

6-15-2017

Soldier-Poet or Écrivain-Combattant: How the French Trenches of World War I Defined Witnessing

Nichole T. Gleisner

Southern Connecticut State University, gleisnern1@southernct.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Gleisner, Nichole T. (2017) "Soldier-Poet or Écrivain-Combattant: How the French Trenches of World War I Defined Witnessing," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 41: Iss. 2, Article 10. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1929>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Soldier-Poet or Écrivain-Combattant: How the French Trenches of World War I Defined Witnessing

Abstract

This paper explores how the French trenches of WWI defined the act of witnessing. An examination of Third Republic grammar textbooks by Claude Augé shows how soldiers were predisposed to be receptive to trench newspapers' exhortations to become witnesses to the war experience. An analysis of these pedagogic reforms, paired with a close reading of trench newspapers, show why the broader term *écrivain-combattant* emerged in France, as opposed to soldier-poet in the British literary context.

Keywords

WWI, poetry, witness, trenches, France, Third Republic, *exercices de style*, *écrivain-combattant*, *témoin*, soldier-poet

Cover Page Footnote

Soldier-Poet or Écrivain-Combattant: How the French Trenches of World War I Defined Witnessing

Nichole T. Gleisner
Southern Connecticut State University

World War I has been marked as a deeply literary war, as large numbers of soldiers took to writing their experiences from the trenches. Yet, a curious distinction in terms occurs among the combatants of the war. In England, a celebrated group of “soldier-poets” emerged, including icons like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sasson, and Isaac Rosenberg. But, as French scholar Laurence Campa has observed, there was no similar postwar anointing in France, despite the fact that many well-known poets served under the French flag. Many of these poets have fallen into the shadows today, even in France (14). Instead, when French soldier poets are mentioned or memorialized, it is under the broader banner of *écrivains-combattants* ‘soldier-writers,’ encompassing many different types of writers.

This article posits that the development of this particular term resulted from modes of rhetoric produced by French trench newspapers and public intellectuals from the Académie française. In their formulation, to be a soldier was to write, not just fight. It became another facet of a soldier’s duty—culturally, morally, and aesthetically—to capture his experiences in written word. This conception of the soldier as writer took root in cultural antecedents from Third Republic educational reforms, which helped make French soldiers more receptive, indeed dedicated, to writing from the trenches. The trench newspapers embraced the concept, routinely encouraging soldiers to write their experience. This confluence of factors resulted in the creation of the term—*écrivain-combattant*—with particular resonance in the French context.

From pupils to poilus

Between 1879 and 1883, Jules Ferry brought sweeping educational reforms to the French Third Republic, which form a crucial antecedent for the *écrivain-combattants* of WWI. As Martin Guiney notes, “it is an axiom in French Studies that the educational laws promulgated by *ministre de l’Instruction publique* Jules Ferry . . . constitute a critical stage in the construction and promotion of French national identity” (4). In particular, specific innovations to the schools’ writing curricula paved the way for the trench newspapers of WWI to demand the same sorts of writing from their reading public: soldiers. Among these men, a great many had received at least some level of public or private education, resulting in a higher level of literacy for soldiers of the French Army than ever before.¹ Furthermore,

against the backdrop of these highly idealized Republican values, the act of writing itself became imbued with patriotic value.

The historian Martha Hanna has shown how letter-writing models from Third Republic textbooks greatly influenced the wartime correspondence of French soldiers. Similarly, a closer look at the writing exercises found in these Republican grammar books explains the unparalleled level of literary production from the trenches of northern France. From the most basic educational level to the more advanced, students in the Third Republic were asked to refine their narrative skills in their schoolwork.

Claude Augé's popular series of textbooks, published between 1890 and 1912, provided rich examples at many levels. Students at the first level were asked to compose "rédactions d'après l'image" 'essays after an image.' A typical exercise shows two images, much like a comic strip. In the first frame, a girl stands on a chair in order to reach the table, where she is holding a plume to write in a book. Unbeknownst to her, a cat has its claws on the edge of the tablecloth. In the next frame, the girl has fallen off the chair; the cat skitters away, ink spills all over the tablecloth, and the child's mother enters from a doorway. The aim of the assignment is to have the students write in their own words what has happened. The teacher guides the students through carefully calibrated questions: "What is Élise doing? . . . what is the cat doing? . . . what happened to Élise? Talk about the chair, the book, the inkwell, the cat, and the rug. Who responded to Élise's cries?" (Augé, *Deuxième livre* 169).² Through contemplation of the picture's details and the teacher's interventions, students learned how to meaningfully organize the information conveyed to them pell-mell by the image alone—useful practice for when the students became soldiers of WWI and would need to craft a narrative from the frenetic and incoherent sensations of war.

In subsequent textbooks produced by Augé, one finds explicit instruction on the art of narration. In an introduction to the *Deuxième livre de grammaire* 'Second Grammar Book,' Augé encourages the student to write in an unadorned style: "Il ne faut pas se croire tenu d'employer des expressions recherchées ni surtout des mots dont on ne comprend pas bien le sens. On doit écrire comme on parle: le style est d'autant meilleur qu'il est plus naturel" (169) 'One shouldn't believe oneself required to use obscure expressions nor certainly those words that one doesn't understand very well. One should write as one speaks: the best style is the most natural.'

Augé's directives were echoed decades later in trench newspaper editor Georges Thuriot-Franchi's description of the best type of prose for his publication: "la prose, la bonne prose française, alerte, simple, et truculente, sans fausse pudeur, forme encore l'essentiel du journal de tranchées" (29) 'prose, good French prose, lively, simple and colorful, without false modesty, constitutes the essential for the trench newspaper.' It is striking that the same qualities were lauded, first by Augé

and then in the editorials of the trench newspapers, as they encouraged the students-turned-soldiers to render their experiences into words, especially as these qualities of simplicity and directness were not necessarily reflected in the literary trends of the period (such as Proust and Claudel). Moreover, this use of language, of rendering “good, French prose,” became a point of national pride.

In Augé’s manual for the second level, the student was provided with sixteen pages of *exercices de style* ‘stylistic exercises,’ meant to stimulate the imagination. Many continue to build on the framework of the *rédaction d’après l’image*, including several with militaristic undertones, such as Exercise No. 16, featuring the poor orphaned child of a soldier who died on an unspecified field of battle (Augé, *Deuxième Livre* 174). Other exercises challenge the pupil to retell a series of dramatic actions, such as Exercise No. 35 in which the château de Fougeray in Brittany is seized by the English. A soldier named Du Guesclin and three comrades decide to reclaim it through disguise and counterattack (179). The nationalist inflection in this and other writing exercises echoed Revanchist modes of discourse prevalent in France at this time that would only grow more powerful in the lead-up to WWI.

In the highest-level textbook that Augé created, the same sorts of exercises appear, but they are more complicated and the imaginative scope of the narration has widened. The student is asked to experiment with many different forms of writing and narration. For instance, Augé classifies some exercises as “narration historique” ‘historic narration’: “No. 936 : Canevas – En 1870. Régiment français décimé. Sergent Robert enterre la hampe du drapeau et en cache l’étoffe sous sa capote. Blessé un moment après. La nuit venue, il se traîne sur les cadavres. Aperçu par sentinelle. Il la tue. Rejoint son régiment. Décoré” (808-9) ‘No. 936: The framework – In 1870. A decimated French regiment. Sergeant Robert buries the shaft of the flagpole and hides the flag under his greatcoat. Wounded just moments after. Night falls, and he trails among the cadavers. Spotted by the sentinel. He kills him. Rejoins his regiment. Decorated.’ Many exercises continue to engage with overtly nationalist sentiments, such as No. 949, which asks students to imagine a story about an Alsatian who deserts from the German Army and is sought by the French police (824-25).

All of the exercises require an active imagination and the willingness to engage with and manipulate either observed or imagined details in order to construct appropriate responses to carefully honed questions. In this way, the act of writing in the Third Republic became formally institutionalized and was no longer the exclusive activity of intellectuals and other privileged groups. The expanded focus on the craft of writing in Third Republic education reforms accounts in part for the literary response of French soldiers to the war. Just as the Third Republic promulgated patriotism, it also provided the nation’s future soldiers with the tools

to narrate their experiences, an indispensable outlet for the trauma they would endure during 1914-1918.

The Trench Newspapers: Producing Writers out of Soldiers

Praised by one soldier as “pearls of the front” and extolled for their inability to lie, the trench newspapers of WWI provide valuable insight into what the soldiers in these units were experiencing—and then writing—during the war (Chollet). A rich archive produced for soldiers, by soldiers, the trench newspapers enjoyed a relatively small amount of interference from official authority (although the level of involvement with authority and the degree to which a trench newspaper participated in the ongoing *bourrage de crâne* ‘brainwashing’ was an issue fiercely debated among the newspapers themselves).³ Historian Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau estimates that at least 400 trench newspapers were produced by French units between 1914 and 1918 (11).⁴

Audoin-Rouzeau has catalogued some of the most frequent themes found across trench newspapers: their preoccupation with the terrible conditions of life, as well as *le cafard* ‘depression,’ boredom, and coming to terms with possible death. But Audoin-Rouzeau does not specifically address the theme of writing or rather, how the newspapers fostered a cult of literature from within the trenches. Examining this theme reveals how the newspapers met their goal of shaking off the horror of daily life, in part by cultivating the belief that any man could write down his story, thereby becoming an immutable contributor to history. To fill their pages, the editorial staffs went so far as to exhort men—at times with very specific instruction—to produce a narrative of their war experience, even if they did not have the slightest inclination to do so.

No other trench newspaper epitomized this trend better than *Poil...et Plume* of the French 81st infantry regiment. The paper’s very name—*poil* ‘hair’ is a play on the French term for the common soldier, *poilu*—attests to its desire to put writing at the forefront of the minds of its readers. As its editor-in-chief, Gabriel Boissy, explained in the first issue:

Et nous appelons *Poil...et Plume*: poil ce mot qui donne leur nom de légende aux gaillards de la grande guerre, plume ce terme qui leur rappelle qu’ils sont et seront dans les siècles les paladins de cette civilisation méditerranéenne construite sur la pensée, sur la douceur, sur la générosité d’âme. (May 1916 1)

And we’re called *Hair...and Plume*: hair, this word that gives its legendary name to the fellows of the Great War, plume, this term that reminds them

that they are and will be for centuries the paladins of this Mediterranean civilization built on thought, on gentleness, on a generosity of spirit.

Uniting these two disparate terms, the newspaper reveals a crucial aesthetic tenet: its desire to cut across established separations between art and the unmentionable, corporeal details of ordinary life. The editorial links the lofty image of the plume—an intellectual implement that conjures French classical culture—with hair, a word that evokes the humble quotidian situation of the soldiers, whose life at the front often prevented them from being able to shave or cut their hair. Hence, the name *poilu*.

Later in the column, Boissy evokes the glorious tradition of the pen and the sword, inserting the men of the 81st infantry into a storied lineage: “Manieurs d’épée, ils manient aussi le verbe, comme leurs ancêtres Périclès, César ou Richelieu, ceux-ci pour rire, ceux-là pour réfléchir, d’autres pour conter leurs souvenirs de combat” (May 1916 no. 1) ‘Sword wielders, they also wield the word, like their ancestors Pericles, Caesar or Richelieu, some for laughter, others for reflection, others to recount their memories of combat.’ This bold gesture adds the ordinary soldier to the great figures of literature, reactivating a medieval view that the pen may be mightier than the sword.

Boissy goes on to motivate the soldiers to write down their experiences of battle by warning them that, if they do not, what they have experienced could be lost forever. Writing, according to *Poil...et Plume*, is an essential service to each soldier’s personal history, but also to the history of France:

Ces récits que l’on répète dans les cagnas, dans le repos des cantonnements quand l’heure est longue, il faut les sauver de l’oubli. La mémoire des hommes est courte, fragile comme un vase. Fixons-la. Traçons dès maintenant la petite chronique des batailles, en recueillant ces innombrables incidents âpres ou plaisants dont se constitue le drame. (May 1916 no. 1)

These stories that we repeat in the bunkers, in the calm of quarters when the hour grows long, we must save them from oblivion. Man’s memory is short, fragile like a vase. Let’s mark it down. Starting now, sketch the little tale of battles, gathering these countless bitter or sweet moments that comprise the tragedy.

This exhortation presciently forecasts the problems and debates that will surround the question of witnessing and memory in the postwar period. Arguing against the ultimate destructive force—time—that will erase what these men have witnessed, the editorial gives the men specific instruction in how to begin writing down what

they have seen. Through an attentive gathering of smaller details of daily life, a larger narrative is constructed.

Every man of the unit and of the reading public at large was thus charged with a duty to witness. The editors even provided a stylistic note (in the same vein as Augé) suggesting that the simpler the writing, the more powerfully transmitted the emotion would be: “Chacun—et le plus simple avec force, on le verra dans ce numéro—peut remplir cet office, bien dû à ceux dont les yeux jamais plus ne verront la lumière” (*Poil et Plume* no. 1) ‘Everyone—the most simple is the most powerful, as you will see in this issue—can carry out this duty, owed to those whose eyes will never again see the light.’ In the editors’ view, witnessing is formulated as a moral duty to one’s fellow soldiers, as well as to the nation and history on a larger scale.

The desire of *Poil...et Plume* to open up the creation of literature to every man in its reach was also evident in its willingness to accept pieces written in regional dialects. Although the French troops were often not unified by one common tongue, the more official publications of the French army downplayed, or even suppressed, this linguistic diversity in the name of cohesion.⁵ In *Poil...et Plume*, the editors understood that lack of a common tongue should not impede a soldier from witnessing, so they welcomed contributions that might not find a home elsewhere: “Il serait souhaitable également que, dans ce régiment où la plupart d’entre nous parlent la vivante et vénérable langue d’oc, nous donnions quelques poésies, contes, récits, ou galéjades en provençal, en languedocien, en catalan ou en tout autre dialecte” (May 1916 no. 1) ‘It would be equally desirable that, in this regiment where most of us speak the living and venerable language of Occitan, we could have some poems, stories, or tall tales in Provençal, Languedoc, Catalan or any other dialect.’ This public openness to different dialects reveals once more the newspaper’s dedication to creative expression. Embracing linguistic diversity worked against dominant pressures of Third Republic ideals and military directives to limit soldiers to expressing themselves only in standard French.

In its first issue, *Poil...et Plume* established recurring sections that showcased different kinds of creative writing, many of them hybrid in nature. These became reliable forums where soldiers could read and then attempt to emulate different formats. One such section was called “Histoire naturelle du front,” a ‘Natural History of the Front Lines.’ Drawing on the perspective of a scientist, and therefore channeling the tone and structure of science writing, these pieces creatively recast various trench flora and fauna. For instance, the first “histoire naturelle” described the character of a radioman. This type of writing replicates a category from Augé’s variation on the standard composition exercises, called the “leçon de choses,” ‘the lesson of things,’ in which a student is asked to describe an object in its entirety (*Troisième livre* 719).

Like most other trench newspapers, *Poil...et Plume* published poetry in every issue. The poetry ranged from the crude and humorous to more descriptive poems that experimented with form and language. The poem “Déboires d’un photographe” ‘A Photographer’s Bad Luck’ was written with many apostrophes, a typographic approximation that attempted to show the actual phonetic and rhythmic pattern of soldiers’ speech. The poem was responding to the recent restriction issued by the military authorities that sought to prevent soldiers from taking their own personal photographs at the front. The poem intervenes by capturing trench life through spoken word now that capturing life through image taking has been prohibited:

J’aimais m’ ballader [sic] dans l’ secteur de l’L
Parfois dans le J ou bien dans le K
Cherchant à fixer d’ façon immortelle
Toutes choses...afin que je n’oublie pas.
...

Adieu Vest Pocket, mon vieux camarade
Je te fiche à l’eau, puisqu’à c’ qu’il parait
Tu sers sans l’ savoir—ah j’en s’ rai malade—
Le salaud d’en fac’, le Boche abhorré. (June 1916 no. 2)

I liked to stroll around in the sector L
Sometimes in the J or even in the K
Trying to put down in an immortal way
Every thing . . . so that I shouldn’t forget.
...

Farewell Vest Pocket, my old friend
I’ll toss you in the water cuz it seems to me
You helped without knowing—ah I’ll be sick—
The bastard across the way, the horrid Boche.

The fact that such extremely different types of verse ran each week shows that the editorial staff was committed to publishing most of the submissions it received from their readers and that they were not concerned with establishing a coherent artistic direction in their trench newspaper. These different poems showed that the trenches were a place where radically different aesthetics could sit side by side in the same newspaper columns, reflecting an utterly democratic notion of what constituted a writer.

Another trench newspaper, *L'Esprit du cor* 'The Spirit of the Bugle,' went even further in its solicitations for writing. An editorial message from June 30, 1917 begins by assuring soldiers that their written impressions are indeed the best ones and that the mundane elements of their lives are essential: "Il est donc indispensable que votre collaboration se poursuive sans interruptions, au jour le jour; que vos écrits, vos dessins, puisent leur inspiration dans la vie que vous menez au combat comme au repos, partout où passe la Division" 'It is indispensable that your work continues without interruptions from day to day; that your writings, your drawings, draw their inspiration from the life that you lead in combat and also at rest, wherever the Division goes.' *L'Esprit du cor* gave detailed instructions on the type of submission that they were looking for:

La Direction vous demande de vous plier aux nécessités suivantes.
Pour la prose: brièveté relative, 150 lignes au plus. Vous vous serrerez pour faire de la place aux camarades.
Pour les poèmes: 60 lignes au plus. Les plus courts poèmes sont souvent les meilleurs . . .

Enfin, la Direction réclame de vous:
1^{er} des histoires brèves et amusantes, les remarques et les observations dont on fait les échos;
2^e les mots spirituels ou crânes que vous entendez.
3^e les anecdotes relatant les actions héroïques de vos camarades.
(30 June 1917)

The Board asks you to defer to the following necessities:
For prose: relative brevity, 150 lines maximum. You will squeeze together to make room for your comrades.
For poems: 60 lines maximum. The shortest poems are often the best.

Finally, the Board begs of you:
1st, short, amusing stories, remarks and observations that tend to be repeated,
2nd, witty or brave remarks that you hear,
3rd, anecdotes recounting the heroic actions of your comrades.

The language here is thoroughly specific, almost as didactic as a page from one of Augé's manuals. The editorial makes the written space of the newspaper columns an extension of the trenches themselves by evoking the cramped nature of both places. With this comparison, the editors insist that the same esprit de corps (a pun

that inspires the very name of the newspaper itself) must reign within the unit and within the newspaper.

The editors also insist upon brevity and the anecdotal in their instructions, characteristics that dovetail with the other driving aesthetic element they were cultivating: the impression of spontaneity. This is reiterated in the same editorial notice: “Rédigez-les comme vous le pourrez, mais notez-les sur le vif; on les retapera, s’il le faut” ‘Write them as you can, but jot them down on the spot; we can retype them if necessary.’ In fact, the editorial staff bent over backwards to accommodate prose and poems that were written on the spot. Once more, the criteria of this trench newspaper presciently foreshadowed the reigning criteria of witnessing that took shape for all WWI literature, but especially in France thanks to figures like Jean Norton Cru, whose work places an emphasis on establishing the legitimate credentials of the writer: where he was and what action he saw.

In another issue, the editorial staff of *L’Esprit du cor* revealed just how willing they were to work with their authors in order to ensure publication. Once the pertinent corrections were made, the piece would find its place in the columns of the newspaper:

Certains envois ont besoin de retouches. Faute de connaître le nom des auteurs, il est impossible de les leur retourner pour qu’ils les modifient.
Il faut que cette discrétion cesse!
Quand elle cessera, beaucoup d’envois qui seraient excellents avec une légère mise au point et qui restent sur le carreau, paraîtront.
Signez donc!
Si vos envois sont mauvais une première fois, ils seront meilleurs la seconde et excellents la troisième. (4 August 1917)

Some submissions need corrections. Because we do not know the name of the authors, it is impossible to return these texts to them so that they may be modified.

This discretion must end!

When it ends, many submissions that would be excellent with a slight adjustment and that now fall by the wayside, will appear.

Sign your names!

If your submissions are bad the first time, they will be better the second time and excellent the third.

The priority here is placed on encouragement and a process of editing to make the pieces fit for publication, not exclusion based on strict literary aesthetics. As formulated by the trench newspapers, writing is a transparent, fluid process that may be improved through working together. While the soldiers who signed their

pieces anonymously perhaps operated under the assumption that their poems were not good enough to be signed, the editors rejected that notion by explicitly encouraging a culture of attribution and collaboration in order to make the pieces better, and most importantly, widely-read.

Other newspapers made similar entreaties to their readers, assuring them in no uncertain terms that their submissions would be accepted with open arms. *Les Boyaux du 95^e* ‘The Guts of the 95th’ echoed the same insistence as *Poil...et Plume* in its entreaty for submissions after its pages doubled in number:

Il faut, pour alimenter nos colonnes, force bons mots, force chansons, force anecdotes, et surtout force récits de guerre.

Tous, vous avez été témoins d’une scène dramatique, d’un combat, d’une relève sous les obus, d’un enterrement près des premières lignes, d’une explosion, d’un bombardement . . .

C’est dans cette mine inépuisable qu’il faut puiser. Les plaisanteries amusent une seconde, mais les récits de guerre vous intéresseront toute votre vie. C’est grâce à ces récits que *Les Boyaux du 95^e* constitueront, pour vous et vos familles, un véritable livre d’or. (no 2, undated)

It’s necessary to flesh out our columns with witty words, songs, anecdotes, and especially with war stories.

All of you have been witnesses to a dramatic scene, to combat, to a shift change under shells, of a burial near the front lines, an explosion, a bombardment . . .

It’s from this inexhaustible source that you must draw. Jokes amuse for a second but war stories will interest you your whole life. It is thanks to these stories that *Les Boyaux du 95^e* will become, for you and your families, a veritable scrapbook.

Here again, the editorial staff attempted to engage all the members of its reading public as potential writers. The newspapers valued soldiers as witnesses, able to write lasting firsthand accounts that would become durable documents of memory for the soldiers themselves, their families, and for the French nation. This entreaty also dismisses the idea that one must have a certain level of formal training in order to produce quality writing: “Inutile d’être académicien, pour collaborer au journal. Il suffit d’avoir des yeux et de raconter ce qu’on voit. Les plus beaux récits de guerre que j’ai entendus m’ont été faits par un soldat, intelligent, certes, et spirituels, mais qui n’avait jamais rien écrit, sinon des lettres à sa famille” (*Les Boyaux du 95^e* no 2) ‘No need to be an academic to contribute to the newspaper. You just need eyes and to tell what you see. The most beautiful war stories that I have heard were done by a soldier, certainly intelligent, and witty, but who had

never written anything before except some letters to his family.’ In this passage, the editors prioritize the experience of being there over academic expertise. Passages like these would go far to fuel the polemical debate in the postwar period, led by Cru, who also valorized the role of participation above all else.

The dizzying variety of pieces found in these newspapers, some poems, some modeled after grammar school writing assignments, shows that the trenches were an environment that fueled literary experimentation. The soldiers grew more and more creative as their talents as writers were validated, sometimes from very prestigious institutions.

“No need to be an academic . . .”

The editorial columns of *Les Boyaux du 95^e* strove to convey the message that all soldiers were capable of becoming powerful writers of their own experience and that higher education and prior publications were no longer required. One trench newspaper, *Rigolboche*, went so far as to invite members of the Académie française to contribute pieces to run alongside work produced in the trenches. By publishing the responses of famous intellectuals alongside the work of ordinary *poilus*, the editorial staff at *Rigolboche* bridged the gaps that previously existed between such different social and literary castes.

The Académie members themselves endorsed this project. In the first instance, the respected Symbolist poet Henri de Régnier contributed an ode to the newspaper itself:

A Rigolboche

Je voudrais tirer de ma poche
 Quelque mirifique quatrain
 Où pas une rime ne cloche
 Pour l’envoyer au « Rigolboche »
 Journal plein d’héroïque entrain!
 Rien n’est parfait sans qu’on le pioche
 Et j’ai peur de manquer le coche;
 Alors tant pis pour mon dizain...
 Si j’attends trop, le Rigolboche,
 On l’imprimera Outre-Rhin! (Easter 1915)

To Rigolboche

I would like to draw from my pocket

Some marvelous quatrain
Where not one rhyme is strained
To send to Rigolboche
Newspaper full of heroic spirit!
Nothing is perfect without being sketched
And I'm afraid of not getting the check mark
So oh well for my ten lines,
If I wait too long, Rigolboche,
You'll be printed in the Outer-Rhine.

These jocular lines are a departure from de Régnier's usual style and it is clear he sought to compose a poem whose light rhymes and humorous subject matter would please the regular readers of the trench newspaper. He takes on a posture of humble modesty in his poem, voicing his hope that it will be worthy of the "heroic" newspaper's normal fare. Régnier also comments on the nature of trench writing, noting that even in his own situation, cultivating perfection through many drafts is simply not an option for publication on the front, where one must write and submit with haste. In his own way, he attempts to conjure the same spontaneity that the soldiers were encouraged to display.

A subsequent issue of *Rigolboche* included a letter from another academy member, Anatole France. From the outset, France laments his own lack of authenticity, addressing his letter, "Cher Confrère, et vous tous rédacteurs du *Rigolboche* . . . Hélas ! que ne puis-je dire: Frères d'armes" (30 April 1915) 'Dear colleague, and all you editors of Rigolboche . . . Alas, if only I could say: brothers in arms.'⁶ His lament was sincere. In October 1914, France, aged 70, sent a letter to the French Minister of War, pleading to be sent into battle: "Beaucoup de braves trouvent que mon style ne vaut rien en temps de guerre. Comme ils peuvent avoir raison, je cesse d'écrire et je reste sans fonction. Je ne suis plus très jeune mais ma santé est bonne. Faites de moi un soldat"⁷ 'Many brave young men find that my style isn't worth anything during wartime. Because they might be right, I've stopped writing and I remain without a purpose. I am no longer young but my health is good. Make me a soldier.' France understood that his ornate style rang false within the new national context of war. He sought authenticity through enlistment. In this sense, his anxiety shows how the aesthetic concerns of literature as a field came to be dominated by a sense of what is termed an appropriate means to witness during wartime.

In his submission to *Rigolboche*, France inundated the soldiers with extravagant praise: "Vous êtes des héros et des héros charmants" 'You are heroes and charming heroes at that.' France then seizes on another important theme, stating that *Rigolboche* describes the reality of the front lines more accurately than any other newspaper. Most importantly, he explicitly legitimates the soldier-writers:

“Savez-vous que vous êtes des poètes, non seulement en action, mais à la lettre” (30 April 1915) ‘Do you know that you are poets, not only in action but to the letter?’ In this declaration, France boldly allows for actions to become the substance of poetry. To France, all soldiers of the Great War, by their heroic actions alone, are poets.

A subsequent issue of *Rigolboche* contains one last submission from the Académie française, this one from Edmond Rostand, famed author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*.⁸ Rostand’s sentiments mirror those of France, composed in letter form and echoing common themes of humility and praise:

Rigolboche, je t’aime. Je t’admire. Ta gaieté me met les larmes aux yeux. Tu comprends que, moi, je ne puisse pas rigoler: car pour avoir le droit, en ce moment, de rigoler, il faut bocher. Mais quand on rigole en bochant, ô Rigolboche, on est sublime. Que dans la barbe du Poilu il y ait ce rire, c’est la France même! Je t’embrasse, de toute mon âme, soldat qui me défend en disant ces folies. Saint François d’Assise disait: « Je suis le fou de Dieu . . . » Tu es le fou de la Patrie! (5 May 1915)

Rigolboche, I love you, I admire you. Your gay spirit brings tears to my eyes. You understand that, me, I cannot laugh: for to have the right, at this time, to laugh, one must hunt Fritz. But when one laughs while fritzing, oh Rigolboche, it is sublime. For in the soldier’s beard, there is this laugh, of France herself. I embrace you, with my whole soul, soldier who defends me while reciting these follies. Saint Francis of Assisi said: “I am God’s fool.” You are the homeland’s fool!

Rostand riffs on the title of the newspaper and offers a ludic interpretation of the soldiers’ mission: to be lighthearted and playful while at war. In a shocking way, he liberally conjugates the pejorative term for German, *boche*, using it as a verb (“il faut bocher” ‘one must [hunt] Fritz’) and a gerund (“en bochant” ‘fritzing’). Despite his light tone, he hints at the tension between those authorized to witness and his own ineffectual position, noting that one does not have the “right” to laugh unless one is hunting down Germans.

Rigolboche continued to engage with literary institutions and literary history in other ways. One recurring rubric, appearing on the last page of an issue, was a poem written to emulate various literary styles. These poems were nods to current literary trends and tastes and showcased the dynamic literary abilities of the trench soldier. This homage was impressive in its diversity. Odes written explicitly in the manner of du Bellay, Ronsard, Horace, and Baudelaire were published on the back pages of *Rigolboche* by different authors. The tribute to Baudelaire, signed by a soldier named Jean Mady, reveals a particularly perceptive treatment of *le cafard*,

a word that was popular shorthand for the mental condition of malaise during WWI that Baudelaire is credited with having coined in *Les Fleurs du mal*. The last two stanzas show just how well Mady, a frequent contributor to the newspaper, marries Baudelaire's tone to the subject of the Great War:

Et laisse-moi rêver aux défuntés années,
Sans y mêler encor des plantes surannées;
Que mon œil au créneau demeure souriant.

Dans un instant j'irai dormir un peu sous l'arche
Et tiens, pour t'obliger, à partir défaillant,
Entends, cafard, entends la Relève qui marche. (20 June 1917)

And leave me to dream in these departed years
Without meddling still with outdated plants
That the eye in my skull remains smiling.

In an instant I'll go sleep for a bit under the arch
And, to oblige you, not fail
But hear, the blues, hear the night watch march.

It is moving to see canonical literature reconfigured in the hands of unknown writers and made to speak to the circumstances of trench life. Creative reinterpretations like these, in addition to the lively correspondence between esteemed members of the Académie française and the editors of a trench newspaper, show just how deeply literary the trenches of WWI proved to be. Through adapting works of great literature and channeling voices from France's celebrated pantheon of great writers, the soldier-writers demonstrate how empowering the trench environment truly was.

The Creation of écrivains-combattants

The Académie française, in particular Maurice Barrès, was also instrumental in defining and solidifying the notion of the *écrivain-combattant* during the war years. Although Barrès claims that the idea for an anthology of "écrivains français morts pour la patrie" 'French writers fallen for the homeland' was initially suggested to him by a friend, he embraced the project wholeheartedly. The resulting four volumes of the *Anthologie des écrivains français morts pour la patrie* 'Anthology of French Writers Fallen for the Fatherland,' edited by Carlos Larronde, were published by Larousse and appeared in 1916.

In retrospect, the publication of such an anthology in 1916, coming so early in the war, seems hasty and ill-conceived, but it reflects the widespread belief that the war would be resolved quickly. What's more, the desire to push the volume into the public sphere influenced the aesthetic choices made in selecting texts for this work. The writers gathered in this anthology were those who had died in the opening months of the war and therefore had little time to set down their experiences into writing. The great majority of the excerpts chosen date to the years before the war. For example, the selections from poet Charles Péguy, while artfully chosen to reflect his prophetic and belligerent vision, all date from before war was declared.⁹ Thus, the concern of the anthology was not with the witnessing of these men, but rather the mere existence of the *écrivain-combattant*, a double embodiment then given final consecration through death on the battlefield.

The importance of this embodiment is made clear in the biographical sections of the anthology. These initial sketches follow a particular order: the place of birth and the exact circumstances of death are always noted in the first paragraph. The ensuing paragraphs provide details of the soldier's early life, education, and military training as well as any information about his literary career. The writer of these biographies (presumably Carlos Larronde) is careful to underline the perfect integration of the figure of the writer with that of the soldier whenever he can, bolstering the notion that the war actually brought these two aspects into harmony. Describing Ernest Psichari, Larronde attests that “[l]a vie du soldat avait stimulé en Psichari les facultés de l'écrivain” ‘the soldier's life had inspired in Psichari the capacities of a writer’ and Psichari was said to have been someone who “définissait le métier du soldat ‘une grande pensée toujours en action’—le plus noble des métiers” (22) ‘defined the job of soldier with a “great thought always in action” — the most noble of professions.’

Aesthetic criteria were ultimately not that important in determining the selections. Rather, one's status as *écrivain-combattant* depended on biographical details, particularly where and when death occurred. While not specifying that dying in combat is essential, Cru's *Témoins* ‘Witnesses’ functions as an extension of Barrès's project by providing an elaborate compendium of these biographical sketches.¹⁰ Barrès admits as much in the preface to this anthology, exclaiming:

Voulons-nous donner à croire que ces vers et ces proses que nous rassemblons soient tous également admirables? Qu'importe! Le génie épanoui des uns complète ces autres resserrés encore en bouton, et certaines méditations crayonnées sur le champ de bataille témoignent pour ceux qui moururent silencieusement. Chacun d'eux a son drame et sa figure à part; pourtant leur sacrifice est commun, et pas un n'échappe à l'admiration dont nous entourons leur sainte cohorte. (10)

Do we want to believe that these verses and this prose that we gather are all equally admirable? What does it matter? The blossoming genius of some fulfills others, still tightened in a bud, and certain meditations drawn on the field of battle testify to those who died silently. Each of them has his own drama and aspect; yet their sacrifice is shared, and not one escapes the admiration with which we surround their holy cohort.

By openly admitting that not all of the selections met high standards of aesthetic, literary value, Barrès manipulated the definition of *écrivain-combattant* so that this category would serve, by the simplest biographical details, as representative of the silent majority of soldiers who did not leave any written trace behind them. Barrès abandons claims to overall aesthetic greatness when memorializing the war writing of this group. Indeed, once the notion of soldier-writer becomes congealed around the primacy of biographical details, any discussion of formal poetics becomes moot. Developing this notion, Cru famously rejects outright the inclusion of any poetry in his encyclopedic compilation of war writing because of his fears that its style is just too literary to convey the truthfulness of the experience (11). In this way, the term *écrivain-combattant* functions as a paradox, simultaneously allowing for the inclusion of a great many soldiers who captured their experiences in written form while also exhibiting distrust for those whose writing prioritized a highly formal quality (i.e. poetry) over the sheer “authority of experience,” to borrow Joan Scott’s influential wording.

Conclusion

Barrès, along with other French intellectuals who advocated for the term, established a much more inclusive definition of the war writer within the French canon than was seen in England. *Écrivain-combattant* is a label that applies to many, including those ordinary, unknown writers who responded to the call of duty to help fill the columns of the trench newspapers. In his detailed study of this phenomenon, Nicolas Beaupré confirms that *écrivain-combattant* was indeed the term most popularly employed (11-12). This term was supported by the formation of a serial at the end of 1914, the *Bulletin des écrivains de 14* ‘Writers’ Bulletin of ‘14.’ This newspaper, published monthly without fail during the war, bolstered the cause of the soldier-writers and performed benevolent duties, such as publishing in each issue the available military addresses of its members, as well as listing those *écrivains-combattants* who had recently died in the line of duty (48-49). The official group, *Association des écrivains-combattants* (AEC) that grew out of the *Bulletin* activity was formed in 1919. In 1924, the AEC added to the growing numbers of published collections of “*écrivains morts pour la France*” ‘writers who died for France’ with its own anthology.

The AEC has maintained an active presence in French society, advocating for the inclusion of 560 names of *écrivains-morts* on a plaque in the Panthéon in 1927, distributing literary prizes yearly in their name, and even establishing an official library in the town of Rueil-Malmaison in 2009. Their reach within French society—as a continuing visible reminder of the *écrivains-combattants* of WWI—has no parallel among other nations of this conflict and points to the very specific cultural and historic factors articulated here that allowed for the formation of this inclusive archetype. Rejecting rigid aesthetic criteria or a narrow group of prestigious war poets, the French have memorialized all of those soldiers from the trenches who responded in some written way to the exhortations to help preserve the precious history that they were living—and dying for.

Notes

1. The Third Republic educational reforms stimulated massive improvement in French literacy levels. For specific figures, see Furet and Ozouf 57.
2. All translations provided are my own.
3. See Audoin-Rouzeau “Bourrage de crâne.” Christian Delporte supports this claim (183-85). Furthermore, the relationship between the authorities of the French Army and the newspapers was an ambiguous one. In an official message to officers on the existence of trench newspapers, General Joffre sanctioned their existence as long as their message did not prevent soldiers from doing their jobs or losing morale (Audoin-Rouzeau, *A travers leurs journaux* 23). Most importantly, the trench newspapers never received any money from the French government to help pay for the printing costs so they always retained financial autonomy (29).
4. These figures vary. André Charpentier, the former editor of one trench newspaper, estimated that there were at about 474 trench newspapers in his massive study dedicated to the phenomenon (33-34).
5. For more on the linguistic polyphony of the French troops, see Roynette, especially the section “Paroles combattantes,” ‘Soldier Speak’ (181-214).
6. I have tried to verify that these letters were penned by Régnier, France, et al. For France, there is persuasive evidence to support this claim. While there is currently no complete volume of his correspondence, this letter is in keeping with the time period given in the chronology of his *Œuvres complètes*. As sketched in the

introduction, France wrote a number of articles marked by “le ton jusqu’au-boutiste général” ‘an all-or-nothing tone’ and only came out of self-imposed silence in writing to support his country and her allies throughout 1916 (Introduction LXXIV). Furthermore, this same exchange between the editor of *Rigolboche*, Louis Lantz, and France was also published in almost its entirety in Thuriot-Franchi’s text (18). Finally, Jean Tubergue also cites this letter from France and does not question its origin (25). Given these additional authentications, I am inclined to believe that France and others did indeed pen these letters to *Rigolboche*.

7. This letter was later published in *Le Gaulois*, 2 October 1918 and cited in the introduction to the *Œuvres complètes* (XLIX).

8. Tubergue notes that Rostand had also contributed two sonnets dedicated to General Joffre which ran in another trench newspaper, *L’Écho des tranchées* ‘Echo of the trenches’ (24).

9. The selections from Péguy were the poems “Heureux ceux qui sont morts” ‘Happy are those who are dead’; “Le Peuple de Paris” ‘The People of Paris’; “Prière de Jeanne d’Arc” ‘A Prayer of Joan of Arc’; “La Tapisserie de sainte Geneviève et de Jeanne d’Arc” ‘The Tapestry of Saint Genevieve and of Joan of Arc’; and an excerpt of the prose work “Sur Victor Hugo” ‘On Victor Hugo’ (*Anthologie des écrivains français morts pour la patrie* I 13-21).

10. In fact, Barrès explains pointedly later in the preface: “Par la suite, on fera mieux que ce recueil documentaire ; nous avons besoin immédiatement d’un répertoire qui donnât des noms, des dates, des titres de livres et dont les marges pussent recevoir nos pieuses annotations ” (11) ‘Thereafter, we will do better than this documentary collection; we needed immediately a repository that gave names, dates, book titles whose margins could receive our pious annotations.’ Cru’s *Témoins* responded directly to this need.

Works Cited

- Association des Écrivains Combattants. *Anthologie des écrivains morts à la guerre*. Edgar Malfère, 1924-1926.
- Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane. 14-18, *Les Combattants Des Tranchées: À travers leurs journaux*. A. Colin, 1986.

- . "Bourrage de crâne et information en France en 1914-1918." *Les Sociétés européennes et la guerre de 1914-1918*, edited by Jean Jacques Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, UP Nanterre, 1990, pp.163-74.
- Augé, Claude. *Deuxième Livre de Grammaire. Théories. 460 Exercices. Lectures. Dictées. 100 Historiettes. Fables. Poésies. Analyse. 120 Proverbes. Rédactions. Livre de l'élève. 170 gravures*. Larousse, 1908.
- . *Troisième Livre de Grammaire. 1500 exercices. 220 gravures... Livre du maître*. Larousse, 1908.
- Barrès, Maurice. Preface. *Anthologie des écrivains morts pour la patrie*, edited by Carlos Larronde, Larousse, 1916, vol. 1, pp. 1-12.
- Beaupré, Nicolas. *Écrire en Guerre, Écrire la Guerre: France-Allemagne, 1914-1920*. CNRS, 2006.
- Les Boyaux du 95^e*, undated, no. 2, Archives de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre de Péronne.
- Campa, Laurence. *Poètes De La Grande Guerre: Expérience Combattante Et Activité Poétique*. Classiques Garnier, 2011.
- Charpentier, André. *Feuilles Bleu Horizon, 1914-1918*. André Charpentier, 1935.
- Chollet. "Les Journaux du front." Poem. *La Voix du 75^e*, April 1916, no. 9.
- Cru, Jean N. *Témoins: Essai d'analyse et Critique des Souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928*. Les Étincelles, 1929.
- Delporte, Christian. *Les Journalistes En France, 1880-1950: Naissance et Construction d'une profession*. Seuil, 1999.
- L'Esprit du cor*. 30 June 1917, no. 2.
- . 4 August 1917, no. 4.
- France, Anatole. *Œuvres complètes*. 4th ed., edited by Marie-Claire Bancquart, Éditions Gallimard, 1994.
- Furet, François, and Jacques Ozouf. *Lire et Écrire: l'Alphabétisation des français de Calvin à Jules Ferry*. Éditions de Minuit, 1977.
- Guiney, Martin M. *Teaching the Cult of Literature in the French Third Republic*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Hanna, Martha. "A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 108, no. 5, 2003, pp. 1338–61. www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/529969.
- Poil...et Plume*. May 1916, no 1.
- . June 1916, no 2.
- Rigolboche*. 30 April 1915.
- . 5 May 1915.
- . 20 June 1917.
- Roynette, Odile. *Les Mots des Tranchées: l'invention d'une langue de guerre, 1914-1919*. A. Colin, 2010.

- Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1991, pp. 773-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343743>
- Thuriot-Franchi, Georges. *Les Journaux De Tranchées*. Nevers, 1921.
- Tubergue, Jean-Pierre. *1914-1918: Les Journaux de tranchées*. Italiques, 1999.
- La Voix du 75*. April 1916, no. 9, Archives de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre de Péronne.