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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

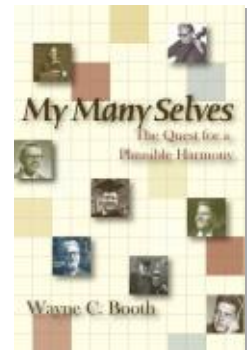
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Chapter Eight

The Lover Becomes a Trapped Army Private

An army marches on its stomach.

—Napoleon

I never expect a soldier to think.

—George Bernard Shaw, *The Devil's Disciple*

"You must not tell us what the soldier . . . said, sir," interposed the judge; "it's not evidence."

—Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*

*But we are soldiers;
And may that soldier a mere recreant prove,
That means not, hath not, or is not in love!*

—Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*

*They're changing the guard at Buckingham Palace—
Christopher Robin went down with Alice.
Alice is marrying one of the guard.
"A soldier's life is terrible hard,"
Says Alice.*

—A. A. Milne, *When We Were Very Young*

November 1944

As a private, trained as a “clerk/rifleman,” longing for undelivered letters from my true love, I was for quite a while just idly, miserably waiting for assignment. We were stationed at a “replacement center” in Givet, France, the “prick that France sticks into Belgium,” sleeping on the ground on straw ticks. One day a sergeant snarled at us, “All right, get it out of your fuckin’ heads you’re going to be clerks. You’re gonna be fuckin’ riflemen, see?” We could hear the bombardments in the distance; we believed him. Then, a few days, maybe even a week or two later, they lined us up to get into trucks that would move us to the front.

“Anderson!”

“Here”—and buddy Jim goes towards the truck.

“Banderzinsky!”

“Here.”

“Booth!”

“Here.”

“You’re not goin’. You’re goin’ back to Paris to be a fuckin’ typist.”

Somebody had seen on my record that I could type eighty words a minute. I was taken to the officers’ headquarters and granted not only a typewriter day by day but—oh, bliss!—a bunk bed. But my buddies were gone; even the few who for some reason weren’t shipped seemed more distant, perhaps angry because I had dodged the bullet.

After lying around for a few days, doing a bit of office typing for the Center, feeling more and more guilty about the contrast between my buddies’ fates and mine, I was trucked back to Paris. On that cold, rough trip I meditated a lot about God, chance, and choice, and recorded my thoughts a bit painfully.

November 22, 1944

It appears that Bob [a buddy with a wife and two children at home] and Dean [with a wife and child] will probably go into combat as riflemen. . . .

I always had a superstitious faith that “something would happen” to keep

me from combat—that “my abilities would be recognized.” . . . Mack Cunningham [a high school friend] would say, “There is some power overseeing your destiny, or this would not have happened.” Poppycock! I’ll admit that I had one brief moment—may I never cease to be ashamed—of thinking, “This is what I deserved.” . . . But immediately I recovered myself and felt ashamed for allowing my ego to play such tricks on my sense. The thousands of men—better men than I—who have died in this war should be given a special assignment to haunt me for eternity. . . . It is arrogance of the most unforgivable sort to think God would preserve me, without wife & children, and allow to be killed men with families. . . . I feel guilty about it, undeserving, disappointed about not being able to observe myself in danger—and exuberantly happy at being out of the worst part of the mess.

That entry understates what I dwelt on in other entries—the absolute, final decision to conclude my inner debates about God’s existence: there is no God, because no God deserving our worship would commit an act like that. I had no choice but to pronounce myself an atheist. Pronounce? Well, not out loud, not in letters home, only in my heart and diary. HypocriteB still knew how to bite his tongue.

That painful, true story underlines a curious fact about being a soldier landed into training; you’ve lost all free choice about what you are to do hour by hour. You are left with puzzles about where the wild “chances” are coming from. Every moment is decided by this or that officer’s order, whether stupid, cruel, or wise. You are thus in one sense freed from the Self-Splits that faced you day by day when you were free. In training, as you sit on the ground waiting for an order or conduct a four-hour hike or practice with your rifle, you tend to think of only one split, and it’s not *within* your Self. Instead, it is “I am trapped and I want out; I want Phyllis.”

It’s true that you’re never tempted to escape; you are doing your duty. When you’re told to do something, you don’t debate with yourself about it; you do it. Hearing the corporal’s shouted order at 5:00 AM to “Drop your cocks and grab your socks,” you wake up, jump out of bed, make it up so neatly that if the inspecting lieutenant later drops a quarter on the blanket the coin will bounce. And then you go through the day doing whatever you’re told to do.

Inner voices do intrude frequently: “Fuck you, lieutenant—my neck is as clean as I could get it in two seconds!” “What an idiot you are, Corporal, for saying, ‘No, you don’t have to file ’em chronological—jes do ’em by date.’” But such voices don’t even get recorded in your journal, let alone in letters that might be seen by a censor. You simply obey. Most of the time you just “shit, shower, and shave,” and then—as often happened to me long before the

Paris assignment—you may spend the morning assigned to clean up the crap room where the other GIs have shat, showered, and shaved. If the inspector finds any cleanup failures, you don't get your weekend pass. The slightest bit of neglected shit and I'll lose my visit with beloved Phyllis, two hundred fifty miles south in Long Beach, California.

Here's how I put it in a poem, in letters to Phyllis, other friends, and my favorite BYU professor.

The Witching Hour

The hour of decision comes apace.
Impending doom? We ask. Impending grace?

We mutter incantations over toilet bowls,
And wave the magic brush above the urinals.
We waft the witching broom with curses soft and low;
The sacrificial mop is wafted too and fro.

The Great God comes, inspects with gloves and glasses—
Our demons do their work: we get our passes.

Even when, after training, you have many idle moments because army life consists of “hurry up and wait,” you simply read whatever book is available or listen to whatever records the Red Cross room provides or write letters to the loved ones you long for. (My strongest memory of the good that such drifting can yield is reported in *For the Love of It*: the “freedom,” as I waited for assignment, to listen again and again to Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* and then write at length to Phyllis about how it had transported me, on my way to almost certain death.¹)

In a curious way such freedom from choice liberates you for daily speculation about what it all means—if anything. Most of your deep Self-Splits disappear, especially after the Mormon within stops believing that some God is responsible for at least part of what you have to do. You can't debate “should I do this or do that?” You can't blame yourself for doing something stupid that your officer ordered you to do. You do, however, find plenty of time to engage in the flowering of *thought*-splits.

ThinkerB actually wrote endlessly about them—and lots of other matters—in diaries and even more in letters to Phyllis and friends. CheaterB practiced the cheating I reported above, typing letters to Phyllis while

1. See *For the Love of It*, 33–35.

pretending to do my dutiful copying of GIs' letters; by using carbon paper, I could type the secret letter underneath what looked like the official letter. No supervisor ever caught me at it, and I could type fast enough to get my other jobs done as well.

HOW THE LONGING FOR PHYLLIS WORKED

The one Self-Split that in a way plagued me most through my two years was between the Luster and the Puritan—no, not really the Puritan, now, but the LOVER who longed for Phyllis and was determined not to betray her. A few weeks after arriving in Paris, I wrote her one of my long daily letters, ending with the following.

Speaking of blessings: Sunday evening as I was standing in line for tickets for "Sacre de Printemps," a French civilian came up to me and said, "Are you alone?" "Oui." "Would you care to join the party in my box? I think there are no more of the other seats." My little man was more than solicitous. . . . After the concert, he took us all to a bar, and seemed surprised and a little hurt when I asked for ginger ale to drink while they drank champagne. While the ladies were talking together, he said, very matter-of-factly: "Would you like a woman to take care of you while you are in Paris? I understand most of the soldiers want one, and you should have a clean one, if at all." Hastily weighing the relative—no, what am I saying?—I immediately refused, thanking him for his kindness, and explained that I had a fiancée to whom I was remaining "fidele." This seemed much simpler, and was certainly easier to get across to him, than to try to explain about my voluntary virginal state. He immediately understood. "When I was in the first war, I was engaged to my present wife, and I was—what you say?—true, fidele. It is the best way." . . . The upshot of it all is that he is going to take me to "many concerts," because it pleases him to please the Americans.

One could argue that such a choice was determined strictly by my being raised a sacrosanct Mormon. I can't argue that there was no quarrel between PuritanB and LusterB; there was, for about one second. (The episode could well belong in chapter 7.) But no matter what it was that produced my resistance to the whore offer, I can never resist boasting, to myself and to others, about the rightness of all that and the result of it in our later lives.

Am I suggesting that if I had taken up with one or many available prostitutes, we later might not have had as happily sustained a marriage? Yes, I am suggesting that again, with no solid evidence whatever. What I'm sure of

is that the excessive guilt of the young Mormon screwer would have changed his life a lot, often for the worse, perhaps up to right now.²

Even though I did some half-dating after that with women who in effect offered themselves, I lived with masturbation (always a bit guiltily), reveling in the dream of getting back to my dream mate. And my letters miraculously kept her interest in me alive so that we could marry two weeks after my return in June of '46—neither of us, so far as we can reconstruct, experiencing any sense of doubt as we embraced at the wedding ceremony.

The journals through the two years show endless speculation about “what it all means” and “how to deal with my sense of guilt.” I didn’t quarrel with god (lower case!) any more; he was as dead as Nietzsche had declared him, and he no longer deserved a capital on the pronouns. (Another “God” returned eight years later. See chapter 17.) But I did feel frequent guilt about not being able to “do any good in the world today”; I debated a lot about whether to volunteer back into combat—but the coward always won.

December 20, 1945 [letter to Phyllis]

I talked to a couple of combat soldiers, in Paris for a 48 hr furlough, the other day. They complained less in an hour than the desk-soldier [like me, in the Intelligence office] does in 10 minutes. Yet they had been losing buddies and officers, talked calmly about half of their unit being wiped out in one battle. I felt very guilty and depressed. . . . My conscience is rather weak in some respects. I can tell a lie without having it bother me for months, if I think the lie justified by events. I have little difficulty in maintaining a hypocritical attitude toward most devout members of the church. But when I see unfair distribution of suffering, I invariably feel guilty. I felt guilty when I saw those fellows who were to go back into

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2. I have to resist speculating about how much other soldiers’ lives were harmed by the prostitute-rich life. I’m almost certain that many who had been raised more or less “virginal” became prepared in the army for the sexual revolution. After writing that sentence, I learn, reading in James Atlas’s *Bellow: A Biography*, about how strongly Wilhelm Reich’s sexual theories influenced Saul’s and my generation after the war. Reich actually preached that promiscuity was essential to good health—or so Atlas claims—and it’s scarcely surprising that men who had been “offered” prostitutes throughout the war would buy into Reich’s comforting, self-destructive thesis. I can remember laughing at Reich’s orgone boxes back in the Fifties, and now I learn that Saul Bellow actually bought one and did his “exercises” in it.

Can you forgive my moralizing? And can you understand my deep pleasure in coming across an editorial in our student newspaper today arguing that the widespread “hooking up” that students engage in (what I would call sex-without-love) has “disastrous consequences”?



Thinking about Phyllis in the army, Bremen, 1946

combat within a few hours, leaving me warm and dry and safe in Paris. . . . I feel guilty when I think of the suffering in America, and more guilty when I think of the suffering in all the war torn countries. There is something perverted about this guilt: why should I feel guilty about things I have no control over, and not guilty about those things I do have a chance to regulate? Perhaps it is not guilt at all, but something else: a feeling of futility, of impotence—perhaps even of disapproval of the universe and the way it is “run.”

“The universe,” my nongod, had trapped me into impotent guilt.

With lots of free time to wander about—sometimes no duties for three full days in a row—ThinkerB writes to Phyllis about “the problem of the spirit of giving.” Giving a few bits here and there is his only available way to “do good in the world today.”

February 28, 1945

For some months now I’ve been giving away my weekly allotment of candy, cigarettes, gum, and cookies³ (yes, and here is a good place to confess that I gave away the pineapple and half of the cake you sent)

(a) There is little or no pleasure derived from giving an inadequate gift. To give only a candy bar to a cold and hungry child is more painful than pleasant. It is as unpleasant as dropping a small coin in a beggar’s cap, and it embarrasses me terribly. I see some fellows doing the same thing, and assuming a look of the great big beneficent American giving alms to the poor little French children. All I can do is feel helpless, and it becomes more and more a task to drive myself to distribute the miserable allotment we have.

(b) . . . It is momentarily fun to see the light in the eyes of a little girl when you give her a piece of candy, but again I feel embarrassed; it is obviously a gesture of selfishness and arrogance, comparable to a millionaire saying, “Keep the change.”

(c) Perhaps the difficulty in both cases is that I am giving nothing that I really need, and also that I am too conscious of my role as giver. . . . I rather think that many who believe they are getting the genuine pleasure of giving, who believe they are practicing Christian charity, are a long long way from the kingdom of heaven, even as I am.

3. Actually he’s exaggerating. He had often used the cigarettes as “cash” to purchase music, books, and etchings. One original Whistler, still prominent in our dining room, cost two cartons of cigarettes. And one first edition of Joyce’s *Work in Progress* (actually *Finnegans Wake*) cost one carton. So where was the Giver at those moments of purchase?

The point in this chapter, again, is that throughout those two years I find far *less* of that kind of self-probing (and self-loathing) than I find in my journals and letters before and after the war. Most of what I recorded and remember is about one sharp pain: the miserable separation from Phyllis. The soul-split torments fade into a single longing but never with a hint of having any choice about it. I won't desert; I have to obey, but I want to escape. I have to stay, but I want to leave. I have to be my non-Self here "typing away, eight hours a day," but I long to return to my true Self, the one who will find ultimate happiness with Phyllis.

How do I decide what to quote from the four hundred or so love messages? Here's one, just after we debarked from the Isle de France and traveled through Britain, headed, we were told, to Normandy—long after the very word "Normandy" spelled PROBABLE DEATH!⁴ At some moments I *knew* I was doomed to die and would never see Phyllis again. At other moments as I wrote the daily letters, I *knew* that they were keeping our love alive and thus assuring our future.

[No date]

Dear Phyll, of the I-surely-hope-the-war-doesn't-last-much-longer-so-that-I-can-return-and-marry-her Phyllises:

We are "Somewhere in Great Britain," and if they [the censors] don't cut that out I'll be surprised.

Going for long periods like this with no chance of our letters being mailed for days or perhaps weeks is not at all conducive to any creative urge. . . . When I finally get set for writing you, after fighting hoards of crap shooters or poker players away from my bunk, I sit and think and think about the distance between us . . . and I have to resist writing simply, "I love you, I miss you. I want you. I love you. I am lonely for you. I miss—" and so on.

Even such longing did yield its ups and downs that might be called splits, especially between the optimist and the pessimist—moments when, after reading a letter from Phyllis, I imagined the bliss of being with her at last, followed immediately by utter despair. Though I kept trying to sound optimistic to her, I often blurted out the lamentations.

One of the worst moments came relatively early. Letters from home were irregular, scrambled in delivery. Some never got to me, and many arrived in an order reversing the order in which they were written. One of Phyllis's delayed reports began by almost crushing me, received after about two lonely months in Paris. Here's my reply.

4. My close cousin, Jim Ross, was killed in Normandy.

December 12, 1944

[After declaring lonely love]. . . Now for your letter, written on the 23rd and 26th [of November]. . . You said, in case you have forgotten, “. . . for one horrible minute there I had the thought that I couldn't remember you! I couldn't think what you were like, what to write to you, a stranger. . .” If that was a horrible minute for you, think what it was for me, over here and unable to do anything about it but be frightened. Yes, fear is what it was, fear of losing you, of having you forget our plans and our hopes, fear of time and what it can do to any love if not carefully preserved.

My fear, like your minute of strangeness, was soon gone. After all, it is natural that you should have moments when I seem hard to remember. I haven't as yet had that trouble remembering you, but I rather expect it, as the time since our last closeness lengthens into a long stretch of weary war months. . . . Anyway . . . I consoled myself, calmed my aching heart, so to speak, and read on—to learn with gladness that you had, after all, remembered that I am by far the best matrimonial bet of the season, even over here. But please, please don't let time have its way with us. Don't forget, even for brief minutes, the wonder of the things we have known and felt together and the greater things we shall feel and do together—after the g.d. war.

Always a bit anxious about the relative rarity of her letters, I naturally was thrilled by them when they came. Many buddies were receiving “dear John” rejections from lovers back home, and the fear of rejection returned again and again. (A standard joke about that situation ends with a GI getting a letter that reads, “Dear John: I'm sorry, but I've decided to marry the mailman.”) Even my generally optimistic letters show that I felt desperate to portray a “self” that would be too appealing to resist, despite often feeling worthless. Here are some brief excerpts from letters, which were always at least two pages long, single-spaced.

March 17, 1945

I love you and want you and curse the Goddamn war and its evil, when I sit over a sad typewriter and beweeep my state. But I love you and want you a thousand times more (rough estimate, made rather quickly) when at a fine concert or when looking at the Seine. The positive enjoyment of things becomes in itself a refined sort of torture, infinitely more healthy than inactive sorrow.

April 4, 1945

. . . my subconscious has discovered a refinement on the regular . . . dreams of you. Today as I dozed in the Red Cross, you came and woke me, and I

explained to you that it was very peculiar, but I had been dreaming that I was dreaming of you, a dream within a dream, and you came and woke me. We both seemed to think that very clever, to have dreamed that I was dreaming of you, so you can imagine how much more clever I thought myself when I really did wake up and realized that I had been dreaming that I was dreaming that I was dreaming. That sort of thing is what you're going to have to contend with, sooner or later.

April 6, 1945

Pfc Wayne Clayson Booth, ASN 39928483, draws himself down to his most depraved posture, hands sloppily in pockets, stomach out, chest in, chin at a 45 degree angle with the ground, and makes the most despicable pun of his career:

“Darling, I love you so much that for me you are a walking Phyllic symbol.”

April 8, 1945

Bob has tickets for us to the Folies Bergere tonight. I promise to close my eyes every time there is a nude woman on the stage, cross my heart. Why should I want to look at anyone else's body, when in my mind's eye—but we won't go into that.

When the Germans surrendered on May 9, I at first expected to be home soon or thought I could perhaps work out some way for Phyllis to come over and work with me in the occupation forces. But soon it became clear that because of my “low points of service”—not drafted until April of '44—I was among those who would go home last. In fact I might well be shipped as a “clerk-rifleman” to fight against Japan. So the loneliness and anxiety did not diminish.

17 May 1945

[After a page and a half, single-spaced] It seems almost certain that I shall be going into Germany with the occupation administration, at least for a while. I'd almost be willing to go to the Pacific just to get a thirty day furlough with you, but not quite, especially when there is a chance for working out some sort of deal later on. . . . I am unhappy without you. . . . About tomorrow I shall break into your dormitory and carry you off on my ectoplasmic charger to my metaphysical castle on my eschatological estate. Better get your guard up.

18 May 1945

Fellow in the office next door offered to bet \$150.00 that if I was away from you another year, you would be married to someone else. “With veterans

returning, no girl will be faithful to anybody. I don't know your girl, but I've got a safe bet." But when I smiled in my beard and agreed to bet him, he backed down. If I could only work out some way to create doubt in peoples' minds and then bet them, it would be an efficient means of increasing our nest-aig. Trouble is, I always give myself away in situations like that with a smug, this-is-different air that puts them on their guard.

19 May 1945

[After a page and a half, single-spaced] You will be interested to know (or else!) that when I'm with a girl I know (Nina and Nicole, in other words) the sexual frustration that is so strong at some other times disappears completely; I am as a boy scout talking with other boy scouts, a lamb talking with other lambs, or something. Really, it's a kind of obscure tribute to you (and, from what I can judge of the other men's behaviour, a blessing for both of us, that whenever I am alone with another girl (about five times now . . .) nothing is quite so present as the adverse comparison with you; somewhere in the process of thinking of you, my abstract desire for you drowns out any specific desire that one would expect for them.

June 15

Since you insist that I be honest about everything, I will confess right out that I've been the saddest of young men for about four days—no, three. I'm not going into details—when I get home and you read my diary you'll find out about them . . . All a matter of complete disgust with myself, with the Army, with the way world events are going, and even with life itself; an equally complete inability to drive myself to work or read or write letters or even smile at my associates. Everything I've done before the mood or during the mood has seemed futile and inept; I seemed ignorant, hypocritical, and unable to find any redeeming feature about myself, except perhaps that I loved you, and that didn't help any, either. In the blackest of the mood (still being perfectly honest), I counted up the number of days since I had received a letter from you, and cursed you silently for being unworthy of all the time I spend writing you. (Only in the blackest of the moods, you understand, after having rejected the alternatives of jumping in the Seine, picking up with one or another of the prostitutes who kept accosting me as I walked along the lonely street, or going back to the billet and bumping my head quietly and desperately against my wooden bedpost.) Probably I shouldn't mention how your not writing for—I believe it was fourteen days between the [two] datelines on your letters, a perfectly understandable delay at the end of the [academic] quarter, or so it seems to me now—for fourteen days had a part in the matter. It was not that that caused the mood. . . .

It sometimes seems that my former buoyant optimism is slowly leaving me; that if I don't get in a different environment soon I shall become sourly cynical. The only different environment I can think of that will serve adequately to prevent the catastrophe is you.

Reading that now and thinking about how it must have felt to Phyllis, trying her best to write frequent loving letters, I cringe. How many nineteen-year-olds, separated by now for over a year from a man who writes that way, would hang in there? But she did. In my incomplete collection of letters from her, I find none revealing any offense at such outbursts, only apologies for not writing oftener. Here is one of her many apologies, just a week or so after receiving my note of despair.

June 25, 1945

Dear Wayne, of the much neglected, much loved, much wanted Waynes,

It is unforgivable that I should have left you for such a long while, end of the quarter or no end of the quarter. It was a terrible time, I can assure you. I was tired & cross & busy and all I did was study and bore myself with my dullness. Never have I spent such a time. I wanted to write and instead of taking time, I just got more busy with other things, till I couldn't write. I don't want to suggest that you try such a thing, but you have no idea how difficult it is to get down to writing letters after you haven't written for such a long time. But here we are back home & writing semi-regularly and things are looking onward and upward.

Except I do get a little lonesome without you. After all, I'm still a young girl. You'd think a fellow in Paris could find something thrilling to buy for a girl at home. Especially when she is the one who is supposed to be sending things to the service man overseas to keep him happy. I wish you would tell me what you would like soon. The money will be just rolling in, so to speak, and I would like to send you something. [By now she's making ninety-three cents an hour for teaching in a nursery school, which to both of them seems high pay!]

I will come over as soon as possible. Just wait & see. I know that's the trouble, but "he also serves," you know. I wish he didn't. Wouldn't it be fine if we changed our policy and decided he doesn't really serve at all. M[ilton] did, why can't we?

Neither of us suspected that it would be almost a full year before I was finally sent home. As the months went by, her letters left me less and less worried about losing her. Definite plans for marriage became more and more frequent. For a while we planned seriously for her to come to England so that

we could both attend universities there. So it could hardly surprise either of us when we were married in the Salt Lake Mormon Temple just two weeks after I was shipped back. Ecstasy—to repeat—ecstasy: the best, the luckiest, the most blessed marriage in the history of . . . well, how about the history of primates?

Did the Self-Splits that had been largely suspended by two years of sustained, unified, unquestioned longing return after marriage? Silly question with an obvious answer. Freedom of choice flooded back in. Conflicts about right choice were met every day, with no army officer to simplify matters. Though the marriage from then to now has never for a moment been considered in doubt by either of us, the diverse ways of handling marriage and the rest of life yielded, as the other chapters here reveal, sustained continuations of the divisions I had inherited and imbibed from birth.

The first choice-free interlude was over. But another radically different one arrived about twenty years later, postponed now until chapter 10.