

*H-France Review* Vol. 8 (June 2008), No. 78

Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2007. ix + 214 pp. Bibliography and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 13: 978-0-8014-4523-1.

Review by Margaret H. Darrow, Dartmouth College

Combatants in the First World War, especially those on the western front, struggled to make sense of what they experienced as senseless and to convey to those outside the trenches the truth of their experiences. To testify, they themselves had to become witnesses. In short, they had to construct both narratives and narrators. It is this double transformation, of experience into narrative and of soldier into author, that is the subject of Leonard Smith's new book, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*.

Historians of the First World War know Smith from his provocative first book, *Between Mutiny and Obedience*.<sup>[1]</sup> In it, he argued that French soldiers were active agents throughout the war whose consent, or lack of it, constantly shaped the French war effort. Throughout the war, French soldiers remained citizens; their fundamental actions were those of will. *The Embattled Self*, although a very different book, is also about soldiers' acts of will—in this case, of self-creation as experience is turned into testimony. In this study, the soldiers' battle is not so much in the trenches as at the typewriters.

*The Embattled Self* examines French soldiers' published writings—diaries, letters, memoirs, short stories, novels—as a body of testimony. Smith does not include poetry, a less significant genre of war testimony in twentieth-century France than in Britain. Apollinaire is the best-known French war poet but he is not alone, as Ian Higgins pointed out.<sup>[2]</sup> Because lyric poetry is less concerned with narrative, it falls outside Smith's interests in the construction of narrated experience—the confrontation of the irreducible "now" of experience with the imperative of temporal coherence of narrative.

Even excluding poetry, this is an enormous amount of material that has long been grist for the mills of First World War historians. Smith asks that historians examine it, not piecemeal but as a whole. To what does it testify? What order of truth does it reveal? Testimony, he contends, has two components: the empirical—what "really happened"—and the moral—what it meant (p. 12). In *The Embattled Self*, Smith explores the difficulties soldiers had with both aspects of testimony, difficulties that they never satisfactorily resolved.

Smith aptly describes what has become the metanarrative of the First World War:

The war of 1914–18 became construed as a tragedy, and the hero in it, the soldier of the trenches, a tragic victim. A figure of great virtue (sincerity, honesty, and above all bravery) but also of great flaws (notably a youthful innocence bordering on gullibility), he is swept away by forces of fate well beyond his control....The destruction is foreordained, in this case through his elders who hold the reins of power. Should he survive, the shattered veteran can simply testify to his victimization, for the possible benefit of civilian society and above all posterity (p. 8).

This story emerged in the 1930s; recently reinvigorated in a spate of novels and films,<sup>[3]</sup> it today gives

meaning to the First World War.

But historians have long been aware that this account never encompassed all of the war testimony. In response to Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*,<sup>[4]</sup> Rose Maria Bracco argued that the story of the "futility of war" was not the only--or even the most prevalent--way that British soldiers translated their war experience into literature. Nor, she claimed, can those writers who found purpose in the war be dismissed as having missed the boat of modernity.<sup>[5]</sup> If alienation and irony were the only authentic meanings of the war, what are historians to make of the abundant evidence of community and commitment? For example, Lionel Lemarchand discovered that the soldier who wrote one of the most despairing letters in his collection of censored correspondence of 1917 went home to become mayor of his village.<sup>[6]</sup> And Martha Hanna reports that artilleryman Paul Pireaud wrote in 1916 from Verdun, "Here it is extermination on the ground," yet quoted Pétain's "On les aura" with complete conviction.<sup>[7]</sup> Smith proposes to examine in *The Embattled Self* what the master narrative omits and what the story looks like when these omissions become central to it rather than aberrations to be explained away.

Smith identifies four alternative narratives that French soldier-authors constructed to relate the truth of their experience: narratives of rite of passage, of mastery, and of consent, and finally, what became the metanarrative of trauma and tragedy. One chapter explores each narrative strategy via selected examples of war writing, most of it by authors well known to historians, such as Marc Bloch, Henri Barbusse, and Blaise Cendrars, but some of it less well known, such as Francisque Vial's 1918 memoir *Territoriaux de France*. Smith selects works on the basis of what the writing contributes to his discussion of narrative strategy rather than because of its popularity or literary merit. The chapters, each exploring the opportunities, variations and weaknesses of one narrative strategy, describe a rough chronology. Rite-of-passage narratives belong largely to the first years of the war while the war-as-tragedy narrative matured in the 1930s. Narratives of mastery and of consent coexist both developmentally and temporally between these two poles.

These categories are not exclusive; as Smith's analysis makes clear, a single testimony can incorporate elements from different narrative strategies. For example, René Benjamin's best-selling war novel, *Gaspard* (1915), largely emplots a rite of passage (pp. 25-29) but finds this in consent (pp. 151-52) and includes, in an early iteration of the *tranchée des baïonnettes* story,<sup>[8]</sup> an attempt to master death (pp. 68-69). Smith does not pretend that these are the only ways in which soldiers attempted to author their experience. He presents them nevertheless as the main narrative strategies. And while French testimony shares with other First World War writing the narratives of rites of passage, of mastery, and of tragedy, the narrative of consent, Smith argues, may be uniquely French.

The rite-of-passage narrative, in Smith's view, proved quite adept at portraying French soldiers' entry into the war. Soldiers described the mobilization as an experience of solidarity and their first encounter with combat as their *baptême de feu*. However, the narrative soon reached an impasse. A rite of passage should transform the initiate by endowing him with special knowledge then reintegrate him into his society in a new, but prescribed, role. Smith points out that there was nothing either illuminating or prescribed about soldiers' experiences in the First World War. Artilleryman Paul Lintier who looked forward to his first battle as a "baptism of fire," concluded his description of it with an admission of confusion: "The battle is lost. I do not know why or how. I saw nothing" (pp. 37-38). A rite of passage imposed closure, but the First World War offered none. And the special knowledge that combat imparted was the immense vulnerability of the male body and the omnipresence of death.

The narrative of mastery developed to make sense of the experience of death and mutilation that the rite of passage could not contain. In this story, as Smith describes it, the soldier triumphs over what happens to him by claiming it as his own and endowing it with transcendent value. In the mastery narrative, suffering and death are the price the soldier accepts for commensurate rewards to come. Narrators

looked forward to different outcomes: while Etienne Derville was willing to sacrifice his life “for the rechristianization of our country” (p. 65), for Henri Barbusse the cause was socialism. But as the war dragged on, narrators increasingly struggled to envision a victory grand and noble enough to justify it. Nor was the problem solely that of the mass scale of the sacrifices. What outcome could be “worth” his right hand to writer Blaise Cendrars? Smith teases out Cendrars's attempt to “master” his amputation in the story, “The Red Lily,” whose narrator concluded without a conclusion: “Never did we find the key to the enigma” (p. 90).

Soldier authors also had great difficulties dealing with killing, usually omitting it from their testimony. Killing is almost entirely absent from rite-of-passage narratives despite the fact that, in some tribal rites, it is killing that transforms a boy into a man.[9] Smith cites only one French testimony, that of medical student Lucien Laby, that places killing as what is necessary to achieve illumination and transformation: “Sigh of relief. I killed, I hope, my Boche, and perhaps several of them. I have done my duty as a Frenchman....And now, it is with a better heart that I will do my duty as a doctor” (p. 94).

Killing for a just cause proved even more difficult to master than suffering or even dying for one. Smith traces Maurice Genevoix's shifting story of shooting German soldiers. Between 1916 and 1961, in different accounts, Genevoix changed the number of Germans he killed, the terms he used to describe them, and the immediate circumstances of the killing. From four “Boches” unaware of him whom Genevoix summarily shot, one by one, in the back, the story became two German soldiers, who, realizing he was there, were about to turn and kill him. In an interview in 1977, Genevoix renounced the effort of mastery altogether, declaring that he hoped he had not killed them at all (pp. 97-100).

Smith's discussion of the narrative of consent is both original and persuasive, and ties *The Embattled Self* to his earlier book about the 1917 mutinies. Perhaps in response to criticism of that book, Smith marshals impressive evidence of French soldiers' articulation of consent. In these narratives, French soldiers entered the war conscious of their status as citizens and willingly embraced the military duty that this entailed. They understood themselves to be enacting the Rousseauian social contract: in obeying orders, they were obeying only themselves. Where this paradox seemed a “miracle” to Jean Marot in his 1919 book *Ceux qui vivent...* (p. 114), it was a simple expression of French citizenship to Francisque Vial: “It thus happened that discipline no longer came from the grip of wills from above on the wills from below. It came from below, spontaneously....They are an egalitarian and democratic army, and we cannot say often enough, a fraternal army” (p. 121).

Smith defines the narrative of consent as a distinct strategy but it seems to me to be a development of the narrative of mastery. With it, French soldier-authors attempted to master the war as a whole, to make it *their* war. As André Pézard wrote in *Nous autres à Vauquois* (1918), the war might be “long and ignoble and stupid” but “we are the ones doing it, it is our thing, and we do not want others to permit themselves to speak ill of it” (p. 117). According to Smith, the deepening horror of the war only deepened the soldiers' commitment, beyond any rational calculus. The narrator's consent to his suffering bound him in community with his fellow soldiers but also to his family and through them to the nation. Smith concludes that, as a result, the narrator of the consent story could not reject the war, even when describing in graphic detail its horror and hopelessness. In doing so, he would be rejecting his own identity as a citizen and even as a man, since citizenship, masculinity and military service were tightly intertwined in French republicanism.

Like the narrative of mastery, the narrative of consent broke down on the issue of compensation. What outcome of the war would redeem so much suffering and so much death? Some narrators found it impossible to imagine an end to the fighting because their commitment to the war had come to constitute their own identity. After the war was over, however, the consent narrative became truly grotesque: France had consented to suffer so much, but for what? This diminished, sordid, bitter future?[10]

All of these testimonies foundered on the narrative necessity of closure: they could not reconcile the sacrifice with the outcome. Cendrars's enigma remained intact. Smith argues that what became the metanarrative of the war developed to address this fundamental problem. The story of the war as a tragedy is not more realistic than other accounts; Smith quite rightly points out that even rite-of-passage narratives could eloquently describe the war's chaotic brutality. The advantage of the metanarrative is that it took the lack of closure as its truth. Smith argues that it is not merely a story of the tragedy and futility of the war (or of war in general), but of the inevitability—the inescapability—of war: war as trauma, never transcended, never mastered but repeated over and over. This narrative is located in, and makes sense of, the 1930s when war again hovered on the horizon. The “closure” of the First World War could only be the Second—the Third, the Fourth, into infinity.

Smith's analysis of these narratives makes for absorbing reading. Even the reader who knows many of these texts well will find new insights here. I particularly enjoyed Smith's analysis of Marc Bloch's war diary and the narrative he wrote from it several months later (pp. 32-34; 45-47). It is an illuminating example of the conundrum that faced the war writers—and perhaps all writers who attempt to construct narrative from experience.

*The Embattled Self* stands on the intersection of literature and history. Some readers of H-France may decide that it tilts too far toward literary criticism. It does not tell readers anything new about the war or French soldiers' experience of it and its lesson for the historian, that no evidence comes unmediated, is well known. But war writing itself has a history and, as Smith repeatedly demonstrates, participates in the history of the war and its aftermath. The task of turning war experience into narrative was difficult—even perilous—work. For many, such as Cendrars, writing about the experience of war was as tortured as the war experience itself. Readers will gain from Smith's book a greater understanding and respect for both the genre of war testimony and its embattled practitioners.

## NOTES

[1] Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[2] Ian Higgins, ed., *Anthology of First World War French Poetry* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1996).

[3] Examples include Sebastian Faulks, *Birdsong* (New York: Random House, 1993); Pat Barker, *The Regeneration Trilogy* (London: Viking, 1996); Sébastien Japrisot, *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (Paris: Denoël, 1991), which was made into an Oscar-nominated film by Jean-Pierre Jeunet in 2004; Bertrand Tavernier's films, *La vie et rien d'autre* (1989) and *Capitaine Conan* (1989), the latter from the novel of the same name by Roger Vercelet (1934); and Christian Arion's 2005 film, *Joyeux Noël* about the 1914 Christmas truce.

[4] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[5] Rose Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp. 1-19.

[6] Lionel Lemarchand, *Lettres censurées des tranchées, 1917* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), pp. 183-84, 193-97.

---

[7] Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 104, 119.

[8] According to the legend, sixty men of one company at Verdun confronted such heavy bombardment that they were all buried, erect, with their bayonets protruding from the soil. An American banker, George Rand, was so taken with this tale of bravery that he donated a substantial sum to have a memorial built on the site, which exists to this day at Verdun, although minus the bayonets, stolen long ago. No such event occurred however, although, of course, many soldiers were buried in their dugouts and trenches. See Antoine Prost, "Verdun," in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 2, pt. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 120-22.

[9] Joshua S. Goldstein, *Gender and War: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 264.

[10] The story of consent and redemption, recounted at sites such as Verdun, remains France's quasi-official narrative of the First World War. At the Citadel of Verdun, the last stop of an automated tour recounts the selection of the Unknown Soldier and intones, against a swell of violins and trumpets, that these millions did not die in vain, that their blood revitalized France's glory.

Margaret H. Darrow  
Dartmouth College  
[margaret.h.darrow@Dartmouth.edu](mailto:margaret.h.darrow@Dartmouth.edu)

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the [Editor-in-Chief of H-France](#). ISSN 1553-9172