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## Expressing the Inexpressible: World War I and the Challenge to Art

*by William Cloonan*

*Perhaps the reason we never learn from  
history is that we are incapable of picturing  
the reality of war and its aftermath, for fear  
that if we did, we would stop believing in  
God and in our fellow human beings.*

—(Charles Simic)

**M**Y PATERNAL GRANDFATHER, a veteran of World War I, once told me a story. A few years after the war, he bumped into some British buddies who had been on active duty for the duration of the conflict. They explained to him that after the war they were shocked by the inability of their friends and families to picture and understand what they had endured. They could recount what happened in all its ugliness, but even though their audiences assured them they had understood, it was obvious that either the veterans were somehow not conveying clearly enough the reality of the events they had witnessed, or their friends were simply not grasping just how awful it was. This was a source of considerable anger and frustration for these men, an open wound of sorts which only began to heal when they discovered people who could, in fact, understand what had happened. These were fellow veterans, French, Italians, even Germans—men and women who, no matter what side they were on, lived comparable experiences. Apparently the situations these men and women had endured were so terrible and unique that they could only be grasped by those who lived them. This being the case, to successfully convey something of the reality of this *war to end all wars* would prove equally problematic for artists whether they were veterans or not.

Difficulties of depiction are probably true about most wars, but World War I was not like most of the conflicts which preceded it; this war was international, for the first time moving the United States outside of its isolationist enclave and onto

a much larger stage; it was also bigger, noisier, longer, more chaotic, and deadlier than any previous bloodletting of recent memory. In *British and French Writers of the First World War*, Frank Field notes that French “losses amounted to over 1,300,000, of whom the overwhelming majority were from metropolitan France” (2). To make matters worse, the battles on the Western Front were largely fought on French soil, and the French military carried the brunt of the war for the first two years (Field 2). Given these facts, it comes as no surprise that the toll on the French was particularly severe. Yet to better understand the French experience it is necessary to first place the Great War in its international context where soldiers of all countries shared remarkable and grueling experiences.

To depict World War I in a manner that was visceral as well as comprehensible and descriptive, to detail the frequent incompetence of the leadership on both sides, to highlight the struggle to survive amid the bizarre moonscape of trench warfare, to treat the decency and the indecency of its participants, would provide artists with a very serious challenge. Those who survived the war knew that the world had changed, and what they sought in their art was a means of allowing their audience to understand some of the causes of that change.

World War I was first and foremost a shock—to the moral, political and aesthetic values of those who were part of the conflict. The initial shock resulted from people simply not expecting this war to be much different from its predecessors; many anticipated a brief, *gentlemanly* encounter where civilized Europe would be sure to put the upstart Huns in their place.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as Paul Fussell observes, “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected” (7). If this is indeed the case, then the irony of World War I was indeed a cruel one.

The title of Robert Graves’s autobiographical *Good-Bye to All That* (1929) effectively conveys more of what the reality turned out to be, and how this reality affected the generation of 1914 and those which would follow. The young Graves marched enthusiastically off to battle, as if he were to engage in the greatest cricket match of his life,<sup>2</sup> only to discover a reality he never deemed possible. After the initial advances and retreats, both sides settled in for a prolonged struggle featuring bloody encounters, often indecisive struggles where one side or another would emerge from trenches to gain or lose a little bit of ugly real estate. At the Battle of the Somme Graves was so severely wounded that he was presumed dead, and his family was so informed. By the war’s end he was radically different from the naïve young man who believed he was off to France on a lark. Despite his subsequent literary successes Graves remained permanently alienated from the complacent middle class values he almost died defending, and lived the rest of his life mostly in a self-imposed exile from England.

Trench warfare was one of World War I’s most striking contributions to the history of military mayhem. Stretching primarily across Northern France, the

trenches eschewed any orderly pattern. They were not dug in neatly ordered rows. They snaked forward and backward over the contested terrain forming a quasi-subterranean world whose vast extent at times defies the imagination. The permanent trench line stretched from Nieuport (Belgium) to the Swiss border, a distance of approximately four hundred and fifty miles (Fussell 9). In such a disorganized setting, the line between friend and foe was often obscured. With the plethora of smoke and fog, as well as the irregular configuration of the trenches, clear firing lines were not always the norm, thus it remains unknown how many soldiers on both sides lost their lives to what today is euphemistically referred to as *friendly* fire.

This inability to see well amid the fog and smoke had an obvious implication for the visual arts. In *Le silence des peintres* (1996), Philippe Dagen addresses the issue of why the war produced so little in the way of excellent painting. Among the answers Dagen proposes is the simple fact that artists could not see well enough into the murky and dangerous world around them. If this obstacle were to be overcome in the visual arts, it would require something other than the raw realism characteristic of so many of the novels addressing the war. To the extent that a solution were possible, it would probably have been along the lines proposed by Franz Marc, the German painter: “Mais nous devons traiter ce sujet d’une tout autre manière, oui, tout autre” (Dagen 141). Marc’s late work displays an effort to render human indecency through animal-like figures, and that sort of image could have been quite apt for the depiction of combat, but we will never know where he might have gone with this idea, since he was killed at the front in 1916. In any case, Dagen’s theory seems well-grounded. In terms of excellent painting dealing with World War I, the great visual artists of the day were essentially silent.

Although World War I had more than its share of major battles, often what were contested were relatively small parcels of land, lying between the combatants. The frequency of these clashes over terrain whose possession was constantly changing gave rise to an expression which apparently existed from the Middle Ages, but achieved a grim popular currency during the war: No Man’s Land, a term that remains the same in French as in English. While No Man’s Land’s meaning is immediately geographic, in a broader sense it can serve as a metaphor for the entity artists of all stripes were seeking: the possession of the hypothetical, uncharted space which would give them the perspective that would allow them to render in one form or another something of the uniqueness of the wartime experiences.

In addition to the reality of trench warfare, among the elements of World War I which remain difficult to grasp, for the contemporaries of the conflict, not to mention ourselves, were the noises, sights, and smells. World War I had heavier artillery than the world had ever witnessed, and it was constantly in use. Airplanes and tanks were also new to warfare. As a result the battlefields were rarely silent, and noise itself became a weapon that affected both sides equally, giving rise to

a wound so totally new that it required a special term: shell shock. It was the confrontation with such an illness while working in a neurological ward in Nantes that helped propel the young André Breton into new ways of envisioning the relationship between the conscious and unconscious that would eventually lead to Surrealism.

In a universe where clear demarcations between the positions of allies and enemies were often impossible to make, the somber task of collecting the dead left on the contested terrain was largely neglected. The result was an incredible nauseating stench, as well as the sight and proximity of mangled, rotting bodies. Yet decomposing flesh was not the only sight and scent to be feared. Yellow smoke drifting across the battlefield heralded the arrival of poison gas, yet another first of World War I. This insidious weapon could blind and kill, but not necessarily at once or even in a short period. In *Épilogue* (1940), the final installment of Roger Martin du Gard's *Les Thibault*, the principal character in this *roman-fleuve*, Antoine Thibault is dying of poison gas as he contemplates what, if anything, World War I had achieved.

Among the most famous French novels of World War I are Henri Barbusse's *Le feu* (1916) and Roland Dorgelès's *Les croix de bois* (1919). The contemporary German equivalent is Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern* (1920). Although all three novels attempt to depict the war's effect on small groups of soldiers, the center of each is not really particular individuals, but the physical existence of the war itself, the sounds, smells, and shadows whose omnipresence touches every aspect of the soldiers' lives. This is particularly true of the novels by Barbusse and Jünger. The titles of Barbusse's work, *Fire*, and Jünger's *Storm and Steel*, suggest something of what must have been the soldier's daily reality of noise, filth, and fear. Years later, when Céline published *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), the opening passages evoke the war as an unfolding of chaos that dwarfs everything around it. This decision, whether consciously taken or not, to shift the center of their fiction from the individual to the composite physical experience of the war is these novelists' version of "traiter le sujet d'une autre manière," and is their major innovation to the literature of World War I.

By the end of the war millions of men and women were dead and others would be dying from their wounds, Northern France was devastated, and the economic well-being of all the belligerent countries, except the United States, was weakened. Yet, quite aside from the postwar death toll, the carnage did not stop in 1918. The after-effects were felt in society as a whole as well as the artistic community. Perhaps not surprisingly, politicians seemed much more naïve about the ramifications of World War I than did artists. If national leaders outside of Germany sought to turn their backs to the past, artists, long before Sartre popularized the term, frequently opted for *engagement* on the Left or Right.

The United States was the first to attempt to deny the new postwar reality when the Senate, despite President Wilson's strenuous lobbying, refused to ratify the treaty creating the League of Nations. Having briefly emerged from the cocoon of isolationism, American politicians would attempt for the next twenty years to find a way back into it. France, the country most devastated by the war, made a mighty effort at forgetfulness by refusing to upgrade its military and generally remaining passive during the Nazi encroachments in the Rhineland. So unwilling was the French military and political establishment to learn from past experiences that when the next war broke out in 1939, the French Army, seemingly secure behind its Maginot Line, was finally prepared to fight World War I.

In the initial aftermath of the war, many right-wing Germans refused to concede defeat. Instead they spread what would come to be called the *Dolchstoßlegende*, the "stab in the back theory," which claimed that the German Army was not beaten in combat, but was the victim of a civilian plot which prevented German soldiers from pursuing the war to its inevitable victory. Various groups were accused of being the plotters, but then Hitler came along and told the Germans exactly who were at fault. Perhaps the oddest example of political ingenuousness on the part of people who should have known better was the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928), which *outlawed* war. Dutifully signed by France, Germany, Great Britain, the United States, and Japan among others, it would only be forgotten ten years later.

Artists turned out to be much more hardnosed about the war. Rage at the brutality of the conflict, as well as the political and moral values that had led up to it, engendered Dadaism and then Surrealism, two movements which, whatever their excesses, constituted a serious, if not particularly nuanced, critique of Western bourgeois society. Both were international movements, inviting artists to overcome national rancor and join in a protest over a war that many thought could have been avoided. Moving through and beyond Dadaism and Surrealism, German literary and visual artists offered scathing assessments of the ruling classes, and to a great extent attempted to support the ill-fated Weimar Republic. In postwar France, the Action Française appealed to conservatives, both Catholics and Protestants, while the French Communist Party drew the more left-leaning artists and was flirted with by André Breton and the Surrealists. French jingoism and anti-Semitism was echoed in the pamphlets of Céline and the writings of Drieu la Rochelle.

Writers and painters who attempted to depict World War I either during the conflict or in its immediate aftermath had to struggle to recreate the feeling and texture of what they experienced. Their efforts and achievements raise two questions. Just how well did they succeed in the immediate, and what is the enduring legacy of their achievement? Painting's serious confrontation with the war did not really begin until its end, and then the most powerful works, strongly imbued with social criticism, originated mostly in Germany through the artistry of painters such



as George Grosz and Otto Dix. In terms of the novelists mentioned above, their initial success had to do with downplaying individuals and giving stage center to the war in its multiple manifestations. They had lived what they described and to varying degrees brought that experience to the reader. Yet what is the long term effect of these works as literature? In *A New History of French Literature*, Mary Jean Green aptly terms this sort of fiction “novels of *témoignage*” (854). They permitted the reader to feel and understand events and actions that had no true counterpart in the past or civilian present. This is a distinguished achievement, yet also one largely limited to a historical moment. The social critiques these books contain are powerful, but would rapidly become the norm in postwar Europe, especially in France. Excepting Céline, even though Barbusse, Dorgeles, and Jünger would continue to write, nothing they subsequently published rivaled their accounts of World War I. With regard to French literature, it might be said that while its texts dealing with World War I are rich in quantity, the quality of the works published during and immediately after the war is uneven at best.

From the end of World War I to the present, many French novels about the conflict have appeared, but the quality has once again been uneven. Among the most famous are André Malraux’s *Les noyers de l’Altenburg*, written in 1943. In this text a French prisoner of war during World War II attempts to write about his father’s experiences in the First World War. Malraux was obviously writing under pressure and in haste, and it was perhaps for that reason the novel eventually degenerates into a rather maudlin plea for peace and understanding. Little better can be said of Jean Echenoz’s *1914* (2012), which repeats the now well-known motif of French soldiers happily marching off to war only to be horrified, and two of the three of them killed, by what they encounter. This work by one of France’s leading novelists offers little that has not been said or done in previous fiction. Claude Simon’s *L’acacia* (1989) is a challenging study of a son’s efforts to come to terms with his father’s death in World War I. This is a fine novel, but one whose stylistic complexities would seem to have prevented its reaching an extended audience.<sup>3</sup> Normally that is not a serious consideration, but in an essay dealing with literature’s effort to evoke a sense of the war in the French public, popular appeal is a consideration. In the case of Claude Simon, the scholarly tendency to read him almost uniquely in terms of technical innovation does the writer a major disservice. Jean Rouaud’s *Les champs d’honneur* (1990) is probably the most successful contemporary evocation of World War I, even if the novel concentrates more on a family history over generations than on the conflict itself. Concerning the war, Rouaud at times movingly captures the sadness, waste, and anger it generated.

For scholars, however, the works published during or after World War I, whatever their artistic value, constitute a treasure trove, a window into an era whose starkness risks being forgotten or pushed into the background by the passage of time and the arrival of later, worse atrocities. A constant in the articles collected in

this special issue of the *French Review* is the way the authors analyze literary texts and historical situations to clarify the nature of the wartime experience, while at the same time introducing a broader context which suggests that learning from the past has the potential to impact the present. Characteristic of each contribution is the manner in which the essay manages to *traiter le sujet d'une autre manière*.

Catherine Daniélou's "La Corrèze, la littérature du terroir de l'École de Brive et la France rurale durant la Grande Guerre" focuses on the consequences of World War I for rural France. Initially analyzing the issue from a historical perspective, she then turns to the literary representations of the destruction of an agricultural society as manifested in the works of *les écrivains du terroir* grouped under the rubric of *l'École de Brive*.

In "Stages of Battle: Theater and War in the Plays of Bernhardt, Raynal, and Anouilh," Leon Sachs and Susan McCready remind us that with regard to World War I, the theatrical literature tends to be overlooked, a situation they hope to rectify in a discussion of three plays which range from the very patriotic (Bernhardt) to more complex encounters with the conflict, where opposition to the enemy and love of country take on a mystical dimension (Raynal), and finally where social criticism ultimately becomes the dominant motif (Anouilh). Yet in each instance, the idea of theater and how it intersects with the real world, is a prominent theme.

Isabelle Reeves, in "Mémoire et anti-mémoire dans *La vie et rien d'autre* et *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*," considers the ways two films attempted to rekindle the memory of the Great War in a country that until relatively recently labored to bury this past. Reeves begins with a brief history of national forgetting and then shows how the two films, so different in many ways, share a common desire to bring back the past, and by doing so honor those *Morts pour la France* as well as the friends and relatives who suffered their loss. The final section of the essay discusses some contemporary efforts on the part of the French government to pay homage to the myriad victims of this war.

In a special issue where the theme of *forgetting* plays a prominent role, Nicole Hudgins's contribution, "Photographic Exceptionalism during the Great War: The Invisibility of the French Photographer," is particularly welcome. Hudgins analyzes the overwhelming extent to which French war photos had no attributions, the name of the photographer being simply left out. She ascribes this to censorship from the French army's *Section photographique*, which wanted to avoid any suggestion of *photographic effect* in order to create the illusion that the pictures were objective renderings of German atrocities and French valor. She demonstrates how the wartime French photos' primary function was to serve as propaganda.

S. Pascale Vergereau-Dewey tells the fascinating story of animal-warriors in "La Grande Guerre des animaux-soldats." These were primarily the pigeons, dogs, and horses that contributed to the war effort, and were duly cited for their deeds. What emerges in this essay is that there was widespread use of animals in the war



effort and that canines like Stubby, the most decorated dog in France, played a genuine role in saving lives and ensuring victory.

For Amye R. Sukapdjo, camembert was for the French *poilu* what the madeleine was for Proust. In “The Camembert: French Memories, Identities, and Heritage in the First World War,” she presents a cultural history of the cheese, discusses its marketing strategies (the inception of the iconic round wooden little box among other things), and shows how camembert’s widespread distribution along with red wine to the soldiers at the front made it a culinary *lieu de mémoire*.

My grandfather, along with the majority of his generation, are no longer with us.<sup>4</sup> Their departure, as well as the passage of time, make the task of remembering all the more difficult, and thus increase the roles of artists and scholars in this endeavor. In very different ways these two groups are burdened with the responsibility of helping others grasp something of the actual experiences of World War I, and of the conflict’s broader social and cultural ramifications. The hope is that something valuable for the present and the future can be gleaned from the study of the Great War. That was true during and immediately after the war, and it remains the case today. At times this task must seem thankless, since history subsequent to 1918 offers little indication that the war taught much to anyone. Still, there is really no alternative to trying to remember and learn. This special issue of the *French Review* marks a significant contribution to those efforts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Fussell citing A.J.P. Taylor: “[T]here had been no war between the Great Powers since 1871. No man in the prime of life knew what war was like. All imagined it would be an affair of great marches and great victories, quickly decided” (21).

<sup>2</sup>“The first Christmas of the war saw an absolute deadlock in the trenches. Both British and German soldiers observed an informal, *ad hoc*, Christmas Day truce, meeting in No Man’s Land to exchange cigarettes and take snapshots” (Fussell 10). An equally bizarre anecdote involves British soldiers’ bravura gesture of kicking a soccer ball before them as they headed into battle (Fussell 27).

<sup>3</sup>To a degree, when a rich novel is prevented from reaching a wide audience because of its alleged difficulty, literary critics have to shoulder some of the blame. Claude Simon has been a particular victim of scholarly shortsightedness. At the famous *colloque* held in Cerisy-la-Salle in 1971, which was dedicated to the *nouveau roman*, one of the conference organizers quoted a passage from a letter Simon had received from a World War II veteran concerning *La route des Flandres* (1960). The former soldier expressed amazement that Simon could have captured the wartime situation so perfectly. Yet

apparently the man's comment seemed rather old-fashioned to the conference participants who dismissed the veteran's remarks out of hand (Ricardou 29).

<sup>4</sup>In her article in this special issue, Catherine Daniélou notes that the last *poilu* died in 2008.

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