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THE THEME OF THE ABSURD
IN THE FRENCH NOVEL OF WORLD WAR ONE

by

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PREVIEW

INTRODUCTION

It has been said that the First World War was responsible for the chaos of standards in modern culture.¹ Conveniently, we have a record of the thought and of the experience of the participants of the war in the form of the novel, memoirs, poetry and even the theater of the time and later. The French soldier, the poilu, suffered as much as any soldier of any other nation in that holocaust. He represented, however, a generation that was better educated, better able to record its thoughts than any other that had preceded it in France or possibly elsewhere. Since the French Revolution and the dawn of the rights of the common man one saw the day of the ordinary soldier-writer coming. Yet, nineteenth century wars had relatively few writer-witnesses and fewer still of those were prepared to record the lower depths of human suffering and abject shock of the futility of war as were those of 1914.

The 1914-1918 war saw a number of literate men in the field. They had been exposed to the conventional themes of patriotism and the glory of battle and death for the fatherland. Some, perhaps most of them, rebelled at this after seeing the realities of warfare. Among these there were, of course, many writers from other countries--to mention only a few, the Germans Arnold Zweig (Education before Verdun, 1936) and Erich Maria Remarque (All Quiet on the Western Front, 1929), the Americans John Dos Passos (Three Soldiers, 1921) E.E. Cummings (The Enormous Room, 1930), the Britons Richard Aldington (Death of a Hero, 1929) and Edmund Blunden (Undertones of War, 1928) and the Italian Giuseppe Antonio Borgese (Rubè, 1923). It is the object of this study to probe the feeling

¹Harry Slochower, Literature and Philosophy between the Two World Wars (New York, 1964), introduction.

of rebellion as expressed in the French war novel.

Alienation: a by-product of war

The reasons for the great disillusionment are most visible to us not only in the fantastic casualty rates of the war, but in its long duration and in the immobility of trench warfare. Enthusiasm did reign at first, as at the beginning of most wars--some writers tell us that there were indeed men who were joyous at the prospect of going off to war as they marched off in August, 1914. But the massive machines bogged down and men came to know the psychological disbelief characteristic of the writers of the postwar period. This brought about a final questioning of values which had seemed secure for decades. It came at a time when philosophical truths which had been cherished earlier were being questioned. The positivist notions which were responsible for the hope of well-being and progress of most of the nineteenth century had already been under attack for some time before the war. The experiences of the Somme, of the Chemin des Dames, of Verdun, would lend more credence to the opponents of the notions of permanent progress. The war was, in effect, a final destruction of many of the ideals of the previous century.

The Dada movement, for example, which was born at the end of the war, is a typical manifestation of the disgust which men felt at that period. In many ways it is a reaction to the war itself. Many of its proponents were war veterans, such as André Breton, Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault. There had indeed been a shakeup of values due to the war. Dada was one element of the revolt against those values as it was interpreted by some of those who had lived through the period.

The French soldier in the trenches was a witness to things that were not entirely new to him, with his humanistic background in education. We know that the theme of alienation was not a new one: it is found in Greek literature, in Cervantes, in Goethe's Werther. There are, of course, new elements present in the twentieth century world. Some of the combatants were certain that an end was in sight, and would even be hastened, for the materialistic society that was Europe. A society based on technology seemed to be feeding itself into the machinery of that technology and being ground up and swallowed by it. The place of the individual was, at best, obscure and insignificant in the society and now, in the crush of war, it was even more difficult to determine.

If personality was a vague concept before 1914, with trench warfare it became even less significant. Depersonalization would lead to an attitude in some, less imbued with a religion of sorts than others, that would confront them with the absurdity of man's own creation. Despite its surface appearance, in retrospect, the belle époque was not a golden age, for most people, we are given to believe, it offered many hardships, injustices and lack of stability.² Men had, however, a certain feeling of security before the war. There had been progress for the lowly of society as well as for those who had faith in humanitarian enterprises. But Krupp, Schneider and Vickers came to personify the military-industrial complex of the period. And the false sense of security fell away to reveal a shivering creature of flesh and blood who was subjected to being rudely dismembered by the

² Barbara Tuchman, The Proud Tower (New York, 1966), p. xv.

all-too-well perfected products of those noble corporations and others like them. A period of social revolution, confusion and search had begun and it was not soon to end.

As we might expect, the theme of alienation is less present in the earlier war novels. Indeed those "war novels" written by established writers of the belle époque change but little in their themes as compared to prewar works by the same authors. We note that even some of the participants in the war somehow maintain a serene attitude towards the conflict, as their works begin to appear in Paris bookstores in 1914 and 1915. It is also of interest to note the differences that exist between the works of actual combatants and those of staff officers and other peripheral witnesses. The evolution to the theme of the absurd can be traced into the postwar period. It is found in attitudes of disgust with political, economical, social and even religious institutions. We shall observe the legacy left by the war to novelists who wrote about the war during the twenties and thirties, even though they may not have played a direct role in it. Finally, we shall observe its effects on works written as late as fifty years later. It must not be forgotten that some "great" war novels are often written a generation or two after the war in question: War and Peace may be considered a classic example.

If those who went to war in 1914 felt that their war was being fought along relatively clear political lines then it is to be expected that confusion will appear in their minds, especially some years after the conflict is over when they will have perceived their misconception. The motives which appear unquestionable at the beginning become cloudy

and vague by the end, even to the most obstinate patriot. The war itself ended "too late" as the British poet-novelist Robert Graves said,³ for a feeling of jubilation, of accomplishment and victory which would have been felt had it ended with victory for one side or another in 1916. Victory came too late: there were no longer any winners in the old nineteenth century sense of the idea. The feeling that resulted was one of solitude, of exile and of loss of identity which was felt by the victorious French and British as well as by the defeated Germans. The dominant movement of British literature of the Great War was in the direction of a demythologized world,⁴ a symptom of alienation. The generation of German writers which followed the war could also be characterized by their feelings of depersonalization.⁵

Background of the French war novel

If we want to understand modern warfare we cannot ignore the traditional concept of war which had been prevalent the minds of men since the dawn of time when bards started to tell of victories over enemies of the tribe. The status of warrior was one of the favored ones in early society, sometimes just a step below, sometimes a step above, the priestly estate. It was one of the main functions of the nobility of medieval Europe to fight for the state or the feudal ruling class to which they belonged. The literature which the top levels of society liked to hear recited or read dealt usually with warfare. This warfare involved noble heroes who did battle with a

³ Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight (London, 1965), p. 101.

⁴ Ibid., p. 198.

⁵ Horatio Smith et al., Columbia Dictionary of Modern European Literature (New York, 1947), p. 316.

national enemy, Trojan or Saracen. There was glory in this combat, even in death itself, provided that one fought well. This is evident in the Iliad as in the Roland, both being among the most ancient monuments in their respective cultures. The French Chanson de Geste, in its earlier forms, represents various cycles of warrior poems which are a recitation of the glories of combat and military life. In later centuries this subject finds its most popular form in adventure novels, satirized by Rabelais and Cervantes and other thoughtful men of their times. To be sure, the theme was always that of single combat against a powerful enemy waged by a brave knight. His reward was riches, a kingdom, perhaps universal recognition and the hand of a damsel. Or, just as appropriate and satisfying, it may have been a noble death, in which case the spirit of the fallen knight was content with a sure path to heaven. There was little change in this attitude towards warfare as long as literature voiced the values of the aristocracy.

A likely point in French history to search for such change is the revolutionary period. Attempts to show the absurdity of warfare (and this, naturally, from the point of view of a commoner) had already appeared in Gargantua and Candide. Candide is perhaps too naive to lose his chivalric notions of military life or of war after his experiences with the Bulgarian army, but Voltaire had made his point in showing this scene of warfare. The common man, fighting in the revolutionary armies, was more personally involved in the warfare at hand than ordinary Frenchmen had been in previous ages. His army was not one of illiterate mercenaries and soudards of varying professional

quality as had been typical up to that time. A national army was in the field in 1793 which included many educated men in its ranks. Memoirs of men who were actually in the midst of combat appeared along with the usual accounts of staff officers which were colored or inaccurate because they probably were not involved personally in the fighting. The voice of the common man who had seen combat was finally liberated to tell of his experience. Some of these have been reedited and published, as were the letters of François Joliclerc, volunteer in 1793, who tells his story and whose impressions are not unlike those of 1914 soldier-writers. Others were the sergeant Fricasse, the grenadier Pils and the simple soldat Jean-Baptiste Barrès, ancestor of Maurice Barrès, who edited an edition of the writings of his grandfather telling of his years of service with the Imperial Army of 1804 to 1814. Latter-day editors, unfortunately, were often under influences of Romanticism and conventional patriotism and hence often they suppressed many personal observations of the authors concerned, leaving accounts which were more in keeping with traditional military and historical notions about the period.⁶ Also, again regrettably, many so-called eyewitness accounts of the time were merely based on notes actually made then and which were expanded and edited by the original author somewhat later when the Napoleonic legend had reached its apex. Examples of these are the memoirs of Jean-Roch Coignet, Souvenirs d'un vieux grognard, and of Marcelin Marbot, Mémoires du général baron de Marbot. Coignet, for instance, recalls more chivalric deeds than could be attributed to a single man: his glorious

⁶Norton Cru, Témoins (Paris, 1929), p. 42.

exploits, taken from a literary point of view, however, may well rival some of those of the lesser novelists of the Romantic period.

An intoxication had clouded the minds of too many people otherwise capable of reporting an accurate picture of the warfare of the time. These wars were more suited to the development of a myth--as Hugo's account of Waterloo in Les Misérables shows. He describes the battle with the sedan-chair perspective of a field marshal, allowing the shadow of Napoleon to hover over the field at every moment. Stendhal's account of the same battle, in La Chartreuse de Parme, is of a different sort, however. Fabrice del Dongo, his hero, is a naïve, bedazzled adolescent whose view of the fighting is reported objectively and never seen from the military historian's godlike recapitulation. Here is a breath of reality that is to find itself emulated in the objective accounts of the 1914 war.

The Algerian campaign, the Crimean, Italian and Mexican affairs all gave birth to published eyewitness accounts in France, but not to any well-known novels. Interest continued to focus on the Napoleonic period as shown by Erckmann-Chatrian's later novels on this and on the revolutionary period. The 1870 war, however, did produce a wealth of material. It occurred at a propitious moment, from the literary viewpoint, providing an opportunity to theorists of the Naturalist school, such as Guy de Maupassant and Emile Zola, to apply their ideas to the subject of warfare. Published works related to the war ran into the thousands. Novels and short stories, such as those of the Soirées de Médan, show an antimilitarism which had developed from the effects of the defeat of 1870 and the repression of the Commune

uprising. The nouvelles which made up the Soirées de Médan were written by the leaders of the Naturalist movement: they include l'Attaque du moulin, by Emile Zola, Boule-de-Suif, by Maupassant, Sac au dos, by Huysmans, la Saignée, by Céard, L'Affaire du Grand 7, by Hennique and Après la bataille, by Paul Alexis. They are based on a theme of the cruel absurdity of military life. Zola's La Débâcle, documented and written with the usual precision, stands as the principal representative of the historical novel dealing with the war of 1870. Zola's pessimistic attitude is to be resurrected a generation later, after the first wave of conventional patriotic novels.

The Naturalist novelists may have been responsible for some of the notions held by the enemy in 1914. It was through Zola and Maupassant that the myth of the francs-tireurs (civilian snipers) was propagated.⁷ Impressed by these lurid accounts, perhaps based on real events, the Germans made swift reprisals in August 1914, against real or suspected cases of civil resistance in Belgium and France. This reaction in turn gave some substance to another myth, that of German barbarism, which was to flourish with the popular writers and propagandists of the early years of the war. Maupassant and Zola had been much read in Germany at the turn of the century, illustrating the far-reaching effects of literary invention. The situation is rather serious when the reading public accepts this invention as historical fact. This is not to say that war novels need be written only by witnesses to the events depicted because the best of such novels cannot

⁷Cru, p. 49.

always make such a claim. On the other hand, many works written by witnesses are known to have represented conditions falsely and, from a literary point of view, to be of little value.

During the belle époque period the French military continued to be the subject of certain controversial novels. The Dreyfus affair, which came to a head during this period, illustrates the agitation brewing in circles of antimilitarism, antisemitism and socialism. The antimilitary novel had been continued by novelists such as Robert Caze, author of Fille à soldats (1884) and Charles Leroy, Le Colonel Ramollot (1883).⁸ In 1887 three significant antimilitary novels appeared: le Cavalier Miserey, by Abel Hermant, les Misères du Sabre, by Lucien Descaves, and Au port d'armes, by Henry Fèvre. Hermant's novel raised considerable furor among the patriotic elements of the country which saw an attack on the military as a thrust at the most sacred institution in France. Lucien Descaves had just finished four years of military service when he wrote his Misères du Sabre, which describes the brutalities of garrison life. He went on to write on the same subject which became even more controversial: les Sous-Offs (1889). This novel had been a mild success at first until Paul de Cassagnac, in L'Autorité, and Joseph Reinach, in the République française, demanded legal action to be taken against Descaves. Accused of insulting the army, he was, however, acquitted after a court trial. A polemic was continued in the newspapers, concerning Descaves, in which 105 newspapers came out against him and 270 supported him.⁹ Descaves's victory allowed an

⁸ André Billy, L'Epoque 1900 (Paris, 1951), p. 417.

⁹ Ibid., p. 419.

outbreak of more audacious realism in antimilitary novels as seen in the works of Georges Darien and Edouard Dubus, whose novels probe life in military prisons (Biribi) and in the barracks (Bas les coeurs).

As war approached, the patriotic movement in literature grew stronger also. Beginnings of patriotic literature in the twentieth century can be dated from 1905 with the writing of Notre Patrie, by Charles Péguy.¹⁰ By 1912 patriotism and literary activities were so confused that newspapers and theaters subscribed for the price of an airplane. Maurice Barrès, Charles Péguy and Charles Maurras were among the chief pro patria writers. A typical patriotic novel of the period is Paul Acker's le Soldat Bernard (1910). A typical subject was the Alsace-Lorraine question, as seen in Barrès's Colette Baudoche (1909): Certain generals were writing patriotic tracts just before the war; these include Gallieni, Lyautey and Mangin. Finally, in 1914, there appeared the novel that would determine the tone of enthusiasm of French literature as the war began: Ernest Psichari's L'Appel des armes. Psichari's hero understands that it is not only France that is threatened, but it is Christianity itself.¹¹ He found that it was his duty to maintain the mystique of the military profession in the face of those who had attempted to drag the French army through the mud in the name of a "false humanitarianism". His mystique of the army is called both humanitarian and Christian, and he compares the vocations of soldier and priest which have "profound affinities" in their mystic callings.

¹⁰Henri Clouard, Histoire de la Littérature Française du Symbolisme à nos jours (Paris, 1962), p. 13.

¹¹Ernest Psichari, L'Appel des armes (Paris, 1919), p. iii.

If previous wars in French history were more sparsely represented by objective published accounts in the form of novels or diaries by soldier-writers, World War One is the great turning point. The war was the subject of hundreds of novels, published collections of letters, memoirs and essays while it was still in progress. Production of works on the subject has not ceased to this day and provides part of our interest in writing this study. The war was not fought "by a great army of boys", as was the American Civil War (average age 22 years),¹² but by more mature men whose average age was 30 or 31 years in 1914. The younger men tend to write little and to forget more easily. Fifty percent of the French army conscripted for the war consisted of men between the ages of 33 and 51 years, in 1918. Also, this army included a large percentage of men from the liberal professions (such as teachers, reporters, doctors, etc.). It is no wonder that many of them wrote and wrote well of their experience. The picture that many of them paint can well be expected to put the standard military-historical interpretation of war to the test. By 1928, when Norton Cru wrote his bibliography of works related to combat written by French participants, there were 250 authors qualifying for inclusion. More appeared later and, of course, there were many novels, whether written by combatants or not, concerning the front-line aspect that might also qualify as war novels. It is after 1928, in fact, that some of the more significant works appear, especially for our purpose of demonstrating a certain prevailing theme. The same phenomenon, that is a flurry of

¹²Cru, p. 37.

novels about the war appearing ten years after the armistice, is visible in the English novel of the Great War.¹³ These novels are often heavily autobiographical and offer a significantly wider field of vision and more profound depth of thought than many of the earlier ones. Apparently there was a need for a period of incubation. The better, or more accurate reportage, novels need not necessarily be those of witnesses but, because of the very nature of the question involved, one feels an inclination to trust such writers. One can witness an event or share an experience and not be able to describe it or even wish to do so. It is for this reason that we must not eliminate the writings of perceptive men who were perhaps involved to a lesser degree. These points seem to hold true for the French novel of the war and undoubtedly would be true, also, for any other nation which played a similar role.

¹³Bergonzi notes that in British war literature, starting with Shakespeare, there are two tendencies: that of Hotspur, glory-seeking, idealistic, and that of Falstaff, safety-seeking, realistic--which he also calls the humanistic ethic. French authors of the war could not fit well into these categories because of the impossibility of lumping all anti-war writers with a Falstaff, a sort of coward. Perhaps the good soldier Schweik is a better example than Falstaff for the continentals.

CHAPTER ONE

The Non-combatant Novelists¹

Authors included in this chapter:

René Bazin	<u>La Closerie de Champdolent</u> (1917) <u>Récits du Temps de la Guerre</u> (1915)
Paul Bourget	<u>Le Sens de la Mort</u> (1916)
René Boylesve	<u>Tu n'es plus rien</u> (1919)
Joseph Delteil ²	<u>Les Poilus</u> (1919)
Lucien Descaves	<u>La Maison Anxieuse</u> (1916)
Marcel Prévost	<u>Mon Cher Tommy</u> (1920)
Marcelle Tinayre	<u>La Veillée des Armes</u> (1914)
Colette Yver (Mme Huzard)	<u>Mirabelle de Pampelune</u> (1917)

¹These writers are mostly authors who enjoyed a certain literary reputation from pre-war days. Their works came to include a "war novel", usually written in the first year or two of the war. There were many others in this category, such as Louis Dumur, Paul Reboux, Maurice Level and J.-J. Frappa.

²Delteil is included in this group, in spite of the fact that he can not be considered an established pre-war novelist, because of the early date of his work and because of its spiritual appropriateness to this group of novels.

--Vous habitez une réalité si intense que vous oubliez la splendeur de vos gestes si féconds et destructeurs.

Henry Malherbe, La Flamme au poing, p. 20.

Most of the authors in this category were well established writers who saw a fertile ground for new inspiration in the war and found it a subject of contemporary interest. In some cases they brought with them a literary method or an attitude which they felt applicable to the war situation. Many of their novels reflect naturalistic influences. Such an influence is to be expected, on the one hand, because of the far-reaching echoes of the Médan series of nouvelles written by Naturalist writers such as Maupassant, Huysmans and Léon Hennique on the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and its demoralizing outcome, as well as that classic of war literature, La Débâcle, by Emile Zola, written in 1892. It is true that Zola was not popular with the militarists and Catholics even before the Dreyfus Affair. Nevertheless these were the works which were in the public mind as representative of "contemporary" war novels as of 1914, because of their fairly recent dates of publication. But the novelists in this chapter, despite influences of Naturalism on their style, find their view of war in an earlier literary epoch. The war itself is Romantic to them. Besides the Naturalists, forming the great mass of war literature most prevalent and outstanding in the popular mind were the writings influenced by the Revolutionary and Napoleonic legends which

had captured the romantic imagination and still represented the general conception of war. This conception is reflected in literature in Hugo's Les Misérables, Balzac's Les Chouans, Erckmann-Chatrian's Waterloo, Mérimée's l'Enlèvement de la redoute) as well as in the thundering battle scenes of Romantic painting (eg. Géricault and Delacroix).

General conceptions about war in novels by established authors

1. The catharsis of war

In the group of novels that we are treating there exists a general notion that the war was "for the good" of individuals or of the nation at large. The novelist Paul Bourget (1852-1935), who had become famous with his le Disciple (1889), an anti-determinist novel, depicts a wartime situation in his le Sens de la Mort (1915). The professor Michel Ortègue, the hero of this work, feels solace when Paris is bombarded because he is at last taking a part, however small, in the danger of warfare: "il me semblait que je communiais avec la bataille, rien qu'en entendant une seconde cet éclatement des bombes que nos héroïques soldats entendent tout le jour."¹ It must be mentioned that the hero, Ortègue, admirable as he may be on a professional plane, is, similar to Bourget's Disciple, a man with an obsession with the value of science as opposed to that of faith. This attitude, however, does not conflict essentially with other characters' ideas, even though they may be traditional, as far as the war is concerned. Most of them share the opinion that some good will come of the fighting. A patient at Ortègue's hospital, wounded in action, refuses to

¹Paul Bourget, Le Sens de la Mort. (Paris, 1915), p. 5.

take morphine because he feels a need to suffer--thus fortifying his religious beliefs as well as assuring his participation in the suffering of his comrades who are at the front. Ortègue cannot appreciate the value of attaining through pain a fuller communication with the basic elements of the human condition. For him, science has replaced these other values and offers a solution that can make possible the avoidance of pain, such as through the use of morphine. Ortègue sees war as an atavism--man unleashing brutal ancestral forces--but a graduate of the French military school at Saint-Cyr maintains that God presides over this butchery and that it must therefore be for the good of mankind. (p. 68)

René Bazin, a member of the French Academy since 1904, was an extremely successful author by 1914, having written his best works, delicate tableaux of provincial customs, forgotten traditions and peasant life, just after the turn of the century (Les Oberlé, 1901, and Douce France, 1911). One of his war novels, Récits du temps de la guerre (1915), tells of a Chatelaine, Madame de Chelles, whose mansion is occupied by the Germans. She, rising to new heights of valor because of the trying conditions of the war, calls down artillery fire on her own house.² Bazin goes on, in La Closerie de Champdolent (1919), to show how, on the Breton homefront, some peasants' lives are turned to more patriotic directions with the coming of war.

Colette Yver (pseud.: Antoinette Huzard), was another writer

²René Bazin, Récits du temps de la guerre (Paris, 1915), p. 249.

who enjoyed a certain amount of success at the turn of the century. Her works, mainly preoccupied with social questions and with the rights of women, include such titles as Comment s'en vont les reines (1905), Princesses de Science (1907), and Un coin du voile (1912). Her war novel, Mirabelle de Pampelune (1917), shows how an ineffectual bookstore clerk, who would doubtlessly have spent his life in obscurity and servility, becomes a hero in his own eyes and in those of his employer's daughter. This notion of an improvement in personality due to wartime demands is a rather common one. Madame Yver shows another character, Teddy Jackson, a son of the English working class, as being encouraged by the war to show a nobler side of his character. He is finally accepted in a French family as a prospective husband for the daughter.

2. Ultra-patriotism

Bourget's hero, Ortègue, is embarrassed at not being able to serve at the front because of his club foot, but even this patriotism is excelled by many of the other characters in Le Sens de la Mort. The Saint-Cyr officer patterned after the patriot-martyr Ernest Psichari,⁴ represents the strongest example of unquestioning nationalism: "Vaincue, la France périrait et elle ne doit pas périr... Pour moi, je n'ai jamais rien tant demandé au bon Dieu que de tomber face à l'ennemi dans une guerre juste."⁵ This common type of ultra-

⁴Richard Griffiths, The Reactionary Revolution, The Catholic Revival in French Literature (New York, 1965), p. 288.

⁵Bourget, p. 44.