The Refusal of War : Also a Literary Matter

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CHAPTER TEN

THE REFUSAL OF WAR: ALSO A LITERARY MATTER[1]

LUCA SALZA

The Great War enacts, for the first time in human history, "total mobilization". Starting in August 1914 a well-defined role and place in the mechanisms of the war is assigned to every individual, in almost every corner of the world, regardless of gender, social class, age class, religious or national affiliation. Nobody is left out. The men, women, elderly and children of every continent must make their contribution. Every existence is converted into energy, into working capacity. There is not a single atom of society that fails to be set in motion. As Ernst Jünger observes, once and for all, war no longer takes place only on the battlefields—where, among other things, hardly any of the men fighting are still professional soldiers, as they were in the wars of the past, but ordinary people. Let's look at the words of Jünger (1978, 126):

> The very image of war, therefore, insofar as it is armed action, increasingly fades into the much larger picture of a gigantic working process. Alongside the armies that clash on the battlefield, there appear those engaged in transport, food supply, the arms industry—the armies of labour, in short. In the last phase, already recognizable towards the end of the war, there is no single movement, not even that of the domestic worker bent over her sewing machine, which does not at least indirectly correspond to an act of war.

This war, in effect, is the 'first', it is 'great' because, first of all, its destiny is bound to the new industrial age. This is how the Great War unleashes a colossal production process to such an extent that there is no difference between the worker-mass, born on the Fordian assembly line,

[1] This essay and all quotations taken from texts unavailable in English have been translated by Simon Tanner.

and the soldier-mass, forced to engage in a series of various operations at the front and behind the lines. In both cases it is totally depersonalized work. Just as work in Fordian industry no longer has any associations with the *homo faber*, also the new war retains nothing of its traditional characteristics. Charlie Chaplin "soldier" is the same identical silhouette that skips or stumbles in the factory of *Modern Times*[2] (in the former case, however, Chaplin chooses his own field, that of the Entente, while in the latter he prefers to abandon everything and go far away ...). The "total mobilization" of modern war turns the whole of society into a kind of gigantic factory so that "total war" becomes a "war of matériel" ("*Materialschlacht*")[3]. This is why it was not the soldiers, their valour and their strength that determined the outcome of the war, but ice-cold, infernal technology. The terrible battle of the Somme began on 1 July 1916 at 7.28am with an explosion that produced a crater 30 metres deep and 100 metres wide. The landscape is still devastated today, one hundred years later: this immense crater can be seen in La Boisselle, a village located three kilometres from Albert in northern France. When launching the shell (which weighed 27 tonnes and contained ammonium nitrate and aluminium powder), the British soldiers took several precautions, yet the shock wave was so strong that in a 250-metre radius around the explosion, those who were unable to run away had their legs smashed. All those who were closer remained buried forever under the earth.

1. Ecce homo in the "war of matériel"

The strongest army would be the one whose industry was the most inventive and productive. And also the most destructive. The Great War definitively marked the alliance, or rather the 'equivalence', of production and destruction, forever associating the Prometheism of the industrial revolution with barbarity and death. Battlefields had always produced death, but now, with this war, the destruction of human lives, landscapes, things and symbolic values, became scientific and programmed, in line with the pure rules of capitalism (Hüppauf 1997, 17). The workers of

[2] *Shoulder Arms* is the film on the war that Charlie Chaplin made in 1918 in the United States. *Modern Times* is the film about the industrial society that he brought to the screen in 1936.

[3] It was German generals in the Great War who used this expression for the first time: "Hindenburg and Ludendorff, amazed by what they saw on the battlefields of the Somme in September 1916—they who until then had known only the Eastern front—therefore coined the expression 'battle of matériel' (*Materialschlacht*) to try and give a name to this great rupture" (Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 2010, 40).

'production' on the assembly lines were the workers—or more precisely soldiers—of 'destruction'[4], on the battlefields.

On the political level, the consequences of the Great War were immediately disastrous. The extreme violence inherent in it implied trivialization and a form of internalization of this very violence that would be reinvested in post-war politics. It was George L. Mosse (1990, 159) who defined the concept of "Brutalization". The war years offer numerous examples, not only through the experience of fighting on the front, but also in the relationships created between officers and soldiers or, more simply, between men. The problem was also, and above all, that, at the end of the hostilities, it would be impossible to forget all these episodes of violence. It would materialize in various ways: indifference to the fate of others or even to their own; exaltation of the dead of one's own side and dehumanization of the enemy (a category, that of the enemy, which no longer included only the enemy bearing arms, who lay beyond their borders, but all the 'different' people, even in their own country, who were not available or unsuitable for combat—starting with 'Metics' and 'sexual deviants'). The 'enemy' also included all those who rejected the need for social cohesion, by choice or necessity (we should remember that the figure of the Jew and that of the Bolshevik overlapped very naturally in the post-war period)[5]. There was also the idealization of virility and *esprit de corps*, which would be the unifying force, for example, of the German *Freikorps* and of the *fasci di combattimento* in Italy. In short, the Great War laid the foundations for a severe exacerbation of political life, one of the essential factors being the standardization of one or more groups of the population, which in turn led to the stigmatization of others who were excluded, if not to actual full-blown racism. In Germany after the war, there emerged groups of individuals who thought that the war was not over and that victory was still possible. This is how the violence of war directly entered the field of politics. Karl Kraus stated, as early as 1915, that soldiers would continue to be driven by rage after the end of the conflict. The soldiers who lost the war would launch themselves into a new war against the civilian population:

[4] Henri Barbusse in his great novel on the war, *Le feu. Journal d'une escouade* (Barbusse 1916), and Arnold Zweig, *Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa* (Zweig 1927), respectively define the soldiers of the Great War as "ouvriers de la destruction" and "Arbeiter des Zerstörung". I quote from Giovanni De Luna's fine book (2006, 44).

[5] On this issue, I would like to mention the fundamental book by Enzo Traverso (2013).

> In spite of everything, the soldier who returns home will not easily be reintegrated into civilian life. He will make a foray into the countryside, and only there will his war begin. He will grasp the successes that were denied him, and the war will seem like child's play compared to the peace that is about to break out (Kraus 1915, 34).

Kraus immediately warned that the effects of the war, of this first war, would be lasting. It is now pointless to stress that such extreme violence would be at the origin of fascist regimes, and more generally, of a century of mass slaughter. It is precisely violence that Marco Revelli sees as characterizing the twentieth century, but, in his book, violence is something deeper still: it is above all the *Leitmotiv* of the politics of this century. Violence manifests itself in a concentrated, uniforming way, it develops in every corner of society:

> a universal and permanent form of collective relations between men, identified with the Politician, and therefore not an (exceptional and preliminary) act external to the constitution of society, but an intrinsic mode of its operation, to the point of making exception the rule (Revelli 2001, 26).

It would in fact be the rule during the "European civil war". How long would it last? For Ian Kershaw (2015), who takes up George L. Mosse's concept of "Brutalization", the Great War initiated a historical cycle comparable to the Thirty Years War. In fact, the Second World War was nothing but the continuation of the First, in the long "European civil war"[6].

The Great War, to clarify, ushers in a real "age of catastrophe", according to the terms of Hobsbawm (1994). It must however be pointed out that colonialism had already revealed all the violence that a political, social, military and industrial system dominated by capital could unleash. The extra-European space did not need to wait until 1914 to experience the "catastrophe". At the turn of the century, a relative peace reigned over most of Europe, accompanied by growing prosperity, even if not shared by everyone. However, this époque was far from being 'Belle' beyond Europe's borders. Britain, France, Belgium, Italy and Germany, to name but a few, exerted considerable violence in order to preserve or extend their dominion over foreign territories and subject the populations of the colonies. In Africa, but also in Asia, during the Boxer Rebellion, for example, this extreme violence was well known: from mass exterminations

[6] I do not use this notion in the perspective given by Ernst Nolte, but rather adopt the view offered by Enzo Traverso (2007).

to concentration camps (on this see Davis 2000 and Le Cour Grandmaison 2005).

The violence of the Great War is then, effectively, a repercussion on European soil, as Aimé Césaire[7] would say, of the colonization of non-European countries.

The "crowning achievement" of this long sequence were the Nazi concentration camps and the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The total destruction of what is human. This is what was seen, what was "felt" "in Flanders fields", in Ypres, on 22 April 1915, the day on which "the first massive use of chlorine gas in combat" (Sloterdijk 2002) took place, also and above all off the battlefields, in whole cities, for example, in Guernica, Hiroshima, Stalingrad, Berlin and Dresden.

For me, however, the catastrophe did not end with the catastrophic conclusion of the Second World War. My hypothesis here is that the distinctive trait of the catastrophe is its permanent topicality[8]. It is a continually present catastrophe. It is the end which is always here and yet is never completed. If so, the temporal limits of this "age of catastrophe" may be prolonged, as Luigi Cortesi (2010, 288) proposed, to our world today, to globalization and the humanitarian and ecological disasters it implies[9]. What began then and never ends, in Bangladesh, for example, or Fukushima, but, more generally and more trivially, a little everywhere, apart from actual catastrophes—those that political and media powers want to call catastrophes—in every continent, in the atmosphere, the poisoned waters and farmers' fields, constitutes a single and unique "end time", to use the expression of Günther Anders (1981). It started in the belle époque, after the violent conquests of colonial territories, after the first clashes in the Marne, the bombardment of cities, the destruction of artistic heritage, and the use of gas at Ypres. We are waiting for this end and are aware that we might die at any moment, no longer as a result of a 'natural' catastrophe, but possibly due to the mishandling of a device, a

[7] According to Aimé Césaire (1955), colonization works to de-civilize the colonizer, to make him ugly and brutish in the profound sense of the term, to awaken his worst instincts.

[8] It seems to me that this is one of the lines of inquiry of the "Research & Mobility" programme launched by the University of Messina, "Representing the unrepresentable. The Great War", which my workshop (Cecille, Université de Lille SHS) has joined. On this, see Amato (2015).

[9] By the same author, more specifically on this "discomfort of civilization", see at least Cortesi (2004). Cortesi was also the founder of *Giano. Pace, ambiente, problemi globali*, an important magazine that tried to encourage dialogue between Marxism, pacifism and ecology.

failure in a nuclear power plant, or as victims of white phosphorus or molten lead. A war can embody one of these moments, and how many wars did we witness in the twentieth century and how many more to this day? But these moments can by now also be considered part of the normal daily life of our societies, of their routine: how many people die from air and soil pollution in the world's biggest metropolises? How many died at Chernobyl or Fukushima? We only know that in order to save itself, to continue to prosper, or even to die in company, capitalism never lets slip an opportunity, even in summer, when the weather is sunny, when we need not suffer, to slide towards barbarism, to destroy everything, every form of life.

The catastrophe is not behind us; it is now, in our time. It was in Flanders or at Verdun, to speak only of striking examples, that humanity began to learn that the primordial and vital elements of the Earth (air, water, earth) are devastated and dangerous. The air, as Bruno Latour claims, has, since then, been part of the industrial-military complex[10]. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there has no longer been any purely 'natural' catastrophes; or rather, 'natural' catastrophes can no longer be divorced from our contemporary technologies, policies and economies. There is a general and growing interconnection between "nature" and "technology". Fukushima is exemplary of this, as Jean-Luc Nancy (2012, 56-57) argues: "an earthquake and the tidal wave it produces becomes a technical catastrophe, which itself becomes a social, economic, political and finally philosophical earthquake".

Nancy is completely right when he says that the catastrophe has now become a catastrophe of civilization. The idea, which I share, is that this catastrophe is linked to the cultural and economic development of humanity. We would do well to remember once again the famous conclusion of Freud's great 1929 work, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, a clear echo of what had happened in Europe only a few years previously:

> The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers', the eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result? (Freud 1962, 92).

[10] Following the line of Sloterdijk, Bruno Latour (2006, 105) writes about the air after Ypres: "air has been reconfigured; it is now part of an air-conditioning system that makes our life possible [...]. What happened in Ypres was different: Air had become public; gas had become a branch of the military; a whole science of atmospheric manipulation had been declared".

Studying the Great War means trying to breach one of the first 'accesses' of this continuous catastrophe. What, in short, are we dealing with? The catastrophe is the inability for the living to escape the future of the world that is being formed, or better: the catastrophe is man's ability to live in this world, when, in other words, horror becomes our only way to behave, a habit. In fact, the catastrophe is not destiny. The catastrophe is the limit or, if you like, the truth of the economic system that dominates the world. The "equivalence" mentioned by Nancy expresses the interconnection between "natural" phenomena and various "technologies". Nancy derives his notion from Marx, for whom money is the general equivalent. Money is what absorbs, beyond the monetary or financial sphere, the whole existence of individuals and life in general. Absorption is possible insofar as there is a profound connection between capitalism and a combination of forces, products and agents (what we call technical and technological development: see Nancy 2012, 16). It is precisely this connection—the beating heart of the system in which we live—which is catastrophic, as evidenced by Fukushima or the wars that have dragged on in our recent history. From this perspective, it is the value of every value, the general equivalent, which is catastrophic and which spreads a generalized catastrophe.

Capitalism, insofar as it represents endless progress, is based on the very idea of catastrophe. These are the "magnificent and progressive destinies" straddling the two centuries leading to the slaughter of 1914. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, some socialists have been working on a Marxist intuition whereby the impetuous development unleashed by capitalism will not lead to peace and prosperity, but will complete its cycle with "barbarities". This is how, by opposing the idea of a linear, unidirectional, conflict-free history of capitalism, preached, for example, by Bernstein, they can argue that even before the war the system was on the verge of conflagrating into a general catastrophe, or more precisely into a continuous series of "catastrophes"[11].

[11] See, for example, Rosa Luxemburg (1913, 31). Alongside this Marxist perspective—which we will call left-wing, to distinguish it from Bernstein's right-

The catastrophe is when the Great War breaks out and the bourgeoisie, having set aside their Sunday best for church and their bonnets for strolling in the park, will show their face as fierce beasts, thirsty for blood and fascinated by destruction. But it is equally a catastrophe when, faced with the threat of waves of howitzers, the old workers' parties in France and Germany vote for war credits. It is once again Rosa Luxemburg who speaks of this other catastrophe: the failure of any opposition to the war in 1914 in a dramatically grandiose text that she would write under the pseudonym of Junius, while being jailed for her opposition to the war:

> Violated, dishonored, wading in blood, dripping filth—there stands bourgeois society. This is it [in reality]. Not all spic and span and moral, with pretense to culture, philosophy, ethics, order, peace, and the rule of law—but the ravening beast, the witches' Sabbath of anarchy, a plague to culture and humanity. Thus it reveals itself in its true, its naked form. In the midst of this witches' Sabbath a catastrophe of world-historical proportions has happened: International Social Democracy has capitulated (Luxemburg 1916, 12).

This pamphlet and the prison years in general served Luxemburg and her group to try to understand the reasons for such a failure, which was inexplicable in their eyes. It should be noted that in the days immediately preceding Germany's entry into the war, Berlin was still beset and shaken by large-scale demonstrations of workers calling for peace. From the moment when mobilization was decreed, every voice critical of the war in Germany and France became inaudible. There was no longer room for peace. Everyone had to be 'inside' the war of their countries, starting with the workers' parties. In this regard, the French writer Leon Werth quite rightly points out that the first murder committed by war is precisely that of the possibility to choose.

If there is war, this war of a new kind, it is no longer possible to defend one's political or ideological or existential positions; all are forced to submit to its mechanisms:

> The war was not a crisis of conscience. It did not lend itself to any deliberation. The acts to be carried out did not depend on an opinion or a sentiment. They were determined by the call-up papers. The mystic, the blindest of patriots and the most fervent revolutionary were bound to perform exactly the same actions: to obey their call-up papers. Once the war machine has been set in motion, nobody can resist it (Werth 2006, 212).

wing line and the centrist line embodied by Kautsky—we should mention a certain 'Nietzschean' school of thought, which also glimpsed, *before* the Great War, that progress would lead to catastrophe, on the basis of an analysis of the culture at the turn of the century, rather than of economic factors. This cultural climate is reconstructed by Emilio Gentile (2008).

It would be precisely the total nature of this war, and thus also its bureaucratization, which no longer made it possible to distinguish, on the ground, the partisans of war from the proponents of peace. This prevented a collective opposition to war from developing.

It must however be remembered that the Great War also leaves us a legacy of the salvific image of fraternization, mutiny and revolts, on which Luxemburg, among others, would try to think and organize a new resistance in the disaster, which would result in disruptions and in post-war revolutions. These in fact were, first and foremost, radical rejections of the war, starting with the first, in 1917 in Russia, the one that would be carried through to the end. The formidable brutalization of the conditions of the war, the industrialization of the massacre and the extreme level of mobilization were unable to completely block the lines of escape.

The range of refusals of war was vast. It included subterfuges, avoidance strategies, small resistances: there were attempts to pull strings to avoid going to war or at least being sent to the trenches, self-mutilation, various forms of 'desertion' (delays in returning to the front, feigning insanity, escaping to foreign countries, plans to go into hiding in the cities, passing over to the other side). There were also more serious forms of refusal occurring collectively and beyond the respective fronts. Truces could be entered into with the enemy, often tacit, sometimes more explicit, as in the case of fraternization. More radically, mutinies could also break out in various forms, ranging from sabotage to revolts, from seditions to revolutionary defeatism, leading to micro-forms of self-government[12] or to revolution, overturning the old world (Loez 2010).

Every refusal, every decision to avoid mobilization, represented a 'scandal' because there could not be any escape from the war. 'Total mobilization' did not spare anyone. And yet, some tried to avoid it. 'Refusal' is nothing other than the opposite of 'total mobilization', in which aggregation to the anonymous mass is replaced by subtraction from it. When the 'call up' moment arrives, one remains deaf, immobile, remains paralysed or escapes, goes elsewhere, and thus dismisses power and, against or beside the 'mobilized' and 'uniformized' society, affirms oneself as a singularity or better still as a community of singularities.

[12] In some parts of the Apennines, deserters formed communes to escape war and try to establish a new way of living together (Rossi 2014).

A defector may also be called "*Überläufer*" in German: "Ich pin Uberlaufer", exclaimed one Italian prisoner, in magnificent German, in one of the letters published by Leo Spitzer (2016). It is a word that comes from the people, and expresses a fundamental truth: the deserter is someone who "runs further".

2. Going outside

The impossible challenge for the deserter is to constitute, in his very escape, the space of an outside, where, in the framework of 'total mobilization', everything must remain within, within our borders, in the utmost respect of order. The different forms of rejection of war express this im-possibility, an im-possibility that belongs to the history of the age. Some of them can thus be seen as 'sidestepping history'. In these specific cases, desertion is a contestation of history, a 'holiday from history'. I will take up an expression of Blanchot to begin to give an initial definition of the term "desertion" that I would like to problematize here. Let us say then that desertion is an "interruption" of history.

Desertion is a "counter-conduct", to use a Foucauldian concept, and Foucault himself speaks of "desertion-insubordination" when he wants to offer an example of an "insurrection of conduct" in the era in which governments, and no longer the church, have begun to deal with the conduct of men. In fact, at a time when waging war is no longer just a part of life, for nobles, nor a more or less voluntary trade, for a small part of the population, when, in other words, waging war becomes a matter that involves the whole of society, riots and insubordination also begin to emerge:

> From the moment when waging war became, for every citizen of a country, not simply a trade, not even a general law, but an ethic, a behaviour typical of a good citizen, from the moment when being a soldier became a conduct, a political and moral conduct, sacrifice, dedication to the common cause and common salvation, under the direction of a political authority, within the framework of a precise discipline, starting from the moment when being a soldier thus became not simply a destiny or a profession, but a conduct, then we can see that the old desertion-infringement, of which I spoke earlier, was joined by another form of desertion that I would call desertion-insubordination, in which refusing to engage in the trade of arms or to practise this profession and this activity for a period, this refusal to carry arms, was seen as a moral conduct or counter-conduct, as a refusal of civic education, as a rejection of the valuespresented by society, as a rejection of a certain relationship considered obligatory with the nation and the salvation of the nation, as a rejection of the relationship with the death of others or of the relationship with one's own death. You can then see that we are facing the emergence of a phenomenon of resistance of conduct that no longer has anything of the old desertion, and that resembles certain phenomena of resistance towards religious conduct [that we saw in the] Middle Ages (Foucault 1978, 201-202)[13].

The thread that links the phenomena of resistance in religious conduct to desertion-insubordination is "extreme rejection". I am taking up this notion of Blanchot because Foucault was directly inspired by some positions of the French writer and philosopher of the 1960s:

> the word itself is out of reach. It has been said and what it has said will remain said. Here, in the Déclaration, what has been said is one word, the grave word of extreme rejection. In all the decisive moments of humanity, some people, sometimes a large number, have always been able to safeguard the right to refuse. 'We cannot', 'I remain firm, I cannot do

[13] Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1532, last edition; see Ariosto 2008) is also, among many other things, a book of desertion: all the great knights, at a given moment, abandon the war to pursue their desires. From the very first canto, we see, for example, several soldiers leaving the battlefield to chase the beautiful Angelica on the run. Orlando embodies this attitude: he, the strongest, the most loyal, the ideal example of the warrior (who was chaste when he became a literary character), abandons the encampment of Charlemagne while Paris is threatened by the Moors and departs to look for Angelica. Love against war, Orlando's desire is so all-consuming that it will eventually make him lose his mind. These themes, on the one hand, already assume a modern nature (the reason for love-passion, art and poetry are powerful vehicles of revolt), but, in Ariosto, they remain within the paradigm of the old desertion-infringement of which Foucault speaks, to the extent that they do not involve any change of conduct in the protagonists. Ariosto's soldiers, after all, are not ever guilty of 'insubordination'. They remain knights. Even Orlando, who has become lost (has lost his head), will return to being a soldier when someone brings him the wisdom lost on the Moon. Moreover, the interest of the book is also to be found in this particular recovery of the past. At a time when the knightly world no longer exists, Ariosto allows the public of his time to relive stories that are no longer of their time, thus producing a short-circuit between a world that is almost finished and another that is about to be born, with all the fears that this arouses. War, the new war, dominated by artillery, and by great armies, the beginning, that is, of modern warfare, with the descent into Italy of Charles VIII in 1494, hovers like a menacing spectre over the whole poem. This is the reason why, in my opinion, Ariosto's poem is one of the favourite books of some of the major writers of the Great War, such as Lussu or Jünger, faced with the same contrast between different ages and appalled by the new forms of warfare.

anything else'. It is the fundamental appeal (...): the last resort of being able to say no (Blanchot 2003, 35)[14].

If asceticism, communities, mysticism, the Scriptures and eschatology—the phenomena of resistance proper to the religious conduct of which Foucault speaks in his lesson—embody different forms of anti-pastoral struggle, they are different attempts to escape the conduct imposed by pastoral power; desertion-insubordination is, in the same way, a defection from political and governmental authority. The parallel with refusals in religious matters, we should stress, serves to underline the radical nature of these refusals, radicality understood as the will to totally break with the 'old'. However, it is not an escape from the world nor a pure negation. Saying 'no' in this case is an affirmative power. The 'no' is a gesture of sovereignty: withdrawing from, avoiding, and defecting from a 'calling' express our ability to revive sovereign power[15].

It is by virtue of this gesture that one affirms oneself as a singularity, breaking with 'total mobilization', while if one remained in this paradigm, all dignity would be lost to the point of falling into animality. The metaphors of animalization (in the negative sense) are frequently used to describe the loss of humanity of soldiers in the Great War. We need merely think about the title of the extraordinary novel by Jean Giono, *Le Grand Troupeau* (1931). This type of 'no' does not (re) establish the rights of a new humanism (which, instead, was the sense of the untiring work of Romain Rolland during the war). Kafka, without a shadow of doubt, but

[14] It is a sort of answer, which Blanchot addresses to Michel Cournot to reply to the criticisms he had made against the *Manifeste des 121*, better known perhaps under the name of *Déclaration du droit à l'insoumission* (September 1960), of which Blanchot was the main drafter and which federated opposition to the war in Algeria. Note that the sentences in quotation marks in italics are famous declarations of religious counter-conduct: the first "*non possumus*" is of the apostles John and Peter; the second "*Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders*" is the statement made by Luther in Wittenberg. Etienne Balibar (2011, 442), quite rightly, considers Foucault's lesson of March 1, 1978, as an "anamnesis" of the *Manifeste des 121* and of the event that it had constituted for all his contemporaries.

[15] Regarding rejection, as a gesture of sovereignty, see Brossat (2014, 39): "From the slums of heteronomy, from the suffering of the vanquished, a gesture of sovereignty can arise [...], while sovereignty is usually manifested in a theatrical, dramatic, indeed noisy, the most banal gesture, that of a pure and simple retreat (or abstention), or the smallest of defections, shows the ability to bring back sovereign power, when it is least expected".

also other writers like Pierre Chaine[16], reveal that the animalization of men or soldiers serves to denounce the historical and social conditions in which man struggles and, in this sense, animalization, that is metamorphosis, constitutes a path towards possible emancipation. One who totally disidentifies himself is however a deserter. It is not a choice that leaves him enjoying the comfort of life as it was before. There is no longer a before. His 'no' opens up the road to abandonment. The deserter is outside everything, outside himself, outside his own world, his friends, his group, his community, his language, history. He loses his identity, sometimes even his humanity, which is why desertion is a disidentification. The deserter loses his belonging to history, desertion is an 'unbelonging'. Let's think for a moment about the figure of Giuseppe Marrasi, in Lussu's *Un anno sull'altipiano* (1945). The first time we encounter him in the book, he is lost behind enemy lines, trying to reach the Austrian army, but, mistaken for a Bosnian, he is captured by his own comrades, who at first do not realize who he is. A few pages later, it is the officer Lussu who captures him after a further attempt at escape, and Marrasi tries to justify himself by saying that he was just looking for his haversack with two reserve tins of meat, then Lussu tells him: "One time you lose your haversack and another time you lose yourself" (Lussu 1945, 32). The deserter is someone who is permanently lost, who no longer has any identity. For the whole company Marrasi is the "Bosnian", as if to underline his extraneousness to the army of his homeland. The deserter is beyond his country of birth. One day Lussu overhears a conversation between some soldiers, including Marrasi:

> – Who will give me half a cigar? – he asked.
> Ja, half a cigar?
> Ja, ja!
> Kamarad, half a cigar.
> He joked about his German and didn't give him the half-cigar.
> – And that shot in the hand? What a smart shot! –
> How did you do that?
> – But when you were taken prisoner, frankly, that wasn't lucky! That time, you didn't have luck! (Lussu 1945, 32).

Marrasi is already outside his community. He speaks little, almost never says anything, while the others, in the famous, sinister, life of the barracks, make friends, laugh, joking among themselves and sometimes

[16] Pierre Chaine, *Mémoires d'un rat*, suivis des *Commentaires de Ferdinand, ancien rat de tranchées*, the first book was published in 1916, the second in 1918, and are now published together (Chaine 2008).

kill[17]. The day after this conversation, we see Marrasi advancing alone, in the snow, with his hands up in the air, without a rifle, towards the enemy trenches. It is his last gesture, evident desertion, crossing the lines. The description of this slow, painful escape is one of the most dramatic moments in Lussu's book. We follow Marrasi step by step in his long march, hindered by snow and barbed wire, between the two enemy armies, with the Italians, behind him, 'dishonoured', who shoot at him, and the Austrians who look on and seem to encourage him. Only at the end, when he is near the Austrian trench, which for him is no longer that of the

[17] The life of a soldier, the thrill of being together among males in expectation of (very few) heroic actions, and more concretely simply being together ends up creating a community, awaiting adventure (a wait which will prove to be infinite and only distressing): this is, as many war writings certify, a powerful vehicle for cohesion and even consent to war. Renato Serra in *Esame di coscienza di un letterato* (1915) speaks of a "going together" into war that unites beyond all differences: "Go together. One after the other along the paths in the mountains, which smell of broom and mint; they move in line like ants across the wall, and lean their heads over the ridge, cautious, in the silence of the morning. Or in the evening in the wide soft streets, with the innumerable footsteps muted in the dark, while above there is a sliver of moonlight up there among the little white virgin stars of April; and when you stop, you can feel the warm breath of the column. Or the nights, when sleep is buried in the depths of the frozen black sky; and then the gloomy cry of dawn is heard amidst sleep, as thin as a crack in crystal; and above, the day is already pale. Thus, marching and stopping, resting and rising, working and being silent, together; lines and lines of men following the same track, treading the same earth; dear earth, hard, solid, eternal; firm under our feet, good for our bodies. And everything else that is not said, because you need to be there and then you feel; in a way, that words become useless. Down there in the city there is perhaps still talk of political parties, of opposing tendencies; of people who do not get along; of people who would be afraid, who would refuse, who would come reluctantly. There may also be something real, as long as you remain on those streets, among those houses. But I live in another place. In that Italy that seemed deaf and empty when I only looked at her; but now I feel that it may be full of men like me, in the grip of my same anxiety and walking along the same path as mine" (Serra 1994, 45). The philosopher Alain (1937) speaks of the "courage of friendship" in his *Souvenirs de guerre* to explain how the soldiers accept to fight, but not in the name of a duty towards the homeland or for Rights or Freedom, but for their companions in danger. It is this solidarity, this courage dictated by friendship that also allows the war to continue. The case of Alain is exemplary in this sense. The philosopher, although radically pacifist, decided to enlist as a volunteer precisely to be near those who suffered in war. The choices made by the deserter are, however, diametrically opposed to these, precisely because he does not aggregate, but abandons, or seeks a different aggregation, not related to the state.

enemy, does Marrasi die, killed by Italian soldiers, who are now his enemies:

> Marrasi was under the other barbed wire fence, no more than two metres from the Austrian trench. Through the large loophole, someone must have spoken to him in Italian, because it seemed to me that a conversation took place between him and the trench. He fell as he touched the fence. He remained motionless, his legs sunk in the snow, his torso bent, his arms and hands outstretched. Against the now inanimate target, the fire of all our trenches raged as before (Lussu 1945, 145).

The deserter is always crushed on the border line if he does not remain wandering through the fields and in no man's land (like the *flâneur* of the trenches, Jacques Vaché) or in foreign lands (like the Dadaists between Zurich and New York). In this way he is always outside time and space, in a desert. Desertion is a crossing of the desert. I am using equally "desertion", "insubordination", "subtraction", "revolt" and "defection" to designate the different forms of refusal of political, cultural and military authority during the Great War, but I prefer, among them all, the term "desertion" since, in "desertion", in its etymological sense, there is "desert": from the Latin *desertare*, derived from *desertus*, past participle of *deserere*, "to abandon".

Deserters refuse the condition of slaves or *morituri* that is assigned to them. They abandon their post and their role in a search (without end) for something else. If one thinks of the biblical account of Exodus, we find the following pattern: liberation from slavery, wandering through the desert, waiting for writing. This is more or less what happens in some cases of desertion occurring in the Great War. The desert is not only the experience of the action of retreat (or abstention), but is also the experience of searching for a word to express this new world towards which we are moving. Literature, in this perspective, becomes one of the strongest expressions of desertion, is identified with it insofar as it is an impersonal power that destroys the old world and establishes, in the desert, a "world of the end of the world" (Blanchot 1949, 323); exemplary are the first lines of Céline's *Voyage*, where he feels a plebeian fury rise in the language and in story that leads the protagonist Ferdinand Bardamu to drift far, in the night, beyond traditional literature, linked to power, and beyond the war, in an endless journey (Céline 2006). The power of literature or, if you prefer, the politics of literature is, to refer once more to Blanchot, the power of contestation: "contestation of power, contestation of what is (and of the fact of being), contestation of language and forms of literary language, finally contestation of itself as power" (Blanchot 1971, 80).

The dismissing power of literature (which dismisses the world and literature itself) has a name: Kafka. According to Kafka, literature is the power that liberates, the force that eliminates the oppression of the world. "The consolation of writing [...] is to jump beyond the line of murderers" (27 January 1922). Kafka wrote this note only a few years after the Great War: his wandering movement in the desert, beautifully described by Blanchot (1994, 114), after being rejected by the land of Canaan, when he knows that his migration tends towards the desert and that the desert is now the true promised land, evokes the movement of those who leave the trenches, abandon the murderous madness and launch themselves into the indefinite spaces between the homelands, aimlessly.

Kafka is a deserter, even if he did not fight on the battlefields, because, in the same years as Lussu's deserting soldiers, in the same way, he excluded himself from everything, starting with his own language; he did not stop wandering with other deserters in the wilderness: "in which, motionless, walking with a slow uniform step, the destroyed men come and go" (Blanchot 1980, 34). Where he starts to write because this other world has something to do with literary activity. In fact, literature, in this Kafkian sense, is an 'extreme rejection', to the extent that the very condition of writing is exile, the uninterrupted movement of this loss.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BATTLE OF LANGUAGES: SOVIET CINEMA AND THE GREAT WAR[1]

ALESSIA CERVINI

Barely twenty years after its birth, cinema was surprised, even enraptured, like the whole world, by the outbreak of the First World War. There is no doubt that the history of cinema was conditioned in various ways by this catastrophic event. The Great War is, we know, the first conflict whose extension and significance were such that it involved all the world's greatest political and economic powers. But it was also the first war to entrust its story to the cinema, initially in documentary form, while battles were still being fought and human lives lost; then, immediately afterwards, through a long, uninterrupted series of films on the subject, which continued to depict the horror of the war, while adopting a variety of representational strategies and approaches. It is perhaps worth remembering that, precisely in the years of the First World War, cinema, just twenty years after its birth, began to be structured in the form of the feature film and to experiment with storytelling in pictures.

The beginning of Hollywood's golden age, in the opinion of many historians, coincided exactly with the outbreak of the Great War, following which European cinema ground to a halt. For American cinema, this was a creative and financial opportunity not to be missed. Indeed, the interruption of European film production left a huge share of the market and the public uncovered, and to satisfy this need, it was necessary to multiply the production of American films to be exported to Europe. It was in these circumstances that many producers, until that time working mainly on the East Coast, considered moving to Los Angeles, thus giving birth to the greatest 'culture industry' of all time: Hollywood. But the war being fought was not only big business; it also soon became, and in various phases, a precious resource for creative inspiration, for directors

[1] This essay has been translated by Simon Tanner.