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The Soldier in French Literature of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

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The Image of the Soldier in French Novels of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

By Jane E. Evans

Throughout the ages, myths have guided man's physical and mental activities. Religion, artistic expression, literature, philosophy, rites of passage, social behaviors, discoveries, inventions, and dreams all reflect the "basic, magic ring of myth" (Campbell 1973: 3). Common archetypal figures appear cross-culturally in various myths: among them are the hero called to adventure and the hero who refuses the call (Campbell 1973: 51, 59). In the case of the hero embracing the unknown enthusiastically, his adventure will be marked with moments of insight in which he will glimpse the transcendence of his mortal state. At his return, the hero will consider the telling of his exploits to be his noblest responsibility (Campbell 1973:190, 193).

In Nation and Narration (1990), Homi Bhabha states that the myth of a unified nation also prevails in modern men's minds:

> [the] large and liminal image of the nation . . . haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the "origins" of nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality. (1990:1)

Bhabha's point is that social and cultural factors influence the actual nation, so that the myth of unification may not correspond to reality. To this end, fictional and non-fictional texts about war may be read as negotiations of the pedagogical (nationalist ideology) and the performative (process of articulation) in language (Bhabha 1990: 3). Three French novels about the First and Second World Wars, Henri Barbusse's Le Feu (1916), André Chamson's Le Puits des miracles

(1945), and Vercors's Le Silence de la mer (1942), will provide the basis of my discussion of the ambivalence of the mythic nation and its narration through the figures of the soldier and the civilian; a very detailed analysis of a fourth novel, René Nicolas Ehni's Algérie roman (2002), will provide the culmination of my argument about the variable signification of the soldier as hero in the "telling" of the nation in the twenty-first century.

Bhabha's comments from 1986 in fact reiterate Eugen Weber's analysis of France's becoming a nation in From Peasants into Frenchmen: the Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914, dating from 1978. The latter author avers that historians from the nineteenth century, including Albert Soboul, Hippolyte Taine, and Augustin Thierry, promoted the myth of French unity geographically, linguistically, and socially as a result of the French Revolution. The concept of a France united in several dimensions, however, appeared prematurely. According to Weber, although France had reached its current size after the Franco-Prussian War, Frenchmen adhered to their particular native regions through language and customs. Moreover, the high illiteracy in rural France meant that news about other parts of the country, perceived as different and far away, did not necessarily interest and/or reach the inhabitants (Weber 1978: 42)

The First World War was instrumental in the creation of French nationalism. When local military units were decimated and then restructured, soldiers were forced to speak French as a *lingua franca* to ensure communication between men from different areas instead of relying on their local *patois* (Weber 1978: 78). This linguistic transformation demonstrates that Frenchmen chose unity over diversity in matters of defense. Exposure to others' divergent ideas as well as to common, grueling war experiences knit young men together as a cohesive group despite their local differences. The image of the culturally diverse French nation and of its people joining together because of crisis is captured in Henri Barbusse's Le Feu. Written in 1916 at the height

of the trench warfare between France and Germany, the novel is subtitled "Journal d'une escouade" 'Diary about a Squadron.' It is based on the author's war diary and is dedicated to the memory of his fellow soldiers who died next to him in "Crouy" and at "la Cote 119" 'Hill 119' (Barbusse 1916: n.p.). Not only did the novel win the Prix Goncourt for 1916, it was also widely read, suggesting that France's civilian population opened its mind to comprehending the soldier's life as it was actually unfolding in history at the midpoint of the war.

The first-person narrator of Le Feu is a *troufion*, a simple ground soldier and stretcher-bearer who records the daily events facing his unit, from bad weather to mortar attacks; he also paints a detailed picture of his comrades through differences in language and experience. At other moments in the text, he comments on the squadron's composition and feelings. For example, in describing his fellow soldiers originating from several regiments, the narrator indicates their regional pronunciations of French to the best of his ability. Tirette, from Auvergne, says to the others: «'Moi, mes enfants, j'suis d'Clichy-la-Garenne. Qui dit mieux?'» 'Me, kiddos, I'm from Clichy-la-Garenne (to the northwest of Paris)]. Who's from anywhere better?' whereas Paradis murmurs in reply, « 'I' se foutions d'moi parce que je sommes Morvandiau [in the Massif Central]. . .' » 'He were making fun of me because I's from Morvan' (Barbusse 1916: 18). The expression, « mes enfants », characterizes Tirette's facility with the French language and condescension towards the others; Paradis's response indicates his awareness of Tirette's superior attitude as well as his own ungrammatical French, perhaps resulting from a lack of education or a lack of practice, or both.

Once the narrator has stressed the distinctions among his fellow soldiers, he insists again on their commonalities: as men engaged in trench warfare, they have all been reduced to a "primitive state." He explains that he and his fellow soldiers have overcome their linguistic

differences, as follows: “Le même parler, fait d’un mélange d’argots d’atelier et de caserne, et de patois, assaisonné de quelques néologismes, nous amalgame, comme une sauce. . .” (Barbusse 1916: 19) ‘The same manner of speaking, made up of a mixture of workplace and barrack slangs, and of local languages, peppered with a few neologisms, blends us together, as in a sauce. . .’. In this way, the narrator’s account of the solidarity that Frenchmen achieved in fighting a common enemy exemplifies Eugen Weber’s claim that 1914-18 were crucial years in the development of French nationalism, that is, in seeing the nation first of all as its various people.

Barbusse’s narrator returns to the notion of military units operating as a single entity despite one’s differences many times throughout Le Feu. For instance, he generalizes about the soldiers’ being « dans la fête de survivre » ‘in the celebration of survival’ because they have escaped death for another day; this feeling erases any sadness that they may harbor because of their buddies’ deaths (Barbusse 1916: 55). Additionally, the narrator insists on the human aspect of the French soldiers. He elaborates this point as follows : « Ce ne sont pas des soldats: ce sont des hommes. Ce ne sont pas des aventuriers, des guerriers, faits pour la boucherie humaine. . . » (Barbusse 1916: 63). ‘These are not soldiers: these are men. They are not adventurers [or] warriors made for butchering fellow human beings.’ Rather, the soldiers in the trenches are prepared to sacrifice their lives for France. Therefore, the men of the lowest military ranks are the heroes of the war, according to the storyteller’s observations (Barbusse 1916: 263).

If the narrator’s understanding of his fellow soldiers grows keener as Le Feu progresses, the characters themselves exhibit an increasing self-awareness, too. Volpatte, following two months’ convalescence in a military hospital, unburdens himself to his regiment of the inequalities that he discerned in the kinds of military services that other Frenchmen fulfill. He rages anew that the rich perform office jobs instead of engaging in battle as he and other poor

soldiers have done repeatedly in order to contribute to the war effort (Barbusse 1916: 120-38). For the first time, he is cognizant of the quality of life that money can buy. Volpatte and several other soldiers experience a similar realization when they spend time in a Parisian café while on leave. One of the civilian customers, a well-dressed man, praises the soldiers for being heroes; however, he subsequently devalues his praise by saying that his « fight » as an economist for France is as important as their fighting at the frontlines against the Germans (Barbusse 1916: 326).

In short, Le Feu provides a multifaceted view of the French soldier's life during the First World War. Barbusse's observations of his comrades in battle and his recall of conversations among them cast the men in a heroic, yet realistic light: their daily sufferings, the war as a death machine, the philosophies that strengthen the men in combat, and civilian misconceptions about the front, all are included here. Moreover, the narrator's reflections concerning the melding of his diverse fellow soldiers through war remind us that the French becoming one people and France thereby becoming a unified nation were both in a developmental phase from 1914 to 1918. Along with the solidarity that arises among men who fight a common cause remain the differences in life experience and language that divide rich from poor. Thus, Le Feu challenges the myth of a seamless military presence composed of Frenchmen fighting equally together in defense of their country. Instead, the novel also highlights the socioeconomic differences among the men. Homi Bhabha elaborates this issue in the following manner:

> The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. We then have a contested cultural territory where the people

> must be thought in a double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process. . . (1990: 297)

Bhabha reminds the reader once again that the myth of the nation as a *fixed* entity [my emphasis] is erroneous: just as stories about nations evolve, countries and their citizens continue to transform themselves as well.

The themes of solidarity and heroism in the definition of the French nation would again be apparent approximately thirty years later in two novels devoted to retelling the Second World War from a civilian point of view: André Chamson's Le Puits des miracles and Vercors's Le Silence de la mer. Like Barbusse's Le Feu, Le Puits des miracles by Chamson, published in 1945, contains a well-informed, reliable narrator who speaks about life in France from 1942–43, just prior to the German Occupation. Very little is known about the narrator, but the novel suggests that he has been wounded while fighting in the war and is convalescent. Mostly confined to a small, upper-story apartment, the narrator remarks on the misery he sees from his window as he gazes at the street below.

Everywhere in this poor quarter, hunger predominates. Children, « scrofuleux» 'scrofulous', do their best at playing, despite their « membres débiles » 'weakened arms and legs' and their « jointures énormes » 'enormous joints' (Chamson 1945: 81). They subsist on root vegetables and grasses; rarely do they eat any meat for nourishment (Chamson 1945: 32). The narrator

compares the pointed abdomen of malnourished pregnant women to a « monstruosité » 'monstrosity' since these future mothers do not even consume enough calories to feed themselves. Almost everyone displays the pallor of skin (without any underpinning of fat) stretched tightly over bone (Chamson 1945: 81).

Besides sharing his own observations with the reader, the narrator discusses the miserable social conditions with his starving neighbors living in the same building. He also occasionally ventures down the main street in order to call on some of his acquaintances. Those who suffer from malnutrition notice that the rich townspeople do not. M. Delpoux, the butcher who always has more than enough to eat, the dog-killer who has managed to become rich during the famine, and the "charitable" Mme Paintendre whose increasing corpulence strains the seams of her clothing, among others, are discussed with contempt (Chamson 1945: 50-51, 60-62).

The impoverished townspeople's awareness of the gulf between rich and poor culminates in the celebration feast for a rediscovered Renaissance author from the region. Only 200 over-fed officials, such as the mayor, have been invited. The narrator, glimpsing some of the buffet-laden tables as he walks through town, states bitterly that the feast would have fed « un quartier de la ville, pendant une semaine » (Chamson 1945: 201) 'a quarter of the town for an entire week'. The guest speaker, a rich man with no direct understanding of what the Second World War has cost the average Frenchman, outrages the narrator; the former intones that he prefers modern-day France to the France of fifty years ago. The narrator's unvoiced contention is that the speaker, unlike the country's soldiers defending their homeland, has not participated directly in protecting the French nation, and should consequently have no say about his preferences.

Chamson's narrator, similar to Barbusse's, conveys an awareness of the privileges accorded to the upper and middle classes especially during wartime, and the misery that binds

the poor together as soldiers and civilians. Le Puits des miracles ends with the wealthy townspeople smiling as the first German officers of the Occupation arrive; this image contrasts sharply with that of the narrator looking at a stash of weapons with two neighbors who are intent on being able to defend themselves against the German invaders. This final scene brings the theme of the impoverished French civilians soldiering on during the early 1940s full circle: they are now shown as potentially armed resistance fighters in the Second World War effort.

Likewise addressing the question of the civilian French during the Second World War is Vercors's Le Silence de la mer. Published clandestinely in 1942 (Brown and Stokes 1991: vii), the novel focuses on Occupied France: the first-person narrator and his niece are housing a young German officer, Werner von Ebrennac, in the upstairs part of their home. Called "the most famous 'Resistance novel'" of its time (Brown and Stokes 1991: ix), Vercors's *récit* functions as a manual of behavior to follow in opposing the enemy, in spite of the latter's physical proximity. Whereas Barbusse's and Chamson's fiction speaks of divergences within the French military and civilian populations, in addition to those between enemy armies, Vercors's Le Silence de la mer lacks this focus. Rather, it recounts a French family's experience of the German Occupation by characterizing its ambivalent feelings about the young enemy lieutenant who spends six months living upstairs.

The narrator and his niece eschew the German officer any social interaction. His habit of stopping downstairs every evening, however, punctuates the day for the parties involved, yet the officer's musings are not acknowledged by his hosts. The silence that meets his words and the lack of eye contact among the three people exemplify the impossibility of any reconciliation between the French and the German populations, although this hope had been harbored by citizens of each nationality before the beginning of the war (Stokes 1991: 6, 8). Moreover, the

silence signifies much more than the absence of words: it demonstrates that the French do not share the contents of their hearts and minds with the interlopers constraining their freedom, thereby safeguarding their profoundest convictions for themselves.

At no point do the French hosts cede to German rhetoric, even when von Ebrennac comments on banal matters, such as the comfort of the narrator's home or his wish that his hosts have a pleasant evening; one could respond automatically to such remarks if one were not vigilant. The narrator explains his family's tactics as follows:

> D'un accord tacite nous avions décidé, ma nièce et moi, de ne rien changer à notre vie, fût-ce le moindre détail: comme si l'officier n'existait pas. . . (Vercors 1942: 44)
>
> In an unspoken agreement we had decided, my niece and I, to change nothing in our life, even the slightest detail: as if the [German] officer didn't exist.

This statement summarizes the narrator's ideas about resisting the enemy: one must not become emotionally involved with one's captors. When the narrator later wonders aloud to his niece if remaining silent as von Ebrennac speaks about his life to them might be too harsh a response, she silently reprimands him by her indignant expression, which causes him to feel cowardly (Vercors 1942: 48). Their family pact thus means that they do not break their silence about von Ebrennac with each other, either.

Besides his shame, the narrator recognizes his admiration for von Ebrennac: the officer simply accommodates his stiff leg, the result of a probable war injury, he never discounts his love for France; nor does he ever show disrespect for his hosts. The narrator indirectly calls attention to the German's gentility in the following terms: ". . . jamais il ne fût tenté de secouer cet implacable silence par quelque violence de langage . . ." '. . . never was he tempted to break

this implacable silence through the violence of speech' (Vercors 1942: 53). Just as the French people serve as von Ebrennac's cultural models, the narrator finds compassion for his intelligent, well-mannered enemy who knows how to behave honorably within the parameters of both the Occupation and his hosts' lives.

In short, Le Silence de la mer lacks the moralizing tone of the previously-mentioned war novels by Barbusse and Chamson in which the narrators speak of the heroic French soldiers in the trenches of the First World War, the starving French civilians ready to fight during the 1940s, and the contemptible wealthy Frenchmen who watch their fellow citizens suffer from malnutrition before the German Occupation of 1940 only to collaborate with the occupiers later on. Rather, the images of the cultured German officer, the narrator, and his niece epitomize the humane coexistence possible between wartime enemies, as long as they observe mutual respect for their political differences. Vercors's novel indicates as well that feelings inspired by one's enemy are not to be trusted: both van Ebrennac and the narrator's niece recognize that their love at first sight must die because of the war. This image sums up the lieutenant's "growing up" during his six months in France: he admits to his hosts that his dream of reconciliation between France and Germany as one great nation at the end of the war has been dashed by his fellow officers alerting him to Germany's plan to destroy France, not annex it. The narrator, in minutely detailing the final scene containing von Ebrennac's confession, insists once again on his awareness of the officer's suffering as a fellow human being.

If Vercors's novel demystifies the figure of the enemy soldier through its portrayal of the cultured von Ebrennac and an empathetic narrator, René Nicolas Ehni's autobiographical novel Algérie roman (2002) reveals anti-heroic aspects of the author's military service during the Algerian War for Independence and of its retelling. Ehni, known as a controversial social critic

and writer for the past 40 years (Cycle 2003), divulges his wartime behavior through a series of disconnected episodes from both civilian and military life. His narration also challenges the traditional, authoritative, chronological model encountered in the war novels by Barbusse, Chamson, and Vercors. The tropes and figures in Algérie roman demonstrate Ehni's violent, irreverent stance as a young soldier in his early 20s and as a storyteller later recalling his military service. He calls his work a "paramyth," which he defines as "a myth in full force"; he then characterizes a "paramyth" as being a series of words fated to leave no skeletons in the closet, meaning no secrets hidden (Ehni 2002: 10).

Accordingly, the first page of Algérie roman consists of one long paragraph in which the narrator speaks about himself and his family: he is young, he has a daddy who served in the Algerian War, and his dad belonged to the group of French soldiers who kept his Arab grandfather prisoner before killing him. The reader also learns that many years after the close of the Algerian War, the narrator's dad found the dead prisoner's daughter and married her. Along with being shocked at the composition of the narrator's family, the reader perceives that this young narrative voice will not be a reliable speaker about his father's war experiences because he was not there; nor could he possibly know everything about his parent's former life, even from the stories he may have heard in detail.

From its opening, then, Algérie roman calls narrative authority into question. The reader's doubts about narrative credibility continue on the second page of the novel as an older voice takes over as storyteller, but only to explain the idea of the "paramyth," rather than the previously-mentioned family relationships. Moreover, the older narrator expresses himself in French, Greek, and German: he uses the Greek word for "Family," comments on the derivation

of the French "mythe" from Greek, and refers to his own grandfather with the Swiss German word *gräbi* (Ehni 2002: 10), a confusing play of language for the reader.

Not until the third paragraph does the storyline set during the Algerian War of the 1950s reveal itself. This time, the narrative voice is that of the soldier on site. He is the "father" mentioned in the boy's words on page one. This destabilization of the narration through several narrative voices is known as "metalepsis" (Heise 1997: 55). Such a technique establishes an irresolvable narrative tension, in that the voices of the young soldier and the older version of himself will never coincide on the account of the Algerian War. The older René cannot recreate the younger's experiences completely; nor can he, or will he, recall everything that his younger self excluded from his wartime journal in the 1950s. The reader understands immediately that she/he will be left to ferret out the truth (Felman 1985: 66-67) about René's involvement in the war.

Besides challenging the so-called omniscience of a single first-person autobiographical narrator, Algérie roman defies the chronological, linear presentation of the typical *Bildungsroman* such as Le Feu. The latter novel's narrator portrays the transformation of a military squadron over a year and a half (Cobley 1993: 26; Barbusse 1916: 378). In a very few pages, however, the reader understands that the narrative voices of Algérie roman, which vary because of age and supposed expertise on a particular subject, such as the father's military experience, are not necessarily complementary. The narrators depart from the storyline about the Algerian War for the purpose of making genealogical, etymological, linguistic, and literary remarks. The reader thus sees the text as "a contradictory site of inscription" and its events as both diachronous and synchronous, meaning that "the horizontal or sequential movement of the plot thus coexists with the vertical or associative stratification of temporally discontinuous

fragments" (Cobley 1993: 3, 190). To sum up, reading Algérie roman draws one deeper and deeper into the narrators' ruminations as one goes along.

For instance, Ehni's young adult and middle-aged narrators move easily between the description of playing tricks on three homosexual men on a cruise ship and the horror of having to fight Algerians who had defended France during the Second World War as enemies. This narrative vacillation presents the narrators' various acts, both personal and military, on an even plane. It is only when the narrator returns to an incident several times, like the murder of two young Algerian shepherds, that the reader grasps the meaning of the entire incident as well as its revulsion for the storyteller (Ehni 2002: 100, 112-13, 115-17, 125-26, 130, 139). Algérie roman displays an interest in its narrators' lives both during and beyond military service that is absent from Barbusse's, Chamson's and Vercors's wartime accounts.

The procedure of baiting the reader by introducing a topic and then delaying the full explanation about it, such as one sees on first two pages of the novel, characterizes the entire work. Despite the initial confusion about whose story is being told and by whom, in theory, the middle-aged René is transcribing his diary from the 1950s in order to compose Algérie roman. However, when remembering an emotionally-charged event overwhelms him, he interrupts the *diegesis*. For example, the detailed inclusion of his acting experience and his friends working in Parisian theater provides a detour from talking about his grandfather'*s* reaction to his going to war, as does an etymological analysis suggesting his possible gypsy and religious roots (Ehni 2002: 10-12). Whereas the narrators of the previously mentioned works plunge themselves into the authoritative retelling of their war experiences as part of the myth of the soldier eager to speak of his manly exploits (Campbell 1973: 190), Ehni's narrators reveal very little about their military obligations.

In the middle two chapters of the novel, for example, the reader learns little about the young adult narrator René's duties as a soldier in an Algerian village: poetic lines in German by Goethe, as well as René's translations of them into French divert the narrator's and the reader's attention from the horrors of the war. The explanatory footnotes given by the older narrator as a means of clarifying the Algerian's status under French law, the contents of the prayer "Ma chère Maman" 'My Dear Mom,' and the meaning of the acronym "HS" 'Not in Working Order' (Ehni 2002: 74, 89-90, 93), further disconnect the older narrator and the reader from learning about the contents of the soldier René's diary. Evidence of the young man's courage or cowardice is held in abeyance once more.

In a later example, René the elder disturbs his narration about the war once again by digressing about a song in German and French as well his "Teutonic soul" (Ehni 2002:125). This digression postpones for the third time the horrific details about the death of two Algerian child shepherds at the hands of his commanding officer. It is almost as if the older narrator relies on his own comic relief to keep himself from falling too deeply into his memories of the past. The older narrator even criticizes his writing of Algérie roman as it unfolds: after describing his flight to Marseille with his homosexual friend Dino, René the elder instructs his editor parenthetically to omit a vulgar sentence about Dino that he has not yet written into his story (Ehni 2002:23). This technique of seemingly passing over an idea, called *occupatio*, in fact emphasizes that very idea (Lanham 1969: 68-69). In this case, the narrator dismisses Dino's homosexual practices only to underscore them in the process. This irony causes the reader to smile, thereby breaking his/her anticipation of the events of the younger Rene's military service. Moreover, the narrator's hesitation about what to say contrasts sharply with the confidence of the

storytellers of war describing living conditions during the First and Second World Wars seen previously, as does his discussion of his friend's sexuality.

The older René similarly comments that five vulgar lines about the male sexual organ are to be omitted from a story concerning Dino that has not yet been told publicly (Ehni 2002: 30-31). The narrator seems to have second thoughts about the information that he has shared with the reader about his youth. Expressing his unease however, merely calls more attention to his attraction to Dino. At the very least, the narrator's editing in mid- composition calls attention to the selective aspect of writing his memoirs; at the very worst, it again casts suspicion on the seriousness of the narrator's attitude towards the composition of his work.

Overblown emoting likewise makes Algérie roman ambiguous. In relaying the suffering and misgivings associated with their reminiscences about the Algerian War, the narrators rely on the figure of *threnos*, or lamentation. For example, the younger René and the older René concur on crying while writing about saying good-by to their grandfather just before reporting for military service (Ehni 2002: 12-12). In the same way, the younger René indicates in a letter to his mother how much he dislikes writing. He tells her that he must continue or he will never get back to it because the writing act is simply "too painful" (Ehni 2002: 36). The reader is struck again by the narrator's pose as he claims to shed tears; in the twentieth century war novels discussed in this article, such an exaggerated emotional response to the stressors of fighting and writing does not exist.

The older René resumes his discussion of the writer's pain in referring to the atrocities that he and his fellow soldiers committed in Algeria. He sums up the military years of his youth as follows:

> Quelle horreur, ça se raconte pas! Toute une vie à pas se la raconter et voilà que mon ami me dit « raconte » et je raconte. . . Se tuer est la seule façon de dire l'Algérie. Là, l'acting est écriture. Là est sculptée l'individualité. Là est le seul devoir de tuer: se détruire. Autodestruction. (Ehni 2002: 72-73)
>
> How horrible! This [the Algerian War] doesn't get talked about! A whole life spent in not talking about it and then my friend tells me, "Recount the story" and I tell it. Killing oneself is the only way to tell about Algeria. There, acting is writing. There, individuality is sculpted. There the only obligation about killing is destroying oneself. Self-destruction.

From the above, the reader grasps the equality between writing about the Algerian War with the violence of suicide or self-destruction. Ehni's dramatic narrator pales in comparison with the twentieth century storytellers mentioned previously who bravely retell their stories without dwelling on their own suffering as participants in the war and subsequently, authors.

If Ehni's narrators systematically downplay their physical involvement in the war and in the composition of Algérie roman through the figures of digression, *occupatio*, and lamentation, they also use the figure of synecdoche for minimizing the cruelty of their army commanders who engage in killing for sport and pleasure. The officers in question have been given nicknames designating the entire person by a single body part, to wit the male sexual organ. While alive, the three men are never known as anything other than "Bout'bite" 'Penis Head' (Ehni 2002: 62), "Sucepine" 'Performer of Fellatio' (Ehni 2002: 36), and "Quéquette" 'Little Penis' (Ehni 2002: 61). By referring to their superiors using vulgar slang terms, the narrators reduce the officers to brainless, testosterone-fueled creatures, from which excessive murder is expected (Accad 1990:

160-61). Further, the contrast between the funny nicknames and the killing of Algerian villagers adds an ironic twist to the narrative.

Word play or paronomasia (Lanham 1969: 73) further designates the narrators' disturbance of textual integrity. For example, the older René declares, "Paris vaut bien un macule."(Ehni 2002: 17) 'Paris is worth an ink stain (on paper)', before he includes information about living in the French capital. The ironic misquoting of the well-known "Paris vaut bien une messe" jars the reader; s/he consequently wonders about the narrator's purpose in equating his description of Paris to mere ink splotches on a page. Likewise, the narrator's use of homonyms makes his discussion of war's mental trauma ironic. He jokingly refers to the postwar need for psychoanalysis as "ma tasse de thé, thé au logis" (Ehni 2002: 51) 'my cup of tea, tea at home.' There is a play on the expression "tea at home" and "theology" in the French. The reader feels baited again, since the idea of regaining one's mental health post-bellum by drinking tea at home strikes one as incredibly over-simplified, although not impossible.

The narrator's manipulation of biblical verses, however, strikes the reader not as ironic, but as irreverent, even blasphemous. One such example is: "Mommy, mommy, why have you abandoned me?" (Ehni 2002: 48). The replacement of God the Father's name with "Mommy" and the narrator's comparing himself to Jesus Christ on the cross potentially offends the reader instead of amusing her/him, regardless of the explanation about illness and fear that the narrator subsequently provides. In the mishandling of Scripture, the narrator directs his violence towards his narration, the original biblical verses, and the reader's sensibilities. Contrarily, the narrators of Le Feu, Le Puits des miracles, and Le silence de la mer instruct rather than antagonize their audiences.

Despite the older narrator Rene's frequent comments about being able to "malaxer" 'mold' his wartime pages into the novel Algérie roman (Ehni 2002: 19), his minimizing the significance of his two-year army tour through narrative unreliability, metalepsis, digression, *occupatio,* asyndeton, paronomasia, synecdoche, irony, and paronomasia backfires. Ehni's unrelenting language play in Algérie roman almost obscures his narrative condemnation of both the Algerian War and the French army. His older narrator criticizes the pro-independence political party, the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), for pitting innocent civilians against the French military presence; he decries the French Army's reliance on torture for gathering information from Algerian prisoners, as well as their subsequent denial of this cruel practice (Ehni 2002: 58-60, 61-69).

René's usual vocabulary play falters, however, as he revisits an incident pertaining to Aïssa, Arabic for "Jesus," an Algerian prisoner of war. He confesses to seeing "in the face of this Semite the face of the Archetype" and to being awestruck (Ehni 2002: 155). The narrator describes his meeting with Aïssa in more detail a second time, alluding to the moment as "la rencontre avec mon Dieu" 'the encounter with my God' (Ehni 2002: 155). Gone are ironic pretense and his poseur's attitude towards the narration at hand: the older René demonstrates his ability to write linearly and chronologically. The dramatic changes in his writing style bear witness to the violent transformation taking place in his narrative tone. The older René concludes *Algérie roman* by stating that he experienced terror in standing before God. He expresses his fright first in his maternal language, German, and then in French as "That about which one cannot speak" (Ehni 2002: 156). The narrator, typically so prolix, runs out of things to say in his last sentence, whose ellipsis indicates that he has nothing more to add, or that perhaps it will be for another time.

Unlike the twentieth century war novels that I have analyzed, Algérie roman maintains an unfinished quality until its last page. The narrator proves incapable of remembering his military service in a linear manner by virtue of his immaturity while a young soldier and his distractibility as a middle-aged veteran revisiting his war memories. Ultimately, Ehni's novel continues its quest for closure even after its final sentence: the ellipsis visually moves the reader and the narrator forward, beyond the narration that has just come to an end. What can be said about the novel's false conclusion? It demonstrates that in Algérie roman, the dramatic and performative aspects of language outweigh its chronological side. Ehni's older narrator emotes about so many incidents in his life, from leaving his grandfather to writing his memoir, that it is difficult to find the pedagogical message that he transmits to the reader, namely that both the Algerian government and the French Army were both accountable for the atrocities that befell innocent civilians, soldiers and prisoners-of-war during the Algerian War for Independence. In contrast, in the writings of Barbusse, Chamson, and Vercors, one can readily identify some underlying lessons: to honor one's fellow soldiers in life and death (Le Feu), to commemorate the French civilians' plight during the 1940s (Le Puits des miracles), and to demonstrate the model resistant behavior when housing the enemy officer, however engaging he may be, during the German Occupation of France (Le Silence de la mer).

Through his difficulties in connecting his past with his present act of writing, René, the narrator of Ehni's Algérie roman, re-illustrates the statement made by Homi Bhabha in Nation and Narration about the on-going definition of the "nation":

> . . .the people are the historical "objects" of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the "subjects" of a process of signification that

> must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process. . . (1990: 297)

Not until June 1999, did France officially recognize that the Algerian War from 1954 to1962 had been something other than "'les événements d'Algérie'" 'the Algerian events,' and "'les actions de maintien de l'ordre'" 'the actions to maintain order,' among other euphemisms (Donadey 2001: 17, 1). This assumption of responsibility by the French government for another *war* [my emphasis] at the end of its imperial era implies a major change in what is taught and felt about the French nation, that is, in its "nationalist pedagogy," especially by those people who participated in the Algerian War. One could perceive Ehni's narrator as grappling with the modified story of Algeria's struggle for independence, and with his role as a soldier at that time. In this regard, the final ellipsis "concluding" the novel suggests that the narrator's account of himself as a signifier of the Algerian *War* [my emphasis] still remains to be mentally processed and written.

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Vercors: see *Bruller, Jean*.

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