

International Conference

The Great War of “ordinary” people. Correspondences, narratives, testimonies

Paul-Valéry University Montpellier, June 15-16, 2018

Site Saint-Charles, salle des colloques 2

Argument

The Centenary of the Great War has generated a vast collection of archives. The Europeana platform 14-18 presently includes close to a million digitized resources; expected to last a few weeks, the “Grande Collecte” in France was such a success that it continues to this day, four years after its launch in November of 2013. More specialized initiatives have gathered the correspondences of families with low levels of literacy (“Corpus 14” project, supported by “Mission Centenaire”), as well as the wartime testaments of Parisian WWI soldiers. In 2018, the digital revolution will make a wealth of archives, inaccessible thus far, available to researchers and to the general public (*Cendari* project, *Feldpost* project, *Letters from the First World War 1916-1918*).

We can subsequently hypothesize that the Centenary marks a turning point that is valued for more than just the symbolic date. The newly-discovered, unpublished archives go, henceforth, beyond personal, family heritages: they are becoming a common good (Roynette, Siouffi, Steuckardt, 2017) and the public exposure of these archives takes on a characteristic of singular originality when they come from these “ordinary people”, who were brought into focus in the sixties by the popularity of life narratives in anthropological and sociological (Bourdieu, 1993), linguistic, or literary research. Sometimes named “the anonymous”, “the without rank” (Descamps, 2005) – even the “without”, full stop (Guilhamou, 1998) – these “ordinary people” are first categorized by what they are not: the elite. For lack of being defined, they have benefited from the attention of historians (for example, Caffarena, 2005; Cazals, 2003), of sociolinguists and discourse analysts (Branca-Rosoff, 1994; Martineau, 2012; Rutten & Van der Wal, 2014; Steuckardt, 2015), as well as of writers who, like Pierre Michon with his *Miniscule Lives*, Annie Ernaux or even Jean Echenoz – regarding the only contemporary French literature –, have made a dent in, after Barbusse, Celine or Giono, the literary representation.

What do we then learn from the writings, now easily accessible, of ordinary people of the Great War? What are their special features, in their appropriation of language and discursive genres, but also in the outlook they bring to the event? In what way do they differ from those of the well-read elite (Allorant & Resal, 2014)? In what way do they resemble them (Vidal-Naquet, 2014)? Do they modify our current perception of the event? How do they contribute to the construction, for new generations, of the memory of the Great War? And to what extent do they sketch another history of the French language?

Writings of “everyday life” (de Certeau, 1980), of the “for privé” (*Les écrits du for privé, de la fin du Moyen-Âge à 1914* project, and Bardet, Ruggiu, 2014), of intimacy, of subjectivity, of emotions, linguistic constructions and reconstructions of memories, of remembrance, of histories and of History: such concepts will allow us to approach these texts, and to examine this quality of “ordinary”, whose quotation marks undoubtedly highlight its approximation. “The world of everyday life presents itself [...] both as a centred order (“normal”), where the expected dominates, and as a marginal system, where there is always room for the unexpected: tradition and innovation are in permanent confrontation. From this point of view, the everyday is not the exact same thing as the ordinary, namely a systematic ensemble of practices subjected to fixed regularities: the everyday is in fact permanently exposed to the risk of irregularity which seamlessly turns it into the extraordinary” (Macherey, 2005): to what extent does the everyday practice of writing during the first world war allow us to see the power of the irregularity or its transformation into the extraordinary?

Writings of the past, these archives form a snapshot, a source of information for the didactics of writing and the history of its teaching (Bishop 2006; Chervel 1992, 2006; David, 2011; Garcia-Debanc, 2016; Plane, 2016; Doquet 2012): what are their linguistic and scriptural characteristics? What do they say about the teaching of writing and particular uses of writing in times of war (Fraenkel & Mbodj, 2010)?

These writings of the Great War summarize the Great War by way, not of the extraordinary history of heroes, but of the ordinary history of men and women. Next to historical documents and historical fiction studied in schools, in French as well as in history (Masseron 1991; Jaubert, Lalague-Dula, Louichon, 2014), how are and how can these archive writings be exploited, in primary school, in secondary school or in college? How can the study of these epistolary, diaristic, and autobiographical writings enrich the viewpoint of students on questions of gender, of enunciation, of textual structuration, of lexicon, or of writing supports? How do these writings of ordinary people of the Great War provoke a particular understanding of writing, of language and of the past in students? According to which interdisciplinarity and for which purposes?

The subject of this symposium is wartime journals, private diaries, letter correspondences, wills etc., left by ordinary women, men and children seized in the upheaval of the war, but also the memories and stories left by or on them, beyond 1918, as a testament *a posteriori* of life after war, which describe the daily life, the process of mourning, the reconstruction. It will also examine the traces left by these archives in the collective narrative.

Based on linguistic material, this conference is intended for all text analysts – linguists, literati, historians – as well as for archive and digital humanities specialists, essential representatives for the contemporary transmission of these documents, and jointly, for didacticians, who rest on these new vectors of transmission to continue the memory of the Great War.

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The symposium languages are French and English.

A selection of papers will be the subject of a publication.

Calendar

Submission of abstracts: starting from November 1, 2017

Deadline for the receiving of abstracts: **January 15, 2018**

Notification of acceptance: March 1, 2018

Publication of program: March 30, 2018

The abstracts, of around 500 words, bibliography included, should specify the type of resources used as well as their accessibility. The abstracts should be sent to the following address: colloque3go@univ-montp3.fr

Guest speakers (confirmed)

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