

# WAR AS INNER EXPERIENCE



ERNST JÜNGER



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TRADITION



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## ***1. Introduction***

At times, a new star shines on the horizons of the spirit, striking the eyes of all the restless, heralding and signaling a change in the world as it once did for the kings of the Orient. Then the stars all around drown in fiery embers, idols splinter into earthen shards, and once again all the embossed forms melt in a thousand blast furnaces to be cast into new values.

The waves of such times surround us from all sides. Brain, society, state, God, art, Eros, morality: decay, fermentation - resurrection? The images are still whirring restlessly by, the atoms are still swirling in the boiling cauldrons of the big city. And yet even this storm will dissipate, even this stream of embers will cool to order. Every frenzy is still smashed against gray walls or someone is found to harness it to his chariot with a steel fist.

Why is our time so rich in powers, destructive and generative? Why does it carry such tremendous promise in its womb? Because even if many things die under fever, at the same time the same flame brews the future and the marvelous in a thousand retorts. A walk down the street, a glance at the newspaper shows this, despite all the prophets.

War is what made people and their time what they are. Never before has a race like ours stepped into the arena of the earth to wrestle among themselves the power over their age. For never before has a generation emerged from a gate so dark and powerful as that of this war into the light of life. And we cannot deny this, as much as some would like to: the war, the father of all things, is also ours; it has hammered, chiseled and hardened us into what we are. And always, as long as the

wheel of life is still turning within us, this war will be the axis around which it whirls. He raised us to fight, and we will remain fighters as long as we live. He may have died, his battlefields may be deserted and as infamous as the torture chamber and the gallows hill, but his spirit has moved into his front-line servants and will never leave his service. And if he is in us, he is everywhere, for we form the world, not otherwise, contemplators in the most creative sense. Do you not hear how it roars from a thousand cities, how thunderstorms storm around us as they did when the ring of battles surrounded us? Do you not see how its flame glows from the eyes of each one? Sometimes it sleeps, but when the earth trembles, it spurts forth boiling from every volcano.

However: It is not only our father who is at war, but also our son. We have begotten him and he has begotten us. We are hammered and chiseled, but also those who wield the hammer, wield the chisel, forgers and spraying steel at the same time, martyrs of our own deeds, driven by impulses.

In the bosom of spun culture, we lived together, closer than people before, fragmented into stores and pleasures, rushing through shimmering squares and underground shafts, in cafés surrounded by the gleam of mirrors, streets, ribbons of colored light, bars full of shimmering liquors, conference tables and the latest craze, every hour a novelty, every day a solved problem, every week a sensation, a great overdrunk dissatisfaction at the bottom. Technically still productive, we stood with Ben Akiba smiles at the end of the art, had solved the world's riddles or thought we were well on the way to doing so. The point of crystallization seemed to have been reached, the superman had come close.

We lived like this and were proud of it. As sons of an age intoxicated by matter, progress seemed to us to be perfection, the machine of godlikeness the key, the telescope and microscope the organs of knowledge. But under that always

shining and polished shell, under all the garments with which we adorned ourselves like magicians, we remained naked and raw like the people of the forest and the steppe.

This became apparent when the war tore the community of Europe apart, when we faced each other behind flags and symbols, at which some had long smiled in disbelief, to make an ancient decision. That was when true man made up for everything he had missed out on in a roaring orgy. His instincts, too long curbed by society and its laws, once again became the only and holy thing and the ultimate reason. And everything that the brain had shaped into ever sharper forms over the centuries only served to increase the force of the fist beyond measure.

That lies behind us now, black and eerie like a forest, crossed by night. Who could fail to understand that our breath is blowing faster? We plunge into the experience like divers and return changed.

What was going on at the bottom? Bearers of war and its creatures, people whose lives had to lead to war and were hurled through it into new paths, new goals - what were we to him, and what was he to us? This is a question that many people are trying to answer today. This is also the subject of these pages.

## **2. *Blood***

The human race is a mysterious, tangled jungle, whose crowns, glided by the breeze of free seas, stretch ever more powerfully out of haze, sultriness and dullness towards the clear sun. If the peaks are enveloped in fragrance, color and blossoms, a tangle of strange plants grows in the depths. If, when the sun is fading, a chain of red parrots falls into the cups of feathery palms like a squadron of royal dreams, then from the lowlands, which are already bathed in night, the adverse confusion of crawling, creeping animals, screeching cries of victims, which the insidious assault of greedy, murderous teeth and claws tears from their sleep, their cave, their warm nest to their death.

Just as the primeval forest strives ever more toweringly and mightily towards the heights, sucking its growth forces from its own decline, its parts decaying and decomposing in the muddy soil, so each new generation of mankind grows on a bedrock, layered by the decay of countless generations resting here from the round dance of life. It is true that the bodies of these beings, who had previously ended their dance, are destroyed, blown away in the fleeting sands or rotting at the bottom of the seas. But their parts, their atoms, are once again snatched up by life, the victorious, eternally young, in restless change and thus raised to become eternal carriers of living power.

Thus, the content of existence, every thought, every deed and every feeling that this endless series of predecessors has sped through the realms of life, retains eternal value. Just as man is built on the animal and its conditions, he is also rooted in everything that his fathers created through fist, brain and heart in the course of time. His generations

are like the layers of a coral state; no stone is conceivable without the countless long-extinct ones on which it is based. Man is the inert, the ever-changing vessel of all that has been done, thought and felt before him. He is also the heir to all the longing that drove others before him with irresistible force towards distant goals shrouded in mist.

People are still working on building a tower of immeasurable height, layering one gender, one state of their being with blood, agony and longing on top of the other.

Although the tower soars to ever steeper heights, its battlements raise man ever higher to become the conqueror, revealing ever greater, richer lands to his gaze, the construction does not progress at a steady pace. The work is often threatened, walls topple and are torn down by the foolish, the discouraged, the despairing. Setbacks of conditions long thought to have been conquered, eruptions of elemental forces boiling under a solidified crust reveal the living power of ancient forces.

The individual is also made up of countless building blocks. The endless chain of ancestors drags him along the ground; he is bound and spun with a thousand ribbons and invisible threads to the root network of the primeval forest swamp, whose fermenting warmth incubated his primordial germ. It is true that the wild, brutal, the garish color of the impulses has smoothed, polished and subdued itself in the millennia in which society has bridled the abrupt desires and lusts. Although increasing refinement has clarified and ennobled him, the animalistic still sleeps at the bottom of his being. There is still much animal in him, slumbering on the comfortable, knitted carpets of a polished, filed, noiselessly interlocking civilization, cloaked in habit and pleasing forms, but when the curve of life's wave turns back to the red

line of the primitive, the mask falls; naked as ever, he bursts forth, the primal man, the cave dweller in all the unbridledness of his unleashed instincts. The legacy of his fathers flares up in him, again and again, when life adjusts to its primal functions. The blood that flowed coolly and regularly through his veins in the machine-like activity of his stony scaffolding, the cities, foams up, and the primeval rock that has long rested cold and rigid in hidden depths melts again into white embers. It hisses out at him, blaze, spurt, devastating assault, whenever he descends into the maze of shafts. Torn apart by hunger, in the gasping devouring of the sexes, in the encounter of life and death, he is always the old man.

In battle, in war, which tears all agreement from man like the patched-up rags of a beggar, the beast rises as a mysterious monster from the bottom of the soul. There it shoots up as a consuming flame, as an irresistible frenzy that intoxicates the masses, a deity enthroned above the armies. Where all thought and action is reduced to a formula, feelings must also melt away and adapt to the terrible simplicity of the goal, the destruction of the enemy. That will remain as long as people wage wars and wars will be waged as long as there are still people.

The external form is irrelevant. Whether the claws are spread and the teeth bared at the moment of the encounter, whether raw-edged axes are swung, wooden bows are drawn, or whether very fine technique elevates destruction to the highest art, the point always comes where the white in the eye of the enemy flames with the intoxication of red blood. The gasping leap, the last, desperate gait always triggers the same sum of emotions, whether the fist is swinging the carved club or the explosive-filled hand grenade. And always in the realms where humanity takes its cause to the bloodiest.

decision, may it be the narrow pass between two small mountain peoples, may it be the sweeping arc of modern battles, all gruesomeness, all accumulation of the most sophisticated horrors cannot imbue man with horror like the second-long appearance of his likeness that appears before him, all the fires of prehistory in his distorted face. For all technology is machine, is chance, the projectile blind and will-less, but man is driven by the will to kill through the storms of explosives, iron and steel, and when two people collide in the frenzy of battle, two beings meet, only one of which can exist. For these two beings have placed themselves in a primal relationship to each other, in the struggle for existence in its most naked form. In this struggle, the weaker must remain on the ground, while the victor, his weapon more firmly in his fist, steps over the slain, deeper into life, deeper into the struggle. Thus the outcry that such an impact mingles with that of the enemy is a cry that wrings itself from hearts before which the boundaries of eternity shimmer. It is a cry long forgotten in the flow of culture, a cry of recognition, horror and bloodthirst.

Also out of a thirst for blood. Alongside the horror, this is the second thing that floods the fighter with a torrent of red waves: the intoxication, the thirst for blood, when the twitching clouds of destruction weigh down the fields of wrath. Strange as it may sound to some who have never struggled for existence: The sight of the enemy brings not only ultimate horror but also relief from heavy, unbearable pressure. This is the lust of blood that hangs over war like a red storm sail over a black galley, related only to love in its boundless momentum. It tugs at the nerves even in the bosom of whipped-up cities, when the columns make the morituri walk to the station in the rain of glowing roses. It smolders in the masses that surround them with cheers and

shrill screams; it is a part of the feelings that shower down on the hecatomb of those striding to their death. Stored up in the days before the battle, in the painful tension of the eve, on the march towards the surf, in the zone of terror before the fight to the knife, it flares up into a gnashing rage when the shower of bullets shatters the ranks. It clenches all its striving around one desire: to pounce on the enemy, to seize him as the blood demands, without a weapon, in a frenzy, with a wild grip of the fist. That is how it has always been.

This is the ring of emotions, the battle that rages in the breast of the fighter when he wanders through the flaming desert of the gigantic battles: the horror, the fear, the premonition of annihilation and the longing to completely unleash himself in battle. Once he, a small world raging through the monstrosity within him, has unleashed the wildness that has been pent up to bursting point in a sudden explosion, moments lost forever to clear memory, once blood has flowed, whether from his own wound or that of another, the fog sinks before his eyes. He stares around him, a nightwalker, awakened from oppressive dreams. The monstrous dream that the beastliness within him has dreamed in memory of times when man fought his way through desolate steppes in ever-threatening hordes fades away and leaves him behind, horrified, blinded by the unsuspected in his own breast, exhausted by a gigantic waste of will and brutal strength.

Only then does he recognize the place where his stormy step has taken him, recognizes the army of dangers from which he has escaped, and turns pale. Courage only begins beyond this border.

### 3. Gray

Horror is also part of the ring of feelings that have long lain dormant in our depths, only to burst forth with elemental force in the face of violent shocks. Rarely do its dark wings flutter around the high forehead of the modern.

It was a constant, invisible companion to prehistoric man on his wanderings through the immensity of barren steppes. It appeared to him in the night, in thunder and lightning and threw him to his knees with a strangling grip, he, our ancestor, who, his poor pebble in his fist, faced all the powers of the earth. And yet it was precisely this moment of his greatest weakness that lifted him above the beast. For the animal may well feel fright when suddenly confronted by danger, it may feel fear when pursued and cornered, but horror is alien to it. It is the first weather light of reason.

It is also closely related to lust, the intoxication of blood and the pleasure of play. Didn't we all spend long winter evenings listening to scary stories as children? All the fibers trembled, you could have crawled into a safe cave and still couldn't get enough. It was as if, lost in reeds and mud, you had stumbled upon a nest of spotted snakes and couldn't flee for the pleasure of looking at the hideous scurrying.

At places where the people seek heightened life, at every fair, every shooting range, horror beckons in bright colors on painted canvas. Lust killings, executions, wax bodies covered in festering boils, long rows of anatomical abominations - whoever puts this on display knows the masses and fills their pockets. Often and for a long time I stood in front of such stalls and stared into the faces of those coming out. There was almost always a laugh and yet it sounded so strangely embarrassed

and pressed. What was that laugh supposed to hide? And why was I standing there? Wasn't that my desire for horror? No one is a stranger to the lust of children and the people.

Like the child in the servants' kitchen, the farmer's boy in the chamber of horrors, young volunteers crouched around some older man in their barracks, their voices still shaking with the horror of the battlefield. Even if their faces were pale and their eyes dark, there was hardly anyone who did not long even more ardently for the day of marching out. Everyone was driven to stare the Gorgo in the face, even if the heartbeat stopped.

And the hour came for each of us when it broke out, dark, indeterminate, from the depths, just when we least thought of it. When the fields were empty as on high feast days, and yet completely different. When the blood was swirling through your brain and veins like before a longed-for night of love, and even hotter and even more frenzied. When you got closer and closer to the thunderous noise up ahead, when the beats became more and more booming, more and more hurried, when the plains around you glowed from the overabundance of rushing thoughts, when you were so emotional that the landscape and events later emerged from your memory only dark and dreamlike. The baptism of fire! The air was charged with such overflowing virility that every breath was intoxicating, one could have wept without knowing why. Oh, the hearts of men who can feel that!

Then it swept along the column with the swing of a bat, so that laughter and shouts died in its mouth. On the path to the side lay a wooden and stiff man with a pointed, waxy yellow face, his eyes staring glassily into the void. The first dead man, an unforgettable moment that froze the heart's blood into ice crystals. Then the horror reared up in everyone as a pale, shy horse before the nightly abyss. And a different impression drilled itself into everyone's brain for all time. One was struck by a man's hand, like a claw beaten into moss and earth,

the other by the bluish lips over the whiteness of his teeth, the third by the black, bloody crust in his hair. Oh, one could still be so prepared for this moment, everything was shattered by this gray figure by the wayside, on whose dirty face the first blue flies were playing. This figure and the countless others that followed appeared again and again in their thousand distorted positions with torn bodies and gaping skulls, pale, admonishing ghosts of mad trench crews in the minutes before the storm, until the redemptive cry to attack rang out.

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

On those nocturnal walks through twitching deserts, the heart was as lonely and deserted as if it were wavering above the deadly shimmer of icy seas. All warmth was swallowed up by the lurking relentlessness all around. Countless times, the plaintive howl of a slowly dying man faded into the void. Onwards, only onwards, towards the safe cave!

Although you had walked over the trampled, scarred terrain for many years, you always suddenly woke up, as if from madness and terrible dreams. Where were we? Somewhere on the crater fields of the moon? Cast out into the depths of an inferno? Surely this could not be an earthly landscape, this hellish dance floor of death, surrounded at the edges by yellowish flames! No hearth flashed its peaceful light into the room, only the

colorful signals of destruction flew into the air from some hole in the ground as a fiery prelude to a crashing massacre. Not a bush, not a tiny stalk brushed the stumbling foot. Pale mists and poisonous gases swam around islands of sad trees, black, shattered carcasses. Sometimes a house appeared, abandoned and crumbling like a wreck at the bottom of the sea. What was it that groped for the heart with slimy tentacles from all angles in the uncertain light? The horror of death and decay.

The decay. Many a man melted away without cross and hill in rain, sun and wind. Flies buzzed around his solitude in dense clouds, sultry haze hovered around him. The smell of decaying man is unmistakable, heavy, sweetish and disgustingly clinging like viscous mush. After great battles it brooded so heavily over the fields that even the hungriest forgot to eat.

Often, a band of brazen fellows held on for endless days in the clouds of battle, clinging to an unknown piece of trench or a row of funnels like shipwrecked men clinging to shattered masts in a hurricane. In their midst, Death had thrust his standard into the ground. Fields of corpses in front of them, mowed down by their bullets, next to and between them the corpses of their comrades, death itself in their eyes, which lay strangely fixed in sunken faces, faces reminiscent of the gruesome realism of old crucifixion paintings. They crouched in the decay, almost asphyxiated, which became unbearable when another of the iron storms stirred up the frozen dance of death and flung the crumpled bodies high into the air.

It didn't help that they sprinkled the nearest ones with sand and lime or threw a tarpaulin over them to avoid the constant sight of black, haggard faces. There were too many of them; everywhere the spade came across something buried. All the secrets of the tomb lay open in a

hideousness before which the most fantastic dreams faded. Hair fell from skulls in bushes like pale leaves from autumn trees. Some disintegrated into greenish fish flesh that shone through torn uniforms at night. If you stepped on them, your foot left phosphoric marks. Others were dried into chalky, slowly flaking mummies. Others' flesh flowed from their bones as reddish-brown gelatine. On sultry nights, swollen corpses came to ghostly life as tense gases hissed and bubbled from the wounds. Most terrifying of all, however, was the seething turmoil that flowed out of those that consisted only of countless worms.

Why should I spare your nerves? Didn't we ourselves once lie in a hollow path between corpses for four days? Were we not all there, dead and alive, covered with a thick carpet of large, blue-black flies? Is there an increase? Yes: many a man lay there with whom we had shared many a night watch, many a bottle of wine and many a piece of bread. Who can speak of war who was not in our ring?

After such days, when the front-line soldier walked through the towns of the hinterland in gray, silent columns, bent and ragged, the sight of him froze even the thoughtless hustle and bustle of the carefree men behind. "As if taken from the coffin," whispered one to his girl, and everyone trembled at the emptiness of the dead eyes. These men were saturated with horror, they would have been lost without the intoxication. Who can measure that? Only a poet, a *poéte maudit* in the voluptuous hell of his dreams.

*And tell me if there is still some torture  
For this Godly corpse without soul and dead among the dead?*

Penetrating horror, accessible in its subtle emanations only to the most sensitive, lay in contrast, crackling up where life and destruction touched in strong embodiment.

It sprang from destruction, terrible in its apparent futility.

Desolate villages yawned into the night like desecrated tombs, flooded with white moonlight, shrouded in carrion haze, with grass-covered streets over which silent packs of rats buzzed. We turned hesitantly around the burnt sites of rich farms, in vague fear of suddenly encountering the ghosts of those who had been torn from their peaceful existence. Could the abbé not appear from behind the ruins of the rectory? What could the darkness of the cellars be hiding? A woman's corpse with stringy hair floating on black groundwater? Animal carcasses hung in the stables, still chained to charred timbers. A child's doll lay like a tiny corpse in the broken doorway.

One walked over the gruesome with nailed boots, brazen and accustomed to blood, François Villon and Simplicius Simplicissimus in one's knapsack. And yet, you could feel something brushing around the orphaned chimneys and constricting your throat, so icy that you had to swallow. After all, you were a bearer of war, reckless and daring, you had killed many a man you had walked over with strong feelings in your chest. But this was like a child's wailing from the wild moors, a ghostly lament like the ringing of the bells of sunken Vineta over sea and noon. Like the sinking of that exuberant city, one sensed the hopeless sinking of a culture, terrified by the realization of being swept away in the maelstrom.

There is often nothing more than a knife's edge between laughter and madness. Once, at the beginning of an offensive, I passed through a town from which the inhabitants had saved only their bare lives. A companion nudged me with a smile and pointed to a house whose roof and walls were already gaping with cracks. A shop window had remained strangely clear in the midst of the incipient destruction. It contained a whole

row of ladies' hats. A few days earlier, on the late evening of a battle, I had torn apart the bodies of a group of corpses while searching for a fallen friend. Suddenly, a fattened rat jumped out of the torn skirt of one of them. Nevertheless, this experience didn't grab me like the ghostly contrast between the desolate street and the shiny tinsel of lacquered straw, silk and colorful feathers that reminded me of women's hands and the thousand superfluous things that make our lives colorful.

Another time, during an endless night watch in the dark corner of a shoulder guard together with an old warrior, I asked him in the course of a whispered conversation about his most gruesome experience. In short pauses, his cigarette glowed under his steel helmet and cast a red glow on his fleshless face. He told me:

"At the beginning of the war, we stormed a house that had been a farm. We forced our way into the barricaded cellar and struggled in the darkness with animal fury, while the house was already burning above us. Suddenly, probably triggered by the embers of the fire, an orchestrion started playing automatically upstairs. I'll never forget how the roar of the fighters and the gasps of the dying mingled with the carefree blare of dance music."

There is much more to tell. Of men who laughed uproariously and for a long time after a bullet shattered their skulls, of someone who tore off his uniform on a winter's night and raced across bloody battlefields with a grin on his face, of the satanic humor of the large dressing stations and many other things. But we children of the time have grown weary 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 everything is just a fantasy.

And yet it was again so palpable, so leadenly heavy on the senses, when a deserted band crossed unknown terrain under the vault of the night, far and near, thundered by the iron weight. If a ray of embers suddenly tore itself away from the earth in their midst, a cry of shattering realization drifted into infinity. Then the dark curtain of horror might have suddenly rushed up from the brains in the last fire, but the frozen mouth could no longer reveal what lay in wait behind it.

## 4. *The trench*

The trench. Labor, horror and blood have riveted the word into a steel tower, weighing on anxious brains. Not only a rampart and bulwark between battling worlds, but also a rampart and dark cave for the hearts that it drew in and expelled in constant alternation. A glowing Moloch that slowly burned the youth of the nations to cinders, a spun vein above ruins and desecrated fields, from which the blood of humanity pulsed into the earth.

Far away, he was already a grip and a cold fist in the villages on the edge of the horror, where the fighter regained his footing, worked during the day and slept at night. The windows banged restlessly as the wagon of destruction roared along the front, heedless and maltreating. Hardly any of those accustomed to blood still heard it. Only sometimes, when the glowing eye of the fireplace stared into dark rooms and the flowers of the world opened up to the wandering brain, glaring and numbing, big cities on the waters of light, southern coasts where light, blue waves foamed, 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 windows. Then there were shivering calls for light and wine.

Sometimes it bubbled up, boiling lava in huge cauldrons, dark redness biting through the morning mist in the west, or flags of dirty smoke fluttered in front of a sinking sun. Then, far inland, everyone stood on the edge of their seats, anxious lowlanders in the roaring storm surge. Just as sandbags and timbers were stuffed into the jaws of broken trunks, battalions and regiments were hurled into the flaming gap of torn trenches. Somewhere, someone was standing by the phone with a granite face over a red collar, shouting

the name of a place of ruins that had once been a village. Then orders clanged, and steel armor, and dark fever shuddered from a thousand eyes.

But even when the rolling mill of war ran more smoothly, death's clenched fist of bone always hung over the wastelands. In the wide expanse of land around the trenches he ruled with severity, and it was not youth, humility and talent that counted when his leaden scourge cracked on flesh and bone. At times it even seemed as if he went easy on the one who grabbed his mask with a laughing mouth and a cheeky hand.

Night after night, dark columns wound their way towards the trench, swarmed by thoughts in greedy packs. Sometimes they disappeared into villages, black, yawning wounds, through whose rubble the foot of the front-line soldiers had trodden narrow, sneaky paths. There was smoldering from torn-open houses, naked rafters cut like skeletons into the disc of the moon, the smell of carrion wafted from cellars, from which swarms of whistling rats escaped. So gruesome was this frozen destruction that the imagination burst into it on blistering nags and created life, a life indeed like that which might have guided a Goya's brush, which crept from all corners of the burnt sites and merged into a hideous round dance.

When they emerged from the edges of the crushed as gray shadows, into endless trenches, they felt relief from heavy pressure. For they no longer trudged through the decaying body of a former state, no longer through places where the bridal bed and cradle stood, where wine and white bread weighed down on the tables of rich farms, where humble altars leaned in colorful sunshine, where in the evening, from all the towers, swinging contentment poured down on huts, stables and fields.

The wind whistled more freely over the rumpled fields, the march became more hurried as the dark threat took shape. Close by, the silver of hissing balls of light shone and rushed with

cold slope over the chain of crouching people. Guns tore the veil of night everywhere, shimmering nets of steel and spraying lead spanned the land. All around, the horizons writhed in red spasms, iron squadrons roared towards the target. Sometimes they dropped abruptly from their steepness, and their shrill curve drowned in explosions, jagged shreds and loamy crashes. Then everything fell down, fearful and stunned as if before an almighty deity, and plunged on, gasping, whipped by flames, crunching crush in their ears. Some remained lying, unnoticed, a piece of earth in a rigid fist, earth in the mouth and on the dirty face, a sad bundle, a springboard for those who followed, whose hearts paled when the nail boot sank into the soft ground.

At last they had reached their destination. There were others staring motionless like pillars of iron at the barren foreland. Those still stirred by 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. Silently and hurriedly, those who had been released and redeemed disappeared into the darkness of winding corridors.

Now they were surrounded by the trench, its masters and slaves at the same time, a crowd cast out into the night, a ship's crew surrounded by icebergs. They knew him; every floe hurled on the ramparts was the work of their hands, every foot of his dark corners they had measured a thousand times. They knew it when at night the clouds floated past the moon like mysterious galleys, and guard posts, shoulder defences and tunnel shafts flashed before them in the changing light as a strange, hostile world. They knew him when the morning fog increased the horror of the desolate desert and the rigid wiring appeared as a moving army of confused figures to eyes that had been burning through the night. They knew him when, at noon, a sky of glass

surrounded him; the wild flowers gave a lingering scent and the solitude of the hinterland opened up wide to the peering eye.

Sometimes they would sit together in the evening in front of the black caves, chatting and smoking their pipes, while the balmy air carried busy hammering and homely songs to the enemy. The night came murmuring out of holes and corners, pushing the sun from pinnacle to pinnacle until it leapt 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 in silent ambushes for long hours or swung their picks against the rock of the shafts.

Every day the trench weighed down on its bent inhabitants with new force. Diligently, it gulped in blood, rest and manly strength to maintain its ponderous gears. Times came when the work rushed on without a break for days and nights. When rain had washed away the trenches and iron whirls had ploughed them up, he had to dig through the mud and earth, only to disappear into the ground again like animals dragged into the light.

Even in times of drought and when the god of war rarely stamped his steel club on the ground, a hundred fixed eyes were fixed on the foreland, on the other side. A hundred ears hung eternally on the changing voices of the night, the call of a lone bird, the tinkling of the wind in the wire. Worse than the quick hours of open field battle was this eternal readiness, the lying in wait, the tension of all senses, the expectation of murderous encounters, while weeks, months seeped away. 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, torn, dried, in a loamy crust, lifeless except for the

lights shimmering in the dark depths of their eyes, they seemed rooted in the ditch as part of the earth that surrounded them. The sum of the thoughts, wishes, curses and hopes that stirred the solitude of countless hours is as infinite as the monotonous waves of the distant and unconscious oceans. When boiling air danced over the yellow sand at midday and made the distances tremble, then dreams of golden harvests emerged from the heat, scythes flashing with momentum, resting under the shady islands of individual trees in the field. Warmth, closeness, domesticity, Christmas became glowing visions when the tramp of frozen feet clattered through the thinness of icy nights and the moonlight covered the steel of the guns with blue cold. If rain poured down for weeks at a steady rate, the only sound was the splashing of approaching detachments, the slapping thud of crumbling earth and an incessant coughing along the lines, until the last pennant of courage sank into the muddy floods.

But always, in heat, wetness or icy wind, the feeling of being in battle, of being a fighter, lay at the bottom of her being. For weeks, everything seemed as usual, the ditch a place like any other, with flowers blooming at the edges and a calm night. But sometimes, when two wires swung together at the front, a stone rolled, a rustling sound glided through the tall grass, all the senses were on the lookout. Then the ear and eye 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 broke out or confused shouts resounded in the depths of the tunnels, the first reach of those still drunk from sleep was for it. This reaching for the weapon from the depths of sleep was something that lay in the blood, an expression of primitive man, the same movement with which the Ice Age man gripped his stone axe.

This imprinted the trench warfare 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 stared back at others often enough, but only for hours or short days. When the aviator rose to decide over the armies, it was only for a short game for life, which the brave could fight through in a white collar and with a serene smile. For 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 skirts and naked blades, or of the parade attack of the infantry behind the silk of shot-through flags, surrounded by the tamed fury of brazen marches. War used to be crowned by days when dying was joy, rising above the ages as gleaming monuments of manly courage.

The trench, on the other hand, turned war into a trade, the warriors into day laborers of death, ground to shreds by bloody everyday life. Romantic legend had also become the feeling of anxious foreboding that crept over the soldier on the eve, at the campfire, on the ride into the dawn, and which transformed 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 lyrical contemplation, for reverence for one's own greatness. All delicacy was crushed and trampled, all delicacy was overflowed by glaring events.

Even in the short days of rest, there was no time to surrender to such moods. Then one threw oneself into life, grabbed it with both fists, chased it through the brain in clenched rushes, as if one had escaped the galleys. Then you could understand why a sinking crew leaves the pumps, smashes the rum barrels and lets the flame of the senses

once again shoot up to the sky. At times, the need to burst the black dams with which the ditch encircled the waters of existence and to mock the constantly threatening hammer fist in a frenzy became a compulsion.

Even in the tunnels, the shelters that had been dug for protection and rest, hours rarely blossomed in which the path of life swung beyond a sluggish twilight. How could one breathe more freely in these caves, whose wood-clad walls were eaten away by a yellowish mold, on whose mists the small, trembling lights of the candles floated and hung the damp, coarse beams with glittering cloaks. They were close genists of dirty people wrapped up in smoke, fumes and tobacco smoke. Occasionally one would stand up, wordlessly, take his rifle in his fist and disappear. Then another would rumble down, dull, awake, and take the empty seat, a barely noticed exchange. Scraps of words, torn off like the short blows of the bullets crashing outside, merged into monotonous conversation. They were so intertwined, so woven on the same wheel of fate, that they understood each other almost without speaking. Everyone wandered through the same nocturnal landscape of feeling, a sigh, a curse, a joke were the flames that for moments tore the darkness above the abyss.

There were certainly hours in which comradeship glowed and the chains with which the trench bound the hearts melted. It had just been every man for himself, one staring into the embers of the tiny stove, one slicing a rough piece of bread, one pulling the blanket over his head on the cot. A voice had broken the dullness and told of some village, some people, of Sunday and everyday life, rest and work. There beat in every relative, the small unknown circle that nevertheless encompasses a whole life, the flashing of the clod under the plow, the

smoke over native rooftops, the swinging of festive bells over lonely fields. Then hearts leapt with emotion, springs blazed from hidden veins, the impassive stare of eyes melted with radiance. So tenderly, so awkwardly did each offer his small insignificance to the other that the wave of his feeling swept them high above the ditch. That was one of the moments when man rolled away the weight of the trench, and humanity flashed across the horror of the wilderness like the fleeting cone of light from a spotlight. If, at such a moment, a treasure digger of feeling had walked across the scarred land outside, the human-filled cave would have sparkled up at him like gold from the depths.

But this clarity quickly faded into the eternity of the trench. Like machines, they picked up their spades again, climbed the guard post or crept off into the unknown. Exhausted, frozen, shivering with excitement, they returned and threw themselves onto the planks of the camp. Slowly the candle flickered out, a rat gnawed at the frame of the gallery, the drops rattled their monotonous melody incessantly. When the burning eyes finally closed, even in sleep the brains were still surrounded by lurking horrors. The bodies rolled restlessly on hard timbers, often enough a groan, a cry from the depths of wild dreams clawed its way into the darkness of the tiny room. The clanking of chains and the plaintive cry of abandoned animals echoed eerily across fields and lonely farms from muffled stables.

Even here in the bosom of the earth, the horror had a thousand arms around you. Somewhere, very close, next to you, under you, it could be slurping, digging, picking and heaping explosives in tangled corridors, creeping and secretly by the glow of the mine lights. Somewhere in the holes of no man's land, a whispering crowd, ready to jump and armed

to the teeth were waiting to throw themselves against the trench for a sudden slaughter, a brief orgy of fire and blood. Everywhere the perimeter was interwoven with hidden scurrying and bustling, with shadowy chains of bearers panting under the weight of their weapons, with the whispering and murmuring of armored figures. And this pressure, this heaviness, rolled over dead fields, also weighed like a leaden bell over the heart of each individual. This was evident when a clod broke dully from the edge of the trench outside or a freezing sentry called for relief. Then the bond of sleep was torn asunder by a flash of recognition, the sleeper startled awake in the expectation of standing before the dark gates of some terrible event.

And once, sooner or later, the day came that set fire to this dark gate, that overwhelmed all foreboding and all expectation in a flash of fulfillment. These roaring thunderstorms usually attacked the crew with sudden fury like wild animals from an ambush. This was called the moment of surprise in the rules of engagement. The cauldron boiled unexpectedly when the black bands of the wire entanglements peeled out of the twilight and illusory figures swarmed around the sleep-thirsty eyes of the guards. Then, all at once, the horizons shattered, the morning mists became drunk with burning red, fire, splashing 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 shrouded all the courage and superhuman daring that those hours gave birth to, a curtain through which death raged down upon victims who awaited it, scattered unspeakably forlorn in their sad holes. Countless have fallen like this, lonely and far from humanity in dark caves or smoky funnels, without the last, searching glance of the glassy eyes meeting anything but naked, torn earth

all around. Countless others fell on the bodies of these fallen on the peaks of battle as long waves of men flooded the trenches.

Then the trench showed its true face. Everything fell from it with which man, who loves the concealment of the hideous, adorns and decorates it. The benches, the carved boards, the bouquet of flowers planted by the guard in a shell casing were crushed and shredded. Only the steep walls, the blocks of the shoulder guards stood as rigid, black backdrops, in front of which a chain of dramatic scenes chased each other in fire and fog. There, in fighting packs, the chosen ones of nations, fearless stormers, rushed through the twilight, trained to plunge to their deaths at the sound of a whistle and a short call. When two squads of such fighters met in the narrow corridors of the flaming desert, the embodiment of the most ruthless will of two peoples clashed. This was the climax of the war, a climax that topped all the horror that had torn at the nerves before. A paralyzing second of silence, in which eyes met, preceded it. Then a scream drifted up, steep, wild, blood-red, burning itself into the brain as a glowing, unforgettable stamp. This scream tore veils of dark, unimagined worlds of feeling, forcing everyone who heard it to rush forward to kill or be killed. What was the meaning of raised hands, pardon or comrade? There was only one understanding: that of blood. Trembling balls of light hung over the strangling, whose spirit no report can grasp, and which had no spectators except those bleeding to death in dark corners, whose torn eyes this desolation was the last image they carried over into the great silence.

Short, raging fevers were these orgies of rage; when they were gone, 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 what they were experiencing. The cries of the wounded rose and fell in monotonous repetition, slowly dying out in the intervening field, spun into funnels or spiky wires.

Again, the days and nights passed over the trench, ships hauling the same cargo into eternity. Decay brooded over the landscape. Slowly, the dead decomposed, uniting completely with the earth, completely with the trench they fought for. Somewhere in the wind and twilight, two willow rods swayed at the edge of the trench, tied to the cross by a comrade.

## 5. *Eros*

When the war blazed like a torch over the gray walls of the cities, everyone felt abruptly torn from the chain of their days. Reeling, distraught, the masses flooded the streets under the crest of the immense wave of blood that piled up before them. In front of this wave, all the values whose interlocking had swung time in ever more frenzied cycles became tiny. The fine, the intricate, the ever more sharply honed culture of nuance, the ingenious fragmentation of pleasure evaporated in the spraying crater of instincts that had been thought to have sunk. The refinement of the mind, the tender cult of the brain were lost in the clinking rebirth of barbarism. Other gods were raised to the throne of the day: strength, fist and masculine courage. When their embodiment roared across the asphalt in long columns of armed youth, cheers and reverent shivers hung over the crowd.

It corresponds to the course of nature that this rediscovery of violence, this manhood taken to extremes, also had to change the relationships between the sexes. In addition, there was a fiercer will to grasp life, a more intimate enjoyment of being in the one-day dance above the maw of eternity.

Every shake-up of the foundations of culture triggers sudden outbursts of sensuality. The lifeblood, hitherto isolated and cushioned with all the safeguards that the community could offer, is suddenly left unprotected. Existence, carelessly sucked in by man like the wide open air, is abandoned, the unfamiliar proximity of danger evokes dreamlike and confusing feelings. Carefully spread over the fields of the years, the harvest of pleasure stood; if the original source dries up, the fruits must wither. The treasures in the

chests, the wine in the cellars, everything that used to be called possession and abundance has suddenly become strangely superfluous and almost a burden. Your fist wants to clutch the ducats - how much longer will you have time to enjoy them? How delicious Burgundy is! Who will sip this wine when you are no longer alive? Will you be warm when the heir sinks his nose into the glass and tastes the flower? Oh, that all the barrels could be emptied in one wild gulp! After us the deluge, in the grave there are no more joys!

O life! Once more, once more, perhaps the last! Exploit, splurge, waste, splash all the fireworks in a thousand suns and circling wheels of flame, burn up the stored power before going into the icy desert. Into the surf of the flesh, have a thousand gurgles, erect gleaming temples to the phallus. If the striking of the clock is to cease forever, may the hands purr quickly across the dial through all the hours of the night and day.

In this way, the forces that had hitherto interlocked as an intricate mechanism were released from their usual course to unite in a powerful expression of the sensual human being. This was an absolute necessity, hidden under romantic veils and cast by the spirit of the time in its more or less pleasing forms, but the setback that always occurred, and always will occur, when the solid ground of existence begins to shake. So the lights flickered out of all the chamber windows into the uncertain night, the streets of the cities roared with a hasty rush, the air was filled to bursting with advertising and devotion. That is the delicious thing about life, that just when death is choking most greedily, it flickers along most colorfully and madly in war, revolution and pestilence. And each of the countless entanglements into which two people fled from each other in the stormy outbreak of the turn of the world was

a victory of life in its eternal power. Everyone, even the most despondent, felt it quite dully: when his breath died away in the whirl of love, he was so detached from the ego, so enmeshed in the circling life, so poured into the eternal universe, that for that moment death appeared to him in true form, small and contemptible. Deep down he remained behind when the curve of feeling shot steeply beyond contemplation.

Two feelings thus confront us as the causes of this flood of sensual phenomena: The urge of life to express itself once again in a heightened way and the escape into the thicket of intoxication in order to forget the impending dangers in pleasure. Of course, there are many other things at play, but our limited questioning will only ever be able to snatch small provinces from the realm of the soul.

The longer the war lasted, the more sharply it shaped sexual love. Under the blows of the restless hammersmiths, it soon lost its shine and polish like everything else that man had brought with him into battle. It too was imbued with the spirit that wove in the fighters of the great battles. The spirit of material battle and trench warfare, fought more ruthlessly, more savagely, more brutally than ever before, produced men such as the world had never seen before. It was a whole new breed, embodied energy and charged with maximum force. Lithe, lean, sinewy bodies, striking faces, eyes petrified in a thousand terrors beneath their helmets. They were overcomers, steel natures, attuned to battle in its most gruesome form. Their rush across shattered landscapes was the final triumph of a fantastic horror. When their daring troops broke into shattered positions, where pale figures with mad eyes stared back at them, undreamt-of energies were released. Jugglers of death, masters of explosives and flame, magnificent beasts of prey, they dashed through the trenches.

At the moment they met, 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 select few in whom the war was so concentrated, but the spirit of an age is only ever carried by individuals. It is clear that in everything they did, the essence of these men of short, ruthless action had to burst forth. Just as they held alcohol in its strong, undiluted forms in the highest esteem, they had to rush against the hurdle of all intoxication in a red rush. Throw themselves fully into the stupor, drink life was the watchword in the short respites between battles. What harm did it do if she found the morning sun under the rubble of the bar table? A bourgeois sense of reputation was a world away. What was health? Important for people who hoped to live to a long age.

Sharp-eyed and weathered, they walked the streets of foreign cities, lansquenets of love who were allowed to reach out for anything because they had nothing to lose. Fugitive wanderers on the paths of war, they grabbed as they were used to, with a hard fist and without much sentiment. They had no time for long courtship, novelistic development, the trappings that even the smallest bourgeois girl needs. They demanded blossom and fruit from the hour. So they had to seek love in places where it presented itself to them without a veil.

Didn't the intersections of the modern highways glow night after night in the sign of Eros, the unleashed? There paraded in long rows ready femininity, the lotus flowers of the asphalt. Brussels! Life, foaming under a thousand propellers. How tremendous was the momentum of life and yet as terrifyingly mechanical as the war itself. Only a steely individuality could exist there without

being swallowed up in a whirlpool. These lovelorn bodies were pure function, swaying in the call of the wind, hung with clothes like shining posters. I once leaned against a lantern for a long time and drank in the same image over and over again, repeating it like the monotonous crash of waves on the beach. Again and again. Even the language was missing, otherwise as suitable as tablecloth, knife and fork to soften the animal-like quality of a meal.

From dark corners of old neighborhoods, red eyes glowed from lanterns, beckoning to a hasty fist full of pleasure. Mirrors shimmered inside nondescript houses, flooding light drowned in the heaviness of red velvet. It was a drunken laughter when the metallic handle sank into white flesh. Warriors and girls, an old motif.

What was going on in the villages that were girded with horror? They lay dead in the darkness when you marched through, only the bayonet of the post flickering in the market. And yet a foreign race dug itself indelibly into a foreign land.

When the red life roars against the black reefs of death, pronounced colors come together to form sharp images. These are - and we are living in the midst of them - epochs of revelation, of unleashing, of rejection of all subtlety, delicacy and lyricism. Everywhere, life is rebounding into barbaric abundance and force, not least in love and art. There is no time to read his Werther with tearful eyes.

Certainly at times - are we not prisms that splinter all colors? Who wants to reduce them to a formula? - a warmer glimmer glowed even at the edge of the material battle. Perhaps it trembled through the broken shutters of the first inhabited cottage over the cold horror of the night as the searching arm of an outpost of feeling. There in a peasant's chamber lay two people under coarse linen

and felt safe for a few hours on the brink of destruction, probably as safe as two young birds in the height of a tree when night forests creak and sway in the storm wind. Perhaps a student and a Picardy peasant girl, flung together on some cliff of war. Now they were all sensation, two hearts burning into each other in an icy world. While the small window pane shook to the hammering beat of the nearby front, two lips brushed the man's ear, urgently trying to pour the whole melody of the foreign language into him. This minute was able to kindle in him an inkling of the soul of their country, brighter than the wisdom of all the books and all the 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 burst into 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 harsh jokes, it trembled less under secret shivers than theirs. He stood clear in the hail of bullets, the breath of kisses still in his hair. Death approached as a friend, a ripe grain fell under the cut.

## **6. *Pacifism***

War is the most powerful encounter between nations. Whereas in trade and commerce, in competitions and congresses, only the advanced tips touch each other, in war their entire team knows only one target, 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 were only preserved, spread or lost through war. Only through war do great religions become the property of the whole earth, do the most capable races spring from dark roots into the light, do countless slaves become free men. War is no more a human institution than the sexual instinct; it is a law of nature, which is why we will never escape its spell. We must not deny it, otherwise it will devour us.

Our time shows strong pacifist tendencies. This current springs from two sources, idealism and bloodlust. The one denies war because it loves people, the other because it is afraid. This also includes the aesthete.

One of them is a martyr. He is a soldier of ideas; he has courage: that is why he must be respected. He cares more for humanity than for the nation. He believes that angry nations only inflict bloody wounds on humanity. And that when the weapons clash, the building of the tower that we want to raise to the heavens rests. So he braces himself between the bloody waves and is crushed by them.

For the other, his person is the most sacred thing; therefore he flees or shuns the fight. He is the pacifist who attends boxing matches. He knows how to clothe his weakness in a thousand shimmering mantles - especially that of the martyr - and many

seem all too tempting. But one must be clear about this: if the spirit of an entire people drifts in this direction, it is a stormy sign of impending doom. No matter how towering a culture may be - if the male nerve dies out, it is a colossus on feet of clay. The mightier its structure, the more terrible its fall.

Someone might ask: "God may be with the strongest battalions, but are the strongest battalions also with the highest culture?" This is precisely why it is the sacred duty of the highest culture to have the strongest battalions. There may come a time when the fleeting hooves of barbarian steeds clatter over the ruins of our cities. Only the strong hold their world in their fist, for 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 increase, i.e. the will to fight, is the magnetic center through which its structure is consolidated and new parts are constantly being drawn in. If this center loses its power, it has to trickle away into atoms.

Examples from history are cheap. With every collapse, we see weakness suddenly revealed by some external shock. This blow comes with unfailing certainty every time; this is due to the way the world is set up. The addiction to destroy is deeply rooted in human nature; everything weak falls victim to it. What did the Peruvians do to the Spaniards? For those with ears to hear, the jungle crowns that today feather over 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 people of the Dronts, the most peaceful people imaginable; they were even close relatives of the doves. They actually had no

enemies, could barely walk due to their clumsiness and fed on plants. Their meat was inedible, hence their nickname "the disgusting birds". Despite all this, they were wiped out after their abandoned island had barely been discovered. A picture you can really imagine: The Dutch ship's people, without fatigue - in such things man is truly tireless, no one is more restless than the hunter - swinging knuckles and heavy spars, and the many thousands of large, lumbering birds watching the carnage with astonished eyes until their skulls break.

"After all, this little episode took place before the Thirty Years' War. One might assume that today, at the time of compulsory schooling, animal protection societies, etc., etc. -- -"

In 1917, I was standing in front of an illuminated shop window in a street in Brussels. There were piles of porcelain, dainty little things from Meissen, Limoges and Copenhagen, colorful Venetian goblets, large bowls of water-clear cut crystal. When I stroll through larger cities, I love to linger for a long time in front of these museums of luxurious small works of art, sparkling in the light. It gives you the same feeling of richness, beauty and abundance with which you walk through the avenues of a wide park frozen in elegant autumnal beauty, unaffected by the thought that you don't own it.

For once, however, I was disturbed by the reflections of two soldiers leaning against the brass bar next to me. They were unmistakable front-line types; the trench had bleached and worn their coats, chiseled the profiles of their knives. Their faces were bold and intelligent, their eyes and mouths set in a petrified tension, marked by moments of high alert behind hammering machine guns. Nevertheless, the

trained eyes in his posture and suit can already detect the small signs of beginning fatigue.

"Well, you don't notice anything about the war here either. It's all there!"

"Boy, there should be a .38 bull's eye here, like this. really high from above."

"That would make all the crap splash up!"

You could clearly see the lust with which this thought filled them from their faces. The little flash gave me food for thought. These were two people who were absolutely "fed up" with the war, yet they were basically the same. They were tired, battered by the mechanical effects, beaten up; they had not gained the slightest moral insight.

At that moment I realized with clarity: these people will never overcome war, because it is greater than they are. Their exhausted fists will probably drop from time to time, they will probably stand panting on the sidelines for a while, they will probably end this or that war with a peace, they will probably sometimes say that this was the last war. But the war is not dead when villages and towns are no longer burning, when millions are no longer bleeding to death with cramped fists in the fire, when people are no longer strapped as whimpering bundles to the bare tables of military hospitals. Nor will it be born of a few statesmen and diplomats, as many believe. All this is only external. The true sources of war spring deep in our breast, and all the horror that floods the world at times is only a reflection of the human soul, manifesting itself in events.

How often have they been heard to sigh in their dugouts: "It's not good that people are killing each other." But all they meant was: "It's not good to be killed." And they were so often the same ones who stabbed in cold blood and sneered

shouted: "Nix, Camerade!" when imploring arms reached out to them. --A whole long summer we had lain in the same barren hilly landscape of Artois, a fighting regiment, a lost bunch, long estranged from the hustle and bustle of the towns. We hadn't seen a woman for months, hadn't heard a bell ring or a factory whistle. The overgrown, scarred wilderness, the faces of our comrades dulled to uniformity, the thousand sounds of a hidden, incessantly working battle, the clouds of bullets by day and the flickering of flares by night: all this had become so familiar to us that we hardly noticed it any more. Every ninth night we marched back from the trenches to a neglected nest to sleep in and clean our rifles.

The land before us was desert. We looked at it day after day, long and sharply through the narrow slits of our embrasures, gripped by the curious dread that surrounds an unknown land. On quiet nights, the wind carried voices, coughing, knocking, hammering and a distant, confused rolling of wheels to us. Then we were filled with a strangely anxious and greedy feeling, like that of a hunter stalking a monstrous, mysterious animal in a jungle clearing.

At lunchtime we often sat together in a patch of sunlight in the ditch, smoking and silent, for we had known each other so long that we had nothing more to say to each other. Forged together like galley slaves by inexorable circumstances, we were usually sullen and hardly liked to see each other. Sometimes one of them would walk past us, in a hurry, busy, holding a map covered with red and blue lines and signs. Very simple, the blue lines were us and the red ones the enemy. We saw that he was shaved, that his boots were shining, that he was interested in what was nagging at us, and made a series of bitter

jokes about it. Then the feeling of the front drew us together, that feeling of animal solidarity in life and death, of which they wrote and spoke so much at home, and by which they apparently understood the roaring unison of the storm cry and the advance of the horns at dawn. Oh, how long ago we had exchanged the shimmering skin of that heroism for the dirty smock of the day laborer.

One was hit almost every day, sometimes very close to us; sometimes we only noticed it when we found his already cold body on a guard post as we walked through the trench. They were usually shot in the head, caused by a stray bullet that had found a gap between the sandbags. There must be a lot of veins in the head; we were always amazed at the amount of blood that can flow out of a person. Sometimes someone was torn apart by a grenade or mine so that even his best friend could no longer recognize him. Then we used our shovels to lift the mangled mass of corpses onto a canvas sheet to wrap them up. In these places the clay still showed large, blasted-in rust stains. We carried the bodies back during the night and buried them in a cemetery that was constantly expanding. The carpenter carved them an iron cross, the sergeant crossed their names off the muster roll and the company commander signed them. Soon we had forgotten them and only retained a vague memory of them. Maybe someone once said in the evening: "Do you remember that little fat guy with the red hair? He was supposed to wire unexploded bombs once and didn't have a hammer with him. What does the guy do? Takes the bling catcher and hits the stakes with it. The colonel just rode past and almost fell off his horse in shock. That was a moth!"

So we lived monotonously, surrounded by death and wilderness. The battle had long since lost its extraordinary quality:

we had come to terms with its phenomena as we had with those of heaven and earth. Our former life was just a dull dream to us, with which we were increasingly losing touch. When we sent letters home, we wrote about general matters or described the external face of the war, not its soul. The few of us who were aware of this knew that those back there would never understand.

Autumn was slowly approaching.

Then something quite unexpected happened, something we would never have thought possible. On a stormy night, a torrential rain lashed down on the trenches. Freezing and wet, the posts stood in the wind and tried in vain to relight the extinguished pipes. The water gurgled down the trench walls in torrents, clapping as one sandbag wall and shoulder barrier after another crumbled into a viscous pulp. Covered in mud, the crews crawled out of the shelters like frightened swarms of rats as the water rose higher and higher. As morning slowly and sadly dawned behind damp veils, we realized that a veritable deluge had descended upon us. Silent and frozen, we crouched on the last ledges, which were already beginning to crumble. The last curse had long since been extinguished, a terrible thing. What could we do? We were lost. The guns were encrusted. We couldn't stay, and showing ourselves above ground was certain death. We knew that from a thousandfold experience.

Suddenly a shout rang out. Beyond the wires, figures in long yellow coats emerged, barely distinguishable from the background of the loamy wasteland. Englishmen who could no longer stay in their trenches. It really was a relief, because we were at the end of our tether. We walked towards them.

Strange feelings were awakened in us, so strong that the area melted away from our eyes like smoke, like a dream. For so long we had been hiding in the ground that it seemed hardly conceivable to us that we could still move about in the open field during the day and talk to each other in human language instead of the language of the machine gun. And now a higher, a common need proved that it was a very simple and natural event to meet in the open field and shake hands. We stood among the corpses that covered the intervening field and marveled at the ever new crowds that emerged from all corners of the trench systems; we had no idea how many people had been hidden in this barren and dead terrain.

Soon a lively conversation had developed in large groups, people were exchanging uniform buttons, brandy and whisky, it was Fritz here and Tommy there. The large churchyard had been transformed into a fairground, and in this quite unforeseen relaxation after months of fierce fighting, a sense of the happiness and purity hidden in the word peace emerged in us. 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 make up like children who had been quarrelling for a long time. In those moments the sun emerged from behind the veils of rain, and everyone might well feel something of the exhilarating 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 did not last long, however, as it was abruptly destroyed by the fierce use of a machine gun, which was fired

from a nearby hill. The sheaf of bullets clapped into the fat ground or dusted into the mirrors of water-filled funnels. We threw ourselves down, some of us sinking into the muddy holes. As we slowly crawled back, barely able to get our hands out of the tough dirt, the jagged saw of the impacts cut through our ranks again and again until we reached cover to hide until evening.

Yes, when you are lying on a plate-flat field and feel completely defenseless and abandoned, then you cannot understand that someone else, who is sitting dry and safe, can take the comfortable target under fire so mercilessly and without compassion.

But when you're sitting behind the machine gun yourself, the bustle in front is nothing more than a mosquito dance. To continuous fire! Hey, how it sprays! There can't be enough lead flying out of the muzzle. And afterwards they sit together and say: "Boy, that was nice! At least it was still war. There was one lying next to the other, like spit!" And when you see how their eyes shine when they conjure up these bloody phantoms again, you feel: this is war, naked war. That's what they call militarism today, and it's deeper than the sound of regimental marches or the frenzy in which the scraps of silk of shot-up flags flutter. It's just the blood's need for festive joy and celebration.

On this point, I agree with the pacifist by conviction: We are human beings first, and that is what unites us. But precisely because we are human beings, the moment will always come when we have to fight each other. The occasions and means of fighting will change, but the fight itself is a given way of life, it will always remain the same.

## 7. *Courage*

Manly courage is the most delicious thing. The blood rushes through your veins in divine sparks as you clatter across the fields in battle, clearly aware of your own boldness. All the values of the world blow away like autumn leaves under the stormy step. On such peaks of personality one feels reverence for oneself. What could be holier than a fighting man? A god? Because we must shatter against his omnipotence like a polished ball? Oh, the noblest sentiment was always dedicated to the weak, the individual who swung the sword in a cold fist for the final blow. Does not our laughter also resound with emotion when animals defend themselves against us, so tiny that we could crush them with one finger?

Courage is the wind that drives to distant shores, the key to all treasures, the hammer that forges great empires, the shield without which no culture can exist. Courage is the commitment of one's own person to the most ironclad consequence, the clash of ideas against matter, regardless of what may come of it. Courage means allowing yourself to be crucified as an individual for your cause, courage means confessing the idea for which you stood and fell in the last twitch of your nerves with extinguished breath. To hell with a time that wants to take away our courage and our men!

Everyone feels it, no matter how dull. There is something irresistible about courage that leaps from heart to heart at the moment of action. No one can so easily escape the feeling of heroism unless he possesses a completely depraved and base character. Certainly the battle is sanctified by its cause; still more is a cause sanctified by battle. How else could one respect an enemy? But only the brave can fully understand this.

The battle is still something sacred, a judgment of God on two ideas. It is up to us to defend our cause sharper and sharper, and so struggle is our ultimate reason and only what has been fought for is true possession. No fruit will ripen for us that is not held in iron storms, and even the best and most beautiful things must first be fought for.

He who thus digs to the roots of the battle and reveres true fighting spirit, reveres 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 the day, but why shouldn't we warriors try to meet on our line, on that of manly courage? We can never fail more than the statesmen, artists, scholars and pious men on theirs. Did we not often enough squeeze the hands that had just hurled the hand grenade at us, when those behind were still more deeply entangled in the undergrowth of their hatred? Did we not also plant crosses on the graves of our enemies? We were still the most decent, reaching into the blood anew every day. Fighting is a way of life from the outset, but it can be ennobled by chivalry. And with its most powerful revelation, war, it is like with religions. Mankind prays to many gods, in each god the truth expresses itself in a special form. The true ring has not been lost, that is democratic chatter, as long as there are idiosyncrasies, there will have to be different rings. And everyone who consciously ran into the buzzing death was driven by something different, but each had its justification. Just as we respect everyone's faith, even though we may have to fight it, we should also respect their courage.

The warrior fights hardest for his cause; we have proven this, we front-line soldiers of the globe, each in our own place. We were the day laborers of a better time,

we have shattered the solidified vessel of a world so that the spirit may become liquid again. We have chiselled the new face of the earth, even if few still recognize it.

For many, it will still be invisible under the clouds of the event: the immense sum of achievement harbors a commonality that unites us all. Not one of us has fallen in vain.

Because the fighter who is absorbed in his goals cannot overlook this, and this realization has no value for the fight, because it weakens its power: All goals must coincide somewhere. The fight is not only a destruction, but also the masculine 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 phenomena of the future, that is their common work. 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, is strengthening itself ever more sharply in its ideas, that morality which does not ask what must be done, but only what the goal is. This is the sublime language of power, which sounds more beautiful and intoxicating to us than anything before, a language that has its own values 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, i.e. the bravest, will be able to communicate in it.

But we lived in a time when the courageous were the best, and if all that emerges from this time is 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 you had to have courage, and to have courage, that is, to be able to cope with any fate, is the most beautiful and proudest feeling.

Again and again, in the flood of attacking whirlwinds of huge battles, one marveled at the increase in strength of which man is capable. In the minutes before the storm, when a strangely altered consciousness was already melting away in a frenzy, the gaze once again swept over the row of figures crouched in gray trenches. There was the boy who fiddled again and again with his pack, the man who stared dully at the clay walls, the lansquenet smoking his last cigarette. Death reared up greedily before them all. They stood before the last and had to find a conclusion in the short time available. Once again, all of their very own things crowded into them, once again the colorful world rolled through their brains in a whizzing film. But there was something sublime about the fact that when the whistle blew to attack, hardly anyone stayed behind. It was the overcomers who swung over the edge of the trench, hence the even calm with which they strode through the fire.

Then came, granted only to the most racy, the exhilaration of one's own boldness. There is nothing more energetic than charging across fields over which the cloak of death flutters, the enemy as the target. This is life in the cataract. There are no compromises; it's all about the big picture. The ultimate is commitment, if black falls, all is lost. And yet it is no longer a game, a game can be repeated, here everything is irrevocably over if you miss. That is what is so powerful.

So the warriors staggered along in the frenzy of battle, arrows darting from their bows in the mist, dancers in uncertainty. But far more than the intoxication of the second hung over these clinking veils, so often torn in the fire. Courage is comparable to dance. The person of the dancer is a form, a secondary matter, only what rises and falls under the veil of his movement is important. Thus courage is also an expression of the deepest awareness that man embraces eternal, indestructible values. How else could even a single man

consciously walk towards death?

## 8. *Landsknechts*

We have become old and comfortable like old people. It has become a crime to be or have more than others. Weaned from strong delusions, power and men have become an abomination to us; mass and equality are our new gods. If the masses cannot become like the few, then the few should become like the masses. Politics, drama, artists, cafés, patent leather shoes, posters, newspapers, morals, the Europe of tomorrow, the world of the day after tomorrow: the thundering masses. As a thousand-headed beast, it lies by the wayside, crushing what cannot be swallowed, envious, parvenu, mean. Once again the individual was defeated, didn't his born representatives betray him the most? We squat too close together, our great cities are grinding millstones, torrents that grind us down like pebbles. Life is too hard; don't we have our flickering lives? The heroes are too hard; don't we have our flickering screen heroes? How beautifully silently everything glides. You sit in the cushion, and all the countries, all the adventures swim through your brain, light and shapely like an opium dream.

And people are good. How else could you sit so close together? Everyone talks about themselves. No one had attacked. Everyone was the attacked party. They peppered the war with phrases to make it palatable. For the true warrior, the man of limited but straightforward action, this was repugnant to the core. Brutality certainly never seemed meaner than under this ragged garb, this thin veneer of so-called culture.

Certainly, there have been times that were more cruel. When Asian despots, when a Tamerlane drove the clangor of his hordes over vast lands, fire lay before them,

desert at their back. The inhabitants of huge cities were buried alive, or bloody skulls were heaped into pyramids. They plundered, desecrated, scorched and boiled with deep passion.

Nevertheless, these big stranglers are more likeable. They acted according to their nature. Killing was moral to them, as charity is to Christians. They were wild conquerors, but just as united and well-rounded in their appearance as the Hellenes were in theirs. You can feel pleasure in them like in colorful predators that break through tropical thickets with bold lights in their eyes. They were perfect in themselves.

The completion. That is the crucial point. Sharp penetration right to the edges of ability, shaping the given into one's own form. Only one, the Landsknecht, appeared perfect in this sense - from the point of view of the front. In him the waves of time crashed together without discord, war was his very own element. He carried war in his blood, just as Roman legionaries or medieval Landsknechts carried it in their blood. That is why he stood alone as a solid figure against the background of gray and red, formally and securely outlined.

He stood out sharply, as if from a completely different race, from the bourgeoisie in arms, the type that ultimately predominated in the people's armies, this military expression of democracy. They were shopkeepers or glove makers, more or less soldierly, who practiced war as a civic duty, good people who were also heroes if necessary. But one thing was a condition of life for them: order. This was shown in all its severity during the collapse, this acid test of the most daring masculinity. Others struck out on both sides, the bourgeois fluttered between them like a bird pushed from its nest, closing its eyes because it saw its world sinking.

There is only one mass that does not appear ridiculous: the army. The bourgeois also made the army ridiculous. There are only two soldiers: the mercenary and the volunteer. The Landsknecht was both at the same time. As a son of war, he was not afflicted by the bitterness that increasingly corroded the body of the armies and whose expression could be read from the wooden walls of every field latrine. He was born for war and had found in it the state in which alone he was able to live out his life.

Nevertheless, the Landsknecht did not embody the heroic ideal of his time. He "did not worry". Rather, he was the conscious fighter who endeavored to penetrate his task, a perfect type whose outer and inner world should be in harmony. This became rarer and rarer with the general weakening of martial morality. It is also questionable whether the will to live of a people is expressed more clearly by a class of fighters who strive to distinguish between right and wrong, or by a healthy, vigorous race that loves fighting for the sake of fighting, or, to put it in Hegel's terms, whether the world spirit is most powerfully represented by a conscious or an unconscious instrument. In any case, only the Landsknecht always remained the same, in his first battle as in the last.

"Alarm! The regiment is ready for loading tonight at 2 o'clock. To Flanders!" The tired faces grew even paler, the conversation fell silent, the whistles went out. Somewhere, surrounded by dreams, a small village shimmered, an unreachable island of the blessed. Again! And just escaped the roaring maw. Call in sick, desert! No. No escape, the rags are set, the new hustle and bustle begins. Mother, a woman's smile, warmth! And a white table at lunchtime. Life, even on the smallest clod: life! Or at least sleep, doze like an animal and sometimes wake up satisfied.

Oh, it has to be! Does it really have to be? Only one sat in the circle with flashing eyes and a sharp face. That was the Landsknecht, the born fighter.

Yes, somewhere they were still really there, the old Landsknechts. When dusk flowed into the trenches from dead fields, a meagre light gleamed from a half-ruined dugout in a godforsaken spot on the front line. If one had slept through the day in the bosom of the earth and, with awakened instincts, wound one's way through the overgrown trenches to the fighting position like a nocturnal animal, one would probably enter them to refresh oneself with their carefree noise. "In old freshness" was one of the catchphrases they liked to hear, and it seemed as if the carefree life had fled from all the death and silent despair into their circle. At last we found ourselves with those who felt at home in this gruesome landscape.

Their surroundings were the most masculine. Rough plank walls, supported by beams and rude pillars, hung with rifles, benches and a clumsy table, a bottle with a candle stuck in it. This is how rough trappers might live in their log cabins or the captains of pirate ships in their cabins. That's how great primal power might have wasted itself in the taverns of the vagrant Villon, in the Wild Pig's Head at Eastcheap. There they squatted in the narrow, cramped space, weather-beaten and tattered, with faces like sharpened blades, full of bounce, race and energy. Their language was short, dominated by buzzwords, chopped and torn like the bursts of fire from their machine guns, the words coined and full of earth power. Wherever men find themselves in the primordial, such languages emerge. Dear God, how superior these men were to those people who wrote indignantly about the war in Geneva and Zurich and later claimed to have been close to the real pulse of the times!

It was strange: wherever they were together, the booze was never missing. It was the kind of intoxication that suited them, as intense as an explosion, as short and brutal as a blow with an axe. Only the moment counted, death stood against the wall as an unnoticed lackey. When the intoxication melted the angular reality into bright colors, an irrepressible feeling of strength awoke in them, some bold legacy blazed in their blood, many a crusader, robber baron, Norman or Bundschuht wearer was resurrected. As the tangle of reckless voices grew ever more frenzied and shards of broken glass pelted the walls, life was no more than a bottle of wine, good for getting drunk on and firing against the nearest wall. Primal forces, blind as storms and waves, threatened to burst the veins and burst into a frenzy to drown in unconsciousness.

Their restlessness often drove them across the wire on dark nights. For them, who had planted the colorful banner of intoxication on the battlements of their lives, there was also a strangely wild intoxication in risking this life. When the wind sang in the wires and whistled through sparse tufts of grass, when strange shadows glided in the mist, the horror of no-man's-land came at them from all sides, so strongly that even the chests of these boldest of them rose and fell in whistling bursts. The feeling of loneliness grew immeasurably in them, when before and behind them the border walls of the peoples loomed like black, threatening bands of night. The lust of the hunter and the fear of the game mingled in their adventurer's blood and stretched their senses to animalistic sharpness. It was not good to skulk in front of the trenches when they were scouring the night. Sometimes, when all the posts were already half asleep, a series of crashing blasts sounded in the wasteland before them, a reddish glow flashed, and a shrill, long and light cry slipped out across the room. Then everyone knew - as one knows something in a dream, though one never knows it

that this scream, which filled the veins with ice, could only be the last. Everything jumped up, excited and awakened, as everything awakens in lonely jungle villages when the huts tremble at the howl of a greedy predator. Then the guns raced, bullets rose and fell, glowing restlessly. It was a brief, gruesome funeral celebration, while the barren landscape hung empty and frozen as an eerie backdrop in the white light.

Once the horror had faded, the Landsknechts broke free from the black shadow of a funnel and crept back into the trench. They hurriedly answered the crew's questions and separated in front of a shoulder guard. When the moon broke out from behind a cloud at that moment, they stared at each other, shuddering: Their faces were so bloodless and gaunt that they glistened like bones in the pale light. For a long time they slept on their cots, their hands trembling high. So the gambler trembles when he walks through empty streets at dawn, while the black and red of the card hands still dance before his eyes.

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

Sometimes it even seemed as if they were not yet satisfied with the chasing events, as if they still had to put their trump card on the summit of the terrible. Thus one was sometimes surprised by a gruesome humor that had settled in verse and image on the walls of devastated villages.

Once, on a bright September night, we moved towards the distant glow of a battle. Dull and silent, the crowds flooded along the dusty country road that led towards

a glowing horizon. All senses were engulfed, stunned by the gigantic force of the ever-approaching fire. In the middle of the stream, however, a man rode calmly, a pair of mighty bull horns tied to his steel helmet, like a Germanic god marching to battle.

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

Some may cringe at such examples of divine impudence; I would not want to miss them. Just in hours when the terrible force of things threatened to soften the soul, there were men who carelessly danced over them as over nothing. And that single idea which befits men, that matter is nothing and spirit is everything, that idea on which alone the greatness of man rests, was exaggerated by them into paradox. Then one felt that this accumulation of explosions, these roaring thunderstorms of steel, no matter how greedily they reared up, were only machinery, only theatrical scenery, which only acquired meaning through the play that man played before them.

It is of very deep significance that it is precisely the strongest life that sacrifices itself most willingly. It is better to perish like a bursting meteor than to go out trembling. The blood of the Landsknechts always foamed under the wings of life, not only when the iron frenzy of the battle made them

from wave to wave. They had to express and form life, wild and powerful, as it poured out of the depths without interruption. If masculine virtue alone was their intoxication and flame, then battle, wine and love fanned them to white heat, to a mad desire to die. Every hour demanded content, the days ran hot and colorful through their hands like beads of a glowing rosary, which they had to pray down in order to be fulfilled. From one source they drew all their being, whether it was reflected in a full glass, in the frenzied eyes of an opponent or in the gentle smile of a girl. Overcoming awoke in intoxication, intoxication awoke on the peaks of battle, both 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 breast. To each, life is something different, to one the rooster's call in the clear morning, to another the field that sleeps at noon, to a third the glimmer of light in the evening mist

For the Landsknecht, it was the storm cloud over the nightly expanse, the tension that lies over the abyss.

## 9. Contrast

I wake up. Where am I? Oh yes! In fact, I'm lying in a bed, an excellent bed at that. They understand that, the French. They're generally bon vivants. Quite pleasant people, actually. I don't hate them.

But I'd rather not tell anyone that. They even resent old Fritz for such passions. From their point of view, they're not even wrong. If you're going to wage war, you should do it all the way. Nevertheless, even among us front-line soldiers there are men who break into a French trench, steel and explosives in their fists, and who read Rabelais, Moliere and Baudelaire in the conquered dugout.

Another one. Where would we be without this bold and ruthless neighborhood that sweeps the rust off our blades every fifty years? Europe as a flat land, green and grazed, with as many good-natured animals on it as can be eaten: as long as Germanic and Gallic blood circulates through hearts and brains, this cup will pass us by. And even going into battle, this realization of the necessity and value of the opponent in the background, that is a special kind of knightly pleasure. But the high culture of battle is long gone, the masses are also allowed to take part in the game of life and death, and they have not left their instincts at home. How did the English lieutenant we captured the other day come to hold out his watch and cigarette case to me? He had done like a gentleman and acted like a pie-maker.

Oh, it's getting harder and harder, the war with polyp arms grabs all clear feeling more and more greedily to fatten itself up in its dark cave. It's nothing to kill people, they have to die sometime, but they must not be killed

No, they must not be denied. For us it is not the most terrible thing that they want to kill us, but that they incessantly shower us with their hatred, that they never call us anything other than Boches, Huns, barbarians. That is bitter. It's true, every nation has its own bad type, and it's precisely that type that our neighbors tend to regard as the norm. We are no better ourselves, every Englishman is a Shylock to us, every Frenchman a Marquis de Sade. Well, we'll probably laugh about it in a hundred years' time, if we're not at war again. Every contemplation requires distance. Distance in space, time and spirit.

In any case, the bed is really excellent. Just like before, when you came home on vacation and slept the day away, so young and carefree. Then you'd jump up, drink coffee in the garden and run off into the woods with your brother, free as a migratory bird and your head full of big plans. Once there was a maneuver. How the ore of the trumpet rang across the wide fields, a call to which one listened breathlessly, while strange shivers ran through the boy's body. That was the manhood calling back there, the banner, the stamping horse and the blade thrusting out of the scabbard. That was the knightly gait before dew and day and the red blood shooting from burning wounds. That was the battle!

Oh yes, if we had known all this beforehand. A fine knighthood, this crawling around between dirt and decay. I dragged the brother through the fire a few days ago, shot to pieces, and sent the sword home long ago. It's more expedient to hurl a packet of dynamite at your feet as a greeting than to cross swords elegantly.

It must be nice weather outside... The autumn sun scatters late gold in bright coins through the curtains. The mirror-smooth parquet flooring, the pink wallpaper, the pendulum, the marble fireplace, everything shines so delicately that you can't help but

toss and turn in the pillows. How sometimes everything becomes a joy! Now a broad, trembling spot of sunlight falls straight on the picture in the narrow gold frame hanging opposite me. A Watteau! The colors shimmer delicately and lightly like the melting of a butterfly's wings, like a fragrant, gossamer minuet. 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 billowing in the wet wind. Silent and shivering, chewing the pipe between our teeth, listening to the steady howling and bursting of the iron blocks. Break! Break!!! Brrrruch!!! "They're getting closer and closer. Shouldn't we go to the right?" "Oh well, either way it's broken. Have you got any more tobacco? It's getting better and better. Watch out, they're going to attack today."

Yes, for hours yesterday I stared stony-faced and nervous at the crumbling clay wall opposite. I can still see it clearly in my mind's eye, this brown wall, interspersed with black flints and chalk chunks, already melting into mush at the bottom, with shell casings and rusty hand grenade heads sticking out of it. There was also a dead man lying in it, but only one leg was visible. He must have been lying like that for a long time. The foot could no longer hold the heavy boot and had fallen off at the ankle. You could clearly see the bone that had peeled out of the brown, burnt flesh. Then came the coarse knitted underpants and the gray trousers, from which the rain had already washed away the clay.

Actually, you should have been lying like this for a long time. With a black Negro skull, his hair pulled out in tufts by the rain, and small, dried-up fish eyes in deep sockets. Somewhere in the field being mauled by crows, in a buried dugout by stinking rats or in no man's land by restless swarms of bullets.

It has always been close enough. Yesterday still. Every day that I still breathe is a gift, a great, divine, undeserved gift that must be savored in long, intoxicating draughts like delicious wine.

I jump up and stick my head in the water. The towel in which I dry myself exudes a very delicate fragrance, somehow reminiscent of the hands of beautiful, well-groomed women. Slipping the shirt on is a solemn act, a crowning of my new incarnation. The way the white, crackling linen caresses my body, so calming and stimulating at the same time. How rich life is in fine things, in pleasures that you can only now appreciate. We owe it to the war, this need to lower every little fiber of our being into life in order to grasp it in all its splendor. To do this, you have to know decay, because 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 I have something in common with the country I'm wounding.

It's wonderful in the swimming pool. The sun casts trembling ripples on the green tiles through the glass roof. I glide through the water with fervor. A few naked figures laugh at me from the diving board. My mates are already there too; I didn't recognize them at first. If you've always seen them stooped over and encrusted in solidified muck as they slink through the trenches, you're amazed at their taut, lean bodies, their muscles playing like liquid marble under the damp sheen. What magnificent creatures they are! Almost all of them have red scars that have glowed on their flesh from the steel that jumped on them in battle. When they shoot into the water from above like swinging arrows, you instinctively feel that they have courage.

I stroll from the swimming pool to the museum, which is very close by. The fresh autumn air makes my damp face cold and smooth, my eyes shiny. In the picture rooms, one Dutchman hangs next to another. That's right, Flanders is very close. These fish markets, village taverns and peasant dances exude coziness, pleasure and sedate enjoyment. Here, the flowing life has guided the brush. Today I must have warmth; I could feel nothing for Goya. There is also a collection of Japanese miniatures under glass, delicate masterpieces of craftsmanship, carvings in ebony, jade and ivory, figures in blackish copper, inlaid with gold and silver. I gaze for a long time at the curled arm of an octopus made of yellowish ivory and studded with a hundred darker suction cups, on which sits a tiny metallic green fly. A fleeting sideways glance during a walk along the seashore must have prompted this idea. There are also melons the size of walnuts with every single seed inside, small turtles with ornamented back shells and a little monkey beating a drum. Everything is so perfect that, once you have seen it, you could not imagine it any better, and that it awakens the purest joy with which the observer becomes completely immersed in its appearance.

In the afternoon I go back into the city, surrounded by awakening hustle and bustle. I walk through the hustle and bustle with the sharpened senses of a city dweller, while my brain easily and precisely crushes the overabundance of changing images. Shop windows, bookshops, pounding streetcars and cars, German, French and Flemish phrases, women, still cradled by the influences of the city of Paris despite the walls that divide them; it all comes together and unites to form a radiant, thousand-armed picture of life. And this flood of the most diverse relationships to being throws its waves at me

all the more strongly as twenty-four hours ago I was still quite the primitive man, dwelling in caves and fighting for bare life. Now I feel that existence is intoxication and life, wild, wild, hot life, a fervent prayer. I must express myself, express myself at all costs, so that I recognize with a shudder: I am alive, I am still alive. I plunge my gaze into the eyes of girls who are about to cross the threshold, fleetingly and insistently, and am pleased when they have to smile. I enter a store and buy cigarettes, the best ones, *bien entendu*. I stop in front of every shop window, looking at lingerie, delicate jewelry and books. I eat in a small tavern and nothing is missing, not even the mocha and the carafe of liqueur at the end.

Then I walk across streets and squares again, which are now bathed in lights. Gradually, I come to a suburb whose blocks of houses tower bare and gloomy into the evening. Only in the wide spaces in between do lanterns glow. I stop at the railing of a bridge and stare into the black mirror of a canal. I have become sad, everything is lonely and unfamiliar. The wind snatches handfuls of leaves from the autumnal trees, drives them rustling past and throws them into the water. A barge glides inaudibly 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, sometimes they emerge mockingly in cold rigidity. That's how you shiver when you find yourself in a strange hotel room in an unfamiliar city or when reading a melancholically insane Russian poet. Leaning against this iron railing that stretches over water that I don't know where it comes from or where it flows to, my soul is assailed by that melancholy that sometimes rises up in us like a leaden mist and makes things empty and colorless by robbing them of their essence. Space slips into cold infinity and

I feel like a tiny atom, restlessly whirled around by treacherous forces. I am so tired, so weary, that I wish I were dead. A lansquenet, a knight-errant, who has shattered many a lance, and whose illusions melt away in derisive laughter. I feel with undoubted clarity that some strange meaning, some terrible significance lurks behind everything that happens. I have sometimes known this at the bottom of mad raptures or in choking dreams, I have only forgotten it again in the surging life. One tends to laugh at such things when one is walking fresh and healthy in the light; when they come to us, all knowledge shatters in an instant like glass and like the dream of a night. Everyone has experienced something similar, but he forgets it because he has to forget it.

A light step sounds, half blown by the wind. A figure strides past and glances at me. I have to address her as I would a person I would meet on a desert island. She hardly seems surprised, and after all, who could it be who is passing by here in this suburb at this hour? Probably a streetwalker, but a Landsknecht is not choosy, and I feel an irresistible need for company, even if it were the very worst.

Now I also find out the name of the suburb. It's called Mouvaux. She doesn't know where the canal goes, perhaps to the Defile. That reassures me a little. She talks easily and unpretentiously; I listen eagerly. About the old days, before the war, when people were happier than they are now. When people still had wine and white bread, and when happy parties were celebrated in the fields outside the gates with music and dancing. Her husband is a worker who has long been fighting on the other side, on the other side of the front. Where might he be? Perhaps he is already lying

long ago in one of the large cemeteries that line the front lines. Perhaps he is walking to the side of another in Paris right now? Perhaps he is lurking between the dark ramparts of a trench in the middle of a night flashing with bullets. Perhaps we will soon be facing each other, very close, without suspecting it. Only our bullets will sing across our skulls.

"But what do you want me to do? The months have turned into years, you'll never get any news from over there, and this damn war will never end. You can't always sit alone in your apartment. The war is a great misfortune for me, for you and for the whole world."

Her apartment is sparse, a kitchen, a single room, spruce furniture. On the walls, oil prints and a bridal portrait. She in a veil and he in a tailcoat, both locked up and awkwardly with their arms held close to their bodies by a suburban photographer. We talk quietly and incessantly, we both find it good to sit in front of the fireplace, in which a bundle of brushwood flares up, and to be in company. Man is very much alone in this vast landscape over which the breath of war blows. In a month's time this city may be a heap of rubble, and tomorrow this heart and this brain, which want to be so closely linked to life, may no longer be able to feel the beat of the blood. When the sun flashes in the morning, we are brave and feel the glow of life in battle, but in the evening we wish to sit quietly and peacefully together in front of warm fires.

As we part at the front door, she says as the damp wind blows through the hallway: "Je ne t'oublierai pas." I won't forget you. That sounds real. I walk back across the bridge to the city, hands in my coat pockets, head bowed. The spurs clink with every step.

A friend comes towards me on Rue de Lille.

"Gosh, where were you? We'll be loading up tomorrow morning."

"Loading? No!? We're just getting out!"

"Old thing. Come with me, I know a little Estaminet where you can swing your tankard beautifully. There's old port wine, oak armchairs and Flemish waitresses."

He hooks me up and we go to Estaminet.

## 10. *Fire*

Although it is still dark, our figures stand out clearly against the chalk walls of the trench, gliding through the night as a white snake. We walk in silence, cautiously one behind the other, man after man, each entangled in the web of his thoughts. In an hour's time we will be, a heap hurled in front of the army, deep in the enemy position that has stretched out before our eyes for so long, wide and mysterious like a strange, unholy coast.

Around us is a great, gray sobriety. Earth walls, grates, road signs, trench cables stare coldly, lifelessly and hostilely out of the trickling twilight, objects to which we have lost all relationship. We still perceive things, but they no longer tell us anything, because the waves of our thoughts dance in our brains more and more intermittently and fleetingly.

Strange, such moments always bring back the same mood. Our maiden battle is long behind us, we've stood in the fire a hundred and a hundred times, we're the chosen shock troops of a famous assault regiment and yet this morning we're all so quiet and thoughtful.

And yet we are actually so brilliantly prepared. We spent three whole weeks training at the back of the earthworks, which were modeled after the airmen's pictures, including every morning at dusk, with live hand grenades, explosive charges and incendiary tubes. We thought about everything, anticipated everything, discussed everything with each other, learned French calls and practiced with their means of close combat; in short, this company is as familiar to us as an incessantly drilled rifle grip, which will fire with natural precision at the appropriate command.

We have known each other for a long time as bold daredevils,

we've met on many a hot day in the places of smoky battlefields, where the spirit of the hour gathers the same ones again and again. We know that we embody a selection of powerful masculinity, and we are proud of this awareness. Yesterday we were still sitting together over our last drink, according to the old custom, and felt that the will to fight, that peculiar desire to jump to the front again and again, where volunteers are needed, would throw us into danger this time too, with our old vigor. Yes, if only it had come to that; we are of a race that grows with the moment.

Nevertheless, we cannot banish this unease, this indomitable chill from within, these foreboding thoughts that storm through our horizon like indeterminate, tattered wisps of cloud; not even if we take a very long sip of cognac. It is stronger than we are. It is a fog that lies within us and at such times of the day, it drives its enigmatic 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 lies dormant deep at the bottom, overdriven by restless daily work, rises up and melts into a dull sadness before it can take shape.

What good is it to have steeled oneself for three weeks for this hour, until one believed oneself hard and without nakedness? What good does it do to say to yourself: "Death? Ha, what is that more? A transition that cannot be avoided." None of this helps, because suddenly one has turned from a thinking being into a feeling being, 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 at the moment of the

experience, all denial is in vain, then that unknown has a higher and more convincing reality than all the usual appearances in the midday light.

We have reached the front of the line and are making the final preparations. We are diligent and precise, for we feel an urge to get busy, to fill the time to escape ourselves. The time that has already tortured us so endlessly in the trenches, a concept that encompasses every conceivable agony, a chain that only death can break. Perhaps in minutes. I know that one consciously feels how the escaping life rushes into the sea of eternity; I have sometimes stood on the edge. It is a slow, deep sinking, with a ringing in the ear, peaceful and familiar like the sound of the native Easter bells. You shouldn't brood so much and keep jumping at puzzles that you will never solve. Everything comes in its own time. Cheer up, let your thoughts flutter in the wind. We can die decently, we can walk towards the impending darkness with fighting courage and daring vitality. Not to be shaken, to smile until the end, even if the smile is only a mask to oneself: that is also something. Man cannot do more than die overcoming. Even the immortal gods must envy him for that.

We are well-equipped for our walk, armed with weapons, explosives, flares and signaling devices, a real, belligerent strike force, equal to the highest demands of modern combat. Not only grown through joyful bravado and brute strength. When you see these people standing there in the twilight, slim, lean and mostly almost children, you don't want to give them much credit. But their faces, which lie in the shadow of their steel helmets, are sharp, bold and clever. I know they don't hesitate for a moment in the face of danger; they leap at it, quick, sinewy and agile. They combine fiery courage with cool intelligence, they are the

men who, in the whirlwind of destruction, clear a difficult jam with a sure hand, hurl the smoking hand grenade back at the enemy, read his intentions from his eyes in a life-and-death struggle. These are the steel figures whose eagle gaze scans the clouds straight ahead over whirring propellers, who, squeezed into the tangle of engines of the tanks, dare to make the hellish journey through roaring funnel fields, who for days, certain death ahead, crouch half-dead behind glowing machine guns in surrounded nests heaped with corpses. They are the best of the modern battlefield, flooded with ruthless militancy, whose strong will is discharged in a concentrated, purposeful burst of energy.

When I watch them silently cutting alleys in the wire entanglement, digging storm steps, comparing light clocks, determining the north direction according to the stars, I am overcome with the realization: this is the new man, the storm pioneer, the selection of Central Europe. A completely new race, clever, strong and full of will. What is revealed here as an apparition in battle will tomorrow be the axis around which life whirls faster and faster. It will not always be possible to pave the way through funnels, fire and steel as it is here, but the tempestuous pace with which events are carried out here, the tempo accustomed to iron, will remain the same. The glowing sunset of a sinking age is at the same time a dawn in which new, tougher battles are being prepared. Far behind, the huge cities, the armies of machines, the empires whose inner bonds are being torn apart by the storm, await the new man, the bolder one, the one who is used to fighting, the one who is ruthless against himself and others. This war is not the end, but the beginning of violence. It is the hammer forge in which the world is smashed into new borders and new communities. New forms want to be filled with blood, and power needs to

be gripped with a hard fist. War is a great school, and the new man will be of our mold.

Yes, he's in his element now, my old shock trooper. The deed, the grip of the fist has shattered all the fog. A half-loud joke is already ringing out over the shoulder guard. It's not in good taste to ask: "Well, fat man, are you full to the brim?", but they are laughing and the fat man is laughing the most. Just don't be moved. The party is about to begin and we are its princes.

What a pity it is. If the preparations fail, if only one machine gun remains intact over there, these magnificent men will be crushed like a pack of deer in the onslaught across no man's land. That is the war. The best and most precious, the highest embodiment of life is just good enough to be hurled into its insatiable maw. A machine gun, just a second's slide of the belt - and these 25 men, with whom one could cultivate a vast island, hang in the wire as tattered bundles to slowly decompose. They are students, ensigns with old, proud names, machinists, heirs to fertile farms, cheeky city dwellers, high school students from whose eyes the dream of some ancient remnant has not yet completely faded. Farmers' sons, grown up under lonely thatched roofs in Westphalia or the Lüneburg Heath, surrounded by ancient oaks that their ancestors planted around the ring wall of field stones. They are so loyal that they would die for their leader without a second thought.

A firestorm breaks out at the neighboring regiment on the left. It is a mock maneuver to confuse and fragment the enemy artillery. It's almost time. Now it's time to rally. Of course, 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, until

we win or we stay. The fighting spirit, the commitment of the person, even if it is for the smallest of ideas, outweighs all brooding over good and evil. It even gives the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance his awe-inspiring halo. We want to show what we are made of, so that when we fall, we have truly lived up to our potential.

Now the weather is also bearing down on us. The artillery of our division is firing excellently, the first impact was accurate to the second. The howling of the iron blocks becomes ever denser and more polyphonic, only to drown over there in a constantly swelling flood of vicious, tearing, deafening noises. Mines draw their sparkling arcs of sparks over us and shatter in volcanic explosions. White balls of light flood the flashing clouds of smoke, gases and dust, which bubble over the area as a boiling lake, with bright light. Colorful rockets hang over the trenches, bursting into stars and suddenly extinguishing like the colored signals of a huge marshalling yard. All the machine guns of the second and third lines are in full operation. The roar of their countless shots blurring into one another is the sombre background that fills the tiny gaps in the sound of the heavy artillery.

Now the French artillery also awoke. First a group of light batteries, drumming our trench with rapid series of steel fist blows, pouring lead bullets down on us from flashing shrapnel like watering cans. Then follow the heavy caliber guns, which, with a growing snarl, pounce on us from the very top like monstrous predators, devouring long stretches of trench with fire and black smoke. A hail of clods of earth, scraps of wood and dull splinters rattled incessantly on our helmets, reflecting the restless dance of the lightning. Weighty tripod mines crash into

mortar blasts, which sweep through the smoke and gloom like swirling sausages, leap into the fire of the first in rows. Thousands of tracer bullets, racing one after the other in chains of glowing sparks, are sprayed into the air to scare away an early airman trying to reconnoitre the barrage guns.

But we are packed tightly around the exit steps. For the first few minutes, we hid in the foxholes and tunnel necks. But only for a short time, because in the forge of battles we have been tempered into even-tempered and fire-hardened natures. We are also convinced fatalists and believe that whoever is to be hit will be hit, even if it is a dud at the bottom of a ten-meter tunnel. The interval between approach and explosion is the worst; even the nerves of the oldest warrior still twitch. Too many horrific images, too much blood and whimpering have already been announced by this fluttering whistle. The longer you sit through it, the more terrifying the movie of memories that flickers through your brain.

Then comes the point where the vortex of fire sucks in the individual perceptions, the senses succumb to the onslaught of images, memory, sense of self, and thus also fear and hope, drift away like fleeting smoke. Then the weak man breaks and falls to the ground like an empty cartridge case because he has lost his last impulse, his fear. No plea, no command and no threat will raise him up again

But the strong man stands in the storm with a petrified face, an intoxicated triumphant of matter. He has found his balance in the changed plane of events, because the world may be upside down, but a courageous heart has its own center of gravity.

A green rocket rises and hangs above us with a long, trickling tail. The signal! We rush out and

storm, a dense, dark cloud into the unknown.

## **11. Among each other**

Endlessly I have stood in the ditch. So endlessly that one sense after another has gone out in me and I have become a piece of nature that blurs in the sea of night. Only occasionally does a thought ignite a chain of lights in my brain and for a short time I become a conscious being again.

I lean against the angle of a shoulder guard and stare at the cloud ships sailing slowly past the moon. How often have I stood like this! Just like this - my right hand on my gun holster and my head bent back in displeasure. Many volumes would fill the thoughts that ran through the mills of my brain on a lonely vigil. That it is the hungriest imagination that runs wildest! Are there people whose footsteps now clatter on the asphalt of big cities? Bars with adventurously layered liqueurs? Were there times when you could travel far away on steamships? Very far? Are there still islands in the South Seas that no European has ever set foot on? - - Blissful islands!

How often have I stood in a place like this! A short section of trench lies before me, a tiny part of the immense front. And yet, this black hole at the entrance to the tunnel, this guard post, a block soaked in darkness and mystery, these three or four wires that cut into the dull sky above, are a whole world that surrounds me, as simple and meaningful as the scenery of a mighty drama.

The guard upstairs hasn't moved a limb for two hours. It seems to have become part of the mud wall, against which it stands rigid and silent like an Indian pillar saint. The post has been standing in this spot for three years, summer and winter, day and night, in wind, rain, heat, cold and fire.

Sometimes he is replaced, sometimes he falls, but you hardly notice it. The personalities glide through a fixed task. If you pass by, there's always someone standing there and announcing: "Post number five, nothing new at the post."

That's terrible. Who's standing there? A post, a rifle, the lowest combat unit, a number. Many don't see it any other way. They read about our good warriors standing on post, yawning and switching off the lights. Others report on the good morale of the troops. By that they mean that we can still hold out. Mind you, we are lying in this position to recover. We'll soon be "ready for the big fight" again. After all, we are the best material.

Material, that's the right term. Like coal that is thrown under the red-hot cauldrons of war to keep the work going. "The troops are burnt to cinders in the fire" is an elegant formula of the art of war.

You can't blame them. They know as little about the soul of the front-line soldier as the rich man knows about poverty. Oh, we are not just guns, we are also people, hearts and souls. When night after night, many thousands of us on both sides, we writhe on the rack of time, our lives lie before us, unspeakably gruesome like the torn apron, and our thoughts are like the bluish cold lights of the rockets that snatch all this agony from the darkness.

I have to vent. I say: "Post, our time is up."

"Yes, Mr. Lieutenant."

Herr Leutnant. He even clicked his heels together. How deep that goes. These people are big kids. You have to love them. Sometimes one of them has said to me, very quietly and naturally: "Now I have to die, Herr Leutnant. I

am too well hit." In insane moments of battle, they push you around: "What should we do? Where should we go? I'm wounded." Then you try to smile and feel just as exposed as they do.

There you sit among his hundred men and feel their urge to cling on. Sometimes you hear from a dugout: "Yes, the lieutenant. You should have seen him at Guillemont." Then you feel a little proud and don't want to swap places with anyone. Then you feel inextricably linked to them, and that it's something powerful to lead a hundred men to their deaths.

It's taking a long time to replace them today. It is strange how the night sharpens the senses. You perceive a certain fluidity that radiates from things and concepts and feel it as an expression of a terrible meaning. This was often very clear to me in dreams, in delusions and as a child when I was afraid. Later I laughed about it. I went to war as the son of an era that was thoroughly convinced of the material, a cold, precocious city dweller whose brain had been polished into steel crystals by studying the natural sciences and modern literature. The war changed me a lot and I believe that the whole generation felt the same way. My view of the world no longer has the same certainty, how could that be possible with the uncertainty that has surrounded us for years. Our actions must now be moved by completely different forces, very dull and blood-like forces, but one senses that there is a deep reason in the blood. And we also sense that everything that surrounds us is not so clear and purposeful, but very mysterious, and this realization is already 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 resounds under light footsteps. "Parole!" "Mackensen." The relief. I hand over hand grenades and flare gun. "Barrage red, destruction fire green, advance fire white with strings of beads. A white one is in the barrel. The red ones are grooved at the back. Everything has been quiet so far."

We whisper as if we were arranging a murder. The horror hangs like a cloud over the trench. Up above, the two guards are whispering. One of them seems to be a newcomer. "There's a separate patrol ahead from four to five, you're not allowed to shoot. If there's a flash on the far left, you have to take cover, then you'll get kademm." "Well, it won't be too bad." The newcomers are usually very tall. They have not yet faced death. The old warriors show a fatherly superiority over them.

In the dugout, I can smell a thick haze of people, mold and decay. When we wanted to enlarge it the other day, our spades came across a layer of earth with a horrible stench. There seem to be corpses or a filled-in latrine.

When I light the candle, I see the melting stearin covered in a layer of lice. My lad has a habit of burning his lice on the candle. At the moment he is lying on the cot with my deputy and his boy. They are sleeping restlessly, gasping, moaning, tossing and turning. With reluctance, I glance at the spot where the fluttering candlelight flits across their blurred bodies. What a stall! How closely they squat together in the dirt. It looks quite cozy in illustrated pages, like a full beard, a colony of leaves and a pipe, but when you hear each other - apart from anything else - smacking their lips every lunchtime and snoring every night, you think back wistfully to the days of your own apartment, your own plate and your own washbowl.

I cut myself a thick slice of bread and drive my pocket knife into a greasy tin can to cover it with mushy beef fibers. My hands are dirty and cold, the fire of an all-nighter burns in my skull. The brain works dully and reluctantly, giving birth to a series of shadowy, desolate and agonizing images. Then I throw myself onto the cot next to the others.

Towards morning, my half-slumber is shattered by the clatter of cooking utensils and the sound of spades. The orderlies come in from fetching coffee and are busy with the tiny tin stove. Apparently they've caught fire on the way.

"Boy, that was another tour; my cooking utensils are almost empty. Tommy especially loved the hollow path, every morning there's an iron portion. One of the things peppered a lump of earth into my backside so that I got out of step. It was dense again!"

He's quite right. It was dense again. It's always dense, actually. You get used to it in the end. The two of them are sitting on their hand grenade box as usual, just a little out of breath. What if they hadn't come back now? Would they be lying disemboweled in the hollow, their large tubular bones bent like straws, scorched and torn?

We would have forgotten it by tomorrow. We are pure forgetting machines. However, when you stand in front of such a capriccio of naked destruction, the horror runs through your soul as a slow, cold knife cut. Then you look away and make a strange effort, which I would like to compare to a pull-up or the convulsive swallowing with which one tries to hold back vomiting. It is a rebellion against the bone fist of madness, the pressure of which is already heavy and dark around the brain. As you move on, you think it might not have been so bad.

Only one still mumbles as if in a dream: "The head. Have you seen the head?"

The two continue talking. The other says: "You're going to get killed once. Whoever got killed right at the beginning had it good. I'm just curious how long this mess is going to last."

One of those endless conversations about the war that I've listened to hundreds and hundreds of times to the point of weariness now unfolds. It's always the same, only the bitterness gets sharper with time. People approach this question of life with religious seriousness, only to run their heads against the walls of their horizon again and again. They will never find the solution, because their question is already a misguided one. They take the war as a cause, not as a manifestation, and so they look outside for what can only be found inside. Only the appearance, the rough surface is of importance to them.

However: You have to understand them. They are definitely materialists, as I, who have lived among them for years now, can hear from every word. At first I was astonished at the importance they attached to food, for example, and soon realized that they, the men of muscle, found deprivation extremely difficult. They are really material, material which the idea, without their knowing it, burns for its great ends. That is their real significance, the magnitude of which they are unable to grasp, and that is the cause of their suffering. They must be treated accordingly: Human and compassionate, in so far as they are individuals; harsh, in so far as their existence belongs not to personality but to the idea.

Yes, only the surface is important to them. For them, their question is the only right one. Once they have found the guiding thread to feel their way out of the labyrinth of war or desperately cut its Gordian knot, then

they have reached the goal of their desires. Then they will once again have that which they lament after every hour, the quiet weaving in the narrow confines, happiness in the petty bourgeois sense. Once they are safe, everything else is "far away in Turkey". It will never be made clear to them that peace or revolt has not brought them one step closer to the real problem of war, that they themselves are the precondition of war. They are egoists, and that is a good thing.

Scraps of sentences I've heard countless times come to me from their whispers. If they had to come to the front for a day, it would be over immediately. Like at the movies; the best seats are in the back, the flickering in the front. The poor guy is always the one who gets the worst of it. Equal pay, equal food, the war would be long forgotten. We're not fighting for Germany's honor, only for the fat millionaires. What's in it for us? They should quit soon, otherwise we won't play along any more.

One buzzword follows another, the pure Wilhelm Tells. Their conversation is neither development nor exploration, but a tossing of worn-out coins that have fallen into the bell bag of their brains somewhere in the dugout, on vacation, in the canteen and, like everything that is incessantly repeated, have imprinted themselves as truths. Drunk on slogans, they have plunged into the abyss of this war and are trying to pull themselves out again using slogans. Inwardly, they always remain the same, despite a kind of backstairs or popular oratory morality in which the corner prophets among them tend to express themselves. Who could blame them? What are the gatherings of the nation's leaders in consultations and parliaments other than big slogan bombardments, ideological congresses? What is the press other than a rattling hammer mill that smashes our brains with buzzwords and standardizes, socializes and proletarianizes our thinking?

The trench spirit 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. Desert in between. Defectors are shot. Sometimes they go on the rampage and bash each other's heads in.

Now they have arrived at home. This is their second major topic of conversation. Just as others divide their world into life and poetry, light and dark, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, joy and sorrow, they divide theirs into home and war. When they say "at home" or "with us", they are not thinking of some colorful spot on the map. Home is the corner where they played as children, the Sunday cake that their mother bakes, the room in the back house, the pictures above the sofa, a ray of sunshine through the window, the skittles game every Thursday, death in bed with a newspaper obituary, funeral procession and wobbling top hats behind them. Home is not a buzzword; it is just a modest little word and yet the handful of earth in which their soul is rooted. State and nation are vague concepts to them, but they know what home means. Home is a feeling that is already felt by the plant.

Now I want to stand up, because they are about to broach the sexual question. They tend to develop the imagination of starving sailors. I pour water into a steel helmet, wash up, drink coffee and holster my pistol to go into the trench.

"The coffee tastes like it's been spat at the wall again today. They'll have had the best of it in the kitchen. I'm going out now, hopefully you'll be better with the food. By the way: I'd also like to sleep for two hours in peace. Where did they get all this stuff anyway, from the fat millionaires etc.?"

I leave without waiting for the answer to my rhetorical question. One can work with this fat fishmonger from Bremen's old town and the four-legged Oldenburg

bog farmer despite all that. They are splendid fellows at heart, loyal and solid as oak beams, from which a building can be constructed. Whether you're clearing a primeval forest or storming a French ditch, these people will always do their job.

Aha! I think I'm under the influence of the fresh morning air! It caresses my nerves, even though I've hardly slept. If the trench seemed like a mysterious cave during the night, it is now quite regular and sensible in the light. Hammering, digging figures everywhere. I pull a centimeter ruler out of my pocket. The machine gun of the fifth group is not yet flanked enough, of course. I wonder if we can install it on the left wing of stage 2. "Our trench is fine now, isn't it?" "Well, they shouldn't take it from us so easily." "The coffee wasn't very good this morning?" "Nah, but three cigars each came up with it, hand grenade brand though, pull it once and throw it away!"

You can see how and what! No, they shouldn't take our trenches away from us. We all know what we're here for. I've become quite amused, smoke the hand grenade and visit the neighboring train drivers, with whom I strike up endless conversations, just like the two lads before, perhaps a little more educated. Politics, the cursed stage, the next vacation. The sexual question is also brought up. What else could you do all day without going crazy?

So it's lunchtime.

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 onwards I have to show my ID, as people no longer know me. After many questions, I reach the crane trench where he lives. He has a visitor, we play the Polish lottery and pour ourselves

schnapps from a canteen. The time passes very quickly, and just as we're on the best train, I have to say goodbye again because I remember that I have trench watch at 9 o'clock.

I walk back through the endless battle trench, from the corners of which dusk is already brewing. A group of gray figures crouch around each tunnel entrance, shivering and silent. An early flare rises hissing and sends its light in silver, trembling waves across the desert. Then it flickers out in stifling silence. The night sentries move up.

Another day has passed of the many that we will spend here. Again there have been small struggles and agreements in this strange community, as everywhere where people live together. But in the end, it is a great destiny that carries us all on the same wave. Here we were once together as an organism facing the hostile outside world, as people who, despite their small questions, sufferings and joys, were nevertheless united by a higher task. Here we argue, here we get along badly, here we fight and suffer together and quarrel with our time, which we do not understand, only to realize later perhaps that it all happened in the spirit of a great and logical reason, which also rests over this uncanny landscape.

## 12. *Fear*

The chalk cave is so hazy that the candlelight condenses into dark red, trembling balls. You would hardly think that so many people could live so close together. I'm sitting on a hand grenade crate opposite the combat commander, separated from him only by a map. He has hardly slept for days, the fine muscles of his lean face dancing restlessly. Without the cigarette, he would collapse immediately.

When you are so tired, the eeriness of things comes out strongly. You hear scornful whispering and whispering in the corners, human faces take on a malicious, treacherous expression. You want to cry or punch your fist into some malicious grimace.

"So you're starting at 6:30. Surprisingly. If you have the second trench, you can see the Totenschlucht, where there are supposed to be strong reserves. The important thing is to bring them under effective fire as quickly as possible. If you encounter strong resistance beforehand. "

Why is he saying all this? Pure malice. His words fray my nerves. I want to sleep, at home in my white bed and not worry about anything.

"Everything clear or is there still a question?"

I wake up. Stagger outside. The fresh night air is good. People are lying by their guns.

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

Without a kick. People often jokingly say for this command: "No purpose." Some people are probably as angry with me now as I was with the Major earlier. This silent, dogged rage into which you silently sink deeper and deeper,

into which you crawl like a helpless animal into its cave. Someone always has to be to blame.

How the moon sparkles on the gun barrels. That is stored power. We will take the two trenches, energetically, expertly and with purposeful technique as always. Then the gorge lies before us. Then one hundred and fifty, no, probably only one hundred and twenty rifles will hail into the reserves. Then the locks hammer and nobody can hurl the bullets out of the red-hot barrel as fast as they want to. It's a big deal that might even make it into the army report. And whoever gets away from this dark, mumbling shadow behind me will later say: "Boy, back then, that was still a thing. Standing freehand! That was fun. Maybe something was due. That was still the war!"

It is also unspeakably exciting when people meet in battle. They talk about these moments for the rest of their lives. Recently we found the following in a letter from a fallen American: "War is very interesting. Even more interesting than tiger hunting."

Hunting the tiger. He very aptly expressed something that probably every man feels at times, this son of a young and bold race, whom we recently shoveled in with twenty others at the same time. Fighting is one of the great passions. And I have never seen anyone who was not shaken by the moment of victory. It will seize us again tomorrow when, after a brief struggle to the death, after the most sophisticated means have been unleashed, after the gigantic display of power of which modern man is capable, we will stare down at the fleeing throng in the ravine. Then, once again, that crazy, stretched out scream that has so often rung in our ears will escape from everyone's open mouth. It is an ancient, terrible song from our dawn, of which one would never have thought that it could be heard,

would still be alive in us.

Tomorrow we will experience another one of these moments, and perhaps at this hour the small groups of people with whom we will meet are already winding their way through the fire on the other side. We have never seen each other and yet we have the same importance for each other as fate itself. "How terrible it must be to kill people you've never seen." You often hear this on vacation from people who love emotional reflections far away from the shooting. "Yes, if they had at least done something to you." That says it all. You must hate, you must have a personal reason to kill. They will never understand that you can respect your opponent 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 throwing flames and attacking with gas. You can only talk about that with men. As a thinking person, you don't kill without further ado. The more you feel connected to life through muscle, heart and brain, the more respect you feel for it. But sooner or later you realize that becoming is more than life.

The murmur of the people dies away. The lungs whistle under the satchel straps. We are on the edge of the desert. In front of us, the whips of death are whirring, flashing their cracking signals. The night swims in uncertainty, the moon throws lime on our faces, our eyes shine as if in a fever.

We are accustomed wanderers of the grenade strewn fields and yet always trembling strangers at the gates of death. Rigid and steely are these grenades and yet full of demonic life, treacherous, groping fists of hell. They are like a strange, inescapable intoxication, a buzzing, growing, swelling and burning, a vortex that tears the brain to the bottom of unconscious depths; rushing iron birds,

roaring hurricanes and greedy beasts. Their language is understandable to everyone.

Shrill laughter races overhead to clatter in the distance. Brief clouds of fire spatter. Occasionally, a roaring onslaught shatters in a tearing, roaring fury. Then whistling swarms of splinters sweep the air, jagged and angular.

That's what we call thick air. Nobody can get completely used to it, not even the boldest.

Fear awakens in us with a thousand limbs and soon condenses into a feeling of absolute strength. If one wanted to give an image of it, one could choose no better than that of this landscape: a black, sad plain, incessantly and painfully burned through by fiery dots. No amount of courage will help against it, for the danger is everywhere, it cannot be recognized, the whole landscape seems to be saturated with it. The uncertainty is the horror. When, where, how? It can shoot up at any moment, very close, maligning, buckling, tearing apart. Whoever it hits remains lying down while the others rush on without giving it a fleeting glance. The cries of the lonely dying are terrible, they swell out of the darkness in long pauses and fade away like those of animals that don't know why they have to suffer.

Again and again one has to ask oneself what actually drives people forward in this darkness, in which there is only a feeling of fear that one cannot imagine. No one lets themselves slide to the ground in order to secretly escape; staggering, panting and cursing, everyone moves forward. What drive is it that still produces movement here, even though there is no more spiritual strength? The desire to fight? That will seize us tomorrow when we see the enemy before us as a being of flesh and blood, but what is happening here is so 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 at all.

But perhaps this drive consists of discipline? That can't be the case either, because here everyone is on their own, the man and the leader too, and what holds this small troop together is only an instinctive urge, like that which prevails in a flock of migratory birds. Discipline no longer plays a role here, neither in a positive nor in a negative sense, the situation is far too serious and demands too much strength. If the leader finds the way and the man is able to stay close to him, that is already a lot. There is only time to stand up for or against discipline when you have peace of mind.

Then surely the fatherland, the sense of honor and duty is what moves us? But if someone wanted to shout these words to us now, just when the shells are surrounding us like a forest of fiery palms, he would only get a wild curse in reply. There is no room for enthusiasm here and, yes, it has to be said, the work being done is almost unconscious and therefore has an animal character.

As far as man is an individual here, he is only composed of fear. But the very fact that he nevertheless moves proves that there is a higher will behind him. The fact that man does not feel it, that everything personal resists it, shows that this will must be very powerful. It is the potential energy of the idea that is transformed here into kinetic energy, and which relentlessly makes its demands.

She knows how to find the way through the unknown and she pulls us towards the goal, even though fear fills us. 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, then we are right to do so, for it is the nature of the hero that the idea sweeps him over all the obstacles of matter. We feel fear because we are transient creatures, but if something imperishable in us conquers this fear, we can be proud of it. This shows that we are really attached to life and not just to existence.

And so we go on, we make our way as a lonely, unknown band, which, without knowing it, is invisibly connected to the great power currents of life in the midst of these deadly deserts. We also overcome the hollow way, this hellish bar of the front line, overwhelmed by fire day and night. We run. More hastily, more violently, the impacts melt into each other, devouring themselves in the rising roar. The ground rolls, in sharp heavy waves stuffy air hits our faces, saturated with gas and decay. Chunks of earth hit our helmets with a dull thud, splinters clink against our armor. In between, you can clearly hear a piece of iron hacking into soft human flesh. In front of our feet and at the edges of the hollow path lie the dead, long months of toll, ghostly wax dolls in the pale light, their limbs strangely contorted. A ribcage sinks softly like a bellows under my nail boot, incessant impressions smash into my brain, bluish buzzing sword blows, glowing hammer blows. You perceive so much that you can hardly feel the fear anymore, but the things you perceive glow in the ghostly colors of a terrible dream.

As those who have escaped the gauntlets of death, we wake up in the front line. Sweat stands in our boots. Breath is struggling out of our chests. One grows out of the darkness in front of me, with a

decayed skull under his helmet. With that superhuman matter-of-factness that prevails on these enchanted islands of horror, he leads me to the company commander's hole in the ground. He pours a saucepan full of schnapps from his canteen, which I down like a wild man. Then we crouch together, mumbling. Our voices are as tuneless as tin. An immobile figure crouches in front of us. Is it a guard or a corpse? The horizon glows all around us.

Phosphoric watch digits glow on my wrist. Clock digits, a strange word. It's 5.30. The storm starts in an hour.

## 13. *From the enemy*

You often have this feeling during the nights of battle: dreaming of a legendary experience. You walk through the trench as if in a dream, the causal connection is far from your consciousness; if an event cuts into your brain, you are hardly surprised, as if you had known everything long before.

That 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 the trench, overtired; this is repeated night after night. You end up mistaking excited dreams for reality and reality for a pale dream.

The night is also so strange tonight. The full moon is hidden behind shimmering mists that stand above the landscape as its radiance. Its light, as if dimmed by frosted glass, sucks the reality out of things, you see nothing and yet you think you see a lot. The heavy air swallows up the sounds, you walk silently as if at the bottom of the sea.

These are the kinds of explanations that people use to calm themselves down. You don't need to fear what you can explain. We put our brain at the center and let it be surrounded by everything.

But when you stand abandoned and lonely on such a night, then you realize how superficial this whole question is. Then you feel at the mercy of a child, then the most fantastic thing becomes a certainty as in a gruesome dream. You may say to yourself that tiredness and a haunted night are playing tricks on your nerves, but that is no more reassuring than the father's consolation in Erlkönig: "My son, it is only a mist."

And then this muffled murmur: something is going on. You want to keep it in your head, not think about it, but it

crawls out, it goes about its business, lurking behind every shoulder barrier and creeping back out of every hole in the ground.

Yes, sometimes you can't resist what's in the air. You realize that when you live as a cell in the body of an army. Enthusiasm, horror and a thirst for blood take hold without you being able to resist them.

Everyone sitting here in the dark can feel it. It murmurs. It's all about. There are faces. The landscape has nerves. Occasionally a machine gun bursts into a short hysterical laughter. A restless flickering of light globes erratically distributes light and shadow. It often twitches red, yellow and green: help, we're scared. Then a blast of fire stomps near or far, the fog boils up from fire and poison. Each thing has its own language, the mechanism of battle works clankingly and spans the 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 of them comes and whispers: "Fault team. Line shot." Certainly: the brain thinks telephone, wires torn, connection with leadership most important task of the troops, yes, yes, yes. War school, field service regulations: oh, you know. But suddenly this understanding becomes a ridiculous side effect in a ghostly conversation. The words take on an underlying meaning, penetrate the surface and have an immediate effect on the understanding of eternally closed depths. Sensation surges around a different center of gravity, one gropes in horror.

Everyone has once had a terrible dream, and when he reflects, he will find that the reality of it was nothing compared to the uncanny power that moved him. E. T. A. Hoffmann is the poet of these breakthroughs, from his court councillors and

philistines suddenly glistens the ghostly; the sight of a doorknob conjures up a choking experience. Dostoyevsky knew them too, otherwise he would never have been able to write Ivan Karamazov's feverish conversation with the everyday-dressed stranger. But how can one say this to those who are only at home between the four walls of the intelligible?

I stand next to the machine gun on the left wing. Every now and then I shoot up a flare and load a new one into the gun. The ground is covered with empty cardboard tubes. Every time the area in front of us is plucked out of the darkness, the guard next to me blinds his eyes with his hand so that he can see better. Sometimes I speak so that he doesn't think I'm scared, but the words come out so uncertainly.

Something is going on. A wire clicks and rattles in front of us. 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, clanking in pauses, gently and delicately, metal against metal. The guard digs his fingers into my arm. Quietly, quietly! We use the outflow of breath to form this word. We are not as ears, as stretched eardrums. The wind passes over the grass like a hunch, in the neighboring section mines flutter through the air to burst like iron barrels in a wooded area. And in between, the fine, metallic click. Now there is a rustling sound and a shadow rises up. It happens quietly, very quietly, but it is like thunder in our ears, our ears hardened by the pounding of cities and the noise of raging battles. The second burns white-hot. The machine gun sprays, a hand grenade shatters in steam and noise. We scream, people come rushing through the trench, one flare chases the other. The night turns electric, guns go off, a group from the second line throws hand grenades to drown out their fear,

one of them puts small mines on a stick and shoots into the blue. A sweet smell of gunpowder smolders in the trenches, reminiscent of similar experiences. A shock troop appears, a pack of burly gladiators, used to working with knives and explosives. They leap silently from shoulder guard to shoulder guard, only the hand grenades rattling in the sandbags. These men are trained in the mechanics of trench warfare: Throw - attention - go! They clatter into each other like engines, leaving no room for thought. This time they have come in vain, but their presence is reassuring, you can feel the united force.

"Are they in the ditch?"

"Just a patrol in front of the wire."

A small interlude, a purely infantry affair. Not even the light guns had a say. The fire dulls, puffs up once more and goes out. One of them finds the right word: "Man, that was another cramp." That's right, a shaking cramp that you only think about when it's over. That always seems amazing to those of us used to thinking. And when we are asked later: "Oh please, tell me, what were you actually thinking out there, that must have been terrible?", we only have an embarrassed smile in response. No, we are not the wax doll heroes that people like to make us out to be. Our blood is swept by passions and feelings that we have no idea about at the tea table.

What actually happened? We scared off a patrol. There's a bundle of people hanging in the barbed wire, shredded by bullets and splinters. We pull it in and lay it on the bottom of the trench. We stand in a circle around it and whisper. A flashlight flashes. "What a young lad. What fine boots he's got on, an officer for sure." The guard says: "I thought, come over here first. And when he got up high enough

he was given a treat. And the lieutenant tossed him a hand grenade."

Yes, yes, that's how it was. We had thought everything through carefully. And when we tell the story in ten years' time, it will shimmer in completely different colors, because time is the best romantic. And if we are still alive in fifty years' time, groping our way through the spring by the stick in the morning, being shown as venerable relics at great festivals with medal ribbons on our skirts, when the blood rolls strangely and dully through our veins, then these years, ravaged by battle and fire, will shimmer over to us like a distant and proud island. Then we will wear our memory like a dress of honor, and our grandchildren will envy us for it. Then youthful energy will once again be stored in abundance, and there will be no lack of sparks to ignite this longing into sparkling fireworks. In front of this motoric rhythm of tension and action, all warning voices from Suttner to Kant must fade away like childish murmuring. Blood has its own immutable laws before which all experience sinks.

The relief. I go into the dugout and lie down. Of course I don't get any sleep. The nerves. It flits over the skin, squeezes the stomach, pricks the roots of the hair. Sometimes you doze off and are awakened by a jerking thud, as if you had fallen onto the camp from high above. And always this dream: you walk through the trench, endlessly, illuminated by flares, surrounded by bullets, looking for a place where you could sleep. Finally, finally, you find the dugout, climb down the steps, shake someone lying on the cot and wake yourself up. That sounds very ridiculous, I know, I know.

After all, the small experience was a relief. We have torn something tangible out of the indeterminate, we have put our horror to rest in those people.

Only very rarely does the enemy appear to us as flesh and blood, although only a narrow, rumpled strip of farmland separates us from him. We crouch in the earth for weeks and months, surrounded by swarms of bullets and thunderstorms. Sometimes we almost forget that we are fighting against people. The enemy manifests itself as the unfolding of a gigantic, impersonal force, as fate that smashes its fists into the blind.

When we climb out of the trenches on the days of the storm and the empty, unknown land in which death reigns between leaping columns of smoke lies before our eyes, it seems as if a new dimension opens up to us. Then we suddenly see very close up in earth-colored cloaks and with clay-colored faces like a ghostly apparition that awaits us in the dead land: the enemy. It's a moment you never forget.

How completely different you thought it would be. A forest fire in the first green, a flowery meadow and guns firing into the spring. Death as a shimmering back and forth between two firing lines of twenty-year-olds. Dark blood splattered on green stalks, bayonets in the morning light, trumpets and flags, a joyful, sparkling dance.

But people here have long since forgotten to listen to the sound of guns. At night, people sneak around in gruesome deserts, armed with adventurous weapons, and the days are spent languishing in the maze of shafts. This battle is not a fire, but a smoldering conflagration. Only sometimes one has a dim idea that there are still people living on the other side. That the night awakens life there too, that conversations flash through telephone wires, that food fetchers are expected in the shelters, that spades are digging and guards stare wearily and shiveringly in long rows into the apron. Surely there are parades and speeches in the resting places, just like here, and far behind is a stage that is mocked and envied.

One of them may be lying on his back, reading the letter from his native Norman or Scottish village for the third time by flickering candles, another may be thinking of his wife, and a company commander may be scribbling a report that Lieutenant Wesson has not returned from his patrol.

Before an attack, their trenches are flooded with enthusiastic troops, and when our storm signals flash across, they get ready for a wrestling match over scraps of trench, woodland and the edges of villages. 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.

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

## **14. *Before the fight***

So the day after tomorrow! On March 21, 1918, that will be the day of decision, when we will finish the tremendous march with one blow of our fists, break the iron chains and push our storming columns to the sea with our last momentum. The wave to the west, for four years dammed and battered by fiery embankments, will finally foam towards its goal. The hour of the great breakthrough and its exploitation has come, we will make a breach in the bulwark that no one can plug. We will tear apart the steel net, so that the masses waiting behind us will seize its ends, eat into its open flanks, rolling up, pursuing and destroying through victory, clear and complete victory, to sanctify our unshakeable faith in him.

There is no one in our circle who doubted it. For four years we carried this conviction from battlefield to battlefield, saw thousands fall in the race to the great promise, were celebrated during short vacations as executors of a holy mission, threw youth and all the glimmer of the world into the dark wagons 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 schools, universities and barracks, the term "fatherland" was placed in the foggy world of our perception as the center, like the sun in the planetary system, like the nucleus in the vortex of an atom. On the gray walls of the barracks corridors, golden letters announced 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 linked to its wars, the serious faces with which generations of officers looked down on us from the walls of our mess, flashing medals and shot-up flags whose silk only flew above the crowd on high feast days: all this had made war a solemn and powerful thing for us. We felt ourselves to be heirs and bearers of thoughts that had been passed down from generation to generation through the centuries and carried closer to fulfillment. Above all thought and action stood a heaviest duty, a highest honor and a shimmering goal: death for the country and its greatness. Thus the forces that the eruption of the long-awaited liberated and hurled out in us were of a force that we considered more powerful and irresistible than anything before. Family, love, lust for the colorful play of light in life, everything was glowed over by them, as they pushed us in intoxication and frenzy beyond the borders towards victory. Even if the work was immeasurably harder than we dreamed when we set off, we are now facing the reward, the last end of the course lies before us, and the day after tomorrow it will be conquered.

The captain has just spoken. Even if the once so great words of glory and the happy death of honor have become pale and empty, today they have the sound and excitement they once had; we drink to victory and let the glasses on the wall splatter into shards. He's right, the battalion will do its thing, we're proud to be the first wave to roar over the beaten trenches. We are comrades, as only soldiers can be, united by deed, blood and spirit into one body and one will. Proven champions 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 the fear of the great uncertainty. The cowards do not

remain in our ranks; just as we know the way to the enemy, they know how to find the safe ground of the hinterland. Despite doctors and commissions, they maneuver masterfully in 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 from Borkum and Pyrmont "with comradely greetings"; today, no thought wanders into their territories of society, good sound and good wines. To be first in battle: we still consider that an honor worthy only of the best. Today the man and the deed of the day are the content, and the day after tomorrow the best team of a great, warlike people will lay the chisel on the new face of the earth. That is a day like those of Wahlstatt, Vienna and Leipzig, when the bloody path of a people and its thoughts will be broken.

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 delicious possession. The future, worries, all the troublesome things with which we have been flooded by the bleak hours are flung aside like the end of a cigarette. In a few hours, perhaps, that confused island will fade behind us, to which we, as Robinsons among many, have tried to give meaning. Money, this source of worry, will become abundance and nonsense, we will drink away the last thaler, if only to get rid of it. Parents will weep, but time takes everything away. No matter how many men fall, the girl will still find one, and her love for the dead man will turn into a feeling with the new one. Friends, wine, books, the rich table of sweet and bitter pleasures, everything will flicker away with her 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 just feels how fleetingly

one has basically passed by people and things. The great evening, resolution, forgetting, sinking and return from time to eternity, from space to the infinite, from personality to that greatness that carries everything in its bosom.

Yes, the soldier in his relationship to death, in the abandonment of his personality for an idea, knows little of the philosophers and their values. But in him and his deeds, life expresses itself more movingly and deeply than any book could ever do. And time and again, despite all the absurdity and madness of external events, one radiant truth remains with him: death for a conviction is the highest achievement. It is confession, deed, fulfillment, faith, love, hope and goal; in this imperfect world it is perfection and perfection par excellence. The matter is nothing and the conviction is everything. Let a man die, bogged down in an undoubted error; he has achieved his greatest. If the pilot of Barbusse sees two armored armies deep below him praying to one God for the victory of their righteous cause, then surely one, probably both, will attach an error to his banners; and yet God will embrace both at the same time in his being. Delusion and the world are one, and he who died for an error remains a hero.

I got a hot head from the noise and the wine. Ever since the light intoxication of wine carried me for the first time, I have repeatedly felt a sense of liberation. For many, colors, sounds and experiences become brighter, more essential, blurring into insignificance and receding pleasantly and dully into a wide background that surrounds me and the thoughts that come to life as a focal point. Then I like to sit alone in order to escape the conversation, which is more volatile and noisy and unites the group into a mental body in which everyone feels the same and yet everyone hears only themselves. That's why I get up and

sit down on the bench in front of our little house, where we have been meeting in the evenings for three weeks and which surrounds us today for the last time before the unknown. It is close to the army road on which our regiment will also march west.

We won't set off until after dark tomorrow to wait out the storm for another day and night, hidden in caves and tunnels. For three nights now, as dusk falls, countless thousands have been rolling past our little house, which lies like an island in the stream, in silence, without song, without play, without jokes or laughter. Sometimes an order, matter-of-fact and impersonal, mingles with the roaring thud of nailed boots, the clink of rifles on helmets, the rattle of sidearms on entrenching gear. Then long columns of artillery roar past again, from small field guns to gigantic mortars towed by engines. In the end, all that remains for the observer in this dark parade of men, animals and material is the impression of a gray, immense force and a will that pushes this force towards its goal. What floods past in the night as a stream to spear itself gigantically in front of the ramparts 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 the machines we want to crush the enemy, blind them, suffocate them, hail them to the ground, throw flames at them, roll them to the bottom of the shell funnels. With them, we want to crush the will of the few survivors with such a barrage of horrific impressions that our storming crew will drag them out of their holes, idly and with stupid smiles. The machine is the intelligence of a people cast in steel. It multiplies the power of the individual a thousandfold and gives our struggles their

terrible character.

The battle of the machines is so powerful that man almost disappears before it. Often, surrounded by the force fields of modern battle, it has seemed strange and scarcely believable to me to witness a world-historical event. The battle manifested itself as a gigantic, dead mechanism and spread an icy, impersonal wave of destruction across the terrain. It was like a cratered landscape on a dead celestial body, lifeless and spraying with embers.

And yet: people are behind everything. They give the machines direction and meaning. He chases bullets, explosives and poison out of them. He rises in them as a bird of prey above the enemy. He crouches in their bellies as they stamp across the battlefield, spewing fire. It is the most dangerous, bloodthirsty and purposeful creature that the earth must bear.

There have always been battles and wars, but what is passing by here, dark and incessant, is the most terrible form in which the spirit of the world has so far shaped life. And it is precisely because these masses are so gray and monotonous as they roll forward, only to accumulate behind the dams into a pool full of tremendous potential energy, that they give the impression of pure power, the idea of which is transmitted to the solitary spectator like an electric current. This is an impression of an intoxicating sobriety that is only similarly revealed in the centers of our great cities or in the concepts of force fields according to the terms of modern physics. There is already a Caesarian will here that is equal to the dimensions of the masses. What is being prepared here is already a battle in the sense of a completely new era.

A moment ago, when I was sitting inside with my comrades, their laughter muddled by the dimmed

window, I was quite the son of an old time, and it seemed to me that the day after tomorrow old and sacred symbols would be carried towards new goals. But here the silken sheen of the flags seems to fade, here a bitter and dry seriousness speaks, a marching beat that evokes the idea 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 makes use of the material. And this language is more decisive and cutting than any other before.

But what kind of people are they who don't feel up to their time? Today, we write poems of steel and compositions of reinforced concrete. And we fight for power in battles in which events interlock with the precision of machines. There is a beauty in these battles on land, on water and in the air, in which the hot will of lightning is tamed and expressed through the mastery of technical marvels of power. And I can well imagine that later on an attitude is possible which confronts these expressions of a race endowed with a powerful sense of fact, like a magnificent orchid which needs no other justification than its existence.

All goals are transient, only movement is eternal, and it constantly produces magnificent and merciless spectacles. To be able to immerse oneself in its sublime purposelessness, as in a work of art or the starry sky, is granted to only a few. But those who have only experienced negation in this war, only their own suffering and not the affirmation, the higher movement, have experienced it as slaves. They have had no inner experience, only an outer one.

Here it flows past, life itself, the great tension, the will to struggle and to power in the forms of our time, in our own form, in the most defiant and defensive stance imaginable. In front of this powerful and incessant overflowing towards battle, all works become void, all concepts hollow, one feels the expression of an elemental, powerful thing that always was and always will be, even if there are no more people and no more wars.