

# Showing What Cannot Be Said

*Total War and the International Project of Modernist War Writing*  
[The First of Two Parts]

## TOTAL WAR AND MODERNISM

WRITING ABOUT WAR is intrinsically difficult. Yet with the increasing complexity of warfare in modern times, the means for fully comprehending and portraying military conflicts have become still harder to grasp and articulate.<sup>1</sup> Ever since its emergence in the Napoleonic campaigns, modern warfare has posed formidable challenges to epistemology and language. The multifaceted complexity of modern warfare has proven elusive to mimetic representation. Take, for instance, Tolstoy and Stendhal, two writers who were keenly aware of the fact that modern war did not seamlessly fit within their realist project. In Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865–69) the Battle of Borodino is narrated through the gaze of Peter Bezukhov, a character who not only lacks the technical knowledge necessary for fully understanding what he observes, but also cannot properly see the battle because his eyeglasses slip off as he rides his mare, leaving the nearsighted Peter Bezukhov in a precarious situation. By depicting the Battle of Borodino in this fashion, Tolstoy satisfies realism's rule of verisimilitude, but he does so by placing war on the margins of representation: in spite of the many pages devoted to its narration, the battle becomes utterly unknowable. Thirty years before Tolstoy finished *War and Peace*, Stendhal had already offered a similar answer to the problem of representing modern warfare. In *La Chartreuse de Parme* (*The Charterhouse of Parma*) (1839) the French writer famously narrated the Battle of Waterloo through a focalizer—Fabrice del Dongo—intoxicated by the excessive ingestion of alcohol. The chaos of battle is thus refracted in the blurred perception of someone who understands nothing of what he sees. The battle is something beyond Fabrice del Dongo's grasp and therefore beyond accurate representation. As would later happen in Tolstoy, Stendhal

applies a formula for representing war that paradoxically undermines realist fiction: narrative unreliability does not constitute a solid basis for building a house of fiction, at least as conceived by the great masters of classic realism, from Honoré de Balzac to Henry James.

But it was the Great War, not the wars fought in the nineteenth century, that truly demonstrated the poverty of language for conveying the experience of modern warfare. As is well known, the Great War affected in fundamental ways the human capacity for understanding and representing war. The Great War's sheer vastness, its huge number of casualties, the alienation experienced by many soldiers in confronting a mechanized and industrialized war, as well as its ruthless command and control, long duration, and total nature, undermined the power of reason to understand the world and the ability of language to represent it, thereby shattering the very foundations of the house of fiction as it had been practiced hitherto.<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that the expression *total war* was coined at the end of the conflict and developed for the first time by Léon Daudet in *La guerre totale (Total War)* (1918). Daudet understands by *total war* "the expansion of fighting . . . into politics, economics, trade, industry, intellectual life, law, and the world of finance."<sup>3</sup> In a total war, not only do the armies fight each other, argues Daudet, but so too do "traditions, institutions, customs, codes, intellects, and specially, the banks."<sup>4</sup> Years later, after the publication of Daudet's book, there appeared Erich Ludendorff's classic *Der totale Krieg (Total War)* (1935), a treatise that would establish the main argumentative lines that define the concept of total war. The Great War was a total war in the sense that in most, if not all, belligerent countries large segments of the entire society were mobilized, one way or another, in support of the war effort. The economy became a war economy, and the rear guard turned into a home front, which made it vulnerable to enemy attacks, for in a total war the enemy's homeland may acquire the status of legitimate target. Thus *total war* defines not only the mobilization of a society (what Ernst Jünger famously called "total mobilization"); it also amounts to a redefinition of what constitutes a legitimate military objective.

A crisis of meaning arose as an aftershock of the Great War.<sup>5</sup> Profoundly baffled and traumatized by the magnitude of the tragedy, European and American artists and writers had to figure out—as it has been repeatedly noted—how to represent an experience lived and perceived by many as unspeakable, unaccountable, incommunicable.<sup>6</sup> Among the different modes that shaped the artistic and literary expressions of the

Great War, the most radical of them all stands out, the one that came closest to capturing the nature of total war: modernism. This literary and artistic correlate of the dismantling of the myths of nineteenth-century Western society produced apropos of the Great War works as diverse as Dadaist and futurist poetry; the war poems of Georg Trakl and Guillaume Apollinaire; T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922); Otto Dix's disturbing series of etchings gathered in *Der Krieg (The War)* (1924); avant-garde paintings and lithographs by Umberto Boccioni, Natalia Goncharova, Paul Nash, Max Beckmann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and George Grosz; as well as plays, novels, and autobiographic narratives entirely or partially related to the war such as Karl Kraus's *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit (The Last Days of Mankind)* (1915–22), Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), William Faulkner's *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End* (1924–28), Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), Edlef Köppen's *Heeresbericht (Army Communiqué)* (1930), Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit (Journey to the End of the Night)* (1932), David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937), and, I would like to suggest, Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu: Journal d'une escouade (Under Fire: A Diary of a Squad)* (1916).

The modernist literature on the Great War has been unevenly studied. Certainly there are solid, important scholarly monographs on the topic, but for the most part they focus on one single national tradition (usually British and/or American), skewing a comparative approach.<sup>7</sup> To a certain extent, this predominance of Anglo-American texts in the scholarship devoted to modernist writing on the Great War is understandable. In the first place, the war of 1914–18—an event that radically shaped Great Britain at all levels—has been ever-present in British cultural memory all throughout the twentieth century. The other belligerent countries have displayed less eagerness than Britain in remembering the Great War and exploring its cultural representations. Furthermore, the Great War triggered the creation of British and American modernist works that have been considered not only as masterpieces of the literature written in English in the twentieth century but also as fundamental milestones of world literature. Key works of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce (whose *Ulysses* [1922], as Paul K. Saint-Amour has recently demonstrated, is closely connected to the war)<sup>8</sup> belong to the Western canon and have a strong presence in the international literary field. Their universal status has drawn the attention of scholars and general readers alike, placing the highly regarded Anglo-American modernism, and in

fact Anglo-American war writing in general, at the very center of the debates on the literature written in response to the Great War. With the exception perhaps of Italian futurism, that is not the case of most modernist artifacts on the Great War that emerged from other national traditions, which generally have remained on the margins of critical discourse. This asymmetry is not a fact of nature but rather the result of economic and political forces (the centrality of Anglo-American literature is a function of the geopolitical power of both Great Britain and the United States), critical strategies (the privileging of modernism as object of study arose partly in tandem with the dawn of post-structuralism in the late 1960s), and power relations within academia (the preeminence of the Anglo-American canon on the Great War also has to do with the wider readership and potentially higher impact of scholarly discourse published in today's lingua franca—English). Another factor powering the preponderance of modernist texts written in English within the scholarly discourse on modernism and the Great War lies in the tacit reduction of the international project of modernist war writing to Anglo-American modernist letters. This phenomenon has been achieved in several influential studies by means of a *décalage* between their title, and their contents. While titles such as Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Vincent Sherry's *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*, and Randall Stevenson's *Literature and the Great War, 1914–1918* seem to be suggesting all-encompassing, comparative approaches, the books themselves explore solely Anglo-American war writing, with only scant attention paid to other national literary traditions. The misleading omission of the predicate “*in English Literature*” from those titles somehow conflates the Anglo-American and the international literary fields, as if they were one and the same thing. Despite appearances to the contrary, the methodology followed by the aforementioned books is none other than the old-fashioned exploration of a single national literature. National approaches are in fact hegemonic in most studies of the literature on the Great War.<sup>9</sup> Thus even the otherwise excellent *Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, edited by Sherry, organizes its chapters, excepting those grouped in the third part of the book, by countries—a methodological decision that limits their reach.

From a comparative standpoint, the modernist literature on the Great War is a question that has never been properly addressed. The German, British, French, American, and Italian respective corpuses of modernist works on the Great War share important family resemblances.<sup>10</sup> Studying

them together, instead of simply analyzing them within their national literary field, reveals the existence of a robust international poetics of modernist war writing. Its comparative study not only enriches our knowledge of individual works but it also provides the panorama of a literature that is best understood as a transnational dialogue. To begin such work, this essay will build upon five propositions. First, using a distinction elaborated by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, I argue that warfare, most particularly modern warfare, is a phenomenon that can be shown, but not said.<sup>11</sup> Second, given the Great War's cataclysmic proportions and its total character, I contend that modernism is better equipped than realism for showing war's multifaceted nature. Third, I view modernism as a *longue durée* mode of writing that exists beyond its hegemony in a specific historical period such as the interwar years of the twentieth century; modernism has been available to all writers ever since the appearance of the first modernist texts (e.g., Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* [1605, 1615], Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* [1759–67], and Denis Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* [1796], among other early manifestations of literary modernism). Fourth, I suggest that studies of modernist literature on the Great War ought to be more inclusive and go beyond the usual Anglo-American canon. Finally, I claim that modernist writing on the Great War is an international project with long-lasting effects that needs to be studied, precisely on account of its multinational dimension, from a comparative and transnational standpoint.

In order to address these propositions, in order also to provide a straightforward model for a comparative and transnational treatment of the modernist literature on the Great War, in what follows I center on two pivotal works that have never been studied together: Henri Barbusse's seminal and widely read novel *Le Feu: Journal d'une escouade* (*Under Fire: Diary of a Squad*), first published in ninety-three installments in the journal *L'Œuvre* (*The Work*) from August 3 to November 9, 1916, and then as a book in December 1916, and *Heeresbericht* (*Army Communiqué*), an experimental novel written by Edlef Köppen that saw the light of day in 1930. A comparative study of these two novels will enlighten and expand beyond their disciplinary boundaries current views of the modernist writing produced in connection with the Great War, which have been based predominantly on Anglo-American texts.

On first inspection, these two works do not seem to have much in common: *Le Feu* has been hailed as a realist testimony based on the author's war experience and observations<sup>12</sup> and as the first clear instance of Barbusse's

political engagement and activism,<sup>13</sup> while *Heeresbericht* has been considered as a novel close to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity).<sup>14</sup> But a comparison is not only possible, but also enlightening—hence its pertinence. When placed in conversation *Le Feu* and *Heeresbericht* set out in all its complexity an important literary problem (i.e., the representation of total war) and expose two sides of the same answer (i.e., modernism seems to provide the most adequate language for *showing* total war). Each novel lays out from different angles the shortcomings of realism and the ruin of representation when confronted with the challenge of representing total war. Although *Le Feu* has almost universally been read as a realist novel, a closer look reveals that the realist poetics underlying the novel is undermined by the war it attempts to represent as well as by Barbusse's use of modernist literary techniques. In his portrayal of a world *unmade* by total war, Barbusse employs literary strategies that question the possibility of a mimetic approach to war.<sup>15</sup> Whereas the French writer displays the difficulties intrinsic to giving a realist account of total war, Köppen puts his energy into crafting a modernist literary work whose form—a collage—may be seen as homologous to the multilayered structure of the total war represented in the novel. Köppen's novel is, therefore, a work that shows total war by its deployment of a modernist language. Ultimately, both *Le Feu* and *Heeresbericht* represent the devastating effect of war on both the nonlinguistic world and the ability of human beings to understand and represent total warfare.

#### TOTAL WAR'S UNMAKING OF THE WORLD AND THE TRAUMA OF REPRESENTATION

MANY REPRESENTATIONS of the Great War portray the war's unmaking of the world; they center on a world that has been partially deprived of those constituents that make it fit for human habitation. Works such as Georges Duhamel's *Civilisation 1914–1917* (1918), Andreas Latzko's *Menschen im Krieg* (*Men in War*) (1918), Ernst Johannsen's *Vier von der Infanterie* (*Four from Infantry*) (1929), Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) (1929), and Gabriel Chevallier's *La Peur* (*Fear*) (1930) depict a world in the process of being unmade by war. Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* surpasses them all in its fictionalization of the unmaking of the world. To a degree that very few Great War narratives would ever match, *Le Feu* deploys a poetics of what Maurice Blanchot has called the "writing of disaster"—a poetics that disarticulates the traditional story,

plot, and discourse of the novel.<sup>16</sup> The French landscape and villages, the human body, literary form, language, and ultimately the realist mode are casualties of the large-scale devastation narrated by Barbusse.

*Le Feu* describes a world that has been turned upside down. It tells the story of several traumas—in the sense of “wound”—which would become a source for personal and collective traumas in the psychological and sociopsychological senses of the term. In *Le Feu* the crisis of realism is a function of physical, psychological, social, and symbolic trauma. Traumatic events, as Judith Herman reminds us in *Trauma and Recovery*, “call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.”<sup>17</sup> In the same way that, as Herman puts it, “[t]raumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning,”<sup>18</sup> trauma erodes the foundations of *Le Feu*’s realism. Barbusse’s detailed descriptions of ruined landscapes and corpses have a paradoxical effect, for the closer the narrator gets to the object, the more he underscores the difficulties of realism in grasping total war. *Le Feu* seems to assert that realism can only adequately represent some of the external features of the misery and destruction brought about by war. No doubt aware of realism’s limited capabilities for representing modern warfare, as we shall see, Barbusse experiments with modernist literary techniques—techniques that could themselves be interpreted as “wounds” within the realist mode, as cracks on the walls of the house of fiction. This is certainly not surprising given Barbusse’s early production of modernist works, or those with a strong modernist component: a collection of symbolist poems titled *Pleureuses (Mourners)* (1895), the verse novel *Les Suppliants (The Suppliants)* (1903), and *L’Enfer (Hell)* (1908), a work stamped at once by naturalism and decadentism. Bearing in mind the presence of modernism in *Le Feu*, it could be argued that the novel speaks not only about trauma, but also *through* it. Barbusse’s novel refracts at the discursive level the structure of trauma, being itself a formal representation of total war and the traumatic experience that it triggers.

The presence of trauma is most visible in the many descriptions of landscape scattered throughout *Le Feu*. Descriptions of the front line, rear-guard positions, and the home front are so pervasive that sometimes they seem to function less as a field for human action than as units whose

main function is to convey affect, as autonomous aesthetic objects suited for the author's artistic contemplation—which is in fact a family resemblance of modernism. Many if not all spaces and places have in common the fact that they are war zones saturated by death.<sup>19</sup> Thus landscape is not just a series of plains, hills, or forests littered with innumerable corpses, the scenario where people fight and die, the graveyard of the fallen. In addition, it is itself a dead entity, as some of the towns described by the narrator are dead. It is no coincidence that the main story starts—after an introductory modernist first chapter that, in a symbolic fashion, prophesies the deadly outcome of war and its potential for triggering a workers' revolution—with a description of what the narrative voice calls “fields of sterility”:

The earth! The desert has started to appear, vast and full of water, beneath the long and desolate light of dawn. Ponds and craters . . . tracks left by last night's troops and convoys in these fields of sterility . . . and piles of mud with here and there broken stakes emerging from them. . . . With its puddles and its banks of slime it looks like an oversized grey canvas sheet floating on the sea, submerged in places.<sup>20</sup>

Further on in the novel the earth is characterized as a “field of death” (25); it is itself “corpse-like” (248). Likewise, the shelling of the armies at war is seen as a “massacre of the earth” (199–200), a trench is described as having been “assassinated” (248), and trees are depicted as “standing coffins” planted on a “tortured, blackened land” (251). Landscape in *Le Feu* takes to the extreme the main characteristics of any war zone, described by Adam Piette as “Death's country” and as being “empty of civilization and culture.”<sup>21</sup>

The central role played by ruined, scarred landscapes in *Le Feu* reaches its climax in chapter twelve, significantly placed at the center of this twenty-four-chapter novel. This chapter is devoted almost in its entirety to describing the complete annihilation of Souchez and its surrounding area. In this chapter the narrator and his comrade Poterloo—a native of Souchez—walk toward that town. Barbusse describes first the terrible destruction suffered by the outskirts of Souchez through the eyes of Poterloo, who says: “I can see [the road to Souchez] as it used to be. It's frightful, old man, to see it like this now. It was a lovely road, with tall trees planted all along it. . . . And now what is it? Just look at that: a sort of long thing, broken, sad, sad. . . . Take a look at those two trenches on either side, all open, and the pavement ploughed up and pitted with holes. These trees, torn up, sawn, blackened, broken into logs, scattered

in all directions, riddled with bullets. . . Oh, my dear man, you can't imagine how disfigured the road is!" (135). As they advance, the destruction becomes more apparent: "The further we go," the narrator observes, "the more everything appears turned over, terrifying, full of rottenness and smelling of disaster. We are walking on a path paved with shrapnel" (139). The narrator writes that he has never seen such a level of destruction. Other destroyed towns he had been in before "still preserved some semblance of locality, with their gutted and truncated houses and their courtyards filled with plaster and tiles" (139). But this is different: "Here, framed by the shredded trees. . . nothing has any shape; there is not even a fragment of a wall or railing or gate still standing, and we are amazed to discover, under the heap of beams, stones and ironmongery, that there are paving stones—here there used to be a street!" (139). Finally, Poterloo and the narrator come to what used to be the former's family home. At first, Poterloo cannot recognize the place where the house used to be: "It is here. No, I've gone past. It's not here. I don't know where it is. . . where it was. . . Oh, misery!" (141). But after looking in several directions, "he stops at one point and steps back a little. 'This is where it was. No mistake. You see, it was that stone that convinced me'" (141). The effect of this annihilation of landscape and human habitation could be described as traumatic. Poterloo concludes: "It's too much, all this, d'you see? It's wiped out too much of my life up to now. It scares me, so much has been wiped out" (142). The centrality of this scene is obvious: the annihilation of Souchez can be extended to other devastated areas in France, and Poterloo's sense of loss, that is to say his traumatic experience, to other Frenchmen.

The trauma of the landscape has its equivalent in the trauma of the human body. With a massive amount of details that one can hardly find in other narratives on the Great War, Barbusse describes the effect of the war on the soldiers—wounds, pain, mutilation, death. The French novelist forces upon the reader all the pain, disgust, guilt, fear, and trauma that one might feel when witnessing the destruction of the human body by modern weaponry. Descriptions of corpses abound. *Le Feu* may be described as a huge discursive war zone inhabited by ghosts (the troops sometimes are characterized as such by the narrator [56]) and corpses of all sorts. The narrator describes the different ways a soldier might die as well as the postures of the corpses and their stage in decomposition. This is the case, for instance, of Marchal's description of the corpses of some comrades: Barbier "had the top of his back taken off by a shell. . . Besse

had a piece of shrapnel through his belly and his stomach . . . You remember little Godefroy? The middle of his body was blown right away. He was emptied of blood on the spot, in an instant, like turning over a pail . . . Gougnard had his legs blown off by shrapnel” (46). And Marchal goes on: Mondain “was lying down and his chest was crushed. Did they tell you about Franco, who was next to Mondain? The roof falling in broke his spine. . . Vigile was with them, too. His body was untouched, but his head was completely flattened, like a pancake” (46). There is a similar scene in chapter twelve. In that chapter, the narrator and Poterloo look attentively at the corpses they encounter in their walk to Souchez. As in the previous example, the gaze is morose, and the observations go into detail: the corpses “are pressed against one another, each making a different gesture of death with his arms or his legs”; some of them “exhibit half-moldy faces, their skin rusted or yellow with black spots” while others “have turned completely black, tarred, their lips huge and swollen. Negro heads blown up like balloons”; between two corpses, “belonging to either one or the other, is a severed hand with a mass of filaments emerging from the wrist”; several bodies “are shapeless, fouled larvae with vague pieces of equipment or fragments of bone. . . You can’t tell the top of this corpse from the bottom; all that can be recognized in the pile is a gaping trouser pocket” (136).

As with the landscape, the descriptions of corpses are so abundant and diverse that often they become autonomous objects intrinsically worthy of aesthetic contemplation—which is, as previously stated, a family resemblance of modernism. *Le Feu* makes us stare at the object; we are forced to face an object that, once a subject, has now been cast out from the world. The corpse condenses the dissolution of the border between subject and object; it upsets whoever confronts it. “Refuse and corpses,” Julia Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror*, “show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.”<sup>22</sup> Body fluids, defilement, corpses, and excrement “are what life withstands,”<sup>23</sup> and every time we contemplate such things we are at the border of our condition as living beings. “The corpse,” according to Kristeva, “is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. An imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and engulfs us.”<sup>24</sup> This is precisely the meaning and function of the abject in *Le Feu*: it is a threat, it is death infecting life—and infecting fiction, for Barbusse’s relation with the abject is ambivalent, it is marked at once by repulsion

and by attraction. Again, Kristeva's remarks on the abject cast light on *Le Feu*. Speaking of its dual relation with the abject, Kristeva notes that contemporary literature "seems to be written out of the untenable aspects of perverse or superego positions while maintaining a distance as regards the abject. . . . The writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language—style and content."<sup>25</sup>

Given that landscape and the human body are typical objects of representation in realist works since the nineteenth century, the destruction of landscape and bodies in *Le Feu* stands as a figure for the destruction of representability. War zones and the abject destabilize and destructure representation. The linguistic signs that refer to space, places, and human beings have an unexpected referentiality, for they point out dead spaces, dead places, and dead bodies. There is nothing left to be represented but corpses and a vast empty space—the war zone, the space of the dead, is itself dead, it is nothing but a huge corpse. The written word thus refers to *nothing*. If the destruction went on (and in the novel, which was published two years before the end of the Great War, there is a sense that the conflict could go on forever), one could infer that words like *body*, *town*, *nature*, or *forest* would have a referentiality different from the usual: they would refer to empty things. Nothing but pain and death would be left for the language of representation.

Realist fiction builds upon structures and codes organized around the plenitude of sense. As is well known, realism populates its writings with a constellation of intelligible and revealing meanings. Roland Barthes said as much in *S/Z: a realist (or lisible [readerly] in his terminology) text is marked by its finitude, its logic, its obsession with everything that is unified and noncontradictory—its texture consists of nominations, closures, and linkages.*<sup>26</sup> To this one must add that the realist novelist "has a vested interest, an ontological stake, in the solidity of social reality, on the resistance of bourgeois society to history and to change."<sup>27</sup> The characteristics of the world portrayed by Barbusse (decadence, rapid change, physical violence, the destruction of everything and everybody, the unmaking of the world) erode the poetics of realism. And let us not forget that one of the outcomes of physical violence—pain—lacks, as Elaine Scarry has authoritatively demonstrated, a language. Even more: physical pain destroys language, and "its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is."<sup>28</sup> The pain described by Barbusse resists, therefore, representation.

The constant use of the soldiers' slang can be interpreted as the presence of trauma within the discourse of the novel.<sup>29</sup> *Le Feu* underscores this deviation from normative French in a well-known passage: the chapter titled "Swearwords" (155–56), which functions as a self-referential metatext. Much like the first chapter, this is a modernist moment of *Le Feu*, a passage that breaks with realism's suspension of disbelief, underscores the novel's textuality, presents the text as *sui generis*, and uncovers some of its rules of articulation. In a conversation with Private Barque, the narrator, who happens to be a writer, insists that he will put in his text the soldiers' swear words "because it's the truth" (155). Barque encourages him to do so. When told by the narrator that his book will contain such language no matter what, Barque's intervention underlines the novelty of doing so within the literary field: "Though I don't know much about books, that's brave, that, because it's not done, and it would be great if you did dare" (156). The use of the French soldiers' slang in *Le Feu* is pervasive. In the context of our discussion on the devastated landscape and corpses, the presence of slang in the novel takes the trauma of the space and the trauma of the body onto language itself. Disfigured space and rotting bodies refract into a language that "rots" and "stinks" by comparison with normative French. In other words: "foul" language—swear words are described in the novel as characteristic of a "foul-mouthed pig" (156)—is a projection at the level of discourse of the "rotten," badly smelling bodies as well as the "corpse-like" (and therefore abject) landscape described in the story.

The trauma and "decomposition" of space, corpses, and language project themselves onto the very texture of the novel. Organized episodically, *Le Feu* is a plotless narrative. Although the novel loosely follows a chronological line, sequentiality is disrupted time and again by the insertion of episodes that can be read autonomously from the main story. *Le Feu* is an instance of what Joseph Frank has termed as *spatial form*.<sup>30</sup> Space, not time, is the novel's main organizing principle. On account of this modernist episodic composition of the novel, one could argue that the multiple "decomposition" at work in the story (landscape, human body) and discourse (the soldiers' slang) is also present in the novel's plot. To put it differently: the decomposition described at length at the level of the story and inserted in the discourse correlates with a de-composition of the plot. It is true that the episodic is already present in realism. But as Fredric Jameson has recently argued, realism carried within itself elements that eventually led to its own dissolution. The "increasingly episodic

character” of realist fiction marked “the supersession of plot by scene, of imagination by fancy, and of narrative by a kind of non-narrative perceptuality.”<sup>31</sup> Jameson adds: “with serialization, this centrifugal tendency is then once again intensified; and the installment, with its recurrent internal dynamic and its relative autonomy, encourages a tendency once again to break up the continuity of the narrative or story-telling process, albeit in a new way.”<sup>32</sup> He denominates this tendency as “autonomization,” which Jameson connects to modernism. And this is precisely what is at work in *Le Feu*. Barbusse’s novel brings to the fore the correlation of the destruction brought about by the total war described at the level of the story with the destruction of the plot, as if total war could only be shown by a fractured literary form that mimics its multiple layers, its discontinuities, its apparent lack of meaning, its destructive power. This modernist fragmentation or “de-composition” of form constitutes the ultimate way of showing total war.<sup>33</sup>

There is one last manifestation of trauma that I would like to briefly comment on: the trauma of realism. If realist fiction focuses mostly on death and the dead—if its world is nothing but the world of senselessness and nothingness—does this not turn realism into a dead poetics, into a language that barely hints at that which escapes representation, into a corpse of sorts? Can there really be mimesis of an experience that, as many veterans and scholars have insisted on, lies “at the boundaries of language”?<sup>34</sup> Barbusse sets up the problem, and underscores the aporias of realism in his attempt to represent total war. But his modernism is hesitant and partial. Barbusse does not really offer thought-out alternatives to realist accounts. This task would be undertaken by experimental writers like Edlef Köppen. The second part of this essay, which will be published in the next issue of this magazine, explores Köppen’s contribution to the modernist showing of total war, followed by a concluding section on modernist war writing in its *longue durée*, or long-time span.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The cognitive challenge of warfare to human understanding and modes of representation has been studied many times. See, for instance, Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 232–58; Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 232–58; McLoughlin, “War and Words,” in *War Writing*, ed. Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 15–24.

<sup>2</sup>See, among other studies, Paul Fussell's classic *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup>Léon Daudet, *La guerre totale* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1918), p. 8. My translation.

<sup>4</sup>Daudet, *La guerre totale*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup>James Dawes, *The Language of War: Literature and Culture in the U.S. from the Civil War through World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 131.

<sup>6</sup>For a recent analysis of this issue in British writing, see Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1–120.

<sup>7</sup>On the Anglo-American modernism produced apropos of the Great War, see, for instance, Vincent Sherry, “The Great War and Literary Modernism in England,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 113–37; Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 90–132, 179–302; Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War*, 114–20, 217–20. On the connection between the nature of the Great War and modernist art and literature, see Modris Eksteins, *Rites of the Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2000). The reader will find an overview of the avant-gardes in the context of the Great War in a recent cultural history of that military conflict: Ernst Piper, *Nacht über Europa: Kulturgeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Berlin: List Taschenbuch, 2014), 98–150, 291–314, 373–77.

<sup>8</sup>Saint-Amour, *Future Tense*, pp. 222–62.

<sup>9</sup>For Germany: Michael Gollbach, *Die Wiederkehr des Weltkrieges in der Literatur. Zu den Frontromanen der späten Zwanziger Jahre* (Kronberg: Scriptor Verlag, 1978); Hans-Harald Müller, *Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller. Der Kriegsroman der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1986); Martin Patrick Anthony Travers, *German Novels on the First World War and Their Ideological Implications, 1918–1933* (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1982). For Great Britain: Fussell, *The Great War*; Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992); Saint-Amour, *Future Tense*; Sherry, *The Great War*; Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War*. For Italy: Mario Isnenghi, *Il mito della Grande Guerra da Marinetti a Malaparte* (Rome: Laterza, 1970). For France: John Cruickshank, *Variations on Catastrophe: Some French Responses to the Great War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Frank Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War: Studies in the Rise of Communism and Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Almut Lindner-Wirsching, *Französische Schriftsteller und ihre Nation im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2004).

<sup>10</sup>I draw the notion of family resemblance from Ludwig Wittgenstein; see, for instance, his *Philosophical Investigations*, German-English edition, third ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), §§ 65–71, 92, 108, 114. This concept constitutes a useful tool for capturing the morphology of modernism. A detailed analysis of modernism's family resemblances can be found in Nil Santiáñez, *Investigaciones literarias: Modernidad, historia de la literatura y modernismos* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2002), pp. 121–35, 247–380.

<sup>11</sup>See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, German-English edition, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001), §§ 3262, 4022, 4115, 4121–4112, 4126, 4461, 561, 562, 563, 612, 636, 651, 653.

<sup>12</sup>Mathilde Flechais, “Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu*, 1916,” in *Littérature et politique en France au XXe siècle*, eds. Guillaume Zorgbibe and Alain-Gérard Slama (Paris: Ellipses, 2004), pp. 47–50; Jonathan King, “Henri Barbusse: *Le Feu* and the Crisis of Social Realism,” in *The First World War in Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Holger Klein (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 43–52; Jacques Meyer, “*Le Feu* d’Henri Barbusse,” *Europe: Revue Littéraire Mensuelle* 477 (1969), pp. 16–67; P. van Rutten, “Le Style du *Feu* de Barbusse,” *La Pensée: Revue du Rationalisme Moderne* 172 (1973), pp. 125–34.

<sup>13</sup>Guessler Normand, “Henri Barbusse and His *Monde*: Precursors to the *Littérature Engagée* Movement,” *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 24 (1977), pp. 451–52; Jean Relinger, “Les Conceptions de Barbusse sur la littérature prolétarienne,” *Europe: Revue Littéraire Mensuelle* 575–76 (1977), pp. 193–203.

<sup>14</sup>For instance: Jutta Vinzent, *Edlef Köppen — Schriftsteller zwischen den Fronten: Ein literaturhistorischer Beitrag zu Expressionismus, Neuer Sachlichkeit und innerer Emigration: Mit Edition, Werk- und Nachlassverzeichnis* (Munich: Iudicium, 1997), pp. 182, 225–30.

<sup>15</sup>For a seminal approach to the war’s “unmaking of the world,” see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 60–157.

<sup>16</sup>The “writing of disaster” has been described by Maurice Blanchot in *L’Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

<sup>17</sup>Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 51.

<sup>18</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup>For general information on war zones in literature, see Adam Piette, “War Zones,” in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 38–46.

<sup>20</sup>Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire*, trans. Robin Buss (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 7. Further citations in text. A good modern French edition of Barbusse’s novel is *Le Feu*, Folioplus classiques 91 (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

<sup>21</sup>Piette, “War Zones,” p. 41.

<sup>22</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup>Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup>Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup>Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup>See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp. 37, 48–49, 112, 136, 162, 177, 206.

<sup>27</sup>Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup>Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup>The omnipresence in *Le Feu* of the *poilus*’s slang is a topic that has already been discussed by scholars: Luciana Alocco Bianco, “Il linguaggio dei *poilus* nel *Feu* di Henri Barbusse,” in *I registri linguistici come strategia comunicativa e come struttura letteraria*, eds. Marco Modenesi, Marisa Verna, and Gian Luigi di Bernardini (Milan:

Università Cattolica, 2010), pp. 119–30; Philippe Baudorre, “‘Les Gros Mots’: *Le Feu* d’Henri Barbusse,” in *Les voix du peuple dans la littérature des XIXe et XXe siècles*, eds. Corinne Grenouillet and Eléonore Reverzy (Strasbourg: PU de Strasbourg, 2006), pp. 167–80; Nelly Wolf, *Le peuple dans le roman, de Zola à Céline* (Paris: PUF, 1990), pp. 34, 154.

<sup>30</sup>Joseph Frank, *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 31–132.

<sup>31</sup>Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, p. 154.

<sup>32</sup>Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, p. 154.

<sup>33</sup>Compare with J. E. Flower, “Henri Barbusse,” in *French Novelists, 1900–1930*, ed. Catharine Savage Brosman (Detroit: Gale, 1988), p. 17; Hynes, *War*, pp. 203–4.

<sup>34</sup>The phrase is borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s lecture on ethics (*Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, eds. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993], p. 44). The philosopher was himself, we should recall, a veteran of the Great War.