## ‘Losing the War and Losing Heart: 1870-1871 and the Fiction of Defeat’

Marion Glaumaud-Carbonnier (University of Cambridge)

Professors of literature should stay away from wars.[[1]](#footnote-1) Gaston Paris who had been teaching medieval literature at the Collège de France since 1866 was indeed convinced that the study of ancient texts requires the severity and calm of a serene retreat, far from the fury of the world. Yet, in December 1870, when France was invaded by Prussia, the French capital having bravely resisted the enemy’s siege for several months, Gaston Paris, distraught by the conflict, delivered a lecture in which medieval texts suddenly resonated strongly with the tragic situation in France.[[2]](#footnote-2) The medievalist begins by stating that a nation’s character is expressed through its national literature. He then comments on *La Chanson de Roland* in the light of this statement and later events. According to him, this 11th-century epic poem, which relates the story of a noble defeat and a dazzling revenge, depicts the character of a brave and heroic people ready to die to defend its “douce France”, whose love inspires their most glorious actions. Galvanised by this “voix mâle et héroïque” (1895: 118) coming from the Middle Ages, the contemporaries of the Sedan disaster, “fils de ceux qui sont morts à Roncevaux et de ceux qui les ont vengés” (118), will prove themselves worthy of the warlike virtues of their ancestors: they will fight and they will win.

A month after this lecture, France capitulated, and with it displacing a heroic and chivalric ideal transmitted by nearly a thousand years of literature. Despite this national disaster, some of the most prominent literary critics confidently declared that at least literature remained unmoved by the defeat. In this respect, Ferdinand Brunetière states in 1889 that “la guerre de France [de 1870-71] n’a pas plus interrompu ni modifié le cours de l’évolution littéraire que jadis la Révolution et les guerres de l’Empire n’ont empêché les écrivains d’alors, les Delille ou les Morellet, les Ducis et les Lemercier, combien d’autres encore, de se retrouver au lendemain de Friedland ou de Wagram, tout ce qu’ils étaient à la veille de la convocation des États-Généraux” (1889: 909). With these words, the critic solemnly proclaimed that the course of history could not change the course of literature: in his opinion, the war of 1870-71 was indeed a literary non-event. In 1905, over thirty years after the French defeat of 1871, the literary and art critic and sometime poet and novelist Gustave Kahn, reflecting in *La Nouvelle Revue* on fiction in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, proposes the same idea: “il est assez curieux que la guerre de 1870 qui fut cause d’une telle submersion des salons sous des flots de peinture militaire, influa beaucoup moins sur la littérature” (1905: 262). If we rely on Brunetière’s and Kahn’s declarations, it may seem that the Franco-Prussian conflict, often described as the “forgotten war”, was also forgotten by French literature.[[3]](#footnote-3)

These proclamations concerning the indifference of literature obviously raise several questions. Indeed, the Franco-Prussian War is commonly described as a turning point in the political history of Europe and its nations, and it therefore seems quite difficult to imagine that it made absolutely no impression on the inspiration of French writers. Contrary to early 21st century French readers’ memory, for whom only a few stories echo this conflict, many fictions nevertheless borrowed their narrative material from the 1870 war.[[4]](#footnote-4) Widely read before the First World War, they failed, however, to imprint their stories and their characters on French minds.[[5]](#footnote-5) As it is often the case after landmark events of the 19th century, writers who had to change their mode of representation found themselves confronted with an aesthetic, ideological and moral conflict that seemed irresolvable.[[6]](#footnote-6) How to express a painful page of French history when many would like to repress the memory of this defeat, and thus not have to question the heroic character of the French nation and the failure to defeat the enemy? Caught between the duty to remember and the imperative of silence,[[7]](#footnote-7) many writers thus looked for a narrative formula that would tell the story of their defeat without diminishing the French “roman national”; one that would turn the page on the Second Empire while preparing future generations for the next chapter of the Republic.

In what follows, we aim to demonstrate that the search for a novelistic language which would be able to express the experience of war in 1870-71 leads many writers to renounce the epic: thus the fiction of defeat becomes a defeat of fiction. Unable to rewrite the epic of Roland and the glorious tale of French revenge, many writers leave the battlefield and the effects produced by its spectacular setting, and seek their heroes elsewhere. When French writers experience difficulties in turning battlefield action into fiction, they choose to put the narrative focus of their writing in the simple setting of a familial interior, where the heart of France beats. This change of setting consequently reshapes the narrative forms and imagery of war: Ulysses and young warriors abandoned, it is now the difficult battles of Penelope and of old men that embody the heroism of the conflict. Encouraging a private and internalised vision of the battle scene, 1870-71 marks a turning point in the history of representations of war. By analysing fictions in which battles essentially take place in the hearts of the characters, we will suggest that this sentimental and figurative interpretation of war aims at the souls of French citizens and thereby strikes a responsive chord.

**Modern war and the hero of yesteryear**

In their recent study *La Guerre franco-allemande, une histoire globale*, Nicolas Bourguinat and Gilles Vogt recall that, along with the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Second Italian War of Independence (1859) and the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War is commonly described as one of the first “guerres modernes”, “du fait de l’augmentation de la puissance de feu des fusils” (2020: 112). In 1870, the use of the Krupp gun, which ironically fascinated Parisians at the Exposition Universelle of 1867, disrupted the conduct of the French campaign and disorganised the movement of French forces, frequently forced to retreat under heavy enemy fire. According to Gabriel Garrote, many military historians attribute French losses to this crucial change in war’s *modus operandi*, which put the French military model in crisis:

les progrès techniques de l’armement portatif et de l’artillerie assoient la supériorité du feu sur le choc. À la force morale et aux vagues d’assauts successives, il convient de substituer une posture défensive, que le rechargement et le tir couchés favorisent, et de chercher à s’exposer le moins possible. Ce mode opératoire est toutefois incompatible avec la furia francese qui anime le corps des officiers, comme avec les règlements et instructions en vigueur au sein de l’armée, qui ne reflètent pas les évolutions de l’armement.  (2021: 163)

However, the defensive postures adopted during the Franco-Prussian War not only hindered the strategy of the French army, but also the deployment of the literary imagination. Indeed, in French epics such as *La Chanson de Roland*, the soldier is usually portrayed as an offensive fighter, courageously going to the front, even when the action seems hopeless. The modern military strategy traced by Moltke therefore put an end to the myth of the French soldier, celebrated from medieval times onwards for fighting with heart and soul in defence of his honour and soil.

Mainly shaped by medieval fiction, the ethos of this chivalrous and noble-hearted character filled the French imagination of wars for a long time. At the beginning of the 19th century, narratives of the French Revolutionary Wars strengthened even more the fable of the passionate French way of war, as Denis de Rougemont summarises in *L’Amour et l’Occident*:

The Battle of Valmy was a victory of passion over “exact science”. It was to the cry of “Long live the Nation!” that the Sans-culottes repulsed an allied army still bent on conducting operations on “classic” lines. It will be recalled that Goethe, after witnessing the battle, said: “On this field and on this day a new era begins in the history of the world.” To this famous pronouncement Foch adds: “Truly enough a new era had begun, the era of national wars that are fought *under no restraints whatever*, because a nation throws all its resources into the struggle, because the aim of these wars is not to safeguard some dynastic claim, but to defeat or propagate philosophical ideas and intangible advantages, because these wars are staked upon feelings and passions, elemental forces never enlisted before.” (1983: 261)

In addition to the literary exaltation of the Napoleonic army’s victories, the expansion of historical fiction obviously contributed to perpetuating during the 19th century the legend of a *furia francese*, thuseasily winning over hearts as well as winning in battle. Contrasting with others’ impassive military strategies, the sentimental French art of war is consequently romanticised by historians and novelists like Michelet or Alexandre Dumas père, whose bold and reckless characters in *Les Trois Mousquetaires* or *La San-Felice* regularly fight with panache rather than with their mind. In changing the course of warfare, the Franco-Prussian conflict not only transformed the portrait of the war hero, but also altered the ideal of epic poetics which had greatly contributed to the writing of the French *roman national*. Thus, the defeat of the Franco-Prussian War also led France to relinquish an ideal: the valiant and chivalrous heart of the nation suddenly stopped beating. If, as the Comte de Gasparin explains, “la guerre comme on est en train de la faire ne conserve plus rien de chevaleresque et de courtois” (1871: 257), then what is left of France?

Moreover, the Comte de Gasparin’s observation expresses a feeling that commonly recurs in war fiction of 1870-71. Thus, in Marie-Louise Gagneur novel *Chair à canon*, the narrator states that France, of course, only loses battles because of unexpected modifications in the rules of fighting: “jusque-là la guerre avait été un art. Elle devenait une science. Le soldat français, confiant dans cet héroïsme qui lui avait valu tant de victoires, ne comprenait rien à cette nouvelle tactique. Sa bravoure impuissante !” (1872: 122). First published in 1872, this successful novel relates the wartime experience in 1870 of a young aristocrat, Camille de Reumont, whose fiancé, Georges Milher, embodies the familiar qualities and virtues of the French soldier: loyalty, passion and devotion. As brave as Roland or the legendary good knight Bayard, “chevalier sans peur et sans reproche”,[[8]](#footnote-8) Milher undeniably behaves like the ancient heroes of old wars: passionately embracing France’s cause, he bravely goes back into the battlefield despite being wounded. Allegorising France, this “nation chevaleresque, héroïque quelquefois jusqu’à la folie” (75), Georges Milher will die in exemplary fashion under the cruel torture of the enemy, causing the death of the woman he loves. With them falls “l’âme de la France” (447), “cette sublime blessée qui, sanglante, écrasée, râlant, se relevait toujours, et toujours ardente à la lutte, se hâtait d’essuyer ses blessures pour s’élancer à de nouveaux combats”, before expiring (448). Besides, George Milher and Camille de Reumont emphasise by their deaths the impossibility of fictionalising the Franco-Prussian War as French writers formerly used to do: no one will come to save them, no one will come to avenge them.

“Le mécanicien est tout. Le héros est supprimé” (1871: 47). Written in despair from Florence in December 1870, this sentence of Michelet summarises French public opinion of the late 19th century. Yet, by symbolising the triumph of science over passion, the Germans’ victory leads irrevocably to a crisis of both idealism and narrative description. Inspired by the depictions of Napoleonic battlefields provided by Stendhal, Victor Hugo, and, by the successful translation of *War and Peace* in 1879, French writers experience difficulties in reshaping both the characters and poetics of war stories. On reading novels taking place during the Franco-Prussian War, it thus appears that only a few actually describe the battlefield. Firstly, because for writers who joined the front such as Maupassant, Huysmans, or Albert Delpit, the experience of defeat is nothing like the heroic and exalted scenes performed by previous fictional characters: their own adventures seem to be a tale of mud and hunger, of cold rain and long waiting. As Edmond de Goncourt observes, framing war is also problematic for writers who have not witnessed any combat, who are then forced to reenact the assault by default.[[9]](#footnote-9) Besides, to quote Odile Roynette, the use of modern weapons marks a significant “turning point” in the representation and aesthetics of the conflict (2020: 145). In a recent article entitled “Blessés et soignants face à la violence du combat en 1870-1871: un tournant sensible?”, examining the diary of Léon Lefort, a physician who treated those wounded during the war, the historian points out the transformation of the theatre of war after 1870. Cited by Roynette, Léon Lefort appears in his journal to be haunted by the violence of images he has seen:

J’ai encore devant les yeux le corps mutilé d’un des nôtres, coupé au niveau de la ceinture par un obus qui probablement éclata en tombant sur ce soldat couché au sol, car il ne restait que le bassin avec les deux membres inférieurs, et l’on ne retrouvait d’autres vestiges du malheureux ainsi foudroyé que des débris d’intestins gisant dans la poussière à quelques pieds de ce lambeau de cadavre. Chevaux éventrés, débris informes d’êtres humains, couvraient le sol de l’avenue. Depuis juin 1848, où cette fois j’étais combattant, j’avais vu quelques champs de bataille ; comme chirurgien j’étais depuis vingt-quatre ans habitué au contact de la mort, mais ici le spectacle était épouvantable. (2020: 145)

The vision of bodies reduced to pieces certainly goes against the literary motif and the “scène à faire” of the brave hero’s agony and death, which represents the pathetic and aesthetic climax of war stories.

With the defeat of 1871, a certain way of representing war and nations disappears, symbolically ending with the death of Alexandre Dumas, master of the historical and national novel, in December 1870. Searching for a novelistic formula that could encapsulate modern warfare, Marie-Louise Gagneur boldly opts in *Chair à canon* for a raw expression that defies the classic “règles de bienséance” as well as the prejudices against her gender: in her novel, blood, disassembled bodies and scattered limbs are not hidden from the reader’s view. Could the defeat of 1871 therefore have invented a new novelistic aesthetic, which we might, by any chance, call naturalism? Zola seems to draw such a conclusion:

What we must confess is that in 1870 we were beaten by science. Undoubtedly we were thrown into a war for which we were unprepared by the imbecility of the Empire. But is it not true that under more disadvantageous circumstances France formerly was not conquered, when she lacked everything, even troops and money? It is evident, then, that at that time the old-fashioned French culture, her gay way of fighting, her fine dare-devil spirit, were sufficient to assure her victory. In 1870, on the contrary, we were crushed under the military method of a more phlegmatic people, less brave than we; we were overwhelmed by an army manoeuvred by logical rules; we were disbanded by an application of the scientific formula to the art of war, without speaking of a more powerful artillery than our own, of a better equipped army, of a better disciplined one, and a more intelligent knowledge of the art of warfare. Again, I repeat, in spite of these disasters, from which we are still suffering, the true patriotism is to see that new times have come upon us, and to accept the scientific formula instead of dreaming of some mythical return into the literary quagmires of the ideal. Scientific principles conquered us; let us employ science if we would conquer others. Great commanders using sonorous words are not to be regretted if it so happens that sonorous words cannot bring about victory. (1893: 99)

**The other side of war**

The question therefore remains: how can the Franco-Prussian War be fictionalised while it appears that writers struggle to assimilate aesthetically modern techniques of warfare which constrain their imagination? In response to this poetic impediment, which often leads them to abandon the depiction of battle scenes and to adopt a different narrative focus, numerous writers choose to represent the armed conflict of 1870 from the home front. Beyond the battlefield, the French people indeed had to face the consequences of the Prussian invasion. The representation of the face-to-face confrontation of French families with enemies who requisitioned their homes will provide writers with the heroism they need to write war stories. No longer singing the glorious epic of “arms and the man”,[[10]](#footnote-10) many writers tell the everyday story of ordinary people as they face the troubles of war. By changing the scale of the conflict narrative, they then shape a familial epic with which readers may identify. In 1873, Francis Charmes, the literary critic for the *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, explains this identification process. “La famille qu’on met sous nos yeux devient bientôt la nôtre”, he suggested after reading Lucie Boissonnas’s *Une famille pendant la guerre* (1873), “et, comme le sort de toutes les familles françaises a été à peu près le même pendant la guerre de 1870-1871, il suffit de nous raconter ce que l’une d’elles a fait et a souffert pour nous rappeler ce que nous avons souffert nous-mêmes et pour raviver de pénibles mais de précieux souvenirs.”

In many fictions set during the Franco-Prussian War, the family is less used as a plotline than as a narrative structure. Adopting such a familial focus allows writers not only to consider inter-generational and intra-generational relationships during the war, but also to explore on another level the concept of private space and time during war. The motif of separated family members, who struggle to communicate during the armed conflict, and the *topos* of grief over the loss of fathers, husbands, sons, fiancés and brothers far from home,[[11]](#footnote-11) indeed change the perception of war-torn and occupied France and offer a much more sensitive and private perspective on it. By integrating an intimate view, these fictions then recall an even more forgotten war than “the forgotten War”: the combat experience of civilians who, beyond the battlefield of 1870-71, silently fight a kind of “outre-guerre”, as Annette Becker calls the occupation of France and Belgium during the First World War.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The novels of the writing duo Erckmann-Chatrian are representative of this literary genre. Mostly set in annexed Alsace-Lorraine, the patriotic works of Erckmann-Chatrian depict to the French reader the violence of the Franco-Prussian War, focused on families living in the annexed territories, who are soon forced to choose between going into exile or becoming German. For Gustave Kahn, the success of Erckmann-Chatrian’s novels in the late 19th century demonstrates the potency of this literary composition of war, which encapsulates civilian trauma in 1870-71:

Longtemps, le livre sur la guerre fut obligatoirement fanfarant. […] C’est dans le roman d’Erckmann-Chatrian que la guerre apparaît complète. […] Ce n’est qu’avec Erckmann-Chatrian, qu’apparaît dans le roman militaire, le peuple foulé par l’invasion, que des tableautins bien tracés montrent le pays où l’on pense au troupier transporté au hasard des luttes à tous les coins de l’Europe, que le soldat nous est montré non comme une unité héroïque, poltronne ou machinale, mais comme un homme tenant à tort à un milieu, n’étant nullement soldat de carrière et présent malgré lui, parmi les fusillades. (1905: 261-262)

Erckmann-Chatrian’s *Le Brigadier Frédéric* exemplifies Kahn’s observation; published in 1874, this novel tells the moving story of a forest ranger in Alsace, whose peaceful life with his daughter, Marie-Rose, and his mother-in-law, Anne, is suddenly disrupted by the invasion and by the subsequent Prussian annexation. Refusing to submit to the Prussians, Frédéric decides to quit his job and to leave their home: so begins a litany of troubles. To punish his insubordination, the Prussians first confiscate his cows and brutalise his daughter, a fact which she hides from her father. Then, as Phalsbourg falls into German hands, Anne and Marie-Rose fall ill, and soon pass away.

In *Le Brigadier Frédéric*, all the family characters will thus die of a sudden heart disease. Called to grandmother Anne’s side, the doctor Semperlin, physician and therapist as well, makes a diagnosis that expressly links the symptoms of the old woman with the heart-breaking grief of war and the homesickness she endures:

La pauvre femme est malade, non seulement à cause de sa grande vieillesse, mais principalement à cause des chagrins qui la minent. Elle a quelque chose au cœur, c’est ce qui la fait tousser. Prenez garde de la chagriner, cachez-lui vos misères… Faites-lui bonne mine… Dites-lui que vous avez bonne espérance… Quand elle vous regarde, souriez-lui… Si elle est inquiète, dites-lui que ce n’est rien… Ne laissez entrer personne, de crainte qu’on ne lui apprenne de mauvaises nouvelles, c’est le meilleur remède que je puisse indiquer. (1874: 195)

As in Daudet’s “Le Siège de Berlin” (1872), where the grandfather character suffers from a similar disease, keeping the grandmother away from the news from the front appears to be the only medicine for her psychosomatic illness. Observer and reader of the symptoms of war, Semperlin explains more than once the terms of this metaphorical disease: “nous aussi, n’est-ce pas, père Frédéric, nous sommes bien malades ?…”, says the doctor to Frédéric, “oui, terriblement malades. Notre cœur se déchire, chaque pensée nous tue” (197). Following her grandmother’s death, Marie-Rose will also die of a broken heart, suffering from the loss of her fiancé during the war. Echoing the poignant motif of death and the maiden, Marie-Rose’s end then offers a view symmetrical to the picture of the falling war hero. On the other side of the battlefield, in the privacy of their homes, women are also dying from the war, at least in the family fictions of 1870-71. In *Le Banni* (1882), the sequel to *Le Brigadier Frédéric*,back in his village, Frederic will die of heart failure too, unable to bear the sight of a stranger in his house.

While the use of allegory can be expected to embody the woes of the nation, the recurrence in such fiction of characters dying of a heart failure is more intriguing. Of course, the heart of one man personifies the nation’s heart. But this image is also inspired in writers by the memory of a particular, and particularly tragic event that happened during the Franco-Prussian War. On the night of 1 March 1871, as Émile Küss, the Mayor of Strasbourg, came to Bordeaux to advocate the attachment of Alsace-Lorraine to France and learned that these territories had just been ceded to the Germans, he suddenly died of a heart attack. *Le Monde illustré* wrote in his honour: “Victime vaincue de son attachement à la patrie française, ce grand citoyen honnête homme succombait au désespoir”. Immediately sublimated by the newspapers, this dramatic event which resonated with the exemplary deaths of antiquity, made a great impression on contemporaries, and thereby encouraged the wider representation of defeat by the death of a character succumbing to heart attack.

In numerous fictions of 1870-71 that are now forgotten but were widely read at the end of the 19th century, the Franco-Prussian War is transposed into the heart of a family and into the hearts of its characters, thus enabling authors to internalise the conflict. Following the emergence of the psychological novel,[[13]](#footnote-13) literature of this kind turns into a laboratory of cases of conscience and patriotism, which are supposed to edify future generations and prepare them for revenge.

**Françoise’s choice**

In wartime, who would you save? Your father or your lover? In Zola’s “L’attaque du moulin”, set in the summer of 1870 in Lorraine, a few days after the declaration of war, the young heroine with the patriotic name Françoise has two hours to make her choice. A few moments earlier, after a short battle against the French, the Prussians invaded her father’s mill and arrested her fiancé. Yet Dominique has escaped and the Prussians are now looking for him, convinced that he killed their sentry in his escape. Suspecting Françoise of having helped him, the enemies give her an ultimatum: if in two hours the fugitive has not surrendered, they will shoot her father. In wartime, who will Françoise save? Her father or her lover? Caught between the filial love that she feels for her father and the marital bliss that awaits her with Dominique, Françoise hesitates, thinking of the past, dreaming of the future. By a cruel irony of the narrative, the young woman does not have to choose in the end: Dominique, who has surrendered, is shot by the Germans, while her father dies from a stray bullet during the battle that the French are waging to conquer the mill. Only Françoise survives the event, without having to decide who she will let die and who she will let live.[[14]](#footnote-14) Before Sophie’s choice, Françoise’s choice is thereby discredited: who can believe that one has a choice in wartime? Thus Zola seems to be mocking the reader who, on reading Françoise’s story, has asked himself who he would have saved.

However, despite the irony of Zola’s short story, much of the war fiction of 1870-71 is precisely composed of this kind of moral issue: following the pattern of Racine’s and Corneille’s tragedies, their dilemmas stem from conflicts that inextricably set heart against heart. To resolve this dilemma obviously requires sublime and heroic sacrifices. As we saw earlier, the defeat of 1870-71 leads to the defeat of a certain narrative of manhood: the failure of the French soldiers of 1870 precipitates the crisis of an old French epic and national figure, which had been revived by the Napoleonic victories of the early 19th century. Since Napoleonic epic lyricism is now barely readable, several authors who are looking for alternatives to this literary and moral crisis imagine another way of telling war stories. Along the lines of the *Bildungsroman* and the plot of the failed marriage, this sentimental literary genre depicts the patriotic growth of a woman who will have to give up her dearest relationships in order to become “une bonne Française”. Thus, according to the gender division expected in the 19th century, while men engage their bodies on the battlefield, the battle of female characters is essentially fought within their hearts.

In the war fiction of 1870-71, the sentimental terms of this female dilemma are often identical, and follow a familiar narrative thread: a woman, married or engaged to a German, finds herself torn by the war between her feelings for her husband or fiancé (conjugal love) and her affection towards France (patriotic love). Following this narrative line, Camille de Reumont, the heroine of *Chair à canon* (1872) with the Cornelian name, hesitates to support her sister’s marriage to Albrecht de Rosenthal; Valentine Dercery, the heroine of *Une Parisienne sous la foudre* (1871), renounces Ludwig von Lamdberg, the man she loves; Marthe Ellangé, the heroine of *Les Frontières du cœur* (1912), no longer knows how to love her husband Otto Rudheimer. Published in 1912, when rumours of a new conflict between France and Germany were spreading, Victor Margueritte’s *Les Frontières du cœur* is a perfect example of the use that writers make of this patriotic-sentimental literary genre: in this novelistic model, private issues serve both to represent and dramatise the conflict, but also to prepare contemporaries for the war to come. In *Les Frontières du cœur* Marthe Ellangé who at the end of Second Empire married Otto Rudheimer, a German doctor living in Hesse, seems at first to be indifferent to the conflict that sets her husband against her brothers. Visiting her parents, Marthe, then pregnant, watches from Amiens the successive defeats of France, the death of her brother Jacques, killed in action, the amputation of the arm of her other brother, Louis, wounded during the battle of Villers-Bretonneux, and the illness and death of her grandfather, who suffered from a stroke after the fall of the Second Empire. In the face of the misfortunes of her country, symbolised by the suffering of her family, Marthe, starts to feel hatred towards Otto rather than love, and she reveals, in the expected denouement of this type of story, her “true French soul”. As she explains to her husband:

Je ne puis concevoir la possibilité de vivre sous votre toit… et tout mon être, à l’idée de coucher dans votre lit, se soulève… Ce qui nous unissait est mort. Il ne reste que ce qui nous séparait, oui, sans que nous l’ayons su… Oh ! je lis dans vos yeux. Vous me jugez inconstante, ingrate, légère, — une vraie Française ! Hélas ! non, je suis la même. Seulement, l’amour enveloppait notre vie, comme un voile… La guerre l’a déchiré… Il n’y a plus en face l’un de l’autre que deux êtres d’une race différente, et entre eux, tout ce qui divise : habitudes, usages, sentiments, pensées, cette lente formation qui vient de bien plus loin que l’enfance et que nos parents tenaient des leurs, le contraste de nos éducations, l’antagonisme de nos religions et de nos nationalités, les mille nuances qui font que nous étions et que nous nous retrouvons étrangers l’un à l’autre. […] Vous êtes, à mes yeux, l’Ennemi. Vous êtes l’Allemagne que j’exècre, de toute ma rage de vaincue et de toute mon âme française !... (1912: 77)

Thus, unable to live with Otto after the end of the Franco-Prussian War, Marthe finally obtained a divorce: their son would grow up torn between France and Germany.

The reader-response to *Les Frontières du cœur* and the debates that followed testify to the didactic aims of this patriotic-sentimental literary genre, which was intended to influence French women in their love affairs and conduct. As is often the case with Victor Margueritte’s novels, literature is thus perceived less as an end than as a means, aiming to educate and edify readers about social and moral issues, and in this instance problems of sentimental geopolitics. A few days after the publication of *Les Frontières du cœur*, Victor Margueritte published an important article in *Femina*, a successful women’s magazine, in which he summarised his heroine’s dilemma in captivating terms:

Qui l’emportera, de la patrie ou de l’amour ? Ce conflit a été celui d’hier. […]. Et ce conflit peut être celui de demain… Voilà en quoi ce livre pose, il me semble, un problème auquel toutes les femmes et toutes les mères réfléchiront… Que penseraient, dans un cas analogue, — le plus affreux des cas de conscience qui puisse se poser à un cœur de femme, — les femmes d’aujourd’hui ? (1912)

Attracted by this patriotic *cas de conscience*, the newspaper’s editors choose to further investigate the issue, proposing to its 1912 readers to answer the following question:

En général une Française peut-elle épouser, même en temps de paix, un homme appartenant à une nation ennemie latente de son pays ?

Et en particulier, individuellement même, si vous aviez été mariée à un Allemand, auriez-vous pu après la défaite de la France en 1870, continuer à aimer votre mari ? Comment auriez-vous résolu le conflit de sentiments qui n’aurait pu manquer de s’élever en vous à ce moment ?

The numerous responses vary, some of them agreeing with Victor Margueritte’s character, others drawing on their private lives to argue that patriotic and marital love can peacefully coexist. These French women’s choices will soon be put to the test in a new war.

Derived from the defeat of 1870-71 and from the failure of a male and epic representation of war, the patriotic-sentimental narrative tone, notably interpreted by Margueritte, was very successful in the early 20th century, as the popularity of Barrès’s *Colette Baudoche* (1909) demonstrates. In this novel, a young woman from Lorraine refuses to marry a German, as she remembers the Franco-Prussian War. After 1914, however, the figure of the war heroine caught up in sentimental dilemmas tended to fade away: the protest against a patriotic lyricism which encourages people to sacrifice body and heart to the fatherland, as well as changes in social mores, made this kind of patriotic and sentimental *littérature à thèse* effectively unreadable. “Les *Frontières du Cœur*, comme ça date et comme c’est faux. Un ménage, Français et Allemande [*sic*], désuni par les différences de culture et par l’orgueil national de chaque époux. Et ces avatars amènent à conclure que l’amour ne peut franchir le poteau bariolé d’une frontière. Ah laissez-moi rire!”, criticises an editor of *L’Humanité* in 1922. For a long time, this narrative thread, however, imposes its imprint on the French imagination as shown in Vercors’s *Le Silence de la mer* (1942). Yet, inspired by the motif of the impossible union of the German and the French woman, Vercors reenergizes in his novel the model provided by the fictions of 1870: the young girl’s private struggle will remain silent. Forced to host a German who gradually becomes aware of the madness of war, the young Frenchwoman resists the enemy and her inclination by her silence.

**War without glory**

How to tell a war story without heroes and without heroism? Many French writers asked this question in the aftermath of the 1870-71 defeat, dumbfounded by the modern warfare of the Prussians. In a few months, the Franco-Prussian War had annihilated an ideal that had existed for centuries: here rests the image of the French soldier as a valiant and chivalrous man who goes to war as one goes to love. Leaving the battlefield behind, writers tried to find the heroes of their fictions in the actions of civilians, in the intimacy of families and in the hearts of women. Few, like Zola in *La Débâcle*, linked the defeat of 1870-71 to the arrogant legend of the Frenchman with the unconquerable arm.

We have to wait until the First World War for writers to find a novelistic formula and language capable of describing the ravages and absurdities of modern warfare. Unlike the writers of the late 19th century, the authors of the first half of the 20th century reclaimed a battlefield devoid of heroism in order to depict the defeat of a warrior ethos derived from the stories of Roland, Bayard and the Napoleonic wars. As Denis Pernot analyses in the introduction to his edition of Barbusse’s *Le Feu*, the Poilu then becomes the war anti-hero par excellence: “le combattant de la Grande Guerre ne saurait être représenté que sous les aspects, qui n’ont rien d’héroïques, d’un actant passif qui reçoit des ordres et n’en donne pas, qui les exécute sans les comprendre, sans chercher à les comprendre ou sans pouvoir les comprendre, sous les aspects d’un rustre ou d’un vilain qui se heurte à des barrières de feu, à des tonnerres de détonations, à des pluies de métal.” Indeed, this character is fully separated from the brave and intrepid soldier of past literature.

The literary crisis of wartime heroism began in France with the defeat of 1870-71 and continued after the experience of the Second World War. In *Le Bouquet*, published in 1944, Henri Calet singularly denounces the ideological function of the literary figure of the war hero, which is used by political and military leaders to send men to their deaths. “C’est les belles phrases qui font les beaux soldats”, believes the naive Adrien Gaydamour, assured, before the beginning of the war, that a French soldier must “mourir, combattre ou périr” (11). Adrien Gaydamour, an everyday character whose life is without grandeur, is no hero: before he was invited “à entrer dans un conflit mondial” and was taken prisoner, he led “une existence des plus ordinaires”. Yet, according to Calet and others, the war is a story of ordinary people sent to their deaths, “une histoire répandue par le monde à des millions d’exemplaires”. By deconstructing a literary myth already dented by the defeat of the Franco-Prussian War, Calet’s approach tends therefore to prove that unhappy indeed are the land and the literature that are in need of heroes.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Marion Glaumaud-Carbonnier**

**University of Cambridge**

**Works cited**

Barrès, Maurice. *Colette Baudoche, histoire d’une jeune fille de Metz*. Juven, 1909.

Becker, Annette. *Les Cicatrices rouge: 14-18, France et Belgique occupées*. Fayard, 2010.

Bourguinat, Nicolas, and Gilles Vogt. *La Guerre franco-allemande de 1870, une histoire globale*. Flammarion, 2020.

Brunetière, Ferdinand. “Le mouvement littéraire au xixe siècle”. *Revue des Deux-Mondes*, 15th October 1889, pp. 867-913.

Calet, Henri. *Le Bouquet*. Gallimard, 2001.

Charle, Christophe. *La République des universitaires, 1870-1940*. Seuil, 1994.

Dartigue, Henry. *L’Influence de la guerre de 1870 dans la littérature française*. Fishbacher, 1915.

Digeon, Claude. *La Crise allemande de la pensée française (1870-1914)*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1959.

Erckmann-Chatrian. *Le Brigadier Frédéric: histoire d’un Français chassé par les Allemands*. Hetzel, 1874.

Fleuriot, Zénaïde. *Une Parisienne sous la foudre*. Plon, 1871.

Gagneur, Marie-Louise. *Chair à canon*. Dentu, 1872.

Gal, Stéphane. *Bayard: histoires croisées du chevalier*. Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2007.

Garrote Gabriel. “Les origines de la débâcle de 1870”. *Inflexions*, 2021, no. 46, pp. 145-167.

Gasparin, Agénor de. *La France: nos fautes, nos périls, notre avenir*. Michel-Lévy frères, 1873.

Goncourt, Edmond and Jules de. *Journal. Mémoires de la vie littéraire.* Robert Ricatte ed., Robert Laffont, 1989.

Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. “Gaston Paris en 1871”. *Le Moyen Âge de Gaston Paris*. Ed. Michel Zink. Odile Jacob, 2004, pp. 69-80.

Kahn, Gustave. “La littérature et la guerre”. *La Nouvelle Revue*, 1905, pp. 260-263.

Leichter-Flack, Frédérique. *Le Laboratoire des cas de conscience*. Alma ed., 2012.

Mariot, Philippe. “Une symphonie inachevée: Frédéric Bazille et la guerre de 1870”. *Frédéric Bazille, la jeunesse de l’impressionnisme*. Flammarion, 2016.

Margueritte, Victor. “Une enquête de *Femina. Les Frontières du cœur*”. *Femina*, 1st March 1912, no. 267.

Margueritte, Victor. *Les Frontières du cœur.* Flammarion, 1912.

Michelet, Jules. *La France devant l’Europe*.1871.

Oehler, Dolf. *Ein Höllensturz der Alten Welt: zur Selbsterforschung der Moderne nach dem Juni 1848*. Suhrkamp, 1988.

Paris, Gaston. “*La Chanson de Roland* et la nationalité française”, *Poésie et Moyen Âge: leçons et lectures*. Hachette, 1895, pp. 87-118.

Renan, Ernest. *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale de la France*. Michel-Lévy frères, 1871.

Rougemont, Denis de. *Love in the Western World*. Translated by Montgomery Belgion. Princeton University Press, 1983.

Roynette, Odile. “Blessés et soignants face à la violence du combat en 1870-1871: un tournant sensible?”. *Revue d’histoire du* xixe s*iècle*, 2020, no. 60, pp. 145-162.

Thiesse, Anne-Marie. *La Création des identités nationales : Europe xviiie - xxe siècle*. Seuil, 1999.

Thiesse, Anne-Marie. *La Fabrique de l’écrivain national, entre littérature et politique*. Gallimard, 2019.

Vercors. *Le Silence de la mer*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 1942.

Zola, Émile. “L’attaque du moulin”. *Les Soirées de Médan*. Charpentier, 1880.

Zola, Émile. “To the Young People of France”. *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*.Translated by Belle M. Sherman. Cassel, 1893.

1. I am grateful to the European Union for their support of my Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action postdoctoral research project, The Family at War in French Culture, 1870-1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On Gaston Paris, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Gaston Paris en 1871”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The loss of collective memory of 1870-71 is all the more remarkable given that this conflict is a well-known turning point in the constitution of a “French literary nation”. Indeed, the defeat determines the formation of a national literary patrimony, as well as a certain intellectual community. Driven by Ernest Renan’s *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale de la France* (1871), French Republicans sought to build a literary and cultured nation, in order to enhance national sentiment, and thus prepare the young generation’s minds for “la revanche”. See Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Fabrique de l’écrivain national, entre littérature et politique* and Christophe Charle, *La République des universitaires, 1870-1940*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the French reader’s memory of the early 20th century, there were only a few books which were immediately associated with this conflict: Alphonse Daudet’s *Les Contes du Lundi* (1873), *Les Soirées de Médan*, a famous collection of short stories signed by a group of Naturalist writers in 1880, and Émile Zola’s *La Débâcle* (1892). These books undeniably overshadow other narratives produced by this conflict. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although forgotten today, numerous works of fiction attempted, more or less successfully, to depict the experience of the Franco-Prussian War during the *entre-deux-guerres* as Léon Daudet called the period from 1870 to 1914. Better-known writers such as Anatole France, Victor Margueritte and Erckmann-Chatrian, as well as more anonymous authors such as Marie-Louise Gagneur, Zénaïde Fleuriot, Ludovic Halévy, and Albert Delpit, all set fiction during this conflict. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Analysing the repression that follows the “social genocide” of the French revolutionary days of June 1848 (1988: 7), Dolph Oehler establishes in *Ein Höllensturz der alten Welt* the ways in which French literature desperately tried to resist this oblivion, as well as the reasons behind its failure. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Y penser toujours, n’en parler jamais”, states Gambetta. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On the legend of Bayard, see Stéphane Gal, *Bayard: histoires croisées du chevalier*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As Edmond de Goncourt writes about Zola’s *La Débâcle* in his *Journal*: “Oui, je le répète, je crois que si moi, si Zola, nous avions vu la guerre – et la guerre avec l’intention de la peindre dans un bouquin –, nous aurions pu faire un livre original, un livre neuf. Mais sans l’avoir vue, on ne peut faire qu’un volume intéressant, mais ressemblant à tous ceux qui ont été fabriqués avant vous sur le même sujet.” *Journal. Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, vol. 3, p. 728. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The first verse of the *Aeneid* (“Of arms and the man I sing”) sums up the literary purpose of the epic. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The search by parents for their son who has gone to the front and is not heard from again is a common feature of war stories. This topos also echoes a reality, for example the experience of painter Frédéric Bazille’s father during the Franco-Prussian War: “Sitôt prévenu de la blessure de Frédéric, Gaston Bazille, le père de l’artiste, se mit en chemin. Il ignorait alors que celle-ci avait été mortelle. Patiemment, il mena son enquête de Gien à Bellegarde, dans une zone totalement désorganisée par les combats récents et où régnait la plus grande confusion. Parvenu à Beaune-la-Rolande, il réussit à se faire guider jusqu’à la fosse qui renfermait la dépouille de son enfant. ‘Mon fils tué… à 29 ans ! Au seuil de sa vie’, lança douloureusement Gaston Bazille devant le corps inerte. Symboliquement, il coupa un brin de genévrier à proximité, afin de la planter sur la terrasse de la maison familiale de Méric.” See Philippe Mariot, “Une symphonie inachevée: Frédéric Bazille et la guerre de 1870”, p. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Quoting a primary teacher about her experience of the First World War, Annette Becker thus explains the concept of “outre-guerre”: “‘Si au début de la guerre on nous avait dit ce que ces trois années nous apporteraient de souffrances de toutes sortes, nous nous serions écriés que jamais nous ne résisterions, que la terre nous renfermerait dans son sein avant qu’elles ne soient écoulées. Et pourtant nous voilà ! Mais combien affaiblis, changés, vieillis. […] Ah ! guerre maudite ! On ferait tourner des usines avec les larmes et le sang que tu as fait répandre sur notre misérable terre.’ ‘Outre-guerre’. Construit à partir d’‘outrenoir’, expression empruntée au peintre Pierre Soulages, le terme pourrait s’appliquer à ces champs de ‘bataille’ habités par des civils, ces lieux d’expérimentation d’une violence inconnue, tels que les décrit cette institutrice d’un village du Pas-de-Calais. Entre 1914 et 1918, exactions, atrocités, déportations et massacres de civils accompagnent la radicalisation des combats. Les habitants avaient d’abord connu les dévastations des affrontements armés pendant la guerre de mouvement; quand ils sont restés prisonniers de l’avance des troupes, les invasions se muent alors en occupation.” See Annette Becker, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Around the turn of the century, the concept of the “psychological novel” was associated with writers often overlooked today who were deemed to be of landmark significance at the time, such as Maurice Barrès, Paul Bourget, Anatole France and Édouard Rod. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On the relationships between literature and such ethical dilemmas, see Frédérique Leichter-Flack, *Le Laboratoire des cas de conscience*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This famous and much discussed line is found in Brecht’s play *Leben des Galilei* (1939): “Unglücklich das Land*,* das Helden nötig hat” (“Unhappy the land that needs heroes”). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)