

## Reading diaries as fiction: Constructing the self against national destruction

(This is a conference paper given in December 2011)

In *The Ethics of Life Writing*, Paul John Eakin, discussing the controversy surrounding auto/biographies that have been accused of lying, writes that “You don’t have to be a Nobel laureate or a Holocaust survivor ... to get in trouble for telling less than the truth in narrative that purports to be based in fact...” (3). [For the purpose of this paper, I refer to biographies and autobiographies equally without differentiation. But criticism in life writing and auto/biographies has been active in studying the differences in these subgenres.] And in courses in life writing, I have discovered over and over again that students presume that what they are reading – be it autobiographies, family biographies, or journal entries – could be taken at face value, or word value. Yet, Mary Evans in *The Missing Persons: The Impossibility of auto/biography*, argues convincingly that the genre of life writing is so deeply entrenched in supporting the social norms (or a master narrative) that uncomfortable truths about the individual often become sacrificed. To add to Evan’s skepticism concerning truths about an individual subject in autobiographical writing, I would like to add that the act of writing itself – the act of transferring distant emotions and memories to words and sentences – necessitates a gap between what has happened and what is represented, often within a power matrix implicating gender and race: who can speak and what can be spoken. This paper examines, as illustration, the diaries of wartime Germany by an anonymous author – published as *A Woman in Berlin* – and argues that the diary entries have undergone such drastic editing and redacting that any claim to simple truth value must be subject to intense scrutiny. Any claim to spontaneity and to writing without regard of an audience must

be questioned. In other words, the diary entries can be critiqued by using the same criteria as one would employ to critique fictional writing.

### The text and its history

*A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City* is fragmented in structure but bounded by a time frame dictated by external events, namely the Second World War. It is a narrative pieced together from three notebooks of dairy entries hurriedly written, with pencil stubs and in candle light, between April 20 and June 22, 1945, during the Soviet invasion and capturing of Berlin. In July 1945, the author transposed the handwritten entries into typed pages and, according to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's forward: "words became sentences, allusions were clarified, loose sheets were incorporated where they belonged" (x). In other words, major editing was undertaken to produce the finished product, the book itself. Before its original publication in 1953, names were changed and certain details were eliminated. The book first appeared in English, and was not published in German until 1958. It was critically attacked because of its contents and disappeared. In 2001, after the death of the author, the book was republished and re-translated into a new English edition.

This brief history highlights the fragmentary nature of the original and the editing processes of subsequent editions. More importantly, though it is not the purpose of Enzensberger's forward, the reader realizes that, while the original pages were spontaneous records of emotions and events, the finished product is a polished reworking of the records, with deletions, changes, and omissions. While it is a valuable resource in terms of the Russian occupation of Berlin in 1945, it cannot be accepted as an unaltered account of events as they happened. Instead, then, of believing that autobiographical narrative has to tell nothing but the truth, it is more useful to look

at how the subject “I” is constructed in the edited text and what it says about women and subjectivity during a time of war.

### The “I” of *A Woman in Berlin*

*A Woman in Berlin* illustrates the generic imperatives of war representations seen “through the eyes of a marginal heroine in a liminal position between safety and danger at work ...” (Genevieve Brassard “From Private Story to Public History 44). On April 20, 1945, the war was “rolling toward Berlin” (1) where the narrator of *A Woman in Berlin* lived. As the Russians rolled into the city itself, the narrator would find herself moving or being moved from place to place, eventually to a flat that essentially functioned as a brothel where Russian soldiers came to enjoy “forced intercourse” (215) with the narrator. Thus far, the narrator was bombed out of her own home, then of a borrowed home, then tried to make a home in the basement, and eventually, was forced to make a home away from home for the enemies in a place not her own. This serial displacement happened in a few weeks, and given the frantic nature of these displacements and the frantic nature of the condition of writing, it is the narrator’s persistence in writing her diaries that would preserve the subject “I” – an autonomous individual repeatedly attacked as a German and as a woman.

The narrator’s descriptions of war-destroyed Berlin also serve to emphasize her heroic status within the story, instead of just being a victim of hunger and rape. In one entry she writes about setting out to walk around Berlin after 3 pm. The space traversed would, I estimate based on my knowledge of Berlin, take at least an hour of solid walking. The narrator and another woman visited friends in one district, then moved on to another neighbourhood to visit another friend, where they stayed for an hour, before walking home again (which would have been in the dark).

While this outing provides the claustrophobic narrative a breather, such vigorous exercise sounds unlikely as these women were just emerging from bombing, extreme rationing, and were in weakened state.( In another episode, she claims to have walked the distance of what it would take 45 minutes to drive at 60 miles an hour. But in the narrative, it sounded as if it were a stroll down a few blocks.)

It can be said that the narrator, in providing the reader details of rape, of destruction of homely objects, of horror and pain inflicted by invading soldiers, a series of horrifying happenings that, at one point, the narrator describes as a soap opera, is also creating a “self” that can be understood and appreciated by the reader. It is her triumphal emergence from these 10 weeks that the reader admires. More momentous events, such as Hitler’s suicide or the discoveries of the concentration camps were briefly touched upon, or not mentioned at all. In this sense, the trajectory of the individual subject, from a calm existence to constant danger and back to survival and normality, follows the conventional expectation of the autobiographical genre. What is different in this particular instance is the voice of the narrator – a woman in extreme and a woman who speaks out in a situation controlled by masculine identities.

#### National discourse and individual identity

When *A Woman in Berlin* was published in Germany through a Swiss publisher, “German readers were obviously not ready to face some uncomfortable truths, and the book was met with either hostility or silence. One of the few critics who reviewed it complained about the author’s ‘shameless immorality.’ German women were not supposed to talk about the reality of rape” (Enzensberger xi). While Hans Magnus Enzensberger correctly identifies that a conservative prudery and repressed sense of shame generated a negative response to *A Woman in Berlin* when

it was first published in the 1950s, it should also be mentioned that the narrative is anything but complimentary regarding the nature of masculinity, which would not have been endearing to a wounded society still entrenched in gender stereotypes. Although men dominate the narrative, they do not appear in ways one would associate with chivalry, with heroism, with enlightenment, or with a sense of justice. The German men who remained in the soon-to-fall city were only interested in helping themselves to scarce ration, to dry shelter, to safe quarters, and Herr Pauli, who lodged with the widow and the narrator in the apartment, was quite content to accept the small luxuries that her enforced prostituting brought all of them. Instead of sympathizing with the narrator, Gerd, the narrator's fiancé, feels that "I've been spoiled once and for all" (259). Instead of the men protecting the women, they hid: "[T]hey all have some excuse when it comes to fetching water or venturing out to perform some other task. And the women do their best to hide their men and protect them from the angry enemy. After all, what more can the Russian do to us? They have already done everything" (149). Thus are the gender stereotypes of the chivalric, strong German men and the docile, pure German women turned upside down. The narrative proves that the women were resilient, and by surviving to tell the story, the narrator proves herself to be a "spoil" but resistant force.

#### The voice of authenticity

One strategy an autobiographer uses to authenticate an account would be to provide data. In *A Woman in Berlin*, the narrator quite conscientiously gives date, and even time, of passages, such as "Tuesday, May 1, 1945, 3.00 P.M." (61). However, some entries (almost chapters) are as long as 20 pages containing changes of setting, introduction of various persona, and detailed dialogues. In other words, these entries are re-constructed as novelistic narratives for expository

purpose and for dramatic effects. Yet, given that the writer had had the time and opportunity to revise her diaries before publication, the text is disappointingly short on reflections on the treatment of the Jews by the Germans, or the existence of concentration camps. The narrator mentions the Jewish question in passing, as well as concentration camps, but she also presents herself as an innocent with regard to the regime: "... they have ferreted a former Nazi party boss in our building, a Reichsamtsleiter or something like that – I don't know the Nazi rankings very well." She adds: "The Nazis were too pompous and subjected the Volk to too many harassments ..." (192-3). Her views of the Nazi regime were uncomfortably off-hand, and in her accounts, her participation in the Second World War as a German was not a matter of examination. It can be argued that at the time of writing, the author would not have gained the perspective of the postwar generation. It can also be said that the individual voice in this text is more representative of that of a character in a novel, and not a voice of conscience.

In the narrator's careful re-construction of events, events that have undergone narrative arrangements, dramatic intensification and editorial diluting all play a structural role, but in the consistent presentation of the self – the survivor – one is reminded of what Sidonie Smith says of the autobiographical self: "There is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating" (108). The narrative I in *A Woman in Berlin* also reminds the reader of Smith's invocation of Judith Butler's performativity theory, which in part explains how the autobiographer becomes this narrated self by adhering to the imperatives of public discourses, especially those of identity and truth-telling (109).

Finally, it seems churlish to be critiquing a seemingly courageous work such as *A Woman in Berlin*. This paper is just one way of reading the text. In another paper, I have also argued that

the narrator has articulated the unspeakable experience of pain. As it is the goal of this conference to look at how first-person narration and life writing can be analysed differently, this paper presents one instance of that practice.

Maria N. Ng ©

The University of Lethbridge, Canada

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