A ‘Shared Working Existence’ : Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby

The friendship between Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain offers an example, not so much of a rare relationship between women, but of one which has been unusually fully documented and discussed. Part of a new generation of professional, university-educated writers, their sixteen-year long friendship was based on the fact that each encouraged and enabled the other’s work. Meeting at Somerville College, Oxford, they shared a flat while they established themselves as writers in London, and then, after Brittain’s marriage to George Gordon Catlin, lived as a ménage à trois until Holtby’s death.

This unconventional set-up enabled both writers to produce a body of work which is, as Jean Kennard says in Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby: A Working Partnership, ‘an ongoing dialogue’ (1989, 17), where each rewrites the other’s texts in their own. Kennard’s study takes Chodorow’s theorisation of mother–daughter relationships and Abel’s definition of friendship as a ‘vehicle of self-definition’ as starting points in order to argue that ‘The friend as a second self provides a way of separating from the mother without rejecting the female self-image she represented, for the friend is after all a similar image’ (1989, 15). The phrase ‘second self’ echoes Brittain’s assurances to Holtby that: ‘Gordon will never be quite the same; never quite my second self in exactly the same and dependable way’ (quoted in Kennard, 1989, xiv, original emphasis). The aim of their dialogue, Kennard argues, is ‘to resolve differences because what is valued is thinking alike; strength is drawn from the image of sameness. They both empower and rewrite each other in an attempt to reach consensus’ (1989, 17). That consensus, Kennard suggests, was reached through the reconciliation with the ‘mother’ in Holtby’s final novel, South Riding (1936), and Brittain’s Honourable Estate (1936).
I want to offer a rather different interpretation of the relationship by reading their intertextual dialogue as a competitive dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense. While this retains the notion of reciprocity, it allows for the constantly shifting power dynamics between the two women, as well as attempts to silence the other. Their textual struggle over the meaning of their friendship, and female friendship generally, is clearest in Brittain’s biography of Holtby, Testament of Friendship (1940). Published after Holtby’s death, it is the text in which Brittain takes final control of the representation of the relationship.

Brittain’s phrase ‘second self’ needs closer interrogation. ‘Second’, as de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex indicates, implies a secondary placing – something which is lesser, additional or inferior in importance or rank to the first. A copy rather than an original. That rivalry can also be a ‘vehicle of self-definition’ is reflected in Brittain’s concern to establish, rather than resolve, difference between herself and Holtby by presenting Holtby as ‘second’ in the sense of lesser/inferior. This is especially obvious in the contrast between Brittain’s status as a married woman and Holtby’s as a spinster.

Rather than reading their relationship as a linear development towards a point of consensus I read it as an ongoing process of interaction in which the self is continually reconstructed through a dialogue with the other. Brittain and Holtby make use of a range of different discourses and positions – not only mother and daughter, or sisters, but also opposite-sex models, especially brother and sister. This indicates in part the lack of a language within which to think about female friendship. But it also suggests the lack of a language within which to think about rivalry between women – unless that rivalry is over a man. The romance plot which has so dominated women’s fiction also shapes textual representations of women’s rivalry. Reading Brittain’s fiction against her non-fiction texts reveals how, in the process of transmuting fact into fiction, academic and professional rivalry between the two women is transformed, through the use of the triangle plot, into romantic rivalry. The romance plot shapes not only Brittain’s fiction but her autobiography and even her biography of Holtby. Holtby’s fiction, in contrast, is concerned to overturn the triangle plot by erasing the man and re-establishing connections between women.

As the relationship between Brittain and Holtby shows, rivalry and friendship are not mutually exclusive, they can co-exist in the same relationship, and within the same linguistic exchange. Moreover, their professional rivalry had a beneficial effect, since it spurred each on to greater achievement. It can, ironically, be seen as a part of their enabling