

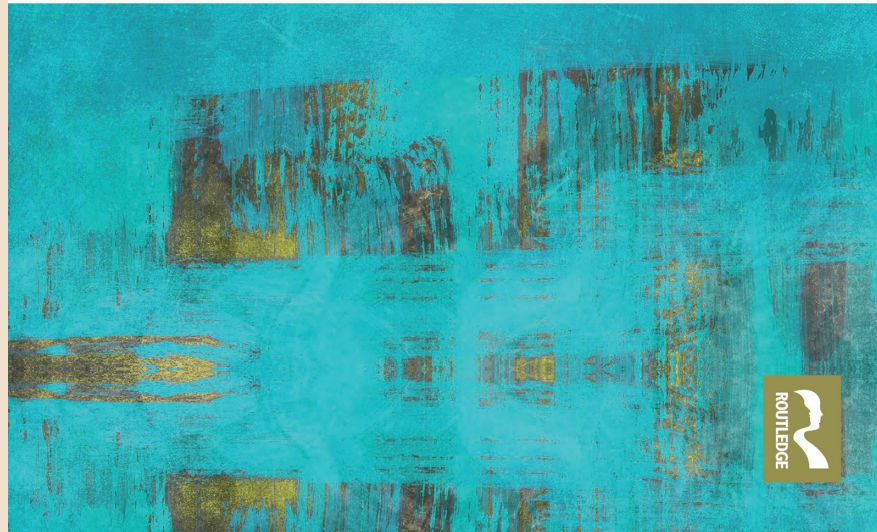


*Among the Victorians and Modernists*

# WRITERS AT WAR

**EXPLORING THE PROSE OF FORD MADOX FORD, MAY  
SINCLAIR, SIEGFRIED SASSOON AND MARY BORDEN**

Isabelle Brasme





May Sinclair



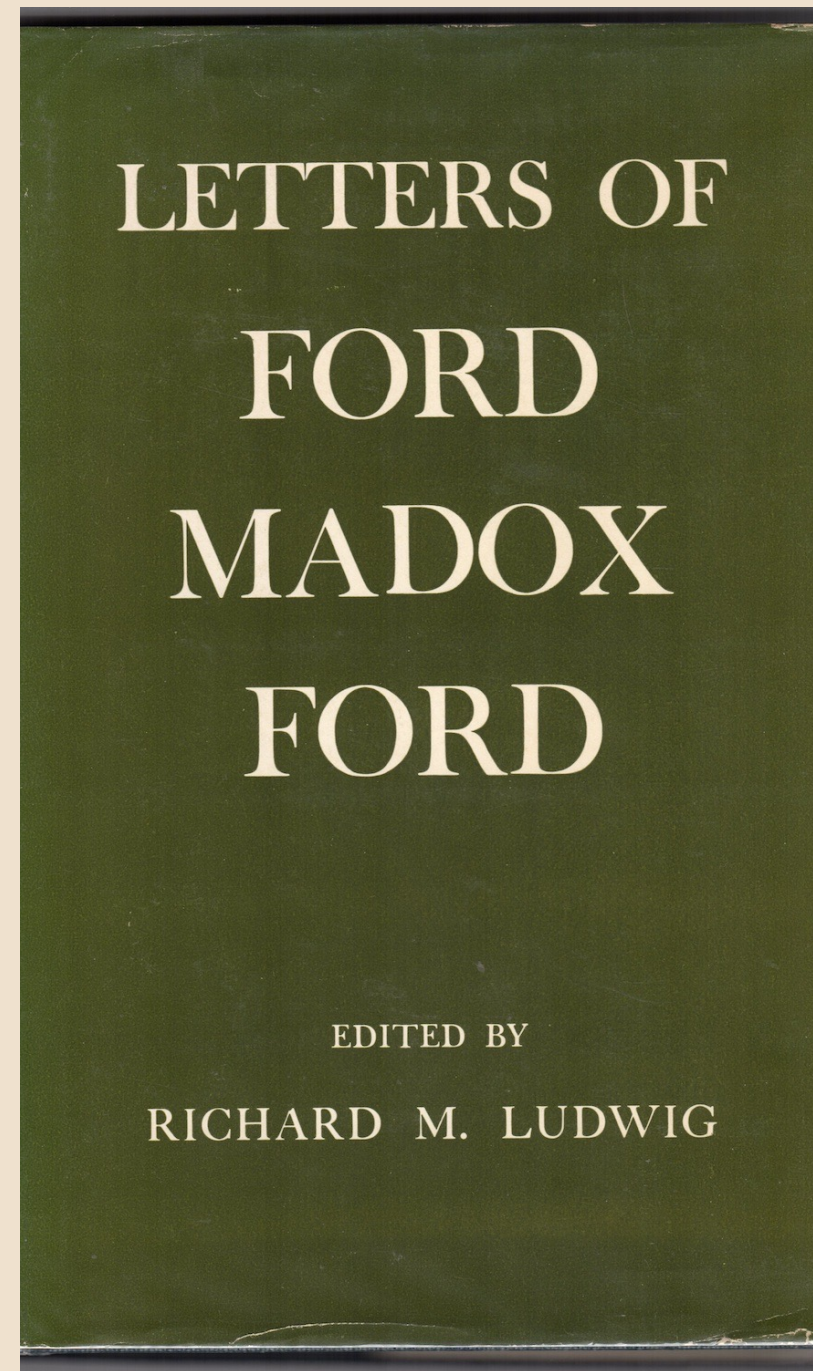
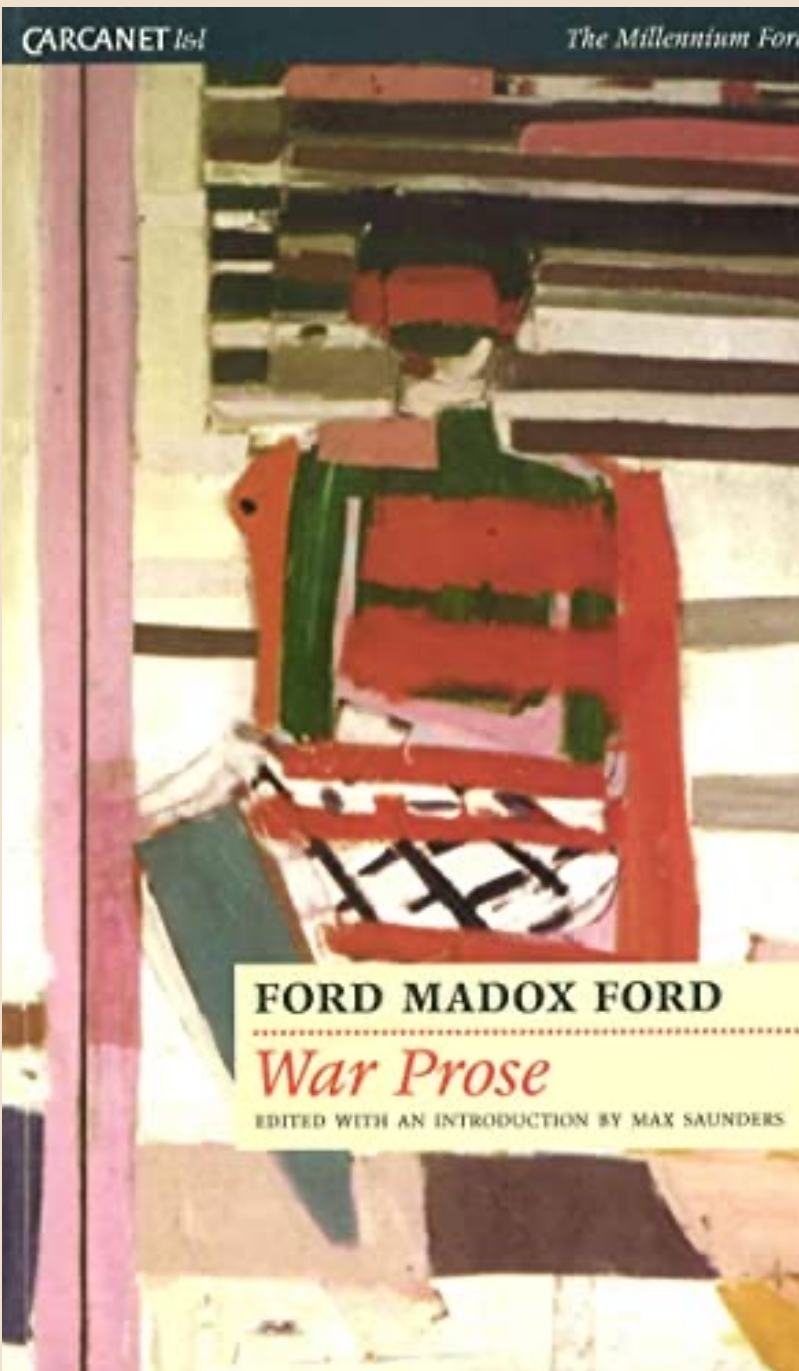
Ford Madox Ford



Siegfried Sassoon



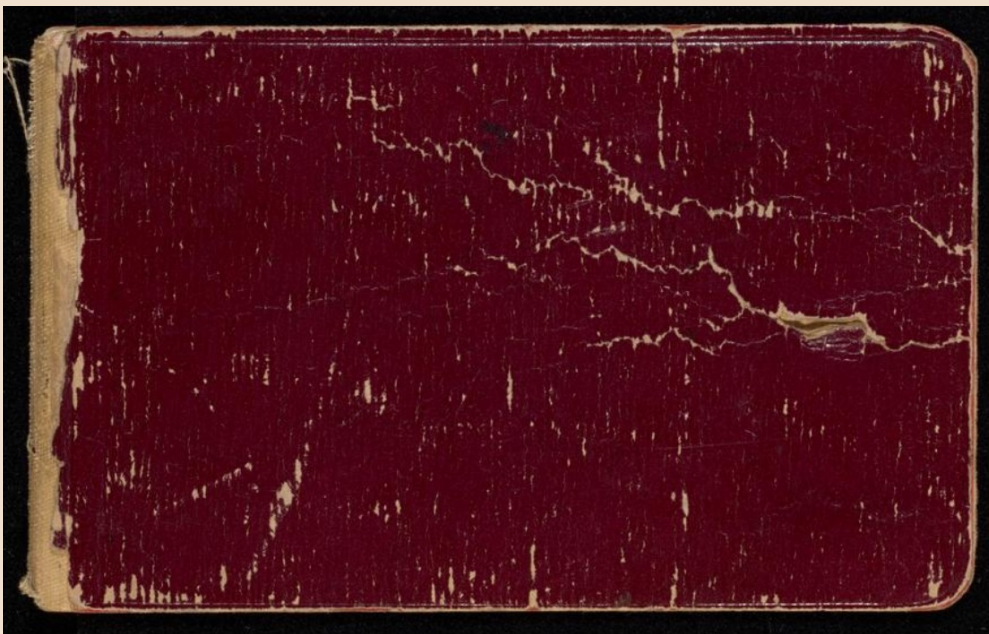
Mary Borden



A JOURNAL OF  
 IMPRESSIONS  
 IN BELGIUM  
 MAY SINCLAIR



~~against~~ ~~spanish~~ Flemish  
 We pass ~~low~~ houses with white walls (This) 10  
~~books~~ ~~serious~~ ~~flung out~~ ~~again~~ in red roofs & green doors - sheltering  
~~are~~ ~~late~~ & slender like old trees, ~~the~~ the colours - vivid as if the  
 paint had been laid on this morning, yesterday. It is all un-  
 flat Sunny (and  
 We go along a straight ~~road~~ highway of ~~flat~~ stoums, ~~between~~  
 thin lines of trees - tall & slender & delicate trees - ~~through flat~~  
~~country~~ formed for the very impression of peace. (Sunny fields  
~~There~~ ~~are~~ ~~no~~ ~~hedges~~ ~~hedges~~. ~~Only~~ ~~have~~ ~~laid~~ ~~them~~ ~~at~~  
~~There~~ ~~is~~ ~~no~~ ~~open~~ ~~a~~ ~~straight~~ ~~row~~ ~~of~~  
 poplars or pollard willows, ~~stretching~~ ~~as~~ ~~a~~ ~~screen~~ ~~against~~ ~~the~~ ~~open~~  
 sky. ~~This~~ ~~country~~ ~~is~~ ~~formed~~ ~~for~~ ~~the~~ ~~very~~ ~~impression~~ ~~of~~ ~~peace~~.  
 All these straight things, the straight flat roads, the straight ~~tall~~  
 trees, ~~stand~~ ~~give~~ ~~us~~ ~~an~~ ~~immense~~ ~~stillness~~ (the straight flat fields)  
 & serenity in an immense ~~quest~~ ~~in~~ ~~tranquillity~~ ~~serenity~~ (serenity  
 & sprakably beautiful & it ~~conveys~~ ~~will~~ ~~the~~ ~~horror~~ ~~shock~~ ~~of~~  
~~the~~ ~~horror~~ ~~of~~ ~~war~~. ~~I~~ ~~am~~ ~~going~~ ~~into~~ ~~the~~ ~~horror~~ ~~of~~ ~~war~~.  
~~I~~ ~~can~~ ~~not~~ ~~see~~ ~~or~~ ~~feel~~ ~~for~~ ~~this~~ ~~beauty~~. ~~I~~  
 look & look, realise it. All that I can (at the moment is  
 it. ~~for~~ ~~me~~. ~~Is~~ ~~it~~ ~~possible~~ ~~that~~ ~~I~~ ~~am~~ ~~enjoying~~ ~~myself~~?  
 for all I know it may be a gesture, here, behind his serenity; a  
 thing, beyond that line of willows. I don't know. I don't care.  
 (V.P.) I dare not talk ~~how~~ I dare not talk  
 of his others. ~~They~~ ~~are~~ ~~inspired~~ ~~with~~ ~~a~~ ~~formal~~ ~~integrity~~. ~~They~~  
 know what they are here for. an austere sense of duty,  
 me it is incredible that I ~~is~~ ~~be~~ ~~here~~.  
 I am in Car I, sitting beside Tom, the chauffeur. ~~There~~  
 is on the other side of me. Tom disapproves of  
 these ~~poor~~ Flemish roads. ~~He~~ ~~can't~~ ~~see~~ ~~that~~ ~~they~~

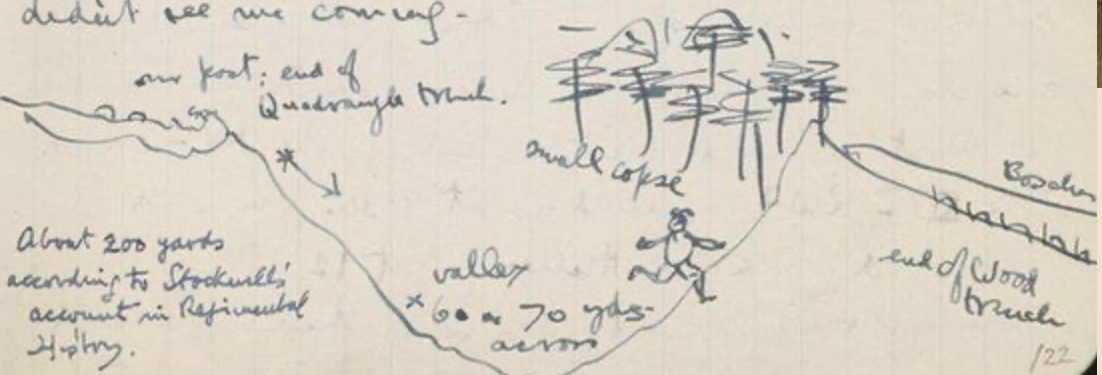


18/  
 March 19th. Riding out to the trenches last night the sky at 6:30 was angry with a red smoky sunset: the village loomed against the glow; it was a sultry, threatening dusk - But when I came home at 10 o'clock everything was covered with exquisite moonlight & a great star hung over Marlescourt, unbelievably bright in the pale azure heavens.

This morning came the evil news from the trenches - first, that Trooper Richardson had died of wounds after being knocked over by a shell last night in front of the trenches; this was bad. But they came afterwards & told that my little Tommy had been hit by a stray bullet & died last night. When last I saw him <sup>two</sup> ~~the night before~~ <sup>ago</sup> ~~last~~, he had this note-book in his hand, reading my last poem. And I said good night to him in the moonlit trenches, that I but know! - the old, human-wreck cry. Now he comes back to me in memories, like

an angel, with the light in his yellow hair, I think of him at Cambridge last August when we lived together 4 weeks in Pembroke Coll. in rooms where the previous occupants name, "Paradise" was written above the door.

sniped a lot from the wood, & we had 5 men killed & several wounded. (C.D. Morgan - got hit in the leg - not badly) - I went across from our bombing post <sup>where</sup> to wood trench ended, as there was a Bosche sniper: the others fired at the parapet so they didn't see me coming.



About 200 yards according to Stockwell's account in Regimental History.

THE  
FORBIDDEN  
ZONE



MARY BORDEN



party today - most of them slight.  
No one killed. My wound is hurting like  
hell & the tetanus injection has made me very chilly & queer.  
I am half dead for lack of sleep -  
sitting in a chair <sup>up</sup> with my same old clothes -  
putties & all & ~~for~~ not having been offered  
even a wash. Never mind - "For 1 1/2  
"How thro' sped thro'! - O life! O Sun!"

1/9

Journal de Siegfried Sassoon, entrée du 16 avril 1917.

Cette page est écrite alors que Sassoon vient d'être touché à l'épaule et qu'une partie des soldats de sa compagnie a été tuée lors d'une attaque.

# I. L'émergence d'une phénoménologie de la guerre

1. Un paradoxe scopique
2. L'impossible cartographie
3. Paysages sonores
4. Une phénoménologie en creux

# II. La puissance éthique des proses de guerre

1. L'impulsion testimoniale
2. L'humanité comme matière
3. Le *care* comme expérience radicale de l'altérité



# I. L'émergence d'une phénoménologie de la guerre

- Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, 2005.
- Sassoon: 'sensuous frontline experience'.

## 1. Un paradoxe scopique

To be in the trenches was to experience an unreal, unforgettable enclosure and constraint, as well as a sense of being unoriented and lost. One saw two things only: the walls of an unlocalized, undifferentiated earth and the sky above.

Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 54

To be in the trenches was to experience an unreal, unforgettable enclosure and constraint, as well as a sense of being unoriented and lost. One saw two things only: the walls of an unlocalized, undifferentiated earth and the sky above.

Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 54

And it came into my head to think that here was the most amazing fact of history. For in the territory beneath the eye, or just hidden by folds in the ground, there must have been – on the two sides – a million men, moving one against the other [...]. It was an extraordinary feeling to have in a wide landscape.

But there it stopped.

Ford, 'Arms and the Mind', 38

To be in the trenches was to experience an unreal, unforgettable enclosure and constraint, as well as a sense of being unoriented and lost. One saw two things only: the walls of an unlocalized, undifferentiated earth and the sky above.

Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 54

And it came into my head to think that here was the most amazing fact of history. For in the territory beneath the eye, or just hidden by folds in the ground, there must have been – on the two sides – a million men, moving one against the other [...]. It was an extraordinary feeling to have in a wide landscape.

But there it stopped.

Ford, 'Arms and the Mind', 38

One is always too close or too remote.

Ford, 'Epilogue', 59

La guerre ne peut se détacher du spectacle magique parce que la production de ce spectacle est son but même. [...] Il n'y a donc pas de guerre sans représentation.

Virilio, *Guerre et Cinéma*, 1984, 7-8

**Below my window** in the big bright square a struggle is going on between the machines of war and the people of the town.

Borden, 'The Square', *The Forbidden Zone*

Ah, dear God, it's true! Look! **Look through the window.** The old men are undoing the bundles inside this shed. Look, there's a face and there's an arm hanging down crooked, and there I see a pair of boots sticking out at one end of a bundle.

[...]

Come away, **come away from the window.** I know now. There is no need to sneak up and stare at them.

Borden, 'The City in the Desert', *The Forbidden Zone*

**Beyond the gauze curtains** of the tender night there is War, and nothing else but War.

Borden, 'Moonlight', *The Forbidden Zone*

I have dared to dedicate these pages to the *poilus* who passed through our hands during the war, because I believe they would recognise the dim reality reflected in these pictures.

Borden, 'Preface', *The Forbidden Zone*



# I. L'émergence d'une phénoménologie de la guerre

1. Un paradoxe scopique
2. L'impossible cartographie

When I used to ride in from the line to Divisional HQ in Albert, for the purpose of copying onto the maps for Battalion use, the alteration of trenches that had been made in the night, I know that the lines that I made with blue, yellow or red pencils, on the map that showed Pozières, Welch Alley, Bazentin le Petit or Mametz and High Wood ..... those lines which represented Brigade and Divisional boundaries, new trenches, the enemy's new lines, MG emplacements and so on, represented nothing visual at all to my intelligence.

[...] No: the mind connected nothing from the maps, except that we hadn't yet – we had eventually – taken Ovillers, La Boisselle and Pozières.

Ford Madox Ford, 'War and the Mind', 1916.

The unconscious map lay spread out beneath it: the wide plain, the long white beach and the sea, lay there exposed to [the plane]’s speeding eye.

On the face of the plain were villages and cities [...].

[T]here dropped something from [the plane] that flashed through the air, a spark of fire. [...] The bombardment had commenced.

The face of the city had begun to show a curious change. Scars appeared on it like the marks of smallpox and as these thickened on its trim surface, it seemed as if it were being attacked by an invisible and gigantic beast, who was tearing and gnawing it with claws and teeth. Gashes appeared in its streets, long wounds with ragged edges. Helpless, spread out to the heavens, it grimaced with mutilated features.

(Borden, ‘Bombardment’, *The Forbidden Zone* 9)

[I]f you have never known what melancholy is and would like to know it, I can recommend two courses. Go down the Grand Canal in Venice in the grey spring of the year, in a gondola, all by yourself. Or get mixed up with a field ambulance which is not only doing noble work but running thrilling risks, in neither of which you have a share, or the ghost of a chance of a share; cut yourself off from your comrades, if it is only for a week, and go into a Belgian café in war-time and try to eat brioches and drink English tea all by yourself. This is the more successful course. You may see hope beyond the gondola and the Grand Canal. But you will see no hope beyond the brioche and the English tea.

May Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, 104-5.

Why, the very refugees have the look of a rather tired tourist-party, wandering about, seeing Ghent, seeing the Cathedral.

Only they aren't looking at the Cathedral. They are looking straight ahead, across the Place, up the street; they do not see or hear the trams swinging down on them, or the tearing, snorting motors; they stroll abstractedly into the line of the motors and stand there; they start and scatter, wild-eyed, with a sudden recrudescence of the terror that has driven them here from their villages in the fields.

May Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, 113-14.

# I. L'émergence d'une phénoménologie de la guerre

1. Un paradoxe scopique
2. L'impossible cartographie
3. Paysages sonores

All night there has been a sound of the firing of machine guns [?]. At first it was like the barking, of all the dogs in Belgium. I thought it *was* the dogs of Belgium, till I discovered a deadly rhythm and precision in the barking<sup>1</sup>.

May Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions*, 1915, 174

1. I'm inclined to think it may have been the dogs of Belgium, after all. I can't think where the guns could have been. Antwerp had fallen. It might have been the bombardment of Melle, though.

Thursday night. 10 pm. Twenty-seven men with faces blackened and shiny [...] waiting in a dug-out in the reserve line. [...] A red flashlight winks a few times to guide us thither. Then up to the front line—the men's feet making a most unholy tramp and din [...]. I am sitting on the parapet listening for something to happen—five, ten, nearly fifteen minutes—not a sound—nor a shot fired—and only the usual flare-lights, none very near our party. . [...] After twenty minutes there is still **absolute silence** in the Bosche trench. [...]

A minute or two later **a rifle-shot rings out** and almost simultaneously several bombs are thrown by both sides: a bomb explodes right in the water at the bottom of left crater close to our men, and showers a pale spume of water; there are blinding flashes and **explosions, rifle-shots, the scurry of feet, curses and groans**, and stumbling figures loom up from below and scramble awkwardly over the parapet—some wounded—black faces and whites of eyes and lips show in the dusk [...]. They are still throwing bombs and firing at us: the **sinister sound of clicking bolts** seems to be very near [...].

I go back to a support-line dug-out and find the unwounded men of the raiding-party refreshing themselves: everyone is accounted for now; eleven, wounded (one died of wounds) and one killed, out of twenty-eight. [...] I get down to 71 North about 2.15, with **larks beginning to sing** in the drizzling pallor of the sky.

Sassoon, entry for 25 May 1916



I will continue, 'for yr information and necessary action, please,' my notes upon sounds.

In woody country heavy artillery makes most noise, because of the echoes—and most prolonged in a diluted way.

On marshland—like the Romney Marsh—the sound seems alarmingly close: I have seldom heard the Hun artillery in the middle of a strafe except on marshy land. The sound, not the diluted sound, is also at its longest in the air. [...]

On dry down land the sound is much sharper; it hits you & shakes you. On clay land it shakes the ground & shakes you thro' the ground. [...]

Shells falling on a church: these make a huge 'corump' sound, followed by a noise like crockery falling off a tray—as the roof tiles fall off.

Ford Madox Ford, Letter to Joseph Conrad, September 1916.

# I. L'émergence d'une phénoménologie de la guerre

1. Un paradoxe scopique
2. L'impossible cartographie
3. Paysages sonores
4. Une phénoménologie en creux



Frontispice de  
*The Forbidden Zone*

## II. La puissance éthique des proses de guerre

### 1. L'impulsion testimoniale

Few writers can have engaged themselves as combatants in what, please God, will yet prove to be the war that ended war, without the intention of aiding with their writings, if they survived, in bringing about such a state of mind as should end wars as possibilities.

Ford, lettre dédicatoire à William Bird, *No More Parades*, 1925

Thursday night. 10 pm. Twenty-seven men with faces blackened and shiny [...] waiting in a dug-out in the reserve line. [...] A red flashlight winks a few times to guide us thither. Then up to the front line—the men's feet making a most unholy tramp and din [...]. I am sitting on the parapet listening for something to happen—five, ten, nearly fifteen minutes—not a sound—nor a shot fired—and only the usual flare-lights, none very near our party. . [...] After twenty minutes there is still **absolute silence** in the Bosche trench. [...]

A minute or two later **a rifle-shot rings out** and almost simultaneously several bombs are thrown by both sides: a bomb explodes right in the water at the bottom of left crater close to our men, and showers a pale spume of water; there are blinding flashes and **explosions, rifle-shots, the scurry of feet, curses and groans**, and stumbling figures loom up from below and scramble awkwardly over the parapet—some wounded—black faces and whites of eyes and lips show in the dusk [...]. They are still throwing bombs and firing at us: the **sinister sound of clicking bolts** seems to be very near [...].

I go back to a support-line dug-out and find the unwounded men of the raiding-party refreshing themselves: everyone is accounted for now; eleven, wounded (one died of wounds) and one killed, out of twenty-eight. [...] I get down to 71 North about 2.15, with **larks beginning to sing** in the drizzling pallor of the sky.

Sassoon, entry for 25 May 1916

Joining events to language, the narrator as eye-witness is the testimonial bridge which, mediating between narrative and history, guarantees their correspondence and adherence to each other. This bridging between narrative and history is possible since the narrator is both an informal and honest witness [...]. Once endowed with language through the medium of the witness, history speaks for itself. All the witness has to do is to efface himself, and let the literality of events voice its own self-evidence.

Felman and Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 101).

I have blurred the bare horror of facts and softened the reality in spite of myself, not because I wished to do so, but because I was incapable of a nearer approach to the truth.

Borden, 'Preface', *The Forbidden Zone*



## II. La puissance éthique des proses de guerre

1. L'impulsion testimoniale
2. L'humanité comme matière

I saw two men and three mules (the first time I saw a casualty) killed by one shell. These things gave me no emotion at all – they seemed obvious.

Ford, Letter to Joseph Conrad, 6 September 1916.

I came right into the middle of ten or a dozen lamentably wounded men, waiting by a loop of the tramline, I suppose for a trolley to take them to a CCS. I remember the fact: but of the aspects of these men – nothing! Or so very little. [...] [T]hey are as dim in my memory as forgotten trees.

Ford, 'Arms and the Mind'.

In battle – and in the battle zone – **the whole world, humanity included, seems to assume the aspect of matter dominated eventually by gravity.** Large bits of pot fly about, smash large pieces of flesh: then one and the other fall, to lie in the dust among the immense thistles. That seems to be absolutely all. Hopes, passions, fears do not seem much to exist outside oneself – and only in varying degrees within oneself.

[...] It is, in fact, the sense of responsibility that is really numbing: your ‘job’ is so infinitely more important than any other human necessity, or the considerations of humanity, pity, or compassion. [...]

**It is all just matter – all humanity, just matter;** one with the trees, the shells by the roadside, the limbered wagons, the howitzers and the few upstanding housewalls. On the face of it I am a man who has taken a keen interest in the aspects of humanity – in the turn of an eyelash, an expression of joy, a gesture of despair.

Ford, ‘Arms and the Mind’

## II. La puissance éthique des proses de guerre

1. L'impulsion testimoniale
2. L'humanité comme matière
3. Vers une éthique de la singularité

War [...] has within it a large element of the symbolic and is ultimately [...] based on a simple and startling blend of the real and the fictional. In each, the incontestable reality of the body – the body in pain, the body maimed, the body dead and hard to dispose of – is separated from its source and conferred on an ideology or issue or instance of political authority impatient of, or deserted by, benign sources of substantiation.

Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 62

## II. La puissance éthique des proses de guerre

1. L'impulsion testimoniale
2. L'humanité comme matière
3. Vers une éthique de la singularité
4. Le *care* comme expérience radicale de l'altérité

it was the most terrible night I have ever spent in my life; and I have lived through a good many terrible nights in sick-rooms. But no amount of amateur nursing can take the place of training or of the self-confidence of knowing you are trained.

Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, 216-17

[H]e asked me if I had any books, and I thought that he wanted me to read to him. I told him I was afraid he mustn't be read to, he must go to sleep. And he said: 'I mean for you to read yourself—to pass the time.'

He is afraid that I shall be bored by sitting up with him, that I shall tire myself... (219)

La sensibilité est exposition à l'autre. Non point passivité d'inertie, persistance dans un état – repos ou mouvement – susceptibilité de subir la cause qui en fera sortir. L'exposition en tant que sensibilité est plus passive encore : comme une inversion du *conatus* de *l'esse*, un avoir été-offert-sans-retenu, ne trouvant pas de protection dans une quelconque consistance ou identité d'état. (Levinas 1974, 120)



De l'objet, l'abject n'a qu'une qualité – celle de s'opposer à *je*. [...] [L]'*abject*, objet déchu, est radicalement un exclu et me tire vers là où le sens s'effondre.

Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 1980, 9

Le cadavre [...] bouleverse plus violemment encore l'identité de celui qui s'y confronte comme un hasard fragile et fallacieux. [...] [L]e déchet comme le cadavre m'indiquent ce que je j'écarte en permanence pour vivre. [...] J'y suis aux limites de ma condition de vivant. (11)

The little whimpering voice of a man who is going to die in an hour or two comes across the whispering grass from the hut next door. That little sound I understand. It is like the mew of a wounded cat.

Borden, 'Moonlight', *The Forbidden Zone*, 52-53

He is my brother, that wounded cat. This also is true. His voice goes on and on. He tells the truth to me. He tells me what I know to be true. (56)

The auto-reject [...] is always able to think (itself) anew constantly and to be always open to what arrives to thought and to itself, which arrives not only from the future but also from the past. Auto-rejection involves creative regeneration, therefore, and not [...] self-annihilation.

Irving Goh, *The Reject: Community, Politics, and Religion After the Subject*, 2014, 7.

# Conclusion

[I]n some obscure way that goes beyond literary affect, our bodies are touched.

Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, 2005, 228.