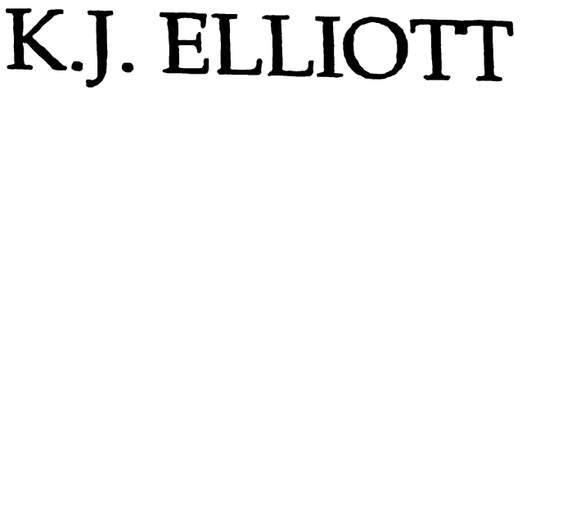
WAR AS AN INNER EXPERIENCE

WAR AS AN INNER EXPERIENCE

ERNST JÜNGER

Translated and Edited by
K.J. ELLIOTT



ANARCH BOOKS
2021

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

English translation of *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* by Ernst Jünger, published by E. S. Mittler & Son, Berlin, 1922.

Cover design: K.J. Elliott.

ISBN: 9798594234482

Anarch Books | www.anarchbooks.com

Contents

Introduction 1

I. Blood 4

II. The Gray 10

III. The Trench 18

IV. Eros 29

V. Pacifism 35

VI. Courage 44

VII. Lansquenet 49

VIII. Contrast 57

IX. Fire 65

X. Among Each Other 72

XI. Fear 82

XII. The Enemy 89

XIII. Before Battle 96

Introduction

SOMETIMES, a new star shines on the horizons of the spirit, striking the eyes of all the restless, a proclamation of a storm, a sign of a world change as it once was for the Three Kings of the East. Then all of the stars drown in fiery embers, images of the idols splinter into earthen shards, and once again all coined forms melt in a thousand blast furnaces, to be poured to new values.

The waves of such a time surround us from all sides. Mind, society, state, God, art, Eros, morals: decadence, fermentation—resurrection? Images continue to flash ceaselessly, atoms continue to swirl in the cauldron of the big city. And yet, even this storm will dissipate, even this flow of embers will cool to order. Every frenzy will shatter against the ruins, unless it meets a steel fist capable of harnessing it.

Why is it that our time is so rich in powers, both destructive and creative? Why does such a tremendous promise lie in its bosom? For even though many risk dying of fever, the same flame brews future and miraculous things in a thousand retorts. It shows a walk on the street, a look in the newspaper, in spite of all prophets.

It was war that made men and their times what they are. Never before has a race such as ours stepped into the arena of the earth to wrest among itself the power over its age. Never before has a generation returned to the light of life by stepping out of a gate as dark and mighty as that of this war. And we cannot deny, as much as some would like to: war, father of all things, is also in us; he has hammered, chiseled, and hardened

us to what we are. And always, as long as the spinning wheel of life continues to whirl within us, this war will be its axis. He has educated us to fight, and we will remain fighters as long as we live. It is true that he seems to be dead, his battlefields abandoned and disreputable like torture chambers and mounted gallows, but the warrior spirit has moved into his front servants, and he never leaves their side. He is in us, therefore everywhere, because it is we who shape the world, not the other way around, we are observers in the most creative sense of the word. Do you not hear him roaring in a thousand cities, do you not hear his thunderstorms all around us, as in the days when the battles surrounded us? Do you not see his flame glowing in the eyes of each one of us? Sometimes he sleeps, but when the earth trembles, he bursts forth boiling from the mouth of every volcano.

Not only is war our father, but he's also our son. We have raised him, just as he has us. We have been hammered and chiseled, but we are also those who know how to swing the hammer and wield the chisel, we are both blacksmiths and hot steel at the same time, martyrs of our own deeds, driven by impulses.

We lived together in the bosom of a chaotic culture, closer than the people that came before, fragmented between business and cravings, whizzing through shimmering plazas and underground tunnels, surrounded in cafes by the glow of mirrors, boulevards, beams of colored light, bars full of glittering liquor, conference tables, everything up to date, a novelty every hour, every day a problem solved, a new sensation every week and a great overdone discontent at the bottom. Technically still productive, we stood with Rabbi Akiva smiling at the end of art, having solved the world's puzzles or believing ourselves well on the way to doing so. The point of

crystallization seemed to have been reached, the Superman was close.

Thus we lived along and were proud of it. As sons of an age intoxicated with material, progress seemed to us perfection, the machine was the key to God-likeness, the telescope and microscope were our organs of perception. But underneath that always polished and shining shell, underneath all the garments that we wore like magicians, we remained naked and raw like the men of the forest and the steppe.

All this became clear when the war tore apart the communities of Europe, when behind flags and symbols, about which some had long since smiled in disbelief, we faced each other for an ancient decision. There, the true man compensated himself in a rushing orgy for all he had missed. There, his instincts, too long curbed by society and its laws, became the only sacred thing and the last reason. And everything that had shaped his brain into ever sharper forms over the course of the centuries, served only to increase the force of his fist to the utmost degree.

That lies behind us now, black and eerie like a forest passed through at night. Who wouldn't understand why our breath hastened? We plunged like divers into the experience and returned changed.

What was going on at the bottom? The bearers of war as well as its creatures, men whose lives had to lead to war and were hurled by it into new paths, new goals—what were we to it, and what was it to us? This is a question that many people are trying to answer today. These pages also deal with this question.

I

Blood

THE human species is a mysterious, twisted primeval forest, whose crowns, slipped over by the breath of free seas, stretch ever higher towards the clear sun out of haze, sultriness and humidity. If the peaks are covered with fragrance, colors and blossoms, a confusion of strange plants proliferates in the depths. If, when the sun burns out, a chain of red parrots descends into the calyxes of feathery palms like a flock of royal dreams, then from the lowlands, already plunged in night, a repugnant tangle of creeping, crawling creatures emerge, one hears the screeching cries of victims subjected to the insidious attack of greedy, murder-trained teeth and claws, ready to tear them from their sleep, from their lair, from their warm nest, to death.

Just as the primeval forest strives ever more toweringly and mightily to the heights, sucking its growth forces from its own decline, so each new human generation grows on soil made stratified by the decomposition of countless generations that now rest here from the circle of life. It is probable that the bodies of these past entities, who have concluded their dance, have been destroyed, scattered in the volatile sand, or decomposed at the bottom of the sea. But their parts, their atoms, are torn again by the victorious, the eternally young, in a state of

ceaseless change and thus raised to eternal carriers of living strength.

So also the content of existence, every thought, every action and every feeling that this endless series of predecessors has raced through the realms of life, has an eternal value. Just as man is born from the beast and its conditions, he also roots himself on all that his fathers have created in the course of time by fist, brain and heart. His lineages resemble the layers of a coral atoll: each pebble rests on countless others, long since extinct. Man is the inert, the constantly evolving vessel of all that has been created, thought and felt before him. He is also the heir of all the desires that have driven others before him, animated by an unstable energy, towards distant goals shrouded in mist.

Men are still creating a tower of immeasurable height, for which the lineages are layered, one state of their being on top of the other, with blood, agony and longing.

The tower swings at ever steeper heights, its battlements raise man more and more to the conqueror, reveal to his gaze ever greater, richer lands, but the construction does not progress in calm unison. Often work is threatened, walls collapse and are torn down by the foolish, the discouraged, the despairing. Setbacks of conditions long thought to have been conquered, outbreaks of elemental forces boiling under a solidified crust, reveal the living power of ancient forces.

The individual is also built up from innumerable building blocks. Propelled by an endless chain of ancestors; he is bound and spun, with a thousand bands and invisible threads, to the root network of the primeval forest, whose fermenting warmth incubated his primeval germ. It is true that the wild, brutal, blinding color of the shoots has smoothed, polished and subdued in the millennia in which society has bridled the

impetuous desires and lusts. Though increasing refinement has clarified and ennobled him, the beast continues to sleep at the bottom of his being. There is still much beast in him, who sleeps blissfully on the comfortable and inlaid carpets of a polished civilization, filed, woven, without making noise, wrapped in habit and in pleasant forms, but when the wave curve of life swings back to the red line of the primitive, the mask falls; naked as ever he bursts forth, the primal man, the cave hermit in all the unbridledness of his unleashed impulses. The inheritance of his father flares up in him every time life restores itself to its primal functions. The blood that, in the machine-like progress of his stone scaffolds, the cities, flows cold and regular through his veins, foams up and the primeval rock, which for a long time rested cold and rigid in the hidden depths, melts again into white embers. Whenever he descends into the maze of shafts, it comes hissing towards him, a wall of fire, a devastating assault. Torn by hunger, in the gasping devouring of the sexes, in the encounter of life and death, he is always the old.

In battle, in war, which tears all agreement from man like the patched rags of a beggar, the beast rises as a mysterious monster from the bottom of the soul, shooting up as an all-consuming flame, as an irresistible rapture intoxicating the masses, a deity enthroned above the armies. Where all thought and all action are reduced to a formula, feelings must also melt back and adapt themselves to the terrible simplicity of the goal: the annihilation of the enemy. This will remain as long as people wage wars and wars will be waged as long as there are still people.

There the outer form does not play a role. Whether in the moment of encounter the claws are spread and the teeth bared, whether rough-edged axes are swung, wooden bows are

stretched, or whether very fine technique raises the destruction to the highest art, there always comes the point where from the white in the eye of the enemy the blood-red intoxication flames. Always the gasping attack, the last, desperate walk, and always triggering the same kind of feelings, no matter if you're swinging a carved club in your fist or a grenade full of explosives. And always in the lands where mankind puts its cause to the bloodiest decision, in a valley separating two mountain peoples, in the sweeping arc of modern battles, not the gruesome, not even the most refined horrors can so imbue man with terror as the second-by-second appearance of his likeness looming before him, with all the fires of prehistory in his distorted face. For all technology is mere machine, it is chance, a blind bullet, devoid of any will of its own, while what animates man is the will to kill through a storm of gunpowder, iron and steel, and when two men clash in the whirlwind of battle, two beings meet, of which only one can survive. For these two beings have placed themselves in a primordial relationship, the struggle for existence in its most naked form. In this struggle, the weaker must remain on the ground, while the victor, with the weapon clutched in his fist, steps over the slain, deeper into battle, deeper into life. In the clash, your scream mixed with that of the enemy is a scream that wrests itself from hearts before which the borders of eternity shimmer. A scream now forgotten in the flow of culture, a scream of recognition, of honor, of bloodlust.

About the thirst for blood. Next to horror, this is the second element that burns over the warrior with a torrent of red waves: intoxication, the thirst for blood, when the spiked clouds of destruction hang over the fields of wrath. Strange as it may seem to those who have never fought for their life, the vision of the enemy brings with it not only pure horror, but also relief

from an unbearable tension. This bloodlust that hangs over war like a red storm sail over a black galley, comparable only to love in its boundless momentum. It tugs at the nerves of the bosom of whipped up cities, when the columns of men, under a rain of fiery roses, make the Morituri march to the station. It burns in the masses that surround them with cheers and shrill screams, it is part of the feelings that shower down on the death-striding hecatombs. It is preserved in the days leading up to the battle, in the painful tension of the eve, in the relegation march, in the conglomeration of fears before a fight to the death. It flares up in a grinding fury when the shower of bullets shatters the ranks, and concentrates all efforts in a single desire: to throw oneself at the enemy, to seize him as one's blood demands, unarmed, in the frenzy, with a wild grip of the fist. As it has always been.

This is the clash of feelings, the struggle that rages in the warrior's chest when he wonders through the fiery deserts of enormous battles: horror, fear, the foreboding of destruction and the eagerness to be unleashed. As soon as he, a small world raging through the horror within him, has discharged the ferocity that has been pent up to the point of bursting in a sudden explosion, moments lost forever to a vibrant memory, when the blood is flowing, whether from his own wound or that of the enemy, the mists sink before his eyes. He looks around, a sleepwalker, awakened from oppressive dreams. The monstrous dream, dreamt by the beast within him, of memories of times when man fought his way through ever-threatening hordes in desolate steppes, fades and leaves him behind, horrified, blinded by the unimaginable which resides within him, exhausted by the enormous waste of will and brute force.

Only then does he recognize the place to which the storming step has led him, recognizes the army of dangers from which he

has escaped, and turns pale. Beyond this border, only the courageous can continue.

II

The Gray

HORROR, too, belongs to that collection of feelings that have long been resting in our depths, ready to burst forth with an elemental force when the violent shocks occur. Rarely do its dark wings flap around the highbrow of the modern.

To the primitive man, it was a constant, invisible companion on his wanderings through the immensity of the barren steppes. It appeared to him in the night, amid thunder and lightning, and with its strangling grip it brought our ancestor to their knees, the one who, only holding measly pebbles, managed to overthrow all the powers of the world. And yet this very moment of his greatest weakness lifted him above the beast. Because an animal may perhaps feel fear when a danger appears in front of it, it may feel fear when it is chased and cornered, but it does not know horror. For it is the first storm light of reason.

Horror is closely related to lust, the intoxication of blood, and the pleasure of play. Didn't we all listen to earie stories as children in the long winter evenings? Your entire being would quiver, you wanted to crawl into a safe cave, and yet you couldn't get enough. It was like getting lost in the reeds and mud, coming across a nest of spotted snakes, and not being able to flee for the pleasure of looking at the hideous slithering.

At places where the people seek thrills, at every fair, every rifle range, horror in lurid colors beckons on painted canvas. Pleasure killings, public executions, wax bodies covered with festering ulcers, long rows of anatomical atrocities, whoever puts this on display knows the masses and fills the pocket. Often and for a long time I stood in front of such stalls and stared into the faces of those who came out. Almost always there was a laugh and yet it sounded so strangely embarrassed and forced. What was this laughter supposed to hide? And why was I standing there? Wasn't it because of my desire for horror? This lust is not foreign to anyone. This childish desire, this craving for horror, is well known to everyone.

Like the child wandering in the servants' kitchen, the peasant boy in the cabinet of horrors, young volunteers huddled around an older man in their barracks, whose voice still quivered with the horror of the battlefield. And even as their faces went pale and their eyes dark, there was not one who did not long for the day of marching out even more ardently. Every one of them was driven by the desire to stare into the face of Medusa, even if it meant that his heart would cease to beat.

And the hour came for everyone, when it brewed, darkly, indeterminately, from the depths, just when one thought of it the least. When the fields were as empty as on public holidays, yet there was something different about them. When the blood swirled in the brain and veins as before a longed-for night of love, yet even hotter and madder. When one moved closer and closer to the thunderous noise in front, when the beats became more and more booming, more and more hasty, when the plains glowed before the overabundance of rushing thoughts, when one was so emotional that the landscape and the events only later escaped one's memory, yet darkly, as if it were a dream. The baptism of fire! The air was charged with such

overflowing masculinity that every breath was intoxicating, one wanted to cry without knowing why. Oh, men's hearts can feel that!

Then it swept along the column of men with a bat's wing, so that laughter and cheers died in the mouth. On the side of the street lay a woody, motionless body with a sharp, waxy face, from which glassy eyes stare into the void. The first dead man, an unforgettable moment that froze the heart's blood into faltering ice crystals. Then the horror reared up in everyone as a pale, shy horse in front of the nightly abyss. And another impression forever bored itself into everyone's brain. His hand, like a claw beaten into moss and earth, the bluish lips over the whiteness of the teeth, the black, bloody crust in the hair. Oh, however much one might have prepared oneself, everything shattered at this gray figure at the wayside, on whose dirty face the first blue flies played. That vision and the countless others to come offered a thousand different and distorted postures, torn bodies and gaping skulls, pale, cautioning ghosts of insane trench soldiers in the minutes before the storm, until the liberating cry rang out.

Horror, as we understand it, is inextricably interwoven with death; we cannot separate it from it, just as primitive man could not separate it from the bolt of lightning that flashed to earth beside him. Will later generations also overcome this horror and think back to us in the same pitying emotion, to us and the feelings that trembled through our chest on the odysseys through the endless wasteland of the fronts?

During those nocturnal walks in darting deserts our hearts were so lonely and ravaged, as if it were swinging pendulously above the deadly shimmer of frozen seas. All warmth was swallowed up by the relentlessness lurking all around.

Countless times the howl of a slowly dying man echoed into the void. Forward, only onward, toward the safe cave!

Although one had walked over the trampled, scarred terrain for many years, one always jolted, as if recovering from a fit of madness, or waking up from terrible dreams. Where were we? Among the craters of the moon? Expelled into the depths of an inferno? This could not be an earthly landscape, this infernal dance floor of death, surrounded at the edges by yellowish flames! There were no hearths to spread a peaceful light in the room, only colorful signs of destruction flying through the air from some hole in the ground, fireworks anticipating a roaring massacre. Not a shrub, not a blade of grass caressed the stumbling foot. Pale mists and poisonous gases flooded islands of sad trees, black, shattered carcasses. Occasionally a house peeped out, abandoned and crumbling like a wreck at the bottom of the sea. What was it that groped for our hearts, in the uncertain light, from all angles with slimy tentacles? The horror of death and decay.

The decay. Many men perished, without cross or hilly burial, in the rain, sun and wind. Flies buzzed in thick clouds around his solitude, a damp mist hovering around him. The smell of a decaying man was unmistakable, intense, sweetish and as revolting as mush. After great battles, it brooded so heavily over the fields that even the hungriest forgot to eat.

Often a squadron of brazen fellows held on endlessly for days in the clouds of battle, stuck in an unknown piece of trench or a row of craters, like shipwrecked men in a hurricane clinging to shattered masts. Death had thrust his scythe into the ground. Fields of corpses before them, mowed down by their bullets, beside and between them the corpses of comrades, death itself in their eyes, which lay strangely fixed in sunken faces, these faces that recalled the gruesome realism of old

crucifixion images. Almost languishing, they crouched in the decay that became unbearable when one of the iron storms stirred up the congealed dance of death again and hurled the destroyed bodies high into the air.

What was the point of covering the new dead with sand and lime, or spreading sheets over them, to escape the constant sight of those black, swollen faces? There were too many of them: the spade was always met with a buried body. All the mysteries of the trench lay in the sunlight, a hideousness before which the wildest nightmares paled. Hair fell in clumps from skulls like foliage from trees in autumn. The flesh of some corpses turned greenish, like that of fish, and glowed at night among the tattered uniforms. If stepped on, the boots left phosphorescent footprints. Others were dried into chalky, slowly decaying mummies. And others, the flesh would peel from the bones like reddish-brown jelly. On the sultriest nights, the bloated corpses would awaken like spirits, the gases escaping from their wounds, hissing and foaming. Most terrible of all, however, was the swarming that emerged from those consisting of nothing more than a mass of worms.

Why should I spare your nerves? Didn't we ourselves once, for four whole days, lie in a trench surrounded by corpses? Weren't we all, dead and alive, covered with a dense carpet of bluish-black flies? Could it get any worse? Yes: among the dead lay people with whom we had shared a few night watches, a few bottles of wine, and a few loaves of bread. Who, if not us, can really talk about the war?

If, after days like these, the front-line soldier marched through the towns of the hinterland in gray, silent columns, stooped and ragged, the sight of him caused the carefree people to freeze. "He looks like he's just come out of a coffin," whispered one to his girlfriend, and anyone who was brushed

by those dead eyes trembled. These men were saturated with horror; they would have been lost without the intoxication. Who can understand all this? Only a poet, a *poète maudit* in the voluptuous hell of his dreams.

Et dites-moi s'il est encor quelque torture
Pour ce Tieux corps sans Ome et mort parmi les morts?
(And tell me if there is still some torture
For this godly corpse without soul and dead among the dead?)

Penetrating horror, comprehensible in its fine radiations only to the most sensitive, lay in contrast, crackling, where life and destruction touched and intersected. It sprang from destruction, terrible in its apparent purposelessness.

Desolate villages yawned into the night like desecrated tombs, flooded with white moonlight, shrouded in a haze of carrion, with grass-covered streets over which silent packs of rats scurried. We walked around ashen courtyards with uncertainty, gripped by the vague fear of encountering the spirits of those torn away from a peaceful existence. Couldn't the abbot appear behind the ruins of the rectory? What could be hidden in the darkness of the cellars? A woman's corpse with straggly hair floating on black ground water? Animal carcasses hung in the stables, still chained to charred beams. At the entrance of a shattered doorway, like a miniature corpse, lay a child's doll.

One stepped over the horror with bloody, hobnailed boots, François Villon and Simplicius Simplicissimus in one's backpack. And yet one sensed something brush against the deserted chimneys and constrict one's throat, so icy that one had to swallow. One was, after all, a bearer of war, reckless and daring, had slain many men over whom one had stepped with a strong feeling in one's chest. Yet all this was like a child's whimpering from the wild moors, a ghostly lamentation like

the ringing of the bells of a sea sunken Vineta at noon. Like the sinking of that high-spirited city, one felt the hopeless decay of a culture, shuddering at the realization of being swept away in the maelstrom.

Between laughter and madness often lies nothing more than a knife's edge. Once, at the beginning of an offensive, I passed through a town where only the daily life of its inhabitants remained intact. A comrade elbowed me with a smile and pointed to a shop with a gaping roof and cracked walls. Strange but true, only one window had remained unbroken in the midst of the destruction. On it stood a whole row of women's hats. A few days earlier, while searching for a friend who had fallen after a battle, I had pulled apart the bodies of a group of corpses and suddenly, from the torn jacket of one of them, a huge rat had jumped out at me. Nevertheless, this experience did not grip me as much as the ghostly contrast between the desolate street and the shiny tinsel of painted straw, silk and colored feathers, which reminded me of women's hands and the thousand superfluities that make our lives colorful.

Another time, during an endless night vigil in the dark corner of a trench, together with an old warrior, I asked him in a whisper to tell me a story, a true one, about his most ghastly experience. In short pauses, his cigarette glowed under his steel helmet, casting his gaunt face in a reddish aura. Here's what he told me:

"At the beginning of the war, we stormed a house that had been an inn. We forced our way into the barricaded cellar and fought in the dark, animated by an animalistic bitterness, while above us the building was already burning. Suddenly, probably triggered by the heat of the fire, a mechanical orchestrion lit up and started playing. I'll never forget the carefree raucous of that

dance music, mixed with the screams of the soldiers and the gasps of the dying."

There would still be much to tell. About men who laughed long and hard after a bullet had crushed their skulls, about someone who tore off his uniform on a winter's night and raced across bloody battlefields grinning, about the satanic humor of the great field hospitals, and many other things. But we children of the time have become tired of the bare facts. So tired.

After all, it is not the facts, but precisely the uncertain, the indescribable, the dull foreboding that sometimes billows out like the smoke of a hidden ship fire. Perhaps it is all just a fantasy. And yet it was again so tangible, so leadenly heavy on the senses, when a forlorn troop voyaged under the dome of night through unknown terrain, far away and closer surrounded by iron heaves. Then suddenly in their midst a glowing ray tore itself from the earth, a cry of shattering realization drifted into the infinite. The brain could perhaps register the dark curtain of horror, raised in the last fire, but what lay behind it, lurking, was not something our gaping mouth could describe any longer.

III

The Trench

THE trench. Work, horror and blood have riveted the word, turning it into a giant steel tower that looms over anxious minds. Not only a rampart and bulwark between two worlds in battle, but also a bastion and dark cave for the hearts, which it has sucked in and expelled in constant change. A glowing Moloch that has gradually burned the youth of the men to cinders, spun veins over ruins and desecrated fields, from which the blood of mankind pulsed into the earth.

Far away, he was already gripped with a cold fist at weapons rehearsal and carousing in the villages on the edge of the horror, where the fighter regained his footing, again managed during the day and slept at night. The windows hammered relentlessly when the wagon of destruction roared along the front, heedless and malingering. Hardly anyone, among those accustomed to the blood, heard it. Only now and then, when the glowing eye of the fireplace gazed into dark rooms and the blossoms of the world opened up to the wandering mind, glaring and stupefying, big cities on the waters of light, southern coasts on which light, blue waves frothed, women cast in silk, queens of the boulevards, then it rang out, quiet and sharp like a curved blade, and black menace rushed through the panes. Then there was a shivering call for light and wine.

Sometimes it bubbled up, boiling lava in huge cauldrons, in the west dark redness pierced through morning fog, or ribbons of dirty smoke fluttered in front of a sinking sun. Then, far into the country, everyone was on the edge of their seats, anxious lowlanders in a roaring storm surge. Just as they stuffed sandbags and timbers into the jaws of burst logs, so they hurled battalions and regiments into the flaming gaps of torn trenches. Somewhere there was someone on the phone, a granite face above a red collar, with intent on pounding out a pile of rubble that had once been a village. Then orders clanged, and steely armor and dark fever radiated from a thousand eyes.

But even when the rolling mill of war ran more quietly, the boney clenched fist of death still dominated the wastelands. In the broad land around the trenches he ruled with severity, and it was not youth, humility and talent that counted when his leaden scourge pelted flesh and bone. At times it even seemed as if he spared the one in particular who, laughing, grabbed his mask with an insolent hand.

Night after night, columns of men wound their way toward the trench, swarmed by thoughts in greedy packs. Sometimes they disappeared into the villages, black, yawning wounds, through whose rubble the boots of the front-line soldiers had trodden narrow creeping paths. There it smoldered from gutted houses, naked rafters cut themselves like skeletons into the disk of the moon, the scent of carrion haze emanated from cellars, from which swarms of squeaking rats escaped. So eerie was this frozen destruction that the imagination bursts in on puffy nags and formed life, a life indeed, as it might have led Goya's brush, which crawled out of all corners of the burning places and merged into a hideous dance circle.

As gray shadows diving into endless running trenches, out of the edges of the crushed village, they felt release from heavy

pressure. For they were no longer burrowing through the decaying body of a former life, they were no longer passing through places strewn with cradles and bridal beds, where rich courtyards had hosted tables of wine and white bread, where humble altars inclined in the colorful sun, where in the evening, from the towers, a satisfied and dangling contentment poured into the huts, the stables, the fields.

The more the wind whistled over rumpled fields, the more the march accelerated, for the dark threat was taking shape. Close by, the silver, hissing balls of light appeared and rushed with a cold gradient over the chain of crouching men. Guns everywhere tore the veil of night, shimmering nets of steel and splashing lead spanned the land. All around, the horizons writhed in red spasms, iron squadrons roared toward their targets. Sometimes they would lose altitude and their jarring curve drowned in an explosion of jagged shrapnel and clayey din. Then everyone prostrated themselves, fearful and stunned as before an almighty deity, and plunged on, gasping, flame-whipped, with a booming eruption ringing in their ears. Many of them remained lying, unnoticed, a piece of earth in their rigid fist, dirt in their mouth and on their face, a sad bundle, mere springboards for those whose hearts paled when their spiked boots sank into the soft flesh.

Finally, they reached their destination. Once there, some stared motionless, like iron pillars in the barren foreland. Those who still felt the excitement of the fire forced themselves to whisper, for silence was the first commandment of the trench, silence as at the high court and in the house of a dead man. And those who have finished their watch, silently and redeemed, hurried into the darkness of the winding corridors.

Now they were bounded by the trench, its masters and its slaves at the same time, a crowd cast out in the night, a ship's

crew, surrounded by icebergs. They knew him well; every clod of earth hurled onto the ramparts was the fruit of their work, they had trampled every inch of his dark corners thousands of times. They knew him when, at night, the clouds swam past the moon as galleys laden with mystery, and when sentry posts, parapets, and tunnel shafts flashed at them in the changing light as a strange, hostile world. They knew him when the morning mists heightened the horrors of the desolate desert by shrouding it, and the rigid wiring appeared to the eyes from which waking nights burned as a moving army of confused figures. They knew him when at noon a sky of glass surrounded him, the wild flowers gave off burdensome smells and the loneliness of the hinterland opened wide to the peering gaze.

Sometimes, in the evening, they squatted together in front of the black dugouts, chatting and smoking pipes, while the balmy air carried busy hammering and native songs to the enemy. Late dawns surrounded the ruins; from holes and nooks the night spilled murmuring, pushing the sun from pinnacle to pinnacle until it leaped from the tops of the ramparts into the darkness. Then they parted; their business began. Some crept as hunters over the wire into no man's land, others stood silently, waiting in trenches for long hours or swung the pick against rocky shafts.

Thus, with renewed force, the trench weighed daily on its bent inhabitants. Voraciously, it swallowed up blood, rest and manly strength to maintain its cumbersome gears. There were moments when the work was rushed, day and night, without rest. If rain had washed away the trenches, if iron maelstroms had plowed them up, like animals dragged to the light, then it was a matter of digging into mud and earth, in order to disappear into the ground again.

Even in dry times, when the god of war rarely stamped his steel club on the ground, a hundred staring eyes were fixed on the foreland, on the enemy. A hundred ears hung eternally on the changing voices of the night, the call of a solitary bird, the whistle of the wind between the wires. This unending readiness was worse than the quick hours of battle on the field, always on guard, all the senses strained, the wait for the murderous encounter spread over weeks, sometimes months. From the Alps to the sea, the chain of frozen men stretched across fields, forests, swamps, rivers and peaks, winter and summer, day and night. Weathered, tattered, parched, in clayey crust, lifeless save for the lights that gleamed in the dark depths of their eyes, they seemed to be rooted in the trench, as part of the earth that enclosed them. As infinite as the monotonous backwash of distant benighted oceans was the sum of thoughts, desires, curses, and hopes that stirred the loneliness of uncounted hours. At noon, the boiling air danced over the yellow sand and made the distances tremble, then escaped the heated dreams of golden harvest, scythes flashing with momentum, resting under the islands of shade of individual trees in the field. Warmth, confinement, domesticity, Christmas became glowing visions, when far away through the thinness of freezing nights the stamping of frozen feet clinked and the moonlight coated the steel of the guns with an icy blue patina. If rain rushed for weeks in steady strength, only the splashing of approaching detachments, a clapping impact of crumbling earth and along the lines an incessant coughing could be heard, until even the last pennant of courage sank into the muddy floods

But always, in heat, wetness or icy wind, at the bottom of their being was the feeling of being in battle, of being fighters. For weeks everything seemed as usual, the trench a place like any other, at whose edges flowers bloomed, and which the

night spanned with peace. But sometimes, when two wires swung together in front, a little stone rolled, a rustle slid through the tall grass, it became apparent how all the senses lay in wait. Then the ears and the eyes sharpened to the point of pain, the body ducked under the helmet, the fists clutched the weapon. The rifle was always within arm's reach: if fire suddenly sprang up or confused shouts resounded in the depths of the tunnels, then the first thing to do, still drunk with sleep, was to grab it. This grasp, when awakening from a deep slumber, was something that lays in the blood, an expression of primitive man, the same movement with which the ice age man grabbed his stone axe.

This imprinted the trench warrior with the stamp of the animal, the uncertain, the elementally fatal, the environment charged with constant threat, as in primeval times. The empty eye sockets of death often stared at other men as well, but only for a few hours, or a few days. If the aviator rose in a decisive flight over the armies, then it was only to play a brief game with death, fighting with a white collar and a serene smile typical of a brave man. To him the battle was still an intoxicating drink, served in the cup of the moment, as in the lost days of surging gallops through field and dew, while the morning sun danced on colorful coats and naked blades, or of the parade attack of the infantry behind the silk of shot up flags, ruffled by the tamed fury of brazen marches. In the past, war was crowned by days when dying was a joy, rising above the times as gleaming monuments of manly courage.

The trench, on the other hand, has turned war into a craft and warriors into day laborers of death, ground down by bloody, everyday life. Romantic legend had also become the feeling of trepidation that crept over the soldier on the eve of battle, around the camp fire, while riding into the dawn, and

that turned the world into a darkly solemn cathedral, the full breath into a heavy breath into the evening meal before a heavy course. The trench had no room for poetic sensing, for reverence of one's own greatness. Everything sophisticated was crushed and trampled, everything delicate was incinerated by the glaring events.

Even in the short days of rest, there was no time to indulge in such moods. One plunged into life, grasped it with both fists, chased it down in one's brain, mad and wild, as if one had escaped the galleys. Then one could understand why a sinking crew would leave the pumps, smash the rum barrels, and let the flame of the senses shoot once more to the sky. At times it became compulsory to break the black dams with which the trench encircled the waters of existence, to mock the constantly threatening hammer fist of death.

Even in the tunnels, in the underground shelters created for protection and a bit of peace, hours rarely blossomed when the trajectory of life swung beyond a languid twilight. After all, how could anyone breathe freely in those caverns covered with damp, crusty beams and planks eaten away by yellowish mold, impregnated with a haze in which the small lights of the candles flickered? These were narrow entanglements of shrouded, dirty men, full of dust, gases, and tobacco smoke. Occasionally one would get up without a word, take his rifle in his fist and disappear. Then another would come rumbling down, dull, desultory, and occupy the vacant seat, a barely noticed change. Scraps of words, torn off like the short blasts of bullets smashing outside, went on to form a monotonous conversation. They were so intertwined, so woven on the same wheel of fate, that they almost understood each other without speaking. Everyone wandered through the same nocturnal landscape of

interiority, a sigh, a curse, a joke were the flames that for moments tore the darkness above the abyss.

There were hours when comradeship glowed and melded the chains with which the trench had bound the hearts. At first everyone was closed in on themselves, some intent on staring at the embers of the tiny stove, others peeling the crust of a piece of bread, one had pulled the blanket over his head on the cot. But then a voice would break the dullness, telling about some village, some people, about Sundays and everyday life, rest and work. Then in each of us the familiar things would awaken, the small things that encircles a whole life: the glow of the sod under the plow, the smoke over native roofs, the swinging of the festival bells over lonely fields. Then hearts leapt with emotion, fires sprang forth from hidden veins, the impassive rigid eyes sparkled with radiance. So tenderly, so awkwardly, each offered his own little insignificance to the other that the wave of his feeling swept them both high above the trench. This was one of the moments when man rolled away the weight of the trench, and humanity flitted like the fleeting glow of a spotlight over the horror of the wasteland. If, at such moments, a seeker after intimate treasures had ventured over those scarred moors, our man-filled caverns would have illuminated before him like nuggets of gold from the depths of the earth.

But this glow quickly faded in the eternity of the trench. Like machines, the men resumed with their spades, mounted their sentry posts, or crept into the unknown. Exhausted, frozen, shivering with excitement, they returned and threw themselves on their cots. Slowly the candle flickered, a rat gnawed at the stud frame, the water drops incessantly played their monotonous melody. When the burning eyes finally closed, even in sleep the brains were still surrounded by lurking horrors. The bodies tossed and turned on hard wood, often

enough a groan, a cry from the depths of wild dreams clawed its way into the darkness of the tiny room. The sound of chains clanking and the whining cry of animals left to their own devices would creep ghostly from the stables to deserted fields and lonely yards.

Even here, in the bosom of the earth, one was entangled by the horror with a thousand arms. Somewhere, very close, next to one, under another, a strange shuffling of feet could be heard, a scraping, a pecking, a piling up of explosives, creeping and stealthily in the glow of the miner's lamps. Somewhere in the craters of no man's land a whispering troop, armed to the teeth and ready to leap, could be waiting to launch itself towards the trench for a sudden slaughter, for a brief orgy in fire and blood. Every nook and cranny was interwoven with hidden bustling and scurrying, men of toil reduced to shadows, panting under the weight of their weapons, armed silhouettes confabulating and muttering. And this pressure, this heaviness, rolled over stagnant fields, also weighed like a leaden bell on the heart of each man. This was evident when a clod broke away from the edge of the trench outside or a freezing sentry gave the call for relief. Then the bond of sleep was torn by a glaring recognition, the sleeper startled in the expectation of standing before the dark gates of some terrible event.

And once, sooner or later, the day dawned that made this dark gate flame up, that overtook all foreboding and all expectation in the lightning of fulfillment. Usually, these thundering storms charged the troop with a sudden fury, like wild animals taken by surprise. This was called "the moment of surprise" in the rules of combat. Thus the cauldron boiled up unexpectedly, when the black bands of the wire entanglements peeled out of the twilight and deceptive shapes bathed the sleep deprived eyes of the sentries. Then, all at once, the horizons

crumbled, the morning mists became intoxicated with a burning red, fire, splattering earth, and smoke billowed over the trench.

This cloud was the fiery curtain under which the men of the trench fought and died, a curtain that eternally veiled whatever was generated in those moments of superhuman courage and cunning, a curtain through which death thundered down on victims who awaited it, scattered unspeakably forlorn in their sad holes. Countless others fell in this, alone, far from everything, in dark caverns or smoky craters without the last desperate glance of their glassy eyes catching anything but bare, torn earth all around. And countless others have fallen on the bodies of those that fell, on the peaks of battle, when long waves of men flooded the trenches.

Then the trench showed its true face. Everything fell from it, with which the man, who loves the concealment of the atrocity, adorns and decorates it. The benches, the carved boards, the bouquet of flowers planted by the guard in a shell were all crushed and torn to pieces. Only the steep walls, the blocks of the parapets stood as rigid, black backdrops, in front of which a chain of dramatic scenes unfolded in fire and fog. There, in fighting packs, the best of their respective nations hunted, fearlessly attacking in the dim light, trained, ready to throw themselves into the arms of death at the command of a whistle and a short call. When two troops of such fighters met in the narrow corridors of the flaming desert, the embodiment of the most ruthless will of two nations clashed. This was the climax of the war, a climax that surpassed all the horror that had previously torn the nerves. When eyes meet, a paralyzing second of silence preceded. Then a scream drifted up, steep, wild, blood-red, burning itself into the brains as a glowing unforgettable stamp. That scream tore veils from dark,

unimagined worlds of feeling, forcing everyone who heard it to rush forward to kill or be killed. What did raised hands mean, or pardon, or comrade? There was only one understanding: that of blood. Flickering balls of light hovered over a battle whose spirit escapes any description and that no one has ever seen, except those who bleed to death in dark corners, their eyes wide open, carrying that desolation with them into the great silence as their last image.

These orgies of rage were short, raging fevers; when they were over, they left the trench like the rumpled bed of someone who had died of convulsions. Pale figures with white bandages stared into the wonder of the rising sun, unable to comprehend the reality of the world and of what they had experienced. In monotonous repetition, the cries of the wounded rose and fell, slowly dying out in the intervening field, twisted in craters or in barbed wires.

Again the days and nights passed over the moat, ships towing the same cargo into eternity. Decay brooded over the landscape. Gradually the dead putrefied, reunited with the earth, with the trench for which they had fought. Somewhere, in the wind and twilight, swayed on the edge of the trench two willow branches that a comrade had tied to make a cross.

IV

Eros

WHEN the war blazed like a torch on the ruins of the cities, everyone felt abruptly torn from their daily lives. Staggering, distraught, the masses poured into the streets under the crest of the immense wave of blood that piled up before them. Shrinking all those values that the tortuous coils of time had made it mandatory to internalize. The fine, the intricate, the ever more sharply honed culture of nuance, the sophisticated fragmentation of pleasure, all this evaporated in the bubbling crater of impulses believed to be lost. The refinement of the spirit, the tender cult of the mind perished in the clashing rebirth of barbarism. Other gods were raised to the throne of the day: strength, fist and manly courage. When their embodiment roared across the asphalt in long columns of armed youth, the crowd rejoiced with shivers of reverence.

It is in accordance with natural events that this rediscovery of violence, this masculinity taken to extremes, must also change the relations between the sexes. In addition, there was a fiercer will to grasp life, a more intimate enjoyment of being in the dance of a single day above the abyss of eternity.

Every jolt to the foundations of culture generates anomalous outbursts of sensuality. The central nerve of society, hitherto isolated and padded with all the safeguards which the community could offer, suddenly lies defenseless. Existence,

carelessly sucked in by man like a breath of fresh air, is abandoned, the unaccustomed proximity of danger evokes confusing, dreamlike feelings. The harvest of enjoyment lay carefully distributed over the fields of time; if the original source dries up, the fruits must wither. The treasures in the chests, the wine in the cellars, everything that before meant abundance and possession, all of a sudden becomes strangely superfluous, almost a burden. The hand loves to claw over the ducats—how much longer will we be able to enjoy them? How delicious the Burgundy is! Who will sip this wine when one is no longer alive? Will we feel warmth when our heir sinks his nose into the glass and tastes the bouquet? Oh, if only one could empty all the barrels in one savage gulp! After us the deluge, in the grave there are no more joys!

Oh life, life! Once more, once more, perhaps the last! To plunder, to splurge, to waste, to splash all the fireworks into a thousand suns and radiating flames, to burn off all the stored energy before going into the icy desert. Into the surf of the flesh, have a thousand babbles, erect shimmering temples to the phallus. If the strike of the clock is to be silenced forever, then may the hands still purr quickly across the dial through all the hours of the day and night.

Thus the forces, which were hitherto interlocked as tangled gears, disengaged themselves from their usual course in order to unite in a mighty expression of the sensual man. This was an unconditional necessity, though hidden under romantic veils and cast by the spirit of the time into its more or less pleasing forms, but that setback which always occurred, always will occur, when the solid ground of existence begins to falter. Thus all the lights in the windows flickered into the uncertain night, the streets of the cities roared with a hasty bustle, the air spanned to the bursting point with promotions and devotion.

That is a delicious thing about life, that just when death strangles most greedily, it flickers along most colorfully and madly in war, revolution and plagues. Each of the countless embraces into which two human beings have thrown themselves at the outbreak of the world-changing storm has been a triumph of life in its eternal supremacy. Everyone, even the most despondent, felt this dully: when his breath died in the whirl of love, he was so detached from the ego, so spun into the circle of life, so poured into the eternal universe that for that moment death appeared to him in his true form, small and despicable. When the wave of feelings shoots steeply beyond contemplation, death remained deep in the depths.

Two feelings appear to us as the causes of this flood of sensual phenomena: the urge of life to express itself once more in an intensified way and the flight into the thicket of intoxication in order to forget the threatening dangers in pleasure. Besides, of course, much else resonates, but our limited questioning will always be able to snatch only small provinces from the realm of the soul.

The longer the war lasted, the more sharply it shaped sexual love into its form. Under the blows of the restless hammers of the blacksmiths, it soon lost luster and polish like everything else that man had brought to battle. It too became imbued with the spirit that weaved in the warriors of the great battles. The spirit of material war, of trench warfare, a spirit that became more and more ruthless, savage and brutal, and forged men like the world had never seen. It was a whole new race, embodied energy and charged with supreme force. Lithe, lean, sinewy bodies, striking faces, eyes petrified under the helmet after a thousand terrors. They were overcomers, steel natures, attuned to battle in its most ghastly form. Their advance over devastated landscapes meant the final triumph of a fantastic horror. When

their daring squads broke into shattered positions, where pale figures stared back at them with mad eyes, unimagined energies were unleashed. Jugglers of death, masters of explosives and flame, magnificent predators, they dashed through the trenches. At the moment of encounter, they were the epitome of the most combative the world could bear, the fiercest assembly of body, intelligence, will and senses.

Of course, there were only a few select people in whom the war was so concentrated, but the spirit of the time is always and forever embodied in individuals. It is clear that the spirit of these men, capable of quick, reckless deeds, bursts forth in everything they did. Just as they held alcohol, in its strong, undiluted forms, in the highest esteem, so they charged into the attack, seeing red, against the hurdle of any intoxication. Throwing themselves fully into the frenzy, "drinking life" was the motto in the brief respites between battles. What harm was it if he found the morning sun under the bar table? Any sense of bourgeois reputation was far away. What was health? Important to people who planned on living a long time.

Sharp-eyed and weather-beaten, they strode the streets of foreign cities, lansquenets of love, too, who were allowed to reach out for anything because they had nothing to lose. Fugitive wanderers on the paths of war, they grabbed their prey as they were used to, with a steel fist and without much sentiment. They had no time for the lengthy courtship, for novelistic development, for the frills that remain dear to even the most bourgeois girl. They demanded flower and fruit now. So they had to look for love in places where it offered itself to them without veils.

Didn't the intersections of the modern military roads glow night after night under the sign of Eros, the unleashed one? There paraded in long lines a femininity ready for anything,

lotus flowers of the asphalt. Brussels! Life foaming under a thousands of propellers. How tremendous was the momentum of life and yet as frighteningly mechanical as the war itself. There, only steely idiosyncrasy could exist without being ground away in the vortex. These bodies given over to love were mere instruments and swayed rustling in demand, with clothes like shiny posters. I once leaned against a lantern for a long time, enjoying the same scene over and over again, repeating itself like the monotonous crash of waves on the beach. Over and over again. There weren't even conversations, otherwise as appropriate as the tablecloth, knife and fork, to soften the bestial nature of a meal.

In the dark corners of old quarters the red eyes of lamps glowed, a prelude to a hasty fist full of pleasure. Inside ordinary houses, mirrors gleamed, engulfing light drowned in the heaviness of red velvet. And when the metallic handle sank into the white flesh, a drunken laughter rose. Warriors and girls, an old motif.

But what was going on in the countless villages that surrounded the horror? When you marched through them they seemed dead and dark, only the bayonet of the soldier on guard shone in the market place. And yet a foreign race dug itself, indelibly, into foreign lands.

When red life roars against the black banks of death, distinct colors come together to form sharp images. These are—we live in the midst of it—epochs of unveiling, of unleashing, averse to everything fine, delicate and lyrical. Everywhere, rebounding life clenches into barbaric fullness and force, not least in love and art. There is no time to reread The Sorrows of Young Werther with teary eyes.

Sometimes, certainly—are we not prisms that fragment every color? Who would like to put them into a formula?—even

at the edges of the material battle a warm glimmer glowed. It flickered, perhaps, in the cracked store windows of the first inhabited house, through the cold horror of the night, like an arm searching for an outpost of feeling. There, in a peasant's room, two people lay together under coarse linen, and for a few hours felt protected, on the edge of destruction, as safe as two birds in the top of a tree when creaking nightly woods sway in the storm wind. Maybe a student and a Picardy peasant girl, flung together on a wartime cliff. Now they were all sensation, two burning hearts in an icy world. And while the little window trembled to the pounding rhythm of the nearby front, two lips caressed the man's ear, insistently trying to pour into him the whole melody of the foreign language. That single minute might have been enough to ignite in him a vague idea of her land, clearer than the wisdom of all the books and high schools before. For what is the understanding of the brain compared to that of the heart?

Such a night was atonement, redemption, even if the morning were to explode into a roaring fire. One of them marched in the ranks of the old lansquenets with shining eyes and a light step. Even if his heart did not hide behind defiant songs and hard jokes, it trembled less than theirs under secret shivers. Strong he stood in the hail of bullets, the smell of kisses still in his hair. Death approached as a friend, a ripe grain of wheat falling under the scythe.

V

Pacifism

WAR is the most powerful encounter between nations. While in commerce and negotiations, in competitions and congresses, only the leading peaks touched, in war the entire team knows only one goal, the enemy. Whatever questions and ideas moved the world, it was always the bloody conflict that decided them. All freedom, all greatness and all culture were born in the idea, in silence, but only through wars preserved, spread or lost. Only by war did great religions become property of the whole earth, the most capable races shot from dark roots to the light, innumerable slaves became free men. War is no more a human institution than the sexual instinct; it is a law of nature, therefore, we shall never escape its spell. We must not deny it, otherwise we will be devoured by it.

Our time displays strong pacifist tendencies. This current springs from two sources, idealism and blood-shyness. The former denies war because he loves people, the latter because he is afraid. And this also includes the figure of the aesthete.

The idealist belongs to the lineage of martyrs. He is a soldier of the idea: he has courage, so he must be respected. For him, humanity is more important than a single nation. He believes that furious people only inflict bloody wounds on mankind. And that when the weapons clang, the construction of the tower

rests, which we want to drive up to the heavens. So he stands between the waves of blood and is crushed by them.

For the other, one's person is as sacred as it gets; therefore, he flees or shuns the fight. He is the pacifist who attends the boxing matches. He knows how to clothe his weakness in a thousand shimmering cloaks—especially in that of the martyr—and some of them seem all too tempting. . . . But one must be clear about this: If the spirit of a whole people drifts in such a direction, then it is a storm signal of a coming downfall. A culture may seem to be towering, but if the masculine spirit burns out, then it becomes a colossus on feet of clay. The mightier its structure, the more terrible its fall.

Someone might ask, "Well, God may be with the strongest battalions, but are the strongest battalions with the highest culture?" That is precisely why it is the sacred duty of the highest culture to have the strongest battalions. Times may come when fugitive hooves of barbarian steeds clatter over the rubble heaps of our cities. Only the strong hold their world in their fist, to the weak it must melt into chaos.

If we consider a culture or its living carrier, the people, as a constantly growing sphere, then the will, the unconditional and ruthless will to preserve and to increase, that is: the will to fight, is the magnetic center, by which its structure is strengthened and always new parts are attracted. If this center loses its power, it will trickle away into atoms.

Examples from history are cheap. In every collapse, we see weakness that some thrust from outside suddenly reveals. This push comes every time with infallible certainty; this is due to the setup of the world. The addiction to destroy is deeply rooted in the human being; everything weak falls victim to it. What had the Peruvians done to the Spaniards? To those who have ears for it, the jungle crowns that today birds above the ruins of

their sun temples sing the answer. It is the song of life devouring itself. To live is to kill.

On the island of Mauritius once lived the dodo bird, the most peaceful bird imaginable; they were even close relatives of the pigeons. They had no enemies, fed on plants, and could hardly walk because of how clumsy they were. Their meat was inedible; hence their nickname "the disgusting birds." Despite all this, they went extinct after their abandoned island was discovered. Here's an image that's very easy to visualize: the Dutch, a people of tireless navigators—in certain matters man really is, and no one is more tireless than the hunter— wielding sticks and heavy spears, and the many thousands of large, lumbering birds watching the slaughter with astonished eyes, until they too end up with their skulls cracked.

"Well, this little episode took place before the Thirty Years' War. One might nevertheless assume that this could even happen today, in a time of compulsory education, animal rights groups, etc., etc."

In 1917, I was on a street in Brussels, in front of an illuminated shop window. There were whole mountains of piled up porcelain, dainty little things from Meissen, Limoges and Copenhagen, colorful Venetian goblets and large bowls made of fine crystal, as clear as water. I love wandering around big cities, lingering for a long time in front of these museums of luxurious small art, sparkling in the light. You get the same sense of richness, beauty and fullness that permeates the avenues of a park in the heart of autumn, unimpaired by the thought that one does not own it.

That time, however, I was disturbed by the sight of two soldiers leaning against a brass pole next to me. They were unmistakable types of the front; the trench had bleached and worn their coats. Their faces were bold and intelligent, around

their eyes and mouths a petrified tension, marked by supremely heightened moments behind hammering machine guns. Nevertheless, to the trained eye, posture and suit already showed the small signs of incipient fatigue.

"Well, you can't even see the war from here. It's all over there!"

"Boy, you'd have to go at it with a .38, really high from above."

"And shit would splash all over the place!"

One could clearly read from their faces the lust with which this thought filled them. The little flash gave me food for thought. These were two men who were absolutely "fed up" with the war, yet they remained basically the same. They were tired, battered by mechanical action, beaten up; they had not gained the least in moral knowledge.

At that moment I understood very clearly that men like this would never overcome the war, because it was greater than them. It is probable that their tired hand would sometimes fall, it is probable that at times they would stand back panting, it is probable that they would end this or that war with a peace treaty, it is probable that every now and then someone would say: this war will be the last one. But war does not die when villages and cities stop burning, when millions of people stop bleeding to death while clenching their fists, when people stop throwing their bodies, like whimpering sacks, on the bare tables of field hospitals. Nor is it born of a few statesmen and diplomats, as many believe. All this is only external. The true sources of war spring from the depths of our chests, and all the horror that then floods the world is only a reflected image of the human soul, revealed in the events.

How many times have they been heard sighing in their shelters, "It's not good for men to kill each other." But in reality,

they meant, "It's not good to be killed." And often saying it were the same ones capable of stabbing in cold-blood, sneering, "It's nothing, comrade!" when pleading arms stretched out to them. For a whole, long summer we laid in the hilly landscape of Artois, a combat regiment, a lost bunch, long since alienated from the hustle and bustle of the cities. For months we had seen no woman, heard no ringing of bells or whistle of factories. The overgrown, scarred wilderness, the faces of our comrades dulled into uniformity, the thousands of sounds of a hidden, incessant battle, the cloud of bullets by day and the flickering of flares by night: all this had become so familiar that we hardly noticed it anymore. Every ninth night we would march back from the trenches and return to a squalid nest to get plenty of sleep and clean our rifles.

The area in front of us was a desert. We gazed at it day after day, long and carefully through the narrow slits of our embrasures, griped by the curious horror that surrounds an unknown land. On silent nights the wind brought us voices, coughs, beats, hammering and a distant, muddled rolling of wheels. Then we were seized by a peculiar anxious and greedy feeling, like that of a hunter stalking an enormous, mysterious animal in a jungle clearing.

At noon we would often squat in a patch of light inside the trench, silently smoking, for we had known each other so long that we had nothing left to say to each other. Forged together by unforgiving circumstances, like galley slaves, we were usually sullen and couldn't stand to see each other. Sometimes one of the rearguard guys would walk past us, very hurried, busy, holding a map covered in red and blue lines and marks. Very simple, the blue lines were us, the red lines were the enemy. We saw that he was clean shaved, that his boots were shiny, and that he was only interested in what made us vomit.

We'd make a series of bitter jokes about it. At that point the feeling of the front united us, that sense of animal cohesion in defiance of death of which so many back home have written and spoken, and by which they apparently understood the rushing unison of the storm call and the advance of the horns at dawn. Oh, how long had we exchanged the shimmering skin of that heroism for the dirty smock of day laborers!

Almost every day someone was hit, sometimes right next to us; sometimes we only noticed it when, moving through the trench, we found a cold body at a sentry post. In most cases it had been a blow to the head caused by a stray bullet that had found a hole between the sandbags. There must be many veins in the head; we were always amazed at the amount of blood that could escape from a human being. One was torn apart by a shell or grenade, so much so that he was unrecognizable, even to his best friend. Then we lifted the mangled mass of corpses with our shovels onto a canvas to wrap them. On the clay that came into contact with it were large, rust-colored wet spots. We carried the bodies back during the night and buried them in a cemetery that was constantly expanding. The carpenter would carve an iron cross, the sergeant would cross the names off the list, and the company commander would sign. Soon we would forget them, or have a very vague memory of them. Maybe one of them said in the evening: "You know that guy, the little fat guy with the red hair? I remember the time when he dug up an unexploded shell and found himself a hammer. What happened to him? That guy took the dud and used it to drive stakes into the ground. The colonel rode past him and was so frightened that he almost fell off his horse! Crazy stuff!"

So we lived monotonously, surrounded by death and wilderness. The battle had long since lost its extraordinary character: it had become a condition for us, an element with

whose appearances was as familiar to us as those of heaven and earth. Our former life was only a confused dream with which we gradually lost all connection. If we sent letters home, we always remained generic or described the outward appearance of the war, not its soul. The few of us who had a clear idea of what was going on probably knew that those back home, far from the front, would never understand them.

Slowly autumn came.

Then something quite unexpected happened, something we never thought possible. During a stormy night, a wild rain pelted down on the trenches. Trembling and soaked, we held our positions and tried in vain to relight our pipes in the wind. In torrents, the water gurgled down the trench walls to the bottom, a wall of sandbags collapsed with a sharp blow and so did the embankments, one after the other, disintegrated into a viscous mush. Covered in mud, the troops crawled like frightened rats out of the shelters where the water level kept rising. And as the sun slowly and sadly dawned behind a damp curtain, we realized that a veritable deluge had descended upon us. Silent and frozen, we crouched on the last remaining ledges, which soon began to crumble. The last expletive we had was long since uttered, a bad sign. What were we to do? We were finished. The weapons were encrusted. We couldn't stay down there, and yet to show ourselves above ground was certain death. We knew this from thousands of past experiences.

Suddenly a shout rang out. Beyond the wires appeared figures in long yellow coats, barely distinguishable from the clay background of the wasteland. Englishmen, who also could no longer stay in their trenches. It was our salvation, because we were at the end of our strength. We went to meet them.

Strange feelings awoke in us, so intense that in our eyes the surroundings melted away, like smoke, as if we were in a

dream. We had been trapped in the bowels of the earth for so long that it seemed almost unbelievable to be able to move freely in the field during the day and speak to each other using human language instead of the language of machine guns. At that moment, a higher, common need proved that it was a very simple and natural event when we met in the open field and shook hands. We stood there surrounded by the corpses that littered no intervening field, amazed at the sight of the ranks that emerged seamlessly from every corner of the trench systems: we had no idea of the multitude of men who had been hidden in that dead and desolate terrain.

In a few minutes a lively conversation developed, in large groups, exchanging uniform buttons, brandy and whiskey, here was a Fritz, there was a Tommy. The large churchyard had been transformed into a fairground, and in this quite unforeseen relaxation after months of bitter fighting, an inkling of happiness and purity surfaced in us concealed in the word peace. It did not seem inconceivable that one day the best team of nations would rise from the trenches, out of a sudden impulse, out of a moral insight, to join hands and finally get along like children who have quarreled for a long time. At that moment the sun came out of the curtain of clouds and everyone could feel a pinch of that precious feeling, of the strange joy with which the spirit, relaxed by the will and no longer under a task, abandons itself to the enjoyment of life.

The joy, however, did not last long, it was suddenly abruptly destroyed by the intervention of a machine gun located on a nearby hill. The volley of bullets tore up the ground or sprayed into the mirrors of water-filled craters. We threw ourselves to the ground, some of us falling, stricken, into the muddy holes. As we crawled slowly back, barely able to pry our hands from the tough muck, the jagged saw of the impacts drove through

our ranks until we reached cover where we stayed until evening.

Yes, when you lie on a plate-flat field, feeling completely abandoned, defenseless, you can't understand how another person, sitting dry and safe, can so unmercifully fire at the convenient target.

But when it's you, crouching behind the machine gun, that movement up ahead is nothing more than a dance of mosquitos. Fire, fire! Hey, it's a pleasure to shoot! The lead never seems to run out. Then you gather around and say: "Boy, that was great! That was war! One fell next to the other, as if spat upon!" And when you see the gleam in their eyes as they conjure up these bloody phantoms again, then you realize: this is war, naked war. There sits what they call militarism today, and it's deeper than the sound of the marching regiment or the rush in which the silk shreds of shot up flags flutter. It is only the thirst of blood for festive joy and solemnity.

In this I am in agreement with the pacifists: first of all we are human beings, and that unites us. But precisely because we are human beings, the moment will always come when we have to fall upon each other. The occasions and means of battle will change, but the battle itself is a given form of life, it will always remain the same.

VI

Courage

MANLY courage is the most delicious thing. The blood rushes through the veins in divine sparks, when one clashes over the fields in the clear cognizance of one's own boldness. Under the storm step all the values of the world blow away like leaves in autumn. On such peaks of personality one feels reverence for oneself. What could be more sacred than the warrior? A god? Perhaps because we have to shatter against his omnipotence like one shatters against a polished bullet? Oh, the noblest sentiment has always turned to the weak, to the only individual capable of delivering one last swing of the sword with a cold fist. Doesn't our laughter also resound with emotion when animals defend themselves against us, so tiny that we could crush them with a finger?

Courage is the wind that blows towards distant shores, the key to all treasures, the hammer that has forged great empires, the shield without which no culture would exist. Courage is the commitment of one's own person to the utmost consequences, the challenge of the idea against matter, regardless of what may come of it. Courage means to let oneself be crucified as an individual for one's cause, courage means to confess the beliefs for which one stood and fell in one's dying breath. To hell with a culture that wants to deprive us of our courage and our men!

Everyone feels it, no matter how dull it may be. Courage has something irresistible that leaps from heart to heart at the moment of action. No one can so easily escape the feeling for the heroic, if he does not possess a completely depraved and base character. Certainly the fight is sanctified by its cause; still more is a cause sanctified by fight. How else could one respect the enemy? But only a brave can fully understand this.

The fight is always something sacred, a judgment of God on two opposing ideas. It is in us to defend our cause more and more harshly, and so struggle is our final reason and only when fought for is it true possession. No fruit will ripen for us that did not hold in storms of steel, and even the finest and most beautiful things must first be fought for.

He who therefore digs down to the roots of the struggle and venerates the true fighting spirit, venerate it everywhere, even in the enemy. Therefore, reconciliation after battle should first embrace the men of the front. I write as a warrior; this may not fit our modern times, but why shouldn't we warriors try to meet in our element, in that of manly courage? It is impossible to fail worse than the statesmen, the artists, the scholars and the pious who have acted according to their own principles. Did we not often enough squeeze the hands of men that had just hurled the hand grenade at us, when those behind were even more deeply entangled in the undergrowth of their hatred? Have we not planted crosses on the graves of our enemies? We were still the most decent ones, who every day, again and again, reached into the blood. From the very beginning, fighting has been a way of life, but it can be ennobled by chivalrous spirit. And in its greatest manifestation, war, the same argument applies as in religions. Mankind prays to many gods, in each god the truth expresses itself in its own particular form. The authentic sense of the fight has not been lost, that is just democratic chatter, as

long as there are peculiarities, there will also have to be different forms of fighting. And everyone who consciously ran into the arms of death was moved by something different, but each had its justification. Just as one respects the faith of others, even if one sometimes has to fight it, one must also respect the courage of others.

The warrior is the fiercest champion of his cause; we have proven this, we front line soldiers of the globe, each in his place. We were the day laborers of a better time, we broke the solidified vessel of a world, so that the spirit might become fluid again. We have chiseled the new face of the earth, even if few still recognize it.

For many, it will still be invisible under the cloud shadow of the event: the immense sum of the achievement holds a general that connects us all. Not one has fallen in vain.

Because the warrior, who is absorbed in his goals, cannot overlook this, and this realization has no value for the fight at all, because it weakens its force: somewhere, in the end, all goals must coincide. The fight is not only an annihilation, but also the male form of procreation, and so not even he who fights for error fights in vain. The enemies of today and tomorrow: they are united in the appearances of the future, that is their common goal. And it is good to feel oneself in the circle of that hard European morality which, over and above the clamor and softness of the masses, strengthens itself ever more sharply in its ideas, that morality which does not ask about the means, but only what the goal is. This is the sublime language of power, which sounds to us more beautiful and intoxicating than anything before, a language that has its own valuations and its own depth. And the fact that this language is only understood by a few makes it noble, and it is certain that only the best, that is, the bravest, will be able to communicate in it.

But we lived in a time when the brave man was the best, and if nothing should emerge from this time but the memory of an event in which man was worth nothing and his cause everything, we will still be able to look back on it with pride. We lived in a time when one had to have courage, and to have courage, that is, to be equal to any fate, is the most beautiful and proudest feeling.

Again and again, in the engulfing storm of gigantic battles, one was amazed at the increase of forces of which man is capable. In the minutes before the storm, when a strangely altered state of consciousness occurs in the intoxication, the gaze once again glided over the row of figures crouched in gray trenches. There was the boy, who again and again fiddled with his storm gear, the man, who stared dully at the clayey walls of the trench, the lansquenet, who smoked his last cigarette. In front of them all, death reared its greedy head. Once again the very essence of themselves was flowing into them, once again the colorful world was rolling through their brains in a whirring film. But there was something sublime about the fact that when the whistle blew for the attack, hardly anyone stayed behind. It was the overcomers who swung over the edge of the trench, hence the steady calm with which they strode through the fire.

Then came, granted only to the raciest, the intoxication before one's own boldness. There is nothing more energetic than the assault on fields over which the mantle of death flutters, the enemy as the target. This is life in the cascade. There is no compromise; it's all about the whole thing. The highest is commitment, if blackness falls, everything is lost. And yet it is no longer a game, a game can be repeated, here everything can irrevocably come to an end with the wrong move. That is precisely what is so powerful.

Thus the warriors staggered along in the rush of battle, arrows flung from the bow in the mist, dancers in uncertainty. But over these clashing veils, so often torn in the fire, hung far more than the intoxication of the moment. Courage is comparable to dance. The person dancing is form, is secondary matter, what's important is what lifts and lowers under the veil of his movement. Thus courage is also an expression of the deepest consciousness that man has, eternal, indestructible values. How else could even a single man consciously walk towards death?

VII

Lansquenet

WE have become old and comfortable like the elderly. It has become a crime to be or to have more than others. Now, unaccustomed to the strong intoxicants, men and power have become an abomination to us; our new gods are the masses and equality. If the masses cannot become like the few, then let the few become like the masses. Politics, theater, artists, cafés, patent leather shoes, posters, newspapers, morals, the Europe of tomorrow, the world of the day after tomorrow: the thundering masses. Like a thousand-headed beast, crushing all that does not allow itself to be swallowed up, envious, parvenu-like, cruel. Once again, the individual was defeated, and didn't his own representatives betray him? We live too close to each other, our great cities are grating millstones, rushing torrents that grind us against each other like pebbles. Too hard, the life; don't we have our flickering life? Too hard, the heroes; aren't these flickering screen heroes enough for us? And how beautifully they flow, smooth and silent, these stories. You sit in the cushion and all the nations, all the adventures of the world swim through your brain, as light and gestalt as an opium dream.

And man is good. How else could we squat so close to each other? Everyone claimed it about themselves. No one had attacked. Everyone was the attacked. One larded the war with

phrases, in order to make it palatable. But to the true warrior, to the man of limited but straightforward action, this was repugnant to the core. Certainly, brutality never appeared meaner than under this ragged garment, this thin whitewash of a so-called culture.

Certainly, there have been times that were crueler. When Asiatic despots like Tamerlane led the clashing cloud of his hordes across vast territories, fire in front them, desert at their backs. The inhabitants of gigantic cities were buried alive, or bloody skulls were piled into pyramids. With deep passion they plundered, desecrated, scorched and boiled.

Nevertheless, these great stranglers are more sympathetic. They acted as it corresponded to their nature. Killing, for them, was moral, like charity to the Christians. They were wild conquerors, yet just as united and consistent in their actions as the Hellenes were in theirs. One can feel pleasure in them as in colorful predators breaking through tropical thickets with a gleam in their eyes. They were perfect in themselves.

Completion. That is the crucial point. Sharp penetration to the edges of their ability, shaping reality into their own form. Only one appeared to be perfect in this sense—from the point of view of the front—the Lansquenet. In him the waves of the time beat together without dissonance, war was his very own element. He carried war in his blood, just as Roman legionaries or medieval lansquenets carried it in their blood. Therefore, he stood alone as a solid figure against the background of gray and red, formally and securely outlined.

He stood out sharply from the philistines in arms, as if from a completely different race, the last predominant type in the people's armies, the military expression of democracy. They were shopkeepers or cobblers, more or less soldierly, who practiced war as a civic duty, good people, who, if necessary,

were also heroes. But one thing was a condition of life for them: order. This was shown in all its sharpness at the collapse, this trial by fire of the most audacious masculinity. Struck from both sides, the bourgeois fluttered between them like a bird that had been knocked out of its nest and closed its eyes because it saw its world sinking.

There is only one mass that manages to not look ridiculous: the army. But the bourgeois was even able to make the army look ridiculous. There are only two soldiers: the mercenary and the volunteer. The lansquenet was both at the same time. He, as a son of war, was not afflicted by that bitterness which more and more disintegrated the body of the armies, and whose expression could be read at last from the plank walls of every field latrine. He was born for war and had found in it the condition in which he alone was able to live out.

Nevertheless, the Lansquenet did not embody the heroic ideal of his time. He "did not worry about anything." That was rather the conscious fighter, who strove to penetrate his task, thus also a perfect type, whose outer and inner world should stand in harmony. This type became rarer and rarer with the general weakening of fighting morality. It is also questionable whether the will to live of a people is expressed more clearly by a layer of fighters who strive to distinguish right from wrong, or by a healthy, vigorous race that loves the struggle for the sake of the struggle, or, in Hegel's words, whether the world spirit represents itself most forcefully through a conscious or through an unconscious instrument. In any case, the lansquenet has always remained the same, in his first battle as well as in his last.

"Alarm! Tonight two o'clock the regiment is ready for loading. To Flanders!" The tired faces grew even paler, the conversation died away, the whistles went out. Somewhere,

surrounded by dreams, gleamed a hamlet, an unreachable island of the blessed. Again! And just escaped the roaring maw. Call in sick, desert! No. No escape, the decision is made, the new hustle and bustle begins. Mother, a woman's smile, warmth! And at noon a white table. Life, even on the smallest clod: life! Or at least sleep, doze off like an animal and sometimes wake up satisfied. Oh, it has to be! Does it really have to be? Only one in the group remained wide-eyed and motionless. That was the lansquenet, the born fighter.

Yes, somewhere there were still, the old lansquenets. When twilight flowed from dead fields into the trenches, a meager light gleamed from a half-ruined dugout at some godforsaken spot on the front. If one had slept the day away in the bosom of the earth and, with awakening instincts, wound like a nocturnal animal through the overgrown stitch trenches to the battle position, one probably entered them to refresh oneself with their carefree noise. "In old freshness" was one of the mottos they liked to hear, and it also seemed, one came out of all the dead and the silent despair into their circle, as if the carefree life had fled to them. At last, one found oneself among those who felt at home in this gruesome landscape.

Their surroundings were the most masculine. Crude plank walls, supported by beams and crude stamps, hung with guns, benches and a clumsy table, a bottle with a candle stuck in it. They lived like trappers in their huts or pirate ship captains in their cabins. That's how Villon might have lived in the vagabond taverns, that's how the Wild Boar's Head in Eastcheap, London, might have wasted its great elemental force. Here they squatted in those cramped spaces, weathered and tattered, with faces like sharpened blades, full of jump, race and energy. Their language was short, dominated by buzzwords, chopped and torn like the bursts of fire from their

machine guns, the words stamped and full of earth power. Wherever men find themselves in the primal, such languages arise. Dear God, how superior these guys were to those men in Geneva and Zurich who wrote about how outraged they were about the war and afterwards claimed to have had their finger on the real pulse of the times!

It was strange: wherever lansquenets gathered, alcohol was never in short supply. It was their ideal intoxication, as violent as an explosion, as brief and brutal as an axe blow. Only the moment was valid, death stood leaning against the wall as an unnoticed lackey. When the intoxication melted the angular reality into glaring colors, an irrepressible feeling of power awoke in them, some bold heritage blazed in their blood, many a crusader, robber baron, Norman or medieval characters. When the clamor of daredevil voices became more and more raucous and the sound of shrapnel pelted down on the walls, life was no more than a bottle of wine, good for getting drunk on and firing against the nearest wall. Primal forces, as blind as a storm or a tsunami, threatened to burst the veins and blaze into intoxication, to drown in the unconscious.

Often this restlessness accompanied them in dark and sleepless nights. They had stuck the colorful banner of exaltation on the blackbirds of life, but in them there was never a lack of wild inebriation, a great desire to get involved. When the wind whistled through the fences or blew through sparse tufts of grass, when strange shadows slipped through the mist, then the horror of no man's land assailed them from everywhere, so strong that even the chests of these brave men rose and fell, panting. A boundless loneliness grew in them as the surrounding ramparts stood out as black, threatening bands of night. The desire of the hunter and the fear of the game mixed in their adventurous blood and sharpened their senses to an

animal sharpness. It was never a good idea to do dig work in front of the trenches where they spent sleepless nights. Sometimes, when all the soldiers on guard were already asleep, in the wasteland a few meters away a series of sharp blows would resound, a reddish light would flash and a shrill scream would spread, long and light across the room. Then everyone knew—as one knows something in a dream, though one has never experienced it—that this scream, which pierced the veins with ice, could only be a final one. Everything jumped up, aroused and awakened, as everything awakens in lonely jungle villages when the huts shake in the howl of a greedy predator. Then the rifles cracked, restless glowing bullets rose and fell. This was a brief, eerie celebration of corpses, while the barren countryside hung empty and frozen as an eerie backdrop in the white light.

Once the horror had died away, the lansquenets would emerge from the black shadow of a crater and crept back into the trenches. In haste they would answer the troop's questions, they would come off the walls, and if at that precise moment the moon broke from behind a cloud, they stared at each other shuddering: their faces were so bloodless and gaunt that they glistened like bones in the pale light. Sleep had long been a stranger to their cots, their hands trembling as a gambler trembles when he walks through empty streets at dawn, while the black and red of the cards still dance before his eyes.

What was it that kept rushing them into the desert at night? The adventure? A desire for horror? Or were they werewolves, humans who transformed themselves into animals to race howling across deserted fields and lie in wait at crossroads?

Once, on a bright September night, we marched toward the distant glow of a battle. Dull and silent, the masses flooded over the dusty country road, aiming toward a glowing horizon. All

the senses were engulfed, stunned by the giant force of the ever-approaching fire. In the middle of the stream, however, rode calmly one who had tied a pair of mighty bull horns in front of his steel helmet, like a Teutonic god marching to battle.

Another time, when the town of Combles was collapsing under the heaviest shelling, overrun by steel and stones, we saw two people in women's dresses masked with red umbrellas running through the swirling debris. These people were of the same ilk as the shock troop rolling up a trench with empty wine bottles, like that Scottish assault team playing their soccer against the enemy line to attack, or like the German lieutenant who was told at the front that he had found a way to let the stick grenade shatter over his head like a torch without a splinter touching him.

Some may cross themselves at such examples of divine impudence; I would not like to miss them. At the very hours when the frightful fury of things threatened to soften the soul, some men carelessly danced over it like it was nothing. And the idea, typical of men, that matter is nothing and spirit is everything, the same idea from which the greatness of man is based, was exaggerated by them into paradox. Then one felt that this accumulation of explosive effects, these roaring storms of steel, no matter how greedily they might be rearing their heads, were only machines, only theatrical backdrops, which only attained meaning through the game that man played before them.

It is important to note that it is precisely the most vigorous life that sacrifices itself most willingly. It is better to go down like a bursting meteor than to go out trembling. The blood of the lansquenets always bubbled under the propeller of life, and not only when the iron rush of battle carried them from wave to wave. They had to express and form life, wild and mighty, as

it flowed uninterruptedly from the depths. If masculine virtue alone was intoxication and flame for them, then battle, wine and love fanned them to white embers, to a mad desire to die. Every hour demanded content, colorful and hot the days ran through their hands like pearls of a glowing rosary, which they had to pray down in order to fulfill themselves. From one source all being blazed forth for them, whether it was reflected in the full glass, in the raging eyes of the opponent or in the gentle smile of a girl. In the intoxication the eagerness to go further awoke, to reach the heights of battle, then everything melted together in the arms of love.

Like others in art or in truth, they sought fulfillment in battle. Our paths are different, each carries a different compass in his chest. Life is always something different, for someone it is the rooster crowing at sunrise, for another it is the field that sleeps at noon, for yet another it is that glimmer of light in the evening mist.

For the lansquenet, life was the thunderclouds over the night's expanse, the tension that looms over the abyss.

VIII

Contrast

I AM awakened. Where am I? Ah, of course! I'm in bed, a very nice bed indeed. They know their stuff, the French. They're *bon vivants*. Quite pleasant people, actually. I don't hate them.

But I'd rather not tell anyone that. They resent such passions even from the old Fritz. From their point of view, they are not even wrong. If one is going to wage war, one should do it completely. Nevertheless, even among us front-line soldiers there are men who break into a French trench, steel and explosives in their fists, and end up reading Rabelais, Molière and Baudelaire in the newly conquered dugout.

One more thing. Where would we be without these bold and ruthless neighbors who sweep the rust from our blades every fifty years? Europe as a plain, green and grazed, with more happy animals than you can eat: as long as Germanic and Gallic blood circulates through hearts and brains, this cup will pass us by. And even to go into battle, this realization of the necessity and the value of the opponent in the background is a chivalrous pleasure of a special kind. But the high culture of battle is long gone; even in the game of life and death the masses may take part, without leaving their instincts at home. How did the English lieutenant whom we captured the other day come to hold out his watch and cigarette case to me? He had acted like a gentleman and also like a cake maker.

Oh, it becomes more and more difficult, the war stretches its tentacles towards every rational feeling and then fattens itself in the darkness of its cave. The fact that one kills human beings means nothing, they have to die anyway, but you can't deny them. No, you can't. The most terrible thing for us is not that they want to kill us, but that they constantly shower us with their hatred, that they never call us anything but Boches, Huns and barbarians. This is bitter. It is true that every nation has its own evil type, and it is precisely this type that our neighbors tend to regard as the norm. We ourselves are no better, every Englishman is a Shylock to us, every Frenchman a Marquis de Sade. Well, in a hundred years we will probably laugh about it, if we don't go to war again. Every contemplation requires distance. Distance in space, time and spirit.

Anyway, the bed is really excellent. It's almost like the good old days when you would come home for vacation and sleep all day, so young and without worries. Then you jumped up, drank coffee in the garden and ran with your brother into the woods, as free as a migratory bird with a head full of great plans. Then came the maneuvers. How the ore of the trumpet rang across the wide fields, a lure to which one listened breathlessly, while strange shivers rushed through the boy's body. It was the manhood awakening in us, the flag, the galloping steed, the blade thrusting from the scabbard. It was the knightly ride before dew and day and the red blood that shot from burning wounds. That was battle!

Ah yes, if only one had known all this beforehand. A beautiful knighthood, this crawling around between dirt and decay. I dragged my brother through the fire, shot to pieces, just a few days ago, and I sent the sword home long ago. It is more appropriate to hurl a packet of dynamite at each other's feet as a greeting than to cross blades elegantly.

The weather must be nice outside. The autumn sunset scatters the curtains with gold like shiny coins. The mirror-smooth parquet, the pink wallpaper, the pendulum, the marble fireplace, everything shines so daintily that you almost want to roll around on the comfortable cushions. Sometimes life is such a joy! Now a broad, vibrating spot of sunlight strikes the gilded framed picture hanging opposite me. A Watteau! The colors shimmer finely and lightly like the melting of a butterfly's wing, like an airy minuet twirled with gossamer tenderness. Yes, is there still such a thing? Does it really still exist?

And yesterday we were still squatting with two others in a hole in the ground, in front of which the canvas was curling in the wet wind. Silent and shivering, chewing the pipe between the teeth, listening to the steady howling and bursting of the iron blocks. Bruch! Brruch!!! Brrruch!!! "You hear it, they're getting closer. Don't you think we should go to the right?" "Aw shucks, they could break through either way. Do you have any more tobacco? It's getting more and more intense. Keep a look out, they're going to attack today."

Yes, yesterday I stared for hours, motionless and nervously, at the crumbling clay wall in front of me. I can still see it clearly in my mind's eye, this brown wall, interspersed with black flints and chalk lumps, already melting into mush at the bottom, from which bullet casings and rusty hand grenades protruded. A dead man was also lying in it, but only one leg was visible. He must have been lying like that for a long time. The foot had not been able to hold the heavy boot and had fallen off at the ankle. Then came the coarse knitted underpants and the gray trousers pulled down by the clay rain.

Actually, he must have been lying like this for an extremely long time. With his blackened skull, his hair pulled out in tufts by the rain, and small, dried-up fish eyes in his deep sockets.

Somewhere in the field by the crows, in the buried shelter next to stinking rats or in no man's land getting battered by ceaseless swarms of bullets. Always one step away from death. No further than yesterday. Every day that I still breathe is a gift, a great, divine, undeserved gift that must be savored in long, intoxicating sips, like delicious wine.

I jump up and stick my head into the water. The towel had a delicate scent, reminiscent of beautiful, manicured female hands. Putting on the shirt is a solemn act, a crowning of my new incarnation. How the electrifying, white linen caresses the body, so soothing and stimulating at the same time. Life is really full of precious things, of pleasures that can only now be appreciated. We owe this to the war, this need to lower every little inch of our being into life in order to grasp it in all its splendor. To do this, one must know decay, for only those who know the night can appreciate the light.

Outside on the street, I ask a civilian about the swimming pool. It gives me pleasure to speak French. I have the feeling that something connects me with the country I am wounding.

It's glorious in the swimming pool. The sun casts wobbly coils through the glass roof onto the green tiled surface. I glide fervently through the water. From the diving board, a few naked figures laugh at me. My comrades are already here; I didn't recognize them at first. When you've always only seen them bent over and encrusted in solidified dirt, you're amazed at their taut, slender bodies, whose muscles play like liquid marble under the damp sheen. What splendid men they are! Almost all of them have red scar marks, which were burnt on their flesh by flying steel in battle. When they dart into the water from above like arrows, you instinctively feel that they have courage.

From the swimming pool I stroll to the museum, which is nearby. The fresh autumn air makes my damp face cold and smooth, my eyes shiny. In the halls of the art gallery, one Dutchman hangs next to the other. That's right, Flanders is very close. Those fish markets, those village taverns, those peasant dances radiate coziness, pleasure and ponderous enjoyment. You can tell that it was flowing life that has led the brush. Today I need warmth: I couldn't feel anything looking at Goya. Behind the display cases, there is also a collection of Japanese miniatures, graceful handmade masterpieces, ebony, jade and ivory carvings, dark copper figurines embellished with gold and silver. I gazed for a long time at the curled arm of a yellowish ivory octopus, studded with a hundred darker colored suckers, on which sits a tiny metallic green fly. The idea must have come to him, in passing, during a walk along the beach. There are also melons as big as walnuts, equipped with every single grain, small turtles with ornamented back carapaces, and a monkey beating a drum. Everything is so perfect that, once seen, one could not imagine it better, capable as it is of awakening a pure joy, the desire to immerse oneself completely in the appearance.

In the afternoon, I return to the city, flooded with awakening hustle and bustle. With the sharpened scent of the city dweller, I walk through the hustle and bustle, while the brain easily and precisely crunches the profusion of changing images. Shop windows, bookstores, pounding streetcars and automobiles, fragments of conversations in German, in French, in Flemish, women who, despite the walls separating the nations, are still influenced by Paris; everything comes together and unites to form a radiant, thousand-armed picture of life. And this flow of very diverse relationships launches its waves towards me with a force heightened by the fact that just twenty-four hours ago I

was a caveman struggling for bare life. Here I feel that existence is intoxication and life, wild, mad, hot life, a fervent prayer. I must express myself, express myself at all costs, so that I realize with a shudder: I am alive, I am still alive. I plunge my fleeting penetrating gaze into the eyes of the girls passing by, I am pleased when a smile escapes them. I step into a store and buy cigarettes, the best, *bien entendu*. I stop in front of each shop window, looking at linens, dainty jewelry and books. I eat in a small tavern and should not miss anything, not even the mocha and the carafe of liquor at the end of the meal.

Then I walk again over streets and squares, which are now swimming in lights. Gradually, I enter a suburb whose blocks of houses rise bare and gloomy into the evening sky. Only in the wide gaps between the buildings do the lanterns glow. I stop at the railing of a bridge and stare into the black mirror of a canal. I am saddened, everything seems lonely and unknown. The wind snatches fistfuls of leaves from the trees, drags them rustling and throws them into the water. A barge passes silently out from under the bridge, like a long, black coffin.

How hostile it all is. Things waver in the fog, sometimes they are like smoke, like a spooky, unreal fluttering, and sometimes they emerge mockingly in cold rigidity. This is how one becomes numb when landing in some strange hotel room, in an unknown city, or reading a melancholically crazy Russian poet. Leaning against this frozen railing, over a stream that I don't know where it comes from or where it goes, my soul is assailed by the sadness that sometimes rises in us like a leaden fog and makes things empty and dull, stealing from them every vital spark. Space slips into cold infinity, and I feel like a tiny atom, whirled around restlessly by treacherous forces. I am so tired, so weary, that I wish I were dead. A lansquenet, a knight who during a joust has broken his spear and whose mirage

evaporates into mocking laughter. I feel with infallible clarity that some strange meaning, some terrible significance lurks behind everything that happens. Something that would flash through my mind in mad frenzies or in unpleasant dreams, but I have only forgotten it again in the midst of life. One tends to laugh about such things when one walks fresh and healthy in the sunlight; when they come to us, all previous knowledge shatters like glass, like a dream at the end of the night. Everyone has experienced something similar but forgets it, because it must be forgotten.

A light step sounds, half blown away by the wind. A silhouette appears, looking at me from behind. I have to speak to her, as I would on a deserted island. She doesn't seem surprised, after all, who would be in this part of town at this hour? Probably a streetwalker, but a lansquenet isn't picky, and I feel an irresistible need for company, even if it's the very worst kind.

Now I know what this suburb is called. It is called Mouvaux. She doesn't know where the canal goes either, perhaps to the Défilé. This reassures me. She speaks to me in simple words and I listen eagerly. She tells me about the old days, before the war, when people lived in peace. When there was still wine and white bread, when people celebrated and danced in the fields in front of the city gates. Her husband is a worker who has long been fighting on the other side, beyond the front. Where might he be? Perhaps he has been lying for some time in one of the large cemeteries that line the fronts. Could he be walking right now in Paris alongside someone else? Or is he lurking in the night, illuminated by bullets, between the dark parapets of a trench? Perhaps we will find ourselves lying in front of each other, very close, without knowing it. Or perhaps our shots will whistle out past each other's skulls.

"What do you want me to do? Months have turned into years, letters from the front don't come, and this damn war doesn't want to end. One cannot always stay at home. The war is a great misfortune for me, for you, for the whole world."

Their apartment is sparse: a kitchen, a room, elegant furniture. On the walls, oil prints and a photograph of a married couple: her in a veil, him in tails, awkward, forced by a provincial photographer to keep their arms glued to their bodies. We converse slowly, without stopping, we both like the idea of sitting in front of the fireplace where a bunch of dry branches are burning, we like being in each other's company. Man is very much alone in this great landscape over which the breath of war is blowing. In a month's time, it is possible that this city will be reduced to a pile of rubble, and tomorrow this heart and brain, which know how to connect to the things of life so well, may no longer feel the pulse of blood. When the sun shines in the morning, we are brave and feel the glow of life in battle, but in the evening we have the desire to sit quietly and peacefully together in front of warm fires.

As we part in the front door, she says, as the damp wind caresses us, "*Je ne t'oublierai pas.*" (I will not forget you.) It sounded sincere. I cross the bridge and head back into town, hands in my coat pockets, head down. Spurs clink with each step.

In the Rue de Lille, a comrade comes towards me.

"Gee, where have you been? We're loading up in the morning."

"Loading? No! We just got out of there!"

"Old stuff now. Come on, I know a little tavern where they have the great trinity: old port, oak benches and Flemish waitresses."

He hooks me in, and we go.

IX

Fire

EVEN though it is still dark, our silhouettes stand out clearly against the chalk walls of the trench, which winds through the night like a white snake. We walk silently, cautiously, one behind the other, man by man, each one entangled in his own thoughts. In an hour we will be a heap flung in front of the army, deep in the enemy lines that stretch out in front of us, wide and mysterious, like a strange, unholy coast.

A great, gray sobriety surrounds us. Earthen ramparts, trench grates, corridors, cables, everything stares at us coldly, lifelessly and hostilely in the trickling twilight, objects towards which we have lost all relationship. We still perceive them, but they no longer tell us anything, for the ripples of our thoughts dance ever more intermittently, ever more fleetingly in our brains.

Strange how certain moments always bring back the same mood. We've long since finished our maiden battle, we've stood in the fire hundreds and hundreds of times, we're the chosen storm troop of a famous assault regiment, and yet this morning we're all so quiet and thoughtful.

But also so brilliantly prepared. For three whole weeks we trained at the back of the terrain, shaped according to aeronautical pictures, also every morning at dawn, with grenades, explosive charges, and Molotov cocktails. We have

considered everything, discussed with each other, learned the French calls, and practiced with their means of close combat; in short, this enterprise is as familiar to us as the trigger of a rifle after incessant drill, which, at the sound of the command, will be squeezed with spontaneous precision.

We've known each other for a long time, we daring daredevils, we've met on many hot days on smoke-covered battlefields, where the spirit of the hour always manages to gather the same men. We know we embody a selection of powerful masculinity, and we are proud of it. Only yesterday we were sitting, according to tradition, for a nightcap, and we felt that the desire to fight, that strange urge to push to the front line, where volunteers are needed, would also this time throw us against the danger in our old vigor. Yes, if only it were now: we are of a race that grows with the moment.

Nevertheless, we cannot banish this uneasiness, this indomitable chill from within, these foreboding thoughts that storm our horizon like indeterminate, mangled wisps of cloud; not even if we take a very long sip of cognac. It is stronger than we are. A fog that lies within us and at such hours floats its mysterious being over the troubled waters of the soul. Not fear—which we can shoo into its cave if we stare sharply and mockingly into its pale face—but an unknown realm into which the boundaries of our sensibilities melt away. Only then do we realize how little we are at home within ourselves. That which slumbers deep at the bottom, that which is overdone by restless daily work, rises up and dissolves into a dull sadness even before it takes shape.

What good is it to have steeled oneself for three weeks for this hour, until one believed oneself hard and invulnerable? What good does it do to say to oneself: "Death? Ha, what nonsense! After all, it's just a transition that cannot be avoided."

None of this helps, because suddenly one has turned from a thinking being into a feeling one, a plaything of phantoms against which even the weapon of the sharpest reason is powerless. These are factors that we tend to deny because we cannot reckon with them. But in the moment of the experience all denial is in vain, then that unknown possesses a higher and more convincing reality than all usual appearances in the noonday light.

We have reached the front line and are making the final preparations. We are assiduous and precise, because we feel an urge to be active, to fill the time to escape ourselves. The time that has already martyred us so endlessly in the trenches, a term that encompasses all conceivable agony, a chain that only death will break. Perhaps in a few minutes. I know, one feels consciously how the escaping life rushes into the sea of eternity; I have already stood at the border many times. It is a slow, deep sinking, with a ringing in the ear, peaceful and familiar like the sound of native Easter bells. One shouldn't brood on riddles that one will never solve. After all, everything comes in its own time. Cheer up, let your thoughts flutter in the wind. We can die decently, we can face the threatening darkness with boldness and daring vitality. Not to be shaken, to smile until the end, even if the smile is only a mask: that is also something. Man cannot die more than once. Even the immortal gods must envy him for this.

We are well-equipped for our mission, armed with weapons, explosives, lighting and signaling devices, a right, belligerent strike force, capable of meeting the highest demands of modern combat. Not only have we developed with a joyful bravado, but also brute strength. When one sees the men standing in the twilight, slim, lean and mostly still children, one would like to believe that they are capable of very little. But their faces, which

lie in the shadow of the steel helmet, are sharp, bold and clever. I know it well: they do not hesitate even for a moment before danger; they leap at it, swift, sinewy, and adroit. They combine ardent courage with cool intelligence; they are the men who, in the whirl of destruction, clear a difficult jam with a sure hand, hurl the smoking hand grenade back at the enemy, read the intent from his eyes in the struggle to the death. They are the steel figures whose eagle eyes scan the clouds straight ahead over whirring propellers, who, squeezed into the turmoil of tank engines, dare the hellish journey through roaring crater fields, who for days, certain death ahead, crouch in surrounded, corpse-clustered nests half-scrounging behind glowing machine guns. They are the best of the modern battlefield, flooded with a ruthless fighting spirit, whose strong will is discharged in a concentrated, purposeful burst of energy.

When I observe them silently cutting lanes in the wire enclosure, digging storm steps, comparing clocks, determining the north direction according to the stars, I am overcome by the realization: this is the new man, the storm pioneer, the greatest selection of Central Europe. A completely new race, clever, strong and full of will. What is revealed here in battle as an apparition will tomorrow be the axis around which life whirls faster and faster. It will not always be possible to clear the way through craters, fire and steel, as it is here, but the stormy pace with which the events here are presented, this iron rhythm, will remain the same. The glowing sunset of a sinking time is at the same time a dawn in which one prepares for new, harder battles. Far behind, the gigantic cities, the armies of machines, the empires whose inner bonds are torn in the storm, await the new man, the bolder, the one accustomed to battle, as ruthless on himself and he is on others. This war is not the end, but the prelude of violence. It is the anvil on which the world is

shattered into new borders and new communities. New forms need to be filled with blood, and power needs to be grabbed with a steel fist. The war is a great school, and the new man will be of our making.

Yes, he is now in his element, my old storm trooper. The act, the grip of the fist has dissolved all fog. Already a loud joke resounds over the embankments. It is not in good taste to ask: "Well, fatso, how many have you slaughtered today?", but everyone laughs, the fat man most of all. Do not be stirred. The feast is about to begin, and we are its princes.

It's a pity, though. If the preparation does not succeed, if only one machine gun remains intact on the other side, then these splendid men will be slaughtered together like a pack of deer in the rush across no man's land. This is war. The best and most precious, the highest embodiment of life is just good enough to be hurled into its insatiable jaws. A machine gun, just a second's slide of the belt—and these twenty five men, with whom you could cultivate a wide island, are left hanging in the wire like bundles, only to slowly decay. They are students, officers with old, proud names, machinists, heirs to fertile farms, cheeky city slickers, high schoolers from whose eyes the briar dream of some old castle has not yet blown away. Farmers' sons, grown up under lonely thatched roofs of Westphalia or the Lüneburg Heath, rustled by ancient oaks that their ancestors planted along the stone wall. They are so faithful that they would die for their leader without thinking twice.

A firestorm roars from our neighboring regiment on the left. It's a diversionary maneuver to confuse and fragment the enemy artillery. It's almost time. Now it's time to regroup. Certainly, it may be a pity for us. Perhaps we are sacrificing ourselves for something insignificant. But no one can take away our value. It is not what we fight for that is important, but how

we fight. Towards the goal—we either win or forever remain in no man's land. Combat, the commitment of the individual, even if it is for the smallest idea, weighs heavier than all brooding about good and evil. This is what gives the Knight of the Woeful Countenance his awe-inspiring halo. We want to demonstrate what is in us, then, when we fall, we will have truly lived.

Now the weather is also rushing down on us. The artillery of our division shoots excellently, the second impact splits the first. The howling of the iron blocks become thicker and more polyphonic, up ahead we drown in a constantly swelling flood of vicious, tearing, numbing sounds. Shells draw their pearly arcs of sparks overhead, shattering in volcanic explosions. White spheres of light flood the cloud of smoke, gas and dust that spreads like a boiling ocean over the fields. Colorful flares hang over the trenches, bursting into stars and suddenly extinguishing like the multicolored signals of a giant marshalling yard. All the machine guns of the second and third lines are in peak activity. The roar of their innumerable shots, blurring into one another, is the somber background that fills the tiny gaps in the sound of heavy artillery.

Now the French artillery wakes up as well. First a group of light batteries, drumming our trench with a rapid series of steel fist blows, pouring down lead balls from flashing shrapnel like watering cans. Then the heavy calibers follow, pouncing on us from on high like monstrous predators with growing snarls, devouring long stretches of trench with fire and black smoke. A hail of clods of earth, shreds of wood, and dull splinters incessantly rattle our helmets, closely mirroring the restless dance of lightning. Weighty tripod mines come crashing down in pounding mortar blasts; bottle mines, sweeping through smoke and penumbra like swirling sausages, darting by the dozen into the fire of the first line. Tracer bullets, racing one

after the other in chains of glowing sparks, are sprayed into the air by the thousands to scare off any early airman who might be trying to reconnoiter the barrage guns.

We, however, were crowded around the sally-steps. In the first few minutes we had crawled into the foxholes and gorges of the tunnels. But only briefly, for we, forged in battle, have matured an indifferent and fire-hard nature. We are also convinced fatalists and believe that whoever is hit will be hit, even if it is a dud at the bottom of a ten-meter tunnel. The period between the approach and the explosion is the worst; even the nerves of the oldest warrior still twitch. Too many horrible images, too much blood and whimpering have already announced themselves by this fluttering whistle. The longer one goes along, the more terrible the film of memories is that flickers through the brain.

Then comes the point where the whirlpool of fire sucks in the individual perceptions, the senses succumb to the impact of the images, memory, sense of self, and thus also fear and hope blow away like fleeting smoke. Then the weak breaks and falls to the ground like an empty magazine, because he has lost the last drive: fear. No request, no command and no threat will raise him up again. The strong one, however, stands with a petrified face in the midst of the storm, an intoxicated triumphator of matter. He has found the balance in the new paradigm of events: the world may turn upside down, but a brave heart will always be firm.

A green flare rises and hangs over us with a long, trickling tail. The signal! We rush out and storm, a dense, dark cloud into the unknown.

X

Among Each Other

It seems like I've been standing in the trenches for an eternity. So long that I've become completely desensitized, a piece of nature that blurs in the sea of night. Only now and then a thought will ignite a chain of lights in my brain and turn me into a conscious being again, but only for a short time.

I lean against the corner of a rampart and stare at the cloud ships that sail very slowly past the moon. How often have I stood like this! Exactly like this—my right hand on the pistol pocket and my head bent back sullenly. The countless thoughts that have ran through the mills of my brain during a lonely vigil could fill many volumes. The hungriest imagination runs most madly! Are there people whose footsteps are now clattering on the asphalt of big cities? Bars with boldly layered bottles of liquor? Were there times when one could travel on steamboats, far away? All the way? Are there still islands in the South Seas that no European has ever set foot on? Blissful islands!

How often have I stood like this, in a place like this! A short piece of trench lies before me, a tiny part of the immense front. And yet, this black hole of the tunnel entrance, this post stand, a block steeped in darkness and mystery, these three or four wires cutting into the dull sky above, are a whole world that encloses me, simple and meaningful like the scenery of a tremendous drama.

The guard at the top has not moved a limb for two hours. He seems to have become a part of the mud wall against which he stands, rigid and silent, like a statue of an Indian deity. The post has stood in this spot for three years, summer and winter, day and night, in wind, rain, heat, cold and fire. At times it is relieved, at times it falls, but one hardly notices. The personalities alternate through a fixed task. If one passes by, there is always someone standing there to report, "Post number five, nothing new on post."

That's terrible. Who's standing there? A guard, a weapon, the lowest combat unit, a number. Many don't see it any other way. Read about our good warriors standing at posts, yawning and turning out the lights. Others report about the good morale of the troops. By that they mean that we can still take it. Mind you, we are holding these positions in order to recover our strength. We will soon be "ready for the big fight" again. After all, we are the best material.

Material, that's the right expression. Something like coal, which is hurled under the red-hot cauldrons of war to keep the work going. "The troops are burned to cinders in the fire," after all, is an elegant formula of the art of war.

One cannot blame them. They know as little about the soul of the front-line soldier as the rich know about poverty. Oh, we are not only guns, we are also people, hearts, souls. When night after night, many thousands of us here and there, we are tortured on the benches of time, our lives lie before us, as unspeakably gruesome as the torn battlefield, and our thoughts are like the cold blue lights of flares that snatch all this agony from the darkness.

I need to take a breather. I say, "Post, our time is up."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant. He even clicked his heels together. How deep that sinks in. These men are big children. You have to love them. Sometimes they would come up to tell me, in a whisper and with great conviction: "I'm going to die now, Lieutenant. They really got me good this time." In insane moments of battle, they really push your buttons: "What should we do? Where shall we go? I'm wounded." Then you try to smile and yet basically feel as helpless as they do.

There you sit in the midst of your hundred men and feel their urge to cling. Occasionally you hear from a dugout: "Yes, Lieutenant. You should have seen him at Guillemont." Then you feel a little proud and wouldn't want to change places with anyone. Then one feels inextricably linked with them, and that is something powerful enough to advance a hundred men to their death.

Today the relief is taking their sweet time. It's strange how the night sharpens the senses. One perceives a kind of fluid that radiates from things and concepts, the expression of a terrible meaning. This was often quite clear to me in dreams, in noises and as a child when I was afraid. Later I laughed about it. As a son of an epoch quite convinced of the material, I went to this war, a cold, precocious city dweller, my brain polished to steel crystals by the occupation with natural sciences and modern literature. I have changed a lot because of the war and I think that it has probably happened to the whole generation. My view of the world no longer possesses the same certainty, how could that be possible with the uncertainty that has surrounded us for years. Now it is completely different forces that must move our actions, very dark and bloody ones, but in the blood there is always a deep reason. And one also suspects that everything that surrounds us is not at all so clear and purposeful, but very mysterious, and this awareness already indicates the first step

in a completely new direction. We have come into contact with the ground again, may we, like that mythical giant, rediscover all our strength through this contact.

The chalk floor resonates under the light footsteps. "Password!" "Mackensen." The relief. I hand over hand grenades and flare gun. "Barrage red, destructive fire green, advance fire white with pearl strands. There's a white one in the barrel. The red ones are lined in the rear. So far, all has been quiet."

We whisper as if we are plotting a murder. Horror hangs like a cloud over the trench. Upstairs, the two guards confabulate. One sounds like a rookie. "There's a separate patrol ahead from four to five, you can't shoot there. If there's a flash on the far left, you have to take cover, because there will be a bang." "Well, it won't be too wild." New people are usually very tall. They haven't seen death in the face yet. Towards them, the old warriors sport a paternal superiority.

In the dugout, an unbearable haze of men, mold and decay hits me. When we tried to enlarge it the other day, our spades hit a layer of earth with a horrible stench. Most likely corpses, or a latrine completely full of them.

When I light the candle, I notice the stearin melting, covered in a layer of lice. My lad has a habit of burning his lice over the candle. In the blink of an eye, my deputy and his lads are lying in their cots. They are sleeping restlessly, gasping, moaning, tossing and turning. With reluctance, my gaze sweeps the spot where the fluttering candlelight flits across their blurred bodies. What a stable! How closely they squat together in the dirt. In the illustrated magazines it all looks so nice, with the full beards, a collection of leaves and a pipe, but when you hear each other—apart from anything else—smacking each noon and snoring each night, you think wistfully back to the good

old days of your own apartment, your own plate and your own wash bowl.

I cut myself a thick slice of bread and ran my pocket knife into a greasy tin can to cover it with mushy beef fibers. My hands are dirty and cold, the fire of a night's watch burns in my skull. My brain works slowly and reluctantly, giving birth to a series of shadowy, angry, agonizing images. Then I throw myself on the cot next to the others.

Towards morning my half-slumber is cut by clattering cooking utensils and spade strokes. The orderlies have come from fetching coffee and are busy with the tiny tin stove. Apparently they were shot at on their way.

"Boy, that was another tour; my cookware is almost empty. The Tommies butchered the trench. That one thing peppered me with lumps of dirt and threw me out of step. The fire was pretty dense!"

He's right. It was dense. Actually, it's always dense. But eventually you get used to it and sit on the grenade box as usual, just a little out of breath. What if they had not come back? Lying gutted in the trench, their large tubular bones bent like straws, scorched and torn?

The next day we would have already forgotten. We are pure forgetting machines. However, when one stands before such a capriccio of naked destruction, the horror runs through the soul as a cold, slow knife cut. Then one looks away and makes a strange effort, which I would probably compare to a pull-up or the spasmodic swallowing with which one tries to contain vomit. It's the rebellion against the bone fist of madness, the pressure of which is already dark and heavy around the brain. As one moves on, one thinks that it probably wouldn't have been so bad. Only one still murmurs as if in a dream, "The head. Did you see the head?"

The two continue to converse. The other says, "Sooner or later you're going to get it. Whoever got killed right at the beginning had it good. I'm just curious how long this chaos is going to last."

Then starts one of those endless conversations about the war that I've heard hundreds, thousands of times before, to the point of exhaustion. And it's always the same, only the bitterness becomes sharper with time. They approach this question of life with a religious seriousness, smashing their skulls against the ramparts of their horizon. They will never find a solution, because it is the question that is wrong. They take the war as a cause, not as an expression, and so they search outside for what can only be found inside. What is of importance to them is only the appearance, the rough surface.

However: you have to understand them. They are materialists by all means, I, who have been living among them for years, hear this from every word. At first, I was amazed at the importance they gave to food, for example, and I soon noticed that for them, these muscular men, deprivation was extremely difficult. They are just matter, raw materials that the idea consumes for its own great goals without them knowing it. And this is the fundamental juice that they are unable to understand, this is the source of their suffering. But they must be treated humanely and compassionately, as far as they are individuals, harshly, as far as their existence does not belong to the personality but to the idea.

Yes, only the surface is important to them. For them, their question is the only correct one. Once they have found the guiding thread to grope their way out of the labyrinth of war or desperately cut its Gordian knot, they have reached the goal of their desires. Then they have again that which they lament after hourly, the quiet weaving in the narrow, the happiness in the

petty-bourgeois sense. If they are safe, everything else lies "far in Turkey" for them. And if by means of a peace treaty or a revolution they have not even come one step closer to the true meaning of war, namely that they too are a precondition of the war, it will never be made clear to them. They are egoists, and that is okay.

Countless times fragments of their whispered conversations have reached my ears. If the men at the back were to stay at the front for a day, in the first few rows, it would all be over right away. It's like in the movie theaters: the best seats are at the back, and there's a flicker in the front. The poor guy is always the joke. Equal pay, equal food, the war would have been forgotten long ago. We're not fighting for Germany's honor, just for those fat millionaires. What's in it for us? They should quit soon, or we won't play along anymore.

One buzzword chases the other, the pure Wilhelm Tells. Their conversation is neither development nor investigation, it's just a tossing of worn-out coins to each other, which somewhere in the dugout, on vacation, in the canteen, have fallen into the bell-bag of their brains and, like everything incessantly repeated, have imprinted themselves as truths. Drunk on slogans, they have fallen into the abyss of this war; with slogans they seek to pull themselves out again. Inwardly, they are always the same despite a kind of morality of the common people, of the underworld, which the prophets use to express themselves willingly among themselves. Who would blame them? What are the international summits, the parliamentary assemblies, if not great bombardments of slogans and buzzwords, ideological congresses? What is the press but a rattling hammer-work that smashes our brains with buzzwords and standardizes, socializes, proletarianizes thought? The spirit of the trench is not a product of war, on the

contrary. Class, race, party, nation, each community is a country in itself, surrounded by ramparts and tightly wired. In between, desert. Defectors are shot. At times, people make a break for it and bash in each other's skulls.

Now they've arrived at home. This is their second favorite topic of conversation. Some people divide the world into life and poetry, light and dark, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, joy and pain, they divide theirs into home and war. As soon as they say "at home," or "with us," they are certainly not thinking of some colorful spots on the map. The homeland is the corner where they played as children, the Sunday cake their mother baked, the room in the back of the house, the pictures hanging above the sofa, a ray of sunshine peering through the window, the game of skittles every Thursday, a death in one's own house and the obituary in the newspaper, the funeral procession and the wobbling top hats following behind. Home, that is not a catchphrase; it is only a small modest word and yet it represents the handful of earth in which their soul is rooted. State and nation are unclear concepts to them, but what homeland means, they know. It is a feeling that even a plant can understand.

Now I have to stand up, because they are about to raise the topic of sex. In doing so, they tend to develop the imagination of starved sailors. I pour water into a steel helmet, wash myself, drink a sip of coffee, pocket the pistol, and go to the trench.

"The coffee tastes like it's been spat at the wall again today. You've all already drank the best in the kitchen. I'm going out now, hopefully you'll do better with the food. By the way, I'd also like to sleep for two hours in peace. And where did you hear all that nonsense about fat millionaires?"

I leave without waiting for a reply to my rhetorical question. After all, one can work with the chubby fishmonger from Old Bremen and the four-headed Oldenburg bog farmer, despite

everything. They are basically splendid fellows, as loyal and solid as oak beams, from which a building can be constructed. Whether clearing a forest or storming a French trench, these men will always do their job.

Aha! I am lost in thought under the influence of the morning breeze! It caresses the nerves, although I hardly slept. If at night the trench seems like a mysterious cave, in the sunlight it appears quite regular, sensible. Hammering, digging figures everywhere. I pull a tape measure out of my pocket. The machine gun of the fifth group is still not flanking properly, of course. Should we put it on the left wing in echelon two? "Our trench is fine now, though, isn't it?" "Well, we don't want them to take it away from us so easily." "The coffee wasn't much this morning, ay?" "Nah, but we each got three cigars to make up for it, the Hand Grenade brand—take one puff and throw them away!"

That's better, you can see it all now! No, they shouldn't be able to take the trench from us. We all know what we are here for. I'm in a good mood, smoking a Hand Grenade and going to the nearby squad leaders with whom I chat endlessly, just like the two guys up front, but maybe just at a higher level: politics, the goddamn rear, the next leave. Even sex. How else do you start your day without going completely insane?

In the afternoon I visit a friend who leads the right wing of the neighboring regiment. I have to walk through twelve company sections to reach him. From the sixth on I have to show my identification card, because the men there don't know me. After many questions I arrive at the crane trench where my friend lives. He has visitors, we play Polish lottery and pour ourselves some schnapps from a canteen. The time passes very quickly, and just when we're all in a great mood I have to take

my leave, because it occurs to me that at nine o'clock I have trench guard duty.

I walk back through the endless network of trenches, from whose corners the twilight is already brewing. At each tunnel entrance a group of gray figures huddled together, silent and shivering. An early flare rises, hissing, and sends its flickering, silver light across the desert. Then it blinks away in stifling silence. The night shift guards take up their positions.

Another day has passed, with many more to go. Again there have been a few minor quarrels and disagreements in this strange community, like everywhere where men live together in close quarters. But in the end, it is a great destiny that carries us all on the same wave. We all form an organism opposed to the adversities of the outside world, we are men united by a higher task despite many small disputes, sufferings and joys. We squabble, we get along, we fight and suffer together, and we struggle with the time in which we live, a time which we don't quite understand, in order to perhaps realize later that all this happened in the sense of a great and higher reason, which also rests over this uncanny landscape.

XI

Fear

THE dugout is so hazy that the candlelight condenses into dark red, flickering halos. One could hardly believe that so many men could dwell so close together in such a small space. I'm sitting on a hand grenade box across from the combat troop commander, separated from him only by a map. He hasn't slept in days, the thin muscles of his lean face dancing restlessly. Without a cigarette he would collapse immediately.

When one is extremely sleep deprived, the uncanniness of things comes out strongly. From every corner there seems to be a mocking voice, a whisper, faces take on mischievous, treacherous expressions. You either want to cry or punch someone's sneering grimace.

"So at 6:30, you're competing. Surprisingly. If you get hold of the second trench you can take a look at Dead Man's Gorge, where strong reserves should be. The important thing is to bring them under effective fire as quickly as possible. Should you encounter strong resistance before..."

Why is he telling us all this for? Pure malice. His words file on my nerves. I want to sleep at home in a big white bed and not worry about anything.

"All clear, or are there any questions?"

I wake up and stagger outside. The night air is good for me. People are lying by their guns.

"We have to attack. Closer orders in front. Take rifle in hand, without kick—march!"

Without kick. Often men will respond to this command out of jest with: "Without purpose." It is likely that some men feel the same anger towards me that I felt towards the major earlier. This silent, dogged rage that eats at you deeper and deeper, in which you crawl like a helpless animal into your cave. Someone always has to take the blame.

How the moonlight sparkles on the gun barrels. That is stored power. We'll take the two trenches, energetically, expertly, and with purposeful technique, as always. Then the gorge lies before us. Then a hundred and fifty, no, probably only a hundred and twenty rifles will hail into the reserves. Then we'll lock everything up so that no one can shoot bullets out of the glowing barrels as they'd like. It's a big deal that might even make it into the army report. And whoever escapes from this dark, droning shadow behind me will later tell: "Boy, back then, that was still a thing. Standing freehand! That was fun. That was still war!"

It is unspeakably exciting when men meet in battle. Men will tell of these moments all their lives. The other day we found a letter from a fallen American: "War is very interesting. Even more interesting than hunting tigers."

Hunting tigers. He has very aptly expressed something that at times every outspoken man has probably felt, this son of a young and bold race, whom we have recently buried along with twenty others at the same time. Fighting is one of the great passions. And I have not yet seen anyone who has not been shaken by the moment of victory. We will be gripped by it again tomorrow, when, after a short struggle to the death, after an unleashing of the most refined means, after the gigantic development of power of which modern man is capable, we

will stare down at the fleeing horde in the ravine. Then, from the gaping mouth of each one of them will come that mad, stretched scream that has often resounded in our ears. This is an ancient, terrible song, dating back to the dawn of man, of which one would never have thought that it would still be so alive in us today.

Tomorrow we will experience one of these moments again, and perhaps at this hour the tiny troops on the other side which we are due to meet are winding their way through the fire. We have never actually seen each other and yet we share the same importance for each other as fate itself. "How terrible it must be to kill people you've never seen before." That's what you often hear when on leave, from people who love emotional reflections far from the bullets. "If only they had actually done something to you!" That says it all. You must hate, you must have a personal reason to kill. That you can respect the enemy and still fight him, not as a human being but as a pure principle, that you can stand up for an idea with all the means of the mind and violence up to the throwing of grenades and the gas attack, that they will never understand. These are things that can only be discussed between men. One does not kill as a thinking man without further ado. The more one feels connected to life through muscle, heart and brain, the higher respect one feels for it. But sooner or later you realize that becoming is more important than life.

The murmuring dies away. The lungs wheeze under the harness straps. We are at the edge of the desert. In front of us the lashing wings of death buzz, flashing its cracking signals. The night swims in uncertainty, the moon casts its light on the faces, and the eyes shine feverishly.

We are accustomed wanderers of the grenade-strewn fields, and yet always trembling strangers before the gates of death.

Rigid and steely, yet these shells are full of demonic life, treacherous, groping fists of hell. They are like a strange intoxication from which there is no escape, a gnashing of teeth, a rising, a swelling, a burning, a maelstrom that tears the brain to the bottom of unconscious depths; rushing iron birds, roaring hurricanes and greedy beasts. Everyone understands their language.

Shrill laughter races forward to ring in the distance. Spiked clouds of fire splash overhead. A down-bursting onslaught shatters into a ripping, roaring fury. Then whistling swarms of shrapnel sweep the air, jagged and angular.

That's what we call thick air. No one, not even the boldest, can quite get used to it.

Fear awakens in us with its thousand tentacles and soon condenses into a feeling of absolute strength. If one wanted to give a picture of it, one could not choose a better one than that of this landscape: a black, sad plain, ceaselessly and painfully burned through by fiery points. No courage can help against this, because the danger is everywhere, it cannot be recognized, the whole landscape seems to be saturated with it. The uncertain is the horrible. When, where, how? At any moment it can shoot up, very close, malingering, bending, tearing. Whoever it hits remains lying, while the others rush on without giving him a fleeting glance. Terrible are the cries of the lonely dying, they swell out of the darkness in long pauses and fade away like those of animals that do not know why they have to suffer.

Again and again one has to ask oneself, what in this darkness, in which only the feeling of a fear prevails, of which one can form no idea, actually still drives the human being forward. No one lets himself slide to the ground to escape secretly; staggering, gasping and cursing, everyone goes

forward. What drive is it that still produces movement here, even though there is no longer any mental strength? The desire to fight? It will seize us tomorrow when we see the enemy before us in flesh and blood, but what is happening here is as sober and mathematical as if death had inserted us into an equation as a function. This is a terrible calculation of probability in which personal power plays no role whatsoever.

But perhaps this drive is discipline? That can't be either, because here everyone is on his own, the man and the leader too, and what holds this small troop together is only an instinctive urge, like that of birds migrating in flocks. Here discipline no longer plays any role at all, neither in a positive nor in a negative sense; the situation is far too serious for that and demands too much of the whole force. If the leader finds the way, and the man is able to keep close to him, that is already a lot. To stand up for or against discipline, there is only time for that when one has peace.

Surely, then, it is the fatherland, the sense of honor and duty that moves us? But if now, just now, the grenade explosions surrounded us like flaming palms and someone sang the praises of the homeland, they would get a wild expletive in response. There is no room for enthusiasm here, and, yes, it must be said, there is work going on here that is being done almost unconsciously, and to that extent has an animal character.

As far as man is an individual here, he is only composed of fear. But since he moves in spite of everything, that proves that a higher will stands behind him. The fact that man does not feel it, that everything human in him opposes it, shows just how powerful this will must be. It is the potential energy of the idea, which converts itself here into kinetic, and which mercilessly makes its demands.

It knows how to find its way through the unknown and lead us to the goal, even though we are filled with fear. As long as it is powerful, it will always find its tools, and when it goes out, then everything is over. And if later, when we have time to reflect, we make a heroic deed out of what is happening here, we do so rightly, because it is the nature of the hero that the idea propels him over all the obstacles of matter. We feel fear because we are transient creatures, but if an imperishable thing in us conquers this fear, we can be proud of it. This shows that we are really attached to life, and not only to existence.

And away we go, back as a solitary, unknown group, which nevertheless, without knowing it, is invisibly connected in the midst of these deadly deserts with the great power currents of life. We've even overcome the trench, this infernal bar of the front line, on which fire rains day and night. We run. Hastier, more massive, the impacts melt into each other, devouring themselves in the rising roar. The ground rolls, in sharp heavy waves stuffy air hits us in the face, saturated with gas and decay. Clods of earth hurtle with a dull thud onto our helmets, splinters clatter against our weapons. In between, you can hear very clearly when a piece of iron hacks into soft human flesh. Before our feet and at the edges of the trench lie the dead, long months of toll, spooky wax dolls in the pale light, their limbs strangely contorted. A ribcage sinks softly like a bellows under my hobnailed boot. Impressions smash into the brain unceasingly, bluish buzzing sword strokes, glowing hammer blows. So much is perceived that one can now hardly feel the fear, but the things one perceives glisten in the ghostly colors of a terrible dream.

As those who have escaped the gauntlets of death, we awaken in the front line. Our boots are soaked in sweat. Breath struggles to escape our chests. A man emerges from the

darkness before me, with a decayed skull beneath his helmet. With that superhuman matter-of-factness that reigns on these enchanted islands of horror, he leads me to the company commander's hole in the ground. He pours a cookware lid full of schnapps from his canteen, which I plunge down my gullet like a savage. Then we squat together, muttering. Our voices are as tuneless as tin. A motionless figure crouches in front of us. Is it a post or a corpse? All around, the horizon glows.

Phosphorescent clock digits glow on my wrist. Strange word, phosphorescent. It's 5:30 a.m. The storm will begin in an hour.

XII

The Enemy

ONE often has this feeling in the nights of battle: to dream of a legendary experience. One walks through the trench as if in a dream, the causal connection is far from consciousness; if an event cuts into the brain, one is hardly surprised, as if one had always known.

It seems quite understandable to me. For two hours you roll around half asleep on the wire mat of the dugout, for two hours you creep up and down in the trench, dead tired; this is repeated night after night. In the end, excited dreams are mistaken for reality and reality for a pale dream.

Also, the night is so strange today. The full moon is hidden behind shimmering mists that stand above the landscape as its radiance. Its light, dimmed as if by frosted glass, sucks the reality out of things, one sees nothing and yet believes to see much. The heavy air swallows the sounds, one walks silently as if on the bottom of the sea.

These are the explanations by which one tries to calm oneself down. What one can explain, one does not need to fear. We put our brain in the center, letting everything else revolve around it.

But when you stand in such a night, abandoned and lonely, you realize how superficial this whole mode of questioning is. Then you feel like an abandoned child, then the most fantastic

things become a certainty, as in a horrible dream. One may say to oneself that fatigue and a spooky night are playing tricks on one's nerves, but this is no more a reassurance than the consolation of the father in Goethe's Erlkönig: "My son, it is only a misty night, nothing else."

And then this muffled murmur: something is going on. One would like to keep it in his brain, to not think about it, but it creeps out, it pushes its being, lurks behind every embankment and creeps out again from every hole in the ground.

Yes, sometimes you can't resist what's in the air. You notice that when you live as a cell in the body of an army. Enthusiasm, horror and bloodthirst grab hold of you without you being able to resist.

This is felt by all those who are squatting here in the dark. It murmurs. It goes around. It takes on faces. The landscape has nerves of its own. At times, a machine gun erupts in a short hysterical laughter. A restless flickering of flares distributes light and shadow erratically. Often it twitches red, yellow and green: help, we are afraid. Then, near and far, a blast of fire stomps, the mists boil up from fire and poison. Everything has its language, the mechanism of battle resounding from every direction, spanning people with a net of fire and steel. Sometimes shadows appear—three boxes of hand grenades—where is the medical shelter—gas alarm—you act and think of completely different things.

It's hard to describe, like everything that happens at the bottom. One guy comes up and whispers, "Repair squad. Line shot." Certainly: the brain thinks; telephone, wires torn, connection with leadership is the most important task of the troop, yes sir, yes sir. War school, field service regulations: oh, one understands. But suddenly this understanding becomes a ridiculous side effect in a ghostly conversation. The words

acquire an undersense, pierce the surface and have an immediate effect in the understanding of hitherto eternally closed depths. The sensation surges around another center of gravity, one gropes in the horror.

Each of us has had at least one horrifying dream, and when we reflect on it, we realize that the factual aspect of it was nothing compared to the uncanny force that moved it. E.T.A. Hoffmann is the poet of these breakthroughs: the ghostly suddenly glistens out of his Councilors and Philistines; the sight of a doorknob conjures up an experience that grabs you by the throat. Dostoevsky also knew of them, otherwise he would never have been able to write of Ivan Karamazov's feverish conversation with the unknown stranger. But how do you explain this to those who have never left the four walls of the intelligible?

I stand next to the machine gun on the left wing. Occasionally I shoot up a flare and load a new one into the gun. The floor is littered with empty cartridges. Every time the area in front of us is plucked out of the darkness, the guard next door shields his eyes to see better. Sometimes I speak so he won't think I'm afraid, but the words come out so unsteadily.

Something is going on. In front of us there is clicking and tugging on the wire. We know all the sounds of the night: this is not the wind, nor a nocturnal bird in no man's land. This is a human being at work, for it jingles at regular intervals, carefully, metal against metal. The guard digs his fingers into my arm. Quietly, quietly! He uses the exhale to form this word. We are all ears, taut as drums. The wind blows across the grass like an omen, in the nearby section mines flicker in the air and then burst like iron tons in a patch of woods. And in between, always the subtle, metallic click-click. Now we hear a rustle, a shadow rises up. It all happens quietly, very quietly, but it is

like thunder in our ears, these ears hardened in the pounding of the cities and the noise of raging battles. The seconds burn white hot. The machine gun sputters, a grenade explodes between the bang and the vapors. We scream, people run towards us from the trench, one flare chasing another. The night becomes electric, guns go off, a group from the second line throws hand grenades to drown out their fear, one of them sticks small mines on a stick and fires them into the blue. Sweet powder smells smolder in the trenches, reminiscent of similar experiences. A shock troop appears, a pack of burly gladiators, used to working with knives and explosives. Silently they leap closer and closer, from parapet to parapet, only the sound of hand grenades rattling in their sandbags. These men are trained in the mechanics of trench warfare: throw—attention—go! They have a mechanical rhythm inside them that leaves no room for thought. This time they have come for nothing, but their presence is reassuring, one feels the united force.

"Are they in the trench?"

"Just a patrol in front of the wire."

A small interlude, a purely infantry affair. Not even the light artillery has made itself heard. The fire becomes dull, pelts up once more and goes out. One finds the right words: "Gee, that was idiotic." That's right, a shocking idiocy that you don't think about until it's over. Something that always surprises us, we men who are used to rational thought. And when we're then asked, "Oh, please, tell me, what you were actually thinking out there. It was certainly tenable, right?" we have only an embarrassed smile as an answer: no, we are not the wax-hero-statues that people like to make us out to be. Passions and feelings flow in our blood that are impossible to comprehend when having tea at the coffee table.

What actually happened? We scared away a patrol. A human bundle is hanging in the barbed wire, riddled with bullets and shrapnel. We remove it from there and place it on the bottom of the trench, then form a circle around it and whisper. A flashlight goes on. "What a young fellow he was. And what nice boots he's got on, an officer for sure." The guard says, "I said to myself, come on in. When he stood up high, I gave him the juice. And the lieutenant also gave him a nice grenade to top it off."

Yes, yes, that's how it happened. We saw it all coming. And when we tell this story ten years from now, it will shimmer in completely different colors, because time is the best romantic. And if we are still here fifty years from now, displayed like relics at the great festivals with decorations and medals on our jackets, when the blood runs strangely and dully through our veins, these stormy years of battle and fire will shine from afar like a distant and proud island, we will wear the memory like an ornamental uniform, and our grandchildren will envy us. Then youthful energy will again be stored in great quantities and the spark capable of transforming this nostalgia into action, into fireworks, will not be lacking either. Faced with this mechanistic rhythm of tension and action, all cautionary voices, from Suttner to Kant, will pass away like a childish murmur. The blood has its own, unchangeable laws, before which all experience sinks.

The relief. I go into the dugout and lay down. Of course, I can't get any sleep. The nerves. My skin tingles, the roots of my hair pricks, my stomach is upset. At times I doze off and am awakened by a jolting blow, as if I had fallen from high above onto the camp. And always this dream: you walk through the trench, endlessly, illuminated by flares, surrounded by bullets, looking for a place to sleep. And finally, at last, you find the

dugout, descend the steps, shake the person lying on the cot, and wake yourself up. This sounds very ridiculous, I know, I know.

Anyway: that little episode lifted me up. We have torn something tangible out of the indeterminate, we have hunted down our horror in those men. Very seldom does the enemy appear to us as flesh and blood, although only a narrow, rumpled strip of field separates us from him. For weeks and months we crouch underground, overrun by swarms of bullets, surrounded by storms of steel. Sometimes we almost forget that we are fighting against people. The enemy expresses itself as the unfolding of a gigantic, impersonal force, as fate, a blind destiny throwing random blows.

When we come out of the trenches on the days of the storm, and the empty, unknown landscape where death does its work amidst soaring columns of smoke stretching out before us, it seems as though we are entering into a new dimension. All of a sudden we see him very close, with his earth-colored coat and clayey face, a ghostly apparition waiting for us in the dead landscape: the enemy. This is a moment that one never forgets.

How very different you thought it would be before. A forest fire, a flowering meadow, and rifles popping into the spring. Death as a shimmering back and forth between two rifle lines of twentysomethings. Dark blood splattered on blades of grass, bayonets in the morning light, trumpets and flags, a happy, sparkling dance.

But here, people have long since forgotten to pay attention to the sound of guns. At night, people creep into gruesome deserts with adventurous weapons, and during the day they spend their time in the maze of shafts. This fight is not a fire, but a smoldering fire. Only now and then do you get the vague feeling that there are men on the other side too. That there, too,

the night awakens life, that conversations flash through telephone wires, that food fetchers are expected in the dugouts, that spades are digging and sentries in long lines, shivering, stare wearily into the apron. Surely in the resting places are parades and speeches like ours, and far behind is a stage that is mocked and envied. One may be lying on his back reading for the third time, by candlelight, a letter from his Norman or Scottish village, one may be thinking of his wife, and a commander may be scribbling that Lieutenant Wesson has not returned from his patrol.

Before an attack, their trenches are flooded with enthusiastic men, and at the shining of our signals in the sky, they get ready for a wrestling match over shreds of trench, forest patches and village edges. But when we clash in the cloud of fire and smoke, then we become one, then we are two parts of one force, fused into one body.

A body—this is a parable of a special kind. He who understands it, affirms himself and the enemy, lives in the whole and in the parts at the same time. He can imagine a deity who lets these colorful threads pass through his hands—with a smiling face.

XIII

Before Battle

THE day after tomorrow! March 21, 1918, is the day of decision, when we will put an end to this epic with a blow of our fist, break the iron chains and push our storm troops towards the sea one last time. The wave to the west, crammed and battered for four years before fiery barrages, is about to foam to its goal. The hour of the great breakthrough and its evaluation has come, we will make a breach in the bulwark that no one can plug. We will tear through the steel curtain and the masses waiting behind us will seize its ends, squeeze through its exposed flanks to make our way like a steamroller, pursue and destroy, until victory, the clear and complete triumph to sanctify our unshakable faith.

No one in our circle doubts it. For four years we have carried this conviction from battlefield to battlefield, seen thousands fall in the race to the great promise, been hailed during short furloughs as executors of a holy mission, thrown youth and all the glimmer of the world into the dark wager, and sacrificed so much for our ideals that their downfall would also be ours.

We learned the "dulce et decorum" at the age of nine. At home, in school, in universities and in the barracks, the concept of "Fatherland" was placed at the center of our misty world of perception, like the sun in our solar system, like the nucleus in the vortex of an atom. On the gray walls of the barracks, golden

letters recited the names of those who had fallen in earlier wars, and the slogans underneath reminded us to always be worthy of these heroes. The monuments to the generals in the squares, the study of history that showed us how closely the greatness and decline of a nation are chained to its wars, the serious faces with which generations of officers looked down on us from the walls of our mess hall, flashing medals and shot flags whose silk waved above the crowd only on high feast days: all this had made war a solemn and tremendous thing to us. We felt ourselves to be heirs and bearers of thoughts that had been inherited through centuries from generation to generation and carried closer to fulfillment. Above all thought and action there was a heaviest duty, a highest honor, and a shining goal: death for the homeland and its greatness. This is why the energies that triggered a long-awaited reaction in us were so powerful that we felt stronger and more invincible than anyone else who had gone before us. Family, love, the desire to enjoy life to the fullest, everything was invested by this ardor that flowed from us as they pushed us in intoxication and frenzy beyond the limits, towards victory. Even if the work was immeasurably harder than we had dreamed when we set out, we are now standing before the reward, the last end of the track lies before us, and the day after tomorrow it shall be conquered.

The commander has just spoken. Of course, in the course of our work, the words we once spoke about dying happily for honor and glory sound hollow and old-fashioned, but today they have the same sound and excitement as before; we toast to our triumph and smash our glasses against the walls. He is right, the battalion will do its thing, we are proud to be the first wave to roar over the tattered trenches. How comrades, as only soldiers can be, have grown together by deed, blood and spirit into one body and one will. Proven fighters of the material

battle, we know well what lies ahead of us, but we also know that there is no one in our circle who is secretly strangled by fear of the great unknown. The cowards do not remain in our ranks; just as we know the way to the enemy, so they know how to find the safe ground of the rear. In spite of doctors and commissions, they masterfully maneuver into military hospitals, health resorts and garrisons, where the blue coat and white cuffs distinguish the soldier from the warrior.

We are often annoyed when they send us cards "with comradely greetings" from Borkum and Pyrmont; today no thought strayed into their bourgeois precincts full of good manners and good wines. We consider it an honor to be in the front line, an honor worthy only of the best. Today there is only the man and the deed on the agenda, and the day after tomorrow the flower of a great fighting people will use the chisel to give a new face to the earth. Today the man and the deed of the day are content, and the day after tomorrow the chisel will be laid to the new face of the earth by the best team of a great, warlike people It will be a day like those of Wahlstatt, Vienna and Leipzig: a river of blood will overflow in the name of a people and its ideals.

Yes, we are cheerful and confident of victory. These days and nights before the battle have a strange charm. Everything that weighs us down sinks into insignificance, the moment becomes a precious commodity. The future, the worries, every burden that made us spend desperate hours is thrown away like a cigarette butt smoked to the end. In a few hours perhaps we will leave behind us that confused island to which we, Robinson's among many, have tried to make sense. Money, a mere source of worry, will become superfluous and silly, so much so that the last thaler will be used for alcohol so as to get rid of them once and for all. Parents will cry, but time sweeps everything away.

So many men fall that the girl will find a new boyfriend and the love for the deceased will undergo a transformation towards the new one. The friends, the wine, the books, the rich array of sweet and bitter pleasures, all will flicker with consciousness like the last candlelight on the Christmas tree. One dies with the hope that all is well with the world, and in the last twitch one feels just how fleeting one has basically passed by things and people. The great evening, resolution, forgetting, sinking and return from time into eternity, from space into the infinite, from personality into that greatness which carries everything in its bosom.

Yes, the soldier in his relationship with death, in his personal commitment to an idea, knows very little about philosophers and their values. But in him and his deed, life expresses itself more poignantly and more deeply than any book could ever do. And again and again, despite all the absurdity and madness of external events, he is left with a radiant truth: death for a conviction is the highest accomplishment. It is a profession of faith, deed, fulfillment, faith, love, hope and goal; in this unfinished world it is something perfect, perfection par excellence. Action in itself is nothing, conviction is everything. One can even die convinced of something that is not true: he will still have done his best. Barbusse's aviator may see below him two armies armed to the teeth praying to a god for victory, and surely one, or perhaps both, will attach an error to their banner; yet, God will welcome both. The delusion and the world are one, and he who dies for a mistake is still a hero.

I got a heavy head from the noise and wine. Since the first time the light intoxication of wine carried me away, I have again and again the feeling of a liberation. For many, colors, sounds and experiences become more vivid, more essential, but to my eyes they are lost in indifference and end up, pleasant and

subdued, in the background, surrounding me and my thoughts, which become even more alive. So I like to sit alone, in order to escape the conversation, which more erratically and noisily connects the mass to a spiritual body, in which all feel the same and yet each hears only himself. So I get up and sit down on the bench in front of our little house, where we have been meeting in the evenings for the last three weeks, and which encloses us today for the last time before the unknown. It lies close to the road on which our regiment will march west.

We will not set out until tomorrow after dark, to await the storm for another day and night, hidden in caves and tunnels. For three nights already, at dawn, uncounted thousands have been rolling past our little house, which lies like an island in the stream, in silence, without singing, without playing, without joking and laughing. Sometimes an impersonal and flat order comes between the deafening thuds of hobnailed boots, with the clanking of rifles on helmets, with the clatter of sidearms on entrenchments. Then long columns of artillery roar past again, from small field guns to huge mortars towed by engines. In the end, the observer is left with only the impression of a gray, tremendous force and a will that pushes this force to its goal in this dark parade of men, animals and material. What flows in the night and then assembles, enormous, near the walls at the borders, is the will to victory, the power reduced to its most concise formula: the army.

The army: men, animals and machines forged into one weapon. With machines we want to crush the enemy, blind, suffocate, hail to the ground, throw flames, spread him out with a grenade on the bottom of shell craters. With the machines we want to annihilate the will of the few survivors through such a recourse to images of horror that our men, impetuous, will simply dig them out of the holes without doing anything, with

stupid smiles on their faces. The machine is the intelligence of the people cast in steel. It increases the power of the individual a thousandfold and gives our warriors their much-feared character.

The battle of the machines is so powerful that man almost disappears before it. Often, enclosed by the force fields of modern battle, it seemed strange and hardly believable to me to witness a world-historical event. The battle took on the features of a gigantic, dead mechanism, spreading an icy, impersonal wave of annihilation over the terrain. It was like a cratered landscape on a dead star, lifeless and spraying with embers.

And yet, behind it all is the human being. He gives the machines direction and meaning. It is he who makes them launch bullets, explosives and poisons. He rises up inside them like a predatory bird above the enemy. He crouches in their bellies as they advance massively across the battlefield, spitting fire. He is the most dangerous, bloodthirsty and purposeful being that the earth must bear.

Battles and wars have always been there, but what passes here, darkly and incessantly, is the most terrible form into which the spirit of the world has fashioned life up to now. And precisely because these masses advance so monotonously and then, behind the banks, become reservoirs filled with tremendous potential, they give the feeling of pure power, invading each and every viewer like an electrical storm. One grasps the same intoxicating sobriety that is manifested only in the beating hearts of our great cities or in the concept of force fields elaborated by modern physics. There underlies a Caesarian will, worthy of the masses involved. What is about to be unleashed here is a battle in the sense of a completely new time.

Just now, as I sat inside with comrades whose laughter rang confusedly through the dimmed window, I was quite the son of an old time, and it seemed to me that the day after tomorrow ancient and sacred symbols were to be carried toward new goals. But here the silk sheen of the flags seems to fade, here speaks a bitter and dry earnestness, a marching beat that awakens the imagination of vast industrial districts, armies of machines, battalions of workers, and cool, modern men of power. Here the material speaks its iron-hard language and the superior intellect that uses the material. And this language is more decisive and cutting than any before.

But what kind of men are they who do not feel up to their time? Today we write poems of steel and compositions of reinforced concrete. And we fight for power in battles where events interlock with the precision of machines. There is such beauty in it all: in the battles of land, sea and air, where the incandescent will of lightning is tamed and expressed by mastering technological miracles. And I can also imagine that soon such miracles are granted to the sight of a race with a powerful sense of reality, for instance, a magnificent orchid which needs no other justification than its existence.

All goals are transient, only the movement is eternal, and it brings forth incessantly magnificent and merciless spectacles. To be able to close oneself up in one's own sublime aimlessness as in a work of art or in the starry sky is a luxury that only a few can afford. But whoever sees in this war only negation and suffering and not affirmation, the maximum dynamism, will have lived as a slave. He will have had only an outer experience, not an inner experience.

Here it flows by, life itself, the great tension, the will to fight and the will to power in the forms of our time, in our own form, in the most defiant and defensible attitude imaginable. Faced

with this powerful, ceaseless flowing forwards towards battle, all works become void, all concepts hollow, one senses the expression of the elemental, of the violent, which always was and always will be, even if there have long since been no more men and no more wars.