from France to the Italian front in the fall of 1917, at a time when censorship regulations were quite strict. At the time, Vera was nursing in France at Etaples. To tell her of his impending move in detail, Edward wrote his letter entirely in Latin, trusting to the censor’s presumed ignorance of this language to get his message through (November 3, 1917). It worked; Vera received the untouched letter and managed to translate it.

The British Army contributed to the evasion of censorship although, once again, this particular method only becomes apparent through a study of the envelopes of the original correspondence. In a curious throwback to the public school ethos of honour, officers were allowed to mail letters home in green envelopes that were not subject to regimental censorship. The writer signed a declaration on the outside of the envelope that the contents contained personal information only. These envelopes were marked: “Correspondence in this envelope need not be censored Regimentally. The Contents are liable to examination at the Base. The Certificate on the flap must be signed by the writer.” Roland conformed to the public school code by not writing about impending military actions in these letters, although he became more personal and ardent in his writings to Vera. However, whether censored or uncensored, many of Roland’s letters to Vera, and also to Edward, contain descriptions of his surroundings and his changing attitude toward the War, some of which radically contradict the official public stance. He was also aware of just how inaccurate the accounts by supposed “eyewitness” reporters were and (again contradicting Fussell’s assumption that the public was not aware of the rigid censorship) conveys his impressions to Vera: “I enclose a newspaper cutting that I came across this morning. It is journalese and not altogether accurate …” (June 3, 1915).

And what of criticisms of the War effort, which were forbidden in the later stages of the War? Edward Brittain never hesitates to criticize the administration and its blunders in his letters to his sister. In June 1917, he was thrust into action within 24 hours of returning to France, in a strange regiment, with no previous knowledge of the territory:

The whole thing was a complete fiasco … The organisation of the whole thing was shocking as of course the position ought to have been reconnoitred before
and it is obviously impossible for anyone who has never even seen the ground before to attack in the dark. (Edward to Vera, July 3, 1917)

We can see, then, that writers and readers actively conspired to either subvert the regulations, or simply ignored them in particular cases. What remains to be examined is the potential effect of censorship; what did writers perhaps omit as the result of censorship regulations? Returning to Bakhtin (1986), we can depict the two levels of censorship—the regimental censor and the Base censor—as adding to the range of addressees the writer had to take into account. The person to whom the letter was addressed was the supposed main addressee, but hovering over the shoulder of the writer, like a distorted version of Bakhtin’s conception of the super-addressee, was the spectre of the censor (perhaps more than one), known or unknown, who embodied the official language and attitudes towards the War. Although Roland does not mention feeling uncomfortable about Captain Adam reading his letters, he is subject, like all other officers and participants, to the discomfort of lack of privacy; perhaps this discomfort is the reason he very rarely mentions anyone he works with at all. Bertha Ann Merriman, a Canadian nurse, is one of the few who actually mentions her dilemma; she is concerned that if she writes about her fellow nurses, the officer censoring her letters will leak the contents, causing her trouble with her colleagues: “we’ve had a tempest in a tea cup today—I’d tell you all about it only I’m not sure our letters are not read…” (Merriman to Merriman family, April 8, 1916). It is a diplomatic dilemma; how can one write home about one’s colleagues, or talk freely about discomforts, when someone wielding power of promotion and punishment reads the letters? We can only speculate whether or not Geoffrey Thurlow’s lack of promotion (Geoffrey remained an unpromoted 2nd Lieutenant for his entire war service) was in part due to his letters, in which he shows no qualms about criticizing his fellow officers. For instance, he writes about his Senior Officer, who censored some of his letters: “Daniel is excellent in the trenches but we grow weary of him: his equal for utter self conceit and childishness will be hard to find” (Geoffrey to Edward, September 18, 1916). In another contradiction of the official depiction of a “good” soldier, he also does not attempt to conform to the “manly” image of the unshaken, courageous officer for he comments repeatedly and openly about his own lack of bravery: “I’m not the slightest use out here—far too windy etc: so that I shall never get promotion—don’t particularly wish for it either” (Geoffrey to Edward, September 18, 1916).

It would seem apparent that personal knowledge of the officer reading the letters would give the individual some notion of the limits of regimental censorship, and of how it would vary from person to person. The unknown censor at the Base, however, presented an entirely different problem. The unpredictability of whether or not a letter was going to be read, especially at first, would only add to the uncertainty of what to include and what to omit. The writers of the Britann correspondence become noticeably more relaxed as they become accustomed to censorship; their letters become more detailed, and they become more adept at including information that will pass either censor. At the beginning, however,
Roland and Vera certainly felt a sense of relief when he began to use the On Active Service green envelopes, which were not censored by Captain Adam, but might be by the Base censor. Despite Vera’s comment that she would look upon the censor as “impersonal” (Vera to Roland, May 1, 1915), clearly, both were somewhat self-conscious about the content of their letters being read by someone else.

In conclusion, the workings of censorship are not always obvious from published texts but become clearer through an examination of the original correspondence. Codes, such as Vera and Roland’s pencilled dot codes, censors’ signatures and stamps, letters in foreign languages, and postcards are usually not included in published letters. These acts of subversion, plus the emotions, criticisms, and allusions expressed in correspondence point to the necessity for a more complex reading model for wartime correspondence.

Self-censorship
Self-censorship, or the strategy of qualification, deliberately omits or ameliorates the conditions of war, presumably, as Fussell (1975) states, to avoid “needless uneasiness” on the part of the reader (p. 87). The wording also conveys an image of the writer, possibly hyper-corrected, as some of Roland’s writing was, to conform to the images imposed upon the writer by public discourse and the various readers of the correspondence. Again, in reading correspondence as a complex exchange, the original correspondence is preferable to an edited, published version, especially when ephemera other than letters is exchanged. Published correspondence, too, is often edited for reasons of space, which means that the full response cannot be studied.

An examination of the letters Vera and Roland exchange during his time overseas demonstrates that Roland does use a strategy of qualification because he is concerned about the effect of describing what he sees to her, and the actual dangers that threaten him. In turn, they also show that Vera does not want Roland to mitigate the dangers he undergoes; she actively urges him to describe his experiences as exactly as possible so that she can share them as much as possible. Roland attempts both, but his strategy of qualification demonstrates how the relationship between writer and reader—the anticipated response and the envisionment of the addressee by the writer—was constructed by relationship, knowledge of the reader (concrete versus abstract constructions), and gender. Part of the reason that Roland’s death was such an unexpected shock to Vera, despite her continued anxiety about his safety, is because of what Paul Berry & Mark Bostridge (1995) term their “pastoral” quality (p. 77); in reading his narratives of sunshine and flowers, it is all too easy to miss the understated descriptions of “unpleasantness.” War is, up to his short leave, qualified and negated by his strategy of qualification; each mention of war is followed by a reassurance of safety. The few letters from Roland to Edward that survive show the contrast between Roland’s audiences, for Roland does not qualify the sights that he sees when he writes to his schoolfriend. Vera, in turn, uses a strategy of appropriation to try to enter into Roland’s new landscape and experiences, attempting to demonstrate that she does
understand and can envision (through imagination) the emotions she assumes he feels in response to events.

In his first letter from the trenches, Roland establishes a convention that he uses only with Vera, and not with his male friends, that of often negating or reducing danger when he mentions it. “Two bullets have just skimmed along the roof,” he says, “but as this is well covered with sand bags there is no danger inside” (Roland to Vera, April 12, 1915). In this sentence, the danger of the main clause is negated immediately by the subordinate clause that follows. Roland does not usually cross out phrases, or make insertions or deletions. His text flows, beautifully spaced, in small, upright, and distinctive black characters. Changes and alterations are all the more marked because of their scarcity. In his first description of artillery fire, however, he changes “The shells come straight over our heads” to “The shells come straight over the trenches,” a revision that distances the danger. The “danger from the fragments blown back from our own bursting shells” is negated by his placement “in the dug-out now,” where he cannot get hit. The qualifiers continue throughout the letter: “a German is sniping” but “all his shots go harmlessly overhead” because of the protection of the parapet; “two men got hit last night” is qualified by “neither of them very seriously.” The sole sign of danger to Roland is the bullet that “whizzed uncomfortably near”—but, of course, it missed. And the only sign of death that he does include is the graves of Germans and British, where the bodies are already covered—just as he has tried to cover up the very real dangers he has encountered. Perhaps his words are meant not only to reassure Vera, but also to reassure himself (all quotes from Roland to Vera, April 12, 1915).

After his first letter, he consistently locates himself in the landscape in his letters. Interestingly, he tends to distance himself from the war, envisioning himself in the centre of a pastoral landscape where the war continues on the horizon, or at a distance—even when he is in the middle of it. On April 20, only nine days after his first letter, he claims his surroundings for his own, but they are most unwarlike, as he notes: “I am sitting … on the little wooden bench outside my dugout … while the sun shines on the paper and a bee is humming round and round the bed of primroses in front of me.” Again, his sense of unreality shows through at the contrast between “War and primroses! At the moment it does not seem as if there could be such a thing as war.” The summery, tranquil mood he sets echoes, complete to the primroses, an English country scene that both he and Vera will recognize.

Roland will repeat this mood and similar settings in many of his letters, locating himself as the writer at the centre of an English landscape, yet writing the details of the outside world as the war zone. In this manner, he establishes a connection to home for himself—an escape from the war zone—at the same time reassuring Vera by emphasizing the lack of action, yet describing the conditions as she asked him to do. The countryside and its primroses are “all exposed to shell-fire,” and the first man has been “shot through the head,” though he does not give any further details of the death. Immediately after his report of the death, however, Roland says that his line of trenches is “much too strong now to be
retaken by the Germans,” which means that no attacks will be made by either side, which, in turn, lessens his danger. Then, as though to internalize the reality of war, he speaks of forgetting “danger and war and death” to “think only of the beauty of life, and love — and you,” a substitution that suggests that both worlds cannot exist at the same time and place. But he follows this displacement of war with home by a “gruesome” description of a rotting British corpse, as though to reassure himself that beauty and love can exist side-by-side with corruption and death. The parallel structures bring Vera into the war zone to blot out its horrors, but also bring the war to her through his words in a gesture of sharing: “You do not mind my telling you these gruesome things, do you?” Even the dead body, though, is hidden from view: “only the toes of his boots stuck up above the soil,” and Roland will hide even that from sight by “having a mound of earth thrown over him”—a nicety that he will not bother with later on. It is as though he brings a small part of the war into her view—and his—but then neatly covers it over to hide the real depth and horror. Yet in this same letter, written less than 10 days after he has spent his first hours in the trenches, comes the first discordant note of disillusionment:

There is nothing glorious in trench warfare. It is all a waiting and a waiting and a taking of petty advantages—and those who can wait longest win. And it is all for nothing—for an empty name, for an ideal perhaps—after all. (April 20, 1915)

Vera’s response to this letter establishes two recurring themes of hers: first, to project as much of herself as possible into his experiences by urging him to describe all the details, however gruesome, and, in this way, to immerse herself in this new landscape along with him; second, to reassure herself that his personality will not change as a result of those experiences because a spiritual death is as frightening to her as his physical death. This paradox—for both have expressed their feeling that elemental war will mature them and make their natures finer and stronger—shows her awareness of the inevitability of change, making her wish to share, as much as possible, the grim side of the sights as a means of changing along with him:

Yes, tell me all the gruesome things you see—I know that even war will not blunt your sensibilities, & that you suffer because of these things as much as I should if seeing them—as I do when hearing of them. I want your new life to be mine to as great an extent as is possible …. Somehow I feel it makes me stronger to realize what horrors there are. I shudder & grow cold when I hear about them, & then feel that next time I shall bear it, not more callously, yet in some way better. (Vera to Roland, April 25, 1915)

In this passage, Vera urges Roland to share his worst experiences while reassuring herself that he will not change because of the sight of them. At the same time, she connects them by equating their capacity for suffering—once again projecting her own emotions onto him—but then equates suffering through “seeing,” which she cannot do, with suffering through “hearing,” a verb which seems to bring him physically closer, since she hears him, instead of reading his words. Making their suffering equal becomes a means of keeping their emotions on par,
and of claiming his experience as her own in an act of appropriation. Paradoxi-
cally, she describes herself as being transformed by his words, but for the “better,”
while claiming (not questioning, but stating) that he will not grow callous because
of the sight of death, but will remain unchanged.

Vera then continues her letter by describing her discomfort in being comfort-
able while Roland is in the presumably uncomfortable war zone. Again, her desire
for Roland to remain “untouched” by the “horrors of war”—“keeping” his
“essential personality”—is foregrounded, but she also emphasizes her “suffering”
over him as a form of transformation and a means to share his discomforts: “Suf-
fering myself makes me want nothing so much as to do all I can to alleviate the
sufferings of other people” (April 25, 1915). She plans to exchange her student
life for the alien life of a nurse, so that she can share a form of sacrifice with him.
It is his words that have the power to alter her emotions and her state, for it is “the
terrible things” Roland describes that make her feel “a sort of infinite pity” she
has “never felt before” (April 25, 1915).

In the most telling use of Roland’s strategy of qualification, his full response,
like the qualifications in his letters, is hidden, not to be revealed until his leave in
August. With one of his April letters, Roland includes a tiny envelope of violets,
freshly picked from his trenches in Plug Street Wood. Obviously, the violets are
sent to Vera in the role of sweetheart, from a lover; a conventional message, except
for the situation, for he is sending them from a trench in wartime. Of course, he
anticipates her reaction; it is a thoughtful and lover-like gesture, and of course, she
is thrilled.

Monday 26th [April]

I am sitting in the same place as when I wrote to you a few days ago—just
outside my dug-out. It is 12 o’clock and the sun is so hot that I have had to take
my coat off and sit in my shirt sleeves. I feel rather like Waldo in the last
chapter—only Waldo hadn’t just picked up two pieces of shrapnel a few yards
away. Still, he felt lazy, and appreciative, and had been thinking of Lyndall. She
would have gone to our corner of the wood just as you did, dear. It was very
sweet of you.

I have just picked you these violets.

Much love

R.

Vera’s response shows her in the role of sweetheart, receiving a message of
beauty, much as Roland has depicted it in his letters, but it also shows her distance
from the war, her impatience at the role of waiting in England, and her desire to
join him, both as lover and as active participant. The first—the role of lover—is
personal and concrete; the second—the subtle expressed wish to be an active
participant—is driven by the public discourse of soldier as active, woman as inac-
tive, a role that she wants to be able to reject. In response to the letter and the vio-
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lets, she responds immediately, not in a letter, but on a card attached to a newspaper she sent to him:

Oxford
30-4-15.

Just received your letter dated the 25th. I am sending these at once & will write to-morrow—there is no further news of Maurice to-day. Thank you ever so much for the violets—I would like to be where I could see the place they have come from.

Much love—
V.

He responds to her with silence in his letters, but replies in a poem that he does not show her until several months later:

Villanelle

Violets from Plug Street Wood,
Sweet, I send you oversea.
(It is strange they should be blue,
Blue, when his soaked blood was red,
For they grew around his head;
It is strange they should be blue.)

Violets from Plug Street Wood—
Think what they have meant to me—
Life and Hope and Love and You
(And you did not see them grow
Where his mangled body lay,
Hiding horror from the day;
Sweetest, it was better so.)

Violets from oversea,
To your dear, far, forgetting land
These I send in memory,
Knowing You will understand.

R.A.L.
Ploegsteert Wood, April 1915.

Vera’s innocent question anticipates a pastoral description, which does not appear; instead, it triggers a poem by Roland that juxtaposes the pastoral zone of home with the war zone, with the violets a symbol of beauty passing between. The violets, however, do not bridge the gap between home and overseas; instead, they hide the ugliness. Roland here is the knowledgeable soldier; Vera is the naïve sweetheart. At the same time, Roland’s deliberate use of “horror” is an attack on the romantic discourse of public heroism; it is also an attack on his own earlier views of war, expressed in his letters, on the “Beauty of War.” So we have here Vera, the writer who has read the violets correctly, but does not actively under-
stand the unspoken message because of a lack of experience; and we have Roland, the writer, who deliberately anticipates her response, and just as deliberately covers up the horror through his language. In fact, what is expressed in the poem is the essence of his strategy of qualification and self-censorship: admitting horror and threat, but mitigating them whenever he writes to Vera. In the last two lines of the poem, he falls back on the conventional discourse of romance—“Knowing You will understand”—but, of course, as he has already anticipated, she does not. We can see right here, Roland, from a position of knowledge, positioning Vera as a sweetheart who does not know about the horror, but is still expected to understand. Superimposed on that particular addressee and role is the super-addressee which, in this case, is the romantic public discourse of war.

This exchange of responses is further complicated when Roland shows Vera the poem the next time they meet in person: it establishes him, in her eyes, as a legitimate war poet. Unfortunately, she attempts to impose the role of the legendary dead soldier-poet Rupert Brooke onto Roland in her letters; he, in his letters, rejects this role, becoming increasingly sardonic and forthright about the passive situation of sitting in a trench being fired on.

Thus, we see two correspondents anticipating and responding to one another, and actively shaping one another’s responses; we can also see the workings of public discourse and individual experience shaping the roles the writers take on themselves and the ones they try to impose on the reader: sometimes it works; sometimes it misfires and active understanding either does not, or only partially, occurs. If those at home did not, as Hynes (1990) argues, “understand” the war, it was not necessarily from lack of trying.

On May 9th, Roland’s first man is killed. His description to Vera, though, emphasizes the tranquillity of the death. No contortions, very little blood: “I only found him lying very still at the bottom of the trench with a tiny stream of red trickling down his cheek” (May 9, 1915). Roland’s emotions seem bewildered, as he does not feel “animosity” towards the enemy, but “a great pity, and a sudden feeling of impotence.” And he feels “cruel” telling Vera of the death, asking “Why should you have the horrors of war brought any nearer to you?” His sharing of the death, albeit phrasing it in such gentle terms, emphasizes the transformation of death by such a “small” thing as a bullet, but negates the horror by its painlessness. But his first sight of death indicates his own fear of transformation. Her letters “help [him] to live, in an atmosphere where the commonplace is perhaps more a thing to be feared than the terrible.” Getting used to death as a paradoxically ordinary event in the midst of life is what he fears more than the horrors.

**Vera and Roland and Edward: Gender roles**

The qualifying strategies that Roland uses in his correspondence with Vera become even more evident when they are contrasted with his letters to Edward. Vera is Roland’s sweetheart, and his correspondence with her demonstrates a chivalrous desire to spare her worry, despite his descriptions of his daily life. His letters to Edward highlight the difference; as one of his best friends, and a young
man who has shared school life, Edward is a correspondent to whom Roland emphasizes the action and dangers of his new life.

Peter Parker (1987) identifies two contrasting genres that contribute to the public school boy’s perspective about war: the classics, which were studied as part of the curriculum, and the boys’ adventure stories and other texts published in periodicals such as The Boy’s Own Paper. Although these are not the only contributing factors to the enthusiasm for war and the wholesale eagerness of the 1914 volunteers—which Roland, Edward, and Victor epitomize—they certainly helped to shape expectations of war. For Roland, who took seven prizes on the July 1914 Uppingham Speech Day, six of them in the Classics, the version he studied at school would become what Parker calls “a binding agent which held together the various particles of an ethos” (p. 99). Vera’s admiration for Roland’s background in the Classics is demonstrated in her letters, and her efforts to master the Latin and Greek necessary for her success at Oxford seem to be fuelled by her desire to emulate him. Their perspectives of war are shaped by this shared bond, as well as their shared literary background in the Romantics. Noticeably, their ideas of war, death, and heroism, particularly before Roland arrives at the Front, are what Parker argues to be the public school version of the classics: “War became ennobled, Death lost its sting, Youth became an object of worship” (p. 99).

Given their shared background, we might expect to see the same bond in Roland’s letters to Edward. In strong contrast, however, Roland’s construction of the same events that he describes for Vera resembles the exciting, suspenseful, and “action-packed stories” disseminated through The Boy’s Own Paper, Chums, and similar boys’ publications (Parker, 1987, p. 130), as well as authors such as Kipling, Newbolt, and Stevenson. What Roland attempts, then, is to fit himself and his surroundings to a genre familiar to both young men, which is equally valid in their public school ethos. The Boy’s Own Paper epitomizes the genre, becoming “part of England’s cultural heritage, its title used as shorthand to describe a type of adventure story and a breezy outlook on life” (Parker, 1987, p. 130), which is exactly what we find in Roland’s letters to Edward.

A brief glance through the bound volume of The Boy’s Own Paper for 1905-06, a year or two before the three boys went to Uppingham, shows the typical story genres: the travel adventure, the school story, the sports story, the war story (The Boy’s Own Annual, 1906). All plunge into action within the first page and, true to the serial type, end each segment with a cliffhanger. The heroes are fearless, using breezy language to cover up any wavering emotions, and always live up to the “manly” virtues extolled by the public schools. Serials in papers such as Chums tended to follow the same pattern. In all these tales, adventure was eagerly sought after as experience; although death occurred, it was noble for any on the “good” side, and deserved for any on the villainous side.

Roland’s construction of Vera as addressee forms a strong contrast to his construction of her brother Edward. Edward, a longtime schoolfriend of Roland’s, is, like Roland, a subaltern in the British Army. Unlike Roland, though, all his efforts
to be sent overseas have failed so far. As audience, his knowledge of army life in England equals Roland’s, but his knowledge and experience of trench life, like Vera’s, is second-hand. Though few letters from Roland to Edward are extant, and even fewer from Edward to Roland, those that survive from Roland narrate some of the same incidents as his letters to Vera, and show the differences.

Roland’s first long letter to Vera from France is dated April 7, 1915; the parallel letter to Edward is dated April 9, though both deal with the same events. The minute description of the “French farm house” that Roland describes in his letter to Vera is left out of Edward’s. Instead, immediately after acknowledging “Teddie’’s letter, Roland disposes of his location (“about 5 miles behind the firing line”) in one brief sentence, and then plunges into action. The 18½-mile march described as “not at all pleasant at the time” in Vera’s letter is transformed to “the devil of a march.” Roland feels the need to state to Vera that he is not really complaining about the “pouring rain” and “inches of mud” on the march, for “one has to get used to that” and “it is remarkable how little anyone minds small discomforts out here,” explanations that he does not feel are necessary when writing to Edward.

The letter to Edward drives towards the fighting line instead of minimizing danger: Roland describes the march in full equipment and then, in a sentence which seems to make the action of marching continuous, says: “Tomorrow we are off again, this time actually to the trenches.” The language is bare, stripped of metaphorical and poetic images: “the German flares make patches of light in the sky” is as high-flown as Roland becomes in Edward’s letter; in Vera’s, the flares “lighten the sky,” the journey across the Channel is dreamlike, “brilliant with moonlight,” and the march has “tall thin sentinel trees on each side” of the “very long and straight” French road. Again, the emphasis in Roland’s letter to Edward is action, told in a direct voice with few flourishes, except for casual mentions of the effects of war like the “bullet holes etc about in various places,” which he omits entirely from Vera’s letter; her letter subordinates action and danger to description.

The direct, shorn language continues in later letters, in which Roland depicts himself as becoming a hardened veteran soldier who teaches a less experienced comrade about the exigencies of war. Vera’s letter of May 9 contains the sensitive and tranquil description, including Roland’s emotions, discussed earlier, of Roland’s first man killed. In Edward’s letter, the man’s death is described as part of the result of a “demonstration of frightfulness,” which ended with “one of my men killed in the morning (which unhappily one gets hardened to).” Emotions have been drained from this account, and only the event of death remains; Roland does not even describe the dead man as he did to Vera. A paragraph later, describing “[t]he whole country” as “a muck heap,” he explains why: “three days ago while digging a machine gun emplacement just to the front of my bit of trench we had to cut through 3 dead bodies to get there” (May 13, 1915), another event that he omits when writing to Edward.
A final example of the differences between Roland’s treatment of Vera and Edward is in a last pair of letters, Vera’s written on May 17, and Edward’s written on May 19. True to form, the letter to Edward, after thanks for cigarettes, leaps instantly into an account of a German mine and countermine, an exciting “hand to hand fight in the sap tunnel underground,” and an account of the “fishing up” of the “bodies” of some men who had been “asphyxiated trying to go down our end of the mine too soon.” Action is followed by action, with the events taking place “on our right hand,” very close to Roland, who actually walked over to look. In a telling paragraph, Roland again claims a place as a veteran soldier (after only five weeks in the trenches), saying that the “First New Army” looks “very smart & church parade-like,” but that “this will wear off very soon.” Roland takes up the position of the initiated, definitely leaving Edward as part of the uninitiated.

Roland’s letter to Vera begins, as usual, with a description of the “ruined farm” and officer’s “shed” in which he is writing. True to his pastoral, uneventful beginnings to her, the shed is decorated with “apple-blossoms,” and he can see “an apple-tree … standing in the middle of a field yellow with buttercups.” The scene, in fact, is “very still. You could walk across the field and think you are in England, except that English fields are not pitted here and there with shell holes.” The juxtaposition of a connection with England, the flowers that recall beauty and spring, and the incongruous fixings of war have become expected in these letters, as though Roland is still attempting to displace the world of war with that of home—but cannot. His description of the mine and the fight is less technical, but more detailed, and although he describes one of the bodies being “brought up”—a considerably more reverent phrase than “fished up”—as “a long rigid mass of clay,” he immediately inscribes the man with the heroic qualities of the soldier that he seems to feel Vera expects: “the remains of a man who deserved the V.C. if ever anyone did.” And he ends this section with a comment about heroism, as if to mitigate the “gruesome”-ness: “But one learns that here too in the perhaps monotonous round of trench warfare there is latent the opportunity for heroism—and in this case a heroism the more real because without glamour and even without light.”

To Vera, Roland writes as to one who expects heroism from individual soldiers, and from whom, despite detailed descriptions of the surroundings, “gruesome”-ness and threats must be largely hidden. In essence, Roland writes to Vera with sensitivity towards death, perhaps because she has expressed her fears for both his life and his transformation to callousness. To Edward, he writes as though war is an adventure full of action and activity, despite the almost disregarded danger; the casual language and callousness he expresses towards the dead are part of the public-school soldier image; he depicts himself, the “hardened” veteran, as already changed and matured by his experiences in the trenches.

Why the difference in Roland’s writings to Vera and Edward? On the surface, Roland responds to Edward as a friend steeped in the traditional public school ethos and language, and to Vera as a lover. The difference goes deeper than this, though, and is more complex. To Edward, Roland presents himself as fearless, in
letters that jest, that focus on action, and that suppress emotion, even when referring to deaths of men and school friends. To Vera, he presents himself as sensitive, as reaching for common emotions and experiences, both as a response to her rhetoric about the war and to try, perhaps, to know her better and reveal himself to her. Throughout her diary and Testament of Youth, Vera’s depiction of Roland is of someone literary, grounded in a literary, slightly Bohemian family, and destined for a great career as a writer. He definitely responds to these expectations, writing to her in descriptive passages that tend, in the beginning, to colour the landscape of war with the hues of their common ground: England. As well, flowers are a common theme throughout his writings to her, as though he offers them to her in words instead of in person, like a courtship carried on at a distance. Primroses, buttercups, apple blossoms, wild roses, and violets (which he actually did send her) are juxtaposed with trenches, bodies, shell holes, and graves. He offers her both, because she desires both: landscapes with flowery images that both can understand, romantic territories juxtaposed and covering, to an extent, the ugliness of the war-torn landscapes that he also offers, knowing that she can enter them only through his descriptions. His language to her is protection: the gift of “real” war is concealed through self-censorship with sensitivity and skill.

Conclusion
What we can conclude from this examination of censorship and self-censorship in the World War I correspondence exchanged among Vera Brittain, Roland Leighton, and Edward Brittain is that models of wartime correspondence previously depicted in scholarship omit the complexities of the writer–reader relationship. If we consider correspondence during World War I in terms of Bakhtin’s dialogic model, in which a range of constructs of writers and readers can inhabit the same letter (utterance), and where each utterance is the result of a myriad of influences, past discussions and anticipated responses, then censorship and self-censorship become part of a web of negotiating meaning among correspondents, instead of merely a means of separation and polarization between soldiers and civilians. Censorship, as this examination has shown, was often ignored or subverted, though it certainly affected the type and amount of information that writers included; self-censorship, in these letters, is certainly present, but is subject to the construction of the audience and the relationship between the writer and reader. Roland’s letters to Vera show conflicting desires, both to conform to her expressed wish for information and to spare her the extreme anxiety that she also openly writes about. Thus, her influence is present in his letters, as his is in hers; their correspondence becomes a complex exchange that does not conform to the male–female polarization and separation usually depicted in scholarship. Finally, this exploration demonstrates the importance of archival work, where signatures, stamps, handwriting, marks on a page, enclosures, and corrections become significant clues to the writers’ and readers’ intentions.
Notes
1. To maintain the aura of youthfulness that pervades the letters, as well as to prevent confusion of Vera and Edward Brittain as their writers, I have chosen to override the tradition of using last names in favour of using the first names by which they called each other, Vera, Edward, Roland, Geoffrey, and Victor, and which Vera Brittain used in Testament of Youth (1934).

2. The published letters of other combatants also contradict scholars’ assumption that soldiers did not send accounts of actions and battles to horrify their readers. Laurence Housman’s (1930) collection, War Letters of Fallen Englishmen, as well as the excerpts included in Lyn Macdonald’s (1914) works, demonstrate that plenty of men wrote detailed descriptions of offensive and defensive actions, while Lionel Sotheby’s letters to his mother contain some of the most horrific accounts of actions published to date. Certainly the idea, expressed by Buitenhuis (1987), that “few serving soldiers could pierce … the curtain of evasions and misconceptions … with the accounts of their own experiences” (p. 101), is contradicted by these accounts.

3. Robert Louis Stevenson would probably have been a strong influence in the Leighton household because Robert Leighton, Roland’s father, had been responsible for accepting Treasure Island for serial publication a number of years earlier.

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