



## The War Transformed Love

**Michelle Perrot**

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# The War Transformed Love

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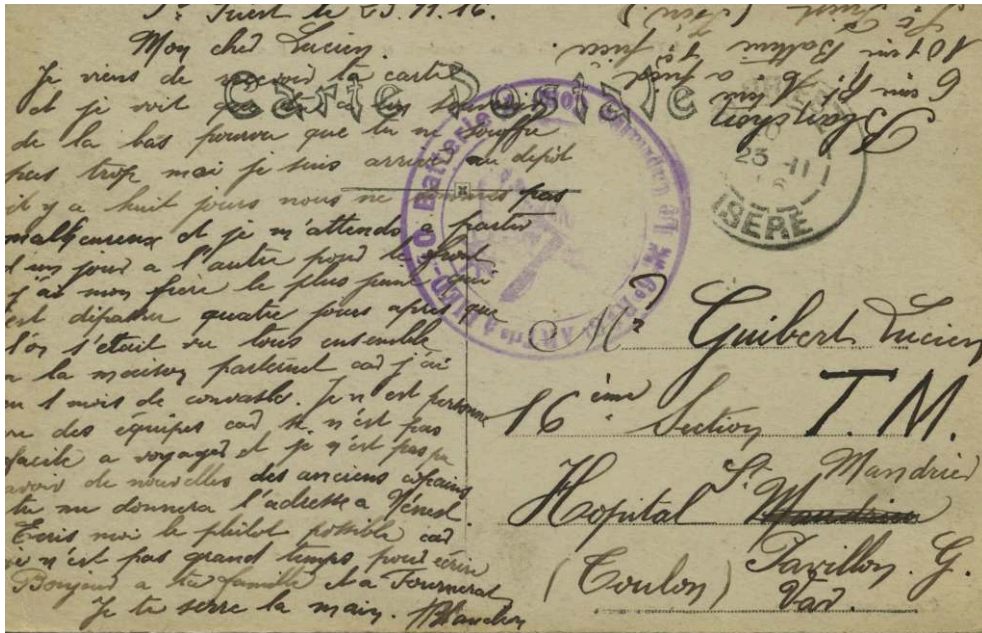
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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Excerpts from the paper delivered by Michelle PERROT

*Source: La lettre, no. 39, March 2015*

- 1 **Paris Diderot University - Paris 7** “The war transformed love”, wrote Blaise Cendrars, who himself lived through this dramatic experience. But what else? How did men and women experience the Great War, not only in their affective, romantic and sexual relationships, but more generally in everything forging their relationships: family life, intimacy, the public and the private spheres, work, writing, images, the body and the soul?



A poilu's postcard, 1916

- 2 The war was first the triumph of the order of the sexes: men at the front, as virile fighters, and women behind the lines, helping, nursing them, standing in for them, and waiting for them. Women were comforted in their traditional and maternal role as auxiliaries and nurses. The nurse shrouded in white: such was the quasi-religious embodiment of femininity. For the declinists of the Belle Époque, there was a morality of the purifying, regenerative war. “War, the hygiene of the world”, the futurists proclaimed. But the war lasted, and had unexpected effects.
- 3 The first were demographic. The drop in marriage and birth rates exacerbated the looming demographic crisis. The number of weddings, which were often postponed, decreased despite the hasty officialization of many unions, especially among the working class, where cohabitation was frequent. This did not however compensate for the decline, even though formalities were simplified. In 1915, a law introduced marriage by proxy so that couples could get married “remotely”, but it lacked poetry and rapidly declined. Instead, furloughs, allowing for brief espousals, soon prevailed. But why get married in the face of such uncertainty?
- 4 The separation was brutal (over three million men were mobilized, many more over the course of the war) and took wholly unprecedented proportions. It disorganized the home, work, intimacy, and roles. People focused on what was most urgent, then settled into the war. They attempted to preserve a link that proved vital. Correspondence played a major role in this respect. In a way, it trivialized the war, accommodating the tragic and making it acceptable. Not that the soldiers kept silent about the war and its operations. Forced to be discrete onsite, they increasingly described the horrors of the front; the mud, the lice, the promiscuity, the bombings, the blood, and the corpses. At first they sought to offer reassurance. The “Krauts” would be defeated, that was certain. Then doubt crept in; those people were tougher than they had thought. But did the women understand? Did they hear? Everyday life was more speakable and filled letters with reassuring repetition. The soldiers spoke about the food, the much-appreciated parcels, the random sleeping arrangements for the soldiers, etc. They inquired about work in the fields, the course of business, the children’s behaviour, and

so on. Forced to delegate their role, they wanted to carry on leading and advising their wives, especially about firmness in their children's education, always fearing they would lack virility without them. They felt stripped of their paternity, the importance of which they directly experienced.

- 5 They also spoke about feelings. Above all, they feared being left and cheated on, and saw every late letter as a sign of abandonment. Even Louis Pergaud, so certain of Delphine's love, became alarmed and reprimanded her: "Do you not have time to write to me?" Sexuality was more difficult to talk about. It was expressed differently depending on social class and writing abilities, and the degree of prior intimacy. Louis Pergaud excelled at this and expressed his desire more and more strongly. Modest at first, he spoke of "kisses on your beautiful eyes". He spoke of "very strong" and "repeated" embraces. He asked for "a warm and passionate kiss as you know how to give them to me and for which I am now so intensely nostalgic at all times" "I promise you such embraces, my dear lassie, and I will caress you, cuddle you with such fervour. And then, at last perhaps we will have the baby we are hoping for", he wrote in February 1915. He was killed a month later. Pergaud was not the only one who wrote about his carnal love. Clémentine Vidal-Naquet<sup>1</sup> gives other examples of the erotic and "emotional inflation" created by longing, by absence, and to a certain extent, appeased by recollection (of the bedroom and the bed) and anticipation of expected happiness. It was not only the men's doing, but also that of their wives – and this was very new, as modesty had until then silenced women.
- 6 "There are things that we do and that we do not talk about, and those are precisely the best ones", said one wife<sup>2</sup>. Paradoxically (but is it so paradoxical?), the war stimulated the desire for intimacy and shared pleasure. It eroticized marital love as much as other forms of sexuality, pursuing the trend that had started before the war, as Alain Corbin has shown<sup>3</sup>.
- 7 Louis Pergaud condemned the army's puritanism. In his sector, the command had prohibited women's visits. He emphasized this rise of latent eroticism expressed in officers' saucy conversations (particularly in the artillery) and in the *poilus'* talk and correspondence. He described this situation quite crudely in a letter to a friend (Marcel Martinet, 10 March 1915): "If we ever entered Germany, I think it would be very difficult to prevent the *poilus* from giving back to the Gretchen the sperm that their cousins or fiancés sowed at home". This was a clear allusion to the rapes practised by the invaders, which begot several thousands of natural children<sup>4</sup> and was argued to legitimize a revenge of the same kind. Women's bodies have always been a real and symbolic stake of national struggles. A battle field, legitimate booty.
- 8 The war did not moralize society, as the declinists had expected it to. Sexual deprivation<sup>5</sup> caused men to resort to prostitution, both clandestine and then organized at a late stage (1918) in "countryside brothels", which some officers (for instance General Mordacq) sought to turn into hygiene and prophylactic regulation centres, inspired by German models and designed to prevent the fast-growing venereal peril. The war contributed to normalizing and medicalizing sexuality. More broadly, "doctors' mass political involvement in this Great War laid the foundations of a medical totalitarianism"<sup>6</sup>. The war reinforced the role of the State in all areas, including the private sphere. Conversely, it resulted in sharpened awareness of the desire for intimacy and space, a life of one's own. Increased control naturally fuelled the sense of individuality.

- 9 But the war had many other effects on gender relations, particularly as far as work was concerned. In the fields, the factories, and even at the head of companies, women “replaced” men. They exercised new responsibilities, handled money, made decisions, left the space of the home, and made new encounters. Married female workers, who in 1907 had finally been granted the right to receive their salaries directly, now freely had access to higher earnings. In the Taylorized space of the factory, they discovered discipline, but also benefits<sup>7</sup>, they readily united, and even made demands. In 1917, “munitionnettes” and “shopgirls” marched in the streets of Paris together to uphold their rights. Women had gained autonomy, independence, and sometime freedom in their love lives. Some were alarmed and lamented the luxury of “silk stockings” and “war profiteers”. This profiteering was grossly exaggerated, as these women had to manage a difficult everyday life, bearing family responsibilities (children, sometime elderly parents) and the anguish of tomorrow alone. But these fantasies haunted the trenches and stirred anxiety among the forsaken men. The war may have brought couples closer together, but it also created distance between the sexes.

The full paper is available at [www.college-de-france.fr/site/colloque-2014/symposium-2014-10-17-17h00.htm](http://www.college-de-france.fr/site/colloque-2014/symposium-2014-10-17-17h00.htm)

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## NOTES

1. Clémentine Vidal-Naquet, *Couples dans la grande guerre*, Les Belles Lettres, 2014, p. 325 sq.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 360.
3. Alain Corbin, *L'harmonie des plaisirs. Les manières de jouir du siècle des Lumières à l'avènement de la sexologie*, Perrin, 2008.
4. see Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *L'Enfant de l'ennemi*, Paris, Aubier, 1995 ; Raphaëlle Branche and Fabrice Virgili (eds.), *Viols en temps de guerre*, Payot, 2011.
5. Jean-Yves Le Naour detailed all the aspects of this history in *Misères et tourments de la chair* (Aubier, 2002
6. see Jean-Yves Le Naour, *op.cit.*, p. 217.
7. In arms factories, especially under the impetus of the Minister of War Albert Thomas, breastfeeding rooms were set up and factory superintendants were appointed to ensure working conditions were respected.

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## AUTHOR

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