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# French Theater and the Memory of the Great War

## **Abstract**

A systematic examination of the ground on which French-language playwrights chose to stage their confrontation with the war would expose many of the literary and cultural biases on which our collective memory of the Great War is based. Even the brief outline of French-language war plays provided in this essay challenges many of our most cherished assumptions about war experience and the meaning of the Great War.

## **Keywords**

theater, drama, modernism, naturalism, memory, commemoration

## French Theater and the Memory of the Great War

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Along the Western Front in the First World War the opposing armies dug in, literally, occupying trenches that ran the length of the disputed territory of Eastern France like a scar. Long periods of stalemate were punctuated by bloody offensives; there were massive losses for minimal gains. The scorched earth of the battlefield, the purgatory of the trench, and the hallowed ground of the grave loom large in postwar poetry, cinema, prose fiction, and memoir. French plays about the Great War, on the other hand, tend to eschew the literal representation of the battlefield, and even the stable, imminently stageable trench is largely absent. Instead, most French-language plays that deal with the war are set in the postwar period and deal essentially with its aftermath; of plays set during the war, most deal with the conflict from the safe distance of the home front. This indirect approach runs counter to our received notions about the gritty, bloody conflict and perhaps accounts for the theater's near total absence from discussions about French literature of the Great War. A systematic examination of the alternate ground on which French-language playwrights chose to stage their confrontation with the war would certainly expose many of the literary and cultural biases on which our collective memory of the Great War is based. Even the brief outline of French-language war plays that I will provide here has the potential to challenge many of our most cherished assumptions about war experience and the meaning of the Great War.

### Contested Ground

Historians exploring the literary memory of the Great War in France have by and large adopted the corpus proposed by Jean Norton Cru in his 1929 *Témoins: Essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs des combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928* ('Witnesses: Criticism and Analysis of Combatant Memoirs Edited in French from 1915 – 1928'). Like Cru, they privilege the first-person narrative as the site of authenticity to the exclusion of a massive corpus of plays written during the war and in the immediate postwar period, plays engaged, like the other arts, in the cultural work of memory and mourning. This omission cannot be justified on historical grounds: the theater was central to cultural life immediately after the war; plays reached huge audiences, were much discussed, and reached a further audience of readers through publication in magazines. Moreover, because of the state's subsidy, there was an expectation that plays produced at public theaters would speak to and for the public. Yet the massive digital project "1914-1918-Online:

International Encyclopedia of the First World War” includes only a few articles on French theater during the war and at the front, and drama is entirely absent from discussions of French postwar literature in its other articles. Similarly, Daniel Sherman justifies treating only first-person narratives of the war thus: “War narratives offered readers access, ostensibly direct and unmediated, to soldiers’ ‘experience’; they . . . offered themselves as the ground for a collective memory of war centering on the combatant experience” (16). This is certainly true, and while Sherman is obviously skeptical of the claim to “unmediated access,” he nevertheless fails to interrogate the extent to which “the combatant experience” may or may not deserve the privilege he (and other scholars) extend to it, of occupying the center of collective memory.

Cru, himself a combat veteran, claims that military history up to his day had deceived its readers in recording only the strategic, the political, the aerial view of war and ignoring the view from the ground. “We thought we knew, we still think we know war” (Cru 1).<sup>1</sup> As his own experience and that of his comrades at the front proved, however, “That is an illusion that is as tenacious as it is dangerous” (1). Cru is deeply concerned with ocular testimony and the truth claims of the works he analyzes, and he rejects many out of hand as overly literary or too far removed from the action. He is not interested in the stories of prisoners of war, of men behind the lines, of generals. He narrows the number of those who have the right to speak and invests them with a privilege born, as he sees it, of the urgency of what they have to tell. According to Cru, only the individual eyewitness has the moral authority to report on the experience of war. Only his account, and only when kept pure of political commentary, strategic insight, or tragic hindsight can accurately reflect the truth. “The combatant’s sight is narrow,” explains Georges Kimpflin in a citation that also appears as one of the ten epigraphs Cru chooses for his tome, “but because it is narrow, it is precise; because it is restricted, it is clear. He doesn’t see much, but he sees well what he sees. Because he is informed by his own eyes and not those of others, he sees what is” (Cru 333).

This privileging of the view from the ground, which seems to be *de rigueur* in postwar discourses on the war and its literature, is in part, of course, a reaction against the florid propaganda that had dominated the official press during the war, and it serves as an antidote to the high-flown discourses about honor and glory that had characterized war literature to that time. It also runs up against what Cru calls “the paradox attributed to Stendhal,” that is, the idea that Fabrice del Dongo’s experience at Waterloo in Stendhal’s 1839 *La Chartreuse de Parme*, (*The Charterhouse of Parma*) demonstrates that “of all the possible testimonies of war, that of the man who was in the mix himself is the most meaningless” (Cru 16). In fact, as Cru doubtless understood, Stendhal meant no such thing. While it is true that Stendhal’s account of Waterloo is utterly unheroic—that Fabrice is not only unseen by the objective eye of history but is himself blind to the sweep and

significance of what he witnesses—the irony in the novel cuts in both directions. Stendhal is certainly mocking the naïveté of his young hero, who does not know where he is, whom he has seen or what he has done; but at the same time, as was the case in *Candide*, war itself is ultimately shown to be absurd and unassimilable in Stendhal’s narrative. It is not so much that Fabrice is too dim to make sense of his experience; what Stendhal demonstrates is that the first-person narrative is too limited a perspective from which to make sense of war in the conventional way. One needs the general’s strategic view, the newspaper’s objectivity, and the historian’s distance to make war into a vehicle for concepts like honor, valor, and sacrifice. *La Chartreuse*, however, is a novel that derides empty political discourse in favor of subjective feeling. However little understood by the novel’s hero, Fabrice’s experience at Waterloo remains the defining episode of his life; it shapes, limits, and guides all of his choices in his subsequent intrigues at the court of Parma. Ultimately, in a novel that in every way, in every episode, privileges interiority, we are forced to conclude that the conventional way of viewing war is the illusion; Fabrice’s experience may be incoherent, but for Stendhal and his readers, “the happy few” to whom he dedicated the novel, it is authentic and therefore true. In this way, the tendency in the years following the Great War to privilege first-person testimony must be understood not only as a departure from the dominant way of talking about war in the nineteenth century, but at the same time as the expression of nineteenth-century notions about the individual and his experience.

Although his focus is on the individual, Cru excludes poetry from consideration in his volume of *témoignages* (eyewitness accounts) because “its literary component is greater than its documentary information. . . . If I had admitted poetry, it would have been necessary to allow war theater, and I exclude it for the same reasons” (11). If his purpose is, indeed, documentation, or as he puts it to curate documents “for future historians of the war” (vii), Cru’s exclusion of “literary” genres is logical. At the same time, however, he does not exclude all novels, arguing that, “despite what many people think, there are really very few war novels and those novels are merely thinly disguised memoirs” (11). So it seems that the literary demerits of a novel can be balanced by how closely the work cleaves to the author’s personal experience, and a novel that is, above all, a work of individual memory, can be considered relevant. For readers of today, who have internalized Cru’s premises, it feels right, somehow, to rely on the first-person, interior narrative of those who fought the war. It fits all the postwar clichés about the difficult reinsertion of the veteran into civilian life, the secret wound, masculinity and brotherhood to the exclusion of the cold, uncomprehending feminine, clichés about innocence, experience, and especially disillusion. It feels right to say that those who were there, only those who were there, have a right to speak, to bear witness for those who did not return. And yet, relying exclusively on these texts, the historian

of memory creates a feedback loop: those clichés that confirm the story told by the combatant memoirs originated in the combatant memoirs.

In *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War* (2007), Leonard Smith posits that the widely accepted story of the First World War “as tragedy, and the hero in it, the soldier in the trenches, as a tragic victim,” (8) emerges not only from the content of the testimonies found in narratives like the ones categorized by Cru but, following Paul Ricœur, from the narrative practices that structured these testimonies. In creating “a narrator, who in turn created experience and the author as arbiter of this experience” (Smith 105), the memoirist shapes lived time into plot points, and in so doing converts the past into, in Ricœur’s term (an inadvertent echo of Cru) “documents for the historian” (Ricœur 123). If, as Smith argues, “In the Great War, the linchpin of authorship [in the Foucauldian sense] was firsthand experience in the war of the trenches, and the text the meeting place between that experience and the rest of society” (16), Great War narratives could thus be posited as a potential resolution of the “Stendhal paradox.” Thanks to first-person narrative, previously unassimilable individual experience is given form such that its meaning can finally be understood and shared. At the same time, however, Smith recognizes “something circular in this way of constructing meaning” (105). The result is the distillation of vast and varied war experiences into a single moral about the suffering of the individual soldier, the “embattled self” of Smith’s title. Smith is gesturing at the limitations of narrative and the inherent structural bias that it imposes on the reader on the one hand and the power of narrative to construct a coherent and durable cultural myth about the war on the other.

Smith intuits that there is something about narrative form that is essential to what became, in his terms “the self-evident metanarrative of [war as] tragedy and . . . a traumatized soldier as self-evident victim” (196). What story of the war might emerge if it were told in other terms? Narrative form is, of course, only one literary possibility, one that has a particular relationship to time, place, and voice not shared by other genres and is in fact antithetical to the structure of the drama. Ironically, throughout his discussion, Smith rather blithely employs terminology borrowed from drama, such as “tragic,” “tragedy,” and “tragic hero,” and makes the nonsensical claim that, “[t]ragedy provided both form and content” (196), for war novels and memoirs. In fact, tragedy as a form is incompatible with narrative form, and taking theater into account in the case of Great War literature would force a recalibration of the key terms of “witness” and “experience” as defined by Cru and refined by Smith and Sherman. In the first-person narrative, the soldier at the front speaks in his own voice to bear witness to his own experience. Not so in the theater, where many characters speak and act and no single point of view is privileged. Moreover, Smith’s definition of narrative (following Ricœur) as “emplotting the events of experience in a way so as to bring them under a structure of time, with a

distinct relationship to past, present, and future” (Smith 17) cannot be operative in the theater, where time is abolished; events unfold in the real time of the performance. In the theater, the witness is no longer the individual soldier but the audience, and the experience that matters is the communal experience of the audience, as they share the play in the present tense of the performance.

Structurally, the theater is not interior but interpersonal, not narrative but dramatic. The speaking subject is not the individual eyewitness; words are shared among the characters. This means, among other things, that women’s voices, silenced in war narratives, can be heard in war plays. By implicitly accepting the special status Cru awards to eyewitness testimony, the theater as a site of memory is not merely devalued or disregarded, but fundamentally disqualified. This is not so much, as Cru suggests, because of the supposed literary deformation of the truth in the theater, but because of the structural principle of drama that requires an external point of view and the abolition of narrative time. The novelists and memoirists of the Great War established themselves as the arbiters of memory thanks to their personal experience, a baptism of fire, which allowed them to lift the veil on the illusion of war. Playwrights of the same period, on the other hand, especially but not exclusively modernists, negotiated the memory of the war through the self-consciously artificial medium of the theater, playing on its artifice to reflect war’s illusions back onto the audience.

In the years following the war, all of French culture was engaged in the work of mourning over a million dead and re-assimilating seven million veterans in a necessarily contentious process. While the retired generals and the monument builders may have clung to the traditional notion of the heroic sacrifice of “[c]eux qui pieusement sont morts pour la patrie,”<sup>2</sup> ‘those who lie piously dead for the homeland,’ a competing narrative was emerging and would eventually take hold in the collective memory of succeeding generations. Situating the meaning of the war in the personal experience of battle and in the brotherhood of the trench, it rejected the illusions of *gloire et patrie* ‘glory and homeland’ which had lured a generation of young men to their peril. This modern, disillusioned view represents a rupture with patriotic discourses of the past, of course, but it is important to recognize it, at the same time, as the crystallization of nineteenth-century notions of an authenticity situated in individual experience. It is not inconsequential, nor is it particularly surprising, that the last war of the long nineteenth century would be reflexively read as the struggle of the individual against the cruel and absurd machine of war. Nor that today, in our “*ère du témoin*” ‘era of the witness’ to borrow from Annette Wieviorka’s title, the first-person narrative form would dominate historians’ and literary scholars’ thinking about the memory of the war, the first, as Wieviorka points out, to produce “mass testimony” (12). Smith, for his part, argues that “in the country of Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Hugo, and Zola . . . it is unsurprising that the novel should have the final say on the experience of the combatant of the Great

War” (149). I contend that it does not have to. Our understanding of the cultural legacy of the Great War ought to take into account that it was a total war, fought by some but experienced by everyone in France. This is precisely why a systematic treatment of war plays, whose dramatic, dialogic structure necessarily shifts the ground from first-person centered narratives to a more comprehensive view of war experience, has the potential to broaden our understanding of Great War literature in French and to radically transform our understanding of war commemoration and remembrance as collective practices.

### Theater in/of Crisis

From the distance of almost a hundred years, the shift from naturalism to modernism in French stagecraft that was accomplished in the interwar period looks like a revolution. In the space of a decade or two, the austere, self-conscious *mise-en-scènes* ‘stagings’ of the modernists cleared the stage, tore down the fourth wall, banished the *toile peinte* ‘painted background,’ and laid the groundwork for contemporary dramaturgy. Next to the modernist stage, naturalism and the *pièce bien faite* ‘well-made play’ were relegated suddenly to a hopelessly naïve past. It seems plausible to ascribe the victory of modernism to the Great War. After all, how could the dramatic illusion survive a generation utterly disillusioned by their experience of the trenches? Modernism provided both the verbal language of irony and the visual language of abstraction and fracture in which playwrights and directors of the postwar period could express the immensity of the war and the isolation and confusion of its participants. Naturalism fell flat; the “authentic” stage could not transport the audience to the battlefield, and “conversation” was totally inadequate to the task of expressing the horrors of war.

As plausible as this explanation sounds, it is based on a false premise. When the war broke out in August 1914, the French theater was already in the throes of a crisis that would eventually lead to the emergence of theatrical modernism. Before a generation of young men lost their illusions in the trenches of eastern France, the dramatic illusion was already under attack from within. André Antoine’s attempt to polish illusion to perfection in his intricately designed naturalist productions had led to an aesthetic impasse, from which stylization, fracture, and self-conscious theatricality (techniques later labeled “modernist”) were emerging as potential ways forward. At the root of the late nineteenth-century crisis in the theater was, according to Peter Szondi, the rise of narrative. Nineteenth-century science, art, and historiography had produced new understandings of the individual, psychology, and heredity; narrative became the dominant expressive form of this new worldview. Playwrights who tried to insert narrative into the drama ran up against its fundamental incompatibility with dramatic form. According to Szondi, drama is “absolute” and “primary” in that it presents a world unto itself and an action that



“is accomplished as it occurs” (8-9); moreover, “The Drama is possible only when dialogue is possible” (10). Viewed in this light, the drama is antithetical to narrative in general, and to Great War combatant memoirs in particular, which sought to represent an already-lived experience in the form of interior, first-person reflection. Still, Szondi highlights various “rescue attempts” (50) through which playwrights of the late nineteenth-century tried to recalibrate dramatic form to accommodate their irreducibly undramatic subject matter. He cites a destabilizing irony, a self-conscious theatricality, the distillation of the play into a single act or the fracturing of the play into tableaux, techniques familiar to adepts of the modernist theater.

The decided preference for realistic depictions of war in novels like Henri Barbusse’s 1915 *Le Feu* (*Under Fire*) notwithstanding, French dramatists, even those working in the naturalist mode and intent on maintaining the embattled dramatic illusion, did not, for the most part, attempt to transport their audience to the front. Even life in the trenches, which would pose no special problems of staging to writers operating in either the modernist or naturalist mode, was rarely the subject of French drama. And yet, what could be more evocative of the war? “To represent . . . a little of the life of the poilus to an outsider,” writes the veteran leader Thomasset, show them “a trench surrounded by sandbags, with a lookout slit on top; the dugout, in which we’ll see the famous little table and its little bench, the bunk beds, the barrel with fresh water, the ventilation slot, the observation post and the straight ladder leading to it” (qtd. in Sherman 49). Thomasset is referring to guided visits of the battlefields that were becoming a fashionable part of the postwar mourning and memory landscape. Sherman sees Thomasset’s model trench as “a kind of ethnographic museum installation, at once authentic and a representation, generic and precisely detailed” (49), and there were, in fact, exhibition trenches set up during the war, one famously (and famously inauthentic) in Kensington Gardens in London. Sherman is not wrong, of course, to think of Thomasset’s description in these terms, but we might also read Thomasset’s lines as the opening stage directions to a play that was never written, at least in French. If French playwrights of the interwar period by and large eschew not only scenes of battle but even the ready-made theater set supplied by the trench, we must conclude that they are aiming at something other than the evocative precision of the replica in their plays.

The great majority of French plays about the First World War take place in the drawing room, on the home front, where the war and its upheaval are discussed rather than enacted. In many plays, much of the action, such as it is, is contrived (the son thought dead on the battlefield returns; a doubt about paternity or identity is resolved through tokens; the letter written at the front months before arrives at a moment propitious to the advancement or resolution of the plot). The war is introduced sometimes quite awkwardly by means of narrative (a letter, a long speech, a dispatch), disrupting the present tense of the performance in an attempt to introduce the depth of the past. The inelegance and ill success of some of these

techniques highlight the crisis in dramatic literature described by Szondi. Regardless of their aesthetic defects, however, the proliferation of drawing room plays about the war shows that the French playwrights of the postwar period were not especially preoccupied with imparting the illusion of a first-hand experience of the war; rather they sought to come to terms with the war through the shared experience of the performance itself.

French people of all classes attended the theater in the first part of the twentieth century, especially in Paris, but the audience was increasingly subdivided among the various theatrical subgenres, which ranged from the more popular café-concert and vaudeville to the middle-brow, middle-class bourgeois theater, to the intellectually and aesthetically more challenging art theater. This meant that writers could, to some extent, choose their audience, but even so, and despite the presence of an active avant-garde movement, French theater during this period was essentially a conservative genre, aiming at commercial success and mass appeal. Unlike a novel, which is read in private, a play is experienced in a public, heterogeneous space and governed by evolving but strict *bienséances* ‘decorum,’ an unspoken etiquette about what can be represented in a space shared by men and women. The realistic gore and low language that characterized French novels of the Great War would never have passed in the theater, where, though official censorship had long been abolished, playwrights and theater troupes observed a restraint suitable to a space where ladies were present. Nor was the presence of women limited to the audience; unlike Great War novels, where “women seldom figure prominently” (Smith 81) and where they tend to represent “the decadence of the home front” (Sherman 26), French plays of the Great War feature women in a wide range of roles. Only rarely do they echo the negative stereotypes found in the narratives; more often they are represented in noble wartime occupations and homely pursuits or as symbolic figures of the homeland.

Cru and those following him suggest that the work of Great War literature is to bridge the gulf of incomprehension separating those who fought and those who did not and in so doing to find a common ground on which to understand an atrocity that was so unequally shared. By its very nature, the theater already accomplishes at least a literal unity, by bringing together disparate individuals to witness the play in a shared time and place. Even in fiction and in prose memoirs, where narrative is the vehicle by which the combatant experience is constituted and imparted, the stage provides a trove of apt metaphors for characterizing the divide between those at the front, the theater of war, and those at home who applaud their valor. Farm boys and factory workers leave their everyday clothes to put on the costume of the soldier and cross over into the space of action. Those left behind must content themselves with throwing flowers to the departing soldiers or leaving flowers on the graves of those who did not return. Through its very structure, the theater lends itself to the exploration of the rupture caused by war. The theatrical performance is

structurally premised on the division between stage and hall (actor and observer), between inside and outside (actor and character) between stage and world (fiction and reality). From its earliest origins in religious ritual, the theatrical performance has negotiated the distance that separates the victims of the wrath of the gods and the witnesses to their sacrifice. In the shared present tense of performance they remain separate, but those watching are transformed, united as a community in the presence of tragedy.

Despite the varied aesthetic and political values espoused by French playwrights of the postwar period, they all used theatrical performance to distill meaning from the Great War. Their methods, though, ran counter to those employed by the memoirists and novelists, who, in documenting the horrors of battle, sought to awaken their readers to the awful truth of war. Their meaning was clear, their moral urgency palpable. Playwrights of the period, on the other hand, began to abandon the dramatic illusion in favor of self-conscious theatricality. As they did so, they nurtured a kind of complicity with the audience, acknowledging that the spectators were not dupes who needed to be awakened to the truth, but initiates, willing and necessary participants in the theatrical adventure, which enacts a truth of its own.

### Corpus<sup>3</sup>

Although the theater is almost entirely omitted from recent discussions of Great War literature in French, it was not always so. The theater was, for those in the immediate postwar period, a vital site of the negotiation of the war's meaning. One need only turn to contemporary commentators to learn to what extent the theater was central to literary and cultural life at the time. Georges Duhamel, a veteran and well-known writer of the period, reported in 1928 that the theater "is at the forefront of the daily occupations of the masses. It occupies the place of honor in newspapers and in the academy. In the cities it represents a vigorous branch of commerce and industry. In short, it simply must be considered as an indispensable institution in the operation of the social being" (27-28). Yet no single play of the period emerges as the iconic war play; few war plays in French are widely known and fewer still are widely read or performed today. One thinks perhaps of Jean Giraudoux's 1928 *Siegfried* and Jean Anouilh's 1937 *Voyageur sans bagage* (*The Traveler without Luggage*), both set in the postwar period and both representing the (already in 1928 and certainly by 1937) clichéd figure of the amnesiac. But in both of these plays, the war is less a subject than a pretext for a contemplation of other issues: nationalism in Giraudoux and the individual in Anouilh.

The only systematic study of Great War theater in French to date is a 1970 doctoral thesis by Philip Fisher, a historian, whose focus is more taxonomical than analytic. His work is a very useful starting point, however, as it lists a large number

of plays with summaries of their plots. Critics from the immediate postwar period are helpful in discerning which of the plays in Fisher's catalogue had the greatest impact at the time. André Antoine, the father of French art theater, is an essential source; in addition to his correspondence and memoirs, he compiled in two volumes a listing of every new play or major revival at all of the main theaters in Paris for each year from 1870 to 1932, sometimes with summaries or commentaries. Pierre Brisson, longtime theater critic for the mainstream daily newspaper *Le Temps*, also authored a volume of reflections on the theater of the interwar period. Alexandre Joannidès edited a series of yearbooks for the Comédie-Française that describe all the new plays produced at the state theater, with figures relating the number of performances and the receipts, and including synopses of reviews and the cast lists. Émile Fabre, administrator of the Comédie-Française from 1915 to 1936, weighed in with his thoughts and reminiscences in several works, and Émile Mas, an important theater critic of the period, produced a volume entitled *La Comédie-Française pendant la guerre* ('The Comédie-Française during the War,') covering 1914 to 1916. Another useful source is the widely read magazine *La Petite Illustration*, whose theater supplement appeared twice a month and included the full text of four or five hit plays with photos of the sets and a summary of the reviews. In search of significant war plays, we might also logically consult the works of the major playwrights of the period, and indeed we find that Nobel laureates Romain Rolland and Maurice Maeterlinck both wrote war plays, as did Henri Bataille, Jules Romains, Jean Cocteau, Michel de Ghelderode, and Paul Claudel. One of the obstacles here, however, is that the interwar period did not produce many playwrights who became household names; many who were major figures at the time have been forgotten, some undeservedly so, like François de Curel and Henri-René Lenormand, others perhaps mercifully, like Maurice Rostand.

Of the many plays written during the war, most can be characterized as propaganda, including the only plays about the war I have so far identified that stage a battle or a trench. The first is Sarah Bernhardt's 1916 *Du Théâtre au champ d'honneur* ('From the Theater to the Field of Honor'), which she performed in a North American tour whose explicit goal was to rally support for the war effort and to encourage American intervention on the side of the French.<sup>4</sup> The second is Henri Lavedan's 1918 *Sacrifices*, whose second tableau, "Noël" ('Christmas') is set in a trench on Christmas Eve. There is no record of this play having been performed and its contribution to the development of the memory of the war is doubtful. This period also saw the production of dozens of comic and musical reviews, and a large number of "pièces patriotiques pour jeunes filles" 'patriotic plays for young ladies' with titles like *Pour la France* ('For France') and *Madine volée par les boches* ('Madine Robbed by the Huns'). These ephemeral works, like commercial theater in general, reflected rather than challenged views already held by the audience. A

lyric tendency also emerged in plays written during the war. André Dumas's one-act "nocturne" *L'Éternelle présence* ('The Eternal Presence') was performed at the Comédie-Française in a commemoration of the victory at the Marne held before the end of the war in 1917. Paul Claudel's *Nuit de Noël 1914* ('Christmas Night 1914') is another often-cited work, but this lyric strain seems to disappear in the immediate postwar period. The only theater of this period that has received significant critical attention was the *théâtre aux armées* 'frontline theater,' which was always examined as an element of the combatant experience and not as a literary phenomenon.

Of plays written during the war, not many rate as memorable, but I would cite Henri Bataille's *L'Amazone* ('The Amazon') from 1915 as a play that deserves serious attention. Bataille was a major playwright of the period, known especially for his complex and sympathetic portrayals of women. Who better, then, to write the first play about the way in which the war was transforming gender roles and bringing forth the modern woman? The play is set during the war, but the final, eerily prescient scenes take place six months into the long-awaited peace and show the characters already at work on monuments and parades, already at odds over how best to honor the dead and reintegrate the returned. In an extraordinary series of scenes in the last act, a group of veterans, including some *grands blessés* 'amputees' appears on stage to demand a say in shaping the memory of the war and to make a plea to be remembered.

In the immediate postwar period, both dramas and comedies treated themes such as the reinsertion of the soldier into civilian life, the generation gap, and the condemnation of war profiteers, but the conservative nature of the theater meant that most of these plays sought to conciliate rather than to condemn. The most important play of the early 1920s is the exception. *Le Tombeau sous l'Arc de Triomphe* (*The Unknown Warrior*) by Paul Raynal caused a scandal at the Comédie-Française in 1924 for, among other things, the accusatory tone adopted by the soldier/hero toward his father. Ten years later, the notion that the older generation had sold out the younger by sending them to die in this war would already be a cliché; so the fact that this accusation (and especially the poignant moment when the father kneels before his son to ask forgiveness) unleashed the fury of audiences and critics alike reveals one of the key moments in the making of that cultural myth. Moreover, both Raynal's play and another important play of the period, Curel's 1925 *La Viveuse et le moribond* ('The Life-Giver and the Deadman') challenge and complicate the negative view of women gleaned from memoirs and novels of the war.

In the later 1920s and into the early 1930s, we start to see the myths of the war coalescing in plays that present the traumatized soldier, the soldier coming to terms with the past, and the readjustment of women to their prewar roles. Again, given the commercial theater's essential conservatism, the exploitation of these

themes suggests that they were already accepted by the culture at large. The settling of these war tropes meant that from this period on, the Great War could become a pretext for other issues, such as the discussion of nationalism and identity in Maurice Rostand's maudlin 1930 drama *L'Homme que j'ai tué* ('The Man I Killed'), which was adapted to cinema in 1932 by Ernst Lubitsch as *Broken Lullaby*, or the masterful exploration of art, identity, and betrayal in H-R Lenormand's *Le Lâche* (*The Coward*) from 1926. To the extent that the memory of the war was still being worked out in the theater of this period, it was through the displacement of the war onto the classics in works such as Giraudoux's 1931 *Judith* and 1935 *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* (*The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*) or Bernard Zimmer's antic adaptation of Aristophanes' *The Birds* for Charles Dullin's Atelier Theater, one of the first major hits for this small art theater in 1928. By the latter half of the 1930s, the lessons of the Great War were so self-evident, the consensus about the war and its meaning was so monolithic, that in the mainstream theater, "war plays" were largely about the fear of the next war rather than the memory of the last one.

In contrast to the mainstream theater, the avant-garde of the period continued to propose alternate versions of the war and its meaning and continued to test the boundaries of what could be done on stage. Writing in 1920, Albert Shinz had condemned pacifist Romain Rolland's 1918 *Liluli* and predicted that it would "probably not be presented on the French stage for some time to come" (362). He was mistaken. Louise Lara's avant-garde theater company Art et Action produced a version of the play with shadow puppets in 1922 (Corvin 198). This and other avant-garde productions worked against the grain of the commercial theater's onus to reflect back to the public what it already believed throughout the interwar period.

The French theater clearly contributed to the elaboration and dissemination of the story of the Great War as a calamity that had left a generation of young men traumatized and broken. At the very least, an examination of French war plays allows us to trace the trajectory of this story into the mainstream of French thought. But I contend that this story, originally proposed in combatant memoirs and war novels, was not the only one that might have been told about the war; in the scores of plays written between 1914 and 1940, other stories lie waiting to be unearthed.

## Notes

1. Translations from French sources are all my own. I chose to use the French text of Jean Norton Cru's *Témoins* rather than the translation *War Books*, which is abridged from the original.

2. This famous verse from Victor Hugo's "Hymne" published in his 1836 collection *Les Chants du crépuscule* 'Songs of Twilight' found its way onto many Great War monuments and represents another enduring legacy of the nineteenth century in the collective memory of the First World War.
3. I gratefully acknowledge the significant contribution of Leon Sachs of the University of Kentucky in identifying and locating many of the plays mentioned in the following section.
4. I address Bernhardt's North American tour at some length in *Staging France between the World Wars*.

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