

Toward a Poetics of Witness: Apollinaire, Cendrars and the French Poets of the First
World War

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
Romance Studies in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses the lack of an identifiable group of World War I soldier-poets within the French literary and cultural canon. Through a study of archival matter from the period, including a survey of trench newspapers, contemporary print media, first editions, and material objects, the author concludes that one possible factor is the phenomenon of the democratization of the figure of the poet in the French trenches. The dissertation describes the groundbreaking rejection of the romantic definition of poetry as a sacred activity in favor of the view that poetry could be written by anyone, particularly those who served as witnesses on the front lines of experience. During the First World War, these common soldier-poets, later known broadly as *témoins*, were validated and encouraged from diverse places in French society: from the trenches where the soldiers' newspapers actively mobilized enlisted men to pick up a pen and write, to venerable institutions such as the Académie Française and Académie Goncourt which continually validated works by soldier-writers during the war years.

However, the democratization of the poet was not always openly received by established poets. Guillaume Apollinaire, who served as a soldier during the the First World War, struggled with how to redefine his role once he enlisted. Through close readings of a wide variety of his wartime writings, with a particular emphasis on *Calligrammes* (1918), the dissertation shows how this struggle dogged him until his death on November 9, 1918.

A second case is examined in the figure of Blaise Cendrars, who served in the French Foreign Legion during the war until he was seriously wounded. Through close readings of several fundamental postwar texts such as *La Guerre au Luxembourg* (1916) and *J'ai tué* (1918) as well as an examination of the film *J'accuse* (1919), one sees how Cendrars resisted the idea that soldiers should become writers and how his renunciation of this double role became a crucial part of his personal mythology, helping to explain his oft-recounted rejection of poetry in 1917 following the amputation of his right hand.

Through comparing the poetic careers of Apollinaire and Cendrars, two distinct responses to the question of how to witness the war emerge. Furthermore, the social phenomenon of the democratization of the poet in the trenches provides an essential backdrop to approaching wartime texts of witness, from both Apollinaire and Cendrars, as well as lesser-known writers such as René Dalize, Lucien Linais, Marc de Larreguy de Civrieux and Pierre Reverdy.

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Introduction

The twentieth century has marked a new beginning for the era of the witness. The Nazi death camps, the World Wars, terrorism, needless death of soldiers and civilians, all of these scars of history have thrust the witness and the act of witnessing into a public position, where the act itself must continually be questioned and reevaluated. Does witnessing an event necessarily implicate us in the enterprise of history? How should this testimony be rendered? More importantly, can language approach what has been seen or experienced? What form should these words take? In the introduction to the anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, Carolyn Forché writes that “the poetry of witness...seeks to register through indirection and intervention the ways in which the linguistic and moral universes have been disrupted by events.”¹ Like Forché, I strive to explore these disruptions, the forms of poetic witnessing, and examine why there remains such a fraught tension between these two words – poetry and witness – when paired together.

There are many different kinds of witnessing, and these different categories all follow their own rules of genre and aesthetics. Well-formed cultural ideas bound up with witnessing exist, owing to the historical evolution of the social category of the eye-witness.² At the end of the nineteenth century, a vigorous, facts-based form of journalism came into its own, elevating the role of the eye-witness in public life.³ Cultural norms then increasingly sanctioned the status of the eye-witness as the best

¹ Carolyn Forché, ed. *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 45. Forché’s project is of special interest to me, particularly as she has chosen to arrange the poems of the anthology according to various catastrophic events: the Armenian Genocide, World War I, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the Holocaust, War in the Middle East, etc.

² For an examination of how the eye-witness developed in the twentieth century, see Renaud Dulong, *Le témoin oculaire. Les conditions sociales de l’attestation personnelle* (Paris: EHESS, 1998).

³ See Christian Delporte, *Les journalistes en France, 1880-1950: naissance et construction d’une profession* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999).

witness. Legal definitions of witness also powerfully inflect the social definition of this role.⁴ However, as Christophe Prochasson has noted, a key distinction between the legal category of witness and the historical witness was articulated during World War I: “Le témoin d’histoire n’a pas le même statut que le témoin en justice. Sa parole est ‘bien plus qu’un message informatif.’ Elle possède ‘une réflexivité politique’ et une dimension morale.”⁵ The witness of history intercedes in society, and his or her account, once put forth onto the public stage in a concrete form, carries political and moral implications. In many ways, these developments serve as a cultural counterpoint for the way a poet seeks to formulate a response as an eye-witness. Not governed by the press or the courts, yet also susceptible to these societal pressures, the poet as witness must find a way to intervene in a way that is meaningfully suited to his medium. For some poets, the convergence of the roles of poet and witness will call for the redefinition of the role of the poet in society itself.

When approaching the loaded term, *témoin*, one must take into account the evolution of the role of the witness. At the word’s etymological center, the legacy of a deep religious conviction still exerts a significant pressure. In the early Christian tradition, a witness testified to his or her faith with a pronouncement that often resulted in death. Vestiges of this religious zeal continue to characterize the way some historians and writers approach witnessing, as I will explore later in my discussion of the legacy of a seminal text on witnessing and World War I, Jean Norton Cru’s *Témoins: Essai d’analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928*.

⁴ To appreciate the connection between the witness of history, particularly World War I, and the witness in court, consider how so many iconic World War I films from Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* (1957) to Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004), and) revolve around a trial.

⁵ Christophe Prochasson, “Les mots pour le dire: Jean Norton Cru, du témoignage à l’histoire,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 48-4, octobre-décembre 2001, 162.

The poets discussed in this dissertation have decided what constitutes the most important quality of witness: the witnessing must take place with words, in language. Form, too, has been chosen, though as we shall see, several of these poets found it hard to contain their writings on the war in traditional verse forms alone. In fact, the intense pressure of witnessing often lead to the creation of hybrid forms of literature. Leonard Smith has discussed hybridity in the context of World War I fiction, noting how writers tended to blur the lines between the novel and other more intimate genres such as the diary.⁶ The poetry of the Great War also experiments with hybridity, a significant trend amplified by the intervention of free verse, a relatively new phenomenon whose shock waves were still being perceived in the literary world in the early twentieth century.⁷ The tension that resulted – how poetry differs from prose writings of World War I – figures as one rich area to explore how witnessing necessitated breakthrough formalist actions, paving the way for the modernist movements of the *après-guerre*. The war writings of Apollinaire, Cendrars and a few

⁶ Leonard V. Smith, “Le récit du témoin. Formes et pratiques d’écriture dans les témoignages sur la Grande Guerre,” in *Vrai et faux dans la Grande Guerre*, ed. Christophe Prochasson and Anne-Marie Rasmussen (Paris: Éditions de la Découverte, 2004), 277-301. Smith primarily discusses the war writings of the novelists Henri Barbusse and Roland Dorgelès and the historian Marc Bloch. He has also written extensively on other aspects of witnessing and World War I, most notably in *The Embattled Self: French soldiers testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁷ The influence of Walt Whitman in the development of French modernism is a rich vein to explore. A few studies have discussed the importance of Whitman’s freeing of the line of verse (see Betsy Erkkila, *Walt Whitman Among the French: Poet and Myth* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980]) and others have called attention to the importance of Whitman to Cendrars (see Paul Morand’s introduction to Cendrars’ collection *Un monde entier* [Paris: Gallimard, 1967]). Another aspect of Whitman’s poetic persona became important during 1914-1918: his role as self-styled witness to the American Civil War. A specially prepared French translation of a compilation of Whitman’s poems and personal letters describing his reactions to the wounded soldiers at military hospitals in Washington D.C. was published during World War I in France as *Panheur des Plaies. Poèmes, lettres et fragments de Walt Whitman sur la guerre*. Traduit par Léon Balzagette (Paris: Revue Littéraire des Primaires, 1917). The translator makes this connection explicit in the preface: “Nous nous contenterons d’insister, au seuil de ces pages, sur le sens que Walt Whitman entendait donner à la grande guerre qui avait transformé sa vie et ses poèmes : celui d’une victoire absolue de l’Union sur la Sécession. Et nous autres, cinquante ans après lui, qui faisons, qui vivons notre grande guerre, la guerre civile d’Europe, lequel de nous, alors que le résultat en est encore en balance, refuserait d’accueillir ce rêve que ses millions de victimes pourraient peut-être aussi former le piédestal de l’Union future, victorieuse pour toujours des forces d’égoïsme, de mensonge, de prédation – ce rêve qui seul est assez grand pour nous laisser entrevoir parfois, comme une promesse flottant au-dessus des charniers, la rédemption de son atrocité, de sa hideur sans nom ? (p. 5)”

lesser known poets bear qualities of this hybridity. The poets' experimentation with mixed forms of verse and prose reflect a formal preoccupation with how to render the war in new forms. I read these formal experimentations as concrete manifestations of each poet's attempt to craft a poetics of witness.

Ultimately, for Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, and the lesser-known poets of the trenches, poetry must be made to witness. Through this act, an aesthetic unique to each writer was formed. It is through the act of witnessing and transmuting their experiences as soldiers during World War I that Apollinaire and Cendrars redefined themselves as writers and were able to craft their own particular aesthetic, and that this transmutation of lived experience into an aesthetic also figures as an ethical choice.

In part, this dissertation has also weighed the prevalence of the notion of the soldier-poets of the Great War as it has been strongly formulated – perhaps one could even say marketed – in the Anglophone canon. Mention the poetry of this era to a scholar or student from the United States, Britain, Canada or Australia, and the names Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and the blood-red poppies of the iconic poem “In Flanders Field” will no doubt trip off their tongue.⁸ Recent films and popular novels such as Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991-1995) have also continued to popularize and uphold this archetype of the British soldier-poet.

Paul Fussell's landmark 1975 work, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, cemented the notion that the British trenches of World War I fueled a high degree of literary activity. In his chapter, “Oh, what a literary war,” Fussell traces the many ways that Britain's soldiers were actively engaged with reading, thinking about,

⁸ The Welsh poet David Jones is another compelling example of the Anglophone soldier-poet but for a variety of reasons, particularly due to the late publication date of his first work on the war (*In Parenthesis* was published in 1937), his name does not readily feature in lists of this nature.

quoting, and creating literature in the middle of fighting the war.⁹ What made Fussell's work so compelling was his ability to cull from soldiers' journals, letters and other written sources, stylistic traits that spoke to how a whole generation perceived the Great War.¹⁰ How these ordinary men were talking and writing about the war was a powerful source of analysis that yielded insights not limited to the field of literary criticism alone. Though some of his pronouncements have withered over time, Fussell's work continues to provide a dynamic model for critics to grasp how the incidence of literary allusions in soldiers' letters and journals was indicative of other sociological, historical and cultural factors.

This dissertation offers a number of reasons why this same phenomenon did not develop in the French canon. In her recent work, *Poètes de la Grande Guerre: Expérience combattante, activité poétique*, Laurence Campa asserts repeatedly that “[d]ans leur grande majorité, les poètes de guerre français restent aujourd’hui méconnus. Quant à leurs œuvres poétiques, comme souvent la poésie de cette période, elles ont été, à quelques exceptions près, progressivement négligées, puis oubliées au cours du XXe siècle.”¹¹ I argue that, in France, the popularization of ordinary *écrivains-combattants* flooded the wartime literary landscape, which may have prevented the establishment of a core unit of iconic figures seen in the English tradition in the persons of Sassoon, Owen and Graves. The scope and extent of this popular literature worked to democratize poetry, effectively making everyone a poet.

⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 155-190.

¹⁰ Edmund Keeley assesses Fussell's work decades later: “He was the first to see the connection between those various wars and the way they were described and who was doing the describing... Style, how you use words, how you use rhetoric, can end up being a kind of symbol of how a whole generation is thinking.” Quoted in Susanna Rustin, “Hello to all that,” *The Guardian*, July 31, 2004, accessed September 22, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jul/31/featuresreviews.guardianreview10>

¹¹ Laurence Campa, *Poètes de la Grande Guerre. Expérience combattante et activité poétique* (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2010), 14.

Furthermore, it must be said that, despite its plentitude, a great deal of this mass poetry in France simply isn't very good and doesn't merit canonization today. Meanwhile, the poetry of already established literary figures, such as Apollinaire and Cendrars, was often not analyzed in terms of its material circumstances, i.e. the trenches. Rather, the work of these poets was immediately streamlined into the narrative of literary history, where little attention was given to their biographical situation or political engagements.¹² At the extreme, some of Apollinaire's war poetry, especially the isolated lines "Ah Dieu! Que la guerre est jolie" from the poem "L'Adieu du cavalier," endangered the poet's postwar reputation and ended up becoming a source of contention within literary studies devoted to the poet.¹³

In the end, the hallowed group of Anglophone soldier-poets serves as a provocative counterexample. The aim of this dissertation, however, is not to propose a French alternative but rather to examine the reasons (democratization, homogenization, and segregation among them) why France did not enshrine its own cadre of soldier-poets after the war.

The evolution of the era of the witness

"Si j'ai un espoir, c'est que cette guerre fera naître une littérature réaliste des combats, due à la plume des combattants eux-mêmes, à la plume des survivants

¹² This is arguably a benevolent twist of fate for Apollinaire. Indeed, his premature death only preserved his literary reputation for he had been profoundly changed by his head wound and was headed on a definitively conservative path at the time of his death. For more on the debate surrounding the marked change after his head wound, see Michel Décaudin, "Le 'changement du front' de Guillaume Apollinaire," *Revue des sciences humaines*, no. 60, (octobre-décembre 1950). Additionally, there are some recent notable exceptions to the general obscurity which will be discussed in the following chapters such as Claude Debon's early text, *Guillaume Apollinaire après Alcools. Calligrammes: Le Poète et la guerre* (Paris: Minard Lettres modernes, 1981), Annette Becker's excellent biography, *Guillaume Apollinaire: une biographie de guerre, 1914-1918-2009* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009), a collection of essays edited by Claude Leroy titled *Blaise Cendrars et la guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1995) and Campa's *Poètes de la Grande Guerre* with chapters devoted to Apollinaire, Cendrars and Duhamel, among others.

¹³ For a discussion of the history of literary critics responding to this statement, see the beginning of Laurence Campa's chapter "Ah Dieu! Que la guerre est jolie," *Poètes de la Grande Guerre*, 39-44.

et à celle des morts dont on sortira les lettres, les carnets de route, les notes intimes...”

– Jean Norton Cru, Letter dated December 29, 1916

In her book *L'Ère du témoin*, Annette Wieviorka states that the era of mass witnessing began with World War I.¹⁴ Despite the book's sweeping title, her remark here is one of the few instances where Wieviorka invokes the First World War and the importance of witness. Instead her work largely concentrates on the evolution and ascendance of the notion of the witness of the Holocaust, particularly in relation to several important postwar trials (principally Nuremberg and Eichmann). Wieviorka's reluctance to move beyond the Second World War points to a central difficulty in discussing the notion of the witness in a pre-Holocaust context. As Wieviorka and others so powerfully demonstrate, the figure of the witness has become inescapably bound to the events surrounding World War II and the Nazi death camps. Trying to excavate the term's use and cultural significance prior to these events proves challenging. And yet the First World War served as an incredibly influential moment for the development and formulation of the notion of the witness and deserves scholarly attention itself.

Wieviorka's observation that “la guerre de 14-18...marque les débuts du *témoignage de masse*” is apt. She rightly hits upon the fact that World War I marked the dawn of an era of witnessing on a mass level, eliciting an abundance of texts, with a special emphasis placed on those texts written by actual participants in the conflict. The literary quality of the text in this era became, in many cases, secondary to its authenticity, and the sheer amount of this popular literature was unprecedented. Moreover, the outpouring of texts on the war substantiated the notion that in order to fully reach an understanding of the events, a more three-dimensional picture from a

¹⁴ Annette Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin* (Paris: Plon, 1998), 12.

variety of sources must be cobbled together. The ability of a narrative to relay the whole story of world events came under intense scrutiny and the belief that one true narrative existed for historical events was radically undermined.

More specifically, the uniquely literary environments of the trenches of World War I became sites where the soldier was called upon to transmute his lived experience into the fixed form of literature. Modes of discourse from the trenches and other sources worked to democratize the role of the poet in society, opening up access to this position to anyone who had seen or heard the events in question, undoing the long legacy of the notion of the poet as a singular, vatic figure called upon to express his vision to the masses, who may or may not grasp his message.¹⁵ Soldiers rose to the call to produce written documents of history; intellectuals, historians, writers and others then sought to theorize and define their production and their newly created cultural role.

Jean Norton Cru (1879-1949) remains a crucial figure for his work in establishing a monolithic notion of witness in response to the war; he may be credited with cementing the use of the word witness or *témoign* in relation to the Great War. His massive study, *Témoins: Essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928*, published in 1929, exists as a highly idiosyncratic, deeply flawed but ultimately powerful interpretation of the notion of witnessing for his time. It was among the first texts to establish specific criteria for the abundance of literature composed in response to the war.

From the outset, Cru's *Témoins* was dismissed as a provocative intervention from an unknown scholar working in America at Williams College. The manuscript

¹⁵ See Frank Kermode's classic essay "The Artist in Isolation," in *Romantic Image* (New York: Chilmark Press, 1961), 1-29.

was rejected multiple times by various French presses. But Cru, a veteran himself, persevered and eventually personally subsidized the printing of the book, with the hopes of then selling enough copies to reimburse his personal wager later.¹⁶ A great deal of his dedication stems from a promise that he made to himself from the trenches:

Mon livre est l'expression d'une grande foi, d'un grand idéal, nés en moi dans les moments de souffrances physiques et d'agonie mentale dans les tranchées. Et dans les dix dernières années, fort peu de mes pensées, lectures, activités intellectuelles de toute sorte, n'ont pas été reliées avec cette foi et cet idéal...¹⁷

The religious undertones of the word “witness” become pertinent once more when discussing Cru. The level of Cru’s commitment to *Témoins* takes on religious connotations, as glimpsed in his use of the words “foi” and “idéal.”¹⁸ A deep religious conviction informs his thinking and drives how he classifies forms of witnessing as appropriate, boiling a text or memoir down to the Manichean question of whether it captures the war ‘correctly’ or not. The historian Frédéric Rousseau proposes the hypothesis that Cru’s rejection of the aestheticization of war may be attributed to a sort of religious commitment, a pact which forbids the rendering of truth in a stylistic, and therefore, pleasurable manner. Rousseau notes that “l’emploi par Norton Cru des termes ‘sacrés’ et ‘péché’ peut effectivement accréditer cette thèse. L’idée d’un interdit, d’un tabou, est tout au moins suggérée.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Frédéric Rousseau, *Le procès des témoins. L’Affaire Norton Cru* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003), 31-42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸ It is not extraneous to note that Norton Cru’s father was a Protestant minister and that Norton Cru spent seven years of his childhood on the island of Maré, near New Caledonia, where his father worked as a missionary, *Ibid.*, 45-46. See also Leonard V. Smith, “Jean Norton Cru, lecteur des livres de guerre,” *Annales du Midi*, 232 (2000), 517-528.

¹⁹ Rousseau, *Le Procès des témoins*, 52.

Throughout, Cru ably puts into practice what the historian Joan W. Scott has powerfully termed the “authority of experience.”²⁰ Cru repeatedly invokes his own wartime experience as a corporal, then a sergeant with an infantry unit on the front lines, including time spent at Verdun, in the introduction to *Témoins*. This experience serves as the basis of his ability to condone or disqualify a war book, should it not comply with his defined notions of the reality of the war.²¹ The textual medium itself becomes pejorative for Cru when submitted to the personal experience of war:

Ces questions [du témoignage] je me les suis posées, comme bien d’autres soldats sans doute, dès le jour où, en 1914, le contact, le choc brutal des formidables réalités de la guerre réduisit en miettes ma conception livresque des actes et des sentiments du soldat au combat, conception historique, et que naïvement, je croyais scientifique.²²

Cru’s rude encounter with the realities of war not only reduced to shreds his “bookish” notions of combat, but challenged the very principles of history. His faith in the science of history thoroughly shaken, he set out in *Témoins* to meticulously and pragmatically draft a new science of witness. Despite advice from prospective readers who encouraged Cru to tone down the severity of his attacks against certain authors who receive his ire for not having “truthfully” represented the war, despite entreaties that he temper his deep-seated subjectivity, his belief in one objective version of the truth permeates all 735 pages of the text.²³

²⁰ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Summer 1991), 773-797.

²¹ Prochasson confirms: “Mais le critère le plus utilisé par Norton Cru est celui qui renvoie à sa propre expérience de la guerre,” “Les mots pour le dire,” 173. The authorization of personal experience continued to mark several key texts on World War I, including Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Leonard Smith argues that Fussell “reasserted the ‘evidence of experience’ as the cornerstone of war writing in the twentieth century.” Smith, “Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory: Twenty Five Years Later*,” *History and Theory*, vol. 40, no. 2 (May 2001), 248.

²² Jean Norton Cru, *Du Témoignage* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1967), 26.

²³ For instance, one reader anticipated the criticism to come when he asked Norton Cru: “N’avez-vous pas appliqué trop généralement un critère de critique basé sur votre propre expérience de la guerre ? Cela n’introduit-il pas un élément subjectif dans les jugements portés sur les travaux de ceux qui n’ont peut-être pas eu exactement la même expérience?” Rousseau, *Le Procès des témoins*, 27.

Following in this vein of distrust for the literary, Cru completely excludes poetry from his massive project. He explains:

La poésie de guerre reste en dehors de notre étude. On pourrait cependant y glaner des impressions de guerre, *mais comme la part de la littérature y est plus grande que la part du renseignement documentaire*, les inconvénients de l'admission de la poésie sont plus grands que les avantages.²⁴

According to Cru, poetry cannot be judged a text of witness because it possesses a larger share of “literature” than any documentary function. The literariness of poetry is, alas, its principal inconvenience. For Cru, poetry as a medium constitutionally resists witnessing, whereas the novel may quite easily slip off its literary qualities. He writes again: “j’ai d’autre part admis le roman car, contrairement à l’idée reçue, il y a fort peu de romans de guerre, et ces romans ne sont que des souvenirs personnels à peine déguisés.” Cru’s distinction here reveals a fault line in literary history: the novel, thanks to Balzac, Zola and other theoreticians of realism, has enjoyed a status closer to objective truth (especially as it has been treated and taken up by historians) whereas poetry, particularly due to its lack of a realist heritage and partly due to the maddening mimetic conundrums of its formal constraints, somehow manages to evade rigorous treatment as an authentic source of witness.

Cru’s exclusion of poetry is the starting point for this dissertation. Just as Cru established precise guidelines for the classification of the hundreds of texts in *Témoins*, I want to explore the tensions of witnessing and poetry through close readings and attention to the specificity of the material and physical circumstances of several poets from the Great War. Seeking to reintroduce poets to the category of *témoin*, I propose a poetics of witness.

²⁴ Cru, *Témoins. Essai d’analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928*, (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1929), 11 (Italics mine).

The continued pressures of Témoins

For Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, leading contemporary historians of the Great War, *Cru* offers one example among many within the French establishment of someone who sought to reinforce the idea that only those who experienced the war were truly able to penetrate its meaning.²⁵ They remark: “Il est presque certain que le témoignage combattant, tout en offrant un fonds documentaire presque inépuisable, a durablement culpabilisé les historiens de la Première Guerre mondiale.”²⁶ They demonstrate that a “dictature du témoignage” exerted a powerful force in postwar society, sustained by two immense pressures: the absolute horrific violence of the war, and the processes of commemoration and mourning that were put into place in the wake of World War I. A certain type of war narrative congealed, thanks to these official practices in play (the continual commemoration ceremonies, dedications of monuments which honored the war and other displays of public recognition) and cultural rituals (the rise of religious sentiment and personal devotion, the outward manifestation of grief displayed by wearing black garments). Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker’s work calls for a reinvestigation of the problem of *témoignage* by exposing the subjectivity inherent to every witness:

²⁵ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker have both written extensively on various aspects of World War I. In addition to their fundamental, co-authored text, *14-18, Retrouver la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), Audoin-Rouzeau has written on the trench newspapers (*A travers leurs journaux: 14-18, les combattants des tranchées* [Paris: Armand Colin, 1986]), on mourning (*Cinq deuils de guerre 1914-1918* [Paris: Éditions Noësis, 2001]) and co-directed, with Jean-Jacques Becker, *L’Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre 1914 – 1918* (Paris: Éditions Bayard, 2004). Becker has written on the occupation in northern France and Belgium during the war (*Les cicatrices rouges 1914-1918, France et Belgique occupées* [Paris: A. Fayard, 2010]), a war biography of Apollinaire (*Guillaume Apollinaire: une biographie de guerre: 1914-1918-2009* [Paris: Tallandier, 2009]), on Maurice Halbwachs (*Maurice Halbwachs: un intellectuel en guerres mondiales 1914-1945* [Paris: Viénot, 2003]) and on wartime faith and religion (*La guerre et la foi, de la mort à la mémoire* [Paris: Armand Colin, 1994]).

²⁶ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18, Retrouver la guerre*, 61.

Du point de vue des témoins, il n'est pas difficile d'imaginer que presque tous ont voulu exorciser et reconstruire une guerre différente, qui leur permet de vivre avec le traumatisme de l'expérience traversée. Le souvenir – mais plus particulièrement le souvenir traumatique – est toujours reconstruction, réaménagement, et bien des choses séparent, selon les périodes et les horizons d'attente, les témoignages des différents belligérants et des différentes périodes. Les historiens, trop confiants dans les « témoignages », oublient aisément la spécificité de toute parole sur la violence extrême, qui ne renvoie pas aux mêmes catégories d'analyse et aux mêmes grilles de lecture que la temporalité ordinaire.²⁷

Their frank questioning of the concept of witness lies at the heart of this dissertation as well. I am attentive to the *specificity* of each case of witnessing and how the circumstances and the person themselves modulate or reconstruct what they experienced during World War I.

The unrelenting tension between poetry and witnessing

As we have seen with Cru's emphatic rejection of the genre, the medium of poetry has presented difficulties for those seeking to witness. Among contemporary historians and literary scholars, French poetry of World War I remains understudied today.²⁸ What reasons may account for this obscurity? For one, I consider this ambivalence from the standpoint of literary history: how did preexisting literary movements, such as realism and symbolism, precondition how the war would be

²⁷ Ibid., 70.

²⁸ Campa asserts that “[l]a poésie combattante a peut-être, plus que tout autre genre, souffert de l'imbrication de l'esthétique, de la morale, de la politique. La plupart des œuvres nées de la guerre sont devenues illisibles,” *Poètes de la Grande Guerre*, 30. Historians of the Great War have been slow to formally include poetry in their analyses. For example, in *Embattled Selves: French soldiers testimony of the Great War*, Leonard Smith does not address war poetry despite taking on the work of novelists, including the highly experimental prose of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, in his excellent chapter “The Novel and the Search for Closure.” Elsewhere, in her study of the Canadian trench newspapers, Marcelle Cinq-Mars does not treat the poetry found in these pages, despite its prevalence. She writes: “Les journaux produits près du front contiennent beaucoup plus de poèmes, la vie quotidienne dans les tranchées poussant les hommes vers l'introspection et, par ricochet, vers la poésie... Ainsi nous avons délibérément laissé de côté la poésie, à quelques rares exceptions, la traduction ne pouvant rendre toute la saveur et la qualité des textes originaux anglais,” *L'Écho du front: Journaux de tranchées* (Québec: Prologue, 2008), 23.

rendered into literature. Another means is to think critically about what aspects inherent to poetry, particularly formal aspects, interfere with the notion of witnessing. The issue of narrativity is essential here, for as Hayden White has demonstrated, classically historical modes rely on an implicit narrative to guide the reader to comprehend events.²⁹ Poetry has a rich narrative legacy, one particularly tied to representations of war and battle as the first line of Virgil's *Aeneid* — “I sing of arms and the man” — so succinctly demonstrates. Yet modern poetry often eschews the traditional form of narrative. A closer examination of how modern poetry engages with narrative will shed some light on the continuing tension between poetry and witness.

The bifurcation of symbolism and realism

It is important to return to the nineteenth century and its literary developments in order to fully understand why many found it hard to assimilate poetry as a means of bearing witness during the First World War. Poetry simply did not emulate the rise of realism in the novel as prose resolutely turned toward the real, representational world. In fact, realism and the rise of the popular press often worked in tandem with one another, as writers borrowed from current events and headlines to furnish their stories with notes of authenticity while journalists sought to make their own style of writing more gripping and novelistic. The symbiosis of these two genres helped to cloak prose with a very convincing garb of authenticity, a quality that poetry could not or would not choose to take up itself.

²⁹ White has argued that “plot is not a structural component of fictional or mythical stories alone; it is crucial to the historical representations of events as well” in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), 51.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, romanticism substantiated the role of the poet. The poet-statesman figure, as exemplified by Victor Hugo and Alphonse de Lamartine, becomes the most palpable example of the intersection of poetry and politics. These men were consummate writers who became intimately involved with politics and their writing sought to address the problems of contemporary society while solidifying the romantic consecration of the poet figure. Paul Bénichou associates the decline of religious sentiment in the eighteenth century in the wake of the French Revolution with the rise of the ministry of the poet in romanticism, where the poet takes on the roles formerly given to priests. Poets like Hugo and Lamartine became the interpreters of the world around them, and their roles in society swelled, allowing them to transmit the spiritual world through their verse to those, the common people, who could not access it readily.³⁰

Poetry in the second half of the nineteenth century evolved from romanticism, a movement with ties in the perceived landscape and with aspirations to destabilize the political landscape, to symbolism, a movement which, on an elemental level, sought to unchain language from its real-life referents in order to evoke mystical realizations on an ephemeral level. The contemporary poet Czeslaw Milosz seizes upon this crucial turn in *The Witness of Poetry* and he invokes the consequences of the symbolist legacy at various moments in his text, noting that “[t]he symbolists discovered the idea of a poem as an autonomous, self-sufficient unit, no longer describing the world but existing *instead of* the world.”³¹ For Milosz, the symbolist quest for an alter-existence would destabilize poetry:

³⁰ Paul Bénichou, *Le sacre de l'écrivain, 1750-1830; essai sur l'avènement d'un pouvoir spirituel laïque dans la France moderne* (Paris: J. Corti, 1973).

³¹ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 19.

Strange things happen in the second half of the nineteenth century: instead of stressing the longevity of art, the solitary rebels who opposed right-thinking citizens elevated art so high as to remove from it any goals whatsoever and began to glorify it as a thing unto itself, *l'art pour l'art*. In the very midst of a universal weakening of values deprived of their metaphysical foundations, there arises the idea of a poem outside that crisis. Such a poem should be perfectly self-sufficient, submitted to its own laws, and organized as a peculiar anti-world.³²

While Milosz takes a strong stance toward the consequences of symbolism, his reading reveals – even fifty-four years after Cru’s rejection of poetry – how entrenched the view remains that the poem, and poetry in general, often exist outside of, or apart from, the “crisis” of history.³³

The First World War broke out in the wake of these dominant literary movements, at a complicated moment in French literary history, a time of diverse experimentation as well as a return to classicism in many forms. Because of this accident of timing, aesthetic responses to the war range widely in their approach: many war poets remained caught in a resolutely traditional mode of lofty, rhymed stanzas melding classicism with patriotism while others pushed beyond established forms, from Apollinaire’s imagistic crafting of the *calligrammes* to Cendrars’ experimentation with the prose-poem in *J’ai tué*, which sought to radically stir up preconceived notions of form and content.

³² Ibid., 46.

³³ I do not share all of Milosz’s feelings about the consequences of symbolism. In fact, I am interested in rereading theories and canonical texts of symbolism to reevaluate just how this movement sought to interact with the real. For the purposes of this introduction, and this study in general, however, the larger tension between realism and symbolism remains a significant fault line. Furthermore, it could be said that these two movements both remained indebted, at their cores, to notions of idealism. In fact, the idealist articulation of the role of the poet in society carries over into the twentieth century and inflects the struggle for the poet to determine how to also act as witness. See Toril Moi’s groundbreaking work that explores the idealist legacies of modernism in *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), especially the chapter “Rethinking Literary History: Idealism, Realism, and the Birth of Modernism,” 67-104.

The narrative of poetry

As Hayden White has asserted, narrative often acts as the most obvious way of formulating a response to an event. Therefore, how the poetry of World War I deals with aspects of narrative is a crucial avenue of inquiry for explaining some of the residual tensions between poetry and witnessing. Tania Collani finds that divisions between prose and poetry, (and therefore the relegation of narrative as an exclusive function of prose), actually disintegrate in the twentieth century, especially because this era has been “un siècle frappé par l’impératif du témoignage.”³⁴ Her cogent observation further supports the idea that the First World War, as one of the first encounters with this “imperative of witness,” is a valuable place to trace out a dissolution between prose and poetry that will only become more pronounced as the century progresses.

In contemporary fields of study, narrative has been a quality traditionally ignored when discussing aspects of modern poetry (that is, poetry from the nineteenth century onward). And yet, as Brian McHale notes, “there would be no tradition of systematic reflection on narrative at all, at least not in the West, without the Homeric poems, which, from Plato on down to Genette and Sternberg and beyond, have continuously served as touchstones of narrative theory.”³⁵ McHale observes that the majority of poems before the nineteenth century were narrative poems in diverse genres such as the epic tradition, medieval and early-modern verse romances, folk ballads, narrative verse autobiographies and novels written in verse.³⁶

³⁴ Tania Collani, “Du seuil fragile qui sépare la prose de la poésie – un aperçu des tendances au XX^e siècle,” *Acta Fabula*, Notes de lecture, accessed March 4, 2011, <http://www.fabula.org/revue/document5507.php>

³⁵ Brian McHale, “Beginning to think about Narrative in Poetry,” *Narrative*, volume 17, number 1 (January 2009), 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12

What, then, complicated the place of narrative in poetry in the modern era? Following the work of Alastair Fowler and others, McHale finds that the introduction of the lyric mode of poetry in the nineteenth century intervened so powerfully that it became the “default mode” for poetry. McHale borrows James Phelan’s definition of lyricity as “somebody telling somebody...on some occasion for some purpose that something *is*.” This contrasts with the definition of narrativity as “somebody telling somebody...that something *happened*.”³⁷ This “*is*”/ “*happened*” distinction encapsulates one of the tensions at the heart of witnessing. Normally, the event is the object of narrative. Yet, lyric poetry doesn’t share this same object; rather, the object becomes the enunciation, what “*is*” as opposed to what “*happened*.”

Contrary to narrative, where an event serves as the engine driving the text forward in a linear progression, in lyric poetry, an historic event is rarely the primary source of the poem. As evidenced with Cru’s formulation of witnessing, by the early twentieth century, a huge value was placed on relating what happened with as much veracity as possible. The lyric element, or those war texts that were concerned with recounting what ‘*is*’, were rejected for their inability to convey the “true” war experience. This notion of the lyric may in fact explain in some way why Cru rejected poetry, for the lyric proposes one subjective account of an event, which is then offered to all readers as the way to access the reality of what occurred. Cru was so stuck in his own personal subjectivity, which he then extrapolated to be an objective reality, that he rejected all other subjective or lyric interpretations.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid., 12-13.

³⁸ Rousseau suggests as much: “Ce que refuse Jean Norton Cru, c’est la mise en scène fictionnelle de l’expérience de guerre. Mais n’est-ce pas aussi parce qu’il éprouve le sentiment que la fiction agit comme une entreprise de dépossession d’expériences individuelles ? Barbusse, Dorgelès, entre autres, ont prétendu dire *la* guerre de JNC et de milliers d’autres et non pas simplement *leur* guerre. En un sens, Jean Norton Cru se sent comme exproprié de sa propre expérience. ...Et cela peut expliquer en

To move beyond this conflation of the lyric with all poetry, McHale proposes the need to define new theories “about what makes poetry *poetry*.”³⁹ To this end, he borrows the notion of segmentivity from the poet and critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis. She finds segmentivity to be the most elemental aspect of poetry, for all poetry requires “the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap (line break, stanza break, page space).” In this way, “all the meanings poetry makes are constructed by segmented units of a variety of sizes. The specific force of any individual poem occurs in the intricate interplay among the ‘scales’ (of size or kind of unit) or comes in ‘chords’ of these multiple possibilities for creating segments.”⁴⁰

The notion of segmentivity as an essential element of poetry is a compelling way to explain why poetry did in fact become the medium of witnessing for so many soldier-writers of the Great War. As explored in greater detail in Chapter One, World War I forced a recalibration of the experience of time for its soldiers: through the precise regimentation of military life, to the indeterminate and often horrific bursts of battle, to the equally indeterminate and excruciatingly long stretches of waiting that consumed the soldier’s life in the trenches and led to *le cafard* or depression. Poetry’s segmentivity, which allows the poet to dissect and manage meaning in discrete units, serves not only as a metaphor, but perhaps also as an essential tool of survival for trench life, allowing the soldier to compartmentalize and order his day into a manageable and meaningful rhythm.

Segmentivity is revealed in various ways in World War I poetry. Some poets, Apollinaire chief among them, experimented with the epistolary mode, often titling

partie la sévérité féroce de ses critiques à l’égard des romanciers les plus fameux,” *Le Procès des témoins*, 53-54.

³⁹ McHale, “Beginning to think about narrative,” 15.

⁴⁰ Blau Duplessis quoted in *Ibid.*, 14-15.

poems “cartes postales” and dedicating them to war-time correspondents. The implied brevity of a postcard forces the poet to encapsulate or segment a moment of free time. One such “Carte postale,” sent by Apollinaire to a friend, elegantly shows how the poet distills hours of waiting into one moving moment:

Je t’écris de dessous la tente
Tandis que meurt ce jour d’été
Où floraison éblouissante
Dans le ciel à peine bleuté
Une canonnade éclatante
Se fane avant d’avoir été⁴¹

The delicate shift of verb tenses in this poem expresses the poet’s concerns for temporality. The narrator of the poem/postcard writes from within the present tense, as the summer day dies around him. In the middle of the poem, three lines pass without any verb, creating a pregnant suspension of time. In the last line, the startling canon shots wither away (‘se fane,’ a verb in the present tense, though its very meaning conveys a slowing down of time toward decay) their passing existence underscored by the past participle of the verb ‘to be’ (“avant d’avoir été”). The poet also plays on the homonyms of this past participle and the word for summer (“été”), likening the passing of time to the season which always seems to slip away. A pang of bittersweet redundancy is struck in the last phrase as the show of canon fire cancels itself out, before it had ever really been.

This short poem shows how poetry, here in the hybrid form of the poetic *carte postale*, allows for the segmentivity of time to be mirrored in the very form of the verse, and in the compressed space of the poem, which accommodates a few carefully chosen verbs. In a mere six lines, one evening of World War I is evoked more powerfully than it could be in a longer, more traditionally narrative format.

⁴¹ *Œuvres poétiques*, (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1956), 297.

Even Cendrars's experimentation with the prose-poem in *J'ai tué* plays with ideas of segmentivity. As McHale once again points out:

Prose, we might say, constitutes the 'zero degree' of segmentivity – spacing that is by design neutral and *insignificant*... Prose poetry, however, does not reflect 'zero degree' segmentivity; rather its prose formatting is *conspicuous*, foregrounded against the background expectation of verse lineation: prose where there *ought to be* verse. Prose poetry *semanticizes* prose spacing, making it signify, if only as difference and deviation from a norm.⁴²

Cendrars certainly does play with the expectations of the reader in his choice of form. In 1918, he was known as a poet and his decision to write *J'ai tué* in prose countered his established literary reputation. Furthermore, as the text continues, Cendrars progressively boils down the prose lines, rejecting grammatical rules and customs, engaging in fragments, so that the pinnacle episode of the title is then rendered in an aggressively taut fashion: "Et voilà qu'aujourd'hui j'ai le couteau à la main... Me voici les nerfs tendus, les muscles bandés, prêt à bondir dans la réalité... Je vais braver l'homme. Mon semblable. Un singe. Œil pour œil, dent pour dent."⁴³ The feeling of hybridization that Cendrars achieves with the line acts as a parallel for the ontological question that he was pursuing: both the use of the prose poem form and the violent act boldly announced in the title question what it means to deviate from the norm, whether it be the norms imposed by traditional verse and prose or the norms imposed upon the soldier to not speak so openly about this gruesome fact of war.

In many ways, aspects of narrativity and segmentivity open up new means of considering poetry, particularly the work of the poets examined here. The circumstances of World War I lend themselves to experimentation with segmentivity, particularly as it relates to the experience of time, while the characteristic of hybridity,

⁴² McHale, "Beginning to Think about Narrative," 15.

⁴³ Blaise Cendrars, *J'ai tué* (Paris: Éditions Georges Crès et Cie, 1919), 20.

which marked so many literary genres of the war, also borrows from experimentation with segmentivity as well as a cross-pollination of narrative within poetry.

The ethical and the aesthetic obligations of a poetics of witness

In seeking to articulate a poetics of witness, I am by extension making the claim that poetry can offer its own powerful version of catastrophic events, an assertion that runs counter to the notion, so forcefully articulated by Theodor Adorno that “After Auschwitz, there can be no poetry.” Following Giorgio Agamben’s investigation of these terms in relation to the Holocaust, I believe that the quality of “unsayable” allies itself with the mystical. And, to quote Agamben: “... why unsayable? Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical?”⁴⁴ Those poets who sought to render their experience of World War I into the written form resist the tendency to transfigure the events of history into a mystical category.⁴⁵ The *fact* of these words in turn deserves a sustained and rigorous critical reading, with an attention to formal, thematic and stylistic aspects. Carefully reading these works validates the notion of a poetics of witness. By relying on the concreteness implied in the term poetics, I hope to avoid some of the mystical baggage that can often make it difficult to approach a work of witness in order to fully concentrate on the text itself.

⁴⁴ Giorgio Agamben. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans. (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 32. Agamben ultimately qualifies this statement by noting: “This is why those who assert the unsayability of Auschwitz today should be more cautious in their statements. If they mean to say that Auschwitz was a unique event in the face of which the witness must in some way submit his every word to the test of an impossibility of speaking, they are right,” 157.

⁴⁵ Certain members of the avant-garde, such as Romain Rolland and the Dadaists, believed that the war was beyond representation and they refused to represent the war in literature. It would be worthwhile to investigate the mystical aspects of this artistic claim, especially as turn toward religion was palpable among certain members of the avant-garde in post-World War I France. For instance, Max Jacob converted to Catholicism from Judaism in 1915 and spent two significant periods of his life living at the Benedictine abbey at Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire. Pierre Reverdy also converted to Catholicism in 1921 and spent some time at the monastery in Solesmes, before moving to the town of Solesmes with his wife in 1926 where he lived for the rest of his life in semi-isolation (See Jean Schroeder, *Pierre Reverdy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 18-19).

Moreover, Agamben makes clear that the role of the witness is always necessarily endowed with an ethical charge:

The act of the *auctor* completes the act of an incapable person, giving strength of proof to what in itself lacks it and granting life to what could not live alone. It can conversely be said that the imperfect act completes and gives meaning to the word of the *auctor*-witness. An author's act that claims to be valid on its own is nonsense, just as the survivor's testimony has truth and a reason for being only if it is completed by the one who cannot bear witness.⁴⁶

The means of the author-witness, the poetics that is employed to constitute this act, also carries an ethical dimension. Agamben's assumption is at the base of my work: the poetry of witness must have an ethos.

Each poet's ethos differs and works as a function of the various elements of his poetics. In a core group of Apollinaire's war poems, his poetics of witness involves a new approach to poetry by equating the material experience of physically writing and producing poetry to a broader paradigm of the artisan, as elucidated by Walter Benjamin. The theme of the artisan then connotes the ethical notion that poetry belongs to anyone, that the work of poetry, a physical act of the hand and eye, was available to any man in the trenches. (Ironically, this realization was at odds with Apollinaire's own feelings about the role of the poet in society and therefore a restless ambivalence marks his wartime writings).

For Cendrars, the enunciation of the most extreme act of war (to kill another) serves as the crystallization of his poetics of witness. His hybrid text *J'ai tué*, whose form wavers between poetry and prose, mimics the ethical exploration of the category of the author-witness, existing in a border region simultaneously as actor and witness, as someone who may kill, specifically because he was endowed with a sense of poetry.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 150.

As Milosz observed: “The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet’s consciousness.”⁴⁷ This decision about how much to engage with background reality – a question of permeation – also informs the poetics of witness. Each poet must ask himself to what extent the war will saturate his verse. Looking at various examples reveals that responses to this question follow political motivations in addition to aesthetic ones. For instance, the work praised by Maurice Barrès in the *Anthologie des écrivains morts pour la patrie* (1916), invokes the war but only in its most glorious tones and moments. By aligning themselves with classical modes, the neo-classical poets of the Great War sidestep the sullen reality of life in the trenches. By contrast, a poet of the avant-garde such as Cendrars levels aggressive gut punches to the reader; declarations like “J’ai tué” seek to point out the very insufficiencies of poetry as defined in the classical sense, as a mimetic art which seeks to transmute reality – through the willing subjugation to a form – into the sublime. For Cendrars, the rejection of the poetic form is one indication of his disgust with the classical model. Another is his willingness to confess to the crime of murder, and to state directly that this crime was, in fact, enabled by his peculiar status as a poet, as a poet fully equipped to perceive reality. Cendrars manipulates the romantic notion of the poet as a prophet figure: the poet has become a prophet of the ordinary, a prophet who seeks to lay bare the inhuman acts of the battlefield and expose them to world.

Cendrars, Apollinaire and a handful of lesser known poets from the trenches left behind poetic texts of witness that demand to be reexamined today, to be reread so as to leave behind the orthodoxy of the authority of experience that was so vigorously elucidated by Cru and others in his wake. In the following pages, the unremitting

⁴⁷Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 97.

tension between witness and poetics in both formal and ethical terms will underpin my investigations of French poetry produced in response to World War I.

In the first chapter, I will show why the trenches of the Great War became such deeply literary environments and how various forces (economic, intellectual, material and institutional) all established convincing discourses that appealed to the ordinary soldier and encouraged him to take up his pen and write down what he was experiencing. The resulting texts, the physical objects of this phenomenon of mass witnessing, were rapidly reproduced and disseminated in volumes, chapbooks, and anthologies of poetry by various publishing houses. The sudden influx of poems worked toward a democratization of the figure of the poet. The trenches enabled a vital transformation, changing the figure of the poet from that of a lone, solitary, romantic prophet to a role open to anyone, especially those who were experiencing momentous events from the unique vantage point of the front lines. Throughout this chapter, I invoke the poetry written in the trenches, both by the untrained soldier who became a poet only due to his singular environment, as well as works by soldier-poets such as René Dalize with more formal training and deeper connections to the Parisian literary milieu.

The second chapter, devoted to Guillaume Apollinaire, an established figure of the Parisian avant-garde who enlisted and made his way to the front with an artillery unit, will grapple with the newly realized democratization of the poet. Apollinaire wrestles with how to define his role as a poet in relation to all of the other soldier-poets surrounding him. His writings – poetry, prose, journalism and personal correspondence – all underwent a transformation in response to his wartime environment. A deep ambivalence toward relinquishing the image of the romantic prophet-poet figure marks his work in a profound way. In the end, his difficulties on

this level are taken up by the following generation of surrealists, who went on to vehemently reject Apollinaire, especially his wartime poetry.⁴⁸ A new look at Apollinaire from the trenches offers a more nuanced view to complicate that put forward by the surrealists of his embrace of a chauvinist, nationalist, even Fascist futurism.

In chapter three, I explore the transformation of Blaise Cendrars, who enlisted with the French Foreign Legion and threw himself into the trenches. I trace how his tragic war injury, which resulted in the loss of his right hand – his writing hand – became the catalyst for the creation of a personal myth perpetuated by Cendrars himself, that World War I effectively killed the poet and prepared the way for the rebirth of the novelist, some twenty years later. I will show how this personal myth of creation remains meaningful to understanding the evolution of Cendrars' oeuvre, but also how it requires a deeper understanding of the reformulation of his aesthetic. Cendrars' involvement with the writing and production of Abel Gance's popular World War I film *J'accuse* (1919) shows the writer, in the immediate postwar period, crafting a new form of hybrid writing which privileges the place and function of the image. Ultimately, this poetics of the image is inseparable from his resistance to the fusion of the roles of poet and witness, as trenchantly articulated in his text *J'ai tué*.

The iconic nature of the trenches of World War I evokes poetry on a primal level; the word “verse” derives from the Latin *versus*, which means “a turn of the plough, a furrow, a line of writing.” Since antiquity, the visual form of poetry, of dark rows of words on a white page, has resonated deeply within our shared agricultural

⁴⁸ In a radio interview many years after Apollinaire's death, Breton revealed: “Devant l'effroyable fait de la guerre, Apollinaire avait réagi par une volonté de plongée dans l'enfance, de ‘réanimisme’ à tout prix qui était très loin d'être le talisman espéré. Quelles que soient les grandes réussites qu'il ait retrouvées dans cette voie ... j'estime qu'en sa personne la poésie avait été incapable de surmonter l'épreuve.” André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 439.

origins as farmers who, before picking up a pen to construct a line of words, pushed a plough through the earth to create a safe, sunken haven where a line of seeds could grow until harvested. This human gesture was perversely exploited by the great upheaval that occurred during World War I as farmland was rent and split asunder so as to create a vertical line of defense, wrapping itself around the northeastern borders of France and Belgium, in whose depths men burrowed in darkness. On a profound level, the creation and subsequent habitation of the trenches of the First World War coaxed the poetic form as an almost organic growth from out of the dirt and darkness.

Chapter One: The Literary Trenches

“Les tranchées d’ici sont de véritables œuvres d’art...”
– Guillaume Apollinaire, letter dated June 4, 1915

World War I saw an unprecedented number of men take up the pen and publish works, motivated largely by what they saw and what they were experiencing. This chapter seeks to flesh out the exact writing circumstances of the French trenches and to provide a compelling portrait of the trenches of World War I as deeply literary sites, where literature was consumed, debated, created, revised and reproduced for personal consolation and escape, as well as for mass circulation and consumption. The physical and psychological conditions of trench life put a pen into the soldier’s hand, while trench newspapers, public figures, intellectuals, and artists, as well as consumers of popular literature on the home front, produced modes of discourse that conflated the role of the soldier with that of the poet. During the Great War, these strident voices helped redefine what it meant to be a soldier: It became a soldier’s duty – culturally, morally and aesthetically – to put pen to paper. The broadening of the definition of soldier drives an enlarged definition of the figure of the writer as well. The growing number of soldier-poets from the trenches lead to the democratization of the figure of the poet, a crucial cultural and literary change that broadened the understanding of this cultural type by moving away from the solitary, romantic genius to a more accessible person in society, one who might embody different roles at the same time (soldier and poet, statesman and poet, doctor and poet, etc).

This chapter begins with an analysis of the material and physical facts of life during wartime which are essential to understanding why literature became so

important. Then, I will demonstrate how cultural antecedents from Third Republic educational reforms helped make the French soldiers more receptive and, in fact, dedicated to writing from the trenches. These diverse factors cohered, and enabled a large-scale production of literature during the war. Next, I will examine how the trench newspapers served as influential voices, prompting the soldiers to pick up their pens. I will then turn to readings of a selection of lesser-known writings produced from the trenches to illustrate how some of these voices complicated the definition of witness. In the following chapters, I will undertake in-depth analyses of the wartime works of Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars, critical members of the French literary pantheon, whose war writings become key texts in the formation of their respective aesthetics. However, in order to fully understand these works, it is crucial to illuminate their backdrop: the vibrant and heterogeneous literary production of the ordinary soldiers who were their fellows-in-arms in the trenches.

A Material Cult(ure) of Literature

Cultural historians, anthropologists and archaeologists in recent years have brought their expertise to the study of the material culture of the Great War. Long dominated by military history, First World War studies are now thriving thanks to these startling new modes of analysis, which are often inspired by ordinary objects of everyday life and other detritus.¹ The writing produced during the war comprises a rich material culture, which helps modern scholars reconstitute the exact circumstances surrounding the production of literature from the trenches, the most

¹ To gain a sense of recent work on material culture and the Great War, see *Matters of Conflict: Material culture, memory and the First World War*, Nicholas J. Saunders, ed. (London: Routledge, 2004) and *Contested Objects: Material Memories of the Great War*, Nicholas J. Saunders and Paul Cornish, eds. (London: Routledge, 2009).

unlikely of places. Despite their utter depravity, or perhaps because of it, the physical conditions of World War I induced great numbers of the enlisted men to write. The type of warfare employed in the First World War – a war of position as opposed to a war of movement – left much time for waiting and the soldiers often found themselves with undefined expanses of time before they would be notified of their troop’s next official movement.²

This particularity of history has a literary consequence, for these long periods of hunkering-down were ideal times to write. Writing was a spontaneous activity that did not require much advance preparation. It could be curtailed quickly, which also meant that it could be taken back up again at a moment’s notice. Literature – or simply language itself – also helped regulate the passing of time; whether through the silent activity of reading during interminable bouts of waiting or through the recitation of prayers, poems, or even verb conjugations to help endure the anguished minutes of an air attack.³

The French soldier Marcel Drouët, who would die in the trenches of Consenvoye in the Lorraine at the beginning of 1915, describes in his *carnet de route* how literature provides refuge during a shell attack. His unit has come upon an abandoned schoolhouse and he wanders among the emptied rooms, growing nostalgic for the remnants of domestic life with each little object that he notices:

Tout est au pillage dans cette maison claire, qui devait être si propre et soignée, avec sa salle d’école en bas, sa salle à manger, une belle chambre à coucher où deux lits d’enfants sont encore côte à côte. Au premier, deux

² This shift in the style of warfare of World War I was widely noted, even during the war itself. For instance, Georges Thuriot-Franchi uses this fact to explain the origin of the trench newspaper in an article dated August 1916, asserting: “Le premier journal de tranchées paraît aussitôt que les événements le permettent. Le conflit passé de la guerre de mouvements à la guerre de positions, vite une feuille naît.” *Les journaux de tranchées* (Nevers, 1921), 19.

³ Paul Fussell relays that one English soldier named Cyril Falls withstood a bout of intense shelling by “repeating a school mnemonic for Latin adverbs, beginning ‘Ante, apud, ad, adversus.’” *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 169.

chambres encore, l'une contenant la bibliothèque de l'instituteur et l'armoire de l'état-civil. Dans un fouillis de tiroirs, je trouve quelques lettres fanées, des souvenirs en fiançailles, « je vous embrasse tendrement, mon oncle a fixé le mariage pour le 29 avril. »⁴

Of all the little rooms that he wanders through, it is the library that affects Drouët most palpably and it is here, surrounded by books, that he waits out the German shells that have begun to rain down: “Je puise avec volupté dans la bibliothèque de l'instituteur. Voilà des Jules Verne et des Mayne-Reid; des *Lectures pour tous*, des Ségur. Je choisis un Lamartine, un Chateaubriand, et un Pascal, et jusqu'à sept heures, je bouquine avec ivresse.”⁵ In fact, the books elicit a carnal, bodily reaction indicated by the repeated variation on the adjectival phrase “avec volupté” and “avec ivresse.”

Furthermore, Drouët's reading choices are heavily symbolic of the most vaunted aspects of French Republican culture: Lamartine, the high priest of romanticism, who represents the ultimate joining of the will of the people with the poetic muse; Chateaubriand, the writer who employs his formidable intellect to rationalize his Catholic belief; and Pascal, the consummate philosopher whose *Pensées* mirror the fragmentary nature of Drouët's own *carnet*. In the end, it is Lamartine who serves as his mainstay as the shells intensify around him:

Un obus tombe à 50 mètres à peine de la mairie. Ces chameaux-là vont nous bombarder. En effet, de deux minutes en deux minutes, un obus arrive, écornant notamment le clocher tout voisin, et l'horloge est arrêtée à sept heures neuf minutes, éventrant quelques tombes du petit cimetière qui l'entoure, sans respect pour ces vieilles pierres où reposent nos frères. Quelle vision ? Cette canonnade précède-t-elle une attaque d'infanterie ? Chaque heure peut être une surprise. J'ai fait bourrer les fenêtres de matelas, mis une sentinelle dans le couloir, et je reprends mon Lamartine qui est fort dur pour le bon La Fontaine.⁶

⁴ *Anthologie des écrivains français, morts pour la patrie*. Carlos Larronde, éd. (Paris: Larousse, 1916), 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

Poetry, once more, proves an exemplary means of filling indeterminate hours. The length of a poem can punctuate space in a clear way, much more so than a novel, which requires sustained – though interrupted – reading. Poetry, especially much of the poetry that was favored by the soldiers, also possesses rhythm, a characteristic that marks time passing in an almost physical manner. Likewise, poetry could be recited aloud, and its rhythm lent itself to being recited while marching, while dressing, while drinking those precious drops of hard-to-come by *pinard* (the stand-in term for any sort of wine that a soldier could get his hands on) in the evening with fellow soldiers, and at a whole host of other moments from trench life.

In fact, poetry's natural tendency to insinuate itself into memory was a widely accepted idea. In a Third Republic pedagogical text intended for students preparing for the baccalaureate exam, the scholar Ernest Calonne provided students with a variety of sample questions, followed by well-written essays of about three pages, meant no doubt to serve as helpful models for the dutiful *élève*. One such essay takes on this exact concept: "Pourquoi les vers se gravent-ils plus facilement dans la mémoire que la prose ?"⁷ The answer provided is forthright and uncomplicated and boils down to two essential aspects: "l'harmonieuse régularité du rythme et la singularité du langage poétique." These very qualities would become salient characteristics of the poetry that was produced during the Great War:

Cette langue est la plus saisissante : l'éclat des images, la hardiesse du style, l'audace des constructions, la fermeté d'un moule inflexible qui emprisonne les pensées, le relief que leur donnent les coupes, les suspensions, les enjambements du vers, tout nous frappe dans la poésie. Aussi la langue du poète, faisant sur l'esprit une impression plus prompte et plus vive que celle du prosateur, s'y fixe-t-elle par une empreinte plus durable.⁸

⁷ Ernest de Calonne. *Recueil de compositions françaises en vue du baccalauréat és-lettres* (Paris: Paul Dupont, éditeur, 1884), 34-36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

How appropriate that this poetic form, with its capacity for startling images, daring constructions, and dramatic enjambments and suspensions, would provide the means for the ordinary soldier to capture and render his war memories in the most durable and arresting way possible.

Writing also became such a popular activity because it was portable. Soldiers of World War I, from every nation, were outfitted with a standard set of affairs that they carried on their backs, and this pack – the “barda,” or “musette,” or “cartouchière” as it was known in French – grew heavier as the days passed full of marching. Bearing daily this onus was a common theme in the trench newspapers: “le dos rond sous le barda, piétinant dans l’eau... Les hommes allaient courbés sous le barda et la fatigue des heures de marche, les épaules en avant, traînant avec eux la douleur de leur misérable vie.”⁹ The contents of these munitions reflected the ambiguity of the war: Their military-issued mess kits were a mix between the utter privation and dehumanization of modern war and a Belle Époque civility. The men were issued silverware and they were given plates. The common soldier was actually given several different eating utensils. Other frequently found objects from the war reflect this yearning for recreating domesticity at the front: pipes for smoking tobacco, cigarettes with the accompanying accoutrements such as lighters and match boxes, horse hair brushes (for hair and shoes and uniforms), razors, flasks for alcohol, perhaps a packet of Vichy-État cough drops to fight the inevitable cold.¹⁰ These remnants of respectable life added up in the rucksack. The French soldier in World

⁹ *L’Argonaute*, février 1917, cited in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *A travers leurs journaux: 14-18. Les combattants des tranchées* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1986), 40.

¹⁰ See the illustrations in *Les collections de l’Historial de la Grande Guerre*, (Paris: Somogy éditions d’art, 2008), 97-100.

War I carried an average of 39 kilograms (or about 86 pounds) on his back.¹¹ *L'Écho de l'Argonne*, a palm-sized trench newspaper, used its small size as a selling point to the overburdened *poilu*, noting that theirs was "...un journal d'un format commode pouvant être lu facilement dans la tranchée et porté sans fatigue dans la cartouchière."¹² Often included in these kits was a small notebook and pen or pencil.

The presence of a *cahier* and pencil – reminiscent of the implement that many young men had used in their school classrooms – signaled that writing was an officially sanctioned way to pass the time. Men could use this blank notebook for whatever they liked and they certainly did. Some used it for making drawings or sketches of the landscapes around them, or the faces of the men of their unit and their daily domestic activities on the front lines. Some drew to reconstitute the faces of loved ones from home.¹³ Many used their notebook as a journal or diary.¹⁴ Some men used the notebook to record their observations in a more scientific way.

¹¹ This figure is supplied in U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine, report T19-89, "Loads carried by soldiers: Historical, Physiological, Biomechanical and Medical Aspects" by Joseph A. Knapik, (Natick, MA: 1989). To provide comparison, Knapik advises that soldiers today carry 33 kg for an approach march load (about 45% of body weight) and 22 kg for combat load (about 30% of body weight).

The Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne takes a unique approach in presenting this load to its visitors. Beside a uniform arranged on the floor (meant to designate a soldier), the contents of a typical backpack are arrayed, fanning out in a large cloud next to the designated man. Looking at all of the objects presented in this way truly drives home just how much was contained within their packs. Jay Winter notes the Cartesian duality in the range of these quotidian objects: "Ils symbolisent de manière en quelque sorte cartésienne la dualité du corps et de l'esprit, des besoins matériels et spirituels." J.M. Winter, "Montrer la souffrance," *Les collections de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre*, 37, 90. See also the entry "L'équipement des soldats" by Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau in *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre, 1914-1918* (Paris: Bayard, 2004), 281-6.

¹² *L'Écho de l'Argonne*, 26 octobre 1914, cited in Audoin-Rouzeau, *A travers leurs journaux*, 19.

¹³ See the *carnet de guerre* of the artist Ernest Gabard (1879-1957) for his excellent collection of watercolors that reflected the mundane activities of his unit on the eve of the battle of Verdun as well as the modest size of his *carnet* (18 x 14 cm). Ernest Gabard, *Carnet de guerre: aquarelles, novembre 1915-avril 1916* (Paul: CRDP Aquitaine, 1995).

¹⁴ For an example of the *carnet* used as a daily diary, see *Les carnets de guerre de Victor Christophe, 1914-1919* in *Journaux de combattants et de civils de la France du Nord dans la Grande Guerre*, edited by Annette Becker. (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1998), 17-106.

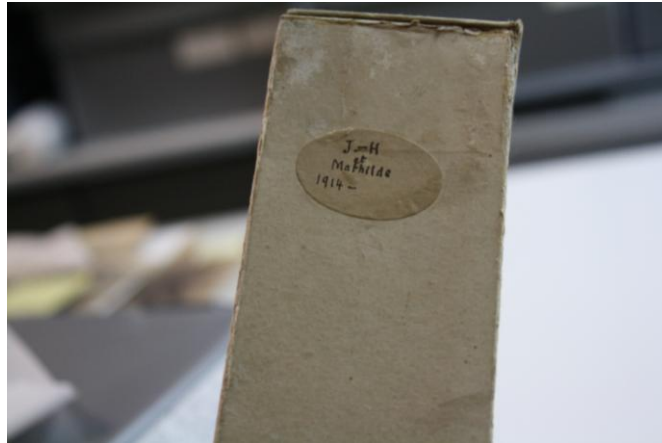


Figure 1: The war-time cahier of a French soldier labeled “J-H et Mathilde, 1914 –”. Printed with permission from the Archives of the Historial de la Grande Guerre – Péronne (Somme, France). Personal photograph.



Figure 2: Three pens used by soldiers during World War I. Printed with permission from the Archives of the Historial de la Grande Guerre – Péronne (Somme, France). Personal photograph.

The French historian Odile Roynette has explored the phenomenon of trench language and the linguists who painstakingly analyzed and compiled dictionaries of soldier argot and other words used or created during World War I. The work of these men was aided by the soldiers themselves, who wrote to the noted linguists of the time, Albert Dauzat and Gaston Esnault primarily, with exacting lists of the novel words that they heard around them in their unit. One such soldier, writing anonymously, sent in a short list of five words to Dauzat, signing his letter with the

popularly used abbreviation: “PCDF: pauvres cons du front, signé: que nous sommes.”¹⁵ The witty sign-off, with its mock formulation of a dictionary entry, testifies to the thought and care that went into recording and transmitting this soldier’s observations into his humble notebook. The *cahier* helped promote such craft and consideration, particularly as keeping a journal was no longer something intensely private that one did in one’s home, but an activity that was done within close confines of one’s fellow soldiers.

It can be difficult to ground words back to their moment of creation. Roynette’s work innovates because it studies the actual, individual words of trench argot as material objects to be uncovered and reexamined. Because the Great War provided such opportune conditions for writing, this materialist approach to language, linguistic studies, and works of literature offers new insights. The scores of poems published by ordinary soldiers during the war can likewise be collected and reread as valuable relics of the intersection of trench life and a snapshot of literary history.

The Great War’s oppressive physical and material conditions made writing an essential outlet. This idea is no better expressed than in an editorial from one trench newspaper: “L’idée de ce petit canard naquit un jour de l’impérieux besoin d’une vie *moins exclusivement matérielle* et de la nécessité de chercher un dérivatif aux sombres préoccupations de camarades que six mois de campagne prédisposent au noir cafard.”¹⁶ In some sense, the life cycle of these words from the trenches has gone full circle. As the editorial notes, the trench newspaper hoped to provide a less material life to its readers through words. The belief was that, through reading, the newspaper

¹⁵ Dauzat published *L’Argot de la Grande Guerre d’après une enquête aux officiers et soldats* in 1918 and Esnault published *Le poilu tel qu’il se parle*, the expansion of an article that ran in the *Mercure de France* in 1919. See Roynette’s book *Les mots des tranchées: l’invention d’une langue de guerre, 1914-1919* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010) for an analysis of these linguistic studies of trench language and the language itself (187-9, 192).

¹⁶ *Télémail*, 18 février 1915, cited in Audoin-Rouzeau, *A travers leurs journaux*, 21 (Italics mine).

created access to a realm where its readers could forget their sorry material conditions. One hundred years later, these artifacts, in the form of *carnets*, newspapers and the other traces of writing, attest to the literary life of the trenches and are an invaluable resource.

One such artifact illustrates this point beautifully. In “Complète du poète en campagne,” the poet and soldier Louis de Gonzague-Frick composes a version of the traditional poetic form known as a complaint to his *carnet* (alluded to in the pun on “complète” in the poem’s title). Though he addresses the poem to a personified Poetry, he probes the strange juxtaposition of transcribing lofty verses of poetry into such a humble and beat-up vessel:

Poésie qui gonflez dès l’aube mes poumons
Et jaillissez de ma bouche comme un chant naturel

...

Je ne possède en guerre pour vous transcrire qu’un bien pâle crayon
Et qu’un mince cahier couleur cendre,
Déjà plein de macules et tout recroquevillé.
Quand je sors de la poche de ma capote bleu-tendre
Ce réceptacle de mon lyrique
Je me sens soudain contristé ;
Sa pâleur est extrême – à peine puis-je lire –
Et reconnaître mes tours elliptiques...¹⁷

In the second stanza, the narrator expresses frustration with the poor quality of the notebook. He notes ironically how the conditions of writing at war are certainly not ideal for pursuing lofty poetic verse in a grand, magnificent fashion: there is no parchment here. The frustration becomes so great that he fantasizes about destroying the notebook by throwing it into a ditch alongside his leftover ration of lentils:

Point de digne parchemin pour vous coucher, strophe,

¹⁷ This poem was published in the anthology *Les Poètes contre la guerre. Anthologie de la poésie française 1914-1919*. Avec une introduction par Romain Rolland et un bois frontispice par Frans Masereel (Paris: Éditions du Sablier, 1920), 73-75.

Point d'encre aux sept couleurs,
...
Vous me hantez partout comme un cauchemar, frêle cahier,
Souvent j'ai voulu vous détruire,
Vous jeter dans la fosse avec mes rogatons de lentilles ;
Des bêtes d'apocalypse y scintillent.
Elles vous eussent dévoré,
Dévoré le mal et le bien dans une semblable ire.

Yet he comes to realize that the conditions of war have changed the way that a "poète en campagne" must set about the creation of his verse. Significantly, because of the chaos of war, the notebook must stand in as the only possible receiver of the poet's thoughts and verse. No one else may hear these verses, whether because of the din of battle, or due to the simple fact that so many comrades have died:

Mais comment dominer le tumulte alors qu'il n'y a personne pour
m'entendre :
Ne sont-elles pas écroulées les ruches d'Évandre.
Hélas ! cahier maudit, vous m'êtes nécessaire comme la douleur à l'amour,
Je vous baignerai dans la souffrance des vierges désormais courbées sous
l'abat-jour
Et dont les bien-aimés ont péri parmi les prés sauvages,
Et cette pourpre humaine vous donnera l'éclat et le visage de la mansuétude
Qu'il sied que vous ayez pour séduire les pensées de ma solitude.

In the end, the poet has no other option. If he wishes to record the experiences of war, he must resign himself to the fact that his smudged, beat-up notebook may be the only place where he can safely place his thoughts. The poem vividly describes the importance of the *carnet* to the writing men of the trenches, and it also registers how the material conditions of the war brought about pervasive change in how poetry was conceived and produced. No longer the exclusive domain of parchment, poetry during World War I came to reside on hastily transcribed, ink-splattered pages.

From pupils to poilus

In addition to the material factors of life on the front lines, other reasons help explain why the ordinary French soldier was predisposed to pick up his pen and capture his wartime experiences in writing. The vast educational changes effected under the Third Republic, inaugurated by Jules Ferry between 1879 and 1883, provide an essential historical antecedent, for broadly, “it is an axiom in French Studies that the educational laws promulgated by *ministre de l’Instruction publique* Jules Ferry... constitute a critical stage in the construction and promotion of French national identity.”¹⁸ In particular, specific changes to the school curriculum regarding the teaching of both literature and writing paved the way for the trench newspapers of World War I to routinely encourage the same sorts of writing from their readers, soldiers. Among these men, a great many had received at least some level of public or private education, resulting in a higher level of literacy for soldiers of the French Army than ever before.¹⁹ Given the highly idealized Republican values of these Third Republic school books, the claim may also be made that the act of writing itself became imbued with a patriotic value, as certainly occurred during the war.

The historian Martha Hanna has brought to attention the wide-scale phenomenon of letter-writing between soldiers of the Great War and their families and how this popular trench pastime activity relates to the French epistolary tradition. She demonstrates persuasively how letter-writing models from Third Republic

¹⁸ M. Martin Guiney, *Teaching the Cult of Literature in the French Third Republic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4. Guiney’s book served as an exceptional resource, leading to several of the Third Republic grammar books explored in this section.

¹⁹ The Third Republic educational reforms truly stimulated a massive improvement in the literacy levels of French men and women. François Furet and Jacques Ozouf note: “Dans tous les départements, les scores atteints à la veille de la guerre de 1914 témoignent que, sous cette réserve, l’ensemble de jeunes Français sait lire et écrire. En 1906, les conscrits illettrés ne sont plus que 5,1% du contingent. Et, dans la période 1901-1906, les signatures du mariage sont presque générales : 97,1% pour les hommes, et 94,8% pour les femmes.” *Lire et Écrire: l’Alphabétisation des français de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977), 57.

grammar books greatly influenced the war-time correspondence of French soldiers.²⁰

The writing exercises found in these Republican grammar books also opened the door to an unprecedented level of literary production from the trenches.

Fussell has written about the prevalence of the *Oxford Book of Verse* as an important literary touchstone for the British soldiers of World War I, noting that “The *Oxford Book of English Verse* presides over the Great War in a way that has never been sufficiently appreciated.”²¹ The medieval epic, *La Chanson de Roland*, presents a rich equivalent for the French context. Presented in a new translation by Edouard Roehrich in 1885, *La Chanson* represented the first surge in a growing wave of medieval texts to be incorporated into the Third Republic curriculum. Roehrich’s text is all the more interesting, because it was one of the few texts to be introduced to students before they reached the *lycée*, where they received the bulk of their exposure to French literature.²² He goes to great lengths to make a case for the use of *La Chanson*, outlining his views in a lengthy introduction with nine chapters. These chapters treat various aspects of the usefulness of *La Chanson de Roland* for the primary curriculum, including how the epic poem glorifies patriotism, friendship and courage as well as providing lessons on French geography and history.²³

²⁰ Martha Hanna, “A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I.” *The American Historical Review* 108.5 (2003), accessed 30 September 2010, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/108.5/hanna.html>.

²¹ Fussell, *The Great War*, 159.

²² Guiney, *Teaching the Cult*, 124.

²³ The nine chapters of Roehrich’s introduction are: Chapitre 1: L’Importance de la Chanson de Roland pour l’éducation de la jeunesse; Chapitre 2: La Chanson de Roland glorifie le patriotisme; Chapitre 3: La Chanson de Roland glorifie l’amitié; Chapitre 4: La Chanson de Roland exalte le courage héroïque; Chapitre 5: La Chanson de Roland jugée au point de vue du sentiment religieux et des idées morales; Chapitre 6: La Chanson de Roland jugée au point de vue de l’enseignement de la géographie et de l’histoire; Chapitre 7: La Chanson de Roland développe le sentiment du beau ; Chapitre 8: Le style de la Chanson de Roland et Chapitre 9: Texte et traduction de la Chanson de Roland. Edouard Roehrich, *La Chanson de Roland. Traduction nouvelle à l’usage des écoles précédée d’une introduction sur l’importance de la chanson de Roland pour l’éducation de la jeunesse* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1885).

La Chanson de Roland, in Roehrich's view, could ably form young minds with the values of the Third Republic and it could also develop their notions of what beauty was: "*La Chanson de Roland* constitue au contraire un moyen admirable de développer chez la jeunesse l'intelligence de ce qui est vraiment beau."²⁴ In fact, Roehrich even offers *La Chanson* as a means to counter the scientific and "utilitarian" bent he detected within primary school instruction:

A force de poursuivre de préférence un but utilitaire et professionnel dans les écoles, l'enseignement risque de tomber dans une tendance terre à terre, quelquefois même dans la platitude. Il est difficile d'éviter ce travers lorsqu'on a en vue avant tout l'éducation scientifique de la jeunesse. Et pourtant il n'est pas possible de nos jours de négliger l'enseignement des sciences exactes. Pour éviter que la prose n'envahisse trop tôt l'âme de l'enfant, que n'a-t-in recours à ces monuments si jeunes, si poétiques dont la *Chanson de Roland* offre un type si accompli ?²⁵

In these lines, Roehrich stages a fascinating opposition between "prose," which in his formulation stands for the language of practicality that threatens to invade young souls, and the "monument...si poétique" of *La Chanson*. By arguing so forcefully for the importance of poetry in the primary education, especially through the championing of such a proto-patriotic and at times violent epic poem, Roehrich makes a strong case for the importance of poetry, not only for his time, but for the context of World War I several decades later. It appears certain that *La Chanson de Roland* then served as recourse to some soldiers in the trenches of World War I.²⁶

The teaching of the art of writing was ground-breaking for the Third Republic as well. Never before had the practice of writing been formally included in instruction, particularly for the lower and middle classes. Beginning with the lowest

²⁴ Ibid., 64.

²⁵ Ibid., 66-7.

²⁶ In fact, the influence of *La Chanson de Roland* extended beyond national borders as in the work of the Welsh soldier-poet David Jones, who uses the epic as an essential point of reference in his work *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937).

educational level, students in the Third Republic were asked to hone basic skills of narration. For instance, in Claude Augé's extremely popular series of grammar textbooks, students at the first level were asked to compose what were titled "rédactions d'après l'image." A typical example shows two images, much like a comic strip. In the first frame, a girl stands on a chair in order to reach the table, where she is holding a plume to write in a book. Unknown to her, a cat has its claws on the edge of the tablecloth. In the next frame, the girl has fallen off the chair, the cat skitters away, ink spills all over the tablecloth and the child's mother enters in from a doorway at the back. The aim of the assignment is to have the students write in their own words what has happened in the image. To help, the teacher is given questions to guide the students: "Que fait Élise? Sur quoi est-elle montée? ... Que fait le petit chat?" and then "Qu'arrive-t-il à Élise? Pourquoi tombe-t-elle? Parlez de la chaise, du livre, de l'encrier, du chat et du tapis. Qui arrive aux cris d'Élise?"²⁷ The carefully calibrated questions are meant to show students how to meaningfully organize the information conveyed to them pell-mell by the image, useful practice for the soldiers of World War I, who also were asked to overlay a narrative onto the frenetic and incoherent details and sensations of battle.

Augé's *manuel* at this first level also introduced students to small excerpts of literature, which he presented in the preface as the rewards for their hard work in apprenticing themselves to the rules of grammar: "Et comme toute peine mérite une récompense, vous trouverez aussi dans ce petit livre des histoires, des fables et de belles gravures que l'on a faites exprès pour vous."²⁸ Unlike the texts for older

²⁷ Claude Augé, *Premier livre de grammaire. Grammaire enfantine. Règles générales. 200 Exercices. Lectures, copies. 150 Dictées, Fables, Historiettes, Poésies, Analyse. 100 Exercices d'élocution. Rédactions d'après l'image. Livre du maître. 120 gravures* (Paris: Larousse, 1910), 78.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

children which drew heavily from the giants of French Classicism (Racine, Boileau, La Fontaine), much of the literature in this textbook stemmed from relatively contemporary sources, with poems written by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and Théodore de Banville among others. These poems appear to be written specifically for children in a conversational tone, on subjects that appeal to this age group, such as animals, candy, familiar household objects.²⁹ Therefore, even if a soldier only received a rudimentary level of education, he would have had at least some exposure to poetry and other forms of literature, as well as an introduction to the basic skills of crafting a narrative.

In subsequent textbooks produced by Augé for upper levels, one finds explicit instruction on the art of narration. In a notice titled “Conseils préliminaires” in the *Deuxième livre de grammaire*, Augé explains the type of writing that these exercises should elicit, even noting that the rules of grammar are all for naught unless a student knows how to apply the rules to reflect a knowledge of writing style: “La connaissance de la grammaire et celle du vocabulaire ne sont rien, si elles n’ont pour complément la connaissance du style.”³⁰ Furthermore, Augé encourages the student to write in a natural, simple style:

Ces mots, il faut les accepter tels qu’ils viennent et se demander simplement s’ils rendent l’idée à énoncer. Il ne faut pas se croire tenu d’employer des expressions recherchées ni surtout des mots dont on ne comprend pas bien le sens. On doit écrire comme on parle: le style est d’autant meilleur qu’il est plus naturel.³¹

Augé’s directives match Georges Thuriot-Franchi’s description of the best type of prose for the trench newspaper: “la prose, la bonne prose française, alerte, simple, et

²⁹ Guiney, *Teaching the Cult*, 116.

³⁰ Claude Augé. *Deuxième Livre de Grammaire. Théories. 460 Exercices. Lectures. Dictées. 100 Historiettes. Fables. Poésies. Analyse. 120 Proverbes. Rédactions. Livre de l’élève. 170 gravures* (Paris: Larousse, 1908), 169.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

truculente, sans fausse pudeur, forme encore l'essentiel du journal de tranchées. La phrase cajoleuse, enveloppante, ouatée, la phrase-tampon, n'a plus qu'une valeur de clinquant. C'est le règne du récit direct et de l'histoire courte."³² The same qualities were lauded, by Augé, and in the editorials of the trench newspapers, as they encouraged the students-turned-soldier to render their experiences into the written word. Moreover, this use of language became a point of national pride, of rendering "la bonne prose française."

In Augé's manual for the second level, the student was provided with sixteen pages of "exercices de style," various writing exercises meant to encourage and stimulate the imagination. Many continued to build on the framework of the "rédaction d'après l'image," including several which had clear militaristic themes, such as Exercice No. 16, titled "Un brave cœur," which features the poor orphan of a soldier who died on an unspecified field of battle:

Canevas – Charles est le fils d'une pauvre veuve : son père est mort sur le champ de bataille. Ses vêtements sont propres mais rapiécés. Des camarades méchants se moquent de lui, de ses vilains habits. Charles pleure. Jean, un bon élève, prend sa défense ; il est fort et résolu. On cesse de railler, et les enfants, honteux de leur méchanceté, demandent eux aussi à être les amis de Charles.³³

Other exercises challenged the pupil to recount a series of dramatic and challenging actions, such as Exercice No. 35: "Une ruse de Du Guesclin":

Canevas – Le château de Fougeray (en Bretagne) est occupé par les Anglais. Du Guesclin et trois de ses compagnons décident de s'en emparer. Bertrand fait cacher ses soldats. Lui et ses trois camarades se déguisent en bûcherons, et se présentent au château que vient de quitter la moitié de la garnison. On baisse le pont-levis ; ils entrent et massacrent les gardiens, avec l'aide des soldats accourus de la forêt. Ils s'habillent en Anglais, et quand la partie de la garnison qui était sortie rentre...³⁴

³² Thuriot-Franchi, *Journaux de tranchées*, 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

The aggressively patriotic undertones of some of these writing exercises uncannily foreshadow the modes of writing that would be produced during the Great War, both by the soldiers, the popular press, and individuals left to imagine the war from a distance on the home front.

In the highest level *manuel* that Augé produced, one finds the same sorts of exercises, only now they have grown more complicated in their details and the imaginative scope of the narration has widened. The student is asked to experiment with many different forms of writing and narration. For instance, Augé classifies some exercises as “narration historique”:

No. 936 : Canevas – En 1870. Régiment français décimé. Sergent Robert enterre la hampe du drapeau et en cache l'étoffe sous sa capote. Blessé un moment après. La nuit venue, il se traîne sur les cadavres. Aperçu par sentinelle. Il la tue. Rejoint son régiment. Décoré.³⁵

Others are broken into other specific subheadings such as “narration géographique” (“No. 931 : Décrivez une ascension dans les montagnes ; cette ascension vous l'avez faite pendant vos vacances...”) ³⁶ Occasionally, there are still *rédictions d'après l'image*. Many exercises continue to engage with overtly nationalist and anti-German sentiments, such as No. 949, a “*redaction d'après l'image*” titled “Il est en France”:
“Canevas. Un Alsacien a déserté pour ne pas servir l'Allemagne. Il est recherché par la gendarmerie. Imaginez un récit...”³⁷

These writing assignments are notable in that all of the exercises require an active imagination and the willingness to engage with and manipulate either observed or imagined details in order to construct appropriate responses to detailed questions. Under the Third Republic, the art of writing became formally institutionalized and

³⁵ Ibid., 808-9.

³⁶ Ibid., 801-2.

³⁷ Ibid., 824-5.

was no longer the exclusive, often mysterious activity of intellectuals, clergy and other privileged people. However, it should also be noted that there was never any explicit instruction on how to write poetry. Whereas examples of narration, letter writing and other imaginative historical thought experiments have been found, there do not appear to be any exercises that required the student to practice writing poetry in any form. In this sense, the French soldier had to make this last leap into the act of poetic creation by himself, based on the poetry that he knew and loved, and encouraged by examples of soldier-poets around him.

This brief look at the specific sorts of writing instruction that the ordinary soldier may have received in his local school reveals that the seismic educational changes enacted under the French Third Republic – particularly the expanded focus and attention given to the act of writing – provides a compelling antecedent and helps to explain the widespread nature of the literary response of World War I among the French *poilus*. Just as the Third Republic promulgated patriotism, it also provided the nation's future soldiers with the means to express themselves, an indispensable outlet for the events they would endure.

The Writing, Fighting Numbers

After the hostilities between France and Germany began in earnest, intellectuals in France started debating what to call the growing ranks of those who wrote about the war, while fighting it. In his detailed study of this phenomenon, French scholar Nicolas Beaupré finds that “*écrivain-combattant*” was the term most popularly employed to meet this need. This term was buttressed by the formation of a serial at the end of 1914, the *Bulletin des écrivains de 14*. This journal, published monthly without fail during the war, promulgated the cause of the soldier-writers, and

performed benevolent duties, such as publishing in each issue the available military addresses of its members, as well as listing those *écrivains-combattants* who had recently died in the line of duty.³⁸ These two functions help identify the *Bulletin*'s readership. The first function reflected the *Bulletin*'s dedication to soldiers on the battlefield. The second function, that of relating important obituary information, was pertinent to the men at the front who were looking for news of their colleagues and friends, but was also extremely useful to the *Bulletin*'s subscribers on the home front, the families and friends of these *écrivains-combattants*, who could scan the list of recently deceased for news of their loved ones.

Immediately after the war, this journal founded a permanent organization called the *Association des écrivains-combattants* (AEC). According to Beaupré, this serial cemented the term *écrivain-combattant* as the key one in play in France during World War I.³⁹ In the war's aftermath, the AEC added to the growing lists of published collections of "écrivains morts pour la France" with its own anthology, thereby validating once more the existence of this special, quasi-military category, the French soldier-writers.⁴⁰ Maurice Barrès championed another such anthology, *L'Anthologie des écrivains français morts pour la patrie*, which was published by Larousse in 1916.

Beaupré also attempts the formidable feat of providing a quantitative sense of just how many *écrivains-combattants* fought and wrote during the First World War. Using a rigorous set of criteria, he determined that a total of 239 Frenchmen met his definition of an *écrivain-combattant*. However, as Beaupré himself acknowledges,

³⁸ Nicolas Beaupré, *Écrire en guerre, écrire la guerre. France, Allemagne 1914-1920* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2006), 11, 48-49.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁰ Association des Écrivains Combattants, *Anthologie des écrivains morts à la guerre* (Amiens: Edgar Malfère, 1924-1926).

this number is limited to those writers who published a book during the war and excludes those authors who were published solely in literary and scholarly journals, reviews and newspapers during the war.⁴¹ As will be seen, the number of men who contributed to these forums was substantial and would therefore greatly enlarge the number that Beaupré proposes.

It is clear that the number of collections of war poetry increased dramatically as the war raged on. In 1914, thirty-three volumes of poetry relating to the war were published. The following year that number shot up to 148 volumes. The next four years sustained similar figures: 155 volumes in 1916; 142 volumes in 1917; 146 volumes in 1918 and 136 volumes in 1919.⁴² These numbers reveal just how deeply the literary scene was reconfigured in order to respond to the Great War and they provide an empirical sense of the extent to which the war entered into the literary domain. Newspapers, especially the trench newspapers produced *for* soldiers, *by* soldiers, provide another example of this effect.

The Trench Newspapers: Producing Writers out of Soldiers

Les Journaux du front

Écrits par la main des Poilus
Sous le feu de mort que déferle
La vague folle des obus,
Les journaux du front sont des perles :
Ils sont comme un éclat de rire,
Quand tout s'évanouit et meurt,
Un mot sublime en un martyr.
« Eh ! Poilus, aurons-nous la guerre ? »
« Les lâches ont peur d'avoir peur »
« Pourvu qu'ils tiennent à l'arrière »

⁴¹ Among the criteria that an *écrivain-combattant* must possess, according to Beaupré, the most important were: he must have written about the war, he must have worn a soldier's uniform and seen combat, and he must have been published between 1914 and 1920 (Ibid., 12).

⁴² Ibid., 233.

Ils ont tous le sel de chez nous,
Qu'ils soient sérieux ou bien gavroches.
Vous ne mentez pas du moins, vous,
Poilus sans peur et sans reproches.⁴³

Lauded in the poem above as ‘pearls of the front’ and praised for their inability to lie, the trench newspapers that cropped up during World War I provide valuable insight into what the soldiers in these units were thinking and writing during the war. These newspapers are a rich archive of documents produced for soldiers, by soldiers, with a relatively small amount of interference from official authority (although the level of involvement with authority and the degree to which a trench newspaper participated in the ongoing “bourrage de crâne” was an issue fiercely debated among the newspapers themselves).⁴⁴ Though the number of trench newspapers attached to various units of the French army was relatively small when compared to the army at large, the phenomenon of their production attests to a lively writing culture taking place in hundreds of units. The historian Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, who was one of the first to reintroduce this precious archive to World War I studies, estimates there were at least 400 trench newspapers produced by French units between 1914-1918.⁴⁵ These newspapers stand in marked contrast to the official organ of the French army,

⁴³ Poem, signed by “Chollet,” in *La Voix du 75*, avril 1916, no. 9, Archives de l’Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne, France.

⁴⁴ See Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, “Bourrage de crâne et information en France en 1914-1918” in *Les Sociétés européennes et la guerre de 1914-1918*. Actes du colloque organisé à Nanterre et à Amiens du 8 au 11 décembre 1988. Sous la direction de Jean-Jacques Becker et Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau (Nanterre: Publications de l’Université de Nanterre, 1990), 163-174. See also Delporte, *Les Journalistes en France*, 183-5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11. André Charpentier, the former editor of one trench newspaper, estimated that there were at about 474 *journaux de tranchées*, in his massive “livre d’or” dedicated to the phenomenon. See André Charpentier, *Feuilles bleu horizon: le livre d’or des journaux du front: 1914-1918*. (1935) (Triel-sur-Seine: Éd. Italiques, 2007), 33-34.

Le Bulletin des Armées de la République. The trench newspaper bearing the name *Le Bulletin désarmé* is the most playful example of this contrast.⁴⁶

Among the papers, there existed a large degree of variation in style, substance and manner of production. Some newspapers, such as *La Gazette du créneau* and *Le Chabi*, were labors of love, handwritten and copied using a rudimentary gelatin printing process, with small print runs corresponding to the great difficulty in producing them.



Figure 3: The masthead of a newspaper that was reproduced rudimentarily from the trenches: the inaugural issue of *Le Chabi*, “journal anti-neurasthénique.” Printed with permission from the Archives of the Historial de la Grande Guerre – Péronne (Somme, France).

Others benefited from the use of commercial printing presses in towns near the front that offered to print the newspaper. These types of partnerships gave these newspapers a professional gloss as their production quality matched that of any other newspaper of the era.

⁴⁶ The relationship between the official authorities of the French Army and the newspapers was an ambiguous one. In an official message to officers on the existence of trench newspapers, General Joffre sanctioned their existence as long as their message did not prevent soldiers from doing their jobs or loosing morale (Audoin-Rouzeau, *A travers leurs journaux*, 23). Most importantly, the trench newspapers never received any money from the French government to help pay for the printing costs so they always retained financial autonomy (Ibid., 29).

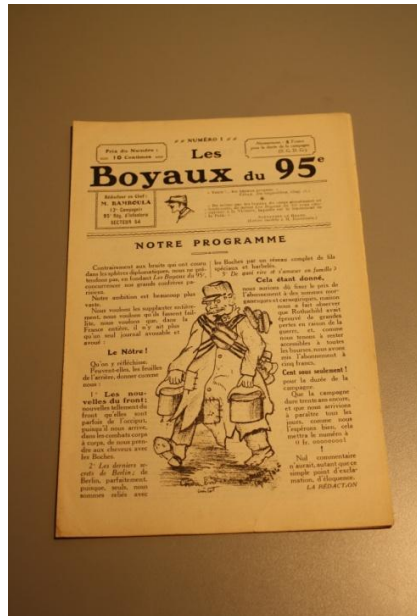


Figure 4: Image of a professionally produced trench newspaper, *Les Boyaux du 95e*. Printed with permission from the Historial de la Grande Guerre – Péronne (Somme, France). Personal photograph.

The success of the newspapers themselves often depended on the wartime fates of their editors and other contributors. During periods of waiting, the editors were able to gather and produce material for the next issue with regularity. When the unit was under fire or sent into battle, the newspaper was bound to reflect this change. Some newspapers simply didn't make it after their unit saw harsh combat. For instance, *L'Écho de tranchées-villes* ceased to exist after six members of its editorial staff were killed or wounded in one month of intense action in the summer of 1916.⁴⁷ Despite their varied print runs, manners of production and diverse numbers of readership, all of these trench newspapers shared the ability to illuminate what daily life was like for these soldiers, especially since their existence was based entirely in the moment.

Audoin-Rouzeau has identified some of the most common themes found across the trench newspapers: their preoccupation with the terrible conditions of life –

⁴⁷ Audoin-Rouzeau, *A travers leurs journaux*, 10.

the rain, the mud, the inadequate food, the rats, the lice, the inability to bathe regularly – as well as more mental conditions like *le cafard*, boredom, and a constant reckoning with death. He sketches a wartime culture based on his readings of these newspapers.

However, Audoin-Rouzeau does not address the theme of writing, or rather, he does not address how the trench newspapers endeavored to promote a cult of literature from inside the trenches. Part of the newspapers' goal of shaking off the depression and horror of daily life among their readers was to inculcate the widespread belief that any man could pick up his pencil and write down what he experienced. The trench newspapers worked hard to validate the prose and poetry that its contributors supplied to them. Sometimes, the editorial staffs of these newspapers went so far as to exhort men to pick up their plumes, even if they didn't have the slightest inclination to do so. These instances reflect just how important and accessible the role of literature had become during the war. No longer the strict vocation of consecrated men like Victor Hugo, literature during World War I underwent a democratization that was desperately needed, especially in the arena of poetry.

No other trench newspaper epitomized this trend better than *Poil...et Plume*, of the French 81st infantry regiment. Its very name – a play on the French word for hair (*poil*), which came to be tied up with the etymology of the word *poilu* and the pen – attests to its desire to put writing at the forefront of the minds of its readers.⁴⁸ It helped that *Poil...et Plume*'s editor-in-chief was Gabriel Boissy (1879-1949), who had been a journalist at the Parisian newspaper, *L'Intransigeant*, before the war.⁴⁹ In its first issue, *Poil...et Plume* explains its raison d'être in a column titled "Salut" (the word

⁴⁸ In his dictionary, Dauzat gives the following as the definition of *poilu*: "soldat, +; homme; (emploi archaïque) qui a du poil quelque part ..." Dauzat, *L'Argot de la Grande Guerre*, 258.

⁴⁹ Boissy is also credited with calling for the placement of an eternal flame above the grave of the unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. This inaugural flame-lighting ceremony took place on November 11, 1923. Today, there is a plaque inside the Arc which reads: "Hommage à Gabriel Boissy 1879-1949 qui eut l'idée de la flamme sur la tombe du soldat inconnu."

itself perhaps containing the faintest allusion to Mallarmé's poem of the same title), which begins by providing an etymology of the newspaper's name:

Et nous appelons *Poil...et Plume* : poil ce mot qui donne leur nom de légende aux gaillards de la grande guerre, plume ce terme qui leur rappelle qu'ils sont et seront dans les siècles les paladins de cette civilisation méditerranéenne construite sur la pensée, sur la douceur, sur la générosité d'âme.⁵⁰

By linking these two terms together, the newspaper reveals an important aesthetic tenet, its desire to cut across established separations between Art and the unmentionable details of ordinary life. The writers join the high notion of the plume, an intellectual implement which has been the bedrock of French culture, with hair, a word which points to the very human and mundane situation of the soldiers, whose life at the front often prevented them from being able to shave or cut their hair. Hence, the name *poilu*.

Further on in the column, the editor invokes the glorious tradition of the pen and the sword, inserting the men of his unit in this very lineage: "Manieurs d'épée, ils manient aussi le verbe, comme leurs ancêtres Périclès, César ou Richelieu, ceux-ci pour rire, ceux-là pour réfléchir, d'autres pour conter leurs souvenirs de combat."⁵¹ It is a radical gesture that seeks to equate the ordinary soldier with the great figures of literature. This idea grows more insistent as the editorial gathers steam: "Ces derniers peuvent rendre, par surcroît, de précieux services à l'histoire de France, et ne le doivent-ils pas ? ... A la besogne qu'ils font nul autre qu'eux n'assiste..."⁵²

What's more, the editors attempt to motivate the soldiers to pick up a pen and write down their experiences of battle by warning them that, if they do not, what they

⁵⁰ *Poil...et Plume*, mai 1916, numéro 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

went through could be lost forever. Writing, according to *Poil...et Plume*, is an essential service to each soldier's personal history, but also to the history of France:

Ces récits que l'on répète dans les cagnas, dans le repos des cantonnements quand l'heure est longue, il faut les sauver de l'oubli. La mémoire des hommes est courte, fragile comme un vase. Fixons-la. Traçons dès maintenant la petite chronique des batailles, en recueillant ces innombrables incidents âpres ou plaisants dont se constitue le drame.

It is remarkable how accurately this editorial foresees the problems and debates that surround the question of *témoignage* and memory in the postwar period. Despite the horrific visions all soldiers have seen, this editorial argues against the ultimate destructive force, the power of time, to forget and erase what these men have undergone.

This duty to witness through writing was imposed upon every man of the unit and upon the reading public at large. The editors even hazarded a small stylistic note (in the same vein as Augé) suggesting that the simpler the writing, the more powerfully transmitted the emotion would be: "Chacun – et le plus simple avec force, on le verra dans ce numéro – peut remplir cet office, bien dû à ceux dont les yeux jamais plus ne verront la lumière."⁵³ In fact, these men owed it to their fallen comrades-in-arms to fix their impressions and their memories into the written word. There was no patience for hesitation: "Certains, a-t-on dit, hésitent. Pourquoi? Ils doivent leur témoignage à leurs frères d'armes, à l'histoire."⁵⁴

The desire of *Poil...et Plume* to open up the creation of literature to every man in its reach was also evident in its willingness to accept pieces written in regional dialects. Although the French troops were often not unified by one common tongue, the more official publications of the French army downplayed, or even suppressed,

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

this linguistic diversity in the name of cohesion.⁵⁵ In *Poil...et Plume*, the editors understood that linguistic restraints should not impede a soldier from witnessing, so the editors welcomed contributions that might not find a home anywhere else:

Il serait souhaitable également que, dans ce régiment où la plupart d'entre nous parlent la vivante et vénérable langue d'oc, nous donnions quelques poésies, contes, récits, ou galéjades en provençal, en languedocien, en catalan ou en tout autre dialecte.⁵⁶

Their openness to different dialects underscores the newspaper's dedication to creative expression. Embracing linguistic diversity worked against dominant pressures of Third Republic ideals and military directives to limit soldiers to expressing themselves only in standard French.

In its first issue, *Poil...et Plume* established regularly recurring sections which showcased certain kinds of creative writing. These became reliable forums where soldiers could read and then attempt to emulate the different formats. One such section was called "Histoire naturelle du front," which described the different flora and fauna of trench life. Drawing on the perspective of a scientist, and therefore channeling the tone and structure of science writing, these small articles took familiar objects and made them new again through the use of creative writing. For instance, the first "histoire naturelle" described the character of a radioman. This type of writing replicates a category from Augé's variation on the standard composition exercises, called the "leçon de choses," in which a student is asked to describe an object in its entirety ("Exercice No. 847: La Maison d'école (Leçon de choses) : Décrivez votre maison d'école extérieurement et intérieurement").⁵⁷

⁵⁵ For more on the linguistic diversity of the French troops, see Roynette, *Les mots des tranchées*, especially the section "Paroles combattantes," 181-214.

⁵⁶ *Poil...et Plume*, mai 1916, no. 1.

⁵⁷ Augé, *Troisième livre de grammaire*, 719.

Like most other trench newspapers, *Poil...et Plume* published poetry in every issue. The poetry ranged from the humorous (for example, a sonnet titled “Boche et Téléphoniste”), to more descriptive poems that experimented with form and language. The poem “Déboires d’un photographe” was written in the same style as Barbusse’s *Le Feu*, with many apostrophes, a typographic approximation that attempted to show the actual phonetic and rhythmic pattern of soldiers’ speech. This poem nodded to popular convention by noting that it was a “complainte sur l’air ‘Ce sont là des choses qu’une femme n’oublie pas.’ ” The poem was responding to the new restriction issued by the military authorities that sought to prevent soldiers from taking their own personal photographs at the front. The poem intervenes by capturing trench life through words now that capturing life through image-taking has become prohibited:

J’aimais m’ ballader [sic] dans l’ secteur de l’L
 Parfois dans le J ou bien dans le K
 Cherchant à fixer d’ façon immortelle
 Toutes choses... afin que je n’oublie pas.
 ...

Adieu Vest Pocket, mon vieux camarade
 Je te fiche à l’eau, puisqu’à c’ qu’il paraît
 Tu sers sans l’ savoir – ah j’en s’ rai malade –
 Le salaud d’en fac’, le Boche abhorré.⁵⁸

Other poems contrasted distinctly in style and tone. A few issues later, the newspaper published a neo-Romantic poem much more formal in tone and subject matter, called “Odelette à la Lune.” This pastoral praises the moon, following the standard Romantic trope of celebrating the beautiful in elements of nature:

O lune, ce soir comme tant d’autres, tu brilles au ciel. Ta lumière d’argent tombe douce et sereine sur les champs. Dans les creux des ravins, sur le vert sombre des prés glissent tes rayons qui illuminent la rosée attachée aux brins d’herbe. Tu es leur parure : de leurs fines gouttelettes tu fais un incomparable écrin. Le long des ruisseaux tu tisses avec tes rayons des écharpes de gaze qui se traînent, légères.

⁵⁸ The author’s byline is P.P.S.L, *Poil...et Plume*, juin 1916, no. 2.

Les bruits de la vie s'éteignent. Tu aimes le silence : devant toi tout se tait. Des ombres lentes passent encore parfois deux par deux et s'en vont comme à regret. Dans les demeures encore quelques lueurs rouges aux carreaux. Mais tout s'éteint.

O toi, lampe d'argent au sanctuaire du ciel, répands sur tous ta mélancolique clarté. Veille sur le repos de ceux qui souffrent et qui luttent !⁵⁹

The speaker loses himself in the moonlit scene, following the tendency in romantic literature to lose oneself in the nature at hand. He praises a moon which passes over fields, through ravines to the tips of blades of grass. The fields depicted here are curiously devoid of the men who were actually huddled under the earth in the poorly-dug, makeshift trenches. The poet's fixation upon the moon creates a strange distance; in fact, no direct reference is made to the war except in a generalized way in the last line where the speaker invites the moon to watch over the repose of "those who suffer and fight."

The fact that such extremely different types of verse ran each week in this newspaper shows that the editorial staff was indeed committed to publishing most of the submissions it received from their readers and that they were not concerned with establishing a coherent artistic direction in their trench newspaper.⁶⁰ These different poems showed that the trenches were a place where such radically different aesthetics could sit side by side in the same columns of a newspaper.

L'Esprit du cor, another trench newspaper, went even farther in its solicitations for writing. Its editorial message began by assuring soldiers that their written impressions are indeed the best ones and that the quotidian element of their life is an essential element: "Il est donc indispensable que votre collaboration se

⁵⁹ The author's byline is A.G., *Poil ... et Plume*, janvier 1918, no. 11.

⁶⁰ It does seem that the editorial staff of *Poil...et Plume* kept their promise to publish most everything they received. An editor's note in one issue states: "La rédaction s'excuse (sérieusement) auprès de quelques collaborateurs d'avoir été obligée de remettre plusieurs envois au prochain no. Ils étaient parvenus trop tard ou ont dû être retardés pour faire place à de nouveaux venus. Chacun son tour, n'est-ce pas camarades ?" (*Poil...et Plume*, juin 1916, no. 2).

poursuivre sans interruptions, au jour le jour; que vos écrits, vos dessins, puisent leur inspiration dans la vie que vous menez au combat comme au repos, partout où passe la Division.”⁶¹ However, *L'Esprit du cor* gave very detailed instructions as to the type of submission that they were looking for:

La Direction vous demande de vous plier aux nécessités suivantes.
Pour la prose : brièveté relative, 150 lignes au plus. Vous vous serrerez pour faire de la place aux camarades.
Pour les poèmes : 60 lignes au plus. Les plus courts poèmes sont souvent les meilleurs.
Pour les dessins : les exécuter au trait. Éviter de faire les inscriptions dans les marges : elles gênent la reproduction. Format à votre volonté : le journal réduira.

Enfin, la Direction réclame de vous :
1^{er} des histoires brèves et amusantes, les remarques et les observations dont on fait les échos ;
2^e les mots spirituels ou crânes que vous entendez.
3^e les anecdotes relatant les actions héroïques de vos camarades.

Note how the editorial makes the written space of the newspaper columns an extension of the trenches themselves by evoking the cramped nature of both places: “Vous vous serrerez pour faire de la place aux camarades.” With this comparison, the editors insist that the same esprit de corps must reign within the unit and within the newspaper; there is no line drawn between the two.

The editors also insist upon brevity and the anecdotal in their instructions, characteristics which dovetail with the other driving element of the aesthetic the editors were cultivating: the impression of spontaneity. This is reiterated further on in the editorial notice: “Rédigez-les comme vous le pourrez, mais notez-les sur le vif ; on les retapera, s’il le faut.”⁶² In fact, the editorial staff bent over backwards to accommodate prose and poems that have been written “sur le vif.” If the handwriting is illegible owing to the chaotic circumstances under which the piece of writing was

⁶¹ *L'Esprit du cor*, samedi 30 juin 1917, no. 2

⁶² Ibid.

produced, so much the better. Once more, the criteria of this trench newspaper presciently foreshadowed the quality of witnessing that took shape for all World War I literature.

In another issue, the editorial staff of *L'Esprit du cor* revealed just how willing they were to work with their authors in order to ensure publication, once more encouraging all soldiers to send their pieces in for publication. *L'Esprit du cor*'s staff claimed that it would send back submissions that needed a small amount of work. Once the pertinent corrections were made, the piece would find its place in the columns of the newspaper:

Certains envois ont besoin de retouches. Faute de connaître le nom des auteurs, il est impossible de les leur retourner pour qu'ils les modifient. Il faut que cette discrétion cesse !
Quand elle cessera, beaucoup d'envois qui seraient excellents avec une légère mise au point et qui restent sur le carreau, paraîtront.
Signez donc !
Si vos envois sont mauvais une première fois, ils seront meilleurs la seconde et excellents la troisième.⁶³

Anonymity was discouraged as it prevented a process of collaboration between the editors and the writers. The emphasis was on encouragement and minor editing to make the pieces fit for publication, not exclusion or judgments based on strict literary aesthetics. Not only were these men comrades-in-arms, they were also comrades-in-letters. While the soldiers who signed their pieces anonymously perhaps operated under the idea that their poems were not good enough to be signed, this trench newspaper turned that notion on its head by explicitly encouraging a culture of attribution and collaboration in order to make the pieces better, and most importantly, widely circulated.

⁶³ *L'Esprit du cor*, samedi 4 août 1917, no. 4.

Other newspapers made similar entreaties to their readers, assuring them in no uncertain terms that their submissions would be accepted with open arms. *La Gazette du créneau* states: “Nous prévenons aux lecteurs[sic] du front que nous acceptons toutes les bonnes volontés. Tous les manuscrits qui nous seront remis seront examinés et insérés en nous les jugeons[sic] acceptables... .” *Les Boyaux du 95^e* echoed the same insistence as *Poil...et Plume* in its entreaty for submissions after its pages doubled in number:

Les Boyaux se sont agrandis. Ils étaient à quatre pages : les voilà à huit. ... Il faut, pour alimenter nos colonnes, force bons mots, force chansons, force anecdotes, et surtout force récits de guerre.

Tous, vous avez été témoins d’une scène dramatique, d’un combat, d’une relève sous les obus, d’un enterrement près des premières lignes, d’une explosion, d’un bombardement ; les plus anciens ont vu Sarrebourg, Xivray, Blamont, Matexé, etc., etc.

C’est dans cette mine inépuisable qu’il faut puiser. Les plaisanteries amusent une seconde, mais les récits de guerre vous intéresseront toute votre vie. C’est grâce à ces récits que *Les Boyaux du 95^e* constitueront, pour vous et vos familles, un véritable livre d’or.⁶⁴

Here again, the editorial staff attempted to engage all of the members of its reading public as potential writers. The newspapers valued soldiers as witnesses, able to write lasting accounts of what they have seen, accounts that would become durable documents of memory, both for the soldiers themselves, their families and for the French nation. This entreaty also dismisses the old idea that one must have a certain level of formal training in order to produce quality writing:

Inutile d’être académicien, pour collaborer au journal. Il suffit d’avoir des yeux et de raconter ce qu’on voit. Les plus beaux récits de guerre que j’ai entendus m’ont été faits par un soldat, intelligent, certes, et spirituels, mais qui n’avait jamais rien écrit, sinon des lettres à sa famille.

It was detrimental to have formal training when writing down one’s war experience.

In this passage, the editors prioritize the experience of being there over academic

⁶⁴ *Les Boyaux du 95^e*, numéro 2, Archives de l’Historial de la Grande Guerre.

experience. Passages like these would go far to fuel the polemical debate in the postwar period, led by Cru, which also valorized the experience of having been there above all else.

The trench newspapers were also an important place of interchange between the home front and the soldiers. One poem printed in *Les Boyaux* was from a young man in the middle of his military training. His sonnet, “A la classe 1917,” is utterly traditional, evoking the glories of the *patrie* and employing multiple exclamation points to convey his eagerness to join the vaunted ranks of those who fight against Germany’s tyranny:

C’est à nous, mes amis, de sonner au clairon,
D’arrêter, d’un tyran, la fureur déchainée,
D’aller grossir encor le flot de notre armée,
D’écouter, sans faiblir, l’orage du canon !

Qu’importe le danger qui plane sur le front !
Alors qu’ils relevaient la gloire abandonnée,
D’autres que nous sont morts dans leurs jeunes années !
Ce qu’ils furent, ceux-là, c’est nous qui le serons !⁶⁵

Before he was able to participate in the war physically, this writer strove to engage wholeheartedly by publishing verse in a trench newspaper. In this sense, writing became a thoroughly mobilized act and the trench newspaper the ultimate, authentic forum for such acts.

Some of the trench newspapers were circulated to domestic subscribers who paid a higher fee for subscription which helped underwrite production costs. In the same issue of *Les Boyaux du 95e* appeared a poem written by a young teacher to the soldiers, in which she asks politely how she may become a subscriber:

Je suis, excusez-moi, une humble jeune fille,
Qui, pour gagner sa vie, dut quitter sa famille.
Je vis à la campagne, y instruis les enfants,

⁶⁵ Signed Maurice Clement, 95^e d’infanterie (classe 1917), *Les Boyaux du 95^e*, numéro 2.

Leur apprend à aimer leurs aînés triomphants
 Qui nous rendront un jour une plus grande France,
 Et dont l'âme accepte, stoïque, la souffrance.
 Je ne vous louerai point par quelque parabole,
 Mais je viens vous offrir une timide chole.
 J'ai ouï-dire, aux « Annales », qu'en votre tranchée
 Paraissait un journal, relatant l'odyssée
 De chacun des pioupious qui, bravant la mitraille,
 A fait luire son nom au cœur de la bataille.
 Je viens, c'est bien osé, demander humblement
 A quelles conditions se prend l'abonnement.⁶⁶

Her playful gesture, in rhyming couplets, feeds into the literary culture of the trenches. She uses the term 'odyssey' – itself a literary term evoking the voyage of Odysseus and his long journey home – to refer to the daily life of the soldiers. The poem also illuminates the porous exchange between the nation's classroom and the front lines. It is not difficult to see how schoolteachers like this young woman took away the lesson that the creation of verse and other forms of literature was becoming an artistic activity open to everyone. Her numerous references to humility in this poem, a humility that stems from her audacity to write verse, are palpable moments of this evolution. While she repeatedly insists upon her humble rhymes, she nonetheless wrote the poem, submitted it and had it published, all acts contradicting the persona of the timid schoolteacher.

Interested civilians also dictated the material found in the trench newspapers. In one such instance, a young woman (another teacher perhaps) asked *Le Bochofage*, a trench newspaper with a large reach thanks to its being printed in Paris, if it would publish an article detailing the contents of an ordinary *poilu's* pockets. Once more, the spirit of this assignment clearly modeled itself after the "leçon de choses"—writing exercises which asked the students to concentrate upon a simple physical object and

⁶⁶ Signed Mlle. Robère Faury, Ibid.

to rediscover it through the course of describing it. The resulting paragraphs reveal the creativity that was being nourished in these forums:

Voici la nomenclature d'un contenu de ses 15 poches :

Un mouchoir d'un noir irréprochable et dégageant la suave odeur de notre nouveau parfum « Tranchéïa ». Un porte-monnaie extra-plat ; c'est ici où en temps ordinaire, *l'or loge*, mais vu les besoins de la Défense Nationale, il est devenu d'une maigreur inquiétante. ... Un couvre-casque transformé en blague à tabac. Trois morceaux de bougie, un bouchon de bidon, une clef de boîte à sardines ; deux boutons de culotte. Deux pipes, culottage extra. Une fusée d'obus. Plusieurs morceaux d'aluminium. Deux bagues en cours d'exécution. Quatre cartouches boches. Un peigne, dont il reste encore 9 dents. Quelques mètres de ficelle ; quelques allumettes. Cinq épingles doubles. Une lampe électrique, sans ampoule et sans pile. Un flacon d'essence pour briquet. Un paquet de pansement, ex-antiseptique. Une paire de ciseaux. Un volumineux portefeuille contenant plusieurs photos de jeunes personnes charmantes au point de vue anatomique, plusieurs lettres signées : Jane, Carmen ! nous n'insisterons pas sur la nature de ces dernières.

...
Voici satisfaite, espérons-le, la curiosité de notre aimable lectrice.⁶⁷

A skilled attention to detail, an ear attuned to plays on words (“l’or loge” playing on the word *horloge*), and the humorous tone of this piece all mark it as a thoughtful response to the ‘assignment’ in question.

The dizzying variety of pieces found in these newspapers, whether modeled after writing assignments or not, exposed an environment that was fueling literary experimentation. The soldiers grew more and more creative as their talents as writers were continually validated, sometimes from very prestigious institutions.

“Inutile d’être académicien...”

“Des collaborateurs sont vite dénichés dans le régiment et les unités voisines. Pour débiter, on décide de s’adresser aussi aux « professionnels » de l’arrière. Mais un cri unanime affirme : ‘Pas d’académiciens !’ ”

– Francis Varedes, “Comment on fonde un journal du front”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Le Bochofage*, 21 octobre 1916, no. 4.

The editorial columns of *Les Boyaux du 95^e* strove to convey the message that all soldiers were capable of becoming powerful writers of their own experience, and that higher education was no longer a requirement. One trench newspaper, *Rigolboche*, went even further in empowering their voices by making contact with members of the Académie Française and asking them to contribute pieces to run in its humble pages. By publishing the responses of famous intellectuals of the time alongside the work of ordinary *poilus*, the editorial staff at *Rigolboche* bridged the gaps that previously existed between such different literary castes.

The Académie members themselves endorsed this project. In the first instance, the venerable Symbolist poet Henri de Régnier (1864-1936) contributed an ode to the newspaper itself:

A Rigolboche

Je voudrais tirer de ma poche
Quelque mirifique quatrain
Où pas une rime ne cloche
Pour l'envoyer au « Rigolboche »
Journal plein d'héroïque entrain !
Rien n'est parfait sans qu'on le pioche
Et j'ai peur de manquer le coche ;
Alors tant pis pour mon dizain...
Si j'attends trop, le Rigolboche,
On l'imprimera Outre-Rhin !⁶⁹

These jocular lines are a departure from de Régnier's usual style and it is clear that he deliberately sought to compose a poem whose light rhymes and humorous subject matter would please the regular readers of the trench newspaper. Just like the schoolteacher, he takes on the posture of humble modesty in his poem, voicing his

⁶⁸ Editorial from the trench newspaper *Marmite*, reprinted in *Le Pays de France*, 4e année, no. 165, 13 décembre 1917. Cited in Jean Tubergue, *1914-1918. Les Journaux de tranchées*. Préface de Jean Rouaud (Paris: Éditions Italiques, 1999), 13.

⁶⁹ *Rigolboche*, numéro supplémentaire, Pâques 1915.

hope that it would be worthy of the ‘heroic’ newspaper’s normal fare. Régnier also comments on the nature of trench writing, noting that – even in his own situation – writing quickly and forgoing the chance to cultivate perfection through many drafts is simply not an option for publication on the front, where one must submit one’s writing quickly in order to meet publishing deadlines. In his own way, he attempts to conjure the same “sur le vif” moment that the soldiers were encouraged to cultivate.

A subsequent issue included a letter from another *académicien*, Anatole France (1844-1924). From the outset, France laments his own lack of authenticity, addressing his letter, “Cher Confrère, et vous tous rédacteurs du *Rigolboche*... Hélas ! que ne puis-je dire : Frères d’armes.”⁷⁰ This lament from France was sincere. In October 1914, France, aged 70, sent a letter to the French Minister of War, pleading to be sent into battle: “Beaucoup de braves trouvent que mon style ne vaut rien en temps de guerre. Comme ils peuvent avoir raison, je cesse d’écrire et je reste sans fonction. Je ne suis plus très jeune mais ma santé est bonne. Faites de moi un soldat.”⁷¹ He continues, inundating the soldiers with extravagant praise : “Vous êtes des héros et des héros charmants.” France then seizes on another important theme,

⁷⁰ *Rigolboche*, numéro 8, 30 avril 1915. I have tried to verify that these letters were penned by Régnier, France et al. For France, there is persuasive evidence to support this claim. While there is currently no complete volume of his correspondence, such a letter as this one is in keeping with the time period given in the chronology of the *Œuvres complètes*. The editor notes that in 1915: “Pendant un an, Anatole France va désormais écrire un certain nombre d’articles dans le ton jusqu’au-boutiste général ; ils forment le recueil *Sur la voie glorieuse*, publié en janvier 1916 chez Champion. France en parlera plus tard avec remords... et demandera qu’ils soient exclus de ses *Œuvres complètes*. Après *Ce que disent nos morts*, publié le 1^{er} novembre 1915 par *Le Petit Parisien* (et reproduit en plaquette en juillet 1916 par René Helleu), il rentre dans le silence, n’en sortant que pour lancer des appels en faveur des alliés de la France en 1916.” France, *Œuvres complètes*, IV, édition établie, présentée et annotée par Marie-Claire Bancquart, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994), LXXIV. Furthermore, this same exchange between the editor of *Rigolboche*, Louis Lantz, and France was also published in almost its entirety in Georges Thuriot-Franchi’s 1921 text *Les Journaux de tranchées* with only the following introductory comment: “un avant-propos pour excuser, si besoin en est, la sécheresse de cette chronique...”, p. 18. Finally, Jean Tubergue also cites this letter from France and does not question its origin. See Tubergue *Les Journaux de tranchées*, 25. Given these second authentications, I am inclined to believe that France did indeed pen this letter to *Rigolboche*.

⁷¹ This letter was later published in *Le Gaulois*, 2 octobre 1918, cited in the introduction to the *OC*, XLIX.

stating that *Rigolboche* describes the reality of the front lines more accurately than any other newspaper. Most importantly, he explicitly legitimates the soldier-writers, assuring them:

Savez-vous que vous êtes des poètes, *non seulement en action, mais à la lettre* : la chanson de Vincent Hyspa est délicieuse et le sonnet sur « Vauquois, sombre colline » comptera, sans flatterie, parmi les plus beaux vers inspirés par cette grande guerre. Et ce n'est pas chose commune qu'un sonnet d'un mouvement lyrique comme celui-là.⁷²

In this declaration, France boldly allows for actions to become the substance of poetry. Thus, to France, all soldiers of the Great War, by their heroic actions alone, are poets. Of course, he goes on to praise the soldiers who composed poetry in the more traditional, literary sense, citing specific examples including an anonymous sonnet, as some of the most beautiful verses written about the war. There is perhaps no better validation of the poetry of these trench writers.

In the following issue of *Rigolboche*, one last submission appears from a member of the Académie Française, this time the famed author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Edmond Rostand (1868-1918).⁷³ Rostand's sentiments mirror those of France, composed in letter form and echoing common themes of humility and praise:

Rigolboche, je t'aime. Je t'admire. Ta gaieté me met les larmes aux yeux. Tu comprends que, moi, je ne puisse pas rigoler : car pour avoir le droit, en ce moment, de rigoler, il faut bocher. Mais quand on rigole en bochant, o Rigolboche, on est sublime. Que dans la barbe du Poilu il y ait ce rire, c'est la France même ! Je t'embrasse, de toute mon âme, soldat qui me défends en disant ces folies. Saint François d'Assise disait : « Je suis le fou de Dieu... » Tu es le fou de la Patrie !⁷⁴

Rostand plays with the title of the newspaper and offers a ludic interpretation of the soldiers' mission: to be lighthearted and playful while hunting down Germans

⁷² *Rigolboche*, numéro 8, 30 avril 1915 (Italics mine).

⁷³ Tubergue notes that Rostand had also contributed two sonnets dedicated to General Joffre which ran in another trench newspaper, *L'Écho des tranchées*, Turbergue, *Les journaux de tranchées*, 24.

⁷⁴ *Rigolboche*, numéro 9, 5 mai 1915.

(*Boches*). In a shocking way, he liberally conjugates the pejorative term *boche*, using it as a verb (“il faut bocher”) and a gerund (“en bochant”). Despite his light tone, he hints at the tension between those authorized to witness, and in such a jocular way at that, and Rostand’s own ineffectual position, noting: “car pour avoir le droit, en ce moment de rigoler, il faut bocher.”

Rigolboche continued to engage with literary institutions and literary history in other ways. One reoccurring rubric, appearing on the last page of an issue, was a poem written in a changing literary style. These poems were nods to current literary trends and tastes and showcased the dynamic literary abilities of the trench soldier. This homage was impressive in its diversity. Odes written explicitly in the manner of du Bellay, Ronsard, Horace, Baudelaire, even one dedicated to the Parisian dramatist and journalist Miguel Zamacoïs, were published on the back pages of *Rigolboche* by different authors. The tribute to Baudelaire, signed Jean Mady, reveals a particularly perceptive reading taking the subject of *le cafard*, a word which was shorthand for the mental condition of malaise that Baudelaire no doubt would have seized upon himself as the modern iteration of *spleen*, were he writing from the trenches. The last two stanzas show just how well Mady, a frequent contributor to the newspaper, marries Baudelaire’s tone to the subject of the Great War:

Et laisse-moi rêver aux défuntes années,
Sans y mêler encor des plantes surannées ;
Que mon œil au créneau demeure souriant.

Dans un instant j’irai dormir un peu sous l’arche
Et tiens, pour t’obliger, à partir défaillant,
Entends, cafard, entends la Relève qui marche.⁷⁵

It is moving to see canonical literature reconfigured in the hands of unknown writers and made to speak to the circumstances of trench life. Creative

⁷⁵ *Rigolboche*, numéro 83, 20 juin 1917.

reinterpretations like these, in addition to the lively correspondence between esteemed members of the Académie Française and the editors of a small trench newspaper, show just how deeply literary the trenches of World War I proved to be. Through adapting works of great literature and channeling voices from France's celebrated pantheon of great writers, the soldier-writers demonstrate how empowering the trench environment truly was.

The trench newspapers, thanks to the abundant poems and other forms of creative writing that appeared regularly within their columns, constituted just one medium for the unhindered outpouring of expression that occurred during the Great War. Other forms of creative expression – writing and staging plays⁷⁶, performing music, painting and sketching⁷⁷ – also thrived in the trenches.⁷⁸ An intimate engagement with the arts functioned as an important outlet by giving soldiers the opportunity to pour their terrible lived experiences into ink and paper, violin and pocket harmonica, paint and charcoal. In this manner, motivated by a humble impulse for survival, the combatants were able to sublimate some of their horrors into something else, moments of art.

Toward a Premature Memorialization

The Académie Française, in particular Maurice Barrès, was instrumental in defining and solidifying the notion of the hallowed *écrivain-combattant* during the

⁷⁶ For more on trench plays and performance, see Annabelle Winograd, “Ten minutes of Anthrax!: Some notes on French combatant trench scripts of the First World War,” *Theatre* 2001 31(1):51-69.

⁷⁷ See Philippe Dagen, *Le Silence des peintres: les artistes face à la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Fayard, 1996) and Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁷⁸ Once more, in this respect, the trench newspapers helped stimulate an artistic culture. Thuriot-Franchi notes that trench newspapers often aided painters and sculptors to organize exhibitions of their artwork, usually displayed in the unit's barracks closer to the interior. *Les journaux de tranchées*, 35.

war years. Although Barrès claims that the idea for an anthology of “écrivains français morts pour la patrie” was initially suggested to him by a friend, he embraced the project wholeheartedly, as did the Académie Française.⁷⁹ The resulting four volumes of the *Anthologie des écrivains français morts pour la patrie*, edited by Carlos Larronde, were published by Larousse and appeared in 1916.

In retrospect, the publication date, coming so early in the war, seems hasty and ill-conceived but it reflects the widespread belief that the war would be resolved quickly. What’s more, the desire to promulgate the volume into the public sphere influenced the aesthetic choices made in choosing texts for this work. The writers gathered here were those who had died in the opening months of the war, having had very few opportunities to set down their experiences into writing. The great majority of the excerpts chosen date to the years before the war. For example, the selections of Charles Péguy, while artfully chosen to reflect the prophetic and belligerent vision of the poet, all date from before war was declared.⁸⁰ Thus, the concern of the anthology was not with the witnessing of these men, but rather the mere existence of the *écrivain-combattant*, a double embodiment which was then given the final consecration through death on the *champ d’honneur*.

The importance of this embodiment is made clear in the biographical sections of the anthology, which are provided as a sort of introduction to each writer before the presentation of a selection of his writings. These small biographical sketches follow a particular order: the place of birth and the exact circumstances of death are always noted in the first paragraph. The following paragraphs provide details of the soldier’s

⁷⁹ Barrès writes in the preface to the anthology: “Mon vieux camarade ligueur Gustave Voulquin était venu m’entretenir de cette idée ; M. Carlos Larronde la réalise ; j’ai accepté l’honneur de la présenter au public,” 10.

⁸⁰ The selections for Péguy were the poems “Heureux ceux qui sont morts”; “Le Peuple de Paris”; “Prière de Jeanne d’Arc”; “La Tapisserie de sainte Geneviève et de Jeanne d’Arc”; and an excerpt of the prose “Sur Victor Hugo,” *Anthologie des écrivains français morts pour la patrie*, tome 1, 13-21.

early life, education and military training as well as any information about his literary career. The writer of these biographies (presumably Carlos Larronde) is careful to underline the perfect integration of the figure of the writer with that of the soldier whenever he can, bolstering the notion that the war actually brought these two essential aspects into harmony. Describing Ernest Psichari, Larronde attests that “[l]a vie du soldat avait stimulé en Psichari les facultés de l’écrivain” and Psichari was said to have been someone who “définissait le métier du soldat ‘une grande pensée toujours en action’ – le plus noble des métiers.”⁸¹ Likewise, the soldier Art Roë is touted, through second-hand accounts, as “officier de carrière, très épris de son métier, mais aimant aussi les lettres, le lieutenant-colonel Patrice Mahon a dit de son existence qu’elle était ‘orientée vers la guerre et pourtant vouée au beau.’”⁸²

Occasionally, the double embodiment of soldier-writer took on sexual overtones, as in the tribute to Marcel Drouët where the editor notes that as the danger grew with each passing day, the writer’s style grew more ‘manly’:

Georges Ducrocq lui-même a d’ailleurs analysé la vie trop courte mais féconde de son jeune compagnon : « Depuis sa sortie du régiment, il avait fait deux parts dans son existence : l’une consacrée aux poètes, aux maîtres de l’humour, et de la fantaisie, à ses amis du Divan, de la Revue critique des idées ; l’autre, vouée à la délivrance du territoire, à la croisade antiboche. Et de jour en jour, à mesure que le péril approchait, son visage devenait plus sérieux, son style plus mâle. »⁸³

In this description, Drouët’s existence is described as being neatly divided between his literary activities and his soldierly duties. However, this firm separation doesn’t last; as the days pass, the dangers of war that Drouët experienced as a soldier correlate directly to the development of both the man (“son visage devenait plus sérieux”) and

⁸¹ Ibid., 22.

⁸² Ibid., 28.

⁸³ Ibid., tome 2, 56.

the writer (“Son style plus “mâle”). The experience of writing during wartime effectively integrated the two separate spheres of his life.

Evidence also suggests that aesthetic criteria weren’t actually that important in determining the selections for this weighty tribute. Rather, one’s status as *écrivain-combattant* depended on the biographical details of one’s life. Cru emphasized the same criteria in his own project twenty years later.⁸⁴ Barrès admits as much in the preface to the volume, exclaiming:

Voulons-nous donner à croire que ces vers et ces proses que nous rassemblons soient tous également admirables ? Qu’importe ! Le génie épanoui des uns complète ces autres resserrés encore en bouton, et certaines méditations crayonnées sur le champ de bataille témoignent pour ceux qui moururent silencieusement. Chacun d’eux a son drame et sa figure à part ; pourtant leur sacrifice est commun, et pas un n’échappe à l’admiration dont nous entourons leur sainte cohorte.⁸⁵

By ignoring aesthetic, literary value, Barrès manipulated the definition of *écrivain-combattant* so that this category will serve, by the very basest historical details, as representative of the silent majority of soldiers which do not leave any written trace of memory behind them. The debates surrounding art and depicting reality proved simply too encumbering for Barrès so he abandoned claims to aesthetic greatness when memorializing the war writing of this particular group. Indeed, once the notion of soldier-writer becomes congealed around the primacy of biographical details, any discussion of formal poetics appears moot. This is one area of historical deformation where the creation of a poetics of witness aims to intervene. By reasserting the importance of a consideration of the formal literary qualities of a text, this reified notion of the poet-soldier which was so dependent on the biographical details of the

⁸⁴ In fact, Barrès demands more pointedly later in the preface : “Par la suite, on fera mieux que ce recueil documentaire ; nous avons besoin immédiatement d’un répertoire qui donnât des noms, des dates, des titres de livres et dont les marges pussent recevoir nos pieuses annotations ; mais pour que soient commentés avec une souveraine autorité ceux que dénombre ce registre, nous attendrons leurs compagnons de fatigue et de vérité” (p. 11). Cru’s *Témoins* responded directly to this request.

⁸⁵ Préface, tome 1, 10.

writer, may be broken down, opening up new avenues of analysis as to what constitutes a witness.

Reaping Poetry from the Trenches

“Et tandis que les bonhommes, couverts de boue, éclaboussés de sang, gravissent péniblement leur indescriptible calvaire, la « grande guerre » à l’arrière est traduite en livres, en articles, en dessins, en films, en chansons. Une horde d’industriels de la pensée et de l’image se sont jetés sur la grande catastrophe comme des mouches sur une charogne.”
– Jean Galtier-Boissière, *Le Crapouillot*, June 1917

The transition from submitting a piece of writing regularly to a trench newspaper to publishing a collection of poems came easily to some soldiers despite the inconveniences of being at war and stranded in the trenches, removed from the Parisian publishing hub. Publishing houses on the domestic front quickly realized that publishing war literature was a lucrative enterprise, and the more authentic the writer’s status, the better the work sold.⁸⁶ To find writers with authentic status, the publishing houses had only to turn to issues of the trench newspapers. Some publishing houses even published ads soliciting submissions to anthologies in trench newspapers, or sponsored writing contests with publication as the ultimate prize.⁸⁷

When advertising these works of trench literature, the publishing houses tapped directly into the modes of discourse from the trench newspaper editorials that were encouraging the soldiers to write so that they would permanently fix their wartime experience in a concrete medium for the benefit of History. One trench journal, *Le Klaxon*, echoes this request: “Si des alertes surviennent, provoquées par

⁸⁶ Beaupré examines the case of one such publishing house, Berger-Levrault, and shows how it completely repositioned itself as a wartime press in order to reap advantageous financial rewards. See Beaupré, “Éditer: la fabrique de l’écrivain combattant,” *Écrire en guerre*, 50-57.

⁸⁷ One such example is the anthology *Les auteurs de la tranchée. Pages choisies des lauréats des concours du front* (Paris: Renaissance du livre, 1917).

des grenades qu'échangent les petits postes, [le journaliste du front] abandonne alors sa plume pour le fusil: finie la littérature gaie, il faut écrire l'Histoire."⁸⁸

The publishing house Berger-Levrault issued one publicity poster, designed by Victor Prouvé (who also drew several propagandistic posters supporting the war effort for the French government), with the tagline "Comment ils écrivent l'Histoire." This line, echoing exactly the trench newspapers' preoccupations with cultivating an honest historical record of these events, sits beneath a drawing of three soldiers huddled amid the debris of battle. They are crouching under the remains of a hulking piece of wrecked metal, possibly a ruined tank. Though only one soldier is writing, a piece of paper propped up on his knee, it is a collective act, each leaning over the scribe. It is clear that they are talking to each other and the soldier with the pen is charged with setting down their impressions, no doubt fresh from the battle around them. Below this scene, there is an inset image of a woman wearing an apron, thoughtfully reading a book and ignoring the two children who cling to her waist. A young boy in pseudo-military garb looks up at her, perhaps beseeching her to share what she is reading, while a young girl sits thoughtfully in a rocking chair, head bowed as she sews a laurel wreath (a symbol of the impending victory).⁸⁹ This ad makes transparent how history is transcribed to the people: thanks to the publishing houses that take on the task of acting as liaison between the soldiers on the battlefield and the civilians on the home front, who yearn for 'accurate' depictions or narratives of the war's events as they unfold.

The domestic public was hungry for war books written by soldiers, and the publishing houses on the home front were more than happy to act as liaison between

⁸⁸ *Le Klaxon*, no 12, décembre 1916, cited in Tubergue, *Les journaux de tranchées*, 18.

⁸⁹ See *Les Affiches de la Grande Guerre* (Péronne: Historial de la Grande Guerre, 1998), 12.

the trenches and the readers at home. The vibrant literary activity, already thriving in the trenches and nourished by the trench newspapers, found a ready outlet during the war years as books of all genres written by *écrivains-combattants* flooded the literary landscape. From among the many works of poetry published during these years, there are some that deserve renewed attention today.

The war poems of Marc de Larreguy Civrieux (1895-1916) provide a fine example of one soldier's reckoning with the facts of war. In his collection *La Muse du Sang*, composed entirely at the front before his death at Verdun in November 1916, the poet struggles to reconcile his pre-war adoration for Lamartine with the realities of war. In a short notice that he wrote, intending it to be included should his poems be published, Larreguy explicitly locates this point of tension by citing this line from Lamartine: "Il faut se séparer, pour penser, de la foule et s'y confondre, pour agir."

He responds:

Je me suis « confondu pour agir » dans la foule des vrais combattants ; mon œuvre, écrite parmi eux, est donc vécue et sincère. Mais il ne m'a pas été donné de pouvoir suivre le premier conseil du poète : « se séparer, pour penser, de la foule. » Aussi ai-je exprimé mes sensations en toute spontanéité, sans en modérer parfois certaines expressions par un recueillement réfléchi. ...Trop d'autres poètes n'ont fait que « se séparer, pour penser, de la foule » et ne s'y sont point confondus, de sorte que, n'ayant aucun contact réel avec l'existence des combattants de « tranchées », ils ont faussé leurs idées sous la ridicule grandiloquence de leur propre égoïsme patriotique.⁹⁰

Larreguy notes with honesty that, due to his role as a soldier, he was not able to withdraw from the men around him in order to contemplate the crowd. Thus, a crucial aspect of romanticism breaks down during wartime, as the soldier-poet simply cannot retreat into the solitude that romanticism requires. If such a retreat is afforded, Larreguy claims, it is often from a writer who lacks any real contact with the soldiers

⁹⁰ Marc de Larreguy de Civrieux, *La Muse du Sang. Poèmes et légendes*. Préface de Romain Rolland (Paris: Librairie du travail, 1926), 12-13.

of the trenches, whose verse only rings of grandiloquence and patriotic egoism. In this way, Larreguy's work clearly embodies the break-down of romantic ideals toward the expression of a "crudité violente," born out of the war's circumstances. As he assures the reader, "[c]es vers ont été écrits 'dans la Mêlée.'" (This last allusion to Romain Rolland's pacifist text *Au-dessus de la Mêlée* (1915) marks a clear transition from Lamartine to Rolland in Larreguy's estimation).

The volume of poems itself also embodies a progressive break-down of the romantic ideal toward a more experimental verse form. The first eight poems are classical sonnets with rhyming, interlocking verse and an elevated diction. The poem "Pourquoi" is one example:

Eaux-fortes de Callot !...Cauchemars de Goya !...
 Vous que jadis je pris pour des caricatures,
 Je sens la vérité de vos sombres peintures
 Depuis que le malheur de moi fit un paria...

L'idéal Sanctuaire est devenu charnier !
 Son dieu-fantôme a fui devant la Pourriture.
 Les Mystères sont morts et morte la Nature,
 Et mon cœur ne sait plus que maudire ou renier !

J'en jure par vous tous, lugubres macchabées !
 Jamais je n'oublierai vos mornes bouches bées
 Dans un muet pourquoi de reproche impuissant...

O pauvre humanité qui, par ta faute, souffres,
 Quel Mal caché te pousse à courir dans le Gouffre
 Jusqu'à ce que ton Âme ait sombré dans le Sang !...
 Janvier 1916 (au front)⁹¹

The sonnets give way to more experimentation, including one which stages a one-sided dialogue with the figure of a dead soldier, a poem that echoes rather closely Rimbaud's "Le Dormeur du val":

Dans le boyau plein d'ombre où tâtonnent mes pas
 Une forme couchée, obstruant le passage,

⁹¹ Ibid., 19.

M'arrête... Je ne puis continuer mon voyage,
Car le dormeur ne bouge pas.

« Allons, debout, ami ! Tu dois veiller là-bas...
La tranchée est déserte et l'Ennemi, d'un signe,
Guette un moment d'oubli pour sauter nos lignes. »
Mais le dormeur ne répond pas.

« Pourquoi donc ce silence ? Es-tu malade, ou las ?
(Quelle immobilité ! n'est-ce vraiment qu'un rêve ?)
« Parle, mon âme a peur, veux-tu que je te lève ? »
Mais le dormeur ne répond pas.

Mon cœur bat lourdement comme un funèbre glas
En levant le haillon de lugubre présage
Qui revêt l'Inconnu des pieds jusqu'au visage...
Mais le dormeur ne bouge pas.

O noirs pressentiments, quelle trouvaille, hélas !
Qui me glace d'effroi et de pitié me navre...
Ce dormeur mystérieux est un morne cadavre,
Et son sommeil est un trépas !

Mais les lèvres, soudain, desserrent leur motus,
Sous le crâne entr'ouvert ressuscite l'œil glauque,
Et le Mort, d'une voix au son lointain et rauque,
M'a répondu dans un rictus :

« Pourquoi viens-tu troubler mon néant radieux ?
Ta parole, o vivant ! réveille ma souffrance,
J'ai connu ton martyre avant ma Délivrance,
Loin de ce monde au joug odieux ! »

Mais les lèvres d'énigme ont repris leur motus...
Sous le crâne entr'ouvert, o vision suraigüe !
L'œil redevient vitreux dans la face exsanguë[sic]
Que crispe un éternel rictus.

Février 1916 (Au front)⁹²

As these two poems indicate, the poetry becomes increasingly marked by images of death, dead bodies, orphaned body parts, the disintegration of these bodies and the grotesque effects of the process of death and decay.

⁹² Ibid., 24-5.

The theme of decay, while not common in the patriotic anthologies such as the one championed by Barrès, nor found often in the poetry of the trench newspapers, was elaborated by other poets from the trenches. The soldier-poet Lucien Linais uses the image of a corpse to penetrate an otherwise perfectly beautiful landscape in his poem “La Neige.”

L’homme, mal éveillé, s’est approché de la meurtrière,
Ses yeux, éblouis, n’ont pas compris tout de suite, mais son cœur, las du
spectacle de la veille, s’est senti soulagé.
Le voile de pureté qui recouvre la plaine est si doux à son regard, que,
déjà, le souvenir de la grande tragédie est partiellement effacé.
Il n’y a plus de sang dans la tranchée.
La neige a caché la laideur de la terre.

Un peu de calme renaît dans l’âme du guetteur.
Il a moins peur aussi,
Il sait que pour accomplir leur œuvre, les héros ont besoin de moins de
clarté.

On n’attaque pas quand il neige.
Et dans sa solitude, l’homme médite et bénit la nature bienveillante qui,
durant son sommeil, a changé le pénible décor.
La neige a caché la laideur de la terre.

Mais voici qu’en scrutant le large réseau qui le protège, il aperçoit une
masse informe.

Il hésite à reconnaître un cadavre, mais la tache rouge le persuade.
Mille becs noirs sont venus, pendant la nuit, transformer la dépouille d’un
martyr en charnier immonde
Et la douleur, un instant fugitive, étreint à nouveau l’homme écoeuré.
La neige n’a pas caché toute la laideur de la terre.
Plus pesant est maintenant l’isolement.
La sentinelle se sent comme enveloppée d’un linceul,
La vérité éclaire trop brutalement ses yeux et son esprit.
Que n’a-t-il tout enfoui du dernier crime des hommes le grand manteau
blanc.

Une ardente prière s’échappe de ses lèvres blêmes.
Son âme implore Dieu, pour qu’il neige sur la laideur humaine.
(Berry-au-Bac, 1917)⁹³

The image of the cadaver in this last stanza destabilizes the plaintive yet
comforting refrain of the poem’s first two stanzas, which end simply with the

⁹³ Lucien Linais, *Les minutes rouges*. Illustrations de Paul Doll (Nancy: Arts graphiques modernes, 1926), 43-5.

observation that “la neige a caché la laideur de la terre.” The discovery of this disfigured body, which was pecked at and rendered even more disgusting during the night, challenges even the snow’s ability to cover up the ugly traces of battle – “la neige n’a pas caché toute la laideur de la terre.” It is the simple transformation of this plaintive refrain that elevates this poem above the other war poetry of its kind.

René Dalize (1879-1917) in his long poem *Ballade du pauvre Macchabé mal enterré* takes up the theme of decay in an extremely provocative fashion.⁹⁴ Before the war, Dalize, whose real name was René Dupuy, mingled among the Parisian avant-garde and figured among Apollinaire (his childhood friend), André Salmon, and André Billy as one of the main contributors to the literary revue *Soirées de Paris*. Like Apollinaire, Dalize voluntarily enlisted for the war and served in the infantry until his death in action in May 1917. This sole poem is the only surviving document of his war experience.

The poem grips the reader in the very beginning with a voice of direct address, a corpse introducing himself in a quatrain marked by sing-song rhymes:

Je suis le pauvre Macchabé mal enterré
Mon crane lézardé s’effrite en pourriture
Mon corps éparpillé divague à l’aventure
Et mon pied nu se dresse vers l’azur éthéré.

From these first lines, the poet takes aim at the lofty diction normally found in patriotic poetry by mixing artful language with the fundamentally base image of a body in decay. The “azur,” evoked longingly by Mallarmé elsewhere, in this poem becomes the target toward which one bare foot points, the high and low effectively joined in a most concrete and banal union. Throughout the poem, a thick irony reigns,

⁹⁴ Originally given the title *Ballade à tibias rompus*, the poem was published with six woodcuts by André Derain (Paris: A la Belle Edition, 1919).

continually undoing the myths of the war in a direct, unapologetic fashion, as when the corpse laments:

Il n'est point si gai d'être mort
Tout cela manque de confort,
Si j'avais un bout de ficelle,
Je sonnerais la sentinelle.

The poem also startles, even provokes, in that it is the corpse of a German soldier who engages in dialogue. This gesture, while generally deployed comically in the poem, is a striking contrast to the inhuman, faceless *Boche* typically portrayed in World War I literature. For instance, the poem vacillates between lightly mocking the German culture to a poignant evocation of the corpse's fiancée back home:

Hermann ! Dorothée ! O Minna ! O Werther !
Que maudit le minenwerfer!
Peu me chaut manqué d'une fesse,
J'ai du coup perdu la sagesse.

Voici bien le grand ciel lumineux, étoilé,
Et mon esprit rebelle va du mauvais côté...
Je me souviens, oh ! oui je me souviens
Elle était ma fiancée des bords du Rhin.

Despite its aggressive portrayal of death and decay, a subject generally taboo in the trench newspapers, Dalize's *Ballade* is nonetheless a product of the trenches and the trench newspapers discourses. The literary critic Laurence Campa notes,

A une période où la littérature tend à se soumettre aux impératifs du réalisme testimonial sous la pression des événements, la *Ballade*... se présente comme une danse macabre qui entraîne dans sa pantomime toute une tradition littéraire, en mêlant les registres élégiaque et humoristique, les décalages rythmiques, les dissonances et la mélodie lyrique, les archaïsmes et le lexique de la guerre moderne.⁹⁵

Placing the poem in line with the medieval poet François Villon's celebrated "Ballade des pendus," Campa picks up on a literary heritage that was championed over and over among the soldiers in the trenches, as they often proudly labeled themselves the

⁹⁵ Campa, *Poètes de la Grande Guerre*, 81.

descendants of Villon and Rabelais. “Évidemment, le journal de tranchées s’apparente plus volontiers à Rabelais, Villon, [Mathurin] Régnier, à toute la joyeuse phalange de nos vieux conteurs,” one trench editor plainly exalts.⁹⁶ Dalize’s poem, with its audacious mix of high and low, his complete disregard for the sanctity of a dead human body and his delight in progressively detailing the degradation of this figure, serves as a deeply irreverent response to the war.

In fact, Dalize’s fundamental irreverence for the category of *témoin* questions the value of the term itself, a value that was being heralded from within trench culture and on the home front. By giving the voice of the poem to a dead German soldier, he alienates the wartime reader. Not only is Dalize’s witness the enemy, he is also dead, therefore physically incapable of witnessing anymore. The poem then closes with an image that may be interpreted as a willed refusal to witness:

Mes pieds humides vers l’azur éthéré
Se dressent incompris
Je suis le pauvre Macchabé mal enterré !

The figure of the witness is so often associated with the eyes (as underlined in the prevalent term eye-witness). In Dalize’s daring formulation, the witness figure is completely upended. His eyes are buried in the dirt of the trenches and we are faced with his dank feet. Sticking out conspicuously, these feet, “incompris,” confront and challenge the traditional literature of witness by remaining a sordid enigma, a gruesome reminder that challenges definitions of witness in a provocative way.

All three of these trench poets, Larreguy de Civrieux, Linais, and Dalize, confront notions of witnessing by engaging with the taboo theme of death and decay. By engaging so directly with war’s ultimate consequence (a consequence that was often ignored or minimized in other forms of literature), they provide compelling

⁹⁶ Thuriot-Franchi, *Les Journaux de tranchées*, 9.

examples of how some soldier-poets attempted to move beyond the conflated modes of discourse that sought to legitimate each soldier as a valuable witness of history. These works push the boundaries of the witness's role and investigate just what constitutes an act of witness; in this way, they also serve as vital artifacts of the trench writing culture of World War I.

Conclusion

Not long after his arrival on the front lines, Apollinaire wrote to his friend Eugène Montfort and remarked upon the life in the trenches that he encountered, likening the intense creative energy and activity around him, as well as the conditions themselves, to works of art: “Les tranchées d’ici sont de véritables œuvres d’art...” In many ways, this description lays bare the singular environment that comprised the trenches of the Great War. The raw material conditions of life for the soldiers of this war did not prevent them from continuing to participate in the powerfully creative zeitgeist ushered in with the beginning of the twentieth century. The trenches’ paradoxical distance from Paris – close enough to be connected via a web of media and the written word, yet far enough away to feel a real sense of loss and loneliness from one’s family and domestic life – also helped nourish this peculiar world, sunk into the earth, unprotected from the rain and the snow and shells, but thriving upon a heady mix of patriotism, duty, and creative energy, particularly when contrasted with the inescapable periods of despair.

Many of the soldiers who found themselves in the trenches couldn’t help but respond in some way to the exhortations to help preserve this precious history that they themselves were living and creating. Active agents of the world around them,

these men engaged with the written word and in so doing, they helped change societal and cultural roles. The poet was no longer a solitary figure who retreated from society but rather, someone thrust deeply into the core of events, and required to intervene in some way.

Apollinaire, for his part, perceived these changes from his own position in the trenches. Surrounded by so many soldier-writers, and seeing the democratization of poetry firsthand, Apollinaire struggled with how to redefine his own conception of the role of the poet during wartime. The tension between Apollinaire and the humble, unknown poets of the trenches provides a crucial backdrop for a more nuanced understanding of his wartime works.

Chapter Two: Apollinaire in Search of “les guerres d’autrefois”

Fête

Feu d’artifice en acier
Qu’il est charmant cet éclairage
 Artifice d’artificier
Mêler quelque grâce au courage

Deux fusants
Rose éclatement
Comme deux seins que l’on dégrafe
Tendent leurs bouts insolemment
IL SUT AIMER
 quelle épitaphe

Un poète dans la forêt
Regarde avec indifférence
 Son revolver au cran d’arrêt
Des roses mourir d’espérance

Il songe aux roses de Saadi
Et soudain sa tête se penche
 Car une rose lui redit
La molle courbe d’une hanche

L’air est plein d’un terrible alcool
Filtré des étoiles mi-closes
Les obus caressent le mol
Parfum nocturne où tu reposes
 Mortification des roses¹

The beautifully startling image of fireworks fashioned out of steel opens this poem, written by Guillaume Apollinaire on the front lines of World War I in 1916. From its first words, the language of the poem demands the rigorous attention of both ear and eye. “Feu d’artifice” stops the reader immediately. Although it is a common

¹ Apollinaire, *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, eds. Marcel Adéma and Michel Décaudin (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), 238. This poem was originally published in a section of *Calligrammes* entitled *Case d’Armons*, which will be discussed at length later. A different, longer version of the poem also appeared in a letter sent to Lou (Louise de Coligny-Châtillon), dated at the end of September 1915, *Lettres à Lou*, Préface et notes de Michel Décaudin (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 515-6.

term for fireworks, within the context of war, the tension between “feu” and “artifice” strikes home on many different levels. For a soldier with eyes continually trained on the horizon, the appearance of any fire is cause for alarm. The “feu d’artifice” is a relic of a different time; the soldier newly arrived on the battlefield must learn to discard the feeling of astonishment at pyrotechnical displays and learn to fear fire, even in its beautiful, sinister forms.

For a poet, especially a poet writing about war, the question of artifice is ever-present; as are its dangers. Just as war makes suspect the beauty of fireworks, poetry that once dazzled in a similar way now seems incongruous during wartime. Apollinaire makes this paradox explicit in the third line of the stanza with the words: “Artifice d’artificier.” The fireworks are the workmanship of the “artificier” or pyrotechnician. By placing two forms of the same word in quick succession, the poet calls attention to the fact that “art” itself is swallowed up and contained in this word. In linking two versions of the same word, Apollinaire highlights the abrupt shift in meaning that the word *artifice* has undergone. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, the word originally bore positive connotations as craftsmanship, the product of something which was wrought from human hands with great skill as opposed to appearing in nature. However, the more standard use of the word has come to mean “skill in devising and using expedients; artfulness, cunning, trickery.” In this manner, *artifice* stands as the opposite of art in the idealist sense of the term, in which art equals something true and beautiful. In all of his writing on the war, Apollinaire reaches back and circles around the fraught relationship between art and artifice at the heart of this poem.

The second stanza adds another layer of significance to this ambivalent relationship: love in wartime also pushes the boundaries between art and artifice. Two

flashes or rockets erupt in the distance with the pink shock of a shell exploding – “deux fusants / rose éclatement.” These short lines of three and five syllables tear onto the page, breaking the pattern of languorous octosyllabic verse of the first stanza, which then resumes for the remainder of the poem. These eruptions remind the poet of two breasts that peek out insolently from a blouse. The next lines – “IL SUT AIMER / quelle épitaphe” – signal the incongruity between the two images, shells exploding and breasts protruding. He knew how to love, yes, but in wartime, this is not a quality memorialized on the gravestones of soldiers. The greater honor is to die bravely for one’s country. In essence, the soldier’s epitaph reads “il sut mourir,” not “il sut aimer.” Apollinaire visually reinforces the image of a gravestone by placing “IL SUT AIMER” in all capital letters, dividing the two lines into two hemistiches of four syllables each, with each half therefore making up the normal octosyllabic line established in the poem.

The ambivalence mounts in the third and fourth stanzas. The narrator finds himself in a forest, staring indifferently at roses as they die hopelessly, his safety-locked revolver a mere detail. He dreams of the legendary roses of Saadi until suddenly his head bends down: “Et soudain sa tête se penche.” Has he been hit? The image suggests violence, but this is not the case. The poet’s attention was triggered downward by a rose, whose petals remind him of the soft curve of a thigh. Violence here is avoided and replaced by the erotic, a legerdemain that Apollinaire often employs in *Calligrammes*, the volume of poetry thoroughly permeated by the poet’s experience in the First World War.² The verse collection was published in April 1918,

² Apollinaire makes the same substitution of militaristic imagery with that of the erotic in the poem “Fusée”: “En voyant la large croupe de mon cheval j’ai pensé à tes hanches” (*Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 261).

just months before his death from complications of an infection from the Spanish Flu on November 9, 1918, just two days before the official Armistice.

The last stanza combines all of the poem's startling images into one heady mix: "L'air est plein d'un terrible alcool." The line itself reads in a languid, almost intoxicated way, surpassing the octosyllabic line with nine syllables. The noxious smell of gas saturates the air, but the air is also rife with the nauseating perfume of over-ripe roses, emphasized in the cloying end-rhymes of the words "mi-closes," "reposes" and "roses." The adjective "mou," which had been used in the stanza above to describe the soft flesh of a thigh, is displaced and used in this stanza to describe the inebriating night smell of the forest, where all of the roses have been massacred in the violence of the shell attack.³ The image of flesh is cast into high relief by the strange pairing of the roses with the word "mortification," which calls to mind the ecclesiastical concept of the mortification of the flesh, literally "putting the flesh to death."

In the midst of this scene, Apollinaire dramatically inserts the physical presence of the other, by using the intimate personal pronoun 'tu': "où tu reposes." The other whom Apollinaire addresses is buried somewhere within the dizzying night air and the suffering roses. Like most soldiers, Apollinaire struggled with the enforced separation from his friends and lovers during his time at the front; his poetry responded to this pressure, and poems often developed out of his correspondence home (particularly the romantic correspondence which nurtured two additional volumes of poetry, collected and published posthumously as *Poèmes à Madeleine*

³ This poem continues the imagery of venomous yet intoxicating flowers that is first famously broached in the poem "Les Colchiques" from *Alcools*. However, in "Les Colchiques" it is poisoned love that presents the potential mortal danger to the narrator whereas in "Fête," World War I, as symbolized in the two rockets, threatens the speaker.

(1949) and *Poèmes à Lou* [1955]). The intrusion of an audience, the intimate “tu” that appears here, recurs throughout *Calligrammes* as a powerful presence in his war poetry.

This poem, “Fête,” represents all of Apollinaire’s preoccupations – and all of the dangers – that he encountered and struggled with as he sought to render into poetry his experiences as a soldier during World War I. His war poetry, particularly the poems collected in *Calligrammes*, wrestles with the powerful and intoxicating relationship between art and artifice, and between artifice and *témoignage*. The poet-soldier figure in this poem, who barely notices his weapon, becomes a central point of contention in the development of Apollinaire’s conception of poetic witnessing. After time spent in the trenches, his lived experiences pushed Apollinaire to complicate this relationship between poetry and witnessing even further.

Apollinaire, who died as the war itself was finally brought to a grim close, has come today to truly embody the experience of the Great War. His substantial output as a poet, novelist, journalist, dramatist and letter-writer shows in a microcosm how the war gained its reputation as a particularly literary war. To borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s term, Apollinaire had a fully defined *habitus* as a writer, casting an important presence in the Parisian literary scene when war broke out in 1914; how he modulated this *habitus* after he put on the soldier’s uniform reveals how he witnessed the war from many different angles. Like many other soldiers, Apollinaire spent much of his time at the front writing, editing, and reading. One quick line drawn from his copious war correspondence attests to his ability to write and manage his literary career from the trenches as he writes to his fiancé Madeleine Pagès in February 1916:

“Mon amour, je t’adore je t’envoie d’autre part le long poème que j’ai enfin terminé et que je vais envoyer à Paris. (Je t’envoie le brouillon).”⁴

In the following chapter, all of these issues (the tension between poetry and witnessing, the physical circumstances of Apollinaire’s wartime experience, his devoted practice as a wartime correspondent, and the enormous stress applied to his *habitus* as both a soldier and a poet) will be addressed in order to arrive at a clearer picture of how Apollinaire witnessed the First World War in his poetry, but also in his creative prose and journalism as well. One main source of tension that emerges from this reading reveals that in his wartime writing, he struggled above all to define his role as poet.

Across varied print media, Apollinaire often painted a contradictory picture of how he defined the poet’s *métier* during wartime. This chapter demonstrates that Apollinaire attempted to reconcile the dual functions of poet and soldier in a paradoxical fashion: he aligns himself with a romantic, idealist view of the poet in society in his novella *Le Poète assassiné*, and he maintains this vision in the pages of his correspondence and in the media, such as the Parisian avant-garde revue *SIC*. In marked contrast to the prodigious literary activity that surrounded Apollinaire in the trenches, where in the columns of the trench newspapers and among the rank-and-file soldier-poets, voices urged for the democratization of the poet figure in order to enable any man to pick up his pen and write down his experience, Apollinaire’s vision of the poet in society appears outmoded.

Yet, after time spent there, Apollinaire also enacts – in spite of himself and his proclaimed beliefs – a turn toward the artisanal in his poetry, blurring the roles of the

⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Lettres à Madeleine. Tendre comme le souvenir* (1949) (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 460.

poet, the soldier and the artisan with the creation and production of a group of poems written and circulated on the front, the section from *Calligrammes* titled *Case d'Armons*. Given his shared time in the trenches, this move may have been directly inspired by the rhetoric of his fellow soldier-poets and their champions. It was certainly spurred on by the physical conditions of life in the trenches. However, Apollinaire will not maintain consistently this fused role. The flux and contradiction of these different roles of the poet, embodied in these different texts, serve as a vital element of Apollinaire's poetics of witness, a poetics profoundly conflicted within itself.

Assassinating the Poet: Apollinaire Writes the War in Prose

“En ce temps là, on distribuait chaque jour des prix de poésie. Des milliers de sociétés s'étaient fondées dans ce but et leurs membres vivaient grasement en faisant, à date fixe, des largesses aux poètes.”
– *Le Poète Assassiné*

The soldier-writers of the First World War blurred the lines between fiction and non-fiction, between *récit* and *témoignage*. Historians and literary scholars of the period have shown how a “littérature de témoignage” was cobbled out of memoirs, war journals, letters, and novels. Most of these analyses have focused on hybrid forms of witnessing in prose.⁵ Apollinaire's *Le Poète assassiné* offers another potent example of this hybridity. Although most critics usually categorize it as a prose piece, the text straddles a gray line between poetry and prose. As its title violently indicates, *Le Poète assassiné*, published at the outset of the war, alludes directly to its historical circumstances and therefore represents an attempt to witness these events. A close

⁵ See Nicolas Beaupré's chapter “Les écritures de la guerre” in *Écrire en guerre, écrire la guerre. France, Allemagne 1914-1920* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2006) as well as Leonard V. Smith's text *The Embattled Self: French soldiers testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

reading of this text will also reveal how Apollinaire tended, especially in this early wartime work, to align himself with a romantic conception of the poet.

In 1916, *Le Poète assassiné* was even nominated for the Prix Goncourt, the prestigious award given annually to a work of prose, though Barbusse's emblematic *Feu: Journal d'une escouade* garnered the prestigious award instead. The books nominated for the Prix Goncourt during World War I reflect the civilian public's growing fascination with the figure of the *écrivain-combattant*. Furthermore, the Académie Goncourts's choices of the wartime laureates are important benchmarks of mainstream aesthetic values of the time, aesthetics that Apollinaire's work did not, for the most part, share (least of all, *Le Poète assassiné*). While he was nominated among several other soldier-writers for this award, Apollinaire did not ultimately receive the honor owing to two important reasons: the hybrid nature of his work pushed the boundaries between poetry and prose, differentiating it markedly from the other nominees and ultimately, because he did not present himself as a witness in a way that conformed with standard manifestations of this role.

The origins of *Le Poète Assassiné* can be traced back prior to the outbreak of war in France. Throughout 1911 and 1912, Apollinaire published a few short stories in Parisian literary journals that were later collected in *Le Poète assassiné*. During this period, he also worked ambitiously on the main body of the work, the eponymous long story, or novella. He continued to work on this piece during 1913, a fruitful year during which he also published *Peintres cubistes*, *Méditations esthétiques* in March and *Alcools* in April.

While the exact date of the completion of *Le Poète assassiné* remains difficult to pinpoint, Michel Décaudin postulates that the work was probably sent off to the editor before Apollinaire left for Deauville in July 1914 with his friend, André

Rouveyre, to work as a summer correspondent for the journal *Comoedia*.⁶ As the poem “La Petite Auto” indicates, the outbreak of war cut short this light-hearted assignment by the sea and the two men returned to Paris, where Apollinaire enlisted voluntarily with the French army on August 10:

Au moment où l'on affichait la mobilisation
Nous comprîmes mon camarade et moi
Que la petite auto nous avait conduits dans une époque nouvelle
Et bien qu'étant déjà tous deux des hommes mûrs
Nous venions cependant de naître.⁷

Apollinaire's preparation at the military training base in Nîmes and his departure for the frontlines of the Marne in April 1915 slowed down the editing and publication of *Le Poète assassiné*. Although he frequently discussed it with his two most important wartime correspondents, Louise de Coligny-Châtillon and Madeleine Pagès, Apollinaire was not able to fully edit the manuscript until the spring of 1916, when he was seriously wounded to the head by an exploding shell on March 17, 1916. He was evacuated soon afterwards to the Hôpital Italien in Paris to recover from his head wound and subsequent operation. The very last piece of the collection, “Cas du brigadier masqué, c'est-à-dire le poète ressuscité” was composed on the front lines of battle in 1915. Apollinaire later added references to his infamous head wound when he was going over drafts during his convalescence. Thus, although it was begun several years before the first shots rang out, the composition and realization of *Le Poète assassiné* is intricately tied up with Apollinaire's wartime experience. It was finally published in October 1916.

Characteristic of Apollinaire's entire literary corpus, *Le Poète assassiné* resists easy classification. It is, for the most part, a work in prose, although in some places,

⁶ Michel Décaudin, editor, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, tome I, Notes, 1149.

⁷ *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 208

this is debatable. For instance, “Cas du brigadier masqué...” contains some rudimentary versions of calligrammic text, a sideways glance to the parallel textual innovations Apollinaire was experimenting with in his poetry at the same time. At other times, the text occupies a border region between verse and prose, reflecting an engagement and experimentation with free verse that aggressively pushes the boundaries of prose.

Is it a novel? This is a difficult question to answer. In addition to the shorter pieces, the work is comprised of the long title story, *Le Poète assassiné*, which is divided into eighteen numbered sections, or chapters. Here, Apollinaire recounts in fantastical terms the life of a poet figure named Croniamantal, who falls in love with a young woman named Tristouse Ballerinette. Tristouse spurns Croniamantal for another lover named Paponat, and Croniamantal, dejected, wanders the world aimlessly.⁸ He later becomes the victim of a universal purge of poets and dies at the hands of an angry mob. Tristouse and Paponat find themselves saddened by his death and the text closes with their attempt to construct a proper memorial to Croniamantal’s memory.

Tristouse’s and Paponat’s discussion about what would properly constitute a memorial to the fallen poet foreshadows with eerie accuracy the debates that would take place after World War I as France undertook a massive memorialization project for its millions of war dead.⁹ In the last chapter, titled “Apothéose,” Tristouse speaks with Paponat, here called “l’oiseau du Bénin”:

⁸ Several critics have noted that *Le Poète assassiné* may read as a *roman à clef* with Apollinaire standing in for the protagonist Croniamantal, Marie Laurencin as Tristouse and Pablo Picasso as Paponat.

⁹ See Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Il faut que je lui fasse une statue, dit l'oiseau du Bénin. Car je ne suis pas seulement peintre, mais aussi sculpteur.
 C'est ça, dit Tristouse, il faut lui élever une statue.
 Où ça ? demanda l'oiseau du Bénin ; le gouvernement ne nous accordera pas d'emplacement. Les temps sont mauvais pour les poètes.
 On le dit, répliqua Tristouse, mais ce n'est pas peut-être vrai. Que pensez-vous du bois de Meudon, monsieur l'oiseau du Bénin ?
 J'y avais bien pensé, mais je n'osais le dire. Va pour le bois de Meudon.
 Une statue en quoi ? demanda Tristouse. En marbre ? En bronze ?
 Non, c'est trop vieux, répondit l'oiseau du Bénin, il faut que je lui sculpte une profonde statue en rien, comme la poésie et la gloire.
 Bravo ! bravo ! dit Tristouse en battant ses mains, une statue en rien, en vide, c'est magnifique.¹⁰

In this dialogue which lacks the usual markers to indicate the exchange of speech, the back and forth takes on the form of verse. Even the non-logical flow of their conversation (for instance, Paponat agrees upon the Meudon wood as the site but Tristouse doesn't seem to register this and her reply insists rather on the material of the sculpture) places the conversation out of the realm of the ordinary and configures it in way that once more highlights the text's hybrid qualities.¹¹

And so Tristouse and Paponat end up digging a hole full of nothing to signify the grave of the assassinated poet. This image forecasts the psychic importance that the trenches of World War I – those mounds of unnaturally upended earth – exerted upon the French memory of the war for generations afterwards.¹² Rather than embracing the classically themed statues of grief and mourning in the form of wan female figures that will characterize the majority of war monuments in France,

¹⁰ *Le Poète assassiné*, 300-1.

¹¹ Michel Décaudin observes this ambiguous language throughout *Le Poète assassiné*: “Cette ambiguïté se répercute dans le langage où abondent les jeux de mots, les méprises de tous ordres qui, loin d'être des facilités, sinon des vulgarités, comme on l'a parfois dit, relèvent d'un parti pris de cohérence et appellent à une lecture au second degré.” *Apollinaire* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2002), 60.

¹² More specifically, Apollinaire predicts with uncanny accuracy the debates that will surround his own memorialization after his death, particularly Picasso's part in creating a sculpture for him. For a detailed account of their relationship and the drawn-out, complicated commemoration process for Apollinaire, see Peter Read's excellent study *Picasso and Apollinaire: The Persistence of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

Apollinaire offers instead the improbable notion of a statue built of nothing but emptiness, a resolutely modern response.

Croniamantal's saga is followed by fifteen shorter works, which range in length from the longer "Le Roi Lune" (also divided into shorter sections or chapters), to short, anecdotal stories of a few pages. The Pléiade edition of these short prose works are collected under the heading "contes et récits;" the *mouvance* of these works and their genres duly noted by their use of a double heading. Michel Décaudin also notes the strange composition of this work as compared to others by Apollinaire: "On en dirait autant du *Poète assassiné*, si différent que soit ce recueil dans sa structure" and he wavers between what to call the different sections: "...le premier récit – faut-il encore dire conte ou s'agit-il d'un court roman?"¹³

Contemporary reviewers of *Le Poète assassiné* also struggled to categorize it. Most of the reviewers immediately noted that Apollinaire was a poet first, and that this work, while not poetry outright, should be understood as having been conceived by a poet. The review in *La Caravane* began by declaring: "Poète avant tout, Guillaume Apollinaire le reste, quand même il écrit en prose."¹⁴ Edmond Jaloux, in *L'Opinion*, closed his review of *Le Poète assassiné* by noting Apollinaire's 'curious' style: "Avec son lyrisme spécial, son ironie cachée, ses inventions curieuses et ses préférences, M. Apollinaire est un des écrivains les plus curieux d'aujourd'hui. A quoi sa fantaisie le conduira-t-elle? Que nous donnera-t-il demain? On ne saurait le prédire, mais du moins, avec lui, est-on sûr d'avoir de l'imprévu."¹⁵ Yet another reviewer underlined the lyric quality: "Que d'alcools flambent dans l'œuvre de cet

¹³ Décaudin, *Apollinaire*, 59.

¹⁴ Valdemar George. Untitled review, *La Caravane*, mars 1917, 12-13.

¹⁵ Edmond Jaloux. "Guillaume Apollinaire," *L'Opinion*, 16 juin 1917, 561-2.

auteur, alcools signifiant ici les flammes du lyrisme et de la plus ensorcelante imagination... *Le Poète Assassiné* est le livre d'un grand lyrique."¹⁶

In light of the critical confusion caused by *Le Poète assassiné*, its nomination for the Prix Goncourt in 1916 is all the more intriguing.¹⁷ At the time, the Académie Goncourt was in the midst of mapping out an appropriate response to World War I. When war first broke out in 1914, the committee members met at year's end to decide a course of action in the face of the grave new political situation in France. At their first meeting, the members of the committee entertained several possible courses of action: continuing in the same manner as before; putting the award on hold; or giving the prize money to a charitable institution instead of an author.¹⁸

The most symbolic course of action proposed before the committee was to bestow the award and its 5,000 francs on a writer whose life had recently been given up for the *patrie*. At this early point in the war, the ideal of the poet-martyr was most clearly embodied in Charles Péguy, who had died on the front lines in the opening battle of the Marne on September 5, 1914. Despite the appealing symbolic nature of giving the Prix to Péguy's widow, the Académie eventually realized that to do so would be to flaunt the very principles on which the award was based.¹⁹

¹⁶ Louis de Gonzague-Frick. "Revue du *Poète Assassiné*," *Les Hommes du jour*, 6 janvier 1917, no. 458.

¹⁷ Décaudin goes even farther in his discussion of the text, noting: "Confronté aux normes conventionnelles du roman réaliste de l'époque, *Le Poète assassiné* est une œuvre mal construite et mal écrite," *Apollinaire*, 62.

¹⁸ See Philippe Baudorre's article, "La Grande Guerre et le Prix Goncourt" in Jean-Louis Cabanès, Pierre-Jean Dufief, Robert Kopp and Jean-Yves Mollier, eds. *Les Goncourt dans leur siècle. Un siècle de « Goncourt »* (Lille: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2005), 317-27. Beaupré also touches on the Prix Goncourt of 1916 in *Écrire en guerre, écrire la guerre*, 58-62.

¹⁹ The award, given annually to a work of prose, was meant to sustain young writers at the beginning of their careers. Robert Kopp observes that "un des buts de l'Académie...était donc de permettre à de jeunes auteurs sans fortune de vivre comme ils avaient vécu eux-mêmes, de se consacrer exclusivement à la littérature et aux arts, sans autre préoccupation matérielle," in "Du Journal à l'Académie," *Les Goncourt dans leur siècle. Un siècle de « Goncourt »*, 245.

In the end, the committee decided to postpone the award. According to their official statement, one of the main reasons for canceling the prize was the growing presence of war books, especially those written by soldiers from the trenches, that were appearing on the literary scene:

L'Académie Goncourt ne pouvant, sans infraction à ses statuts, affecter à une œuvre de secours, nationale ou particulière aux Lettres, le montant de son prix annuel a décidé de ne point le décerner en 1914. Elle a considéré d'autre part l'injustice qu'il y aurait à ne se prononcer que sur les ouvrages publiés jusqu'au mois d'août, beaucoup de volumes annoncés et prêts à paraître étant restés chez l'imprimeur, par suite de la mobilisation des auteurs et des éditeurs. Mais ce qui est différé n'est pas perdu et le prix Goncourt réservé ne se confondra pas avec celui de l'année prochaine. Il en sera donné deux en 1915.²⁰

It was a cryptic decision. Rather than expressing outrage at the world's turn to war, the Académie Goncourt seemed merely preoccupied with ensuring that it would remain poised to respond to the fast-growing trend of war literature.

The following year, the committee unanimously decided to award the Prix to René Benjamin, a soldier on the front lines, for his novel, *Gaspard*. Despite its promise to award two prizes that year, the committee deferred once more, explaining that it hoped to leave yet more time for those young authors who may still have had novels waiting to be published.²¹ By its postponement of the award once more, the Académie Goncourt implicitly prescribed the subject matter of the works that it was interested in: the members wanted to honor works about the war, preferably written by someone from the trenches.²²

²⁰ Quoted in Baudorre, "La Grande Guerre et le Prix Goncourt," 317.

²¹ The official *communiqué* states "afin de permettre aux jeunes auteurs qui avaient des romans sous presse ou en lecture au début de la guerre de prendre part au concours," Baudorre, 318.

²² Moreover, Lucien Descaves, an influential member of the Académie Goncourt during the war years, explicitly told Benjamin to take notes of his experiences on the front. Following Descaves' instructions, Benjamin then reformulated these notes into his novel *Gaspard*, which Descaves published in serial form at *Le Journal*. Hardly a surprise, then, that Benjamin's novel won in 1915, given the high level of involvement that Descaves exercised throughout its conception, execution and publication, (Ibid., 381).

In 1916, the Académie Goncourt was intent once again on making a political point. Though Apollinaire met two of the most important criteria for winning the award that year – he was a soldier in the war, and better yet, he had been grievously injured during the course of battle – the Prix Goncourt went to Henri Barbusse for his novel, *Le Feu. Journal d'une escouade*. Barbusse, though he was 41 years old at the time of enlistment, was serving as a soldier with the French 23rd Regiment. The committee additionally awarded the missing prize of 1914 to *L'Appel au sol* by Adrien Bertrand, another soldier who had been gravely injured in battle. In fact, of the fifty novelists who were considered for the Prix that year, forty were soldiers who were serving or had actively served in the war.²³

Moreover, the Académie exercised questionable conduct with regard to the selection of Barbusse for it appears that he essentially had been promised to take home the award before he had signed a formal contract with his publisher. In a letter to Barbusse from the Fischer Brothers, then the literary directors at the publishing house of Flammarion, the involvement with Académie member Paul Margueritte is made clear: “Nous avons parlé de la possibilité que nous entrevoyions relativement au Goncourt. Certaines conversations que nous avons eues ces jours-ci, notamment avec Paul Margueritte, nous font croire que nous ne nous étions pas tout à fait trompés. Mais il faudrait aller bigrement vite pour cela.”²⁴ The reciprocal relationship between the Académie Goncourt, an arbiter of literary standards and values of the French public, and the writers on the front, could not get any more entangled at the height of the war in France.

²³ Ibid., 321.

²⁴ From Archives Barbusse, cited in Baudorre, 319

The collaboration that went on between a literary institution like the Académie Goncourt and writers like Barbusse who strove to record life realistically in the trenches shows how porous the lines were between reality on the front, and how that reality was perceived in texts disseminated to domestic audiences.²⁵ Such direct mediation into the creative process was apparently exercised time and again during the Great War.²⁶ Apollinaire himself was well aware of this kind of collaboration. During the war, Apollinaire began a correspondence with a woman named Jeanne Yves-Blanc, who had published some poems under the pseudonym Yves Blanc. In several of their exchanges, Apollinaire writes that he had mentioned her poems to his friends in order to help them get published. In one letter, he explicitly states what she must do:

J'ai parlé de votre talent poétique à M. Crouzet directeur de la *Grande Revue*. Il attend de vos vers et vous avez les plus grandes chances qu'il en publie si vous suivez exactement mes conseils. Envoyez-lui, en lui rappelant que je lui ai parlé de vous, une vingtaine de poèmes. *Il est absolument nécessaire qu'ils aient trait à la guerre ou du moins qu'ils s'y rattachent*. C'est ainsi que le sonnet sur mon casque conviendrait parfaitement à *La Grande Revue* ainsi que le quatrain talisman.²⁷

With this pragmatic advice, Apollinaire acknowledged that World War I was an important and essential topic of interest for the literary establishment, and that writing about the war made for useful currency. It is remarkable, then, that Apollinaire did not

²⁵ Barbusse is a fascinating case. Despite his devotion to transcribing the colloquial language of the soldier, and his willingness to show an unfavorable portrait of war itself, he was still tied to the expectations of the home front, and he modified his work accordingly, thereby undermining his ultimate goal of unwavering realism.

²⁶ See Beaupré's chapter "Le monde des lettres et les écrivains combattants" for a discussion of how other publishers handpicked and custom-ordered war narratives from the trenches, *Ecrire en guerre, écrire la guerre*, 47-72.

²⁷ Apollinaire, *Lettres à sa marraine. 1915-1918* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 83 (italics mine). For more on their correspondence, including Apollinaire's specific entreaty that Blanc compose him a special poem in honor of the helmet which saved his life, see Becker, *Apollinaire*, 147-8.

modify his own work in more substantial ways to conform to the expectations of the reading public and to those in positions of power within the literary establishment.²⁸

In *Le Poète assassiné*, Apollinaire did not compromise. Striking a discordant note with the times, the tone often verges from acerbic irony to frothy humor. Chapter XIII, called “Mode,” recounts an exchange on contemporary fashion between Tristouse Ballerinette and her future lover, Paponat. In a bid to make small talk, he asks her about that season’s fashion trends.

Cette année, dit Tristouse, la mode est bizarre et familière, elle est simple et pleine de fantaisie. Toutes les matières des différents règnes de la nature peuvent maintenant entrer dans la composition d’un costume de femme. J’ai vu une robe charmante, faite de bouchons de liège. . . . Un grand couturier médite de lancer les costumes tailleur en dos de vieux livres, reliés en veau. . . . Toutes les femmes de lettres voudront en porter, et l’on pourra s’approcher d’elles et leur parler à l’oreille sous prétexte de lire les titres. . . . Pour le printemps, on portera beaucoup de vêtements en baudruche gonflée, formes agréables, légèreté et distinction. . . . Pour les courses, il y aura le chapeau ballon d’enfant, composé d’une vingtaine de ballons, effet très luxueux et parfois détonations bien divertissantes. . . .²⁹

This passage captures the spirit of *Le Poète assassiné* at one of its best moments.

Apollinaire excels at this type of marvelous description imbued with a zany, imaginative spirit. These vignettes forecast the poet’s own lighthearted experiments with style in the form of some of the more whimsical calligrammes (such as “La cravate et la montre”) that he will publish a few years later. He affects a comedic tone by displacing ordinary objects and putting them into new and strange contexts, such as taking balloons and weaving them into haute couture. The result is to make one question the object and perceive it in a different light. (This device would be used to great effect by late surrealists, such as René Magritte.)

²⁸ It is particularly remarkable given that Apollinaire had no problem often inventing personae and using a wide range of pseudonyms in both his journalism and other prose pieces.

²⁹ *Le Poète assassiné*, in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, tome I, eds. Michel Décaudin and Pierre Caizergues (Paris: Gallimard, 1977—1993), 275-6.

At the same time, the necessity of repurposing objects (for instance, using the spines of books or used wine corks instead of more luxurious materials like silk or satin to fashion clothing) also bears witness to an attitude of privation and make-do that was prevalent during wartime. With this echo already in mind, the ‘distracting detonations’ of the balloon hat serve as a stark contrast to more ominous detonations that were occurring on the battlefield. Through these double entendres, World War I permeates his prose but in a way that was much more subtle than in other war narratives. By exercising a refined manner of allowing historical reality to seep into the text, Apollinaire once more aligns himself as a poet, echoing Czeslaw Milosz’s observation that “the poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet’s consciousness.”³⁰

On another level, the passage acts as an *art poétique* for Apollinaire, as “toutes les matières des différents règnes de la nature peuvent maintenant entrer dans la composition...” Apollinaire continually sought to integrate the new into his work. He spawned neologisms and loved to bring back eccentric words from the hinter regions of lexicology.³¹

Additionally, invocations of modern culture, and scraps of modern life are incorporated into his work. Nothing escapes his poetry; even the hum-drum fragments of café conversation are reconfigured to make a poem, as in “Lundi Rue Christine.” He makes this assertion of an *art poétique* more explicit toward the end of Tristouse’s long monologue on *la mode*:

J’oubliais de vous dire que, mercredi dernier, j’ai vu sur les boulevards
une rombière vêtue de petits miroirs appliqués et collés sur un tissu. Au

³⁰Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 97.

³¹Décaudin notes: “Apollinaire est fasciné par le vocabulaire. ... Il ne s’agit pas pour lui de cultiver l’obscurité, mais de recourir à toutes les richesses de la langue, dont il ouvre au plus large l’éventail,” *Apollinaire*, 95-6.

soleil, l'effet était somptueux. On eût dit une mine d'or en promenade. Plus tard il se mît à pleuvoir, et la dame ressembla à une mine d'argent. ...La robe brodée de grains de café, de clous de girofles, de gousses d'ail, d'oignons et de grappes de raisin secs sera encore bien portée en visite. La mode devient pratique et ne méprise plus rien, elle ennoblit tout. *Elle fait pour les matières ce que les romantiques firent pour les mots.*³²

In this vision, fashion adapts and melds to become an amalgamous art, just as romanticism, in Apollinaire's understanding, showed poets that all words could be adopted equally into poetry.

The use of the term "romantiques" is vital, for it reveals that Apollinaire attributed a modernist function to the romantics, connoting his view that romanticism made substantial contributions to the avant-garde. Apollinaire locates himself positively in this line of literary history – at the end of romanticism, reaching toward something new.

Many did not consider romanticism, nor Apollinaire, by the same optimistic light. The radical artist Jacques Vaché, another soldier of World War I, criticized Apollinaire for this very lineage. Although Vaché died in January 1919, his influence on his friend André Breton was deeply significant and Vaché's early criticisms of Apollinaire swayed the surrealists, especially Breton, to align against Apollinaire in the postwar period.³³ In one letter, Vaché writes dismissively that Apollinaire, along with Jean Cocteau, tried "...de faire l'art trop sciemment, de rafistoler du

³² *Le Poète assassiné, Œuvres en prose complètes*, 276 (Italics mine).

³³ Claude Debon discusses how Breton and his circle went from adoring disciples to fierce critics following Apollinaire's death: "L'image que l'on a retenue d'Apollinaire après sa blessure est caricaturale. Elle doit beaucoup à A. Breton et au groupe de jeunes poètes, qui, après avoir fait leur cour à l'aîné prestigieux, ne manquèrent pas de tourner en ridicule ses attitudes par trop 'patriotiques.' Notons en passant que leur degré de participation à la guerre n'avait rien de comparable à celui d'Apollinaire. Breton par exemple est affecté au service de santé à Nantes puis au centre psychiatrique de Saint-Dizier," *Guillaume Apollinaire après Alcools. Calligrammes: Le Poète et la guerre* (Paris: Minard Lettres modernes, 1981), 106.

romanticisme du fil téléphonique et de ne pas savoir les dynamos.”³⁴ In Vaché’s view, romanticism, and, as its derivative, the work of Apollinaire, tried too consciously to be art, and this displayed an anxiety that was not irreverent enough for the truly modern spirit that he admired, a spirit fully embodied by Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu roi*, which Vaché cites deferentially several times in his correspondence.

Others, however, found this same spirit of irreverence in *Le Poète Assassiné*, especially in view of the fact that the work was written and published during the war. In a review in *L’Œuvre* from November 1916, the same passage on fashion is praised:

L’ouvrage abonde en morceaux bien venus, d’un vif relief. Voici un passage sur la mode de ce temps de guerre qui mérite de rester comme un curieux document. Quand les bibliothèques brûlent, quand les cathédrales s’écroulent, quand les poètes sont assassinés; le mauvais goût seul est indestructible...³⁵

The review closed with the hope that Apollinaire would continue to display such “mauvais goût” in future works: “Qu’il se maintienne dans cette note: il pourra désormais marcher seul, libre des entraves émancipées des morts, sur la voie éclatante et sereine de l’avenir, pleine pour lui de myrtes souriants et de lauriers immortels.”

Other reviews also seized on this satiric tone and because of it, placed Apollinaire in a long line of avant-garde writers, a lineage that included even Jarry as a predecessor:

Et cependant qu’ultra moderne, tant par sa conception que par sa forme, *Le Poète Assassiné* ... est de nos mœurs littéraires théâtrales et artistiques une pénétrante satire et découle de Rabelais, et de Jarry à la fois – des récits tels que « Giovanni Moroni » et « Sainte Adorata », où le profane et le sacré alternent à dessein, procèdent d’une tradition dont Baudelaire, Barbey d’Aurevilly et le comte Villiers de l’Ile Adam sont les initiateurs certains et les maîtres incontestables.³⁶

³⁴ Jacques Vaché, *Lettres de guerre* (1918) (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2001), 33. Quoted in Annette Becker, *Apollinaire: une biographie de guerre 1914-1918-2009* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009), 221.

³⁵ “Le Poète assassiné de Guillaume Apollinaire,” *L’Œuvre*, 19 novembre 1916, 3.

³⁶ Valdemar George, *La Caravane*, mars 1917, 12-13.

These debates over the text's literary heritage affected the novel's status and, by extension, the status of its author. The hybridity of *Le Poète assassiné*, which ran counter to the realist norms favored at this time by the Académie Goncourt and others, nourished the text's essentially modernist flair. Décaudin remarks that this hybridity reflects Apollinaire's search "d'une formule qui lui permette d'échapper aux conventions du réalisme, de l'espace et du temps, de l'analyse psychologique et de la vraisemblance langagière, qui ouvre ainsi une voie inédite entre prose et poésie..."³⁷ *Le Poète assassiné*, while maintaining its roots in reality with autobiographical and other subtle references to the war, pushed the boundaries between prose and poetry in order to reflect reality in the way that Apollinaire found most convincing.

The decisions of the Académie Goncourt reflect how implicated the literary culture became with the representation of World War I. Through its selection of laureates, the Académie helped shape the definition of what a war witness should like (a soldier with authentic battle experience) and how a text of witness should read (preferably realist depictions of the front lines contained within the standard novel form). Barbusse, Bertrand and then later Henri Malherbe for *La Flamme au poing* (1917) and Georges Duhamel with *Civilisation* (1918) became prime, public examples of the *écrivain-combattant*.³⁸ Though a poet like Apollinaire was nominated for the award, he did not conform to this standard picture of the witness, and his highly experimental text did not resemble the other nominees in any way.

Did this ultimately modernist status prevent *Le Poète assassiné* from being awarded the Prix Goncourt? Annette Becker draws this connection: "*Le Poète*

³⁷ Décaudin, *Apollinaire*, 62.

³⁸ In fact, Malherbe would later serve as president of the *Association des écrivains combattants*.

assassiné ne recueille aucune voix [pour le prix Goncourt]. Apollinaire est pourtant un écrivain combattant, comme Barbusse, un blessé de guerre, comme Bertrand. Mais son statut de poète moderniste occulte celui du témoin.”³⁹ This question exposes the profound tension that existed – and that still exists – between witnessing and poetry. Although Apollinaire met the biographic criteria of an *écrivain-combattant*, aesthetically, his work did not fit the typical realist mode that was prescribed for texts witnessing the war. For their part, the Académie Goncourt may well have sanctioned the same stance that Cru later expounded so forcefully in 1929: literary style and form can compromise the act of witnessing, and poetry is a particularly volatile medium to handle the task of witnessing the events of war.

The majority of the reviews, other than the passage from *L'Œuvre* cited above, which notes Apollinaire's sacrilegious sense of humor during wartime, did not make a substantial effort to read *Le Poète assassiné* as a product of the war. Many reviewers noted the fact that the author had been wounded in the line of duty, but made no additional reference to the war. The working-class newspaper *L'Opinion* briefly discussed the relationship between Apollinaire's real-life war experience and what he wrote about, invoking the last tale, “Le Cas du brigadier masqué.” The review, written by Edmond Jaloux, begins with a description of the book's cover:

Son livre se présente à nous sur orné d'un dessin de Rouveyre, qui nous montre M. Guillaume Apollinaire, le chef ceint d'un bandeau, car ce poète a été grièvement blessé à la tête, durant cette guerre où comme tant d'autres intellectuels, il s'est héroïquement battu. Aussi a-t-il joint à son recueil un conte bref, où l'on voit ce qu'il a rapporté de tant de batailles. Mais ce récit ... ne donnera d'elles la description prévue et déjà si conventionnelle que nous lisons partout. M. Apollinaire, qui prétend aimer la réalité, la traite un peu comme un grand seigneur faisant d'une fille d'auberge, il s'en amuse, mais ne la respecte beaucoup. C'est un poète véritable qui croit bien en elle, mais entend lui imprimer son sceau. En un clin d'œil, il a fait le plus singulier paysage d'ensemble de la guerre, en y

³⁹ Becker, *Apollinaire*, 143.

mêlant tous ses personnages à lui, à travers de grands éclairs, des 'illuminations,' à la façon de Rimbaud.⁴⁰

In this review, we see once again an inherent tension between realism and poetry; between “believing in reality” and remaking this reality in verse. Unexpectedly, Jaloux found that a deeply idiosyncratic and valuable perspective of the war is born from this tension, a witnessing that becomes an “illumination,” in the Rimbaldian sense. For him, the modernist strains in *Le Poète assassiné* only augmented the role of the witness and opened up a singular way of seeing.

In addition to being the most poetic text in the collection from a formal perspective, “Le Cas du brigadier masqué...” is the text that engages the war most directly. Apollinaire explicitly acknowledged the fact that this tale was written during the war, by including a disclaimer at its end: “Ce livre était sous presse au moment de la guerre. On y a ajouté la dernière nouvelle.” This scrupulous attention to date and composition is not unique to Apollinaire. A majority of the poems seen in anthologies or published in serials or newspapers during World War I list the date, and wartime location and military rank of the author, these details adding a layer of authenticity to the poem.

Despite this fixed date and location, the boundary between truth and fiction is occluded. The protagonist of the tale, referred to only as “Le nouveau Lazare,” finds himself in a cemetery, where he shakes the dust and dirt off himself, and leaves: “Le nouveau Lazare se secoua comme un chien mouillé et quitta le cimetière.”⁴¹ One recognizes the figure of Croniamantal here, for *Le Poète assassiné* ended with his burial. Yet, as he exits the cemetery, Croniamantal/Lazarus leaves the indeterminate and fantastical realm of the first novella and steps into the present day where he sees

⁴⁰ Edmond Jaloux, “Guillaume Apollinaire,” *L'Opinion*, 16 juin 1917, 561-2.

⁴¹ *Le Poète assassiné, Œuvres en prose complètes*, 382.

military posters, clamoring for the enlistment of the public, hung up throughout the street.

From this point forward, Apollinaire layers his own biographical details onto the figure of Croniamantal, creating a palimpsest of fact and fiction that culminates with his head-on contact with an exploding shell:

Venu à cheval jusqu'aux lignes, avec une corvée de rondins, et enveloppé de vapeurs asphyxiantes, le brigadier au masque aveugle souriait amoureuxment à l'avenir, lorsqu'un éclat d'obus de gros calibre le frappe à la tête d'où il sortit, comme un sang pur, une Minerve triomphale.⁴²

In the war, on the battlefield, the poet figure, who had been hunted down and killed in a scourge earlier in *Le Poète assassiné*, receives a transfiguring vision and is then rewarded with a symbolic wound, which marks him as the beneficiary of the Muse.⁴³

In the work's final revelation, war resuscitates the poet that society had killed. Yet, can this vision of the poet endure as war threatens his very existence and crumbles the old divisions of society?

Throughout this prismatic text, Apollinaire meditates on the role of the poet in society, especially during wartime. The nomination of *Le Poète assassiné* for the Prix Goncourt in 1916 also thrust these issues, as well as the question of witnessing and poetry, to the forefront of discussion among the Parisian literary establishment. The Académie Goncourt's commitment to honor texts written by soldiers from the trenches during World War I underlines the importance of the trenches: not only as literary sites where literature was produced, but also where literature was authenticated. While Apollinaire figured among those writing from the trenches, the

⁴² Ibid., 385. For his part, Décaudin believes that Apollinaire meant the character of the *brigadier masqué* to be read as his friend and fellow soldier René Dalize, whereas Apollinaire himself figures marginally in this tale as "le sous-lieutenant blessé que l'on porte à l'ambulance," *Apollinaire*, 64.

⁴³ Becker writes on the symbolic importance of the head wound: "Réelle ou métaphorique, la blessure à la tête est devenue, dès 1914, un véritable lieu de mémoire: la représentation des écrivains morts à la guerre et aussi une décapitation spirituelle de l'élite de la nation," *Apollinaire*, 144.

modernist vein of his writing set it apart from the other work written by soldier-writers and the modernist hybridity of his prose threatened his status as a veritable war witness.

The metaphorical example of Croniamantal's persecution, death and resurrection is also colored by Apollinaire's interrogations on the role of the "littérateurs-soldats" on the front pages of literary journals and newspapers. The hodge-podge of the rest of the collection of *Le Poète Assassiné* also bears evidence to how his prose writing trended to the anecdotal, and the last *récits* before "Le Cas du brigadier masqué..." read like *faits divers*. Apollinaire's print presence in the media, particularly his participation in these literary debates, warrants a closer look.

"Écrivain combattant": Apollinaire on the Front Lines of a Debate

J'en ai pris mon parti Rouveyre
Et monté sur mon grand cheval
Je vais bientôt partir en guerre
Sans pitié chaste et l'œil sévère
Comme ces guerriers qu'Épinal

Vendait Images populaires
Que Georquin gravait dans le bois
Où sont-ils ces beaux militaires
Soldats passés Où sont les guerres
Où sont les guerres d'autrefois
– "C'est Lou qu'on la nommait"

Apollinaire wrestled publicly with the question of what it meant to be a writer during wartime. Thanks to his widespread exposure as a poet, art critic and journalist, Apollinaire was accustomed to maintaining a public forum for his opinions and he practiced a wide-ranging form of journalism, not limiting himself to specific genres or specific audiences. For instance, Apollinaire published a variety of articles during the

war, in publications as diverse as the avant-garde review *SIC* and the bellicose *La Baïonnette*. He wrote articles on poetry and reviewed books written about the war in the *Mercure de France*'s section called "Ouvrages sur la guerre actuelle," which was specifically created to handle the overflowing category of works written about World War I. He found time to hold forth on political issues, cultural phenomena, even scientific discoveries. Apollinaire's multi-faceted literary stature involved him in debates about what it meant to be a war writer, and he contemplated this question in several different articles and interviews.

Implied in these debates were questions of how to represent the war truthfully, and whether or not one could write about the war without betraying its "truth." Soldiers, intellectuals on the home front and civilians abroad argued about these questions in the pages of literary magazines and in the prefaces to books, years before Jean Norton Cru attempted to quantify the categories of witnessing. To provide just one early example, in the preface to *Les Poètes de la Guerre*, an anthology published in 1914, Hugues Delorme pondered the problems of writing about war in a three-page poem, composed of classical quatrains in rhyming, octosyllabic verse. The fourth and fifth stanzas proclaim that poetry can become a weapon deployed in honor of "douce France":

Avec le rythme, avec la rime
Ce qu'on veut dire, on le dit mieux !
Redoublant de force et de charme,
Le mot devient alors une arme
Contre les méchants et les sots,
Et, pour les batailles superbes,
Assembler des strophes en gerbes,
C'est encor former les faisceaux !...

Et c'est pour cela – douce France –
Que, nombreux, tes fils chaque jour
Disent ta gloire et ta souffrance,
D'un cœur tout débordant d'amour.

Hymne, Chanson et Mélodie
De ta formidable épopée
Célèbrent les exploits divers.
Pour les vainqueurs et les victimes,
A l'ombre des lauriers ultimes
Germe la semence des vers.⁴⁴

Maudlin images and precious language abound in this explanatory ode where the conservative arm of the literary establishment has no trouble equating the Great War with other epic wars that France endured for the glory of the French race. Delorme easily places the poets of World War I in line with the bard who composed *La Chanson de Roland*. The last stanza shows how the poetry composed in the trenches will only endure and contribute to the glory of France:

C'est l'âme du pays qui vibre,
Forte quand même, et toujours libre,
Même en les plus humbles essais,
La terre entre nous toutes choisie,
Pour l'éternelle Poésie
Étant notre vieux sol français !...

However conservative this viewpoint appears to be, it was shared by both sides of the literary spectrum. Even Apollinaire described the wartime poet in epic terms. The avant-garde journal *SIC: Sons, idées, couleurs, formes* launched an inquiry in its first issue in January 1916, asking its readers – particularly those who were mobilized to the front – to write them and discuss what influence war exercises upon art.⁴⁵ The journal then published an interview with Apollinaire as the culmination of

⁴⁴ *Les Poètes de la Guerre. Recueil de poésies, parues depuis le 1^{er} août 1914*. Préface en vers de Hugues Delorme (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1914). For more information on the publication of this anthology and the publisher Berger-Levrault, see Beaupré, *Écrire en guerre, écrire la guerre*, and his chapter “Éditeur: La Fabrique de l'écrivain combattant.” For example, Beaupré cites the terrible review that this anthology received in the *Mercure de France*: “Tous les poèmes parus depuis la guerre, à deux ou trois exceptions près, étaient mauvais, très mauvais, et la brochure qui nous occupe est bien loin d'être complète.” *Mercure de France* (juillet 1915), 619.

⁴⁵ The entreaty read: “Afin d'avoir quelques données au sujet de l'influence que la guerre pourra exercer sur l'art, *SIC* serait heureux que ses lecteurs mobilisés veuillent bien lui exposer leurs idées sur cette question. (Les réponses bien concises ne doivent pas dépasser 5 lignes.)” *SIC*, janvier 1916, no. 1. Quoted in Beaupré, *Écrire en guerre*, 63.

this debate in its April 1916 issue. Despite the fact that they hailed from opposite ends of the political and aesthetic spectrums, the viewpoints of the readers of *SIC* do not differ greatly from those expressed by Delorme. Both avant-gardistes and guardians of traditionalism find hope that the war, and the poetry written during the war, will someday renew the country.

La guerre, c'est une purge de cheval qui guérit quand elle ne tue pas. La nouvelle France égalera au moins l'ancienne. – Louis B.,
...d'Infanterie...Cie. S P...

Pas besoin de cinq lignes, la guerre marquera le vrai départ d'une ère nouvelle. – Victor R. ...Corps d'A. Secteur...

Prêchez, prêchez le modernisme pendant que nous sommes dans les tranchées, vous faites comme nous votre devoir de Français. Prêchez le modernisme ! c'est tout ce que j'ai à dire. – S.T. ...d'Infanterie, ...S.P.⁴⁶

Themes of purging the old in order to obtain a newer, purer France appear in these answers, even though modernism is the flag under which they are aligned. The similarities that exist between these two sides show just how nebulous the lines were between the conservative literary establishment and the avant-garde in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁴⁷

Apollinaire's responses to *SIC*'s inquiry reveal that he also tended toward quite traditional modes of thinking about the role of the poet during wartime. At one point, Apollinaire's answers echo those in Delorme's preface. The interviewer asks: "Pensez-vous que la guerre elle-même puisse inspirer des œuvres dignes d'intérêt?"

To which Apollinaire responds :

Certes et il faut le souhaiter. Il ne faudrait pas qu'une leçon aussi violente fut perdue. Quoi de plus beau du reste que de chanter les héros et la grandeur de la patrie. Quoi de plus beau que d'inspirer de nobles

⁴⁶ These responses from *SIC*, March 1916, no. 3.

⁴⁷ Additional proof of this gray area between left and right can be found in the fact that *SIC* published the poems of Pierre Drieu la Rochelle in its pages, alongside those of Louis Aragon, André Breton and Tristan Tzara.

sentiments aux générations à venir, quoi de plus noble qu'en rappelant les expériences de la guerre forcer les gouvernants à ne jamais oublier que nous devons être forts si nous voulons exercer librement les arts de la paix et nous élever dans ces arts.⁴⁸

Surprisingly, Apollinaire paints the same image as Delorme – that of the bard singing of the hero and his great deeds for the country – and he praises the epic style elsewhere in the interview. Apollinaire then tries to offset the traditionalism in his response, explaining that the epic will truly be realized by one art, the cinema:

Mais il est aujourd'hui un art d'où peut naître une sorte de sentiment épique par l'amour du lyrisme du poète et la vérité dramatique des situations, c'est le cinématographe. L'épopée véritable étant celle que l'on récitait au peuple assemblé et rien n'est plus près du peuple que le cinéma. Celui qui projette un film joue aujourd'hui le rôle du jongleur d'autrefois.⁴⁹

Was this an attempt to disguise his conservative appreciation of the epic bard by clothing him in the new technological guise of film director, the jester for the film technician? Or was Apollinaire, like other members of the avant-garde such as Cendrars, genuinely drawn toward this new medium?⁵⁰ Ultimately, the views that Apollinaire espouses in the interview stand out with their regressive conception of the figure of the poet, who was called upon to “chanter la grandeur de la patrie.”

In his personal correspondence, Apollinaire admits to yearning for this classic model of the poet in society. In a letter to his friend Jean Mollet, he writes:

Mais tout de même, vieux, les armées de métier, il n'y a que ça. Ce n'est pas notre affaire de guerroyer ou la pensée humaine foutra le camp. On a fait la guerre pendant tout le XVIIe siècle, mais Corneille, Racine, Malherbe avant ne se battaient pas, ni Pascal, ni Bossuet. Nous faisons notre devoir aussi bien que les autres, mais vraiment c'est ailleurs qu'il devrait être. A chacun son métier. Maintenant si j'en reviens ce sera une sacrée cure d'énergie.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *SIC*, aout-septembre-octobre 1916, nos. 8-9-10, 1-2. Quoted in Becker, *Apollinaire*, 187.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Becker notes that Apollinaire in 1917 wrote the synopsis for a film to be titled “C'est un oiseau qui vient de France,” “un ciné-drame classiquement anti-allemand,” *Apollinaire*, 83-84.

⁵¹ Letter written January 3, 1915. Quoted in Becker, *Apollinaire*, 54. Becker notes how Apollinaire vacillated at times, at one point writing to another *marraine de guerre* that Cervantes was right that “les

“A chacun son métier” or to each his own: in Apollinaire’s view, poets should not be soldiers. If nothing else, trying to fulfill both of these roles is a terrible waste of the poet’s time and creative energy.

The notion of *métier* is essential for it has been recognized as a point of historical contention during periods of great social upheaval. Kristin Ross, in her work on Rimbaud and the Paris Commune of 1871, observes that, in France, the premium importance placed on one’s *métier* can be traced to Plato’s Republic where each role of society is properly divided up and meted out to the population of citizens. Since antiquity, the roles of each man in society cannot overlap. By the end of the nineteenth century, this was exemplified in the great resistance to the idea that an *ouvrier* could also be a poet. Ross observes the importance of *métier* to regulate society to a metonymic degree: “tools as fetishized anticipation of the gestures and disciplines of the *métier*, but above all as identification devices: the brand, the badge, the heraldic emblem.”⁵² Likewise this rigidity regarding a separation of *métier* (despite the radical attempts of the Commune to break down these barriers) still flourished during the First War I as voiced by Apollinaire when he reveals his ambivalence in acknowledging and embodying the fact that poets could also be soldiers. As in the era of the Commune, the Great War called for men to put down their identifying professional elements, their respective tools of trade, and to take up the common tools of the soldier. Thanks to the democratization of the role of the poet

poètes et, en général, les gens de lettres faisaient de bons soldats” *Apollinaire*, 134. These oscillations are in keeping with Apollinaire’s global struggle to firmly define the role of the poet-soldier during World War I.

⁵² Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 14.

that was happening in the trenches, the pen, always historically likened to the sword, was becoming another standard tool of the soldier.

In keeping with this classical notion of *métier* as set forth by Plato, Apollinaire's conception of the poet also led him to class all writers within the same divine Republic, regardless of their earthly politics. Apollinaire reveals this tendency in an article that he wrote for the *Mercure de France* on the writers Paul Souday, a literary critic for *Le Temps*, a conservative yet republican newspaper, and Charles Maurras, the nationalist, monarchist leader of *L'Action française*:

Mais l'on me dit que MM. Souday et Maurras n'appartiennent ni au même parti politique, ni au même parti littéraire et que ce serait les désobliger que de les assembler dans un même article. Qu'importe ? la disparate paraîtra moins cruelle dans les circonstances qui ont provoqué leur rapprochement. N'appartiennent-ils pas tous deux à une même communion, celle de la divinité d'Homère ? La royauté de la poésie ne réunit-elle pas ces deux prosateurs dans le même parti royaliste ? Ce sont en outre deux républicains de la république des lettres. Et leurs divisions sont peu de chose au regard de ce qui les associe dans un même amour pour la divine poésie.⁵³

This utopic vision of the republic of letters, in which Apollinaire manages to fuse royalist and republican values at the same time, discloses once more his orientation; Apollinaire clung dearly to the classical ideal of the poet in society (as filtered through romanticism), even as that role was in the process of vanishing under the pressures of the Great War. Coupled with this tension was the feeling that the old models of the poet in society were in the process of breaking down around him, as poet-soldiers sprang up in the trenches in large numbers. These changes prompt him to ask plaintively:

Où sont-ils ces beaux militaires
Soldats passés Où sont les guerres
Où sont les guerres d'autrefois?

⁵³ From Apollinaire's column titled "La Vie Anecdotique," "La Poésie," *Mercure de France*, 1^{er} novembre 1918, in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, tome III, 302-304.

as he writes in the poem “C’est Lou qu’on la nommait,” a poem marked by nostalgia for the epic wars of the past.⁵⁴

Calligrammes: *The emergence of the artisan*

“...Je suis gelé, j’ai dormi en plein dans l’eau et il fait triste malgré la grande victoire dont je suis content d’avoir été un artisan si petit soit-il.”
– Letter to Lou, Septembre 30, 1915⁵⁵

Calligrammes, as its subtitle indicates, is a collection composed of “poèmes de la paix et de la guerre (1913-1916).” It is comprised of six separate sections, which were organized roughly in chronological order. *Ondes*, the first section, was written before the war; *Étendards* during Apollinaire’s time in Nice and then in Nîmes at the military training camp before he was dispatched to the front in April 1915. *Case d’Armons* was penned and published on the front, as were most of the poems of the following section, *Lueurs des tirs*. *Obus couleur de lune*, deviates slightly from the chronological order for this section is comprised mainly of poems written to Madeleine Pagès between August 1915 and February 1916. Finally, *La tête étoilée* closes with three poems composed after Apollinaire’s head wound on March 17, 1916.⁵⁶

Case d’Armons, the section that Apollinaire wrote, published and circulated on the front, provides the richest example of Apollinaire writing *en guerre*. Annette Becker has seized on the unusual circumstances of this work, noting:

⁵⁴ *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 218.

⁵⁵ *Lettres à Lou*, 519.

⁵⁶ Michel Décaudin outlines this chronology in the notes of Apollinaire’s *Œuvres poétiques*, eds. Pierre-Marcel Adéma and Michel Décaudin (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 1076-1077. See also Debon, *Apollinaire après Alcools*, 127-8.

Le livre... est un produit du front, par ses matières premières, les hommes soldats qui l'ont fabriqué, l'homme soldat qui l'a créé. Le titre, emprunté au vocabulaire de l'artillerie, vient synthétiser matière première et produit fini : une case d'armons est un emplacement dans la voiture où le conducteur d'un canon peut déposer ses effets personnels, son 'barda.' Le poète narre son temps d'artillerie en déposant ses mots et ses dessins dans la case d'armons.⁵⁷

The title is a powerful evocation: the small compartment in the military weapon reserved for the personal possessions of the soldier becomes a synecdoche for the book object itself. The material objects of the poems make their way to the protected spot, the *case d'armons*, both literally and figuratively.

Apollinaire endeavored to preserve this section's special status, by including a note about its production in the printed version of *Calligrammes* when it went to press. The notice, found on the opposite side of the section's title page, reads: "La 1ère édition à 25 exemplaires de Case d'Armons a été polygraphiée, sur papier quadrillé, à l'encre violette, au moyen de gélatine, à la batterie de tir (45^e batterie, 38^e Régiment d'artillerie de campagne) devant l'ennemi, et le tirage a été achevé le 17 juin 1915." Functioning as a stamp of authenticity, the notice anchors Apollinaire's poems in a very specific place and time, "devant l'ennemi."

Apollinaire's note is exacting: he describes in careful detail the precise state of the original print object, noting the lined nature of the paper, the color of the ink, and how it was copied (through the use of gelatin).⁵⁸ This note also firmly places itself in

⁵⁷ Becker, *Apollinaire*, 76.

⁵⁸ The gelatin printing process, though quite rudimentary, was also used by some trench newspapers. Audoin-Rouzeau describes the arduous nature of this method: "Si on laisse de côté les journaux 'tirés' à un seul exemplaire manuscrit et passant de mains en mains, le plus simple était celui du tirage à la pâte de gélatine. Cette méthode, qui n'autorisait que de très petites productions au prix d'un travail important et pour un résultat médiocre, nous livre aujourd'hui les documents les plus émouvants. Ce procédé exigeait la préparation de matrices manuscrites s'inscrivant ensuite au négatif sur des feuilles de papier sur la pâte afin de tirer les pages une à une. L'ensemble de l'opération pouvait durer six heures, après quoi tout était à recommencer pour les pages suivantes. La plupart des journaux de ce type excédaient donc rarement quatre pages..." *A travers leurs journaux: 14-18. Les combattants des tranchées* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1986), 26. Apollinaire in fact borrowed materials from the trench

the midst of war, and the fact that it was fabricated “devant l’ennemi” makes its creation an act of resistance in front of the enemy.

Apollinaire delights in comparing the printing with the function of the artillery, as the double entendre in the word “tirage” suggests. The poet plays on this double entendre throughout all of *Calligrammes* where a constellation of usages all deriving from the verb *tirer* appear. In addition to the section title “Lueurs des tirs,” one finds: “Et les canons des indolences / Tirent mes songes vers les cieux”⁵⁹; “On tire dans la direction ‘des bruits entendus’”⁶⁰; “Et ma sœur / Suivit plus tard un tirailleur / Mort à Arras”⁶¹; “Allongez le tir amour de vos batteries”⁶²; “Mon désir est là sur quoi je tire.”⁶³ Fittingly, even the word “attirer” enters into this web of meaning: “Ton sourire m’attire comme / pourrait m’attirer une fleur.”⁶⁴

The fragile nature of the manuscript, with its intimate human scale (the size of a soldier’s *carnet*), exemplifies the amount of care and attention that Apollinaire put into the act of copying these poems.⁶⁵ *Case d’Armons* is utterly a work of its situation. Enduring the endless monotony of the trenches, Apollinaire whiled away hours carefully turning out twenty-five copies of these poems. Each page is marked with small drawings, sometimes of little blue men in the margins, sometimes doodles of flowers scrolled under the title of a poem. Throughout, his handwriting is artful and

newspaper to which he occasionally contributed, *Le Tranchman’Echo*, in order to produce *Case d’Armons* (Becker, *Apollinaire*, 76).

⁵⁹ *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 222.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 261.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁶⁵ I would like to thank Jean-Paul Avise, the librarian in charge of the Fonds Adéma at the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, for his generous and illuminating conversation and for allowing me to see this manuscript, as well as Apollinaire’s personal library. I am indebted to Becker, whose work also treats this text (see *Apollinaire*, 76-77), for pointing the way to this manuscript. For more on Apollinaire’s library see my article, “In Memoriam: The Library of Guillaume Apollinaire: 1913-2010,” *French Studies Bulletin*, 31, no. 116 (August 11, 2010).

deliberate. In sum, it is a work of tremendous dedication to the physical object itself, reminiscent of medieval monks bent over parchment. Becker expands on this sentiment in her analysis of the activities that Apollinaire pursued alongside his compatriots in the trenches:

Car essayer de s'occuper, mener une activité intellectuelle, manuelle, artistique, ludique, c'est se recréer une sociabilité à l'intérieur de l'isolement des longs jours de cantonnement. L'artisanat permet d'améliorer l'ordinaire matériel et psychologique. On lutte ainsi contre l'ennui, contre le temps long de la guerre, que l'on fragmente en temps, court des activités diverses: lire et écrire, travailler le bois, le métal, les os d'animaux, les écorces d'arbre, la craie, attendre, entendre le son du canon, manger, cueillir des fleurs, des baies, attendre, aller à l'exercice, dessiner, écrire, regarder des photographies des siens, attendre, fumer, se laver, ravauder son linge, le laver et l'étendre, regarder un obus exploser au loin, attendre.⁶⁶

One finds a true artisanal devotion in the work of producing *Case d'Armons*, a feeling that is at odds with Apollinaire's own stated conception of the poet in the romantic sense, discussed earlier. The romantic view of the poet paints him as a figure driven by genius, creating poetry alone in solitude or communing with nature. The classic image of the bard, praised by Apollinaire in the pages of *SIC*, sings of war in the high style of the epic, and this style does not treat the bare details of life during wartime.⁶⁷ Yet, this view is challenged by the physical evidence of the manuscript of *Case d'Armons*, a collection of poems which are marked thoroughly by life in the trenches and reflect an engagement with an artisanal mode of producing poetry. Apollinaire was caught in a contradiction: he wanted to adhere to his romantic definition of the poet's *métier* but it was obvious that existence in the trenches dictated a different poetic practice.

⁶⁶ Becker, *Apollinaire*, 119.

⁶⁷ Debon discusses how the epic was one possible avenue of response to World War I: "La première solution consiste à l'assumer de manière emphatique: à le sublimer en l'enrobant dans une rhétorique de la grandeur ; c'est la tentation épique. La parole se transporte au-delà du réel," *Apollinaire après Alcools*, 20.

The trenches of World War I constituted a singular environment, which allowed literature to return to a state of pure materiality. For the ordinary *écrivains-combattants*, writing became an artisanal trade, an activity that was just as valid as any other for passing time between engagements with the enemy. Passing time in this way produced a concrete object – a poem, or a story – which could be circulated and shared.

Marking time through artisanal work is also a key characteristic of the storyteller's function as elucidated by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin begins his 1936 essay, "Le Narrateur: Réflexions à propos de l'œuvre de Nicolas Leskov," by posing the problem of war and representation. He remarks that the soldiers who came home from the Great War were unable to talk about their experiences.

Avec la Grande Guerre un processus devenait manifeste qui, depuis, ne devait plus s'arrêter. N'est-on pas aperçu à l'armistice que les gens revenaient muets du front ? Non pas enrichis mais appauvris en expérience communicable. Et quoi d'étonnant à cela ? Jamais expérience n'a été aussi foncièrement démentie que les expériences stratégiques par la guerre de position, matérielles par l'inflation, morales par les gouvernants. Une génération qui avait encore pris le tramway à chevaux pour aller à l'école se trouvait en plein air, dans un paysage où rien n'était demeuré inchangé sinon les nuages; et, dans le champ d'action de courants mortels et d'explosions délétères, minuscule, le frêle corps humain.⁶⁸

Benjamin describes the art of narration: "cette ancienne coordination de l'âme, de l'œil, et de la main est d'origine artisanale." Yet the First World War, being the most horrific experience of the twentieth century at the time he was writing, had ruptured this connection between the soul, the eye, and the hand for the narrators post-war.

⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Le narrateur: Réflexions à propos de l'œuvre de Nicolas Leskov" in *Écrits français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 265. Quoted in Leonard Smith's article "Le récit du témoin. Formes et pratiques d'écriture dans les témoignages sur la Grande Guerre," in Christophe Prochasson and Anne-Marie Rasmussen, eds. *Vrai et faux dans la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Éditions de la Découverte, 2004), 277-301. Smith's crucial article finds that a return to the artisanal may indeed be possible through the work of Dorgelès, Barbusse and Bloch, particularly through the unique ways in which these writers approach the narrative construction of their war *récits*.

This may be true for other veterans of the war, but not for Apollinaire. His careful, meditative production of *Case d'Armons* clearly strives to reunite the soul, the eye, and the hand with a return to an artisanal spirit that informs his poetics of witness. In the quotidian reality of the trenches, Apollinaire embraced the figure of the artisan, of someone who works with his hands in a skilled, traditional way in order to produce an object of value. By exploring this role during wartime, the poet exposes the difficulties of upholding a romantic view of the solitary, poet-prophet figure.

Thus, although Apollinaire's calligrammes have been heralded as modernist, experimental creations, they may also be seen, paradoxically, in the light of the artisanal. These well-known experimentations with the calligrammatic form obviated – or at least hindered – their ability to be mass-produced by the type-set printing press. In this sense, their production enacts a return to the artisanal through their refusal of modern modes of technology. In this new light, the image-poems in *Calligrammes* may be said to have been born out of a more traditional desire to slow down the modern process of reproduction and to call attention to the act of writing itself.

Despite Benjamin's initial declaration in the essay that World War I rendered communication impossible, his description of the storyteller bears much in common with the role that Apollinaire fulfilled as a poet at war. Benjamin argues that the storyteller is at odds with the novelist:

Ce que le narrateur raconte, il le tient de l'expérience, de la sienne propre ou d'une expérience communiquée. Et à son tour il en fait l'expérience de ceux qui écoutent son histoire. Le romancier, par contre, s'est confiné dans son isolement. Le roman s'est élaboré dans les profondeurs de l'individu solitaire, qui n'est plus capable de se prononcer de façon pertinente sur ce qui lui tient le plus à cœur, qui est lui-même privé de conseil et ne saurait en donner.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Benjamin, "Le narrateur," 270.

The experience of being at war, living in close quarters among his fellows for months at a time, thrust the soldier-poet into intimate contact with those with whom he sought to communicate. The poet during World War I, even in the face of the rapidly advancing war technology, meets Benjamin's description of the artisan and the storyteller coming together with the same shared purpose. Aligned with the storyteller through the exigencies of his circumstances, the poet becomes better equipped than a novelist to witness the war experience.⁷⁰

Apollinaire struggled with this fact of military existence from the earliest days of his training. He found being forced to write from the trenches, elbow-to-elbow with the men of his unit, difficult. He wrote to a friend from the military casern at Nîmes about this lack of privacy: "...surtout je suis rarement seul et ce manque de solitude me pèse."⁷¹ Despite this lack of solitude, Apollinaire never fully connected with another soldier, leading to a heightened feeling of loneliness – a fact that speaks to the poet's isolation within his military unit and may perhaps explain his ambivalence toward fully integrating the roles of soldier and poet.⁷²

Furthermore, Benjamin notes that the presence of death works at the heart of storytelling: "La mort est la sanction de tout ce que le narrateur peut raconter. Son

⁷⁰ On a material level, this is true. Apollinaire and other poets were able to put poems directly into a *carnet* and then reproduce them on the front. Most novelists did not use their *carnet* to begin drafting their novels. Rather, their *carnets* contained fragments and notes of the war experience, which were later reconstructed and shaped into novels from a safe distance from the front lines. For instance, Barbusse's war notebook comprises a mere ten pages of fragmentary notes and he wrote *Le Feu* once he was dispatched to a position as secretary with the état-major. See Henri Barbusse, *Lettres à Sa Femme 1914-1917. Précédé de son Carnet de notes du front. Suivi d'un choix de poèmes extraits de son recueil Pleureuses* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 2006).

⁷¹ Letter to Fernand Fleuret, December 20, 1914.

⁷² Debon observes: "Le point sur lequel Apollinaire semble le moins rejoindre les sentiments communs est celui de l'amitié: 'Pour le soldat, dans sa vie de chaque jour, en face de l'ennemi et plus intimement que le chef, ce sont les camarades (au pluriel) qui comptent et le copain (au singulier).' Ce trait ne caractérise notre poète. Nous l'avons vu sensible aux souffrances de ses hommes et soucieux de ses responsabilités, mais sur le front, il ne paraît pas avoir noué de véritable amitié, si ce n'est peut-être avec René Berthier," *Apollinaire après Alcools*, 116.

autorité, c'est à la mort qu'il l'emprunte."⁷³ Death became once more a crucial ontological force for the soldiers of the First World War, forcing them to confront the last minutes of the lives of their neighbors and friends at intimate distances. This was shocking, particularly as nineteenth century bourgeois cultural practices up to this point had worked on withdrawing death from the public gaze.⁷⁴ Apollinaire's wartime poetry is also marked by death, particularly through his use of the dedication.

Apollinaire dedicates poems throughout *Calligrammes*, beginning with the initial one, a lovingly homage to his longtime friend René Dalize: "A la mémoire du plus ancien de mes camarades René Dalize mort au Champ d'Honneur le 7 mai 1915." Invoking Dalize's death on the 'field of honor,' Apollinaire once more installs the war, and by extension death, as the backdrop for the poems that will follow.⁷⁵ Of the 21 poems that compose *Case d'Armons*, Apollinaire explicitly dedicates nine to friends such as Jean Royère and André Level, to his lovers Madeleine Pagès and Louise de Coligny- Châtillon, and to what were commonly known at the time as "marraines de guerre" or "war god mothers," civilian women on the home front who wrote to soldiers out of a sense of patriotic duty.⁷⁶ These detours into the personal realm remind the reader that these poems are not only literary texts but also missives charged with the weight of bringing the poet closer to the person to whom the poem is dedicated.

⁷³ Benjamin, "Le narrateur," 278-9.

⁷⁴ See Philippe Ariès, "Invisible Death," *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Winter 1981), 105-115.

⁷⁵ With this dedication to a fallen friend, Apollinaire participates in the common World War I practice of dedicating his writing to the war's dead. Sherman remarks: "Yet even noncombatants could join soldiers in what many authors described as their primary motivation for writing: the desire, even a sort of primal need, to pay tribute to their dead comrades," *The Construction of Memory*, 16.

⁷⁶ In *Case d'Armons*, Apollinaire dedicates "Reconnaissance" to "Mademoiselle P..." (Madeleine Pagès), "SP" to Maréchal des logis René Berthier, "Visée" to Madame René Berthier, "Carte Postale" to Jean Royère, "Saillant" to André Level, "De la Batterie de tir" to Maréchal des logis F. Bodard, "Toujours" to Madame Faure-Favier, "Fête" to André Rouveyre, and "La Nuit d'Avril 1915" to "L. de C.-C.," Louise de Coligny-Châtillon.

In this way, the poems occupy a space in the margins between letter and poem. “Carte postale” makes this liminal position clear by questioning its own medium. Is the poem a postcard? Its physical material is indeed a postcard – one of the official ones supplied by the French Army to its soldiers – that has been taped onto a page of the lined graph paper that constitutes *Case d’Armons*. Apollinaire cut out a triangle from the page, to showcase a corner of the postcard itself, and this decoupage acts as a window, linking two poems with one postcard. “1915” occupies the other side of the postcard and it is taped onto the back of the other page. Turning the page, one sees the places where Apollinaire has cut the paper to expose the back of the postcard.

The language of both these poems, “1915” and “Carte postale,” is prosaic and they appear to be handwritten, even in the printed versions of *Calligrammes*.⁷⁷ In “Carte postale” especially, there is nothing to distinguish it from just another postcard sent home:

Nous sommes bien
 mais l’auto-bazar qu’on dit merveilleux ne vient pas jusqu’ici
 LUL
 On les aura⁷⁸

With the phrase “On les aura” or “We’ll get ‘em,” Apollinaire employs a pastiche from a popular military jingoism found on postcards and other advertisements during the war. The literary critic Anna Boschetti finds this prosaic language to be in keeping with Apollinaire’s poetics of witnessing as a whole: “il s’agit de suggérer une idée synthétique de l’expérience qu’est la vie sur le front, par

⁷⁷ Debon signals this aspect as well: “Dans le cas de ‘Carte postale’ et ‘Madeleine,’ il s’agit de correspondances et l’écriture manuscrite procure un effet de réel. Dans les deux autres cas, Apollinaire pousse plus loin la rupture avec les conventions poétiques et confère au poème une allure de spontanéité : l’écriture, qui n’est même pas une calligraphie (‘1915’ mélange les majuscules et l’écriture en script, sans recherche esthétique particulière ...) manifeste ainsi ce qu’elle a de conventionnel, donc de peu important. Ce qui l’est davantage, en l’occurrence, ce sont les points forts de la page, mis en relief par la grosseur des mots et les signes musicaux ou l’accolade, ” *Apollinaire après Alcools*, 153.

⁷⁸ *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 226.

une sorte de bulletin où cohabitent allusions aux événements et au décor, pensées mélancoliques, paillardise de soldats, argot militaire, variations sur les rythmes de chansons connues...⁷⁹ Apollinaire's concern with suggesting a synthetic experience of life on the front dovetails in many ways with his artisanal orientation.

Apollinaire continues to question and play with the placement of the words on the page and the medium of the postcard. In the last section of *Calligrammes* titled *La Tête étoilée*, he includes another poem with the same name, "Carte postale," but there is no visual or calligrammic element to this poem. The language here makes a stark contrast to the prosaic lines in the earlier "Carte postale" for the verses follow clear-cut formal requirements. They are written in octosyllables, with alternating rhymes:

Je t'écris de dessous la tente
Tandis que meurt ce jour d'été
Où floraison éblouissante
Dans le ciel à peine bleuté
Une canonnade éclatante
Se fane avant d'avoir été.⁸⁰

The act of writing to someone far away is once again signaled and emphasized in the first line. This time, the loneliness frames a melancholy image of a summer day dying, its blue sky the backdrop for a volley of canons.

Other poems continue to play upon the gray area between poems and letters. Apollinaire often copied out fragments of poems in the letters that he sent home. Inversely, he transcribed questions from his letters in many of his poems. By exposing the overlap between these two media, Apollinaire evokes the artisanal once more. The poem "Oracles" concludes with this fragment tacked on at the bottom:

Avec un fil
on prend

⁷⁹ Anna Boschetti, *La Poésie partout. Apollinaire, homme-époque (1898-1918)* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 209.

⁸⁰ *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 297.

la mesure
du doigt.⁸¹

This prosaic request reveals an artisanal orientation in that, by taking the finger's measurement, this data will allow the poet to begin a new task in the trenches, forging a ring. By cross-referencing his correspondence, it becomes clear that this was his exact intention. He wrote to his fiancée at the time, Madeleine Pagès:

Quant aux bagues, je crois que c'est à notre batterie qu'on les fait le mieux. On coule l'aluminium dans un moule creusé dans une pomme de terre et on achève ensuite à la lime. ... Renvoyez-moi une mesure ... La plaque de cuivre ou de bronze enchâssée comme nous faisons est une spécialité de la 45^e batterie du 38^e où se font, dit-on, les plus belles bagues du front.⁸²

Apollinaire also sent a ring that he made to Lou, his other wartime correspondent and former lover. Once more, this action is assimilated into his letters and poems written at the same time. In one letter, he is anxious to know if the ring pleased her: "J'ai envoyé maintenant la bague. J'espère qu'elle te plaira. J'ai fait de mon mieux et j'ai eu bien du mal aussi à graver l'inscription qui est à l'intérieur."⁸³

Not only did Apollinaire allow specific artisanal talk to seep into his poems, but these references served as a means of reinforcing the cohesion of the military group. As he boasted in his letter, his unit was famous for their jewelry-making skills. His request for a finger measurement surely resonated as a point of pride with each man from his unit who read these poems. The poet, literally apprenticing himself,

⁸¹ Ibid., 230.

⁸² Letter dated June 27, and July 1, 1915, *Lettres à Madeleine*, 75-77. Quoted in Becker, *Apollinaire*, 122. Becker discusses Apollinaire's artisanal practices, although she mainly attributes this activity as a way to reinforce an exchange or "fluidity" between the home front and the front lines, *Apollinaire*, 117-123. For an article detailing Apollinaire's exact production of jewelry from the trenches, see Hervé Péjaudier, "En aluminium pâle comme l'absence et tendre comme le souvenir, les bagues limées par le soldat Apollinaire (1915)," *Cahiers d'histoire de l'aluminium*, no. 11 (hiver 1992-1993), 9-36.

⁸³ August 2, 1915, *Lettres à Lou*, 475. In a poignant series of letters, it appears that Lou does not mention the ring right away and Apollinaire asks repeatedly for her reaction: "A propos, et la bague?!!" (Letter dated August 12, 1915, Ibid., 486) as well as "Tu me diras si le cœur d'abord et la bague ensuite sont arrivés en bon état. Pour la bague, je crois que c'est la plus jolie que j'aie faite et même peut-être une des plus jolies qu'on ait faites avec cet aluminium boche, j'y ai mis mon peu de goût et tout mon amour." (Letter dated August 14, 1915, Ibid., 494).

weaves artisanal vocabulary and modes of discourse in his poems, creating once more a synthesis between the lived situation and the words that sought to describe this experience.

Apollinaire's working with the notion of the artisanal is also present on a thematic level. In the poem "Reconnaissance," he conjures the timeless activity of the artisan once more, writing:

Un seul bouleau crépusculaire
Pâlit au seuil de l'horizon
Où fuit la mesure angulaire
Du Cœur à l'âme et la raison.⁸⁴

In this wooded place, a common scene for many of the poems of *Case d'Armons*, a stillness allows the measured angle of heart, soul, and reason to disappear, a cryptic image which gains immediacy when put next to Benjamin's formulation of that "cette ancienne coordination de l'âme, de l'œil et de la main."⁸⁵

The revolution in thinking that led Apollinaire back to the artisanal even extends beyond *Case d'Armons* into other sections of *Calligrammes*.⁸⁶ He takes it up movingly in a later poem, "Océan de Terre":

J'ai bâti une maison au milieu de l'Océan
Ses fenêtres sont les fleuves que s'écoulent de mes yeux
Des poulpes grouillent partout où se tiennent les murailles
Entendez battre leur triple cœur et leur bec cogner aux vitres
Maison humide
Maison ardente
Saison rapide
Saison qui chante
Les avions pondent des œufs
Attention on va jeter l'ancre
Attention à l'encre que l'on jette
Il serait bon que vous vinssiez du ciel

⁸⁴ *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 222.

⁸⁵ Debon describes at greater length the importance of the forest as setting for the poems of *Case d'Armons*, *Apollinaire après Alcools*, 111-113.

⁸⁶ Debon locates a similar move in his reading of the poem "L'Avenir": "L'avenir à espérer n'est pas celui qu'est en train de bâtir l'humanité, mais celui qui peut naître des mains ouvrières du poète," *Apollinaire après Alcools*, 162.

Le chèvrefeuille du ciel grimpe
Les poulpes terrestres palpitent
Et puis nous sommes tant et tant à être nos propres fossoyeurs
Pâles poulpes des vagues crayeuses ô poulpes aux becs pâles
Autour de la maison il y a cet océan que tu connais
Et qui ne se repose jamais⁸⁷

The first line equates the poet with a builder: “J’ai bâti une maison au milieu de l’Océan.” The placement of this home in the middle of the ocean sets off a slippery surrealist chain of images (no doubt intended for Giorgio de Chirico, to whom the poem is dedicated): octopuses swarm all over the walls of the house and their “triple cœur et leur bec” knock at the windows. It appears that this hypnotic seascape exists entirely outside the limits of Apollinaire’s wartime experience until the line: “Les avions pendent des œufs” interjects with the forceful metaphorical presence of wartime aircraft laying down shells. This interruption reinforces the vision that the seascape and the trenchscape are superimposed onto one another: the trenches are sending up waves of earth in rippling effects out into the fields of Northern France and their inhabitants, the mud-covered soldiers become base creatures of their environment: “les poulpes terrestres palpitent.”⁸⁸

In the end, the poem closes with one last humble gesture, an act that once more fuses the role of the poet with that of the artisan, of someone who works with his hands: “Et puis nous sommes tant et tant à être nos propres fossoyeurs.” In this line, the longest in the poem, words add up, often unnecessarily (the repetition of “tant et tant,” the double filler words “et puis”), creating the feeling of mass, as the reader must sort through the heavy sentence on a linguistic as well as an ontological level. In this way, the material conditions of writing the poem, of living within this

⁸⁷ *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 268.

⁸⁸ For more on aspects of this trenchscape, see Santanu Das’s chapter “Slimescapes” in *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

hallucinatory and muddy rift in the earth, influence the poem's poetics: the choices of imagery and prosody both reflect the physical conditions of the trenches.

Thus, in a number of ways (thematically, formally, and physically), *Case d'Armons* prompts a return to its own materiality. The physical presence of the poems, how they were conceived, how they were made, printed, and circulated, yield new possibilities for rethinking *Calligrammes* within the context of Apollinaire's experience as a soldier of the First World War. By considering aspects of Apollinaire's poetics as a willed fusion of the role of the artisan as according to Benjamin with that of the poet, one gains a larger understanding of Apollinaire's wartime poetry, a view point which at times runs counter to the romantic notion of the poet who must work in isolation from his fellow man because of the sacred nature of his task. (Apollinaire did feel isolated and lonely in the trenches, but this isolation was perhaps a more modern one, deriving in part from his own ambivalences about what social role he should fulfill as both poet and soldier.)

Because the trenches of World War I, due to a variety of factors, were such deeply literary sites, the work of writing became an artisanal task and an act of resistance open and visible to all, undoing the legacy of the romantic and symbolist poets that had dominated poetry just before the war. The materiality of Apollinaire's wartime poems, and his insistence on calling attention to the details of their creation, argues for a new consideration of these poems as an attempt to witness war through the poetic medium.

In a letter to Charles Maurras, Apollinaire described the scar on his head in arresting terms: "...les Allemands me baptisaient français avec le sang jailli de ma tête où la cicatrice d'une trépanation en forme d'étoile est le plus beau calligramme

que j'aie encore dessiné.”⁸⁹ The poet integrates the physical trace of war on his body into his poetic oeuvre, synthesizing a lived experience and putting it in line with the production of these image-poems. For Apollinaire, witnessing the war comes down to the same gesture: tracing out elements and details of trench life, and distilling them physically onto the page in images and words, meter and rhyme.

Conclusion

“C’était un temps béni La guerre continue...”
– Les Saisons⁹⁰

Modern warfare was fully realized in the First World War by a motley group of men, most of whom were not accustomed to battle, who were called upon to fight for their country. Previously, the soldier was a defined figure with a specific role in society. In the Great War, men from all strata of society put down their everyday *métiers* to learn the art of war. Apollinaire was just another one of these men and the experience of being a poet among so many newfound *écrivains-combattants* provoked an ambivalent tension in his wartime writings. And yet, in spite of his beliefs and his desire to maintain a romantic notion of the poet, his poetics underwent this same leveling, most visibly in the composition and production of *Case d’Armons*.

The artisanal nature of the production and circulation of the poems in *Case d’Armons* reinforces a new vision of the poet, pointing toward the fusion of the poet as soldier and artisan, as opposed to the romantic ideal, which placed the poet high above the ordinary worker. Paradoxically, Apollinaire himself had trouble reconciling this newfound democratization of the poet in society. His continued attraction to the

⁸⁹ Collected in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, tome II, 997.

⁹⁰ *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 240

poet/bard figure may be interpreted as his way of mourning the loss of this archetypal figure. The traditionalist who yearns for the epic poet to sing of arms and war is registered in some of his poems and in the end of *Le Poète assassiné* where the poet figure is resuscitated in the midst of war. Likewise, when he spoke about the poet in wartime in various interviews, Apollinaire reverted to this romantic conception.

Other literary critics have attempted to narrate Apollinaire's wartime experience and the writings that he produced in terms of a gradual transition: the poet, a foreigner with a deep longing to firmly and officially belong to France, who enlisted with naively patriotic enthusiasm at the age of 36, became progressively more disillusioned as his time on the front lines wore on.⁹¹ However, such a clear evolution is difficult to trace out and his postwar texts, especially the play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, represent a return to a thinly-veiled nationalism. Apollinaire's whole oeuvre is marked by a perpetual anxiety, specifically located in the question of the role of the poet during wartime and his oscillations in how to define this role.

Conflict has always been Apollinaire's most powerful characteristic. The transformations of soldiers into poets and poets into soldiers that happened during the First World War forced Apollinaire to question the poet's *métier* in society. He held onto the romantic notion of the poet and his lofty lyric tone yet his war poetry refutes this same style by remaining intensely intimate. He struggled to maintain a classic vision of the poet *en guerre*, whose trial by fire would eventually produce a new epic genre to renew the glories of France. However, in his poetry, he shirks this idealist role and brings witnessing down to a human, intimate level by blending poems with letters, production with devotion.

⁹¹ André Breton was among the first to propose that Apollinaire the soldier lived the war in phases (see his essay "Guillaume Apollinaire," in *Les Pas Perdus* [Paris: Gallimard, 1970]). Debon and Becker also sketch this evolution.

Apollinaire's search to find new ways in which poetry could be brought to register the experiences of war lead to a personal tone in the poems of *Calligrammes* where the poem becomes a hybrid between a love letter and a fact of everyday existence. The letter motif also brings symbolist experimentation down to a very human level. The *Calligrammes* do not have any of the wildness, formal austerity or daring of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*. They derive their source, pictorially, from something utterly quotidian – postcards home. In this way, Apollinaire is skillfully blending two different veins of modernism: formal experimentation is coupled with a reappropriation of ordinary objects, the readymade meets the unmaking.⁹² Apollinaire has repeatedly been called a “figure charnière” for multiple reasons: he straddles the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and his poetry reveals an aesthetics in transition from romanticism to symbolism to modernism. His poetic testimony of World War I also bears witness to opposing forces and in that sense, it remains deeply honest.

The experience of war radically redefined the conception of space and Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* were one response to this reconfigured perception. In the next chapter, Apollinaire's friend and fellow soldier, Blaise Cendrars, will push these issues of visuality even further to accommodate his own poetics of witness.

⁹² Becker discusses the influence of World War I over the ready made movement (in particular the relationship between Apollinaire and Marcel Duchamp), observing: “Car cette guerre industrielle peut être décrite comme un immense *ready made*, où les objets de la vie ordinaire sont décontextualisés et renommés, voire nommés dans une autre langue qui serait l'argot des tranchées ou les calembours des poètes,” *Apollinaire*, 126-7.

Chapter Three: Cendrars and the Renunciation of the Soldier-Poet

Shrapnells

I.

Dans le brouillard la fusillade crépite et la voix du canon vient jusqu'à nous
Le bison d'Amérique n'est pas plus terrible
Ni plus beau
Affût
Pareil au cygne du Cameroun

II.

Je t'ai rogné les ailes, ô mon front explosible
Et tu ne veux pas du képi
Sur la route nationale 400 mille pieds battent des étincelles aux cliquetis des gamelles
Je pense
Je passe
Cynique et bête
Puant bélier

III.

Tous mes hommes sont couchés sous les acacias que les obus saccagent
Oh ciel bleu de la Marne
Femme
Avec le sourire d'un aéroplane...
On nous oublie¹

These three poems, dated October 1914, exist as the sole traces of writing that Blaise Cendrars composed during his time as a soldier during World War I.² After the war, Cendrars testified that he emphatically chose not to write – neither poems, fiction, or journalism – in the trenches. When it came to writing letters home to loved ones – that sacred pastime shared among soldiers – Cendrars' output was also minimal and laconic.³

¹ Blaise Cendrars. *Poésies complètes avec 41 poèmes inédits*, ed. Claude Leroy (Paris: Denoël, 2005). These poems were originally published in Rome in the review *Valori Plastici*, February 1919. They were reprinted in *Écrits du Nord*, November 1922, 2e série, no 1.

² See the notice of "Shrapnells" in *Poésies complètes*, 368.

³ For instance, see a letter to his close friend August Suter that Cendrars wrote from the trenches in September 1915 where he tersely attempts to describe his mood: "Cher Ami, ... J'ai bu d'un seul trait

The only traces of poetry from Cendrars' time as a soldier in the third regiment of the French Foreign Legion are these three poem fragments, called "Shrapnells."⁴ The title, invoking the name of the man, Henry Shrapnel, who invented this diabolical tool of warfare, mimics their form: small, sharp, and uneven, yet with a lasting impact. With this title, Cendrars evinces a nascent fascination with the terms of war and its machinery.⁵

The first poem fragment attempts to sketch the setting a little more clearly. It begins with a preposition: "Dans le brouillard la fusillade crépite et la voix du canon vient jusqu'à nous." However, the scene and its elements remain cloudy. Within the fog, guns go off and the canon's voice reaches as far as "us." The pronoun refers to the speaker's unit, a group of soldiers that coheres together tightly through a unity forged under fire, leaving little room for anyone else. Only those at the front, and specifically those enduring the attack, can belong to this first-person plural.

Moving out dramatically from this close-knit group, the remaining lines of the poem soar elsewhere. Without any transition, the poem is lifted to far-off locales by way of an unstated comparison: to the Great Plains of America where the buffalo roam, and to Cameroon and its swan. The implied comparison sets the war against these strange and disparate creatures and reveals the chief preoccupation at the heart

toute une année de guerre, sans m'en apercevoir. Et je n'en suis pas plus saoul qu'avant. C'est vieux, vieux – guerre, canons, Féla, sang, batailles, mines, mon fils, mes livres, les morts – je suis plus seul et plus détaché que jamais. ..." Cendrars, *Inédits secrets*. Présentation de Miriam Cendrars (Paris: Denoël, 1969), 399.

⁴ Cendrars (whose birth name was Frédéric Sausser) voluntarily enlisted to fight in World War I at the age of 27. Because he was a Swiss citizen, Cendrars fought with the French Foreign Legion as a first-class soldier. The artist Franz Kupka was also a member of this same regiment. During his time at the front, Cendrars' unit moved among three main sites of battle: the Somme from December 1914 to July 1915, in the Vosges from July 18 to September 15, 1915 and the Champagne front where he was seriously wounded on September 28, 1915. For a summary of Cendrars' specific military activity with the Foreign Legion, see Jean Bastier's article "Blaise Cendrars légionnaire (1914-1915)" in Claude Leroy, ed. *Blaise Cendrars et la guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1995), 35-50.

⁵ A fascination with technical language will color all of his later writings on World War I, especially his memoir, *La Main coupée*, published in 1946.

of war witnessing: how to reconcile the terrible reality of the situation with its strange beauty. These are indeed the terms of the comparison, as evidenced in the equation provided by the two final adjectives “terrible” and “beau”: “Le bison d’Amérique n’est pas plus terrible / Ni plus beau.”

The critic Françoise Gerbod notes the troubling comparison between the terrible and the beautiful in her reading of “Shrapnells” but she goes even further, finding that the first poem is actually a call to arms. She writes: “La comparaison épique, l’association du beau et du terrible, l’évocation de la chasse donnent à la guerre une réelle séduction. C’est l’appel aux armes, en cette première strophe.”⁶ Gerbod seizes on the evocation of the hunt, which is underlined in the fourth line of the poem by the word “affût.” This term is distinctly associated with military language, referring to the carriage of a gun, and is also used figuratively in hunting. “Être à l’affût” means to “lie in wait”; a predatory image that interrupts the poem with its isolated placement in the fourth line, as if the word were enacting its meaning, hiding in plain sight in pursuit of the exotic beasts on either side.

The second poem leaves the group of soldiers to focus solely on the narrator. He speaks to himself, and enumerates his body parts as separate entities, entities which should submit to the exigencies of the circumstances: “Je t’ai rogné les ailes, ô mon front explosible / Et tu ne veux pas de képi.” The soldier protagonist is dissected into vulnerable elements: the wings (his arms), the forehead, and the head, which should be covered with a standard-issue military beret or *képi*. However, the language of the body also invokes the language of war: In French the word “front” refers to one’s forehead but also calls to mind the physical place of the war. Furthermore, the action in this line, ‘I clipped your wings, my explosive forehead/front,’ resists a clear

⁶ See “Cendrars et Apollinaire: la guerre est-elle jolie?” in *Blaise Cendrars et la guerre*, 51-63.

image. Visually, the image of wings refers back to the swan of Cameroon, mentioned at the end of the first poem. On a metaphorical level, the poet may be “clipping his wings” or trying to rein himself in because he must focus on the dangers at hand.

The third line uses metonymy – the disembodied image of four hundred thousand feet – to stand in for the presence of the army of men all around, marching on the national route, their feet beating time with the clicking of their mess-tins: “Sur la route nationale 400 mille pieds battent des étincelles aux cliquetis des gamelles.” Just as the line of men stretches far off into the horizon, this line of verse is the longest in the poem, with an abundance of syllables and sounds, especially compared to the terse, two syllable lines which follow. In these lines, “Je pense / Je passe,” the first person voice returns to the poem, solitary, apart once more from the troops as the narrator thinks and passes them by.

He is “cynique et bête”; a “puant bélier.” Gerbod notes how the protagonist has become doubled in this second poem and how this doubling continues with the play on the words “pense,” “passe,” and “bête.” She writes: “C’est le jeu entre penser et passer qui reprend celui du front et du képi. C’est le double sens de passer (marcher et mourir), de bête (stupide et bestial), de bélier (machine de guerre / animal), le mot cynique concentrant toute cette duplicité.”⁷ The double meanings that Gerbod notes, in addition to the metonymy, reinforce the central image of shrapnel. Within the compressed space of seven lines, the poet sets off numerous explosive associations while negotiating the relationship of the narrator to the larger body of men. Just as shrapnel fragments into pieces and renders the body fragmented after contact, the poem creates fragmented views of the body at war.

⁷ Gerbod, “Cendrars et Apollinaire,” 57.

The third poem reconciles the solitary cynicism of the protagonist in the second fragment with the “nous” of the first poem. As in the first fragment, the setting is signaled but here the line begins with a possessive, a grammatical construction which intimately links the narrator with “his” men: “Tous mes hommes sont couchés sous les acacias que les obus saccagent.” Long and thick with the sibilance of –s and –c sounds, the line evokes the whizzing bombs overhead. The length of the line and its sounds also create a dense, lush feeling, not unlike the shelter underneath the acacias that the men are occupying.

The next line reads like an untethered thought; the eyes are lifted upward to the “ciel bleu de la Marne.” Just as the first poem sought distraction by contemplating the bison of America and the swans of Cameroon, the bucolic blue of the sky does not go unnoticed here, even amidst the flying bombs. The reverie continues into the closing lines. The figure of a woman – “Femme” – floats into the poem. Dreaming about women, whether it was their wives, girlfriends, or models from the pages of newspapers and magazines, was the ultimate diversion for many soldiers.⁸ Here, the woman is disembodied, and non-specific. Lacking a first name, she is called only by her gender. She doesn’t provide a full detachment from reality either, as in the next lines her smile recalls an airplane, a war plane no doubt hovering near the site of the attack: “Femme / avec le sourire d’un aéroplane...”

The last line dramatically reverses the aim of the protagonist, and that of his men. The evocation of the exotic places and their creatures and the appearance of a woman’s smiling face are distractions meant to take the soldiers from the place of battle to a *locus amoenus*, a sheltered space where they may forget the terrible reality

⁸ For more on the importance of women for soldiers, see Jean-Yves Le Naour, “‘Mon flingot, c’est Cupidon,’ la sexualité du soldat,” in *Amours, guerres et sexualité 1914-1945*. Sous la direction de François Rouquet, Fabrice Virgili et Danièle Voldman (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 74-81.

that they see before them. Yet, in this line, the narrator realizes that it is he and his men who will be forgotten, that they are perhaps already forgotten: “On nous oublie.” The damning impersonal third-person pronoun, “on,” points a finger at the vast population of civilians at home, away from the war, who can forget the soldiers and their meager fight to stay alive. In the end, the poet cannot provide the power of distance or distraction from the war’s realities. Nor can he prevent others from forgetting him and his men.

“Shrapnells,” with its subtle shifts in places and pronouns, exposes the deep ambivalence that Cendrars harbored toward witnessing the First World War. His conflicted feelings were so strong that they prevented him from further attempting to render his trench experiences into poetry or any other written medium until he was no longer physically engaged at the front. Furthermore, the traumatic event that precipitated the end of his military engagement – he was seriously wounded at the battle of the Ferme Navarin on the Champagne front in the fall of 1915⁹ and had to have his right arm amputated just below the elbow – also had serious repercussions for his writing career.

Following the amputation of his writing hand – the hand with which he had composed the brilliant modernist poem “Pâques à New York” in 1912 – Cendrars spent the rest of the war years and the immediate postwar trying to relearn how to write: how to physically coerce and cajole the left hand into putting words onto paper. He also struggled with how to construct a poetics of witness, and how, or even if, poetry could render into words his war experience. These turbulent years, from 1916 to 1926, have been called the “unclassifiable” years by Cendrars’ critics because the

⁹ The fighting was so fierce that in three hours of combat the regiment lost 608 soldiers out of 1,960 and 20 of 431 officers. Bastier, “Blaise Cendrars légionnaire,” 50.

works that he produced during this time resist easy categorization. Texts such as *La Guerre au Luxembourg* (1916), *J'ai tué* (1918) and *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange Notre Dame* (1919) defy strict genre rules and reveal a hybrid experimentation with verse, often extending the poetic line into other forms, such as the *récit* with *J'ai tué*, or film scenario with *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange Notre Dame*. These works also bend the boundaries between the autobiographical and the fictional, making their classification even more difficult.¹⁰

Moreover, with the passage of time, Cendrars went on to mythologize the loss of his right hand, and he would equate this bodily loss and the ensuing process of relearning with his decision to give up poetry entirely. Liberally revising the past, Cendrars later encapsulated this renunciation into a few key moments, which he retold frequently in his correspondence and personal interviews. In this later retelling, he pinpoints the moment of his decision to reject poetry to 1917, after he abandoned the manuscript of poems he was composing. He described this moment to Michel Manoll in 1950: "En 1917, j'ai quitté Paris sans esprit de retour, après avoir cloué dans une caisse le manuscrit de *Au cœur du monde*. ... J'avais pris congé de la Poésie. ... Je vous parle de la poésie. Du malentendu de la poésie moderne."¹¹ His infamous "congé" was not just a retreat from poetry as a viable form of literature, but a rejection of the "malentendu" of modern poetry in general.

However, in reality, the rupture from verse was not quite as stark as he painted it, for Cendrars continued to write and experiment with verse forms at least until the

¹⁰ See *Blaise Cendrars, les inclassables 1917-1926* in *La Revue des Lettres modernes*, série Blaise Cendrars, no 1, (Paris: Minard, 1986). Other texts that date from these years not treated here are: *Le Panama ou les aventures de mes sept oncles* (1918), *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* (1919), *Les Sonnets dénaturés* (collected and published in 1944 but written during this period), *Kodak* (1924) and *Feuilles de route* (1926).

¹¹ *Blaise Cendrars vous parle...* Propos recueillis par Michel Manoll. Montage (1952), in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 8 (Paris: Denoël, 2001), 33. Quoted in Laurence Campa, *Les Poètes de la Grande Guerre. Expérience combattante et activité poétique* (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2010), 51.

1920s. Ultimately, *Kodak* (1924) and *Feuilles de route* (1924-1926) were his last published collections of poetry. Cendrars insisted that he never wrote verse again, although throughout his life he continually returned to and reworked in prose the experiences of World War I.

Although Cendrars transformed the loss of his right hand into a significant symbolic event that led to his rejection of poetry in favor of prose, he never recounted the actual episode in which he lost his hand, nor his amputation, in any of his works.¹² Despite several false starts with provocative titles such as *J'ai saigné* and *La main coupée*, Cendrars could not approach this traumatic episode in any written medium.¹³ In fact, the dismembered hand from the title of *La Main coupée* doesn't belong to Cendrars but rather mysteriously appears one day toward the end of the novel as a group of soldiers sit in the grass, awaiting "la soupe":

Nous avions bondi et regardions avec stupeur, à trois pas de Faval, planté dans l'herbe comme une grande fleur épanouie, un lys rouge, un bras humain tout ruisselant de sang, un bras droit sectionné au-dessus du coude et dont la main encore vivante fouissait le sol des doigts comme pour y prendre racine et dont la tige sanglante se balançait doucement avant de tenir son équilibre. ...Le ciel était vide. D'où venait cette main coupée ?¹⁴

Fallen from the sky, the disembodied hand bears a strong resemblance to Cendrars' missing hand, "un bras droit sectionné au-dessus du coude," but the author resolutely refuses to own up to this injury. Instead, he transmutes the hand into the symbolic, transforming it into "un lys rouge," which will remain tantalizingly, for

¹² In this way, Cendrars' silence toward his amputation conforms to a more general phenomenon of silence among the war's amputees and other wounded as observed by Sophie Delaporte in "Le Corps et la Parole des Mutilés de la Grande Guerre," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 205 (January-March 2005), 5-14. For his part, Norton Cru also notes the silence on behalf of many war wounded, though he shrouds this silence in sacredness: "La souffrance physique des blessés est sacrée..." *Témoins*, 595.

¹³ For a detailed account of Cendrars' failed attempts to write this experience, see Claude Leroy "D'une main à l'autre," *Continent Cendrars*, no. 5, 1990, 33-40.

¹⁴ *La Main coupée* (Paris: Denoël, 1946), 409.

many readers, as “l’énigme de la métamorphose d’une main morte en écriture nouvelle.”¹⁵

The aim here is not to reinterpret this vital event and its transmutation in Cendrars’ oeuvre¹⁶ but to focus on the avowedly abrupt switch from poetry to prose, for it is clear that Cendrars continued to engage with poetry and the poetic form in diverse ways throughout his career. Laurence Campa observes that Cendrars’ retreat from poetry may have had more to do with his desire to eschew the avant-garde than with the poetic form itself:

Cette prise de congé concerne essentiellement l’activité poétique telle que l’avaient conçue les avant-gardes et exercée Cendrars dans les années 1913, puis prolongée, quoique d’une tout autre façon, le surréalisme dans l’entre-deux-guerres. Elle est un adieu à l’ancienne manière de Cendrars, celle des *Pâques* et du *Transsibérien*, au nom de l’amour, de la modernité, et des conséquences mortifères de la notion d’avant-garde. Elle n’est pas censée concerner la poésie comme activité de l’esprit et du langage, ni le poème comme genre.¹⁷

Her distinction between the formal and the social is important here for in fact Cendrars did not fully abandon poetry after the war. Rather, he explored new ways to work with hybrid poetic forms. Through a wide-ranging experimentation, he rendered different aspects of the war experience in a variety of texts.

La Guerre au Luxembourg, *La Fin du monde filmée par l’Ange Notre Dame* and *J’ai tué*, all produced in the thick of the ‘unclassifiable years,’ demand to be reexamined, for they reveal how Cendrars attempted to construct a poetics of witness in response to his lived experiences as a soldier of the Great War. His choice of form,

¹⁵ Leroy, “D’une main à l’autre,” 38.

¹⁶ Several other critics have already attempted this reading, including Leroy in his text *La main de Cendrars* (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1996) and Campa’s chapter “Le Poème mutilé: De *La Guerre au Luxembourg* à *J’ai tué*,” where her intention is to “saisir dans son immédiateté le poids de la mutilation dans l’écriture poétique pour montrer comment le corps et la blessure cherchent chez Cendrars, entre 1916 et 1918, un statut et une fonction dans le champ du poème et de la poésie,” *Poètes de la Grande Guerre*, 52.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the material aspects of these works, and how these texts represent the figure of the poet all contribute to his poetics.

This chapter will follow Cendrars' circuitous path from mobilized soldier to war amputee to film production assistant to famed novelist through the texts that he created. After "Shrapnells," his initial attempt to witness the war in poetry from the trenches, Cendrars composed *La Guerre au Luxembourg*, a poignant book-length poem that explores his return to Paris from the front lines. After this second attempt at verse, Cendrars moved increasingly toward more hybrid forms, choosing genres which prioritize the image such as the poetic screenplay of *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange Notre Dame*. Finally, with the drafting of *J'ai tué*, Cendrars pushed his questioning of the poetic form into the realm of prose, creating a taut, powerful work that directly addresses his war experience.

Emphatically not a Soldier-Poet

"Qu'est-ce que tu faisais dans le civil?
– Je suis poète.
Et je me mordis la langue de m'être coupé."
– *La Main coupée*¹⁸

Unlike Apollinaire, who actively discussed and wrote about the stakes of being a writer during wartime, Cendrars claimed to reject, from the beginning, the notion that soldiers should be writers. However, Cendrars only came to articulate his rejection of this double role much later, in the shadow of the Second World War, when he wrote a series of memoirs – *L'Homme foudroyé* (1945), *La Main coupée*

¹⁸ *La Main coupée*, 162.

(1946), *Bourlinguer* (1948) and *Le Lotissement du ciel* (1949).¹⁹ For Cendrars, it seems as if the experience of the Second World War finally liberated him to approach his experience as a soldier in the First. In particular, his vocal objections to writing while serving in the trenches warrant a chronological detour.

Though it was written in 1946, *La Main coupée* focuses on Cendrars' time as a soldier in 1915. In this text, Cendrars directly discusses his decision to not write during his time in the trenches. He makes this ideological position very clear, avowing:

Au régiment, je restais un inconnu. Nul ne savait que j'étais un écrivain. Et aujourd'hui (1946) je ne fais pas encore partie des *Écrivains anciens combattants*. Au front, j'étais soldat. J'ai tiré des coups de fusil. Je n'ai pas écrit.²⁰

In this loosely autobiographical work, he continually returns to the notion that being a soldier precludes being a writer, a viewpoint that counters the movement in the trenches that sought to enact the opposite response, transforming soldiers into writers specifically because of their access to experience on the front lines. To demarcate the cross-over from soldier to writer, Cendrars placed an emphasis on one's *métier*, on what one did to earn a living "dans le civil." One such symptom of his focus on *métier* is his compulsive habit of making Whitmanesque lists detailing the professions of the

¹⁹ Cendrars actually began writing *La Main coupée* dedicated to reliving his war experience with a draft of several pages in 1918. Although he abandoned the project for almost three decades, it is significant that its genesis originated in the thick of the unclassifiable years. See *La Main coupée de 1918*, published in *Blaise Cendrars et la guerre*, 255-260.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 142. Georges Duhamel provides a compelling counterexample to Cendrars. Though Duhamel initially renounced the act of writing to devote all of his energies to his work as a doctor in the French Army during the war, he came to revise this position, writing later in *La Pesée des Âmes* (1949): "...je me sentis saisi, et de manière impérieuse, par le besoin de peindre, de narrer, sans doute, mais surtout par un grand désir de ne pas laisser s'enfoncer à jamais dans l'oubli certains traits, certains mots qui me semblaient exprimer assez bien l'âme des hommes en guerre et, plus étroitement, les pensées des soldats qui vivaient sous mes yeux en tête à tête avec la douleur...Et voilà qu'une voix, soudain, me disait à l'oreille que ma tâche était sans doute non seulement de soigner ces hommes, mais de raconter leurs épreuves, de faire une déposition pour eux devant la conscience du monde." Quoted in Campa, *Poètes de la Grande Guerre*, 105. Moreover, Duhamel also abandoned poetry in the years following World War I (*Élégies*, published in 1920, was his last published collection of poems) in favor of prose.

men he encountered during his time in the trenches. In the beginning of *La Main coupée*, he describes his unit of the French Foreign Legion:

Et dire que nous étions tous des étrangers, des fils d'étrangers, certes, mais à quelques exceptions près tous ceux qui tenaient le crachoir étaient nés à Paris. Il n'y avait pas un seul paysan parmi nous, rien que des petits artisans des faubourgs, tailleurs, fourreurs, tapissiers, doreurs sur cuir, peintres en lettres ou en voiture, orfèvres, et des pipelets, des musiciens de boîtes de nuit, des coureurs cyclistes, des maquereaux et des barbeaux, les petits-fils des révolutionnaires de 1848 venus de tous les coins d'Europe garnir les barricades de juillet ou ceux des derniers compagnons faisant leur tour de France, et qui s'étaient fixés à Paris parce que bons ouvriers, gagnant largement leur vie et ayant trouvé femme ; aussi quelques fils de nobles... ; plus quelques intellectuels de Montparnasse que, comme moi...²¹

For Cendrars, a definite line can be drawn between what one did before the war and what one does during the war (an emphatic contradiction to Apollinaire's wartime struggle to define the role of the poet during wartime and his personal quest to maintain his sense as a poet from within the trenches). Cendrars also uses these professional details, traces of the civilian life that these men had left behind, to starkly show how most of the soldiers were dramatically unprepared for the reality they would encounter once in the trenches and under fire.

This passage is particularly telling. Just before launching into the list of his comrades' *métiers*, Cendrars asserts that the argot of the streets of Paris makes for the best poetry, a remark that clearly aligns him against the idea that poetry should be comprised of a precious, arcane vocabulary, like that of the symbolists. He swoons: "...et je chérissais déjà mes camarades rien que pour leur parler. Quelle poésie dans la bouche du peuple, cette frangine des faubourgs!"²²

²¹ *La Main coupée*, 31-2.

²² *Ibid.*, 31. After this line he remarks: "Il n'est bon bec que de Paris." This phrase is important for Cendrars' conception of poetry and he quotes it again during a series of radio interviews in 1950. After virulently criticizing the Surrealists for their lack of a sense of humor, he states: "La Poésie est dans la rue. Elle va bras dessus, bras dessous avec le Rire. Elle le mène boire, à la source, dans les bistros de

Cendrars often returns to the idea that translating lived experience into writing, particularly into poetry, can place an event at a remove from reality. At one point in *La Main coupée*, he describes the surreal night when he ran into Garnéro, a fellow soldier from his regiment, in Montmartre ten years after the war. In the text, the memory of this surprise meeting comes on the heels of a description of combat that resulted in the supposed death and burial of Garnéro, affectionately called Chaude-Pisse by Cendrars and the other men of the unit. There is barely a transition:

...Nous avons enterré Chaude-Pisse avec son lièvre.

Dix années plus tard. J'avais passé la nuit à Montmartre. Au lieu de rentrer chez moi, je m'étais installé à la terrasse du bar-tabac qui fait le coin du boulevard des Batignolles et de la rue du Mont-Dore pour boire un dernier verre. ... A cette heure indécise le large boulevard paraissait vide. ... Et tout à coup mon attention fut attirée par un fourgon noir, attelé d'un grand cheval blanc, qui remontait le boulevard désert. Le cheval allait au pas. La roue arrière du fourgon raclait la bordure du trottoir. Les pattes du cheval faisaient gicler l'eau du ruisseau. Les balayeurs matinaux se mettaient à l'ouvrage. *Il y avait quelque chose d'irréel, d'extraordinairement poétique* dans ce véhicule qui s'en venait à contre-jour et du coffre profond duquel s'élevait une voix aigrette criant : « – Sciure !...Sciure !... »...²³

As Cendrars recounts, Garnéro recognized him from his position on top of the large white horse and Cendrars learned, happily, that Garnéro was never dead, but had been buried alive on that fateful night during the war. In describing this strange moment in the early morning hours of postwar Paris, Cendrars links the adjectives “irréel” and “poétique,” a significant association that suggests Cendrars found the poetic to be indicative of something beyond the real.

Furthermore, just before deploying these two adjectives, he sets up a stark contrast between the poetic and the early morning street sweepers who had begun to set about their work: “Les balayeurs matinaux se mettaient à l'ouvrage.” With the

quartier, où le rire des petites gens est si savoureux et le langage qui leur coule des lèvres, si beau. ... Il n'est bon bec que de Paris...” *Blaise Cendrars vous parle*, 564.

²³ *La Main coupée*, 127-8 (Italics mine).

elegance of this sentence, the simplicity of the image of the street sweepers taking up their daily task (the word “ouvrage” carries connotations with art and “œuvre” as well) underlines the differences perceived by Cendrars between the real and the surreal, or poetic.

And yet Cendrars only came to vocalize this attitude toward the activity of wartime writing decades after World War I. With this lapse affording him the benefit of time and distance, he constructed a philosophical stance against a poetics of witness anchored “sur le vif,” as the editorials of the trench newspapers during 1914–1918 so persuasively exclaimed. Unlike Apollinaire, who did not live long enough to modulate his reasons for writing *Calligrammes*, Cendrars spent many years attempting to reconcile his literary output with the Great War. As Gerbod states, “Apollinaire fut donc un poète de guerre, alors que Cendrars est un poète qui a mis pendant la guerre la poésie entre parenthèse.”²⁴ The resulting poetics of witness *à la longue durée* conveniently fits into the personal myth that Cendrars constructed for himself in which he abandons poetry in the wake of the war. In this sense, Cendrars provides a poetics of witness that evolved over time whereas Apollinaire struggled “sur le champ” (quite literally) to reconcile his position as a writer and a soldier.

Indeed the figure of Apollinaire looms over Cendrars’ explanations of his position to abstain from writing during wartime. In a series of radio interviews that he recorded in 1950 with Michel Manoll, Cendrars returns to his stance on writing and the Great War by criticizing Apollinaire for producing ‘pretty little poems’ from the trenches. First, he reiterates his stance as someone who strove to remain emphatically apart from the group of “écrivains-combattants”:

²⁴ Gerbod, “Cendrars et Apollinaire,” 52.

C'est pourquoi je n'ai jamais fait partie – et ne puis pas encore en faire partie aujourd'hui – des écrivains-combattants. On est combattant ou l'on est écrivain. Quand on écrit, on ne combat pas à coups de fusil et quand on tire des coups de fusil, on n'écrit pas, on écrit après. On aurait bien mieux fait d'écrire avant et d'empêcher tout ça...

In this statement, Cendrars definitively shows that he disapproved of the popular phenomenon of the *écrivains-combattants* and that he did not sympathize with the notion that every man who experienced the war should also pick up a pen and begin to record his experiences for the sake of history and posterity.

When Manoll mentions Apollinaire, Cendrars responds:

Je puis vous dire que la guerre ne m'a pas pu inspirer au point de vue poésie. Ce qui m'épate, c'est qu'un Apollinaire, par exemple – et il y en a eu d'autres depuis, par exemple, Aragon, le 10 mai 1940 – a pu faire des rimes dans les tranchées, écrire des gentilles petites poésies, des gentilles petites choses, des gentils petits paysages, des gentils petits bonshommes.²⁵

Cendrars' tone and repeated use of diminutives – for example, “gentilles petites poésies” – makes his opinion apparent: Writing about the war from the trenches is an artistically compromising endeavor, especially if the result finds beauty or portrays the war in a positive light. For Cendrars, no poetry, no beauty, could emerge out of circumstances so horrible. He reminds himself of this fact at times during the course of *La Main coupée*: “Je m'empresse de dire que la guerre ça n'est pas beau...”²⁶

However, Cendrars only arrived at this view after many years, and some false starts where he did attempt to write about the war in poetry, as seen with the three short poems that comprise “Shrapnells. It is imperative, then, to return to those poetic works that Cendrars did compose and publish during and immediately following the war to gain a more accurate sense of his poetics in evolution. Despite the seductive story of his decision in 1917 to never write poetry again, following the loss of his

²⁵ *Blaise Cendrars vous parle*, 646-647.

²⁶ *La Main coupée*, 93.

right hand, texts like *La Guerre au Luxembourg* show that Cendrars' abdication of poetic witness was a slow transition out of poetry into prose, via an orientation toward the image as a primary source of poetic power.

La Guerre au Luxembourg

“Les deux dernières pages de *La Guerre au Luxembourg* sont parmi les plus belles choses que j’ai jamais lues.”

– Max Jacob²⁷

Cendrars was evacuated following the bloody battle at the Ferme Navarin on September 28, 1915 when his right arm was seriously injured after being hit by a machine gun bullet. Following amputation, he recovered at a military hospital before he was eventually discharged, whereupon he returned to Paris at the end of 1915. He underwent a second operation related to the amputation in February 1916. By spring, he began the composition of *La Guerre au Luxembourg*, marking it one of the first published works that Cendrars composed with his left hand.

The text was published with illustrations by the Polish artist Moïse Kisling, a fellow soldier in the Foreign Legion who had been at the Cendrars' side during the battle at Navarin and was wounded there as well. As Michèle Touret remarks, the text is “à la fois un texte et un livre; ceci est important dans la mesure où son ancrage dans un moment et une situation fait partie de l’œuvre elle-même.”²⁸ Yet, despite the fresh, shared memory of battle underpinning their personal relationship, one is initially hard-pressed to find any explicit imprint of the war in the artwork. At first glance, the illustrations exude an air of quiet. Kisling drew in black and white, in a frail, almost

²⁷ Quoted in Jay Bochner, *Blaise Cendrars: Discovery and Recreation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 126.

²⁸ Michèle Touret, “Manipulations poétiques: autour de *La Guerre au Luxembourg* de Blaise Cendrars,” *Études françaises*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2005), 111.

precious, figurative style. The font, a special concern of Cendrars, matches this attenuated feeling.²⁹

Upon reflection, however, the drawings reveal a deeper air of unrest. Only children, their mothers and the garden's municipal guard figure in the vast empty space in the heart of the city, the Jardin du Luxembourg. The lack of other people, particularly men, recalls the overall depopulation of the capital city during the war. Immense trees overshadow the tiny figures at play, evoking a feeling of latent helplessness. The interplay between the drawings and the text becomes more meaningful as one registers their turbulence upon closer inspection.³⁰

Cendrars evinces clear ambivalence about *what* to call this work. In the poem's dedication, which reflects once more Cendrars' considered use of typescript, the words are carefully positioned on the page so that their shape evokes a fleur-de-lys (a potent visual symbol of France). The dedication, similar to the one at the beginning of Apollinaire's *Case d'Armons*, also authenticates the work by acknowledging Cendrars' time served in the military by the naming of his "camarades":

CES ENFANTINES
sont dédiées à mes camarades
de la Légion Étrangère
Mieczyslaw KOHN, Polonais
tué à Frise ;
Victor CHAPMAN, Américain
tué à Verdun ;
Xavier de CARVALHO, Portugais
tué à la ferme de Navarin ;

²⁹ Happily, Denoël included Kisling's drawings with *La Guerre au Luxembourg* in Cendrars' *Poésies complètes*. Although first editions of this text are extremely difficult to find today (only 1,000 copies were printed), the Bibliothèque Historique de la ville de Paris contains Apollinaire's personal copy of the book, which Cendrars presented to his friend as a Christmas present. In the front, there is a poignant inscription, written in crude handwriting (a sign of Cendrars' early difficulty writing with his left hand): "A Guillaume Apollinaire / Son Ami / Blaise Cendrars / Noël 1916." Fonds Adéma, Bibliothèque de Guillaume Apollinaire, Bibliothèque Historique de la ville de Paris.

³⁰ For more on the illustrations, see Henryk Chudak's article, "Kisling, peintre d'origine polonaise dans l'entourage de Cendrars," in *Blaise Cendrars et les arts*, Maria Teresa de Freitas, Claude Leroy and Edmond Nogacki, eds. (Valenciennes: Presses universitaires de Valenciennes, 2002), 119-129.

Engagés Volontaires

MORTS
POUR LA FRANCE³¹

The dedication follows the conventions in play for works written by war *témoins* by providing specific verification of the author's war experience. The names of several different, bloody battles are listed (Frise, Verdun, and "la ferme Navarin," where Cendrars was wounded) and the author's military unit is given. Cendrars' dead comrades from the Foreign Legion are named and he goes so far as to make explicit their nationality, before employing the traditional phrase soon to be inscribed on a vast majority of the World War I *monuments aux morts*: "Morts pour la France."³²

Yet, with the term "enfantines," the dedication deviates from more conventional ones and the word carries a strange charge when paired with the notice of the deaths. Additionally, by calling his work "ces enfantines," Cendrars distances the work from his other published poetry up to this point, mainly *Pâques à New York* (1912) and *La Prose du transsibérien de la Petite Jehanne de France* (1913). By employing the term as a noun, he allows its quality of childishness to stand in for its literary genre; rather than dedicating "ce poème," Cendrars offers "ces enfantines."

The critic Michel Décaudin notes a bitter allusion in Cendrars' use of the word "enfantines" to describe his poem:

C'est un premier compte réglé avec la guerre, non par un affrontement brutal de ses réalités, comme il le fera dans *J'ai tué*, mais dans un contrepoint de parodie implicitement cruelle, que souligne le sous-titre

³¹ *La Guerre au Luxembourg*, in *Poésies complètes avec 41 poèmes inédits*. In *Tout autour d'aujourd'hui, Œuvres complètes de Blaise Cendrars, volume 1*. Textes présentés et annotés par Claude Leroy. Paris: Denoël, 2001-2006, 98.

³² See Sonia Batten, "Exploring a language of grief in First World War headstone inscriptions," in *Contested Objects: material memories of the Great War* (New York: Routledge, 2009) and Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).

d'*Enfantines*, amère allusion aux tendres *Enfantines* du temps de la paix publiées par Larbaud.³³

Décaudin uses the term 'counterpoint' to describe the parody working at a deep level in the text. The musical term is apt; the text plays off a sense of musicality, with a shifting chorus of children's voices that shout and interject. The contrast between their innocent game and the war raging around them becomes the main tension animating the poem.

Additionally, with the invocation of "enfantines," the poem stands as a critique of Parisian civilian culture as Cendrars perceived it after his return to the city. The tension between the home front and the front lines was widely registered in numerous novels, letters, and newspaper articles of the time. For Cendrars, some of this tension may have derived from the Parisian public's appetite for frivolous, childlike diversions during wartime. For instance, the January-February 1917 issue of the *Mercur de France* attests to the popularity of juvenile distractions in an art review dedicated to the "Exposition des jouets" at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris. Similarly, in his impressionistic cultural column, "La vie anecdotique," Apollinaire touched upon the strange disconnect between life at war and life at home as evidenced through the growing popularity of children's toys:

Une de mes premières impressions de Paris, lorsque j'y revins blessé, fut de surprendre, au téléphone de l'hôpital où l'on me pansait, cette bribe de phrase : « ...l'industrie admirable des poupées... »
Qui parlait ? je ne sais et peu importe : « C'est tout de même un peu fort, pensais-je, de s'occuper de poupées en ce moment. »
Depuis, mon opinion s'est bien modifiée à cet égard.
La poupée de Paris qui montrait la mode à toute l'Europe ne faisait-elle pas beaucoup pour le prestige de la France ?³⁴

³³ Michel Décaudin, "Profond aujourd'hui ou bilan de 'l'année terrible,'" *Blaise Cendrars, les inclassables 1917-1926*, 27-36

³⁴ *Mercur de France*, janvier-février 1917, tome 119.

Imagining this scene – Apollinaire, probably still in a great deal of pain, is being bandaged up at the hospital and he overhears someone talking on the telephone about the ‘admirable doll industry’ – only highlights the odd incongruity that a soldier recently returned from the trenches must have registered when confronting some of the more trivial activities and cultural expositions that preoccupied the Parisian public during the war years. While Apollinaire, with characteristic patriotic aplomb, turned the comment into an insight that glorifies French culture, Cendrars used this term to subtly deplore the “enfantine” culture that welcomed him back home from the trenches.

Finally, Cendrars’ work shares its theme with the subject of a 1915 short film that played during the war, called *Paris pendant la guerre*.³⁵ Directed by Henri Diamant-Berger, the film is comprised of several different scenarios showing humorous takes on life during wartime. One of these vignettes is called “La Guerre des gosses” and it shows footage of children play-acting different scenes of war.³⁶ The segment was punctuated by illustrations from Francisque Poulbot, a popular cartoonist, whose name would become synonymous with the sentimental Montmartre street children that he portrayed in newspaper illustrations and cartoons of this time period. The film is clearly meant to be funny and even has several jokes at the expense of those serving in the army. (One sketch called “En permission” chronicles the drunken adventures of two *poilus* while on leave in Paris.) The silly

³⁵ This short film is included as extra material on the Flicker Alley DVD release of *J'accuse*.

³⁶ Children playing at war were also the subjects of an astonishing series of photographs taken by *L'Illustration* photojournalist Léon Gimpel. Also inspired by Poulbot, Gimpel posed Parisian children in scenes of war play for color photographs in August and September of 1915. Though the photographs were not published by *L'Illustration*, they were displayed at a prominent Parisian photography gallery in early 1916. See Jennifer E. Berry’s article, “Little Soldiers: A French photojournalist captured Paris children playing at war in the dark days of WWI,” *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, 23.3 (Spring 2011), 50-58. The similarities between these photographs and the scenes described by Cendrars, as well as their shared time frame, suggest Cendrars may have seen these photographs, and possibly had them in mind when writing *La Guerre au Luxembourg*.

preoccupations and diversions pursued by the Parisian public equates them with the children that Cendrars describes in his poem, making for an unflattering portrait of the capital of a nation at war.

La Guerre au Luxembourg opens with the sound of voices. One cannot immediately tell who is speaking but the words are simplistic, sing-songy:

“Une, deux, une deux
Et tout ira bien...”
Ils chantaient³⁷

The fourth line introduces a liminal figure:

Un blessé battait la mesure avec sa béquille
Sous le bandeau son œil
Le sourire du Luxembourg.

In contrast to the singing group, a wounded man watches from the periphery, keeping time with his cane. The wounded man evokes Cendrars himself, a recently wounded soldier, ill at ease with his amputated arm as he interacts with the civilian public upon his discharge from the Army.³⁸ The presence of this wounded figure serves as a sobering element throughout the poem, and he continually distinguishes the real war from the fictive war recounted in the Jardin du Luxembourg.

As the poem continues, the scene gradually comes into clearer focus:

Et les fumées des usines de munitions
Au-dessus les frondaisons d’or
Pâle automne fin d’été
On ne peut rien oublier
Il n’y a que les petits enfants qui jouent à la guerre³⁹

The smoke from the munitions factories rising above the golden foliage of the park on a late summer, early autumn day in Paris is another subtle reminder of the

³⁷ *La Guerre au Luxembourg, Poésies complètes*, 101.

³⁸ In her reading of this poem, Campa squarely locates Cendrars, more specifically the wounded Cendrars, in this figure of the *blessé*, *Poètes de la Grande Guerre*, 54.

³⁹ *La Guerre au Luxembourg, Poésies complètes*, 101.

distance between the war's front lines and the home front, where the summer is slowly winding to a close. Despite the menacing clouds in the distance signaling the place where war munitions are produced, the scene in the Jardin du Luxembourg is calm, beautiful even.

The following line, "On ne peut rien oublier," sounds a mournful note and has a bodiless quality. It could be read as a sad admonition coming from the wounded man who stands to the side, a man who knows that only children could 'play at war.' The preoccupation with forgetting returns to one of the main themes of "Shrapnells," which Cendrars closes with the haunting line "On nous oublie." The fear of being forgotten, particularly as a soldier, underpins many of his wartime texts. In a sense, this concern turns on its head the rhetoric of the trench newspapers that attempted to make writers out of ordinary soldiers by warning them of the imperfection of memory to preserve their war experiences. In the trenches, men were told to write so as not to forget; their voices were needed to bolster the enterprise of history. Cendrars writes so as not to be forgotten, as just one voice plaintively looking for acknowledgement and recognition. As an amputee on the fringes of wartime society, whose wound was seen but whose pain often not voiced,⁴⁰ the desire for recognition speaks even more powerfully in this poem through the figure of the *blesé*.

The poem persists with a kaleidoscopic shift in voices and place names of the war:

La Somme Verdun
Mon grand frère est aux Dardanelles
Comme c'est beau
Un fusil
Cris voix flûtées

MOI !

⁴⁰ Delaporte observes: "Le mutilé n'a pas apporté de témoignages, s'inscrivant ainsi à contre-courant de la vague de publications d'Anciens combattants de l'entre-deux-guerres," "Le Corps et la Parole des mutilés," 5.

Cris
Les mains se tendent
Je ressemble à papa
On a aussi des canons⁴¹

MOI !

Cendrars heightens the cacophony of the scene by making the infamous geography of the Great War echo and rhyme: La Somme with Verdun, for example. On the right margin of the page, the effect of a second or third voice chiming in is created with the simple interjection, “moi!” The children interject with “moi” repeatedly, clamoring to hold the rifle or to play with the cannons; they even note the crucial importance of mimicking the war as they play. One of the voices boasts: “Je ressemble à papa / On a aussi des canons.” The children’s preoccupation with capturing the verisimilitude of the war in their play reveals the poem’s global concern with war and representation, underlining what the critic Rino Cortiana observes, “l’image de la guerre est aussi importante que la guerre réelle.”⁴²

As the scene develops, Cendrars painstakingly delineates the difference between the real war and the play war that the children are engaged in:

On part à l’assaut du garde qui seul a un sabre authentique
Et on le tue à force de rire
Sur les palmiers encaissés le soleil pend
Médaille Militaire⁴³

In this context where small children are brandishing make-believe weapons, the guard’s ‘authentic’ saber – and the fact that it goes unused on his belt – is an essential detail which once again reiterates the realm of make-believe where the children reside, and underlines just how far this scene remains from the real trenches. Even the term for sword, “sabre,” appears old-fashioned, as a throwback to an older era and not in keeping with the current technology of World War I.

⁴¹ *La Guerre au Luxembourg, Poésies complètes*, 101.

⁴² Rino Cortiana, “La guerre et *La Guerre au Luxembourg*” in *Blaise Cendrars et la guerre*, 111.

⁴³ *La Guerre au Luxembourg, Poésies complètes*, 101.

Later in the poem, Cendrars returns to the image of the children undertaking the reproduction or representation of the war as a serious aim:

A présent on consulte les journaux illustrés
Les photographies
On se souvient de ce que l'on a vu au cinéma
Ça devient plus sérieux
On crie et l'on cogne mieux que Guignol⁴⁴

Guignol was an excellent source of inspiration for the children to turn to in order to glean information about staging the war. Several puppet theatres in Paris changed their repertoire during wartime to stage plays specifically about the war. The mainstream newspaper *L'Opinion* profiled one such theatre in the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont that inaugurated a popular series titled "Le Guignol et la Guerre," boasting a whole suite of war-themed shows: "Guignol dans les tranchées," "Guignol contre Guillaume," "Guignol en Alsace," "Guignol s'en va-t-en guerre," "Guignol cuistot," and "le capitaine Guignol." The puppeteer, giving credence to Cendrars' poem, confirmed the popularity of his series with the young crowds, noting "Ils n'ont que la guerre en tête."⁴⁵ For many of these young children, the war occupied their total attention because it had radically reconfigured their domestic lives; within a majority of French households, fathers and brothers were missing, gone to the front lines, leaving behind anguished mothers to assume life's daily tasks.⁴⁶ Once more, these historical realities, which are woven deftly into the poem, show how attuned Cendrars

⁴⁴ *La Guerre au Luxembourg, Poésies complètes*, 103.

⁴⁵ Gustave Fréjaville, "Marionnettes de guerre," *L'Opinion* (2 juin 1917), 512-3.

⁴⁶ Manon Pignot notes: "Mais les enfants sont aussi des victimes indirectes de la guerre: presque tous ont un père, un frère, un oncle au front. Chacun est donc susceptible de voir revenir un parent blessé ou de devenir orphelin. ...L'orphelin de guerre est un nouveau type d'enfant à secourir; il constitue désormais une catégorie à part. Avec 350 000 orphelins en Grande-Bretagne, 1 100 000 en France, plus d'un million en Allemagne, c'est toute une génération qui va grandir sans père," "Les enfants," in *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre 1914-1918. Histoire et culture*. Sous la direction de Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau et Jean-Jacques Becker (Paris: Bayard, 2004), 636.

was to the transmission of the war into forms of popular culture and how detrimental this transmission could be.

In *La Guerre au Luxembourg*, Cendrars illustrates that the materials available to those on the home front – newspapers, photographs and movies – all helped civilians to visualize the war.⁴⁷ Cendrars is one of the first writers of World War I to call attention to the synthesis between the images produced about the war and how others, both soldiers and civilians, manufactured their own war experiences.⁴⁸ All that the children needed to artfully and seriously play at war were the newspapers, photographs and violence that they learned to copy from their first trips to the cinema and Guignol in the park. The battlefield where their brothers and fathers fought could be conjured up as easily in the Jardin du Luxembourg as on the film sets of the era; “pour certains, la guerre est une suite d’images qui stimulent l’imagination.”⁴⁹ In this view, the lines between real experience and manufactured experience were easily blurred. It makes sense, then, that Cendrars rejected war writing for this very reason.

In the poem’s last stanza, Cendrars continues his examination of how the war is represented. With these last lines, he envisions how the war’s end will be staged with a sweeping, almost giddy, use of the future tense:

A PARIS
Le jour de la Victoire quand les soldats reviendront...
Tout le monde voudra LES voir
Le soleil ouvrira de bonne heure comme un marchand de nougat un jour
de fête
Il fera printemps au Bois de Boulogne ou du côté de Meudon

⁴⁷ The slogan displayed on the posters for the “Le Guignol et la Guerre” series was “A la guerre comme à la guerre,” a pithy phrase which encapsulates the desire for representational forms about war. The author of the article likens this urge for representation to a civic duty: “N’est-ce pas la vraie formule du courage civique en ces jours difficiles ?” Fréjaille, “Marionnettes de guerre,” 512.

⁴⁸ In fact, Cendrars’ intuition anticipates Paul Virilio who notes many years later in *Guerre et cinéma*: “il n’y a plus de vision directe, en quelque 150 ans, le champ de tir s’est transformé en champ de tournage, le champ de bataille est devenu un plateau de cinéma longtemps interdit aux civils.” *Guerre et cinéma I. Logistique de la perception* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 15.

⁴⁹ Touret, “Manipulations poétiques,” 115.

Toutes les automobiles seront parfumées et les pauvres chevaux
mangeront des fleurs
Aux fenêtres les petites orphelines de la guerre auront toutes de belles
robes patriotiques
Sur les marronniers des boulevards les photographes à califourchon
braqueront leur œil à déclic
On fera cercle autour de l'opérateur du cinéma qui mieux qu'un mangeur
de serpents engloutira le cortège historique
Dans l'après-midi
Les blessés accrocheront leurs Médailles à l'Arc-de-Triomphe et
rentreront à la maison sans boiter⁵⁰

The stanza begins in all capital letters, firmly noting the setting, “À PARIS.” Cendrars then places an emphasis on the necessity of *seeing* the soldiers as they parade home. As he hinted in the previous lines, they had disappeared from view of the civilians during the war and now everyone will clamor to see them. For seeing is believing, isn't it? The next few lines portray a lovely scene – Technicolor *avant la lettre* – of the Victory Day parade, with the narrator of the poem playing the role of a film director: The sunlight will cooperate and the set designers will make sure that spring is in the air. All of the cars will be cleaned, perfumed even, and the poor, hungry horses will eat flowers. The costume designer will see to it that the little orphans of the war will all be decked out in beautiful, patriotic dresses. The photographers will straddle the trees lining the boulevards with their ‘eyes’ ready to snap the scene. Cendrars notes that the cameraman, thronged by people, will consume this historic scene better than a snake-swallower. In managing all of these sunny details, the poet’s role becomes more like that of a film director, focused on creating an event, rather than the traditional role of the trench writer, whose goal was to fix these events down before they dissipated in the memory.

In the afternoon, Scene two: The wounded will hang their medals on the Arc-de-Triomphe and then will miraculously walk home without limping. This last detail

⁵⁰ *La Guerre au Luxembourg, Poésies complètes*, 107.

obliquely nods once more to Cendrars and his wounded condition – both physically and emotionally – after his discharge from the army. In fact, the poem is deeply concerned with images of the wounded on many levels. From the initial character in the first stanza with his cane, the poem continually recalls the presence of the wounded. Earlier, the children raise the dead and amputate limbs in their play (a cruel parallel to Cendrars’ own wound and subsequent operations):

Puis on relève les morts
Tout le monde veut en être
Ou tout au moins blessé
Coupe coupe
Coupe le bras coupe la tête
On donne tout
Croix-Rouge
Les infirmières ont six ans
Leur cœur est plein d’émotion
On enlève les yeux aux poupées pour réparer les aveugles
J’y vois ! j’y vois !⁵¹

Ironically, in the children’s version, everyone wants to be dead, or at least wounded and the harrowing anguish of these war wounds is solved perfunctorily with several swift “coupe coupe”s and the miraculous substitution of dolls’ eyes to mend the blind.

In the last scene, the poet creates the resplendent image of the Victory Day parade, when “les blessés accrocheront leur Médailles à l’Arc-de-Triomphe et rentreront à la maison sans boiter,” thereby reenacting the same miracle that the children did in their play. By making these two scenes parallel, Cendrars equates the make-believe games of the young with the make-believe techniques of modern day film and photography.

In his envisioning of the Victory Day scene, Cendrars is the ultimate *metteur en scène* of the long-awaited day and he notes every detail that would figure in a

⁵¹ Ibid., 101-3.

movie scene, from the lighting down to the costuming.⁵² As the culmination of the poem, it strikes a diffident tone. From the poem's outset, with the sincere dedication to the soldiers who died, the ending can be read as willfully positive, perhaps even as encouragement to his comrades still fighting the war, as the future tense in every sentence reinforces the feeling that, someday, these events *will* take place.

At the same time, the poem, which has been concerned throughout with how war is represented, ends on a deliberately manufactured air. Cendrars shows that the war cannot be truthfully reproduced. Victory Day commemorates not what war was, but how it was *represented* in the newspaper articles, the iconic photographs, and the movies that will later enshrine the conclusion to these terrible and bloody years. The critic Michèle Touret notes: "les adultes réduisent la guerre en images: journaux illustrés et photographies la représentent et dans le même mouvement la déréalisent."⁵³ Therein lies the danger for Cendrars: Through representation, the war becomes less real than when it was experienced.

La Guerre au Luxembourg reflects Cendrars' struggle with the representation of the war, both in the subject matter and in the poem's form. From his initial gesture of labeling the verses "ces enfantines," the poet demonstrates wariness to place the work firmly in the genre of poetry. Yet, the poem's lines, arranged artfully on the page in free verse, cultivate a musical and kaleidoscopic allure. A chorus of voices chimes in throughout, and the words rhyme and play off one another in a free form, unforced way. The deliberately childlike phrasings (such as the repetition of certain

⁵² In her excellent book *Medieval Roles for Modern Times: Theatre and the Battle for the French Republic* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2010), Helen Solterer discusses how the medieval scholar and WWI soldier Gustave Cohen similarly conceived of the war in dramatic terms and how he applied his knowledge of medieval *mise-en-scène* to refashion his war memories into a moving lecture, even incorporating images from contemporary war footage, 26-33 and 43-50.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 116.

basic phrases and words like “Il y a” and “moi”) also add to this effect.⁵⁴ From the beginning, when the scene is blurred and comes slowly into focus, *La Guerre au Luxembourg* resists the urge to depict events exactly as they are. After the first two lines, the quotation marks typically used to mark speech fall away and the reader is left to untangle the distinct voices of the poem.

Cendrars makes representation and the transmission of representation a major theme of the poem, particularly because he was still working out how to engage the war as a subject himself. Recently returned to Paris while the war waged on without him, with the pains of his amputation still plaguing him on a regular basis, Cendrars was not ready to approach the experiences of the trenches directly in his poetry. Nevertheless, *La Guerre au Luxembourg* finds a way to engage the war as its main topic without violating the separation that Cendrars felt he should enforce between his two roles, the soldier and the poet. The result retains a mournful sense of beauty (that fellow poet Max Jacob sensed and praised as “*parmi les plus belles choses que j’ai jamais lues*”) without veering into the realm of those “*gentilles petites poésies*” that Cendrars so abhorred in other poets’ representations of the war.

La Fin du Monde filmée par l’Ange Notre-Dame: Toward a Poetics of Image

“Si je l’avais écrit au lendemain de la guerre, c’eût été un tout autre bouquin, beaucoup plus imagé, photographié, instantané, mais pas plus véridique pour cela.”
– *Blaise Cendrars vous parle*⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Touret goes a bit further in explaining these childish repetitions: “la formule ‘il y a’ qui convient si bien au registre enfantin n’est pas sans rappeler le poème des *Illuminations*, en toute équivoque car l’illumination n’est plus mentale et éblouissante, elle n’est plus un guide pour une exploration intérieure et une meilleure connaissance du monde mais le signe des dangers, d’une sorte de fin des temps à l’échelle humaine,” *Ibid.*, 114-115.

⁵⁵ *Blaise Cendrars vous parle*, 647

The end scene of *La Guerre au Luxembourg*, with its staged victory to come, anticipated Cendrars' growing interest in rendering a poetics of witness that privileges the image. He pursued this investigation even further with *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange Notre-Dame*.⁵⁶ The composition of this text was also extremely important in the personal mythology of the writer. He wrote it freely all in one night with his left hand. Cendrars later called these several frenzied hours of activity on September 1, 1917 "la plus belle nuit de l'écriture."⁵⁷ *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange Notre-Dame* and its transcription became profoundly symbolic for Cendrars on many levels. On a physical level, his hand was finally able to keep up with his inspiration. On an aesthetic level, the text kept pace as he moved away from verse toward a language dominated by images.

La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange N-D was initially published in the *Mercur de France* in December 1918. Overseen by Cendrars, the first printed edition of the work was produced by the publishing house Éditions de la Sirène, where Cendrars edited a series. As with *La Guerre au Luxembourg*, Cendrars carefully selected the font for this text, Morland 24. The number indicates the large size of the text, which gives it a thick, black presence on the page, recalling the effect of blowing up the text of newsprint. Cendrars also collaborated with another artist-friend to produce accompanying images, the cubist Fernand Léger (1881-1955). Léger, born in

⁵⁶Décaudin also notes this transition: "Le modèle du montage cinématographique [de *La Guerre au Luxembourg*] le conduit à écrire, comme dans une inspiration fiévreuse, *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange Notre-Dame* en une nuit, sa 'plus belle nuit d'écriture' (comme on se rappelle sa plus belle nuit d'amour)," Décaudin, "Le bilan de l'année terrible," 29. See also Touret, "Manipulations poétiques," note 15, 116.

⁵⁷This connection has been noted many times by critics of Cendrars. In the "Notice" to the text in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 7, Leroy states: "*La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange N-D* est le témoignage d'une expérience bouleversante, le résultat, comme le dit le poète lui-même, de sa 'plus belle nuit d'écriture (comme on se rappelle sa plus belle nuit d'amour). Le texte a été écrit dans la nuit du 1^{er} septembre 1917, dans une grange de La Pierre, un village près de Méréville, d'une traite et sans aucune rature, de la main gauche," 362.

Argentina, also voluntarily enlisted and fought in World War I with the French Foreign Legion. He spent several periods at the front and was gassed by the enemy at Verdun in September 1916.⁵⁸ Their partnership shows that, once more, Cendrars envisioned his text in a visual manner and had it produced as a luxurious print object.⁵⁹

Just as *La Guerre au Luxembourg* does not engage the war experience directly but obliquely through the games of children, World War I is buried in the background of this text.⁶⁰ As the title indicates, the trajectory of the piece is concerned with the end of the world, a concept not so foreign to the French public during wartime. More pointed references to the war, such as a line of blind war veterans who make their way out of the Hôtel-Dieu in one scene, are interspersed in the text.

Cendrars chose to render his vision of catastrophe in a thoroughly visual way, calling *La Fin du monde* a “scénario” in the introduction. (Printed versions, however, call the work a “roman” on the title page.) The language is spare and simple, parsed out over fifty-five numbered sections. Directives take precedence. Just as in the last scene of *La Guerre au Luxembourg*, the reader is directed to visualize the scenes, and the voice of the narrator resembles that of a film director. The work opens with a description of the setting:

⁵⁸ For more on their creative relationship, see Claude Leroy’s article, “L’Atelier du double: Cendrars et Léger en miroir,” in *Dis-moi, Blaise : Léger, Chagall, Picasso et Blaise Cendrars*. 27 juin – 12 octobre 2009 (Paris: Éditions des musées nationaux, 2009), 15-29.

⁵⁹ The production details of these texts are noteworthy, as most of them were envisaged as *objets de luxe*. Most were offered as first editions in limited numbers on special paper with expensive leather covers. (A glance at the last page of any of Cendrars’ texts during this period carefully noted the print runs.) The contrast between the valuable materials and their subject – the war – strikes a discordant note. Furthermore, the production of the texts is highly invested in expressing a particular aesthetic, even though Cendrars felt strongly about poems written about the war that rendered the war as beautiful.

⁶⁰ Décaudin writes: “Le grand bouleversement de la guerre est présent en profondeur dans cette histoire tragique et dérisoire d’une ‘banqueroute’ – c’est le dernier mot du texte – sur fond de catastrophe cosmique permanente, la dernière image nous ramenant à la première,” “Bilan de l’année terrible,” 29.

1. C'est le 31 décembre. Dieu le Père est à son bureau américain. Il signe hâtivement d'innombrables papiers. Il est en bras de chemise et un abat-jour vert sur les yeux. Il se lève, allume un gros cigare, consulte sa montre, marche nerveusement dans son cabinet, repousse fiévreusement les papiers qu'il vient de signer et ouvre le Grand Livre qui est à sa droite. Il le compulse un instant, note des chiffres au crayon sur son bloc-notes, souffle la cendre de son cigare qui est tombée entre les pages du livre. Il s'empare soudain du téléphone et téléphone furieusement. Il convoque ses chefs de rayon.

2. Entrent les chefs de rayon. ...ils entrent à la queue leu leu et viennent s'aligner derrière le fauteuil du patron. Ils ont tous revêtu les insignes de leur ministère et ont leur livre de comptes à main. Dieu le Père les interpelle tour à tour. Chacun s'avance, présente son livre que Dieu contresigne, après en avoir l'addition sur son carnet. Puis il les congédie brusquement d'un geste.⁶¹

The sentences here are short and clipped; verbs dominate the semantic plain.

The war and its influence over Cendrars can be traced in some of the words used. For instance, the “abat-jour” that Dieu le Père is wearing has an entry in Dauzat's encyclopedic work *L'Argot de la guerre* (1918), signifying a term that was commonly used among the colonial troops for a soldier's helmet.⁶² Although the term predated the war, the specific usage as headwear stems from how the word was used in the trenches. Elsewhere, Cendrars refers to “chefs de rayon,” another term from *L'Argot de la guerre*. The expression “filer sur le grand rayon” is listed as “faire une étape sur une grande route,” an appropriate image for the various characters that Dieu le Père calls into his office.

The image of God and his leaders presented throughout *La Fin du monde* resembles the way that Cendrars would later irreverently portray the various governmental authorities and military leaders of the First World War. In *La Main coupée*, he paints an extremely disorganized portrait of the colonels and officers who

⁶¹ *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange N-D, Œuvres complètes*, tome 7, 259-260.

⁶² Albert Dauzat, *L'Argot de la guerre. D'après une enquête auprès des Officiers et Soldats*. Préface d'Alain Rey. Introduction d'Odilon Roynette (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1918; Armand Colin, 2007).

were charged with leading Cendrars and his fellow soldiers. The officers are often criticized for a lack of merit and a lack of valor; they don't keep their word and they can't be trusted. The word "pagaïe" continually reappears as one adjective used to highlight the unpreparedness of the officers when they led their men into battle.⁶³

Other sections of *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange N-D* are explicitly visual. Familiar Parisian monuments are listed as the "Opérateur," the Angel of Notre Dame, takes a view of the cityscape (note the technical and strategic language here):

16. Paris. Vue générale. La Roue ; la Tour ; le Sacré-Cœur ; le Panthéon ; les Ponts. En amont et en aval, les bois de Boulogne et de Vincennes. Les coteaux souriants de Saint-Cloud et de Montmorency. Dans le fond, du côté d'Alfortville, remonte la Seine, lumineuse. Les trains.

17. Scènes particulières dans différents quartiers. Les artistes à Montparnasse ; les élégantes au bois ; l'apéro au Moulin-Rouge. Les Halles à cinq heures du matin. Un encombrement de voitures au Châtelet ; la Bourse ; la sortie des ateliers rue de la Paix, un thé mondain. Les automobiles, Place de l'Etoile, qui se déplacent comme des stylos. Une grève à la Villette. Les rotatives du *Matin* ; les soupes populaires boulevard de l'Hôpital ; la rue de la Glacière ; le jardin du Luxembourg ; le quartier de l'Europe. Les chiffonniers, quai de Grenelle. Une opération à Saint-Louis ; les grandes usines en banlieue, etc.

18. Petites scènes parisiennes d'intérieur et de la rue. La marchande des quatre saisons ; le camelot le poète sous les toits ; le gentleman cambrioleur ; la grande Marcelle. Un boulevardier ; le détenu de la cellule 11. L'égoutier au travail ; le dernier bohème ; la mère Coupe-Toujours et la mère Lunette ; le diacre de Saint-Séverin. Monsieur Deibler ; le garçon de bureau de Ministère des Finances, etc.

Taking on the eye of the camera as the machine that guides his prose, with its startling power to zoom in and out of different perspectives, Cendrars strings together a vast array of different scenes. The medium of the scenario also allows these images to exist simply as they are, as visual facts to be registered, connected only by semi-colons. No extra language is required to explain the scenes or to link them together in

⁶³ For more on Cendrars' unflattering depiction of officers in World War I, see Jean-Jacques Becker's article, "La vision de la guerre chez Cendrars," in *Blaise Cendrars et la guerre*, 13-21.

a more substantial, meaningful way. Rather, the reader merely registers these verbal photographs as they progress, eventually leading to more cosmic images of the end of the world.

Although he refused to write from the trenches, Cendrars did not impose a similar restriction on taking photographic images from the front, despite military rules that forbade photography.⁶⁴ Manoll asked Cendrars about his use of photography during one of their interviews:

Manoll: Vous avez aussi pendant la guerre, en dépit des règlements militaires qui l'interdisaient formellement, pris des photographies. Je suppose qu'elles sont maintenant perdues.

Cendrars : J'avais un petit Kodak. J'ai eu des tas d'ennuis parce que je tirais des photos au front. Quelqu'un m'a volé mon appareil, au poste chirurgical 53, en Champagne. Si les chirurgiens m'ont fait le bras, les infirmiers m'ont fait les poches. Enfin... je ne me plains pas, c'est tellement loin tout cela...⁶⁵

In fact, Cendrars' practice of taking photos with his Kodak (a name he later used to title a volume of poetry) influenced and helped define his poetics of witness. Searching for a means to register the catastrophic events around him, Cendrars took up a technological tool that froze images in time.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ To my knowledge, there are no publications of these extant war photographs. Incidentally, one photograph that Cendrars took was published in *Le Miroir* in the spring of 1915; it depicted a Russian soldier camouflaged as a tree trunk in order to surprise the enemy. This same scene was later famously adapted into Charlie Chaplin's World War I film, *Charlot soldat* (1918). See the footnote on page 167, *La Main coupée*.

⁶⁵ *Blaise Cendrars vous parle*, 604.

⁶⁶ Nicolas Beaupré notes the importance of the camera for Cendrars, but only in relation to his prose work, *La Main coupée*: "Comme le carnet ou les lettres, les photographies sont davantage qu'un aide-mémoire. Elles forment un regard nouveau, médiatisé par la technique, sur une guerre moderne, dominée par la technique. On retrouve cette fascination pour la photographie ou le cinéma comme *révélateur* mais aussi *ré-enchanteur* du réel dans *La Main coupée* de Cendrars qui paraît pourtant en 1946. La relation qu'entretient l'auteur avec son Kodak et avec les photos qu'il *raconte* dans son ouvrage prend une place de premier plan. La prise en compte de la photographie dans une écriture moderne de la guerre par les auteurs les plus pionniers fait de leurs livres des œuvres d'art à l'heure de la reproductibilité technique au sens où l'entendait Walter Benjamin." See *Ecrire en guerre, écrire la guerre*, 126-7.

In a similar fashion, in the years immediately following his discharge, Cendrars' poetics also sought to distill the war – or metaphors of the war like the end of the world – into a series of images. Additionally, the transition into the visual entailed crossing into different literary genres, or more specifically, blurring the lines between different genres to create a compelling hybrid. The possibilities of film scenarios allowed Cendrars to dispense with the constraints of poetry in order to produce a text that is vigorous, direct and unrelenting.⁶⁷ The primacy of the visual nature of these images of the end of the world renewed Cendrars' language and allowed him to access tropes that were deeply relevant to French society as it emerged from four years of destructive warfare. With *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange Notre-Dame*, Cendrars witnessed once more the war experience, without succumbing to common tropes or modes of doing so.

From Scenario to Cinema : J'accuse

“...dans *J'accuse*, je faisais tout: l'homme de peine, l'accessoiriste, l'électricien, l'artificier, le costumier, de la figuration et de la régie, l'aide opérateur, le vice-metteur en scène, le chauffeur du patron, le comptable, le caissier, et dans les Morts qui reviennent, je faisais un macchabée, tout empoissé dans de l'hémoglobine de cheval car on m'avait fait perdre mon bras une deuxième fois pour les besoins de la prise de vue.”
– *Blaise Cendrars vous parle*⁶⁸

⁶⁷ A few years after the publication of *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange N-D*, Cendrars formulated specifically how the power of the cinema was going to renew language. In his sweeping essay-cum-manifesto *L'ABC du cinéma*, he makes this equation all the more dramatic by using a language inflected by his war experience: “Les derniers aboutissements des sciences précises, la guerre mondiale, la conception de la relativité, les convulsions politiques, tout fait prévoir que nous nous acheminons vers une nouvelle synthèse de l'esprit humain, vers une nouvelle humanité et qu'une race d'hommes nouveaux va paraître. Leur langage sera le cinéma. Regardez ! Les artificiers du Silence sont prêts. L'image aux sources primitives de l'émotion. On a essayé de la capter derrière les formules artistiques désuètes. Enfin le bon combat du blanc et du noir va commencer sur tous les écrans du monde.” *L'ABC du cinéma, Œuvres complètes*, tome 3, 144-145.

⁶⁸ *Blaise Cendrars vous parle*, 672.

The quasi-screenplay that is *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange N-D* reflects Cendrars' growing preoccupation with how to push poetry in a more visual direction. He took his investigations into the realm of the practical when he joined the director Abel Gance on the set of the film *J'accuse*. In the quotation above, Cendrars demonstrates his great gusto for enumerating various jobs, although in this instance, they are all being carried out by one man. Since Cendrars claimed to have helped with a little bit of everything, the nature of the work relationship between Gance and Cendrars remains difficult to define concretely. However, the plight of the film's protagonist, the poet Jean Diaz, stages the tensions that Cendrars himself felt as a poet during wartime and the film offers a devastating retort to the notion that soldiers could also be poets. Ultimately, the collaboration between Gance and Cendrars produced a film that powerfully explores the role of the poet during wartime and offers a dramatic, cinematic response to the problem of witnessing the war.

A silent, black-and-white film, *J'accuse* was filmed between August 1918 and March 1919 throughout different locations in France. The film serves as a perfect example of an aesthetic period in transition, between romanticism and realism, as it is brought to life in a new art form. The film's protagonist is romantic: A poet from the south of France named Jean Diaz is sent off to fight in World War I where he will be completely transfigured by the horrific war experience. A melodramatic subplot also carries the film along, involving a love triangle between Diaz, a married woman named Édith and her husband, François Laurin.

Contrasting with the romantic themes were the realist aspirations upheld by the film's director. Gance was committed to representing the war and its atrocities as realistically as possible. To this end, he famously filmed segments on location at World War I battlefields. For what has been hailed as "one of the most magnificent

scenes in cinema,” Gance aspired to complete authenticity and he went to great lengths to recruit wounded veterans to act in the film’s raising -of-the-dead sequence.⁶⁹ This is, incidentally, how Cendrars first met Gance; the wounded poet helped the director recruit other war wounded to populate this scene.⁷⁰

Just like the narrator of “Shrapnells,” who sought to divert the mind from the reality of the war, the poet’s role in *J’accuse* is to provide moments of diversion to assuage the beleaguered souls of his fellow soldiers. In a written chronicle of the film that appeared in print to help promote its release, Jean Diaz, the visionary poet figure, is compared to a “Christ des tranchées:”

Les hommes se réunissent autour de lui et l’écourent religieusement. C’est comme une sorte de Christ de tranchée, mais un Christ qui prêche la guerre sainte, il a ses heures de lyrisme, d’accusation. C’est sa poésie actuelle qu’il évoque en images émouvantes et que la douleur et la vérité de la guerre rendent compréhensibles aux yeux simples de ses compagnons qui en pleurent quelquefois. ... Il évoque ses poèmes avec une telle acuité d’images nettes et vraies, que ceux-ci sont devenus une sorte de liqueur enthousiaste et justicière dont les hommes ont besoin autour de lui. Et quand il y a faiblesse ou fatigue quelque part, il est là, ses yeux éclatants de fièvre, pour soutenir un accusant.⁷¹

The task of Jean Diaz – using poetry to create lifelike images for his companions in the trenches – is not unlike the task that the poet undertakes in the last scenes of *La Guerre au Luxembourg*, where the poem becomes a visual celebration of victory to come. In both cases, the poet uses words to create images that heal or

⁶⁹ Quoted in James M. Welsh and Steven Philip Kramer, “Abel Gance’s Accusation against War,” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 14, no. 13 (Spring 1975), 57.

⁷⁰ The banker Pierre Laffitte, the financier of Éditions de la Sirène, suggested to Gance that Cendrars would be an excellent resource for his film, particularly as Gance needed help recruiting “les gueules cassées” and other wounded soldiers from the war to star in the final scene of his film. See Miriam Cendrars, *Blaise Cendrars* (Paris: Editions Balland, 1993), 481.

⁷¹ Print circular containing this long written summary of the film, without date, without publication source. Fonds Abel Gance, Bibliothèque nationale de France-Richelieu, Cote 4-Rk-5395. It is also noteworthy that the only allusion to a contemporary literary text is also found in this passage describing Jean among his fellow soldiers: “Pour faire passer une des terribles heures d’enlèvement dans la boue de Flandres où les hommes, selon la belle expression de Barbusse, semblent changés en choses, le visionnaire raconte.” Unlike Apollinaire who admitted to never getting around to reading Barbusse’s popular war tale, it is evident that it made an impression on Gance.

distract the other soldiers from the real horrors of war. Likewise, just as *La Guerre au Luxembourg* questions the power of representation, at the end of Gance's film, the poet Jean Diaz goes insane and is no longer able to write poetry. The only phrase that he can muster is "J'accuse," repeated again and again in a hollow refrain.⁷²

The derangement and subsequent demise of Gance's main character, Jean Diaz, mirror Cendrars' contention that a man cannot be a soldier and a writer at the same time. As the film draws to a close, Diaz returns wounded from the war and wears a bandage around his head.⁷³ His behavior is strange and erratic. He calls all of the people of the town together one evening by circulating an unsigned letter which reads: "Venez ce soir chez Édith pour des nouvelles de vos morts...J'accuse." As this dramatic scene unfolds, Diaz has a vision of the battlefield. He is alone, on a bleak field full of white wooden crosses, denoting all of the dead. The film cuts back to the townspeople gathered together in a dark room, with Diaz in front of them, his white bandage a beacon in the firelight. Next, the viewer is told via the film's title cards: "Alors il s'est produit un prodigieux miracle." The camera returns to Diaz on the battlefield where, in a hallucinatory vision, the crosses turn into men, and then the men begin to raise themselves up off the ground. One of the dead soldiers speaks into the camera, saying: "Mes amis, le temps est venu de savoir si nos morts ont servi à quelque chose ! Allons voir au pays si on est digne de notre sacrifice. 'Réveillez-vous.' "

⁷² The film's title and its refrain are obviously an allusion to Zola's celebrated intervention into the Dreyfus Affair in 1898. Gance appears to be using the allusion in a fairly straight-forward manner as a similar expression of outrage toward society.

⁷³ One wonders if this could be a reference to Apollinaire. The head wound of the poet became endowed with a strong symbolic power, in large part owing to Apollinaire's wound, which was taken up by his artist friends and continues in contemporary iterations today. See Annette Becker's chapters "Le Poète assassiné" in *Apollinaire: une biographie de guerre*, 143-153.

Cendrars appears in this final scene, among the sea of real-life veterans that Gance recruited for this scene, and he is instantly recognizable with his amputated arm displayed prominently. The fact that Gance insisted on casting the war's wounded soldiers is revelatory: He wanted the vision of a final reckoning to have complete authenticity. The faces of the soldiers who return to accuse their loved ones are indeed faces with the power to haunt. Gance pushes the boundaries between reality and the reckoning even further when he superimposes two shots in the same frame. On the top level, we see the staged – albeit with real soldiers – resurrection of the dead, while the bottom frame is actual documentary footage of the French victory parade down the Champs-Élysées, led triumphantly by a group of *mutilés de guerre*.⁷⁴ Contrasting the parade of the actual dead with the parade commemorating victory recalls the same issues of representation and commemoration that Cendrars evoked in the final scenes of *La Guerre au Luxembourg*. In an uncanny fashion, both works interrogate the values of realistic representation and test the limits of symbolic commemoration rituals.

After his vision and dramatic confrontations with the people of his village, Jean is exhausted beyond the point of return. He has become completely deranged. The next morning, he wanders into his old home, where he finds the vestiges of his former life as a poet. He picks up a collection of poems that he wrote before the war titled “Les Pacifiques.” He flips through the poems but finds that the bucolic images of harvesting, farming, or fishing have become completely alien to him.⁷⁵ The next

⁷⁴ See Van Kelly, “The Ambiguity of Individual Gestures: Revisions of World War I in Abel Gance’s *J’accuse*, Alain’s *Mars ou la guerre jugée*, and Bertrand Tavernier’s *La Vie et rien d’autre*,” *South Central Review*, vol. 17, no. 3, *Cinéma engagé : Activist filmmaking in French and Francophone Contexts* (Autumn, 2000), 8.

⁷⁵ Whenever Jean is working on these poems or reciting them, the film cuts to lush hillside and lake scenes, some of which appear to be filmed, and some which appear to be painted landscapes. In the silent film medium, it is fascinating how these visual tableaux substitute for the actual words of Jean’s

film title states: “Le soldat avait tué en lui le poète et il riait de ce fou qui jadis avait écrit ces vers sur la paix ensoleillée et la douceur de vivre.”

This stark line echoes Cendrars’ own concerns about the coexistence of the poet and the soldier. The harsh realities of the war destroy the old ways of writing that had existed before. Bucolic poems about rural life, written in classical stanzas, ring completely hollow. Poetry must seek out new ways of expressing itself, new ways of approaching reality. In his final moments before he dies, Diaz shouts a feverish new poem out the window to the sun, declaiming his new muse:

...Je m’appelais Jean Diaz
Mais j’ai changé de muse
Mon doux nom de jadis
Est devenu : J’accuse !
Et je t’accuse, toi soleil
D’avoir illuminé l’effroyable épopée
Muet, placide, sans dégoût,
Comme une face horrible à la langue coupée
A ton balcon d’azur,
Sadiquement crispée
D’avoir regardé jusqu’au bout !

The last line of Diaz’s final poem evinces a commitment to going “jusqu’au bout,” to completely invest oneself in one’s task. Cendrars repeats this same commitment several times in *La Main coupée*:

Hé ! parce que je découvrais tout cela pour la première fois et qu’il faut aller jusqu’au bout pour savoir ce dont les hommes sont capables, en bien, en mal, en intelligence, en connerie, et que de toutes les façons la mort est au bout, que l’on triomphe ou que l’on succombe.⁷⁶

Elsewhere, Cendrars uses this same phrase to denote the vast difference between words and deeds: “Je ne me paie pas de mots. Je m’étais engagé, et comme

poems. One is transported, quite literally, by his words to see what he is describing, rather than seeing the words themselves.

⁷⁶ *La Main coupée*, 234.

plusieurs fois déjà dans ma vie, j'étais prêt à aller jusqu'au bout de mon acte."⁷⁷ Diaz also went "jusqu'au bout" and did indeed pay with his sanity, and ultimately, his life. These profoundly altering circumstances, for both Cendrars and Gance's Diaz, lead to the rejection of poetry as it had once been. They cannot return to their prewar *métier* in light of all that they have witnessed.

Other themes that are central to Cendrars' postwar works are also taken up in *J'accuse*. The last line of "Shrapnells," "On nous oublie," is an observation that borders on an accusation. The civilian public is able to put the soldiers out of their minds (a charge also implicit in *La Guerre au Luxembourg*). The closing scenes of *J'accuse* seek to confront this forgetful public by directly putting the viewer face-to-face with real soldiers from the war. Gance explicitly stated that he set out to make a film that would make the general public confront the horrors of war, but also a film that would bring a sense of comfort to those soldiers who had endured World War I's atrocities. In an article titled "Pourquoi j'ai fait *J'accuse*," he explained:

Si j'ai voulu donner au spectateur une vision aussi précise et exacte que possible de la guerre, de façon à conserver un souvenir vivant de l'affreuse mêlée, j'ai eu aussi comme aspiration essentielle d'apporter une sorte de réconfort à tous ceux qui, y ayant assisté, n'en ont connu que les horreurs et les déceptions.⁷⁸

Gance wanted to hold mothers and fathers, wives and children, and other members of the community accountable for their wartime behavior, remedies the feeling of being forgotten, which Cendrars evokes so powerfully at the close of "Shrapnells."

The rich artistic collaboration between Gance and Cendrars produced an epic that was widely hailed as an important anti-war film all over the world.⁷⁹ Although it

⁷⁷ Ibid., 158.

⁷⁸ Abel Gance, "Pourquoi j'ai fait 'J'accuse,'" *Hebdo-Film*, 13 avril 1922. Fonds Abel Gance.

⁷⁹ The extent of their creative relationship warrants a closer look. Given the similarities outlined here, one is tempted to claim that Cendrars had a major role in drafting the screenplay of *J'accuse*, but this

is impossible to say to what extent Cendrars influenced *J'accuse*, it seems clear that the film stages on screen the same preoccupations that Cendrars explored in his postwar writings: the dangers of forgetting the soldiers' sacrifice, the consequences of representation and commemoration. In particular, the saga of Jean Diaz, a poet who goes to war and returns completely unable to return to his old poetic forms, mirrors the transformation that Cendrars himself was undergoing and it seems entirely possible that Gance modeled Diaz after Cendrars.⁸⁰ In order to render the war in such a devastating manner, the traditional figure of the poet was annihilated. A new model of the poet had to be found.

Confronting a reality: J'ai tué

“Le réel n'a aucun sens. Aucune signification. Tout est rythme, parole, vie. Il n'y a plus de démonstration. On communique. Fixez l'objectif sur la main, le coin de la bouche, l'oreille, et le drame se profile, s'agrandit sur un fond de mystère lumineux.”
– Cendrars in *L'ABC du cinéma*⁸¹

The time that Cendrars spent working on *J'accuse* overlapped with the publication of his text *J'ai tué*. Written in the fall and published in November 1918, this work also occupied an important place in Cendrars' personal mythology. In 1950, he recounted with vivid detail the fortnight of the armistice when he saw Apollinaire

has never been substantiated. Moreover, in 1931, Gance filmed *La Fin du monde*, a work which partially shares the same title as well as the same themes as Cendrars' text (although film critics assert that Gance's work was based on a novel by the astronomer Camille Flammarion (see Welsh and Kramer, “Abel Gance's Accusation against War,” 58). Presently, there are very few studies devoted to Cendrars and Gance. For a look at their work together on a second film after *J'accuse*, see Standish Lawder's chapter “*La roue*, Cendrars et Gance,” in *Le Cinéma cubiste*. Traduit de l'anglais et préfacé par Christian Lebrat (Paris: Éditions Paris Expérimental, 1994), 77-91. Unfortunately, Gance's personal notebook for the year in which he made *J'accuse*, part of the Fonds Abel Gance at the Bibliothèque nationale-Richelieu, has deteriorated and is currently unavailable to researchers.

⁸⁰ Although it seems that if Cendrars had played a more influential role, the poetry written by Diaz that appears in the film would be better. For this reason, it is difficult to fully speculate that Cendrars exercised any writing duties.

⁸¹ *L'ABC du cinéma*, 141-142.

on the eve of his death, went disbelievingly to his former mentor's funeral on the day of the armistice, and then attended a "matinée de poésie" held in honor of the publication of *J'ai tué*, before he returned to Nice where he was filming *J'accuse*. He later described this tumultuous period to Manoll: "Le dimanche 17, j'étais de retour à Nice. Ma quinzaine parisienne était terminée. Le lundi matin, je reprenais le boulot. 'Silence, on tourne !' Je criais dans mon mégaphone. 'Lumière !' Je ne vais pas m'attarder sur la marche du temps."⁸²

Cendrars envisioned a text with powerful visual and tactile elements and he worked with Léger once more, continuing their creative partnership. The first edition of this book was a limited print run produced by the publishing house A la Belle Édition. There were five drawings, or more specifically, engravings by Léger. The font was also notable; while not as large as the one used in *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange N-D*, it was still larger than normal print. The font was also printed in red, a shocking color given the work's title and subject matter.

Perhaps given its audacious confession, *J'ai tué* attained a level of popularity that previous works of Cendrars had not. It was acquired by the mainstream publishing house Georges Crès et Cie, who printed a much larger second run in 1919. In this black and white version, the format is very small, rendering the entire book in slender chapbook form. Léger's drawings have been excised but for a portrait of Cendrars in the front of the book. The inclusion of this portrait is significant, for the work itself – as the title indicates – pivots around the frank admission of a soldier who kills an enemy during combat. Cendrars uses the first-person pronoun *je* throughout the work, even in the title, and by including the portrait as the frontispiece, the reader is forced to confront directly this *je*. Yet, the portrait by Léger strikes a diffident tone:

⁸² *Blaise Cendrars vous parle*, 672.

it is clearly Cendrars, his face thin and gaunt, but his eyes are obscured by dark hatches of lines in the etching, preventing the viewer from truly engaging in eye-to-eye contact with the *je*, the killer, of the title.⁸³

Again, Cendrars is playing with the boundaries between poetry and prose, as well as testing the constraints of reality and the surreal conditions produced by the war. Normally, such an admission – “I have killed” – would be unspeakable, and legally, proof of one’s guilt. However, cast in the light of war, the admission serves as another layer of the representation of the war, albeit a truth that was often suppressed.⁸⁴ Most texts of *témoignage* do not broach the act of killing another man; it was one subject that remained taboo within the literature of the First World War.⁸⁵ The use of the first person singular pronoun here also marks the first time that Cendrars approaches the war experience from this intimate perspective. There are no metaphors of children’s games, no large, apocalyptic background of the end of the world. It is merely the admission of one act, by one man. The simplicity of this statement became a theme for Cendrars and he uses it in later texts that treat his war experience, such as *J’ai saigné* (1938).

Short, staccato sentences like those in the opening paragraph syncopate the rhythm of the entire work:

⁸³ Déborah Lévy-Bertherat also observes this troubling veiled effect of the Léger portrait: “Plus troublant, [le portrait de Cendrars] est sans yeux, le regard se dérobe. Peut-être ce visage aveugle signifie-t-il une transposition de la mutilation du corps sur le visage, ou un évitement de l’identification complète,” “‘Les hommes bons ne tuent pas.’ Violence guerrière, éthique et idéologie,” in *J’ai tué: Violence guerrière et fiction*. Études réunies par Déborah Lévy-Bertherat et Pierre Schoentjes (Genève: Droz, 2010), 58.

⁸⁴ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau notes that “la guerre transforme l’interdiction formelle de tuer en obligation de le faire,” “Morale et anomie de guerre en 1914-1918,” in Annie Stora-Lamarre, *Incontournable morale*. Actes du colloque de Besançon (Presses universitaires de France, 1997), 233.

⁸⁵ Other than Cendrars, Ernst Jünger was one of the few novelists to broach the taboo subject of killing. See the section “Violence combattante et non-dits historiographiques” in Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18, Retrouver la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 61-71 as well as Nicolas Beaupré’s chapter “Tuer,” in *Écrire en guerre, écrire la guerre* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2006), 115-132.

Ils viennent de tous les horizons. Jour et nuit. 1000 trains déversent des hommes et du matériel. Le soir, nous traversons une ville déserte. Dans cette ville, il y a un grand hôtel moderne, haut et carré. C'est le G.Q.G. Des automobiles à fanion, des caisses d'emballage, une chaise-balançoire de bazar. Des jeunes gens très distingués, en tenue impeccable de chauffeur, causent et fument. Un roman jaune sur le trottoir, une cuvette et une bouteille d'eau de Cologne. Derrière l'hôtel, il y a une petite villa enfouie sous les arbres. On n'en voit pas bien la façade.⁸⁶

The subjects of the sentences are impersonal. The only personal pronoun in the entire opening is found in the third sentence: "le soir, nous traversons une ville déserte." Objects and material – like the train, the hotel, the cars, the swinging chair, and the bottle of eau de Cologne – take precedence in this landscape. The stripped-down prose is journalistic – even militaristic – as it reveals only what is necessary, or that which is strategically important, especially as seen in the last sentence quoted above, "on n'en voit pas bien la façade" which reads as if the narrator were relaying a tactical bit of information.

Cendrars continues to dissect the scene, by portraying different sensations in a fragmented fashion. In the following lines, he takes apart the sounds of the night:

On n'entend que le frôlement des bras balancés en cadence, le cliquetis d'une baïonnette, d'une gourmette ou le heurt mat d'un bidon. Respiration d'un million d'hommes. Pulsation sourde.⁸⁷

Even the objects producing the sounds are fragmented here. It is not bodies in motion, but arms swinging in cadence, chains swinging from the horses' bridles or the chain links of a watch, and the exhalation of all the men which draw the ear. The fragmentation of the men's bodies recalls "Shrapnells," where the same metonymic effect was also used to evoke the multitude of the army. Through its continual use, metonymy becomes a characteristic aspect of Cendrars' poetics of witness. In Cendrars' hands, metonymy has the power to convey the frightening

⁸⁶ Cendrars, *J'ai tué* (Paris: Éditions Georges Crès et Cie, 1919), 5-6.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

impersonalization of institutions such as armies, or the massive effects of mobilization, by focusing on one visual symbol – such as a body part or a horse’s bridle – in order to make broader semantic associations about the alienating capabilities of these institutions or cultural movements. Moreover, metonymy is a particularly visual operation, requiring the reader to interpret one visual symbol and then convert this piece into a larger, more meaningful whole.

A little while later, the words of the soldiers’ marching songs are also reproduced in fragmented fashion:

C’est la nuit noire. Les chants de marche reprennent de plus belle.

Catherine a les pieds d’cochon
Les chevilles mal faites
Les genoux cagneux
Le crac moisi
Les seins pourris
...
A nous les gonzesses
Qu’ont du poil aux fesses
On les reverra
Quand la classe (bis)
Quand la classe reviendra
...
Soldat, fais ton fourbi
Pas vu, pas pris
Mes vieux roustis
Encore un bicot d’enculé
Dans la cagna de l’adjutant
...⁸⁸

Cendrars transcribes faithfully the soldiers’ songs one after another, until the songs seem to blend together in the night. He is even careful to note how many times a verse is to be sung with the instructional terms (*bis*) and (*ter*) found littered in parentheses. Piecing together these different songs becomes a sort of aural metonymy, as the snippets of the songs speak to larger issues of the war experience: Catherine,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 7-9

with her “seins pourris” recalls images of death and putrefaction (as conjured by Dalize in *Le Ballade du pauvre Macchabé mal enterré*); the refrain of the second song “Quand la classe reviendra” elicits the fear of being forgotten by those of the home front (a recurrent theme in Cendrars) and the third song focuses on the trench itself, where the soldier must make “[s]on fourbi.”

The next sense Cendrars dissects is the smell of the battlefield:

Cela sent le cul de cheval enflammé, la motosacoche, le phénol, et l’anis.
On croirait avoir avalé une gomme tant l’air est lourd, la nuit irrespirable,
les champs empestés. L’haleine du père Pinard empoisonne la nature.⁸⁹

And so the prose continues in this fashion, alternating between terse, two-word sentences and slightly longer attempts to describe the scene. Cendrars has taken the short sentences of *La Fin du monde* to their extreme. The metonymic fragmentation of the five senses stages the scene. The staccato alternation of the sentences, coupled with the hard-driving sensorial metonymy, push the boundaries of prose so that it occupies a liminal place between prose and poetry.

When the men encounter enemy fire, the prose continues in rapid-fire sentences and fragments:

Le rideau se déchire. Tout pète, craque, tonne, tout à la fois. Embrasement général. Mille éclatements. Des feux, des brasiers, des explosions. C’est l’avalanche des canons. Le roulement. Les barrages. Le pilon. Sur la lueur des départs se profilent éperdus des hommes obliques, l’index d’un écriteau, un cheval fou. Battement d’une paupière. Clin d’œil au magnésium. Instantané rapide.⁹⁰

In this disjointed description of the battle, all of the senses are jumbled together. Sounds and images appear in quick succession: fire, flames, explosions, a wild horse, the fluttering of an eyelid, the blink of a magnesium flash. The rapid metonymic parade of nouns evokes the tumult of battle. At times in *J’ai tué*,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 10-11.

Cendrars' writing powerfully anticipates modern theorizations of how twentieth century warfare led to a feeling of "derealization" in the mind of the soldier.⁹¹

Yet, in *J'ai tué*, Cendrars resists the temptation to render the final scene in a fragmentary fashion, which would have perhaps obscured the magnitude of his deed. Instead, when he kills a German soldier, Cendrars focuses clearly on the fundamental act of killing, an act of ultimate violence, of one man versus another. In his determination to recount this grisly exploit, one sees the seeds of his desire to go "jusqu'au bout de mon acte," as he claims in *La Main coupée*.

Before the work reaches this climax, Cendrars returns to another device employed in *La Fin du monde*; channeling the capability of a film camera, the perspective swings out dramatically and widens as the narrator includes all of the people who help churn the war machine:

Me voici l'eustache à la main. C'est à ça qu'aboutit toute cette immense machine de guerre. Des femmes se crèvent dans les usines. Un peuple d'ouvriers trime à outrance au fond des mines. Des savants, des inventeurs s'ingénient. La merveilleuse activité humaine est prise à tribut. La richesse d'un travail intensif. L'expérience de plusieurs civilisations. Sur toute la surface de la terre on ne travaille que pour moi. Les minerais viennent du Chili, les conserves d'Australie, les cuirs d'Afrique. L'Amérique nous envoie des machines-outils, la Chine de la main-d'œuvre. Le cheval de la roulante est né dans les pampas d'Argentine. Je fume un tabac arabe. J'ai dans ma musette du chocolat de Batavia. Des mains d'hommes et de femmes ont fabriqué tout ce que je porte sur moi. Toutes les races, tous les climats, toutes les croyances y ont collaboré.⁹²

In the wide-scale view, everyone in the world, all races, and creeds are implicated and recalled by the narrator, who now stands, humble switchblade in his hand, prepared to defend himself against another man. In this way, as Déborah Lévy-

⁹¹ See, for example, Virilio, who writes: "Dans le déphasage inattendu de la vision indirecte le soldat a moins le sentiment d'être détruit que déréalisé, dématérialisé, de perdre brusquement tout référent sensible au profit d'une exagération des repères visibles..." *Guerre et Cinéma*, 19.

⁹² *J'ai tué*, 17-18.

Bertherat observes, “la brutalité individuelle du soldat (je) est l’émanation de la collectivité humaine.”⁹³

This viewpoint is the opposite of depersonalization, as is the final scene of the killing itself. The narrator returns to the initial image of one man, clutching a weapon, against another:

Et voilà qu’aujourd’hui j’ai le couteau à la main. ... Me voici les nerfs tendus, les muscles bandés, prêt à bondir dans la réalité. J’ai bravé la torpille, le canon, les mines, le feu, les gaz, les mitrailleuses, toute la machinerie anonyme, démoniaque, systématique, aveugle. Je vais braver l’homme. Mon semblable. Un singe. Œil pour œil, dent pour dent. A nous deux maintenant. A coups de poing, à coups de couteau. Sans merci. Je saute sur mon antagoniste. Je lui porte un coup terrible. La tête est presque décollée. J’ai tué le Boche.⁹⁴

The fleshliness of the narrator is emphasized; his nerves are tense, his muscles tight. He will brave man, his likeness, an ape. The quotation of the Biblical verse, “an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth,” only highlights the body at stake. The verse also highlights the Biblical use of metonymy to convey principles of crude justice.

Without pity, the narrator doesn’t flinch from recounting the act; he jumps toward the other man. He almost takes off the other man’s head though this gruesome detail is painted neutrally through the use of the definite article in front of the body object: “la tête” instead of “sa tête.” Still, the last sentence of this scene uses an extremely pejorative, though common, term for the German enemy: “J’ai tué le Boche.” By substituting “boche” as the direct object of the criminal act, the narrator somehow refutes his previous descriptions which sought to equate the two men on the same level. In this sense, the narrator remains deeply ambivalent toward his act.⁹⁵

⁹³ Lévy-Bertherat, “Les hommes bons,” 54.

⁹⁴ *J’ai tué*, 20-21.

⁹⁵ Cendrars’ use of the term “boche” in many of his World War I writings reveals a somewhat problematic tendency on the part of the author and deserves further examination. Audoin-Rouzeau briefly mentions the “contamination du champ sémantique par le vocabulaire anti-allemand de la

Because of the compressed nature of the sentences, every word, and every word omitted is of import here. In this sense, the lines function much more like poetry than prose as imaginative leaps are required to bridge the gap between the rudimentary phrases which have boiled down to their metonymic essence. Cendrars clearly uses the segmentivity inherent in poetry here to great effect.

In the final words of the text, the narrator describes the crucial differences between the two men, a difference between life and death:

J'étais plus vif et plus rapide que lui. Plus direct. J'ai frappé le premier. J'ai le sens de la réalité, moi, poète. J'ai agi. J'ai tué. Comme celui qui veut vivre.⁹⁶

He relates his will to survive to his ability to recognize the reality of the situation: "J'ai le sens de la réalité, moi, poète," just as earlier he noted that he was "prêt à bondir dans la réalité." With these powerful and enigmatic lines, Cendrars weds the reality of the situation with the capacity of the poet to recognize such a reality. These lines serve not only as a commentary on the act itself, but on the form of the text, an ultra-real rendering of a terrible consequence of war, only able to be rendered by a poet. The allusion to Baudelaire earlier ("mon semblable") anticipated this connection as well.

By linking the poet to the act of killing, Cendrars also reveals a turbulent undercurrent that may have motivated his later rejection of poetry. In this passage, the poet-soldier crosses over from witness to actor, and the art of poetry is implicated in this act as well, for poetry becomes the vehicle for how the narrator perceived the reality of the situation. In this way, poetry becomes another component of the war machine, through its capability to represent reality in such a way where the killing of

Seconde Guerre mondiale," which is certainly at work in the later memoirs. See "L'Image de l'Allemand dans *La Main Coupée*" in *Blaise Cendrars et la guerre*, 71-78.

⁹⁶ *J'ai tué*, 21.

another man becomes allowable. After this acknowledgement, it would be difficult to figure out how to neutralize the act of writing poetry.

In *La Main coupée*, Cendrars revisits this same scene but in the prose version of this recollection, the event has been defused, “corrected” to borrow the words of Lévy-Bertherat.⁹⁷ In the second account of the murder, however, there is one crucial difference. The German soldier, the enemy, is already dead:

C'est durant ce nettoyage que j'ai tué d'un coup de couteau un Allemand qui était déjà mort. [...] Je lui sautai dessus et lui portai un coup terrible qui lui décolla presque la tête et le fit tomber à la renverse, semant son casque à pointe. Alors, je constatai qu'il était déjà mort depuis le matin et qu'il avait eu le ventre ouvert par un obus. Il s'était vidé. Jamais un homme ne m'a fait aussi peur.⁹⁸

Cendrars renders this event in a radically different way: he abandons the short, clipped, muscular prose of *J'ai tué* to longer, more explanatory phrases in *La Main coupée*. By dramatically modulating the length of the phrases, Cendrars recalibrates the segmentivity of the event. In *J'ai tué*, where the text borders between prose and poetry, time stops and halts, as the sentences are deployed in varying lengths. Fragments are used often to further heighten the feeling of immediacy. In *La Main coupée*, the line is not segmented meaningfully to create an enhanced feeling of immediacy. Rather, the line flows along in the style of speech where logical effect follows cause; past tense is used instead of the present tense: “Je lui sautai dessus et lui portai un coup terrible qui lui décolla presque la tête et le fit tomber à la renverse” versus “La tête est presque décollée.”

Whereas the narrator of *J'ai tué* refuses to disclose any of his emotions during this act, the prose retelling ends on a pathetic note, as the narrator admits to his intense fear at the sight of the mangled cadaver, in an attempt to gain the reader's

⁹⁷ Lévy-Bertherat, “Les hommes bons,” 56.

⁹⁸ *La Main coupée*, 76-66.

sympathy for an act that was nothing more than accidental. The very nature of the prose sentence, with its expounding, bumbling rhythm, conjures this effect while the terse lines of *J'ai tué* do not leave any room for emotion to seep in. The dramatic differences in the ways of retelling the same event show how Cendrars stressed the intrinsic difficulties of poetry over prose. Poetry wreaked havoc with the soldier's sense of reality whereas prose allowed the same event to be retold in a neutralized way.

J'ai tué, with its terse sentences and its fragmented visions, culminates in the confession of an unspeakable act and it allows the poet and the soldier to coexist in this moment, to share the burden of this moment. The soldier kills another, but it was the poet, with his heightened awareness of reality, who is fully able to appreciate the dangers and the consequences of the moment. Sharing the responsibility of the act, the soldier and the poet both witness the war experience, a feat that Cendrars had elsewhere deemed impossible.

A parallel revelation occurs in *La Main coupée*, when Cendrars once again finds it possible to equate the soldier with the poet: "Et le métier d'un homme de guerre est une chose abominable et pleine de cicatrices, comme la poésie."⁹⁹ The traditional figure of the poet, one who seeks to lift himself and his fellow men out of their situation by composing beautiful verses, was rendered obsolete earlier in Cendrars' journey toward a poetics of witness. A new figure of the poet has been found here – and at what cost. In *J'ai tué*, the poet coexists with the soldier and does not turn away from the cruel reality of war; the resulting text describing this event bears the scars of this realization and attests to the new reality of this double embodiment through the hybrid nature of the prose-poem.

⁹⁹ *La Main coupée*, 159.

For Cendrars, in these painful postwar years as he sought to come to terms with the war, the long lines of his earlier works like *Pâques à New York* were completely unable to demonstrate his new reality. He struggled in early attempts at writing the war, such as “Shrapnells,” but the problem of the war’s terrible beauty plagued him. When he began to engage with questions of how the war was being represented around him, he was able to break through. His poetics became preoccupied with the image, in order to get closer to being able to convey reality, a reality that is finally distilled in *J’ai tué* in its starkest form.

Conclusion

World War I had a profound impact on Cendrars’ poetry and the physical wounds of the war forced him to seek out new ways of writing: with a different hand, and with a different set of constraints. Upon returning from the front, where the only poems he attempted were the three small “Shrapnells,” he wrestled with trying to render the war experience in written form. *La Guerre au Luxembourg* (1916), *La Fin du monde filmée par l’Ange Notre-Dame* (1919), and *J’ai tué* (1918), all resist easy classification but are linked together because each text advances Cendrars’ formulation of a new poetics of witness, a poetics that would ultimately reject traditional forms of poetry in favor of hybrid forms like the film scenario and the confessional novel. Hybridity infuses each work, down to the composition of the line itself, where Cendrars cultivated a language, especially through the use of visuality and metonymy, that straddles a middle ground between prose and poetry.

Following his discharge from the French army in 1916, Cendrars redefined his prewar *métier* of poet. As he reformulated thirty years later in *La Main coupée* and in

interviews, the loss of his right hand ultimately led him to take leave of poetry permanently. In this way, his poetics of witnessing began with a refusal; after the isolated poems, “Shrapnells,” his reaction to writing the war was not to write it at all. Unlike the soldiers in the trenches who were embracing the dual roles of poet and soldier, Cendrars found the embodiment of these two practices to be too problematic. Poetry that rendered the war experience in a way that highlighted its beauty (as Cendrars criticized Apollinaire for doing later) was also not a possible approach for Cendrars because he remained attuned to the utter depravity of the war. However, Cendrars did not renounce poetry completely; rather, in the texts he wrote in the years after he left the trenches and returned to Parisian society, he experimented with hybrid genres and hybrid forms in a quest to enlarge his notion of poetics so that it could accommodate the act of witnessing.

Throughout these shifting forms, Cendrars returns to several themes that explain why his poetics underwent such change. Grappling with the question of forgetfulness versus representation transforms *La Guerre au Luxembourg* from a pithy text to a deeply moving examination of what motivates a poet in wartime. The same motivations are taken up again in Cendrars’ collaboration with Abel Gance in the war epic *J’accuse*. In *J’ai tué*, Cendrars directly treats how a poet can confront reality – a reality in one of its rawest states – and this interrogation continued nearly thirty years later in *La Main coupée*. If he had never gone to war, Cendrars’ poetics may have continued in an entirely different direction. Instead, the onus of witness – the terrible need to admit “j’ai tué” – completely transmuted his poetics.

Conclusion

“Looking back from these sterner months, those early days in Paris, in their setting of grave architecture and summer skies, wear the light of the ideal and the abstract. The sudden flaming up of national life, the abeyance of every small and mean preoccupation, cleared the moral air as the streets had been cleared, and made the spectator feel as though he were reading a great poem on War rather than facing its realities.”¹
– Edith Wharton, 1915

In her description of the days leading up to the outbreak of World War I in Paris, Edith Wharton compares the pregnant sense of reality that she felt in the French capital city to the act of “reading a great poem on War.” Here, the word war is used in an ideological, disembodied sense, as emphasized by its capitalization as an abstract noun. If we were to try and imagine what this “great poem” looked like, it would no doubt be composed in a lofty, epic style, befitting the abstract, noble sense of the word “War.” Reading current events in an epic manner prevented citizens from achieving a clear-eyed appreciation of war and “its realities.” This shock was postponed to a later date in the war’s progression. In this comparison, Wharton evokes the dangers of classical poetry and representation, exposing the sentiment that poetry, at least poetry in the traditional sense, was not equipped to register the facts of war in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Almost one hundred years later, the trenches of World War I continue to exert powerful pressure upon the European and international imagination. Although in the latter half of the twentieth century critical and scholarly attention shifted from the First World War to the Second, scholars and artists in recent years have returned to World War I as a compelling and fecund point of interest. The French trenches have

¹ Edith Wharton, *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort* (New York: Scribner, 1915).

become their own *lieu de mémoire*, with Verdun meriting its own entry in Pierre Nora's ambitious memorialization project of contemporary France. With the inclusion of this battle in the pantheon of French cultural sites, Antoine Prost gestures toward its fraught importance, explicitly comparing the experience of Verdun to that of Auschwitz: "Comme Auschwitz durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, Verdun marque, en effet, dans la Première, une transgression des limites de la condition humaine."²

The privations and negotiations that were required of every soldier in order to survive in these dangerous, dank, rat- and lice-infested corridors, dug into the shallow earth and open to the sky's unending elements, have become sources of inspiration. Films such as Bertrand Tavernier's *La Vie et rien d'autre* (1989) and *Capitaine Conan* (1996) take the trenches as their setting. Beginning with Jean Rouaud's *Les Champs d'honneur* (which won the Prix Goncourt in 1990), contemporary writers in France have also made World War I and the trenches the backdrop of their novels, and they have been rewarded with great commercial success.³ Additionally, the trenches of the Great War have earned a prevalent spot in popular culture thanks to several *bandes dessinées* set in this era, beginning with Jacques Tardi's popular series *Les Aventures extraordinaires d'Adèle Blanc-Sec* (the first volume was published in 1976) and later, *14-18. C'était la guerre des tranchées* (1993).⁴ On the eve of the Great War's

² Antoine Prost, "Verdun" in *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992), 135. Prost also contributed another essay relating to the legacy of World War I in France, "Les monuments aux morts," for the first volume of the *Lieux de mémoire* series. Prost is mainly interested in Verdun as a site of battle and its subsequent memorialization with the ossuary at Douaumont and he does not touch on the literary nature of the trenches at all.

³ Sébastien Japrisot's best-selling novel *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (Paris: Denoël, 1991) was adapted in 2004 into the film of the same title, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and starring Audrey Tautou in the wake of her "Amélie" fame. For more on the phenomenon of recent fiction writers taking up World War I, see Dominique Viart, "L'exacte syntaxe de votre douleur." *La Grande Guerre dans la littérature contemporaine*, in *Écrire la guerre*. Études réunies par Catherine Milkovitch-Rioux et Robert Pickering (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2000), 463-474.

⁴ Others include David B.'s series *Par les chemins noirs* (tomes I and II, Paris: Editions Futuropolis, 2009) which features the Italian poet and soldier of World War I, Gabriele d'Annunzio as well as *La Lecture des ruines* (Marcinelle, Belgium: Dupuis, 2001). For an overview of World War I culture

centenary, novels, films, and scholarly works devoted to this historic episode continue to appear in France and elsewhere in large numbers.

From the earliest days after the armistice, the rubric of the British soldier-poet became well-established in popular culture, thanks to the inclusion of this group in most secondary educational literature textbooks and its popularity in anthologies.⁵ The British poets Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves form a hallowed triumvirate of World War I soldier-poets for the Anglophone reading public. In France, the soldiers were just as invested as the British troops in producing and consuming literature from within the trenches. Yet, to this day, France has not canonized a similar group of soldier-poets from the Great War and most of the poetry from the war remains obscure. Despite the presence of well-known writers in uniform – chief among them Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars – these men have resisted easy classification into the soldier-poet rubric.

This dissertation has attempted to explain the lack of an identifiable group of French soldier-poets within the French literary and cultural canon. One possible factor is the democratization of the figure of the poet as it was enacted in the French trenches, a groundbreaking rejection of the romantic definition of poetry as a sacred activity in favor of the view that poetry could be written by anyone, particularly those who served as witnesses on the front lines of experience. During the war, the phenomenon of the common soldier-poet was validated and encouraged from diverse places in French society: from the trenches where the soldiers' newspapers actively

within the graphic arts, see *La Grande Guerre dans la bande dessinée. De 1914 à aujourd'hui*. Sous la direction de Vincent Marie et l'Historial de la Grande Guerre (Péronne: Historial de la Grande Guerre, 2009. Paris: ADAGP, 2009). Jean Kaempfer likens Tardi's work on World War I to a "poétique naturaliste," which is then perverted in a fashion akin to Céline, in "Continuations récentes du 'roman 14-18,'" *Écrire la guerre*, 453-462.

⁵ See Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) particularly Chapter 3: "England: Lost Legions of Youth," 85-121.

mobilized enlisted men to pick up a pen and write, to venerable institutions such as the Académie Française and Académie Goncourt which continually validated works by soldier-writers during the war years.

The democratization of the poet was not always openly received by men who had been actively publishing poetry before the war. Apollinaire, as a soldier and witness to the First World War, struggled with how to redefine his role as a poet once he enlisted and put on a soldier's uniform. This struggle dogged him for the rest of his life until his death just two days before the official Armistice in 1918. Cendrars also resisted the idea that soldiers should become writers and his renunciation of this double role became a crucial part of his personal mythology, helping to explain his mythologized "congé" from poetry in 1917 following the amputation of his right hand. He repeatedly struggled in attempts to explicitly set his experiences from the First World War into writing until he found himself, in the shadow of World War II, writing the memoir *La Main coupée*. However, his attempts before this point left behind essential relics, such as *La Guerre au Luxembourg* and *J'ai tué*, which today may be interpreted as one man's evolving attempt to formulate a poetics of witness.

The struggles of these two poets with the pressure to witness in writing, particularly because of their status as soldiers (and voluntarily enlisted soldiers at that) was manifested in different ways. Apollinaire's war writings, especially *Calligrammes*, embody a profound tension between a romantic conception of the poet and the newfound sense of the poet as an artisan, working with his hands from the trenches. Cendrars responded to these pressures by turning more and more to hybrid literary creations such as *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange Notre-Dame* and *J'ai tué* to relieve the pressures of witnessing, forms which ostensibly refuse the traditional structures of poetry in favor of a potent, taut, visual language.

Through juxtaposing the poetic careers of Apollinaire and Cendrars, two distinct responses to the question of how to witness the war emerge. Apollinaire attempted “sur le vif” to adapt his role as a poet to the exigencies of the war, though he clung to an outmoded conception of this role. During his time in the trenches, he was forced, in spite of his beliefs, to embrace a different notion of the poet’s *métier* and this turn toward the artisanal is reflected in his poetics. Apollinaire’s poetics of witness is marked to its core by a profound sense of conflict. Yet, because of his premature death, Apollinaire’s conflicted poetics is one in stasis, bound permanently to its historical moment.

With Cendrars, a picture of a poetics in evolution comes into view. After a brief attempt to write poetry from the trenches, Cendrars rejected the idea that the poet and the soldier could coexist on the battlefield. In the years just following World War I, he realized that he needed to break through to new forms in order to witness the war. His poetics of witness is filtered through time. As the war recedes into the past, his approach to it follows a revelatory pattern. His first reaction was to witness the war in short poems, his “Shrapnells.” He then moved through different hybrid forms, gravitating toward the image as a powerful tool. Finally, thirty years later, he recounted the war in his prose memoir, *La Main coupée*. His poetics of witness migrates through time and formal experimentation; it is the opposite of a poetics in stasis, a poetics always in flux.

In the years following the Great War, literary critics and historians have responded to the body of *témoignage* left in the war’s wake in various ways. In the immediate postwar, many anthologies were produced and sold to the general public. These texts, with their insistence on noting the biographical data of each writer, exemplified the wide-scale cult of mourning endemic across the French nation

immediately following the Armistice.⁶ In many respects, Jean Norton Cru's work continued in this vein. His project, *Témoins*, sought to honor the fallen soldiers, his own comrades, by presenting the texts that most faithfully transcribed the war experience. In Cru's rigid formulation, literature, or "literariness," and especially poetry, was excluded because it interfered with this purpose.

And yet, some critics rejected the notion that ordinary soldiers could produce works of value. As early as 1919, the literary critic Henriette Charasson disputed the net value of the production of the *écrivains-combattants*:

La manie égalitaire, l'encens dont « l'homme et le citoyen » ont pris l'habitude ne peuvent qu'amener chacun à s'écrier : « Et moi aussi je suis écrivain ! » On hésiterait, sans travail préalable, à se vouloir peintre, sculpteur ou musicien [...] Littérairement, la valeur de presque toutes ces œuvres est quasi nulle. Il ne suffit pas d'avoir des yeux, il faut savoir regarder [...] Sincérité et bonne volonté ne sauraient suffire, pas plus qu'en tout autre art [...] les meilleurs livres de guerre sont dus à des professionnels, et il est peu d'amateurs, d'inconnus qui se soient révélés maîtres.⁷

Charasson's view that the value of the vast majority of these works was "quasi nulle" continues to the present day (as Laurence Campa has noted). The first chapter of this dissertation set out to counter this claim by illuminating several valuable texts written by little-known soldier-writers of the trenches. Still, Charasson's assertion that "il ne suffit pas d'avoir des yeux, il faut savoir regarder" rings true and may be taken as a guiding aim of the readings attempted here, both from the lesser-known poets of the trenches, such as Marc de Larreguy de Civrieux and Lucien Linais, as well as the

⁶ Much critical attention has been devoted to the subject of mourning and World War I. See the section "Le deuil" in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18, Retrouver la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 233-300 and *La Victoire endeuillée. La sortie de guerre des soldats français 1918-1920* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2004) by Bruno Cabanes for the French context and the work of J.M. Winter, *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: the Great War in European cultural history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) for a comparative historical approach. Others have applied mourning to the realm of literary study, such as Carine Trévisan's notable work, *Les Fables du deuil: la Grande Guerre: mort et écriture* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2001).

⁷ *Le Rappel*, 2 février 1919. Quoted in Campa, *Poètes de la Grande Guerre*, 118-119.

most celebrated soldier-poets of the war, Apollinaire and Cendrars. It is not the fact that one saw the horrific events of the First World War, but rather, how seeing was transmuted into literature, that matters. Poetry, in the hands of these men, those who knew how to witness, (or “savoir regarder”), became a dynamic and versatile medium in which the phenomenology of the trench experience was fully and provocatively registered.

The seeds of this thesis stemmed from Cru’s a priori rejection of poetry from the ranks of witness. By turning toward formal considerations, the readings offered here have sought to show how the realities of war were not only registered, but adumbrated and transmuted, by poets. Apollinaire and Cendrars are the best known soldier-poets that Cru excluded and their work defies his narrow notion of witness in essential and productive ways which today enhance our understanding of what it means to witness, and who may do so.

A further examination of the concept of the poetics of witness should be enlarged to include those who witnessed from different vantage points. Young surrealist poets like André Breton and Jean Cocteau, while not soldiers of World War I, did witness the war through secondary positions as medics or ambulance drivers, and the war impacted the development of their aesthetics in vital ways. On many levels, surrealism was born out of a direct refusal to acknowledge the oppressive rhetoric sustained by World War I and the desire to eschew the dire historical contingencies of the time in favor of completely liberated expression. Breton’s *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924) bears the traces of the historical event that ravaged French society in the war years. How else can one read the last section, titled “Contre la mort,” but as a willed desire to refuse the oppressive reminders of the death of an entire generation?

Witnessing was not an act isolated to the front lines alone but also an activity taken up by those left behind on the home front or in occupied regions. Turning to the poetry of these voices will further enlarge the dimensions of poetic witness. The voices of female French poets are missing from this study, and future critical attention may determine in what ways women's writing from this time period, particularly women's poetry, was hijacked by cultural pressures to partake in the national cult of mourning that dominated the French cultural landscape after World War I. Could the pressures felt by women to witness in a conventional way explain the general poverty of female avant-garde figures for this period of French letters? The postwar poetry of Anna de Noailles, such as her collection *Les Forces éternelles* (1920), is marked by an elegiac tone which, coupled with a strong classical tendency, makes her work seem extremely dated today.⁸

Pierre Reverdy provides a rich example of a poetics that sought to witness the historical realities of World War I, both from the vantage point of a soldier, and then as a civilian. Although the exact details of his military experience remain nebulous, Reverdy did enlist voluntarily in 1914 at the age of 25. For unclear reasons (most probably due to some sort of medical dispensation), he was discharged in 1916 and sent back to Paris.⁹ Resistant throughout his life to furnishing straightforward biographical information, Reverdy was characteristically laconic in detailing his war experience, telling one biographer when pressed: "Comme tous ceux qui étaient dans mon cas ou quelque chose de semblable – non appelés d'office – je m'engage. Et

⁸ See Gill Plain's article for a discussion of women's poetry and mourning in the British context, "'Great Expectations': Rehabilitating the Recalcitrant War Poets," *Feminist Review*, no. 51 (Autumn 1995), 41-65.

⁹ Jean Schroeder, *Pierre Reverdy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 17.

puis, au bout de quelques mois, réformé. Je retourne à Paris où je retrouve les éclopés de mon genre et les glorieux blessés.”¹⁰

His remarks reveal the difficulties that non-mobilized men of a certain age experienced on the domestic front during the war years. In one poem, Apollinaire alludes vaguely to this class of men: “Il y a des hommes dans le monde qui n’ont jamais été à la guerre.”¹¹ Immediately suspected of being shirkers or *embusqués* solely because of their age, these young men had to fend off inquisitive and often judgmental stares from those around them, and their place in society was renegotiated, often redefined in an emasculated way (note his pejorative use of the adjective “éclopé,” paired with “[s]on genre”) especially when compared to the “glorieux blessés.” The feeling of alienation that a young man like Reverdy must have felt provides a compelling contrast to the estrangement that Cendrars evokes in the figure of the *blessé* in *La Guerre au Luxembourg*.

The poem “Couvre-feu” serves as an evocative illustration of the difficulties of transmuting witness as the poet inhabits and articulates a space outside the officially sanctioned role of *témoin*:

Un coin au bout du monde où l’on est à l’abri
Les colonnes du soir se tendent
Et la porte s’ouvre à la nuit
Une seule lampe qui veille
Au fond il y a une merveille
Des têtes qu’on ne connaît pas
Au mur des plans qui se ressemblent
Ma figure plus effacée
Entre nous deux l’air chaud qui tremble
Un souvenir détérioré
Entre les quatre murs qui craquent

¹⁰ Lettres à Jean Rousselot, quoted in Jennifer Papp, “Transforming the Horizon: Reverdy’s World War I,” *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 101, no. 4 (October 2006), 966-978. Papp’s rich article reads several early poems of Reverdy’s (primarily “Soldats,” “Bataille,” and “Fronts du Bataille”) with the aim of establishing moments where he specifically alludes to the war or his war experience.

¹¹ “Il y a,” *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 281.

Personne ne parle
Le feu s'éteint sous la fumée¹²

The title immediately places the poem within a military context, referring to the practice of instituting a curfew for cities during wartime. Despite the specificity of the term, Reverdy does not dare exploit the allusion and the first verse of the poem resists fixing an exact location. The scene remains resolutely nondescript, “un coin au bout du monde où l'on est à l'abri.” The ambiguity of the scene is further heightened by the use of *on*, the impersonal third person pronoun; it is not clear who exactly is taking shelter (a refusal of biographical specificity in keeping with Reverdy's practice).

The next two lines reconfigure the night, giving the amorphous dark the architectural heft of a building: “Les colonnes du soir se tendent / Et la porte s'ouvre à la nuit.” In these lines, Reverdy folds the poem into an intimate, domestic space.¹³ The prepositional phrase “au fond” at the beginning of the fifth line pulls one deeper into the darkness as well as the later repetitions of the preposition “entre.” The poem maintains a tense relationship to the historical reality of the curfew outside through the feeling of surveillance perceptible in the line “une seule lampe qui veille” and the presence of maps, which often carry a strategic, militaristic function, adorning the walls of this space: “Au mur des plans qui se ressemblent.” By juxtaposing the curfew with the muted beings (“des têtes qu'on ne connaît pas”) huddled inside this vague

¹² Pierre Reverdy, *Œuvres complètes*, tome I. Edition préparée, présentée et annotée par Étienne-Alain Hubert (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 217. The poem was originally published in the collection *Les Ardoises du toit* (1918).

¹³ Following Georges Poulet, the literary critic Jennifer Papp has noted the importance of the room as “a visual model with which to understand Reverdy's inscription of history into his poetry. The room holds great symbolic value as the space where the mind, like a transforming camera, lets aesthetic structure develop. The historical cataclysm outside is transformed within the room,” “Reverdy's World War I,” 971.

space, Reverdy poignantly exposes the often complex and undefined nature of life during wartime for those outside prescribed roles.

The eighth line of the poem speaks to the indeterminate anguish that Reverdy must have felt during wartime: “ma figure plus effacée” but the tension is mitigated as the poem penetrates even deeper into the domestic space, closing in on the warm air hanging between two people: “Entre nous deux l’air chaud qui tremble.” Within this intimate space, “un souvenir détérioré” recalls once more the outside reality of the war. Memories from before the war deteriorate during the exigencies and sorrows of life during the war. The evocation of this ruined memory speaks loudly “entre les quatre murs qui craquent” and no one dares interrupt the silence.

The last line plunges the poem into darkness: “Le feu s’éteint sous la fumée.” The sole light that served as a beacon from deep within this closed space has been extinguished, self-extinguished, by the smoke that the lamp emitted. The various forms of fire in this last line – the nouns “feu” and “fumée” as well as the verb *s’éteindre* – refer back to the poem’s title, the curfew in effect. With one simple gesture, the poet literally enacts the simple meaning at the root of “couvre-feu” – the fire has been covered up and the light has slipped away, snuffed out by its own smoke, choked off in the crowded room where these indeterminate figures are left to wait out the night.

In a subtle fashion, Reverdy illuminates the war experience without explicitly alluding to the war in any concrete fashion.¹⁴ As a witness from the periphery,

Reverdy’s poetics of witness develops out of the act of *détournement*, but closer

¹⁴ Papp has noted this tendency in Reverdy’s poems that engage more directly with the war: “If there is a seen/scene of history, it is always unfinished and its most compelling feature is its shared reinterpretation or reliving. . . . This poem [“Soldats”] insists on the war reinterpreted *inside*. By drawing the war into the transforming ‘chambre close’ of his image-process, Reverdy connects these brief moments of historical evidence with another expressive system. The historical scene is transformed and muted but powerfully real,” *Ibid.*, 973.

readings reveal a profound engagement with the situation of his time. Reverdy was not alone in writing poetry that navigated the edges of experience of the First World War. Other poets who did not wear a uniform such as Paul Valéry, Paul Claudel and Max Jacob ought to be included in future discussions of the legacy of World War I *témoins* in order to offer a more nuanced view, not only of the literary repercussions of this horrific event, but also of the philosophical and poetic implications that ensued when the act of witnessing, as defined by Cru, became foreclosed to poets.

Agamben has written that “[n]either the poem nor the song can intervene to save impossible testimony; on the contrary, it is testimony, if anything, that founds the possibility of the poem.”¹⁵ And it is true: Poetry cannot reconstitute impossible testimony. With this claim, one finds an affinity with Adorno’s truncated statement that “After Auschwitz, there can be no poetry,” for this is exactly what Adorno feared and sought to warn against – a poetry that blindly sought to repair what could not be repaired; on the basest level, a poetry that could only describe what should not be described. Yet, the possibility of poetry thrives as a function of witness: the desire to witness history, to witness the quotidian. The edifice of testimony legitimates the poet’s first impulse. What happens in the poem following this initial recognition of the urge to witness remains the exclusive domain of poetry; an essential part of its untranslatability, and its vivid power.

In his poem “Ombre,” Apollinaire distills this process. The shadow evoked in the poem’s title starts off as the form of the memory of the speaker’s fallen comrades. The poet begins with the desire to witness their passing:

Vous voilà près de moi
Souvenirs de mes compagnons morts à la guerre

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone, 2000), 34.

The initial shadow of the fallen men then changes shape and morphs into the very shadow of the poet himself:

Souvenirs qui n'en faites plus qu'un
Comme cent fourrures ne font qu'un manteau
Comme ces milliers de blessures ne font qu'un article de journal
Apparence impalpable et sombre qui avez pris
La forme changeante de mon ombre

In the last lines of the poem, the shadow transcends the specificity of the war dead completely and casts a wider shadow, yielding a cosmic view of the passing of time and the passing of history. All of these things are embodied in the dark ink of the sun, the poet's light put into writing, the collection of regrets, the act of a god humbled:

Ombre encre du soleil
Écriture de ma lumière
Caisson de regrets
Un dieu s'humilie¹⁶

These four lines elude a clear paraphrase or explanation. Yet in the compressed space of each line, the poet gestures toward distinct dimensions that speak to the different senses in moving and unexplainable ways. The poet has moved beyond the shadow of his "souvenir," moved beyond his first impulse to bear witness to his fallen friends, and leaves us to contemplate the transmutation of shadow into the sun's ink. The burden of witness and comprehension has shifted, imperceptibly, into our hands.

¹⁶ "Ombre," *Calligrammes, Œuvres poétiques*, 217.

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Biography

Nichole Gleisner was born on March 4, 1981 in Buffalo, NY. She graduated from Boston University in 2003 where she earned a B.A., summa cum laude, in comparative literature. For her senior thesis, under the direction of Rosanna Warren, she translated *La Terre arrêtée*, a collection of poems by Lebanese Francophone poet Nadia Tuéni. During college, she also interned at *The Atlantic Monthly* and the *Partisan Review*.

After a brief stint in journalism, she attended graduate school at Duke University, earning her M.A. in Romance Studies in 2008. During the course of her graduate studies at Duke, she was awarded a Chateaubriand Fellowship to carry out research in France as well as a Summer Research Fellowship from the Duke Graduate School. She has published an article on Apollinaire's personal library, "In Memoriam: The Library of Guillaume Apollinaire, 1913-2010," which appeared in *French Studies Bulletin* in August 2010.