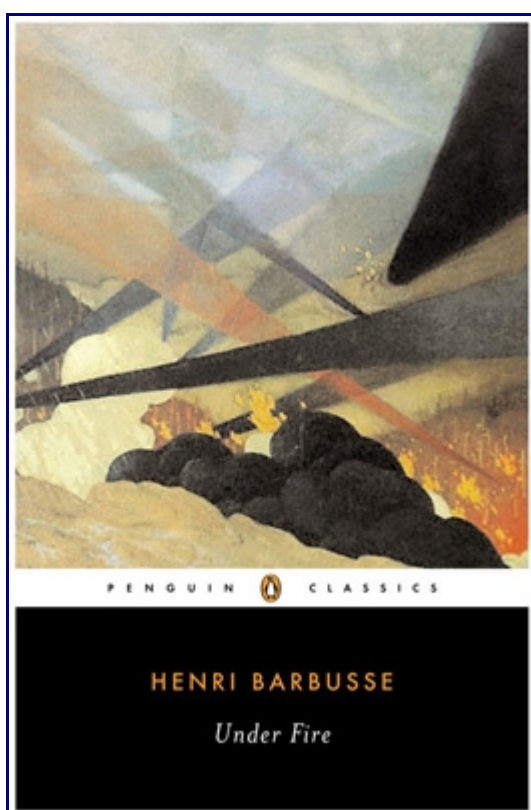


Teaching Le Feu/Under Fire by Henri Barbusse

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There is something about Henri Barbusse's evocative attempt to translate the horrors of the First World War that continues to capture the imagination. This is true even in the dated and widely available wartime English translation by W. Fitzwater Wray. In the much improved and more readable Robin Buss English-language version of 2003, the episodic journey of Barbusse's poilus gradually builds to its compelling apotheosis. Unlike other first-hand accounts by First World War soldier-authors to which it is often compared, *Under Fire* lacks the tragic arc and poignancy of Erich Maria Remarque's postwar coming of age classic *All Quiet on the Western Front*. What it offers instead is a kind of piecemeal, fragmented, and thereby seemingly authentic recounting of just how combatants tried (or failed) to survive the Great War.



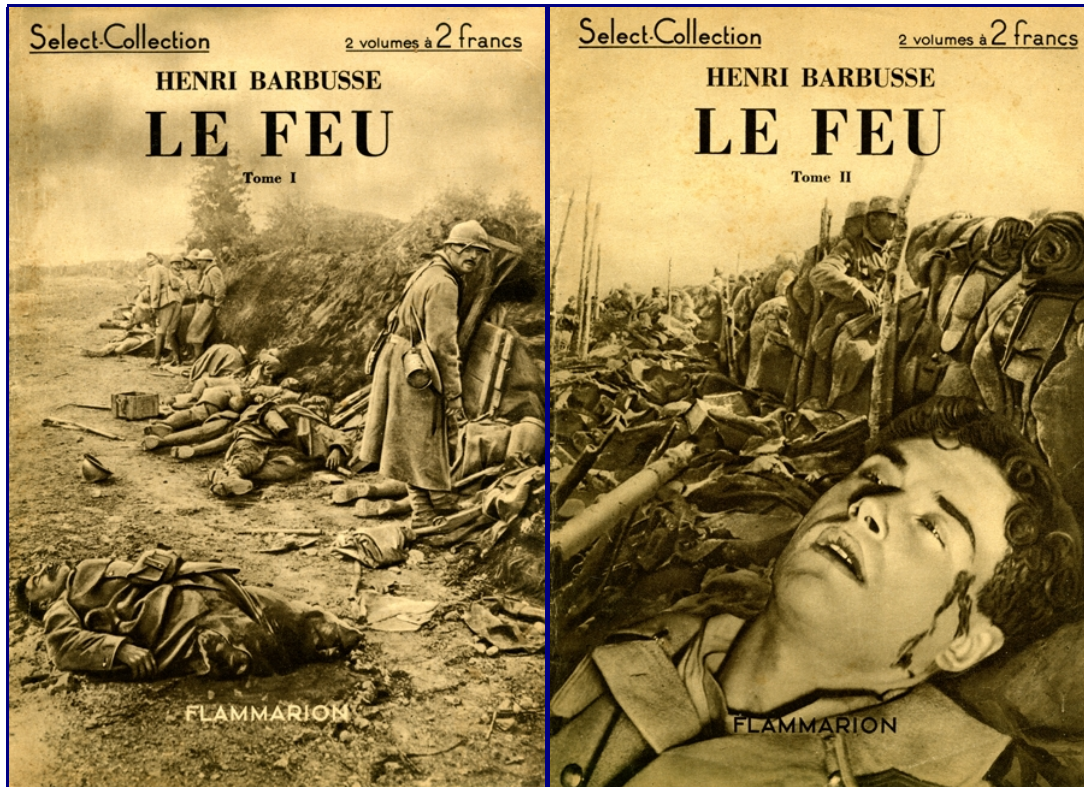
I have taught *Under Fire* (or excerpts from Barbusse's text) in the broad survey class on modern Europe, in seminars on the First World War, in lecture classes on Europe in the Age of Imperialism and World War, and, perhaps, more unexpectedly, in a course on modern European gender history. It is not always the class favorite, but it usually captures the attention of a few students, who then want to know more: about the author, about the war, about the book's reception, about how "true" a portrait this fictionalized memoir conveys. I have not taught it in a class on modern French history, and so questions about the ways in which it typifies (or not) the French experience of the war—and there are things about this work that only make sense when students understand the particular nuances of characters and language within that national context—remain outside this discussion. What I've done here is reflect about a few of the ways in which teaching Barbusse helps us engage with the First World War in fundamental ways.

First, perhaps, Barbusse's words prod us to address the contrast between lyricism and realism, to think what it meant to convey a modern war using modes of communication that bridged the

naturalism of the nineteenth century and the fragmented perspectives of the twentieth. The opening pages offer a sweeping vista of a riven landscape from which human figures slowly emerge.

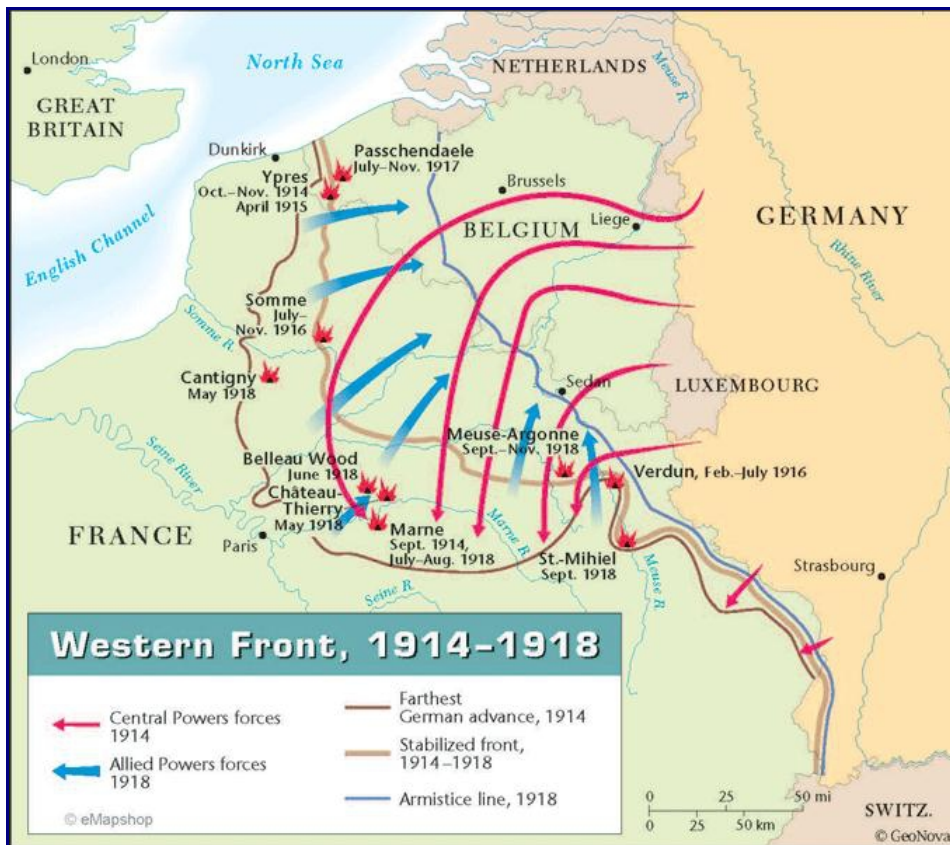
Up there, on high, far away, a flight of fearsome birds, panting powerfully and with broken breath, which can be heard but not seen, spirals upwards to look down upon the earth....

You can see a maze of long ditches in which the last remnants of night linger. This is the trench. The bottom of it is carpeted with a viscous layer that clings noisily to the foot at every step and smells foul around each dugout because of the night's urine. (p.7)[1]



From the start, here are soaring, poetic descriptions and the prosaic, messy, human reality of soldiers living in their own excrement. Then slowly names and features are given to the men who emerge from the muck. We meet the squad and for the rest of the novel, we glimpse the mundane and the tragic as they wend their way through the battlefields.

Set eighteen months after the start of the war, the novel follows a squad through the first-person narrative of Barbusse's stand-in (an educated foot soldier who scribbles during lulls) who is part of, and yet an observer of the action. Barbusse was recovering from wounds that would prevent him from returning to combat when he wrote and then published it serially in *L'Oeuvre*. Intermingled with details of how soldiers navigate daily life in the charnel-house atmosphere of the trenches and surrounding areas are both poetic, harrowing descriptions and a political, pacifist argument about this war and war more generally that culminates in final chapter set within and beyond the war zone. In snippets, we see members of the squad go through their daily routines: reading letters from wives and mothers; going on and coming back from leave; sneaking off to a home in the occupied area to find a wife entertaining German NCO's; trying to find a way to scrounge extra food or someone to do their laundry in the zones beside the trenches, coming across the site where a soldier has been executed for refusing to obey orders; and in a long sequence in the middle of the tale, taking part in battle. Through it all, they talk about the war, attempting to make sense of the altered world in which they find themselves.



While the focus is on the squad, in the early chapter “In the Ground” we learn something about each of the members of this “reserve unit” as they emerge from the trenches. They can also be seen as archetypes. So we have: the leader Corporal Betrand, dignified, upright, a foreman in his prewar life; baby-faced Paradis, a carter before the war; square-faced Volpatte, who in almost the next scene will lose his ears to a shell; Lamuse the human bull “a lump of a peasant from Poitou;” Cadilhac the peasant landowner; working-class Parisian delivery boy Barque; Biquet the little Breton and one of the youngest from the class of ‘13; toothless Old Blaire, who could be Biquet’s father; Fouillade, a boatman from Cette, at 40 among the older men; that “funny fellow” Tirette from Clichy-la-Garonne; Tirloir, the “grumbler” who “used to splash paint on carriages;” Cocon, who worked in an ironmonger’s shop and is obsessed with figures, counting to the minute how long a task can take; the shifty Pépin, whose exact occupation was none of the above; tall and bony Tulacque no longer tending bar; Eudore, soft and pale who used to run a tavern not far from the trenches; delicate, proper Farfadet; Mesnil André a “comfortable pharmacist from some Norman town” and his brother Joseph who worked in a railway newsstand; Poterloo, the miner from Calonne and our nameless narrator. Yet Barbusse insists after these introductions that “the frightful narrowness of communal life compresses us, adapts us and blends us into each other” (p.18).



Thus one aspect that helps orient students to the war through the novel comes from the sense of familiarity with Barbusse's "story of a squad," which fits the ways they've learned to approach war.

American audiences are familiar with the motif of a group of guys from all over brought together to fight in an idealized version of the unified nation at war.[2] Barbusse's version offers a similar sense of "union sacrée" as the story of the group takes center stage over the story of any one individual. This in itself illustrates the power of the comforting myth about morale and camaraderie, at least among the rank and file, where the bonds forged by the troops are shown to transcend differences of region, class, and generation, let alone personality.

In addition, because of its composition and publication first in serial form in 1916, *Under Fire* permits what most other celebrated war texts—Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon's poems, Ernst Junger's *Storm of Steel* and Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*—do not. It allows us to explore how a wartime audience reacted to a wartime text. Barbusse not only wrote the book as a soldier in the middle of the war but did so before the outcome was clear. Its publication during the war and the acclaim it immediately received reveal postwar mythmaking in the very midst of the cataclysm. That the prose is so stark, with descriptions that conjure up the landscape of the Western Front further contributes to its appeal. Barbusse—the narrator—even offers a commentary on the book as it is being written. In the chapter titled "Swearwords," he tells his fellow less-educated compatriot Barque (who asks him "will you make them speak like they really do, or will you tidy it up and make it proper?") that, "I'll put the swearwords in, because it's the truth" (p.155). This claim to authenticity pervades the novel and debates over its blend of truth and fiction dominate conversations about its reception. It provides fertile ground in the classroom for basic questions about how we come to know "the truth" about the war.

That it was quickly translated into English and published in July 1917, demonstrably influencing important British soldier-authors such as Siegfried Sassoon, also creates space for classroom discussions about the national and transnational ways in which the combatant's experience came to be seen as one of universal and unmitigated suffering. Samuel Hynes, in his now classic study of war literature, asserts that "*Under Fire* was the first novel to reach the English public with an unameliorated rendering of the horrors of the war." [3] In a world where much about the war was subjected to censorship, there is something startling about the vivid, realistic manner with which Barbusse shows suffering and endurance. Unlike *All Quiet on the Western Front* (which is as much a postwar as wartime text), *Le Feu* is definitely a wartime text, indeed a mid-war text. Since Barbusse did not return to combat, its depiction is very much of the war of 1915-16, not the upheavals of 1917 and the dramatic shifts in the war that accompanied the fighting of 1918.

Furthermore, there are incredibly useful historical studies that help contextualize this middle of the war perspective. For instance, the reactions of Frenchwomen who read Barbusse, explored in an

excellent essay by Leonard Smith, show how much they wanted to visualize life at the front and used this work to try to understand their men and their war experience.[4] Thus Barbusse can help convey what Martha Hanna discusses in *Your Death Would Be Mine* and her work on warime letter-writing, namely how a literate generation expanded the meaning of total war by their ability to use the written word to connect the fronts, however imperfectly.[5]



Le Feu also facilitates conversations about the war and its legacy because Barbusse's narrative itself became enshrined in the memory of the war. The availability of Jean Norton Cru's 1929 *Témoins*, which played a pivotal role in the critical assessment of eyewitnesses (a debate neatly summed up in the introduction to Leonard V. Smith's *Embattled Self*), means that teaching *Le Feu* offers a chance to think about the war as both lived experience and construction of memory.[6] That Cru denounced the novel as a mixture of truth and falsehood only underscores that what is authentic about *Under Fire* is the perspective, albeit partial, rather than all of the details. Moreover, the rich and stimulating body of secondary works in English also makes *Under Fire* a text that works both on its own terms and as way to think about the project of cultural history more broadly—i.e., why interpreting the text sheds light on new aspects of the First World War.

Under Fire lets students delve into some of the richest (and to some extent still obscure) historiographical terrain. It is very much about combatants, but also has a good deal to convey about gender, violence, life under occupation, class, race, what it means to be a man and a Frenchman and a soldier witnessing the conflict. Closer readings uncover the toll on the land as well as on its human population, expanding the discussion to environmental history.

Given its diverse, succinct chapters, any number of characters or themes or passages can strike the reader. In my first reading, I was haunted by the figure of Eudoxie—"the fleeting vision—a woman crossing between shadows" (p.62), a refugee who darts, all huge eyes and fair hair, in and out of the paths of the squad. The slow, gentle giant Lamuse becomes fixated with this young woman: he "wants" her (as he confesses to our narrator) but once he learns her first and last name, he also wants to marry her (now able to situate her within a kin network). The narrator alone notices the tender looks that pass between Eudoxie and another member of the squadron, "sensitive" Farfadet. The author describes her as prey and Lamuse as a hunter who stands still at her very scent, but Barbusse nonetheless conveys the poignancy of what might be seen as unsettling—comparing lovesick Lamuse with Volpatte, an injured member of the squadron, and asking who is the more wounded.

Yet, when Lamuse recounts the fate of Eudoxie, despite all the other carnage they have witnessed, it

seems especially horrific. Volunteering to assist a group of Sappers, Lamuse returns to the squad, “covered in soil and mud... unable to say a comprehensible word,” refusing even the wine offered to him. He gestures the narrator over to tell him: “‘I saw Eudoxie again.’ He is trying to catch his breath... his eyes staring at some nightmare. ‘She was rotting.’ (p.181). Coming across a corpse in a half-collapsed trench, Lamuse identifies Eudoxie by her hair, “‘cos there’s no two heads of hair like that on earth; then the rest of the face, all sunk in and rotted, the neck like dough and the whole lot of it dead for a month, probably. It was Eudoxie I tell you” (p.182). Lamuse has to hold up the corpse up as he clears the trenchworks, although she “kept trying to fall on me.” He imagines her mocking him for his desiring her (“it was ghastly. It was like she was saying to me: ‘You wanted to kiss me, well then, come on, come on!’”). After the tale of his forced embrace of the decomposing body, once the object of his infatuation, Lamuse collapses, “his face buried in the earth, in his dream of love and decay” (p.182). Despite hundreds of days of fighting and countless corpses, this one dead body—this one dead woman—retains its power to disturb. Is Eudoxie real? What does the blend of violence and eroticism represent once she literally becomes part of no man’s land? The entire chapter is three pages long, and yet Barbusse makes us feel the horror, the longing, the loss, and the fundamental unintelligibility of the war, even to its participants.

Whether or not *Le Feu* is a timeless classic, it deserves our attention and not merely as the perspective of a soldier-author who became a committed anti-militarist and communist. Its ending vision of a world where senseless suffering is redeemed by the vision of a better, more peaceful world of equality and justice is just one example of the way Barbusse manages to convey at once the horror of the cataclysm and the eternal human hope that something good might come out of it.

Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire*, New York: Penguin Classics, 2004. *Le Feu*, Paris: Flammarion, 1916

1. All translations from Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire: The Story of a Squad*, trans. Robin Buss (New York: Penguin, 2003).
2. Think of the popularity of contemporary miniseries about the Second World War such as *Band of Brothers* or *The Pacific*; the film *Saving Private Ryan* or for more recent wars, *Platoon*, the imbedded focus on the heroic teamwork of Navy SEALs in war movies about our most contemporary wars straight through to *Zero Dark Thirty*.
3. Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York, 1990), 205. Hynes cites Sassoon’s diaries as indicating that he read the novel while recovering from shell shock.
4. Leonard V. Smith, “Women Readers of Henri Barbusse: The Evidence of Letters to the Author,” in *Warfare and Belligerence: Perspectives in First World War Studies*, ed. Pierre Purseigle (Leiden: Brill, 2005).
5. Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2006) and her “French Soldiers and Their Correspondence: Towards a History of Writing Practices in the First World War” *French History* 17 (2003), 79-95 and “A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in World War I France” *AHR* 108 (2003), 1338-43.
6. See Jean Norton Cru, *Témoins: essai d’analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1929) and Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers’ Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), preface and introduction.