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## From Barbusse to Lemaitre: The Evolution of Experience

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### Abstract

Direct witness and thoughtful meditation are core values of content and form in the canon of French Great War fiction and were established from the earliest narratives in 1914. Moral authority and ownership of the truth were both the privilege of soldier-writers like Barbusse and Dorgelès, who also sought insightful meaning in their direct experience. Their works remain “in collective memory” and continue to be published, read, and analysed (Grabes). With the passage of time, the gaps in insights and memory of direct witness were filled by fiction in the works of canonical post-memory writers (Rigney). The rediscovery and reappraisal of disparate elements of the war by historians and non-canonical genre writers restored value to some of these objects, such as executions and the reintegration of veterans into society, that had “fall[en] out of frames of attention” (Assmann). Crime fiction novels set during the Great War, by virtue of their non-canonical status as genre fiction, were not restrained by acknowledged and often depreciatory imperatives of form and content. Unencumbered by these canonical constraints, the works of crime fiction writers tell a “counter-history,” thus transferring a proscribed and obfuscated subject to the public sphere (Assmann).

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### 1. From Black to White

In 2013 Pierre Lemaitre’s runaway bestseller, *Au revoir la-haut* (*The Great Swindle*) won the Prix Goncourt, France’s top literary honour. Before this award, Lemaitre enjoyed international celebrity as a writer of crime fiction, or *littérature noire*, a sub-genre of popular fiction. Crime novels, along with other forms of genre fiction, such as fantasy and romance, are differentiated from *littérature blanche*, or general fiction, so named for the off-white colour of their book jackets. These designations however have meanings that go beyond the choice of colours for covers and in fact manifest long-standing values held within the sphere of French writing, publishing and book-buying. These viewpoints privilege works that are deemed to proceed from more literary, intellectual and philosophical centres and are selected by certain publishers, like Albin Michel and Gallimard,

who are identified with these values. The so-called *noir* books often have black covers, include many categories of popular fiction, and are published by a wide variety of publishers. This white/black distinction is an example of the type of evaluative selection and powerful prestige indicative of an established literary canon (Grabes).

Thus, the sanctification of a crime or *noir* novel (called *polar* in French) by the Académie Goncourt, certainly one of the most elite upholders of *littérature blanche*, was viewed as a promotion for Lemaitre, and the selection of his book as proof of his elevation to the French literary establishment. Writing in *Le Monde*, book critic Macha Séry heralded the selection of Lemaitre's book as the author's passage from *littérature noire* to *littérature blanche*, while Guy Duplat in *La Libre Belgique* pointedly underscored Lemaitre's outsider position as a *noir* writer in that year's competition for literary prizes. Lemaitre himself subscribed to the value judgements associated with these designations and boldly and unapologetically explained to the interviewer in *Paris Match* why he deliberately chose to adopt the characteristics of *littérature blanche*. Going from black to white would legitimize his reputation with his peers, and most importantly, satisfy a long-held personal desire to be included in the literary elite. The double meaning below conflating cocaine use with the path to "the white" reveals in a self-deprecating way the intensity of his craving:

Quand on est un auteur noir, qu'on écrit des polars, il arrive un moment, dans notre carrière, où on a envie de "sniffer de la blanche": d'écrire des romans, et de devenir enfin, un écrivain. Je ressentais ce besoin. Aussi celui d'être reconnu par mes pairs. Avoir un prix littéraire, c'était pour moi une légitimité, une reconnaissance. On en rêve tous. Moi le premier. (Blanchère)

When one is a "black" author, that is, a writer of crime fiction, at some point in that writer's career, we feel the craving to "inhale the white one [cocaine]": to write novels, and to become finally, a writer. I felt this longing. And the desire to be recognized by my peers. To have a literary prize was for me a legitimacy, a recognition. We all dream of it. Me first. (trans. N.S.G.)

## 2. Témoignage and the Canon

The official distinction of "high" and "popular" literature is one of many possible literary canons identified by Grabes, who also notes the power of these constructions in "the shaping and sustenance of cultural memory" (311). In the case of French Great War literature, the concept of *témoignage*, or direct witness, was and remains the essential standard for the selection of works authorized for retention. The primacy of testimony was established by soldier-writers from the very first publications of French Great War fiction in 1914 in order to "bring into the public

sphere some sort of intellectual message drawn from their own experience in the war” (Smith 381). Thus, the degree of authenticity and the extent of a text’s realism determined a book’s value and worthiness for publication more than any other characteristic or trait. In this sense then, the French writing and publishing establishment became from the earliest days of the conflict an essential part of the “institutions of active memory [which] preserve the past as present [...]” (Assmann 98) and an instrument in the collective remembering that connects the generations (Erll).

Accordingly, the winners of the Prix Goncourt for the years 1914–1918 were restricted to soldier-writers, whose experiences were deemed to be the only valid expressions of faithful authenticity.<sup>1</sup> These works were experiential, largely episodic and anecdotal narratives saturated with what was considered realistic detail. The emphasis on accuracy in the reception of these publications ignored differences between genres, such as the novel and war narrative, and erected a supposedly irrefutable record of fact. Regardless of category, the soldier in these texts is portrayed as an ordinary man for whom the camaraderie of his squad both eases and advances the completion of his duty. The images of the humble courage and brotherly confidence of the simple French citizens contained in these narratives contrasted sharply and repudiated directly the glaring jingoism of newspaper accounts and best-selling novels written typically by well-known civilian authors.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, direct witness was privileged to the exclusion of other voices; how could those who had not experienced life at the front, such as women and other civilians, bear witness to what they could not know? Indeed, the word witness (*témoïn*) and its derivatives featured prominently in commentary about these early works. The publication of Jean Norton Cru’s extended critical taxonomy of French Great War narratives, *Témoins* (1929), reiterated and reinforced a viewpoint that had validated and promoted the moral authority and primacy of direct witness from the earliest days of the war.

Despite the passage of time, the predominance of personal experience in the field of French Great War studies has retained its dominant place and pivotal role (Smith). Thus, for Pierre Lemaitre, eager to be granted the mantle of canonical legitimacy, historical precision was a primary value. Indeed, his concern that his novel be considered historically accurate figures prominently in many of the interviews the year of its publication (2013), as well as in the acknowledgements placed at the end of the book. Lemaitre notes that he spent nearly 2000 hours conducting research in libraries and in archives and highlights his debt to well-known Great War historians such as Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau. Lemaitre is nonetheless careful to qualify the assertion of accuracy: his book is true (*vrai*) without being strictly accurate (*exact*) and that he, as an author, is searching for the truth (*la vérité*) and not objectivity (*l’exactitude*). This distinction, repeated so often and so emphatically, is foundational and important for two reasons: it accepts the dominance of *témoignage*, the long-standing primary value of personal witness in novels published during the war era by soldier-writers such as Henri

Barbusse and Roland Dorgelès, while simultaneously justifying Lemaitre's own authority and asserting his prerogative to construct, nearly one hundred years after the war, a work of imagination that communicates significant and profound truths about the war (Sokołowska-Paryż and Löschnigg).

### 3. Remembrance and Representation

“When thinking about memory, we must start with forgetting,” asserts Aleida Assmann, and what she terms the “perpetual interaction between remembering and forgetting” (97) figures thematically in the canonical novels by Henri Barbusse and Roland Dorgelès. Barbusse and Dorgelès were both soldier-writers, and their respective best-selling and award-winning novels, *Le Feu (Under Fire)* (1916) and *Les Croix de bois (Wooden Crosses)* (1919) have remained the best-known works of French fiction on the war. These texts and additionally, Dorgelès' novel of the demobilization, *Le Réveil des morts* (“The Awakening of the Dead”) (1923) tackle major philosophical issues that combatants and veterans faced, and these novels portray the range of emotions in the soldiers' reactions. Perhaps no concern is more compelling or universal than the unease surrounding memory and forgetting. How will the soldiers remember the war if they survive? How will they be remembered if they do not? How long will any of these memories last? Will their involvement in the war have an impact on world events? Will the loss and damage they have come to know most intimately have a lasting value? Throughout the novel, Barbusse's characters struggle to understand how easily and quickly even they are beginning to forget the sights, sounds and odours they thought were indelible. They can accept that civilians might forget the war, and even that it would be normal for them to do so, but for the soldiers themselves? They have seen too much to imagine that it could possibly happen to them:

C'est vrai, c'qui dit, fit un homme sans remuer la tête dans sa cangue. Quand j'sui' été en permission, j'ai vu qu'j'avais oublié déjà bien des choses de ma vie d'avant. Y a des lettres de moi que j'ai relues comme si c'était un livre que j'ouvrais. Et pourtant, *malgré ça*, j'ai oublié aussi ma souffrance de la guerre. On est des machines à oublier. Les hommes c'est des choses qui pensent un peu, et qui, surtout, oublient. Voilà ce qu'on est. (239; original emphasis)

“That's right, what he's saying,” a man said without moving his head in its collar. “When I was on leave I saw how I'd forgotten lots of things from my life before. There were letters from me that I read like opening a book. And yet, in spite of that, I also forgot what I'd suffered in the war. We are machines for forgetting. Men are things that think a little but, most of all, forget. That's what we are.” (trans. Robin Buss)

Barbusse's allusion to a book as a permanent storehouse of individual memories and experiences underscores the fact that his nameless narrator is consciously writing a book, the book we are now reading. His pledge to write the truth, by putting "les gros mots à leur place, [...] parce que c'est la vérité" (126) ["I'll put the swearwords in, because it's the truth"; trans. Robin Buss] acknowledges, as in the passage above, the distance between the resolve of the person who created a concrete and enduring form of memory, such as a book, and the subsequent attempt to recall that same memory. That the act of remembering is unfortunately subject to various forms of failure, including caprice, randomness and the passage of time, is also featured in Roland Dorgelès' *Les Croix de bois*, where another soldier narrator is writing another book we are reading. Dorgelès accepts the loss of memories as cruel but entirely natural. For him, the weight of such "souvenirs atroces" (423) is so heavy that they sink to the bottom of the human heart, along with the forgotten dead:

On oubliera. Les voiles de deuil, comme des feuilles mortes, tomberont. L'image du soldat disparu s'effacera lentement dans le cœur consolé de ceux qui l'aimaient tant. Et tous les morts mourront pour la deuxième fois. (424)

We shall forget. The veils of mourning will fall, even as the dead leaves fall. The image of the soldier who is disappeared for ever will slowly fade in the consoled hearts of those he loved so much. And all the dead men will die for the second time. (trans. unknown)

Nonetheless, the book that the narrator is writing seeks to preserve their memory even beyond the lives of everyone who knew them, thus thwarting the "second" death of forgetting. And yet, the narrator's attempt is burdened by his all-too-human limitations that reveal the collapse of his capacity to accurately remember. Still, although time and trauma have cheated his memory, the transcendent power of art remains intact. The narrator does not yet fully understand that by means of his imagination and concretized by the book he is writing, the men he knew have not vanished but are bound up into an all-embracing whole:

Certains soirs comme celui-ci, quand las d'avoir écrit, je laisse tomber ma tête dans mes mains, je vous sens tous présents, mes camarades. Vous vous êtes tous levés de vos tombes précaires, vous m'entourez et, dans une étrange confusion, je ne distingue plus ceux que j'ai connus là-bas de ceux que j'ai créés pour en faire les humbles héros d'un livre. Ceux-ci ont pris les souffrances des autres, comme pour les soulager, ils ont pris leurs visages et leurs voix, et ils se ressemblent si bien, avec leurs douleurs mêlées, que mes souvenirs s'égarent et que parfois, je cherche dans mon cœur désolé, à reconnaître un camarade disparu, qu'une ombre toute semblable m'a caché. (424)

On evenings such as this when, weary with all I have written, I let my head fall into my two hands, I feel you all beside me, my comrades. You have all risen up

from out of the insecure tenancy of your graves, and you are round about me, and in a strange confusion, I can no longer distinguish between those whom in the flesh and blood and bone I knew out there, and those I have created to be the humble heroes of a book. These have taken up the sufferings of those, as though to ease and relieve them, they have taken on their face, their voice, and they are so much alike, with their mingled pains and woes that my memories stray, and now and then I strive in my disconsolate heart to recognize a missing comrade whom a shadow in his very semblance has hidden from me. (trans. unknown)

#### 4. Rediscovery and Restoration: *Fusillés* and *Anciens Combattants*

Issues concerning memory and remembrance took on added importance in the post-memory phase, especially during the 1980's and 1990's (Sokołowska-Paryż and Löschnigg). The dwindling number of Great War veterans, along with the much-publicized trials of ex-Nazis in France, and the increased visibility of Holocaust deniers brought renewed attention and a sense of urgency to the topics of memory and commemoration of both the First and Second World Wars. Historian Leonard Smith notes that the flourishing of studies on memory in France, especially Pierre Nora's important three-volume work, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984–1986), brought about a series of reinterpretations and re-examinations of the role of the soldier, which cast “the soldier as victim turned hero through his victimization” (390). Such reframing and recontextualization of disregarded memory objects resulted in new scholarship on a number of aspects concerning France and the Great War, especially the *fusillé*, the soldier executed for a variety of lawful or extrajudicial reasons as well as the reintegration of veterans (*anciens combattants*) into the immediate post war French society. Thus, research in the post-memory phase recovered previously marginalised, forgotten and censored topics that were both absent and absented from sites of “active remembering” such as history books, older museum installations and canonical works of fiction (Assmann 103). A new “counter-history” materialized in a variety of non-fiction publications, renovated museum exhibits, and especially in detective novels, a genre of popular fiction.

Some French soldiers were executed from the earliest days of the war for a variety of reasons, including desertion of post, self-mutilation and cowardice in the face of the enemy and most notably for mutiny after the Chemin des Dames offensive in 1917. But there were other times, when soldiers became disoriented in battle and were suspected of desertion, when soldiers were ordered to wear bloodied and dung-filled uniforms, and when officers wanted to displace blame for their own shortcomings on soldiers who would be held accountable. While histories, museums, memoirs and novels mention the subject of the *fusillés*, the treatment in these books and places is often brief and hurried, as if the writer were swallowing a bitter pill. The metaphor here is not hyperbolic, for as many scholars

have rightfully indicated, the harsh reality of the executions questions the moral authority of the military and impugns the rationale of a just war (Anderson 223; Offenstadt 69–99). It is not surprising then, that the stories of these men were long excluded from official commemorations as an affront to the soldiers who continued to fight. The vehement polemic that ensued in 1998 following the declaration of French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin that the *fusillés* should be reintegrated into “notre collective mémoire nationale” [“our national collective memory”] demonstrates the continued solidity of that restricted historiography (Jalons 1998). There were many public officials who argued against any form of recognition of the *fusillés* as a de facto pardon that would threaten the future defence of France, but there were also those who emphasized instead the cruelty and arbitrariness of military justice (Offenstadt 177–200).

An example of the minimization of the topic of executions is found in chapter 10, “Argoval” in Barbusse’s *Le Feu*. Here a sergeant relates to the narrator and others in his squad the execution of a French soldier that took place that morning. It is important, however, to consider “Argoval” alongside the chapter immediately preceding it, “La grande colère” in which one of the squad angrily recounts his two months of medical leave in the rear. His intense rage is directed at the many shirkers he encounters, and he describes their activities in great detail. In *Le Feu*, Barbusse often uses antithesis to emphasize his point of view, and in these two chapters he skilfully compares the very different fates of soldiers who were equally guilty of seeking shelter from the fighting. Barbusse briefly evokes the execution and the squad’s reaction somewhat matter-of-factly in “Argoval,” a sharp contrast to “La grande colère” in which the narrator bitterly parades before the reader a panorama of slackers, both civilian and those in uniform, only to end the chapter with a discussion on heroism, duty, and danger. The injustice Barbusse reveals is less for the executed soldier, who was “un bonhomme comme nous, ni plus, ni moins” (99) [“a bloke like us, no different”]; trans. Robin Buss] than for the hypocrisy of those who support the war in word but not in deed: “La guerre signifie danger de mort pour tout le monde, pour tout le monde: personne n’est sacré. Il faut donc y aller tout droit et non pas faire semblant de le faire, avec un uniforme de fantaisie” (97) [“war means deadly peril and sacrifice for everyone, everyone; no one is sacred. So you have to go straight at it, right to the end, and not just pretend, wearing some fancy uniform”]; trans. Robin Buss]. While antithesis is a device Barbusse utilizes throughout *Le Feu*, it occurs most sharply in the evocation of life at the rear.

Critique and mistrust of civilian behaviour is unambiguous not only in *Le Feu* and *Les Croix de bois*, both written during the war, but also in two novels of the immediate post war period, equally written by veterans: *Le Retour d’Ulysse* (“The Return of Ulysse”) (1921) by Jean Valmy-Baysse and *Le Réveil des morts* (1923) by Roland Dorgelès. Both novels recount the hypocrisy and greed of civilians that the returning soldiers encounter from 1919–1920, as well as the inefficiency



of the French army and government that renders their demobilisation and reintegration into society slow and difficult, if not altogether impossible. The veterans and their daily struggles are at the centre of these novels, and the unfolding of their plotlines likewise depend on the fraudulent schemes and the exploitation of veterans by civilians. Yet public attention in the immediate post war period was focused, not on the veteran, but rather on mourning and commemoration of the dead with more than 36,000 monuments erected in France before 1922 (Prost 1997; Becker). Both *Le Retour d'Ulysse* and *Le Réveil des morts* fell out of print and became difficult to identify or find, and the retelling of the story of the soldier's reintegration, disregarded and largely forgotten, became stored as "relicts of passive forgetting" (Assmann 99). In 1977, however, Antoine Prost's monumental and multi-volume work, *Les Anciens Combattants et la société française*, brought renewed and overtly sanctioned attention to the Great War veteran, along with subsequent historical studies, such as Bruno Cabanes' *La Victoire endeuillée* (2004), *The Men with Broken Faces* (2015) by Marjorie Gehrhardt, and even a section in the newly renovated (2016) Mémorial de Verdun, perhaps the most important Great War memory site in France. Not surprisingly, *Le Réveil des morts* was reprinted in 2010.

## 5. Post-Memory Elite and Popular Literature

The shifting focus among historians in the post-memory period followed a more subtly bifurcated path in literary works of the era. While popular novels readily took up the case of the wrongly executed and the precarity of veterans (see below), narratives with elite credentials continued to combine biography and fiction in the same complementary and interwoven bond as did the canonical works by Barbusse and Dorgelès, with an important difference. In Jean Rouaud's *Les Champs d'honneur (Fields of Glory)* (1990), Marc Dugain's *La Chambre des officiers (The Officers' Ward)* (1998) and Olivier Barbarant's *Douze lettres d'amour au soldat inconnu* ("Twelve Love Letters to the Unknown Soldier") (1993), gaps in memory that result from time, neglect, and even embarrassment, are contemplated and analysed, with imagination and fiction explicit surrogates.

Jean Rouaud's *Les Champs d'honneur* was a best-seller that won the Prix Goncourt in 1990. Rouaud explores in his work the multi-generational story of his family. Set in a small town in western France, the account is a meditation on memory and the progression and practice of remembering. In considering his own recollections of his family, Rouaud reveals more than the failure to recall that results from the passage of time. Rather than the forgetfulness that grants peace to the "cœur consolé" by time in Dorgelès' book, the memory of the deaths of two great-uncles in *Les Champs d'honneur* during World War I depresses, disturbs

and ultimately disrupts forever the lives of those who remain. The slow dissolution, both physically and mentally, of Rouaud's great-aunt Marie anchors the text, but it is the story of the recovery of the body of Emile in 1929 that imposes a destructive, rather than redemptive, memory. Denied help from the government, the remaining brother Pierre travels on his own to retrieve his Emile's body but finds not one but two extensively decomposed bodies impossible to identify. The clandestine nature of the disinterment, and the fact that Pierre has no choice but to take home the two incomplete sets of remains, are memories that bring anguish rather than relief to the family.

The details of the recovery of Emile's body are known thanks to letters to his wife, Aline. This written record late in the book (172–181) is similar to other tangible attempts we have seen to preserve memory from the passage of time, but Rouaud has already sharply undermined its power. The narrator's maternal grandfather, with fewer connections to his in-law family, has rearranged the attic and regrouped the photographs, letters and other objects of both sides of the family, effecting a "redistribution de la mémoire" without chronology or official kinship lines (139). Rouaud recounts this destabilization of the familiar as a rearrangement of memory that erases the authority of remembrance:

De fait, on ne reconnaissait plus le grenier. Si l'on considère que l'ordre n'est qu'une variation algorithmique subjective du désordre, alors on peut dire du grenier ordonné selon grand-père que c'était la même chose qu'avant mais dans le désordre, c'est-à-dire qu'au chaos il avait substitué un autre chaos, avec cette différence pour nous que celui-là ne nous était pas familier. (138)

The place was hardly recognizable. On the supposition that order is only a subjective variation on disorder, it can be said that the attic as rearranged by Grandfather was the same as before, but that for our chaos he had substituted another, the only difference being that the new one was unfamiliar. (trans. Ralph Manheim)

Such restructuring of memory leaves the details intact and concrete, yet at the same time adrift, separate, and without the foundational capacity to grant meaning or redemption to the survivors. In Rouaud's novel, reticence and confusion produce a breach between memory and perception that remains hollow and his characters disheartened. In Marc Dugain's *La Chambre des officiers* (1998), however, imagination fills the void in an incomplete set of memories to create an improbable tale of redemption and even happiness. The book is written as the first-person narrative of Adrien Fournier, who suffers extensive facial wounds during a reconnaissance mission in the first few days of the war, and who remains hospitalized for the rest of the war. The book has the form of a diary or memoir and yet we know from interviews with the author that he is in fact Fournier's grandson, and that he wrote the novel at his grandmother's request (Dugain 2013). The story depicts in detail the severity of Adrien's disfigurement, the care given

by doctors and nurses, his numerous and painful reconstructive surgeries, and those of several other officers in the hospital ward. It is fairly straightforward with little character development and is similar to innumerable war narratives that string together events and anecdotes without analysis. Yet what gives this story interest are precisely those elements that are completely fictional: the conversations and interchanges between characters and the progression of Adrien's inner thoughts. These completely imaginary dialogues make Adrien's story genuine and approachable. They reveal his despair but also a sense of humour that mitigates his tragic circumstances.

While it is clear that Marc Dugain created a vision of his grandfather that would please his grandmother and provide a role model for his children, he also humanized, rehabilitated and made visible these *gueules cassées*, the men and women with "broken faces." Adrien explains the sad nature of the invisibility that he and others like him endured: "Je vous voyais de trois quarts, vous m'avez vu sans me voir. Les gens défigurés ont ceci de particulier, qu'on les remarque, qu'on ne voit qu'eux, et que, dans le même temps, on ne les voit pas" (151) ["I saw you at a three-quarter angle, you saw me without seeing me. Disfigured people have this peculiarity, that we notice them, that we see only them, and that, at the same time, we do not see them"; trans. N.S.G.]. In giving voice, form and substance to his grandfather and his fellow patients, Dugain countered the absence of memories with fiction. He depicted them as people fully in life, who love and are loved despite their suffering, and this inspirational model resonated with a public who seemed to perceive them for the first time.<sup>3</sup> The triumph of Dugain's imagination over the absence of memory reiterates Pierre Lemaitre's affirmation of the primacy of the *vrai* over the *exact*.

In *Douze lettres d'amour au soldat inconnu* (1993) Olivier Barbarant creates an identity for the Unknown Soldier buried under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Unlike Rouaud and Dugain, Barbarant has no family connection with the war to orient his memory or link him to a shared national past. The commemorative parades he witnessed as a teenager left him with a "sourde hostilité" for the hypocrisy and deceit he recognized in official remembrance: "il y avait surtout dans ce troupeau de petits vieux délabrés un mensonge, puisqu'ils acceptaient, leur chair tenue dans la raideur des costumes, l'œil vitreux, l'hommage rendu à ce qui ne fut que leur mise à mort" (35) ["There was especially in this herd of the elderly and decrepit a particular lie, because they accepted, with their flesh held in by the stiffness of their uniforms and their watery eyes, the homage paid to what was simply their own slaughter"; trans. N.S.G.]. Barbarant's expressed goal is to reverse the duplicity of memory manufactured by the war's survivors and to "détronner le dieu de la guerre que le siècle a inventé" (31) ["to destroy the god of war that the century invented"; trans. N.S.G.]. He seeks to counter the idealized and deified image of the Unknown Soldier with an invention of his own. Inspired by the washed-out photograph of a soldier he remembers from his

high school history book and a few chance postcards, Barbarant creates a one-directional correspondence that visualises the *poilu*'s last days and moments, and he even imagines the possibility that the soldier discretely congratulated Pierre Brizon, one of three socialist deputies in the French assembly who refused to vote for war credits in 1916.

In *Douze lettres d'amour au soldat inconnu*, Barbarant creates an entirely fictional narrative that effectively undermines the long-standing authority of historical memory and recognizable experience. His imaginary correspondence with the dead soldier has no link with the canonical experiential accounts in the tradition of Barbusse and Dorgelès that commonly represent First World War fiction. Neither does Barbarant explore in his work the deficiencies of the process of remembering as do Rouaud and Dugain. Rather his text interrogates and ultimately rejects the dominant and normative understanding of experience, to consider it rather as a vehicle of official indoctrination on the meaning of the war. For Barbarant, the ceremonies on November 11 are stomach-churning theatre, a yearly resurrection that “dément la misère et anesthésie le scandale de ce corps de vingt ans mis à mort” (31) [“denies the misery and anesthetises the scandal of the butchery to this twenty-year-old body”; trans. N.S.G.]. His text creates an imaginary world freed from the constraints of the politics of remembrance, in which only fiction has the capacity to truly “voir le malheur en face” (31) [“face up to the reality of catastrophe”; trans. N.S.G.].

Rather than analyse and subsequently embrace or discard canonical tropes of Great War remembrance, detective and other genre writers preferred instead to examine the recently recovered topics of the *fusillés* and the *anciens combattants* in the format they knew best. In commenting on his deliberate choice of writing popular fiction, the well-known crime novelist Didier Daeninckx observed that *littérature noire* alone provides the unlimited creative freedom forbidden by the “crushing weight” of literary tradition (“Écrire la guerre : rencontre avec Didier Daeninckx, Jean Rouaud et Gilles Heuré” 2015). While hyperbolic, certainly, Daeninckx's assertion confirms Aleida Assmann's classification of remembering and forgetting. We recognize in the recent prominence of the *fusillés* and the *anciens combattants* a transfer from active forgetting to active remembering, that is, from taboo and censored memories to the working memory associated with the canon and the museum (99). Moreover, Ann Rigney notes that fiction can function as “oppositional memory” that “undermines hegemonic views of the past” (348). Writers of popular fiction, unlike Olivier Barbarant, are free from the expectations and exigencies required by the elite *littérature blanche* and have no impediments to articulate the marginalised accounts of the *fusillés* and the *anciens combattants*:

In the case of traumatic events, moreover, the freedoms offered by fictional genres and literary modes of expression may simply provide the *only* forum available for recalling certain experiences that are difficult to bring into the realm of public

remembrance or that are simply too difficult to articulate in any other way. (348; original emphasis)

The majority of the numerous crime novels set in the period of the Grande Guerre since the 1980's portrays the corruption and greed of French officers and civilians that result in extrajudicial executions, exploitation of soldiers and veterans, and extreme violence. Among the best-known are *Le Boucher des Hurlus* ("The Hurlus Butcher") (1982) by Jean Amila, film adaptation *Sortez des rangs* (1995), which inspired Daeninckx's own *Le Der des ders* ("The Last of the Last") (1984), republished with Jacques Tardi in graphic novel format in 1997; Sébastien Japrisot's *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (*A Very Long Engagement*) (1991) also adapted for the screen in 2004; the six-part series, *Célestin Louise, flic et soldat dans la guerre de 14–18* ("Celestin Louise, cop and soldier in the First World War") by Thierry Bourcy (2005–2014); *Les Âmes grises* (*Grey Souls*) (2003) by Philippe Claudel, film adaptation in 2005; Patrick Pécherot's *Tranche-caille* ("Trench Chick") (2008), *L'Inconnue de la tranchée* "Unknown Woman of the Trench" by Hélène Almalric (2013), and Pierre Lemaitre's *Au revoir là-haut*, winner of the Prix Goncourt for 2013, graphic novel version in 2015 and film adaptation in 2017.

The long tradition of the *polar*, or detective and police fiction, is steeped in allegories of good and evil, and the development of the story generally leads the principal investigator, as well as the reader, through a process of vindication and absolution to a satisfying restitution of order (Ekstam, 2015). Do Daeninckx and the other authors construct an allegorical landscape where good triumphs over evil and order is restored? In *Le Der des ders* (1984), Daeninckx creates a complicated plot that indicts several crimes and social injustices committed before, during and even after the war. The sweeping scope allows him to demonstrate the connections he sees between social problems based on real-life situations, like the efforts of Parisian anarchists to alleviate the pre and post war exploitation of apartment renters, and the widespread trafficking and extortion that proliferated after the war. The mutiny of Russian troops at La Courtine following the Russian Revolution in 1917, as well as the better-known mutinies of French troops that same year, are not merely background elements but are intrinsic to the plot development. From the summary execution that conceals an officer's act of cowardice to the image of wheel-chair bound amputees at a wedding, Daeninckx interweaves historical events and imagination to create a bleak vision of society. That the story ends with the violent death of his detective René Griffon and the triumph of the culpable officer, rather than with justice re-established and order restored, shows the profound and lasting disruption of society produced by the war.

As in Daeninckx's book, the disconnect between the soldiers at the front and civilians in the rear is a plot point common to the crime novels. These works underscore the hypocrisy of civilians who evade military service while proclaiming

loudly their patriotic fervour. The non-combatants are guilty of fleecing the *poilus* when they are alive and profiting off of monument sales when they are dead. In Philippe Claudel's *Les Âmes grises* (2003) a local district attorney commits a murder in a small town near the front but uses his position and legal connections to frame two hapless deserters caught by chance. One of the deserters commits suicide to escape the ordeal, but the other valiantly protests his innocence. The judge and the army prosecutor, overfed and self-righteous, tie the soldier nude to a tree in freezing temperatures, douse him with water and beat and kick him in an effort to exact a confession, thus supposedly solving the murder.

The extra layer of cruelty in *Les Âmes grises* robs the soldier of his humanity and vacates his punishment of any notion of judicial validity. As violent and cruel as execution might be, it is nonetheless supposedly required to adhere to certain boundaries and norms of military justice. These customs and rules, even when applied to the death penalty, tend to give the practice a certain legitimacy and acceptability. However, the gruesome brutality depicted in the executions in *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (1991), far surpasses that shown in *Les Âmes grises*. At the beginning of his crime novel, Sébastien Japrisot recounts the fate of five soldiers condemned for self-mutilation. Not all of the five are guilty, but the arbitrary reason for their sentences only adds to the barbarity of the method selected for their punishment. After marching for days in the mud and brutal cold of January, 1917, they are bound and placed in No-Man's-Land, where bright lights and loud noises are sure to bring German shells and machine-gun fire that will kill them. The other soldiers are repulsed by this excess of brutality, especially since one of the men is not yet twenty years old and has obviously had a mental break down. Nonetheless they are forced to carry out this extrajudicial execution that leaves no proof or paper trail (Japrisot).

Patrick Pécherot's *Tranchecaille* (2008) begins after the execution of Antoine Jonas has already occurred. The principal narrator, charged with defending Jonas believes that "la justice militaire, parce qu'elle est justice, était l'honneur de l'armée" (12) ["military justice, because it is the law, was the honor of the army"; trans. N.S.G.]. The multiple points of view, told through an alternating series of letters, reports, and eye witness accounts slowly reveal that the case is more complicated than the murder of an officer by an enlisted man. This fragmented style of narration reproduces Duparc's process of discovery and makes him and the reader aware of historically-based issues relevant to the murder: the hostility and hypocrisy of civilians, the problematical position of the war godmothers, and especially, the class prejudices that separate officers and enlisted men. Contemporary readers would have recognized in the novel a reference to Lucien Bersot, the soldier executed for refusing to put on a blood-stained uniform, whose story had been adapted to television.<sup>4</sup> Duparc races against time to save Jonas, a man whose inability or unwillingness to help himself only adds to the wide-spread assumption of his guilt. That Duparc remains committed to upholding justice

during the war is deemed worthless by his commander. The book ends confirming this point of view. Good does not triumph over evil and there is no absolutism. The day after the execution, Duparc and others are sent into battle. Whatever satisfaction the reader might have shared with Duparc for solving the murder evaporates in the last scene with his death.

## 6. “Le premier crime, c’est la guerre”

Perhaps the only way to restore order is not to reinstate it, but to subvert it. Two crime novels, each a kind of chronological bookend, propose revenge as an alternative in the allegory of right and wrong. If we accept Pierre Lemaitre’s contention that “le premier crime, c’est la guerre” (Lemaitre, “Le Prix Goncourt” 2013) [“the original crime is the war”; trans. N.S.G.], then the locus of culpability resides not with the characters in the novels regardless of their actions, but with those who orchestrated the war. Vengeance for this original crime is served in these classic “caper” novels, not as the proverbial cold dish, but with humour and the sense that justice in some form will prevail. True to the time-honoured structure of the caper novel, both *Le Boucher des Hurlus*, (1982) by Jean Amila and *Au revoir là-haut* (2013) by Pierre Lemaitre, recount the intricate planning and suspenseful accomplishment of the act(s) of retaliation from the point of view of the perpetrators. The reader experiences along with the characters the abusive circumstances that led to the need for revenge and the gradual unfolding of the plot to retaliate. Balance and equilibrium are restored when the authors of the original crime become in turn the victims of those they victimized.

In *Le Boucher des Hurlus*, a young boy, Michou, and his mother are living in poverty in post war Paris and are ostracized by their working-class neighbours because of the father’s execution for mutiny. Amila portrays the violent confrontation between the widow and her neighbours as a clash of competing memories, for the widow’s defence of her executed husband threatens for them the validity of the sacrifice of their soldiers who died. With no pity for the widow or her child, these civilians conspire with government institutions to further isolate them and reduce their economic circumstances. Sent to an orphanage, Michou encounters other children whose fathers were also executed under the command of general Des Gringues, and Amila structures the rest of the story as a paradigmatic odyssey, a quest for justice for these men. This framework provides ample opportunity for Amila, much as other authors would later, to analyse the war’s effect on the social reality of Paris and the devastated regions of the Red Zone, the worsening poverty of the post war period and the aggravation of conflicts among social classes. Amila casts Michou as the “archangel de Justice” who succeeds in killing his mother’s main tormentor and burning down the entire building where they all lived. Such a violent punishment seems disproportionate to her crime and certainly

dishonours Michou's mission and role as a *justicier*. Amila restores the wholesome virtue of Michou's quest for justice through a humorous *deus-ex-machina* resolution: the hated general the boys targeted dies from complications from the Spanish flu, although they believe that he succumbed due to the hatpin they thrust ceremoniously in his picture.

The smug patriotism of Amila's Parisians "tout gonflés d'avoir gagné la guerre" (181) ["all puffed up at having won the war"; trans. N.S.G.] and the general self-absorption of most civilians are also motivating forces in Pierre Lemaitre's *Au revoir là-haut* (2013). The summary execution<sup>5</sup> that provides the book's title and prologue, as well as the first chapter, recount "le premier crime" that sets into motion the complicated double swindle that unfolds across this novel. Lemaitre examines the many difficulties in the lives of returning soldiers by interweaving their stories with schemes designed to defraud and exploit the government and the public at large. The research of post-memory historians, especially Béatrix Pau-Heyriès, as well as the aforementioned novels of the demobilisation by Jean Valmy-Baysse and Roland Dorgelès uncover important and specific facts concerning the period 1919–1920, especially during the French government's establishment of national cemeteries. Motivated to participate in a parallel act of communal mourning, individual communities sought to construct monuments and memorials to the fallen. However, the lack of specific guidelines created a situation ripe with possibilities for fraud and deceit as unscrupulous profiteers moved in to capitalize on the public's need and desire to memorialize the dead soldiers. Lemaitre's storyline recaptures these forgotten and misplaced material vestiges of the past: his characters, two former combatants, Édouard Péricourt, a *gueule cassée* who is thought to be dead but is living in the shadows of society with Albert Maillard, use their skills to sketch and sell models of war memorials they know will never be built. A third veteran, a former officer, Henri d'Aulnay-Pradelle, who was largely responsible for the intense suffering of the two schemers in the last few days of the war, devises his own plan to profit from the reburial of soldiers and the sale of coffins to the new cemeteries.

In Édouard, Lemaitre created an avenger, similar to Michou in *Le Boucher des Hurlus*. The evocation of the acute pain, anguish and distress that is the reality of Édouard's day to day life imbues the monuments scheme with righteous vindication. This act of revenge, however, has greater importance in the novel than a simple way to exact payback for a permanently wounded soldier's suffering, for it ridicules and impugns the motivations of the public that accepted and consented to the war. The designs and language of the monuments catalogue echo the hyperbolic patriotic and nationalistic slogans of heroism, sacrifice and glory prevalent during the war and convince families and public authorities to commission these monuments in honour of their lost sons and other relatives. That such exaggerated drawings and slogans could still attract a positive response from the public in 1920 underscores the novel's judgement that everyone is



accountable for the war. The extent of the swindle is the fitting punishment of an entire country that supported the war and is now obsessed with commemorating the dead, a fixation, the author wryly notes, that is equal to their revulsion for survivors like Édouard and Albert. Lemaitre concludes that the purpose of the memorials is not to represent an individual feeling but to express a collective sentiment, to respond to the greater public's need and desire to remember the fallen soldiers as national heroes, in an effort to put their personal experiences of the war solidly in the past. Significantly, Lemaitre connects the monuments hoax to the consecration of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier on November 11, 1920, a vast national communion that effectively subsumed all of the deceased into a single symbolic death.<sup>6</sup> The fury to commemorate the fallen in *Au revoir là-haut* is less as an act of individual mourning than a pretext to release any lingering feeling of responsibility or guilt. The moment the swindle is revealed publicly brings immense joy and peace to Édouard, who understands his revenge as a settling of moral debts and a colossal act of heroism.

## Conclusion

This essay began with a query into Lemaitre's polemical defence of his right to tell the "truth" about the Great War in his novel, despite the fact that he had no direct experience of that war. His distinction between truth and accuracy seems overwrought and defensive, as if he were protecting himself from a threat, verbal or written. To problematize his assertion leads to an investigation of the canonical pressures in both form and content on French fiction writers of the Great War: requirements to rehearse the direct witness and meditative reflection that emanate from the battlefield experience. Examination of fiction published in the post-memory period exposes differences beyond those of format. Novels classified as *littérature blanche*, the venue of cultural prestige and power, sustain the traditional themes and conventions that are part of what Aleida Assmann named the "reductive and restrictive drive" of the "active working memory of society" (106). The recovery by historians in the post-memory period of the disregarded and/or censored memory traces concerning the *fusillés* and the veterans become, in Assmann's terms, part of "a second-order memory that preserves what has been forgotten," and she notes the important role of fiction in filling the gaps in historical records (106). Historian Bruno Cabanes concurs, admitting that the paucity of conventional documents limits comprehension of the veteran's social reintegration, while conceding that literary works may be the only way to access the complex and often contradictory emotions of the returning soldier (20, 248). In French novels of the Great War, it is in the domain of *la littérature noire*, a genre of popular fiction as historically marginalised as its suppressed subject matter, that the memory of forgotten objects is restored. The *noir* novels

go beyond a surface reinterpretation of the soldier as victim to show the process of their victimization: the excesses of military justice, the abuse and exploitation of veterans, the unequal sacrifice of officers and enlisted men, and the pervasive self-interest that beleaguered commemoration of the dead.

## Notes

- 1 Adrien Bertrand, *L'Appel du sol*, 1914; René Benjamin, *Gaspard*, 1915; Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu*, 1916; Henry Malherbe, *La Flamme au poing*, 1917; Georges Duhamel, *Civilisation*, 1918.
- 2 For example, Marcelle Tinayre's *La Veillée des armes*, 1915, Paul Géraudy's *La Guerre, Madame*, 1916 and famed Spanish novelist Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's *Los cuatro jinetes del Apocalipsis* 1916, written at the request of French president Raymond Poincaré.
- 3 *La Chambre des officiers* was an award-winning novel and popular film.
- 4 Lucien Bersot was executed for disobedience in 1914. His story was the subject of *Le Pantalon*, a book by Alain Scoff (1982) and a television film of the same name in 1997.
- 5 The words are from the last letter written by Jean Blanchard, one of the so-called Vingré martyrs. The men were falsely accused of desertion, executed December 4, 1914 and rehabilitated in 1921.
- 6 Bernard Tavernier's 1989 film, *La Vie et rien d'autre* also critiques the establishment of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier as a means to shift attention from the massive numbers of dead to one, symbolic death.

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