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Masculinities in War: René-Nicolas Ehni's
Algérie roman

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Writing the Masculinities of War: Algérie roman, by René-Nicolas Ehni

Throughout the ages, myths have guided man's physical and mental activities. Religion, artistic expression, literature, philosophy, rites of passage, discoveries, and dreams all reflect the "basic, magic ring of myth" (Campbell 3). Common archetypal figures appear cross-culturally, such as the hero called to adventure (Campbell 51, 59). As the hero embraces the unknown, his adventure will be marked with glimpses of the transcendence of his mortal state. At his return, he will consider the telling of his exploits to be his noblest responsibility (Campbell 190, 193).

Henri Barbusse's Le Feu, the popular novel dating from 1916 about his military service during the First World War, illustrates the mythic hero above who speaks of his exploits once he has accomplished his adventure; it will provide the 20th century model of narrator and narration on war. An analysis of René-Nicolas Ehni's Algérie roman from 2002 will provide my counter-argument about the writing of masculinities in the retelling of war in the twenty-first century.

The image of the culturally diverse French nation and of its people joined in crisis is captured in Barbusse's Le Feu. Written at the height of the trench warfare between France and Germany, the novel is subtitled "Journal d'une escouade." 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" (Barbusse n.p.). Consequently, the reader knows immediately that the narrator will be speaking as a witness honoring the members of his squadron.

The first-person narrator of Le Feu is a *trouffion*, 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. For example, in describing his fellow soldiers originating from several regiments, the narrator indicates their regional pronunciations of French (Barbusse 18). Once the he has stressed the distinctions

among his fellow soldiers, he insists again on their commonalities: as men engaged in trench warfare, they are all caught up in the “celebration of survival” (Barbusse 55). Additionally, the narrator highlights the human aspect of the French soldiers, 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 63). Thus, the soldiers in the trenches, ordinary men prepared to sacrifice their lives for France, are uncontested heroes (Barbusse 263).

In short, 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 while fighting, all are included here. Masculinity in Le Feu connotes one’s physical stamina, love and defense of France, and loyalty to one’s squadron. 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.

Whereas Barbusse’s novel defines the heroic traits of the French soldier as well as its narrator according to their efforts against the German enemy, René-Nicolas Ehni’s autobiographical novel Algérie roman reveals ambivalent aspects of both the author’s military service during the Algerian War for Independence and of its retelling. Ehni, a controversial social critic and writer for the past 40 years (Cycle 2003), divulges his wartime behavior through seemingly disconnected episodes from both civilian and military life that include digressions on a wide range of subjects, including word study and homosexuality. His narration thereby challenges the traditional, authoritative, chronological model encountered in the war novel by Barbusse. The tropes and figures in Algérie roman demonstrate Ehni’s violent, irreverent stance as a young soldier 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, or no secrets hidden (Ehni 10).

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 who belonged to the group of French soldiers who imprisoned his Algerian grandfather 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 the shocking make-up 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 the details about his parent’s former life, even from the stories he may have heard.

From its opening, then, Algérie roman calls narrative authority into question. The reader’s doubts about narrative credibility continue 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 10), confusing language play 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 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 their accounts of the Algerian War. Just as the elder René cannot

recreate the younger's experiences completely, nor did his younger self include every minute of his military service in his war diary. The reader understands that she/he will have to ascertain the truth 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 presentation of the typical war novel. For example, Barbusse's portrayal of his military squadron covers a year and a half (Cobley 26; Barbusse 378). Algérie roman, however, contains multiple narrative voices varying because of age and expertise on a particular subject, such as the father's military experience. 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 textual events as both diachronic and synchronic: "the horizontal or sequential movement of the plot thus coexists with the vertical or associative stratification of temporally discontinuous fragments" (Cobley 3, 190).

For instance, Ehni's young adult and middle-aged narrators move easily between the description of playing tricks on three homosexual men aboard a cruise ship and the horror of having to fight so-called enemy Algerians who had defended France during the Second World War. 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 100, 112-13, 115-17, 125-26, 130, 139)..

The procedure of baiting the reader by introducing a topic and then delaying the full explanation about it, as seen on the first two pages of the novel, characterizes the entire work. This technique of seemingly passing over an idea, called *occupatio*, in fact emphasizes that very idea (Lanham 68-69). When criticizing his writing of Algérie roman, for instance, René the

elder instructs his editor parenthetically to omit a yet unwritten vulgar sentence about his homosexual friend Dino (Ehni 23). In this case, the narrator dismisses Dino's homosexual practices only to underscore them in the process. Moreover, the narrator's hesitation about what to say contrasts sharply with the confidence of the storyteller describing living conditions during the First World War seen previously, as does his discussion of his sexuality.

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 create Algérie roman. However, when remembering an emotionally-charged event overwhelms him, he interrupts the *diegesis*. For example, details about his acting experience in Parisian theater provide a diversion 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 10-12). Contrary to the narrator in Barbusse's Le Feu, who plunges himself into the masterful retelling of his war experiences, like the mythic hero eager to speak of his exploits (Campbell 1973: 190), Ehni's narrators remain reticent about their military assignments.

Similarly, in the novel's middle two chapters, 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 atrocities of the Algerian War. The explanatory footnotes given by the older narrator to clarify the Algerian's status under French law, the contents of the prayer "Ma chère Maman" and the meaning of the acronym "HS" 'hors de service' (Ehni 74, 89-90, 93), further distance the older narrator and the reader from the contents of the soldier René's diary, namely the horrific details about the death of two Algerian child shepherds at the hands of the young René's commanding officer. It is as if the older narrator relies on his own comic relief to keep himself from falling too deeply into his memories of the past.

Overblown emoting likewise makes Algérie roman ambiguous. In relating 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 about crying while writing about saying good-by to their grandfather just before reporting for military service (Ehni 12-13). In the same way, René the young soldier's journal contains the draft of a letter to his mother indicating how much he dislikes writing, because the writing act is simply "too painful" (Ehni 36). The reader is struck again by the narrator's artful pose as he claims to shed tears; in Le Feu, by Barbusse, such an exaggerated emotional response to the stressors of fighting and writing does not exist.

The elder René resumes his discussion of the writer's pain in hinting at the suffering that he and his fellow soldiers inflicted 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 est le seul devoir de tuer: se détruire. Autodestruction. (Ehni 72-73)

From the above, the reader grasps the idea that writing about the Algerian War is a violent act: re-examining one's role as a soldier long ago implies having to plumb and possibly edit memories about one's earlier identity. Ehni's dramatic narrator contrasts sharply with the twentieth century storyteller mentioned previously. Rather than retell their stories without dwelling on their own suffering as a soldier and later author, René the younger and René the elder insist on the various masculinities present during war, from homosexuality and its sensitivity to hyper-machismo and its seeming lack of emotion.

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" and synonymous terms (Ehni 62). 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 160-61). Further, the contrast between the funny nicknames and the killing of Algerian villagers adds an ironic twist to the narration.

Word play or paronomasia (Lanham 73) further designates the narrators' disturbance of textual integrity as well as playful tone. For example, the elder René declares, "Paris vaut bien un macule." (Ehni 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 is well worth a mass" jars the reader; s/he consequently wonders about the narrator's purpose in equating his description of Paris to ink splashes 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" (Ehn 51). 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 elder narrator René's language play almost obscures his condemnation of both the Algerian War and the French army. He criticizes the pro-independence political party, the FLN

(*Front de Libération Nationale*), for pitting innocent civilians against the French military presence; moreover, 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). This lack of clarity stands in opposition to the unambiguous pedagogical statements that Barbusse's first person narrator makes about the war and national solidarity.

René's paronomasia completely fails, however, when he revisits an incident pertaining to an Algerian prisoner of war, Aïssa, Arabic for "Jesus". He confesses to seeing in the man's Semitic face the "face of the Archetype," and designates the moment as "the encounter with my God" (Ehni 155). Gone are ironic pretense and his poseur's attitude towards the narration at hand: the elder René demonstrates his ability to write linearly and chronologically as he elaborates his violent illumination. He concludes *Algérie roman* by stating that he experienced terror in standing before God: he reduces the experience to an ineffable, taboo subject (Ehni 156). The narrator, usually 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. The narrators' divergent stances remind us of the 21st century idea that healing from traumatic events, such as killing one's fellow man during war, requires "re-externalizing the event" (Felman and Laub 69; qtd in Anderson and MacCurdy, Writing 6). Ultimately, Ehni's novel defies closure in its final sentence: the ellipsis visually moves the reader forward, beyond the narration that has just come to an end.

Algérie roman essentially transmits the same image of masculinity as that found in the 1916 novel, Le Feu. Neither work portrays soldiers as mere killing machines. Ehni, through his inclusion of anecdotes about his homosexuality, emotional moments with his family before his military service, and painful re-visitation of his war memories, underscores his narrators'

masculinity as being founded on empathy towards their fellow man instead of a homicidal instinct. Barbusse likewise insists on soldiers as “men,” most of all. Although the narrator in Le Feu does not hesitate in recounting the whole truth about his squadron’s heroic exploits during the First World War, Ehni’s narrators demonstrate that one’s personal truth about being a soldier and a man does not rely on physical strength alone; nor does its story write itself effortlessly.

Through his difficulties in connecting his traumatic past with his present via the act of writing, René, the elder narrator of Algérie roman, also exemplifies the definition of the modern “nation,” as its *people* [my emphasis] who are simultaneously the “‘objects’ of a nationalist pedagogy” and the “‘subjects’ of a process of signification” that both redeems and defines national life (Bhabha, Nation 97). This message also manifests itself in Barbusse’s Le Feu whenever the narrator mentions the soldiers’ unanimous war efforts despite the socio-economic and linguistic differences among them.

Not until June 1999 did France officially recognize that the Algerian War from 1954 to 1962 had been more than “‘the Algerian events’,” among other euphemisms (Donadey 17, 1). The French government’s delayed acceptance of responsibility for another *war* [my emphasis] implies a major change in feelings about the French nation and its “nationalist pedagogy,” especially for participants in the Algerian War. One could perceive Ehni’s narrators as grappling with the modified story of Algeria’s struggle for independence as a *war* [my emphasis], and with their role as a soldier at that time. In this regard, the final ellipsis “concluding” Algérie roman suggests that the narrator’s account of himself as a signifier of the French nation at war connotes additional mental processing and writing.

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