Searching for the Relations Between Modernism and Life-Writing

An Interview with Max Saunders

On October 1, 2018, two days after the one-day forum at Hitotsubashi University, five members of Correspondence, Eri Kai, Kaori Inuma, Kazuma Morita, Satomi Isobe, and Ryosuke Yamazaki, conducted an interview with Professor Max Saunders, a guest speaker at the forum, at the university. The main topic was his research on life-writing, which has been a major research interest of his from early on. As well as asking him about the background of his research, we discussed life-writing with him in connection with our individual research topics.

Background of Research on Life-Writing

Kazuma Morita: I'd like to ask you about your personal history as a researcher of modernism. I heard that you became interested in life-writing while studying Ford Madox Ford. Could you please give us some information about that?

Max Saunders: Yes. I got interested in Ford Madox Ford and started PhD on him. That wasn't a life-writing project at all. I studied modernism and as an undergraduate I really enjoyed writing a dissertation on Ezra Pound. Most of the critics of Pound would mention Ford from time to time but not say very much about him, and Pound wrote a quite lot about him and mentioned him very often, always very admiringly. While I was looking for a PhD topic, I started reading Ford. Back in the early 1980s there was very little written on him. Although

there was some material written about him by his contemporaries and by the American new critics in the 1960s and 70s, there wasn't a Ford academic industry, like there was for T. S. Eliot, Joyce or Ezra Pound. So he seemed a really promising character to look at for a PhD and I started out writing something on Ford's idea of history—because he was a strange novelist who kept pivoting between writing historical and modern novels. The historical ones were from very different periods in (usually) English history. His best-known historical novel is a trilogy about the time of Henry the Eighth in the Tudor period, and it's called *The Fifth Queen* because it is about the fifth wife of Henry the Eighth, one of the least known wives of the six that he had.

And Ford would also write modern novels like *Good Soldier,* which is his best-known book and deals with very contemporary life. It is a very odd book with an impossibly difficult chronology to work out. The later events in it turn out to be later than the date of the book's publication, so it could even be said to deal with the future. He also wrote *Parade's End*, a novel sequence about the First World War, which is one of my favorite works of his. There he is dealing with very contemporary events as well as historical ones. So the idea of history in these works seems to be important. I spent a year working on this topic with Frank Kermode. I read what had been written on it, and thought there were some good insights. But I couldn't see that there was anything much to add on that subject. This is something almost impossible for our graduate students now to experience because we make sure the topics are so well worked out before they start. But at that time graduate study was much less structured. I had to rethink what I was doing. I had been reading reader response theory, which was very current in the 1970s and 80s, and it became clear to me that Ford was very interested in the idea of the reader. His criticism often focuses on the reader; so much so that he was clearly taking a reader-based approach to his writing. So that became the topic of my PhD. It was

about the technique of fiction and how Ford constructed ideas about that technique.

He wrote a wonderful book about his friendship and collaboration with Joseph Conrad. He had worked with Conrad for nearly ten years, really intensively for about five or six of those years, producing three novels. When Conrad died, the first thing he wrote was a book called *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, which was a tribute to his friend. It is not a biography of Conrad but a novel in the form of a memoir. Which is not to say that it behaves like a normal biography. In it Ford says some bizarre things about Conrad. For example, that Conrad was born in the South of France; in fact, he wasn't. Everyone who knows anything about Conrad knows that he was born in part of the Ukraine that was then in the Russian Empire. Ford explains in the book that spiritually Conrad belonged to France because he loved French literature so deeply, and this was an indication of something very interesting in Ford which critics often found difficult to deal with. How do you deal with a writer who claims to be writing something biographical and says something like that? It doesn't make any sense to a lot of critics, particularly to serious Conradians. My point about the book on Conrad is that what matters to Ford about Conrad is not the factual details of his biography, but his contribution to the novel. Ford's memoir of him has a whole section in which Ford goes through all of the techniques of the novel he and Conrad worked on together. It's like a manual of how to write that kind of novel. It appeared in 1924, when modern literary criticism was just beginning to be redefined. Because there weren't many books about how to structure novels, this became something like a bible for creative writers.

So I was happily working on my thesis about Ford's reader-based theories of fiction when I was asked to write biography of him because the half centenary of his death was coming up in 1989. I finished my PhD essay and I thought I should accept it, but I knew that

it would be a challenge. If Ford says Conrad was born in the South of France, how could you trust the things he was saying about himself? Ford writes in the preface of his first book of memoirs called *Ancient Lights* "I have for facts a most profound contempt." He said that he didn't care about facts but his truth to impressions was absolute. It was really an intriguing job. I hadn't written biography before, but I knew I couldn't write a conventional biography of Ford. The question was what to use as evidence. You could use the evidence of several people who got annoyed because he would say something to them they then found out wasn't true, but that would be very odd sort of biography; and you still wouldn't get at what was true. Ford is a wonderful story teller, and when something important happened to him he would tell the story many times, and these versions are all different. I found my job was to put these versions together and to see what the differences might tell us about the writer. What he was telling us was less about what actually happened, but more about what kind of writer he was. That was what he was most interested in. So it seemed to me that it had to be the center of any sensible biography of him. And the biography was absurdly long because I had to tell some stories about four or five times!

I will give you one example. When he survived the First World War and was demobilized, he went to a little cottage in Sussex that his young lover, Stella Bowen, found for him. Because they weren't married and it was 1919 and she was very young, she didn't join him immediately. So he went on his own to this cottage, which was tiny and very rough and falling down. It was quite depressing. In his memoir about the period after the war called *It was the Nightingale*, he described his first evening in the cottage. Because the cottage was beautiful, he thought that was very auspicious. But when he got there, he was very depressed that there was so much work to do; it was old, and in a terrible state. He had brought some food to eat and cooked a

stew. Although he was a great cook, he couldn't be bothered to prepare it properly this time. He just threw the onions in without peeling them first, and said that he made a pact with destiny. If the skins came off and floated to the top, then he would carry on. The suggestion was that he wasn't sure he could go on living. He was letting the stew and the onions give him a sign about whether he should continue with his life or not, and with his attempts to be a writer. He hadn't been able to write much for several years while he was in the army, so he didn't know he could do it anymore. And in this memoir, he describes how the stew was bubbling away and the onion skins did float up to the surface and he had a delicious meal. On the next day, he was quite sure he would able to start his life over again.

That seemed to be why he changed his name. Originally he had a German surname. His father was a German who had come to London in the nineteenth century and worked as a music critic for the *Times*. Ford was originally Ford Hueffer. He went through the whole of the First World War with a German name, which was not easy. In 1919, he changed it to the oddly circular form of Ford Madox Ford. I took that as a sign that he started his life again after the war. He was reborn as a result of his new life with Stella Bowen, this new cottage, which was fortuitously called "Red Ford," and his new name. But when he wrote her a letter the next day after having arrived there, he described a completely different meal. He just fried some chicken and some vegetables in a pan; so not a stew (laugh). That gives you a sense of the kinds of changes in his biography as he writes about it. You are clearly not getting factual accounts of recipes and meals and events on particular days. But the *story* gives you a sense of what he was feeling at that moment. If you describe frying some onions, it wouldn't get in that sense of destiny. That was what he was interested in. He gets that across in inventing this beautiful story about cooking a meal. Now where did he get that from? Maybe the next day he cooked the meal he

said he cooked on the first night, because the detail is so precise. But he has no compunction in bringing these different elements together in a new story because it was the best story. It captures what he wants to express of his life more effectively. This is by way of saying that you can see how you might get interested in life-writing while working on a biographical project like this. Because the way Ford writes about his life is very fictionalized and very unusual—or at least it was then. It is unusual to make the transformations so explicit. He is not trying to fool anyone, or not trying to just tell a lie, or making mistakes. What he tended to call these stories was impressions. He defined his own writings as impressionism.

KM: It seems to me that such fictionalized autobiography is very similar to the I-novel in Japanese literature. The I-novel is a very popular genre in Japanese literature. This kind of novel is supposed to depict an author's life as it is, but such works are in fact fictionalized. While we easily believe that they write their lives, it is not the case. Osamu Dazai, a famous Japanese writer, wrote an interesting short story that describes such a gap. In this novel, a female fan of a writer visits his house and is disappointed to find that his life is very different from that depicted in his works.

MS: That's interesting. It sounds like the "I-novel" must be the Japanese equivalent of what French and English-speaking critics call "autofiction." When you focus on the question of autobiographers fictionalizing their life, there are different ways to approach it. The classic way is to think that the authors are either careless or their memories are bad; or, worse still, that they are being untruthful. If you look at one of the most famous earlier autobiographies, the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, footnotes to Rousseau correct his dates and facts at key points. But clearly the kind of work Kazuma and I are

talking about is a different phenomenon. The writer is much more conscious about what is going on; not making a slip but making a formal choice or a decision to change details. And that kind offers a different set of questions or ways of judging the work. You can say "this writer is irresponsible because he knows this isn't true but he says it anyway to make a good story. We should be aware that we cannot trust what they are saying." Or you can be more postmodern and celebrate a good story. But I think it's an interesting phenomenon and I did a lot of work on Ford and his fictionalizing. What's the context for this departure from the evidence? Is anybody else doing anything similar or is he unusual? Was he eccentric or pathological in some way, as some critics argue? This is how I started thinking about life-writing and Modernism.

Engagements with Life-Writing in Modernism

MS: When I started this project, it was an almost impossible topic to think about—at least for someone with such a formalist training as a critic. I studied in Cambridge, where a center piece of the degree was "Practical Criticism." That involves being given a piece of literature or a poem without any information about it (such as author or date). You just have to comment on the words on the page. You give a close reading of the work. That was the Cambridge method, and was developed there in the 1920s and 1930s. It became very influential then in America through the American "New Critics." It was still one of the main ways of teaching when I was in school and when I went to university. Although things would change when Marxist Criticism, which emphasized the importance of context, became very strong, where Marxist critiques and practical criticism agreed was that biography was somewhat irrelevant. One of the founding theoretical essays of the New Criticism was an essay by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley called "The Intentional Fallacy." Through this essay,

I became familiar with the idea that talking about intentions in literary works is very problematic. Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that when you try to think about the intention of the work, the best evidence for that is the work itself. Anything you take from outside the work—the author's biography, letters, critical comments, etc.—might tell you something, but it would tell you something about what the author said or thought, not about what the work means. What the work actually means is in the work, not in the author. So biography was seen as somehow irrelevant. It was regarded as a mistake to rely on biography to understand literary works. The great modernist writers like Eliot and Yeats and Ezra Pound tended to advocate the theory of impersonality in poetry. Eliot talked about impersonality in his influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Yeats wrote about masks, and Pound about personae. To think you get Eliot's biography from *The Waste Land* is the very idea he resisted very forcibly. Marxists also argue that biography is suspect because it was all about the individual. Marxists didn't believe in the primacy of the individual. They thought what mattered was the social collective, and class and economics were the main determinants of social relations. Biography was regarded as a symptom of bourgeois individualism. It made a fetish of the individual free of social context.

Therefore, biography was treated with condescension when I was a student. So to think about life-writing and modernism especially seemed to go against the grain. But when you start asking what modernism does about life-writing, you will start noticing there is a lot of what I'm calling engagement with it. T. S. Eliot doesn't write biography, but all of his poems, particularly the late poems *Four Quartets*, can be taken to be quite autobiographical. Ezra Pound, too, could be very scathing about biography. There is a funny letter where he says, "AS usual, pubrs / continue to want naughtyboyography"—not autobiography, but the headline-grabbing indiscretions of a young

man. But one of his best-known works is the poem no one really knows what to do with, which is the sequence of short poems called *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, the name of a person. One of the poems is *E. P. ODE POUR L'ÉLECTION DE SON SÉPULCHRE*, which is an allusion to the French poet Ronsard. But he put his initials, E. P., Ezra Pound, in the title. So people wondered what the relation was between *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and Ezra Pound. Is E. P. Ezra Pound? Is it Pound writing a poem about Mauberley? Is it Mauberley writing a poem about Pound? Or something else? Its form makes it almost impossible to answer those questions. But it creates questions about who is Mauberley and who is E. P. And the subtitle is *Life and Contacts.* A lot of the poems seem to be about the other writers who are presumably Mauberley's contacts. They are loosely based on real writers, minor figures from the 1890s. What I argue about this work is that it's a kind of parody of the little books that would be published about minor literary figures. So it's a parody of biography. That's what I mean by "engagements with life-writing." It is not biography although it has traces of Pound trying to find his own way through this group of writers in London in the early 1900s. But what he does is produce a form which takes up biography and autobiography, and makes a kind of formal game out of them. That's really what I argue that most modernists did. They played games with life-writing. They didn't produce auto/biography, for the most part, but they didn't ignore it. Instead, they *use* it, to make new kinds of interesting forms out of it.

If you look at Ellmann's famous biography of Joyce, it shows us that almost everything Joyce put into *The Portrait of the Artist of the Young Man* is true. It's from Joyce's own life—his school, friends, episodes—but it's all changed. The name of the main character is not James Joyce, but Stephen Dedalus, and everyone else has different names, though the name of the school is the same. Why does he do that? You could say that most novels are autobiographical in some way;

but this one seems to be playing different kinds of game with life-writing. What I take to be key to that is that in the manuscript of the early version of *Portrait of the Artist*, he ends it with "Stephen Dedalus pinxit," which means "Stephen Dedalus painted this" (in Latin). And it's what a painter in the Renaissance would have written on their painting as a signature. Stephen Dedalus was a pseudonym Joyce used when he was publishing journalism. He doesn't say "James Joyce pinxit," but "Stephen Dedalus pinxit." So what I ask about that novel is whether we shouldn't be reading it differently. Rather than seeing it as Joyce writing an autobiographical novel—here is my life but I'm changing the details; so you don't read it as autobiography but just as a beautiful novel—instead of writing that kind of book, which everyone had written all through the nineteenth century, what if we see it as Joyce thinking: "I'm writing a new kind of book which has a character, Stephen Dedalus, and I'm imagining what kind of the book *he* would write." Can you read *A Portrait of The Artist* as a fictional book, which is not the book Joyce narrates, but the book his character might have written? That might sound like a slightly crazy suggestion! But my argument is that it is not very different from the way most people read *Portrait*, which is as a stream of consciousness novel. What you have is Stephen thinking about what happened in his past life and how he would turn it into words. So for me, we're reading Stephen thinking out the novel of his life. If Joyce had kept in the "Stephen Dedalus pinxit" at the end, it would have established a clear distance between Joyce and Stephen; would have made the book like a Victorian dramatic monologue in which the entire work is a dramatized utterance of a fictional persona. But, of course, Joyce didn't put it in the published version; and so produced a much more cunning work, in which the fictional novel is hidden inside what looks like an autobiographical novel.

Ryosuke Yamazaki: Can I ask a question?

MS: Yes, of course.

RY: In the case that the author expresses his past experience, for you, which is more important, his text itself, or the context?

MS: Well, that's a good question. I think in a way what Joyce is interested in here is something slightly different from both of those things, which is *the process of becoming an artist*. Even if you think that the "fictional novel" reading goes too far, what you have in *A Portrait* is the story of a person from a very young boy to someone who starts writing poetry, when you get one of the poems towards the end, the villanelle of the temptress. Joyce doesn't just produce it, but gives us the process of Stephen's writing it stanza by stanza. It's only after a long sequence of pages that we have the whole poem. And then the last section is his journal entry. So you have two kinds of Stephen's writings: poem and journal. So you already have texts by Stephen *in* the book. Even if you don't accept the reading I'm proposing, it's clear that Joyce is showing how Stephen becomes an artist. And a lot of Joyce criticism of that novel has turned on the question of what we think of the poem? Is it a good example of a bad poem, the thing the author of *A Portrait of the Artist* has grown out of, or is it the example of a good poem? Actually it's a poem Joyce wrote himself. It's in his notebooks. But he makes a different use of it by 1914. So I think the poem is important as a sign of the birth of the artistic consciousness. But, of course, that's ironized because it's the birth of very 1890s literary consciousness which Joyce doesn't embody any more when writing the novel. And the title, *A Portrait of the Artist as the Young Man*, is odd, isn't it? It comes from art history. It's what you would see on a painting by someone like Rembrandt of the young figure, maybe

in some kind of costume, in a painting *by* Rembrandt—himself as a soldier, say, as in one famous painting. But how do we understand that title? Is it just a self-portrait of someone painted when they were young? Or did an older writer paint a portrait of what they were like when they were younger? That's a different temporality, isn't it? But I think one thing is very obvious. This is the book which is playing all kinds of games with life-writing. The idea of a self-portrait invokes the ideas of autobiographical poems and autobiographical narratives and autobiographical novels, none of which Joyce's scholarship had really dealt with. But I think it's surprising that this major work of modernism is so deeply bound up with questions about autobiography and the fictionalization of autobiography. I really wanted to focus critical discussion on these questions. My reason for thinking that question about fictional authorship was worth asking about Joyce was this. In 1916, when *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was published, it might have seemed an odd things to do, but by 1933, when Gertrude Stein published *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, that's exactly what you have: the author writing someone else's book for them and pretending the whole book is the created work of someone else. It's quite a disturbing take on creativity, isn't it? But a number of great modernists were doing this. Have you ever come across the Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa?

KM: I know his name.

MS: Fernando Pessoa is a great Portuguese modernist writer, whose name, weirdly, means "person" in Portuguese.

RY: Is it fictional…?

MS: No, it was his real name. It just happened to mean "person,"

which—who knows?—maybe started him thinking on these lines. But he works with what he calls "heteronyms," which are fictional names of poets whose poetry he writes, and he has at least seventy-six of these different poets and writers whose writings have different styles. He produced their whole works. Some had very small complete works of a few poems, but some wrote a lot. And he wrote a very long book called *The Book of Disquiet* by Bernardo Soares, whom he calls a "semi-heteronym" because that book is more autobiographical. But the crucial point is that he can write whole creative work as if it's coming from another voice than his. That was his distinctive mode of writing. Once he discovered it in 1912, there was no stopping him, and all his poetry after that came from these heteronymic voices. So his case demonstrates that you could do that before Joyce. My argument is that there was an explosion of this fictionalizing of life-writing in this period. But it had been suppressed by formalism, the new criticism that was telling us not to think about life-writing.

The Idea of "Autobiografiction"

So I was just looking for what was going on in the period in the relationship between fiction and autobiography. Then I came across an extraordinary essay from 1906. Its title sounds very modern, in fact, even postmodern: "Autobiografiction." This was an essay by Stephen Reynolds, who is not very well known now. He was known in the twentieth century mainly for a book called *A Poor Man's House* (1908), which is about the life of a fisherman's family in the west country of England, in Devon. He lived with this family and got very friendly with them, and he just wrote their story. And it became a working-class literary classic. But "Autobiografiction" was written a couple of years before that. And it was revelation to me when I read it. He argues that there was a lot of writing which looked like autobiography but wasn't, around the turn of the century from the 1870s and the 1880s through to

1906. These works were very famous at that time although not many people read them now. I suppose the best-known is *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* (1881). But there are others by people like George Gissing, a very well-known writer, or A. C. Benson, who was also a very prolific, best-selling writer at that time. *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* was written by someone who wasn't called Mark Rutherford but William Hale White. He told the story of his loss of religious faith and his nervous breakdown, which were difficult things to write about in the 1880s. But after the success of the *Autobiography* Hale White wrote all his fiction under the name of Mark Rutherford as well as other journals and letters. So he created this whole heteronymic output. As Mark Rutherford he could say things that William Hale White could not. Reynolds argues that there was a significant small genre which he calls "autobiografiction." He was not talking about the autobiographical novel, which normally denotes a fiction written in the third person, but drawing on the author's life. What he means is a novel written in the form of autobiography. It has to be a first-person narrative which tells someone's life story, but it's just not actually, or at least not exactly, the life story of the writer. And he says it normally makes use of three genres: autobiography, novel, and the essay. It is true that lot of these works don't just tell a life story. They develop ideas about other things, like religion, nature, happiness and so on.

RY: So he tried to show it as another person's autobiography. This is the same thing Mr. Morita was talking about.

MS: Yes. In the 1970s, the term "Autofiction" was introduced by the French critic Serge Doubrovsky for a kind of novel that most postmodernist writers write now, and that the Japanese writers have been producing in the I-novel. Perhaps it's so widespread now that it's almost hard to think of novels that are not autofictional to some extent.

What I think is interesting about autobiografiction and Reynolds's idea is that it is provides a prehistory of autofiction. He just had very good antennae for what was emerging at that time, which later became a really major strand of modernist writing.

Life-Writing and Literary Genres

RY: Can I ask your opinion about a frank question? It's ok?

MS: Yes, it's good!

RY: Thanks. I think this question relates to your discussion, and, maybe, to the question that Mr. Morita asked. I study working-class literature of the 1930s, sometimes called proletarian writing. There is always a controversial issue about the "distance" between authors and authors' viewpoints, and the content and people the authors describe. Sometimes, it is a deep relationship with class.

MS: Yes.

RY: About the authenticity of the content itself, some critics say that there are differences between working-class works written by working-class authors, and working-class works written by middle-class writers or others. I struggle with these differences because, when I try to say something about the authenticity of the works, I think there is a difficulty that people cannot say anything about the working-class works which are not based on the author's own experiences as a member of the working-class. So, especially, in literary history, proletarian critics praise the works written by working-class people because there is a kind of real experience, saying that "We experience this plight." But I think, at the same time, they also reject the works written by people who do not experience hard times. What do you think

about this?

MS: It is an important question. Can you give me some examples?

RY: There are many proletarian fictions that are focused on workers' physical labor in the factory. But these works omitted to focus on the labor of females. And, even if some female writers wrote about housework at that time, some contemporary male-authored proletarian works appeared to underestimate women's labor because they did not consider that their work was equivalent to the physical labor of male workers. Maybe a better example is Mike Gold. Do you know his work? He wrote about Jewish immigrants in New York. He worked as an editor, a writer, and a journalist. Although he well knew the Jewish immigrants he tried to describe, his own social status was not the working-class.

MS: So it's a question about the relation of the intelligentsia to the proletariat? Have you come cross Nick Hubble's book called *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question*? I think that you will find it extremely helpful in thinking through your question. What he is concerned to do is to dismantle the binary opposition many critics set up between proletarian literature and modernism. What he shows is that proletarian literature, whether it is written by proletarians or modernist intellectuals, meets on precisely those questions that you are asking. He takes a comment by the Marxist critic Alick West, which is the modernist question he refers to in the title: if I don't understand my society, how do I know who I am? So, the intellectual author and the class context seem to be very interconnected. That interconnection has been written about from both sides at the same time, as Hubble shows in order to dissolve the boundary between modernism and the proletarian. It makes proletarian literature a much broader and more

interesting category, including writing about proletarian experiences from different positions. For example, he takes Lewis Grassic Gibbon's trilogy *A Scots Quair* (1932-34). Much of the experience is given from the perspective of Chris, a female character, which early critics read as a kind of sexism. But Hubble shows how he uses it in a different way to think about the perception of masculinity by someone distanced from it.

RY: Thank you very much. What do you think about the relationship between realism and autobiography? I think this is quite a broad issue.

MS: The concept of autobiografiction is helpful here too. It is very problematic for realism; but it makes it easier to see the different kinds of relationship that are possible between autobiography and realism. Classic formal autobiography is realist in form and content. Autobiografiction is formally realistic, but the content is not. Whereas there is another kind of writing—Ford Madox Ford's, for example, which is realist in neither form nor content. He defines himself as impressionist as opposed to realist in his fiction. And I think there is such a thing as impressionist autobiography too, which doesn't tell a realist story in a realism form, but is realist about affect or ideas or emotions.

Autobiografiction in Literary History

Eri Kai: My question is very different from Mr. Yamazaki's. I was surprised to hear that Ford Madox Ford wrote a biography of Conrad which provoked controversy. Vera Brittain said something similar, that is, "I have a desire to write history like a novel." She wrote a biography of Winifred Holtby, who was her close friend and who died at an early age, so I will try to analyze it in future. I have a question about the particular period of literary history in the 1930's. Gertrude Stein's *The*

Autobiography of Alice B Toklas, which you mentioned, and Virginia Woolf's *Flush* were published in the same year. What do you think about this trend in the 1930s for auto/biografiction in English?

MS: That's a very good question, too. If you'd asked someone that a few years back probably what they would have said was that the major change in the 1930s is a move towards a kind of documentary realism, whose representative writer is George Orwell, producing works that were not novels but a form of reportage like *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) or *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). He uses the first person about his experiences not to produce autobiographies, but to bear witness to social and historical circumstances about the working-class or the Spanish Civil War. There is clearly something in that view. But I also see it rather differently in Vera Brittain's case. She is an interesting figure in this context because she was writing in the period when all the famous First World War memoirs started appearing. The so-called "boom" of war books is normally dated around 1928, 1929 and 1930 when a lot of narratives started appearing about the First World War, like Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) by Siegfried Sassoon, and *Testament of Youth* (1933) by Vera Brittain. If you look at Sassoon's memoirs, the first thing you will notice is that the main character isn't called Siegfried Sassoon but George Sherston. Again, we've got something strange happening: an autobiografictional thing. Graves in the preface to *Goodbye to All That* said that "Having stupidly written it as a novel," he had "to re-translate it into history." It is a strange idea, isn't it? And Vera Brittain said something quite similar to that. She says that in *Testament of Youth* she tried writing novels about the experiences but they weren't right.

EK: She received negative reviews for the first autobiographical novel,

The Dark Tide. So she gave up writing about her experiences in the form of the novel, and came to concentrate on writing the journals and newspaper articles. But she tried again to write her war experiences in the form of autobiography. Here, I have another question. In fact, she had been training to be a historian in Oxford. Bostridge's biography mentions that she was recommended to write *Testament of Youth* in the form of autobiography. Initially, Brittain had trouble writing it, but the form allowed her to face her war experience, I think. However, autobiogra / fiction such as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Flush* included a lot of humor and depicted their daily lives.

MS: Yes, that's right.

EK: Recently, in life-writing studies, many researchers have written about daily life. So, I'd really appreciate it if you could give us your opinion on this. Because we are learning about it in Professor Nakai's lectures.

MS: Yes. I absolutely agree with your comments, particularly about Brittain. I'm not at all trying to suggest that *Testament of Youth* is fictionalized. It's not a work of autobiografiction or comparable with the other ones I'm talking about. I don't think Sassoon's memoir is fictionalized other than in changing the name to Sherston and playing down the fact that he was a poet. He was trying to make himself more ordinary, more representative. And I think what both writers are doing is, in a way, wanting to be historians, but feeling that the best way to be a historian is to describe exactly what they have seen; and feeling a great pressure to do that—as most people who experience that kind of traumatic suffering have felt. But it is very difficult to do. They have to approach their war experiences through fictional forms first. They can't get to a more autobiographical form directly because the experience is

too raw. But Brittain and Graves and Sassoon do it via fiction. Eri gave a very good account in a paper on *The Dark Tide* of how that process of working through fiction was the beginning of the solution for Brittain and enabled her to deal with her experiences more directly. By the time she got to *Testament of Youth*, she had done the rehearsal, so she could face the darkest experiences of the war.

Woolf's engagements with life-writing are very different. *Flush* is a wonderful game with biographical form, isn't it? *Flush* is a book which proposed to be the story of the famous poets Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning told from the perspective of their dog, the spaniel Flush. So she gives a kind of dog's eye view, or dog's nose sense, of a story that was incredibly well known in the period. But the book she had written in a few years before that, *Orlando*, is doing a similar thing. It's subtitled "a biography," but of course it's completely fantastical. The central character, Orlando, lives for 400 years and changes gender in the middle of the story. Gender transitioning is familiar nowadays but was not realisable in 1928. That seems to me a text that works even better in comparison with Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. For they both are dealing with lesbianism, which it was not possible to write about then in literal, autobiographical, explicit ways. We know that from one of the great literary scandals of the same year, the trial for obscenity of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*. It was clearly dangerous to write about lesbian friendships in 1928. But you can do it as *Orlando*, or you can do it a, few years later, as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Autobiografiction was a very popular mode for expressions of all kinds of non-normative sexuality and life-choices because it offered a good disguise to present the statement as coming from the fictional persona.

Someone asked an interesting question in the symposium two days ago about what connection there was between the nineteenth century autobiography and the talking cure sense of modernist life-

writing. Actually a lot of the works I have been looking at under heading of "autobiografiction" would be good examples of something like that. One is a famous journal that was published as *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* under the name of Barbellion, which is, again, one of these works which is partly fictionalized, but the real figure who wrote it had a tragic disease that killed him and stopped him doing most of things he wanted to do; which is why he was a disappointed man. But the journal is annotated to record his dying; though he wasn't in fact dead when it was published. It's as if he wanted to finish his life before he actually died himself. So it's a good example of the ways in which some of this work is partially fictionalized. There's a similar work, called *Memoirs of a Failure* which, like a lot of them, is about someone who had some kind of nervous breakdown. Loss of faith, nervous breakdown, and homosexuality are very strong motifs for people fictionalizing their works. And I think that opens up a question of what is success and what is failure in these narratives because all of these books seem to be telling a story of loss, failure, depression, and disappointment. But it is the very active narrating them which makes them partly redemptive, making something positive out of the story as the talking cure is supposed to do.

The Writer's Position

Kaori Inuma: Can I ask a question? Do you think there is a gap between autobiography written by novelists, writers, and by ordinary people? And if so, how do they differ? Because in my studies I translated and discussed the memoir written by a lady who said she saw fairies, and who took photograph of fairies at Cottingley. I argued that her reality could be understood in two ways. One is ordinary, and the other is a bit extraordinary—one which enables her to see fairies. So, I could discuss the content of the autobiography but I couldn't discuss and position her life in relation to the theory of auto/biography.

Because the theory of auto/biography is based on the autobiography and autobiografiction and the autobiographical novel which are all written by novelists. So, could you make any suggestions about how to approach such work?

MS: That's interesting! In a way, this is a central question for life-writing theory, isn't it? When does someone become a writer? How much do they have to write before they become a writer? If they just write a diary, or a letter, or a tweet, is what they are doing "writing"? What if I post a picture on Instagram? Doesn't that constitute a piece of 'writing', or, in a Derridean sense, a "text"? I think you asked that question in a way which put a certain pressure on the word "ordinary." It makes one ask: "when does an ordinary person become a writer?" Are all people who haven't written and published novels ordinary writers however good they are at writing?—however formally experimental or linguistically interesting their work? Or, does everyone become a writer once they start writing? So I'm a bit wary of that term "ordinary person." Although I absolutely accept that it is a meaningful distinction between people who are professional writers and ones who are coming to it accidentally, ones who are coming to it accidentally still acquire that technical skill by other means, just by reading. There are a lot of brilliant self-taught novelists. But they don't produce *Orlando* or *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

Satomi Isobe: I have a question which follows on from Ms. Inuma's. I'm studying children's literature, fantasy literature, in the post-war period, which is sometimes called the second golden age of children's literature. The author I'm working on is Lucy M. Boston, and she wrote two autobiographies. I'm wondering how to deal with her awareness of unseen things or supernatural things in her autobiography. She brings her awareness into her fantasy as well. And she wrote fantasy

literature, including many supernatural things. I think she had a direct awareness of them, but such experiences tend to be treated as "not real" by literary critics. So, I'm just wondering how to deal with her reality and her awareness of unseen things in fantasy. What do you think about this?

MS: That sounds really fascinating. Can you tell me when her autobiography was written?

SI: Yes, it was in the 1970s . . .

MS: Right. There are interesting comments by writers from that period. I'm thinking of Graham Greene's comment about what it's like as a writer to inhabit the world of the imagination. To write a successful novel, you have to immerse yourself into a fictional universe for many months and to really get to know those characters and their experiences of living in that environment. So, if you think of a writer like Ford as a critic, it's clear he was someone who worked like that and writes very interestingly about it. That is to say, even when he was reading other writers, he would get so involved in the material that he's got some wonderful passages about looking up from the pages he was reading, and being confused about why he wasn't in that world anymore. There is a kind of immersive reading like that. It takes him into a fantasy space. And there is clearly a sort of immersive writing as well. So I take it that in the case of novelists who have paranoid experiences like that, their fantasy world seeps out into their lives. It doesn't seem at all strange because that's what they are doing in the fictional world. Other kinds of biographical critic might want to argue it the other way round: that people write about visions because that is what they know. But writing fiction is quite a strange thing to do with your life from one point of view, isn't it? You may wonder what's motivating it. For some

writers like Ford or Greene, it seems that the motivation is a sort of enjoyment or being at ease in a world of a fantasy. That's rewarding or gratifying in a way that being in a real world or social world doesn't provide. Being moved between the two is perhaps gratifying as well.

SI: Thank you very much.