Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit
Accampo, Elinor

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Accampo, Elinor.
Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit: Nelly Roussel and the Politics of Female Pain in Third Republic France.

Weary, Wounded Heart

I believed in Progress, Justice, and Good.  
This belief was my joy and my support, 
My profound reason for living 
But faced with the dreadful madness of the World 
I fear I no longer believe in anything.

Nelly Roussel, “Invincible Croyance”

One of the enduring questions in feminist historiography is whether the Great War, in its destruction of traditional modes of thinking and in the creation of new occupational opportunities, advanced women’s status. Even if we set aside the matter of her health, the war did not offer Roussel emancipation, at least not in the ways most important to her. It completely silenced the already persecuted neo-Malthusian movement. Eugène Humbert fled to Spain just before its outbreak to avoid the draft, and the last issue of Génération consciente appeared in August 1914. Humbert’s wife, Jeanne, remained in Paris, where, she said, the atmosphere was full of hatred: “No one spoke anymore, they only whispered. Everyone distrusted one another . . . our friends were taken over by panic.”¹ War seemed to vindicate the populationists, who had long argued that the defense of the nation depended on its fertility. Jules Breton, a member of the Chamber of Deputies, proclaimed that Germany would never have declared war if France’s birthrate had been as high as its own.²

Feminists were less receptive than ever to the issue of birth control; even prior to 1914, the patriotic impulse had caused them to focus more directly on motherhood as a justification for women’s full citizenship. The importance of motherhood only intensified when the war broke out, rendering the climate openly hos-
tile to Roussel’s “freedom of motherhood” campaign. On the other hand, most feminists expressed optimism that the war would benefit women in the recognition and respect they would receive for shouldering the home front burdens. However, as social commentary indicated, female war activities could easily be read through the lens of the “eternal feminine.” Women’s performance of masculine jobs became emblematic of their eternal, self-sacrificing nature, peace would quickly restore prewar gender roles. By 1918, Roussel herself appeared to have yielded to this gender imperative. Having faced the outbreak of war with considerable political bravery, she ended it all but cloistered from the outside world.

The war and related events at once drew Roussel’s family closer together emotionally, while geographically dispersing its members, resulting in a richer and more abundant correspondence. The Roussel-Godet wartime family correspondence also reflects a keen self-consciousness about the act of letter writing. Authors apologized for letters that were too long and rambling or too short and abrupt, or simply “improper.” Correspondence became a source of contention in Marcel’s relationship with his parents, sister, and grandparents, all of whom scolded him for not writing “proper” letters and not writing frequently enough; indeed, Godet especially considered daily composition of letters an essential part of Marcel’s education. Even Roussel’s letters changed. Hers had always conformed to rules of grammar and etiquette, and in the hundreds she wrote prior to the war, she crossed out only one line. Those she wrote during the war frequently had crossed-out sentences, sometimes to the point of making them impossible to read. Her “messiness” resulted from her fatigue, weakness, and fuzzy-headedness, she explained; but correcting mistakes in her word choice was for her an important means of maintaining dignity.

Indeed, Roussel’s health turned letter writing and reading into a collective endeavor. Often too weak to write on her own behalf, Nelly appointed Mireille or Marcel to write to Henri, her mother, or other family members and friends, and then often added a note of her own. Mireille also added notes to letters her mother wrote. No boundaries of privacy existed between Roussel and Godet, for in her absence from Paris, he routinely opened her mail—excusing himself for his “indiscretion”—out of curiosity about the welfare of her friends. This body of correspondence yields a microcosm of the French war experience, as well as being a window into the complexity of their contentious family relations.
The Outbreak of War

Nelly, Henri, and their domestic Mathilde spent the summer of 1914 in a rental home in Dainville (Seine-et-Marne), approximately twenty-seven miles east of Paris. There they passed five tranquil weeks, though Nelly continued to suffer ill health to the point that she could not receive visitors other than family. Mireille joined them in the last week of July. They received the news of mobilization the day it was announced, August 1, 1914. Though Henri, at age fifty-one, was in no danger of being called up, the announcement nonetheless took an immediate toll on Nelly, causing insomnia and plunging her into a state of fatigue so debilitating that she could do nothing but rest for two days. Three days later, she mustered the energy to write her sister Andrée:

I do not know what sentiment dominates in me, anger or boundless contempt for a humanity capable of such a monstrous madness! Ah! The pretty phrases of public meetings!! We have received an abominably sad letter from poor Juliette [her sister-in-law, whose husband Fritz Robin had been called up]. I think also of Mme Fon-sèque [a member of the UFF and mother of her close friend Germaine Lambert], whose two sons are leaving! And then of Tilquin [her friend’s brother], and Philippe [Nel, her cousin], and so many others!! This prevents me from thinking too much about ourselves, who risk no immediate danger, but for whom the future is no longer anything but a somber question mark. I am very happy to have Mireille with me, and I would really like to have Marcel. As for the other Marcel [Noble—a close family friend], it is useless to tell you how Mathilde [their domestic] cried over him; but she has regained her calm and her insouciance.5

Godet retrieved Marcel from Paris on August 11, and the family remained in Dainville for the rest of the month. The material impact of the war hit them immediately: oil, sugar, and salt supplies became depleted within three days. They began dining at the early hour of 6:30 in order to save on lamp oil. The locals asked them to prepare to help with the harvest, because the farmers had been called up, and they saw military trucks charging through their village, going east to meet the invading Germans.6

In these shocking early days of the war, Émile Darnaud, now eighty-eight years old, conveyed his optimistic impressions from the Ariège, in the southern tip of France, remote from the palpable impacts of German invasion. Because circumstances so prodigiously favored their nation, he wondered whether it was France that wanted this formidable European war. Darnaud noted that the Allies outnumbered the Germans, who would have to fight a two-front war, and
he thought the French mobilization went “marvelously well—calmly, methodi-
cally, and with proud satisfaction.” Despite the rise in prewar nationalism, few
French people shared either Darnaud’s optimism or his patriotic enthusiasm at
the outbreak of war; indeed, surprise, worry, sadness, and resignation character-
ized general public opinion. The Germans first set foot on French soil on August
3. By the end of the month, they had occupied Lille and other northern towns
and had invaded as far as the Somme river. Information about this latest advance
did not reach most people until August 29: it was the first news indicating that
France had been invaded. It was met with shock and disbelief. We can only won-
der whether Émile Darnaud’s sanguine vision dissolved as the horrors of the war
unfolded. This was his last letter to Roussel; he died that September.7

Meanwhile, Roussel and Godet abruptly decided to give up their summer
rental a month early. They returned with their family to Paris on September 1,
arriving one day after the first German shells fell on the city, killing an elderly
woman (a fact concealed from the public). Airplanes also dropped messages stat-
ing: “The German army is at the gates of Paris. All you can do is surrender.” The
day after their return, the French government decided to move to Bordeaux, a
measure that hardly inspired confidence.8

The French had not anticipated the Schlieffen Plan that sent German troops
into France through Belgium, and the first several weeks of the war went very
badly for them. They culminated in the Battle of the Marne (September 6–10),
which took place not far from the summer home Roussel and her family had
fled the previous week. Though this key battle seared itself in French memory
because it succeeded in driving the Germans back, by November the fighting had
stalemated. The troops became entrenched, with the Germans occupying most
of northeastern France. The first two months of the war turned out to be its most
deadly period: the French lost 329,000 soldiers.9

President Raymond Poincaré’s immediate call for a Union sacrée (Sacred
Union) had its intended effect, particularly as the Germans drew closer to Paris.
Its purpose was to integrate into the Third Republic all the political groups, in-
stitutions, or communities that had opposed the government and warred among
themselves—the Army, the Church, socialists, syndicalists, and even anarchists,
as well as the extreme right wing. The collective sense of innocent victimhood
at the hands of unjust German aggression made this appeal compelling. Propa-
ganda portraying Germans as murderers, rapists, torturers of civilians, and espe-
cially of children fed the impression that they were cruel beasts. Moreover, press
censorship prevented the spread of antiwar sentiment, as well as any accurate
knowledge of early military defeats and the numbers of dead. Laws extant even
prior to the outbreak of the war allowed the military authorities the right to ban newspapers “likely . . . to have a bad influence on the morale of the army or of the population,” as well as “anything that might be taken for peace propaganda.” But the law of August 5, 1914, gave local police the power to silence virtually anyone.10

The Union sacrée and the censorship muted or realigned the vast majority of feminists and pacifists. Most feminists became caught up in the spirit of national defense and believed that advocating women’s rights would be selfish and anti-patriotic; many thought, moreover, that women’s contributions to the war effort would ultimately advance their cause of full citizenship. As Margaret Darrow has noted, women’s patriotic role invoked their “natural” disposition for self-sacrifice. Wartime female patriotism meant sacrifice—suffering the loss of fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, lovers, and members of one’s extended family. In the interests of national defense, women were told to “hide their tears and stifle their sobs” in order not to undermine soldiers’ courage. Beyond stoic silence, they could exhibit their patriotism through an array of services, ranging from working for the Red Cross to knitting and crocheting clothing for the military and sustaining soldiers’ morale with regular correspondence. Indeed, in the spring of 1915, the press promoted marraines de guerre (godmothers of war), a campaign that encouraged women to “adopt” soldiers as pen pals. Mireille Godet adopted one such soldier. The entire family took such an interest in him that the Montupets began sending him money.11

Nelly and Mireille willingly dedicated themselves to wartime projects. Once back in Paris, they donated old clothes, purchased wool, and began knitting. Caroline Kauffmannn, through the Grand Orient, organized an ouvroir (sewing room) of “republican feminists,” and she and other members of the UFF attended training exercises for Red Cross rescue dogs. But Kauffmannn was not content to abandon prewar feminist goals. In December, she wrote to Roussel remarking on how enfeebled the feminist movement had become, adding:

We would like . . . to see you regain your health so that you can work on the sacred cause of feminism whose soul you incarnate with enthusiastic force, admirable eloquence that awakens those who are unconscious, and makes them share, almost without their knowing it, the inspiration that you [ignite], yes! You awaken obscure thoughts that suddenly become clarified. . . . Earlier feminists often had a forbidding appearance. [Your poetry and grace] . . . ennoble feminism as the cause of justice and truth; you add to it beauty, and by this means it will be better understood and more accepted. That is why [both] old and young feminists place all their hope in
you and ask you to take precious care of yourself, because your strength and health are so useful to the world.

Attendance at meetings had dwindled to a handful of people. Were Roussel able to attend, she would attract women “like a magnet,” “dissipate the torpor,” and inspire new motivation.12

**Battling the War and Censorship**

Although Roussel succumbed neither to the appeal of the “Sacred Union” nor to the image of Germans as any less human than the French, the war led her to reorder her priorities, as it did other feminists. Within two weeks after its outbreak, she sent antiwar articles to the mass circulation *Petit Parisien* and to Marguerite Durand’s newly revived *La Fronde*. Neither of these submissions, however, was published. The police had already begun to crack down on *La Fronde*. Marguerite Durand had stated in her newspaper that German soldiers had no “monopoly on cruelty,” and early in September, she wrote an editorial calling for peace. The police even forbade Durand’s ironic observation that the first victim of shells launched on Paris had been a woman. Indeed, they found even the title of her newspaper (which translates as “The Insurrection”) seditious, and Durand stopped its publication that same month.13

In subsequent months, Roussel combined her feminism with war-related issues: women’s work, pacifism, and internationalism. Mobilization meant that many women immediately lost their husbands’ incomes. Eventually, the government did provide allowances to the wives of men who had been called up, and other women’s situations eased as they began to perform men’s jobs. But prior to those developments, Roussel opportunistically used the crisis of women’s economic situation to stress the inequities they faced more generally: “The question of female economic independence,” she wrote in a letter to *L’Humanité*, “is going to pose itself with more urgency and acuity than ever before. Let us consider for the moment only the practical side of the problem, without resorting to feminist arguments based on the dignity and liberty of the female being, which would only result in indifference. This atrocious war has mowed the husbands of young women down by the thousands, obliging them to survive on their own. They must be . . . assisted in sustaining the bitter battle that awaits them.”14

In January 1915, an editorial assistant for the left-leaning feminist newspaper *L’Équité* urged Roussel to contribute an article about women who had taken on responsibilities “for which they had been previously thought incapable.” They
loved the article she submitted, but it was “ruined” by censorship, according to the angry editors.\textsuperscript{15} The article that finally saw the light of day in April said that while it was suitable to talk only about “the nightmare [of war] that haunts us, and the pains that restrain us,” the “loyal silence” of feminists should not be interpreted as abdication. Roussel compared the war to a storm that surprises the traveler and forces him to stop, but does not distract him from the path to his destination: the goal of pacifist, socialist, rationalist, Malthusian, and feminist ideals. Did the war mean that women would have to wait to implement these ideals? “Oh, to wait!” she answered, “A simple word that can designate the supreme degree of suffering and of courage. But women are not just waiting. They know when it is necessary to act.” Roussel said she was not referring here to “brilliant heroines” who commanded the admiration of crowds or to female ambulance drivers who fell on the “field of honor” (a phrase she always put in quotes) under a hail of bullets; rather, she was referring to the countless women workers who everywhere in public and private enterprises, without any previous training, had replaced the men who had been mobilized; and to the peasant women who had had to undertake harvests without either the men or the farm animals commandeered by the war. For all these women, “we must not ask for laurels,” she said, but “instead [we must] demand citizenship.”\textsuperscript{16}

Other observers interpreted women’s new work roles quite differently. Her journalist friend and colleague Urbain Gohier, who was neo-Malthusian and antimilitarist, also believed women should not receive laurels for their wartime contributions, but for reasons opposite of Roussel’s. He wrote in \textit{Le Journal}—one of the four largest Parisian dailies, with a circulation of close to one million—that such self-sacrifice was not only inherent in the female “race,” it was woman’s duty:

\begin{quote}
The Great War is causing civilization to assume the characteristics of primitive societies. The man takes up his role as warrior, hunter, nomad; and the woman once again finds herself sovereign of the home. . . . Rural and urban workers have adapted themselves to all sorts of new jobs; from the fabrication of shells to the tramway and Metro services, there is only one idea: duty. The man is gone? Well, the home must survive, the little ones must be fed, family life must continue. This is the duty toward the country, toward the husband who is at war, in short, \textit{duty}.  

And this race has always done its duty; it does so by instinct, without thinking about it, with no need of glorification; something that is closest to her being would be torn away from her if she were diverted from it. Devotion, sacrifice, courage in the face of peril or pain, an effort above and beyond reasonable limits is natural to our women.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}
This article was one among many that treated the issue of women’s work in this manner. Rather than viewing female performance of traditionally male tasks as a sign of strength and ability, most commentators instead naturalized it as a new variant of “eternally female” self-sacrifice. It was against this very notion that Roussel had directed her entire career. As she clipped and saved these articles, she had good reason to doubt that women would win citizenship as a reward for their wartime contributions.¹⁸

Early in the war, Roussel became just as committed to pacifism as she was to feminism. She published her thoughts in the Geneva-based *La Libre Pensée internationale*, in December 1914, saying that she was unequivocally not launching herself into “the hymn of universal love”:

> I do not dream of a world of inert peace, of beatific bliss, which is neither possible nor desirable. I know the necessity and also the beauty of the eternal instinct of battle, to which every living species owes its survival and progress. Violence itself, to my eyes, is not always inexcusable. But international war seems to be an absurd deviation from this primordial instinct, the work of a false civilization. Certainly, it is necessary to fight! But to fight consciously and freely for an idea, even for a wild dream; to fight against natural disasters, against social tyrannies... against an enemy that has been recognized as such, not one that is hated [just] because of tradition, prejudice, or obedience.

Roussel argued that the “enemy” could never be an entire people, because a “people” includes diverse elements, individuals who are soul mates with those in other nations. Hatred between peoples is neither natural nor instinctive, but instead systematically manufactured by those invested in armed conflict. She applied Le Bon’s theory of crowd psychology—to which Darnaud had so often referred in his correspondence—to explain the modern means of coercion, an explanation that anticipates Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and postmodern thinking two generations later: “Neither friendship nor antipathy come from profound instincts; they are political affairs. It is so easy for those who hold the press and education in their power to create an atmosphere favorable to their designs, to give birth . . . to contrived sentiment, collective and momentary passion that carries crowds away.” The distinction between “defensive” and “offensive” war is inane, she argued, because the people on both sides believed that “the enemy” had started the war. Despite what the French had already suffered, she suggested, they should regard the first victims of war—the German people—who had been “led astray by perfidious educators [and] abominably sacrificed to the ferocious appetites of a madman [Kaiser Wilhelm II]”—with pity and indulgence.¹⁹
Roussel contributed another article to *La Libre Pensée internationale* early in 1915, which caused the French government to ban its circulation from France; but it received considerable notice in Switzerland and was sent to Germany as well. Her article lamented the official publicity about the atrocities of murder, rape, pillage, and destruction that Germans had wrought on Belgian and French soil. She feared such reports would incite French soldiers to horrific reprisals and would inspire more enmity. “Overshadowing the consciences of even the best,” she said, “the war transforms into ferocious beasts the bad or doubtful elements of which modern armies cannot purge themselves . . . what [German] soldiers are doing in France and Belgium is no different from what invaders have always done in the countries they have invaded. The current war is distinguished only by the reach of the line of fire, the number of combatants, and the improved engines of destruction.”

Roussel’s pacifism might have seemed antipatriotic to some. She cleverly deployed patriotic sentiment as a guise for her pacifism, internationalism, and feminism. She gave a talk entitled “Pour le salut de nos blessés” (To Save Our Wounded) in Paris on March 15, 1915. She delivered it at the prestigious Hotel Continental, under the presidency of Dr. Troussaint, doctor-in-chief of the army, to an audience that included Henri, her mother, Montupet, Marcel, her sister Andrée, her aunt, her friends the Wolfs, and other members of the Montupet family. Ostensibly, Roussel spoke on behalf of the Women’s Committee of the Society for Rescue Dogs (sponsored by the Red Cross), to raise funds for the purchase and training of dogs to rescue injured soldiers on the battlefield. But she used this opportunity to criticize the war, referring to the “dreadful upheaval” that was “digging an abyss between the past and the future.” Prior to the war, men and women had been “animated by the single passion of universal progress and of hope; but henceforth, the noble battles of ideas . . . will be victim to the bellicose aspirations of the civilized world.” Now “philosophers and artists have made way for soldiers [and] the pen and the spoken word [must] temporarily abdicate in favor of the sword.” Roussel then said that she was raising her “weak voice in the middle of the tempest’s roar” so that she could speak about the only thing now in the thoughts of her audience: national defense and the salvation of the Fatherland.

Roussel’s task on behalf of the Women’s Committee of the Society for Rescue Dogs was to explain that how these canines—whose senses made them more efficient than human rescuers—were trained to find soldiers on the battlefield. Roussel seized on the opportunity to portray the battlefield through the sensibilities of the stretcher-bearer—what he saw, heard, touched, smelled, and felt. Her
description divested the battlefield of any honor or glory. To the stretcher-bearer, she said, the war is

stripped of all its glitter, appears naked, shameful. For him, when the tumult of combat fades, when the exaltation and exhilaration that encourage and sustain fall away, when the mirage of glory fades . . . the “field of honor” is nothing more than a mass grave. No voice other than that of the pain that exhalés in an immense, infinite moan; no movement other than the heavy black flight of ravens, drawn by the tragic odor of death. Who could be astonished that, in the lugubrious night, among the piles of ragged cadavers, the upheaval of an earth disemboweled by cataclysm, a man, reduced to his human means, cannot always—however highly strung all his faculties—discover the poor quivering, mutilated body, from which a breath of life escapes, too weak to become a signal, an appeal or a moan . . . so many martyrs have died alone, unknown and despairing.22

She also made more subtle points in her genuine effort to raise funds for the purpose of saving lives. For example, Roussel admitted that as a lover and owner of cats, she had previously disliked dogs. She had not only thought them “noisy, clumsy, brutal, malodorous creatures” but had seen their “passive obedience” and “ability to forget injuries,” traits other people admired, as evidence of “a servile spirit, without grandeur” (similar, perhaps, to that of the “eternally sacrificed woman”). Her observation of rescue dogs in training had changed her estimation of this species completely, however. In fact, the experience had brought “tears of tenderness and appreciation” to her eyes.

Throughout this lecture, Roussel manipulated the metaphor, if not the reality, of being silenced by war, patriotism, and censorship. Her own patriotism, she claimed, muffled her voice, for even though the Germans had many more dogs than the French, she “would never dare, for the honor of my country, make an avowal of such inferiority,” if it were not necessary to do so. Finally, she paid homage to her sponsors by publicly expressing her fear of angering them by suggesting French inferiority in this respect. By acknowledging the mechanisms of silence, she evaded both official and unofficial censorship and gave voice to the illicit.

Roussel also used the speech as an opportunity to deliver a feminist message. The commitment to national defense gave her the excuse to highlight women’s special contribution. After praising women’s charitable work with the rescue dogs, she went on to say that woman would “repair the wrongs that men commit. Where he injures, where he kills, where he destroys, where he causes suffering and tears, she comes to heal, to relieve, to console, to cure. She is too familiar with pain not to feel pity.” Woman, she said, was the “irreconcilable, eternal en-
emy” of war. Elsewhere, Roussel argued that only women could redress the horrors of war, for “it is we, creators, who know the price of life, who must come to abolish the works of war.”

Indeed, women across the world had already begun to undertake that effort. To establish principles to guide a peace settlement, Dr. Aletta Jacobs of the Netherlands (who as an advocate of contraception had a good deal in common with Roussel) and Jane Addams of the United States convened an International Women’s Congress, which opened on April 28, 1915, at The Hague. French feminists refused to send a delegation, however, and even Hélène Brion, who would later be prosecuted for her pacifism, expressed reservations about this effort, because she thought that the Congress would call for immediate peace at any price, something the French could not support. Only 52 of the 1,100 women who attended the conference came from belligerent nations.

Disappointed at the absence of Frenchwomen from this Congress, Roussel published a third article in *La Libre Pensée internationale*. She attacked the journalist Gustave Téry for congratulating Frenchwomen on their decision not to converse with “Austro-Boche shrews” (the French had derogatorily called the Germans “Boches”—wooden heads—even prior to the war). The “shrew” epithet resulted from the putative discovery of letters on prisoners and dead soldiers “in which German women encouraged their husbands and sons to exterminate our husbands and sons.” Roussel wondered how, on the basis of a few “inferior individuals,” Téry could conclude that German and Austrian wives and mothers were any different from their French counterparts. She recalled by name the women she had met in Hungary and Germany: “Oh! To see them again, to embrace them, to cry with them over the pains that torture us in the same way, to tell each other that in spite of . . . the men in arms who cut each other’s throats, our hearts and minds have remained fraternal, sharing always the Ideal. . . . Perhaps this would give me consolation . . . for the few ‘shrews’ among us.”

In arguing that women—even across enemy nations—would collectively oppose war because they placed a higher value on life, Roussel appears to have been attributing an inborn pacifist quality to them. But she was not; rather, she was claiming that experience made women and men different: women gave life, men killed. Her argument nonetheless brought her into an apparent logical paradox. It was women’s experience with pain, she said in her lecture “Pour le salut de nos blessés,” that rendered them more capable of empathy. Ironically, this was the same argument Augusta Moll-Weiss had made in opposition to Roussel’s campaign against female suffering. If women were emancipated from the maternal pain caused by nature, law, and society—as Roussel so wanted—they would no
longer be “too familiar with pain not to feel pity.” But Roussel saw a paradox or contradiction in Moll-Weiss’s logic: if women had a share in public power, she argued, a new morality would emerge: war and war-related scourges that demanded female empathy would cease to exist, and female pain would no longer be necessary as a foundation for morality.

Enduring the War: Neurasthenia, Financial Stress, and Family Battles

Roussel presented “Pour le salut de nos blessés” three more times in March 1916. It was published in *La Française d’aujourd’hui* the same month. She planned to deliver it in the provinces, but never did—almost certainly because of her ill health. Indeed, this was her last public appearance for three years, until March 1918 when she testified at the trial of Hélène Brion, who was accused of distributing pacifist brochures. The energy with which Roussel carried on her numerous activities in the first eighteen months of the war belied her ongoing physical ailments. Added to her worsening digestive disorders were increasingly debilitating menstrual periods and states of extreme anxiety. Her menstrual period became a routine subject in correspondence to Henri, Mireille, and her mother; she personified it as “Colcotar,” a most “unwelcome visitor” who “terribly excited” her nerves. Her weight became another closely monitored symptom. By June 1915, she weighed only 99 pounds, wearing shoes and several layers of clothes.

Roussel’s abdominal pain set off a vicious cycle of anxiety, insomnia, and mental instability. She and others concluded that her symptoms resulted from overwork and a crisis of “nerves,” even though writing and speaking had always been inherently salutary for her. She continued to pursue various remedies for her gastrointestinal disorder; she routinely purged herself with “phoscao,” put herself on a milk diet for several days each month, sought and took rest cures, and took laxatives. In the last two years of the war she received abdominal massages, either manual or with the application of electric current, at one point on a daily basis. All these cures, with the exception of laxatives, constituted the clinically recommended treatment for digestive disorders that were wrongly attributed to neurasthenia.

In their concern for Roussel’s health, family members sometimes worked at cross-purposes and caused further distress. The war directly contributed to family conflict in two ways: it fueled tensions over already existing political differences among them because Antonin Montupet favored the war and felt optimistic throughout, while Nelly and Henri persisted in their cynicism, pessimism,
and internationalism. The war ruined Henri’s Cararra marble business. By the spring of 1915, he and Nelly again found themselves almost broke, placing them at Montupet’s mercy. Henri worked temporarily in his step-father-in-law’s Paris office, alongside Paul Nel, Andrée’s husband, for whom he and Nelly had long harbored contempt. Godet’s sense of humiliation deepened with Montupet’s repeated lectures to him about how to salvage the Carrara joint-stock company.28

Nelly and Henri’s relationship with Antonin Montupet had always been tenuous and complex, not least because Nelly remained intimately close to her mother. Louise Nel and Montupet were, moreover, raising Mireille, and doing so with love and generosity. They had been generous to Henri and Nelly as well. Louise Nel frequently handed cash to her daughter, and through the war years, Montupet often sent them money orders, which cumulatively amounted to at least 3,000 francs. But tensions persisted, and each conflict revived past injur-ies. On one occasion, Montupet threw Godet out of his office for no apparent reason, and on another, Godet barged into the Montupet home without ringing the door bell and went straight to the master bedroom to see Louise Nel, an act that infuriated Montupet. In so tightly knit a family, lines defining appropriate intimacy with regard to space were often blurred. Anger at Montupet surfaced frequently in the correspondence between Nelly and Henri, and at one point, the latter started referring to Louis Nel’s husband as “sontupet”—meaning something like “her angry old fart,” perhaps. Nelly rarely referred to him as “Pépé,” as their children, and even Henri (in third person) routinely did. In her diary, she always calls him “Mr. Montupet” or, even more frigidly, “my mother’s husband.” But the family correspondence also reveals that Montupet had the best of intentions, even if he was avuncular, condescending, and conservative. His generosity and genuine concern for Nelly, Henri, and their children made it impossible for them to extricate themselves from their reluctant intimacy.29

In the late spring of 1915, a family crisis erupted over Roussel’s health. She wanted to go to a sanatorium, but investigations into such an arrangement led nowhere, no doubt because she and Godet could not afford it. When she accepted an invitation from her childhood friend Jeanne Tilquin to join her in the coastal resort town of Trouville (Calvados), relations with Montupet exploded. The resulting correspondence offers a rare glimpse into family dynamics and the nature of Roussel’s multifaceted illness. When Godet initially informed Montupet of his wife’s trip, he was “subjected to a lecture on expenses.” But the stepfather’s objections had deeper roots. For reasons not made explicit, he had had a serious dispute with Jeanne’s father and said he could not bear to have Nelly “sit at the table of a bandit who wanted to ruin [my] family.”30
This family affair became what Godet described as “good theater with too many acts.” He concluded that his father-in-law had seized upon the first possible pretext for a conflict whose ulterior motive was to “get rid of us, since he finds us troublesome and expensive. After your return [from Trouville], if he wants to launch into the fifth act, my intention is to tell him straight out what I think, to put him at his ease and force him to speak frankly.” Godet said he was going to investigate the possibility of employment in America through the Society of Artists. He would liquidate his workshop, and Nelly and the two children would move to the United States. And then using the wartime lexicon, Henri added: “If he sees us so entrenched, the enemy will retreat . . . and we must never be afraid.” Roussel responded from the coastal villa that if Montupet persisted in his threat to ban her from his home, “tell him that I don’t care, and that I am not at all fond of entering a house where I am obliged to encounter people who disgust me, beginning with my amiable brother-in-law [Paul Nel]. . . . I think it best that I not return until after the terrible ogre’s departure to Fourchambault [of which he was mayor], and that way I’ll see him again after the glories of his high municipal authority have made him forget all this.” Even Louise Nel expressed deep concern about her daughter’s “lack of discipline.” Henri’s desire to escape to the United States—and to bring Mireille, to whom the Montupets were as deeply attached as her own parents—indicates how seriously relations had deteriorated. Henri continued to encourage Nelly not to fear her stepfather, a “wolf who snarls, but from a distance.”

After Trouville, Nelly went to stay with Henri’s niece, Angèle Déraux, in Vaires (Seine-et-Marne), and then to a hotel near Dainville. New tensions arose as Montupet, Louise Nel, and, unwittingly, even Mireille pressured Nelly to stay with them at their home in Beurey (Meuse), which produced a rarely expressed sense of guilt about maternal and filial obligations—she especially worried about disappointing Mireille. It also produced a new “symptom” strongly associated with neurasthenia—indecisiveness—quite uncharacteristic of Roussel’s former self. “Ah, my wonderful state of tranquility didn’t last long, my sweet satisfaction of knowing what I want and must do!” She described herself in a state of despair at “having to choose, to fall again into the incertitude that has tormented me for three weeks.” Still smarting from his stepdaughter’s “disobedience,” Montupet urged Henri to send her to Beurey for the sake of her health and blamed him for the family crisis. He claimed that Henri, if he had wanted to, could have prevented Nelly from staying with the Tilquins.

Henri angrily drafted a response to his father-in-law in which he expressed his deep frustration over Nelly’s condition: “Could I have opposed this trip? Yes, it’s
true, but the question for me was to know if this was wise, given the situation: Nelly having her [train] permit in her hands, and the idea in her head that this trip would improve the state of her health? That put me in the position of either upsetting her or annoying you—you to whom I owe so much and whom I like very much, despite [the fact] that it doesn’t disturb you in the least to hurt me without any reason when something passes through your head.”

On the subject of Nelly joining the family in Beurey, Henri stressed her need for the solitude: “I do not know if it will please her to go to Beurey, which is so far away, and where she will have stormy arguments with Marcel, because she does not know how to moderate her anger with humor, as it is necessary to do with children”; and then with reference to a fundamental aspect of her personality and the “overwork” that was causing her illness, he stressed: “she does everything with the same conviction—that is what is killing her—lectures, or discussions, or simple conversations, she uses all her strength in them—that is why the regime that suits her the best for the moment is solitude.”

The dispute also aggravated tensions between Henri and Nelly. As he argued against her journey to Beurey, she began to rationalize why she should go: she wanted to visit both Mireille and war ruins Mireille ardently wanted her to see. At the same time, she feared that the train would exhaust her and aggravate her gastrointestinal problems. But she further reasoned that a change of scene had always been good for her, and that it would compensate for the fatigue. She asked Henri’s advice. He responded furiously: “I was . . . imagining that it was the solitude that suited you, and not Pépé’s passionate conversation. The question is to know whether you are counting on taking care of yourself or treating your physical depression with contempt. . . . Decidedly, it is your lot to be pulled between contradictory projects.”

Nelly’s indecision and sense of powerlessness deepened her psychological crisis; she wrote four or five letters to Henri over four days, but she was unable to send them. He in turn fell into depression because he had not heard from her. His fears about her health deepened, especially when he received letters from the rest of the family indicating that they anticipated her arrival in Beurey. When he finally heard from her, the physical appearance of her letters drove him to further despair. Although she had written in the same manner for more than ten years—neatly adding notes in the margins, sideways and upside down (in order to save paper), now her marginalia were scribbles that represented to Henri the disarray of her very being. But the content upset him more, especially when she wrote, “I just came through a ghastly crisis, a true torment of indecision, which aggravated my poor sick nerves.” These words only fueled Henri’s anger and
frustration, already at a boiling point because of his overriding concern for her mental and physical health. Just thinking about the possible trip to Beurey, he claimed, had put her in a terrible mental state, and he blamed her for creating her own crisis. Still smarting from Montupet’s suggestion that he had no control over his wife, Henri confessed that he had “surrendered as always to the desire not to oppose” her for fear of making her even iller; but in this case, Henri concluded, his own surrender only contributed to her crisis of indecision, and he felt “deeply discouraged.”

Roussel did not go to Beurey. Instead, she spent August and September of 1915 in a pension in Villiers (Seine-et-Marne, near Dainville). Upon her arrival there, she was in such pain that she could not even “read a newspaper and understand the meaning of the words” or write legibly. The proprietor, appreciative of her “celebrity,” kindly told her it did not matter when she paid her rent. Her condition improved, but she was far from alone; she made friends with the other residents, performing *La Faute d’Ève* and reading her lecture on rescue dogs for them. Uncharacteristically, she engaged in séances with local friends from the previous summer, Mmes Bienaimé and Béal, whose husbands had been called up. Mme Béal, a “remarkable medium,” made the spirit of Émile Darnaud, deceased a year earlier, appear in a hat. As Nelly recounted, “this spirit told us (using knocks) astonishing things, astonishing in that they were really from him, and could hardly be inspired by Mme Béal.” Henri was not at all happy to learn that his mentally fragile wife was dabbling in spiritualism, fearing it would frighten her, put her into a trance, or otherwise psychologically damage her.

Though Nelly’s stay in Villiers proved salutary, her gastrointestinal problems persisted. Henri proposed she stop all laxatives and purgatives, and she tried this, resulting in “an intense gastrointestinal crisis.” By the end of August, he was convinced she needed medical intervention, and he visited a sanatorium, where a Dr. Hercourt and his assistant reiterated the now familiar refrain, as he told Nelly, that they had “cared for and cured sick people of just your type.” Hercourt, who had examined Nelly on an earlier occasion, promised Henri that he would make “special arrangements” so that the sanatorium would be more affordable for them. It would be expensive nonetheless, Henri confessed, “but in the final analysis that doesn’t matter as long as we get results.” Henri insisted that Nelly could be cured if she set her mind to it and if she were far enough from Paris that she saw only family. But for reasons not revealed in the correspondence, she did not go into this sanatorium, and Henri concluded that Nelly lacked the conviction to seek the only thing he believed could cure her: complete rest and solitude, and isolation from everything that got on her nerves.
The stress that Henri endured over his wife’s health was intensified by the failure of the Carrara joint-stock company, his dependency on Montupet, and his need to find some other source of income. He was also forced to relinquish the sculpting workshop on rue du Rendez-Vous that he had occupied for twenty-five years; it was being converted to a factory for war production. He had to find places to store his large and unwieldy works of art, including the statue of Clémence Royer. After years of effort at raising money for the project, he had not succeeded in finding a public site for it. Henri felt a deep sentimental attachment to this space, and he compared his forced move to a bombardment.\(^{40}\)

In the early summer of 1915, at a time when his antipatriotic feelings were most intense, Godet attempted to go into business selling postcards—photographs of bas-reliefs he created that represented patriotic allegories of war. He quickly failed because, as wholesalers told him, his cards were “works of art,” and only “really stupid cards” sold.\(^{41}\) He then pursued every possible industrial contact. Many among them, both family and friends, were profiting from war-related industries, especially Montupet, Paul Nel, and Fritz Robin. Indeed, the latter two, originally called up for duty, were returned home within a matter of months so that they could attend to their respective industries.\(^{42}\) Their longtime friends the Wolfs also profited; Mr. Wolf was in the business of financing industrialists and was directly involved with a three-million-franc order for shells. Henri’s desperation even drove him to consider asking Wolf for money. In the end, no doubt through Montupet’s or Wolf’s contacts, Henri settled on the production and sale of machine oil as a possible business, but again met with marketing difficulties. He hoped to get Wolf to introduce him to the socialist leader Albert Thomas, who had just entered Viviani’s cabinet as undersecretary of state for artillery and munitions, so that he might obtain a government contract. But by the beginning of August, the situation looked grim. “I do not find the means of earning a penny, despite my work and my perseverance,” Henri wrote frustratedly, fretting about what “Pépé” thought of this, just when Nelly had written that, to her surprise, she had little money left—not even enough to pay for her first week’s stay at the pension. Their letters crossed in the mail. When Nelly received Henri’s, she responded: “Since I hope that mother is going to think of sending me something, you don’t have to think about selling your soul this time. It is true that we can sell the jewels first, which would be a lot easier—because your soul is too valuable to find someone who could put a price on it in the general mess of these times.”\(^{43}\)

Godet’s luck then began to change. By chance, he ran into Billiard, an old acquaintance he assumed had been mobilized. Like the others, Billiard had more value on the home front in war-related production. Billiard put Godet in touch
with an English oil company and a steel manufacturer, whose representative he became. While he did not make the millions he thought he would, his financial situation improved quickly. In 1916, he went into partnership with a man named Del Pozo, formed H. Godet & Company, General Factory Suppliers, and became an aggressive entrepreneur. Even while urging Nelly not to travel to the Montupets’ home in Fourchambault in the summer of 1916, he instructed her to distribute his prospectus and price lists to the industrial establishments there. Times had changed for the antimodern Henri Godet, who had dismissed automobiles for always breaking down and believed that airplanes would never get off the ground. From the Taverne de Paris on the Place de la République, he wrote to Nelly about how bizarre it felt to be composing a letter in the midst of the noise of automobiles and the “soft perfume of gasoline.” After a business trip in which he met with aviators, whose conversation “was not banal,” Godet noted “it goes without saying, how lucky one is to be in living in a period where extraordinary things are happening.” Despite his native cynicism, Henri Godet was finally “modern” in his sensibilities. By October 1916, he reported that his business was going “distinctly well.” All the same, he continued to identify himself as a “sculptor.”

Mireille, Marcel, and Mathilde

No one in France escaped the ravages of the Great War, but people’s experiences of it varied according to age, gender, and social status. This was as true in the microcosm of Nelly Roussel’s family as elsewhere. About to turn fifteen when the war broke out, Mireille had already blossomed into a competent, serious young woman who shared many of her parents’ tastes and passions. As with other young people, the war forced an early adulthood on her when the lives of close friends were struck with tragedy. Initially, she shared Montupet’s optimism, and contrary to her parents’ position, she openly expressed “anti-Boche” sentiments. She also expressed a keen fascination with troop mobilization and the presence of Germans on French soil. In the summer of 1915, about to leave for the Montupet home in Beurey, not far from the front, she felt excitement at the prospect of hearing cannon fire. Once there, she observed evidence of what she referred to as “kulture Boche” with contempt. Soldiers’ outhouses became salles à manger de Guillaume (William’s dining rooms), and henceforth guillaume became the family’s word for toilet. “Admire the pretty color of the Eure [river],” she wrote; “it must be made with the blood of Germans.”

But Mireille then saw ruins from the Battle of the Marne, which transformed her: “I am beginning to see a little of what the war is; it’s horribly sad, all these
demolished villages . . . all that remains are chimneys or walls pierced with bullets. Everywhere one encounters soldiers’ graves, French and German.” A few days later, she sent another postcard of the village they had seen: “My dear Mama, this is what we saw yesterday; it is the most moving of what I have seen up to this point . . . Not one house is standing, the region is desolate. Soldiers’ graves are everywhere, both French and German, in the gardens, on the roads, one meets up with nothing but that. I have never seen anything so sad!” In principle, such postcards should have been censored, because they conveyed a stark reality to everyone who saw them that the censored newspapers and word of mouth could not communicate. Such images sank into Mireille’s consciousness more profoundly as the sons, nephews, boyfriends, brothers, and husbands of close friends lost lives and limbs. Their close family friend Marcel Noble became a German prisoner of war and had his leg amputated.46

Throughout the war, Mireille not only found consolation in her studies but became nearly obsessed with them. Her academic awards and her letters demonstrate a lively innate intelligence. Throwing herself into the study of Latin, Italian, English, physics, chemistry, history, geography, and French literature, she worked to the point of exhaustion. Her efforts had such a deleterious impact on her health that at one point, she was forced to drop out of school. But she doggedly pursued her objectives in the face of increasing hardship and disruption. In 1916, at age 17, she decided to take courses to prepare herself for the baccalaureate examination, so that she could obtain a degree in philosophy and teach the subject. Such options had been unavailable to her mother’s generation. Ironically, Louise Nel helped cultivate in her granddaughter a drive for the education that she had denied her daughter.47

Given his purported feminism and aesthetic sensibilities, it is also ironic that Mireille’s father was far less keen than other family members on her idea of pursuing higher education. By the summer of 1916, his business was so successful that Henri imagined the opportunities it would offer Mireille: the “infinite diversity” of occupations, self-instruction, and possibilities of travel. She could use her English, and she would have the spare time to play the piano. He envisioned Mireille at some point replacing him in the business, “with her brother, or her husband, or even by herself . . . independence is the most essential thing in life,” he stressed. “The position of professor,” he told Nelly, “even when admirably paid, is a chain. It’s necessary to be on time, to recite platitudes in order to advance, one can get fired, etc.” He, however, would offer Mireille “liberty, [but] not equality.” She could learn to be a shorthand typist, for he would prefer a “patronne” (owner) to perform this indispensable labor rather than an employee. Emphasizing the
Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit

seriousness of his proposal, he urged Mireille and Nelly, who were together in Barbizon at the time, to decide quickly. Instead, Mireille worked so hard studying for the baccalaureate that she again became ill and once again had to suspend her studies.48

Mireille’s correspondence shows considerable maturity and an intimate, tender relationship with both her parents. Seeing her mother’s declining health, she became worried and protective. During the family crisis over the possibility of Nelly going to Beurey in 1915, she first pleaded with her mother to come. Then, realizing her mother’s psychological crisis, Mireille tried to assuage Nelly’s guilt, saying, “you must not regret that you did not come to see me,” and ended the letter with a tone of forced cheerfulness. Indeed, at times it seemed as though the mother-daughter role were reversed, as when Mireille wrote on the occasion of her eighteenth birthday: “I am happy to get your news, but above all, do not tire yourself out more by writing to me; that would make me feel bad. Take advantage this month of the solitude and come back to Paris with more energy.”49

Mireille also provided emotional support for her father in the relocation of his workshop, and she aided both her parents by participating in the ongoing effort to discipline and cultivate Marcel. She tutored Marcel in English and chastised him when he did not correspond frequently enough, and when the letters he did write lacked proper etiquette. Mireille rarely wrote about her brother without biting sarcasm. Her attitude seems not to have derived from simple sibling rivalry, since she was five years older and they had not lived together under the same roof. Rather, it was a piece of the family dynamic, which included the perception that Marcel, unwanted from his conception, continued to cause disruption by his very existence, especially for Nelly.50

Marcel faced his own set of challenges during the war. It broke out shortly before his tenth birthday. Rather than returning to boarding school in the fall of 1914, he moved back to his parents’ apartment and attended school in Paris. Henri, who was alone with him during Nelly’s rest cures, generally had a much better relationship with Marcel than did his mother, Mireille, or their domestic, Mathilde. But Henri needed to discipline him, which he did maladroitly. He complained, for example, that Marcel was not diligent enough about his homework. One night “the animal” (meaning silly devil), as they regularly called him, returned home nearly two hours late, which infuriated Henri. In retaliation for his son’s insensitivity to the worry and annoyance he had caused, Henri chose to do something that would “deliberately annoy” Marcel. “I fell on his green beans and pitilessly destroyed them,” provoking “tears and grinding of teeth,” he wrote Nelly. Marcel had carefully cultivated his potted haricots verts, and Mireille and
Henri had previously threatened to throw them out the window as punishment for his recurring misdeeds. Despite Henri’s penchant to retaliate rather than to discipline, he, more than Nelly, understood that much of Marcel’s behavior had to do with simply being a child.51

Marcel got on his mother’s nerves more as her progressively worse illness further reduced her toleration for noise of any sort. In the summer of 1915, when Henri was making plans to visit Nelly at her summer pension, he asked whether he should bring Marcel. She responded that it would be better to leave him in Paris with Andrée, so that he would not miss school. But Henri cut to the truth of the matter: “It’s not an issue of school; he doesn’t attach importance to it; but the kid’s presence would perhaps be a little too much for you [and would be] the opposite of solitude.” And on the same subject a few days later, he wrote, “you seem to dread the presence of your son so much that I no longer know what to do.” A year later, when Nelly was visiting her mother with the children at the mineral springs in Bourbon L’Archambault, she wrote, “however likeable my entourage is, I suffer from being constantly surrounded, above all, when the entourage includes Marcel, the terrible ‘tormentor.’” A week later, from Montupet’s house in Fourchambault, she wrote of Marcel’s “laziness and abominable character that drives us all to despair. He can’t say here that ‘it’s Mathilde’s fault.’” The problem with Marcel was not just in Nelly’s mind. When Henri read this last sentence to Mathilde, she emitted “shouts of triumph” that Marcel could no longer blame her for his bad behavior. Marcel was difficult for everyone.52

Mathilde Eyssartier was otherwise the glue that held the family together. Like all bourgeois families of the time, Roussel and Godet continued to depend on the help of a domestic servant—and more so as Nelly’s health declined. They were fortunate after years of unreliable servants to hire Mathilde, who first came into their service in February 1912.53 The war transformed relations between employers and domestic servants, not just because of supply and demand economics—domestic servants became increasingly rare during the war, while the need for them did not—but because the crises it produced in everyday life loosened some of the psychological, emotional, and class barriers between them. Such was certainly the case with the young Mathilde, aged twenty when the war began.

Mathilde attended Roussel’s lectures, went on long walks with her in Vincennes and the forests of Fontainebleau and Barbizon, and corresponded with the family when she was away. The penmanship, grammar, and spelling errors in her letters reflect her lower-class background and a deferent attitude, but the letters also reveal a warm affection and genuine concern for her employers. They do not, however, indicate the power she wielded. Mathilde had control over when
and for how long she would take time off to visit her own family in the provinces or to see one of her succession of poilu (soldier) lovers. Henri and Nelly had to “borrow” the servants of others when Mathilde decided to leave for several weeks at a time. Many of their own decisions had to take her wishes into consideration. Her willingness to accompany them determined whether Nelly or the family would go into a pension or rent a house or apartment while away from Paris. During one relocation crisis in 1918, Mireille wrote to her father, “Mathilde assumed direction of the [multifamily boarding] house and everyone must obey her here, including us.” In the summer of 1917, when Mathilde was temporarily working elsewhere, Godet lamented, “It’s the eternal question of maids at this moment; it’s that way everywhere. We shall talk about it in Barbizon—and Mathilde will tell us what she wants to do.” Mathilde was particularly fond of Nelly’s company, which she found stimulating, and she especially enjoyed being with her in the forest.  

Roussel’s Refuge: “Her” Forest

EXHILARATION

Hour of exaltation too brief,
Respite from my exquisite suffering,
Sublime happiness of a moment,
Reality more beautiful than a dream
I come, in the summer that draws to a close
To gaze upon your dazzling sight.
I come, vibrating like a lyre,
To proclaim my joy and my delirium,
Plunge myself, exhilarated, into your splendor,
Which in turn enchants me and tears me apart,
Autumn, heroic smile
of dying Nature.

Nelly Roussel,
Barbizon, October 15, 1917

Nelly Roussel had always loved forests. She had spent hour upon hour walking and hiking through whichever one she came upon in her peripatetic existence. The forests of Barbizon and Fontainebleau (Seine-et-Marne) assumed such special meaning to her that she claimed them as her own (“ma forêt”). She
measured every other natural setting by the standard of “her forest,” and nothing was ever as good (fig. 15). Her devotion to the forest became more acute during the war, because it alone offered her respite and solace during these dark days of failing health and the suspension, if not complete failure, of all the principles to which she had dedicated her career. Thwarted from public speaking and political writing, forced into prolonged rest cures, Roussel found her voice in poetry; “Exhilaration” was one of seventeen poems she later published in a small volume entitled *Ma forêt*. Of these published poems, the first was written in 1909; but she wrote most of them in 1916 and 1917 while in Barbizon.

“Exhilaration,” whose translation above loses the fine symmetry of her rhyme and form, exemplifies the mixture of dark emotion and sublime spirituality the forest evoked in her. “Hymne” is more explicitly spiritual: “O living temple! Cathedral of/ Gold and emerald at every turn!/ . . . I am your priest, your vestal virgin,/ Whose love never sleeps/ . . . ” (Barbizon, October 29, 1916). The spiritual self Roussel expressed in her poetry is reminiscent of her youthful religious devotion, and of her first publication, a poem about the cathedral of Notre Dame. Although she had not completely abandoned her belief in science and progress, the horrors of war, added to the repeated failures of conventional and alternative medicine to diagnose or cure her worsening stomach ailment, magnified her need for a new kind of cathedral. The forest offered a tableau of beauty that constantly changed with the seasons and with the light of each day. It afforded her solitude and freedom from the noises that so enervated her, as well as the space for physical exercise and rest; and it gave her an outlet for literary self-expression as her former ones dried up. The forest, she claimed, made her feel sixteen years old.56

Marcel and Mireille both spent more time with their mother during the two summers in Barbizon (1916 and 1917). During that time she had unusually few complaints about her son; in fact, she wrote about him with warmth, and she genuinely amused herself with him. Godet and both children also visited her on weekends when her stay there extended into the autumn months—the season that held most meaning for her. Nelly loved sharing her forest with others. After one visit, Mathilde returned to Paris with “shouts of enthusiasm” about “Madam’s forest,” and recounted, to Godet’s consternation, that she could not keep pace with “Madam,” who, she said, almost turned a somersault scrambling through a ravine. Nelly subjected each of the many friends and family who visited Barbizon and Fontainebleau to her walking itineraries. She incorporated her family into the forest by naming her special places for them: “Mireille’s and Marcel’s Oasis,” “Belvedere Henri Godet,” “Tatadée Route.” Because she consid-
erected the forest “sacred,” she passed judgment on others based on the degree of respect—or lack thereof—they accorded to it. “Mr. Montupet” did poorly on this count, because he thought all trees were the same.57

If the forest offered Roussel solace, it could not stop her recurrent gastrointestinal crisis and other sources of physical distress. Her need for silence and solitude, moreover, sometimes made visitors unwelcome. As in the past, Nelly complained of her sister Andrée’s loud, excessive chatter in the forest and expressed relief when she departed: “in the sudden silence, one hears all the songs of the meadows and woods better.” In September 1917, Nelly’s mood swings and Andrée’s screeching voice caused a serious, long-term breach between them. Nelly felt “shattered,” but she had no regrets. The two sisters had no direct contact for more than a year.58

If the forest could not cure Nelly, it alone was able to provide a measure of spiritual and emotional comfort, not only as a space, but as an outlet for her need to write and to perform. “Exhilaration,” Henri thought, was among the best poems Nelly had written about the forest.59 The autumn months that inspired it had special meaning for her because of the changing vibrant colors; but as her bittersweet poem indicates, nature inevitably “died with a smile.” The autumn reminded her of her own mortality; death must at times have seemed imminent. But her literary production also revitalized her social contacts. She sent her poems to friends and family and read them aloud at a Barbizon dinner party in honor of an artilleryman home on leave. The hosts and guests seemed very pleased.60

Roussel extended her 1917 stay in the forest as long as she possibly could—until the end of October—when even the thought of leaving made her sob, caused insomnia, and gave her “black ideas.” When she finally returned to Paris with her persistent digestive disorders, her routine centered on treatments by a therapist called Magnin, who massaged her stomach with electric currents to ease her digestion, the standard treatment for neurasthenia. She saw him nearly every day. When she was too fatigued to go out, he came to her home. If her weight is any accurate measure of the success of these treatments, they may have helped, for she gained five pounds from the beginning of November through the end of December.61

Paris Bombardment, 1918

On January 30, from 11:30 p.m. to 1:30 a.m., four squadrons of seven Gotha bombers each attacked Paris, each dropping more than 250 bombs. Some of them fell directly on the Godets’ neighborhood: rue du Rendez-vous (where
Henri’s former workshop was located, place de la Nation, avenue St. Mandé (where the Montupets and Mireille lived), and the cour de Vincennes. Altogether the Germans dropped fourteen tons of bombs, which killed 49 people and injured 206. Parisians suffered panic during several siren alerts through February, and they endured another bombardment on March 8. This time the bombs hit Nelly and Henri’s street, boulevard Soult; 13 people died and 50 were injured. More bombs fell three days later. Then, on March 23, “Big Bertha,” a cannon capable of hitting its target from 74 miles away, lobbed shells into Paris throughout the entire day. Parisians abandoned their city en masse. On April 1, Nelly, Henri, Mireille, and Marcel took a night train to Grenoble, where they arrived at noon the next day, three hours behind schedule.62

Roussel and Godet chose Grenoble because Mireille had a friend there who could help them find lodging. More important, they needed to go to a city where Henri could conduct his business and the children could resume their schooling. Mireille, who had once again decided to take the baccalaureate exam, felt particularly concerned about continuing course work to prepare for it, and Grenoble offered that possibility. The move was hard on everyone: the exodus from Paris produced chaos on the train system and led to price gouging in the cities to which Parisians fled. Hotels, boardinghouses, and apartments quickly filled up, and the few rooms available rented for outrageous prices. The trip itself was traumatic for Nelly. Already plagued by nervous anxiety and insomnia, the two months of bombardments and bomb alerts further destabilized her. Upon their arrival in Grenoble, she collapsed with fatigue. They managed to reserve a hotel only for the first night, and had no idea where they would stay thereafter. Henri complained to Montupet about the shortage in housing and high prices, and he was grateful to receive 670 francs from the latter.63

The following day, everyone but Nelly scrambled about looking for a permanent place to stay. It was Marcel—now thirteen years old—who found a convenient “villa” in La Balme, two and a half kilometers outside Grenoble, accessible by a tramway that ran every thirty minutes. The proprietors rented out three rooms, of which the Godet family occupied two. They were pleased that the house had electricity, and they appreciated the beauty of its location at the foot of the Alps. From one side of their rooms, they had a lovely view of the mountains. The other side, unfortunately, offered the unpleasant and ominous sight of munitions factories. At first, Nelly was able to endure the ugly sight of these factories by telling herself that they served the cause of national defense; but she later complained bitterly about the noise they emitted, and the railroad line running just below them that kept her awake at night. As Mireille described it to
her grandmother, the cannon fire from nearby forts, and the “factory sirens that groan lugubriously several times a day, and even at night” made her think they were under attack, as in Paris.°

The family mobilized itself around Nelly’s care, obtaining a chaise longue so that she could spend her days resting tranquilly in the sun. They immediately established a normal routine: Marcel started school in Grenoble, tutors were found to guide Mireille through her “bachot” studies, and Henri conducted business in Grenoble. The bombardment had shaken him too, for it brought back memories of 1914, when it had seemed that the Germans were on the verge of laying siege to Paris. Thoroughly cynical now, he saw no end to the war, and he feared for his own business if he lost its Paris headquarters. He came to view the move to Grenoble as a semi-permanent one. The attacks on Paris continued sporadically, and he worried that the Germans would soon invade the city. If they did, the same thing would happen there as in other places the Germans had invaded: refugees had to flee suddenly, leaving all their possession behind to be looted or destroyed. He thus decided to return to Paris as soon as it would be practical in order to shift the headquarters of his business outside of Paris and retrieve the family furniture and valuables. As he summed up their situation to the Montupets, “we have no choice but to be buffeted about by events.”

Because of Nelly’s health, Henri had to remain in La Balme until they could find lodging for Mathilde and arrange for her to join them. It took two weeks for Nelly to emerge from her self-described “scatterbrained, stunned, numbed” state, during which she continued to feel head and stomach pain. Her “extreme weakness and nervousness” persisted beyond the first two weeks: every concern became an object of obsessive worry, and she feared her own mental depression as much as she did her physical state. Just as she thought she was recovering from the fatigue of relocation, Mireille came down with German measles. The proprietor was “crazy with fear about contagion,” and Henri had to persuade him to let them stay. The maid refused to enter their rooms, placing on them the burdens of housekeeping, which Henri assumed. Nelly wrote to her mother about the sad month that had passed since their arrival in Grenoble—a month of “rain, cold, ennui, illness,” and the “diurnal and nocturnal battles” with her stomach.

Nelly began to feel better once she hired a masseuse, Mme Berthier, to treat her four times a week; she became strong enough to take 90-minute walks. They finally found a room for Mathilde in La Balme, and she joined them, which allowed Henri to depart for Paris on June 22, for what they—especially Nelly—assumed would be a brief trip. His departure sent her into a renewed state of profound depression and anxiety. She worried about what might happen to him
in Paris, and she lamented, moreover, the worry she caused him. The day after he left, she wrote to him of the sadness and guilt she felt over her mental state: “When you are here, I worry you with my neurasthenia; when you are gone, I want you to think of me without bitterness, seeing me as I once was, and not as I am now . . . without forgetting that there are ways in which I have not changed, and shall never change.”

In the meantime, the ever-determined Mireille had decided, despite crucial time lost to German measles, to take the baccalaureate anyway, and she continued her tutoring in physics, chemistry, and English. She then took the exams—with great diffidence—at the end of June. Her other preoccupation was her mother’s health.

Around 3:00 p.m. on June 29, Nelly was preparing to dress and go to Grenoble; she was still in her nightgown and slippers. Mireille was writing a letter to Louise Nel. She said that her mother was plagued by “Colcothar [her period], who is a person more and more disagreeable; [Mama] is not well these days, all the more so now that she is worrying about Papa being in Paris . . .”

Mireille’s letter abruptly broke off in mid-sentence because the house started shaking violently; armoires with mirrors fell shattering to the floor as windows exploded, covering Mireille and Nelly with shards of glass. They tumbled down the stairs, out the door, and scrambled up the mountain into a meadow where, from under the shelter of trees, they witnessed the source of this calamity: the munitions depot across from their house had exploded. A second detonation followed fifty minutes later, and a series of others lasted until 6:30 p.m. Mathilde found them, and as night fell, they joined other neighbors and slept in a field. Mireille later wrote, “Apart from the worry over Marcel, who was at the lycée [in Grenoble], this marvelous summer night, soft and starry, illuminated by the fire was an extraordinary spectacle.” The explosions shattered windows even in Grenoble, where people at first thought there had been an earthquake. All transportation between La Balme and Grenoble stopped, and Marcel was not even permitted to try to go home on foot. He spent two nights in a hotel owned by friends of theirs, wondering why no one in the family had come to get him. “It appears I was the bravest,” he later told his father.

The day after the explosion, Mireille, Nelly, and Mathilde miraculously found a new pension farther up the mountain in La Monta, a 40-minute tram ride from Grenoble. While not as elegant as their La Balme “villa,” the setting was more beautiful. The following week, Mathilde, Marcel, and Mireille salvaged all they could from the damaged house they had fled. They found that they had lost surprisingly few of their possessions. Also surprising, Nelly came through the
disaster more successfully than anyone would have thought possible, given her mental and physical state. She wrote her mother about how “lucky we are to have come out of the rubble of the house without the slightest injury, not to have been rendered crazy or deaf by this frightening day of cataclysm, not to have caught a cold while sleeping outside, not to have lost anything, lucky not to have been more shaken up, and the extraordinary luck of having found a new pension right away.”

In the midst of this disruption, Mireille learned, to her surprise, that she had passed her written exams, and was expected to appear for an oral exam within a week of the explosion. Henri received the news of his daughter’s success by way of telegram when he was in his Paris office and in a fragile mental state. Fearing the continued bombardments in Paris and regretting his trip there, he was further unnerved by the news of the explosion—about which he had received only the barest of details through the press. His reaction to Mireille’s unexpected success is noteworthy: “I who have endured everything since I left you so well, including your catastrophic story, without showing any emotion—become dizzy and am obliged to hide myself in the closet and cry like a kid . . . you are going to catch it for having made your father cry.” He described Mireille as his baby duck who kept swimming toward the “bachot” in the middle of explosions.

When Henri wrote this letter, he had been in Paris for about a week, and it had become clear to him that his stay there would not be short. Beyond tending to his business, his other task was to sort through the possessions in their apartment on boulevard Soult, obtain a long list of objects Nelly and Mireille had requested, store valuables in the basement, and decide whether to send their furniture to Grenoble. Most important, Nelly wanted all their photographs and the correspondence from Émile Darnaud. Entering the boulevard Soult apartment threw Henri into a state of reverie. Of a cherished photo, he said, “Mireille is still on the piano with her little doll in hand,” and then referring to the bust he had so lovingly sculpted fourteen years earlier, “the other Mireille . . . seems to look out benevolently; and you, Nelly, you have the air of being in the clouds,” a noteworthy comment, given that he had originally wanted to sculpt his wife’s eyes cast downward on Mireille. Two weeks later—July 14—Henri still could not decide what to take and what to leave, for he could not determine which objects were most valuable and where they would be safest; moreover “everyone” now thought a “Boche” advance on Paris improbable.

As Henri’s stay in Paris dragged on with no clear end in sight, Nelly grew impatient and even angry, because she could not understand why he was unable to accomplish the few tasks they both deemed urgent and return to La Monta. She
continued her obsessive worry about further bombardments. News of the bombardments always reached her sooner than his letters, the latter being further delayed because Paris had once again become a military zone. Meanwhile a new cause for family conflict emerged: the question of where they would spend the winter.

The conflict that ensued highlights details of their wartime material life, their chronic, free-floating anxieties, and the fragility of Nelly’s mental health. Montuget, ever optimistic that the war would soon end, wanted them to return to Paris. Godet, having just packed and stored their valuables in the cellar and divested himself of the Paris branch of his business, had now committed to a permanent residence elsewhere. Del Pozo had made Henri his sales representative for engineering supplies in both the departments of the Isère (Grenoble) and the Rhône (Lyon). Nelly and Mireille strongly favored the former, Henri the latter, primarily for reasons of business. A fierce debate ensued. Nelly viewed Lyon as city of “seagulls and sausages,” a virtual cesspool with a damp, chilly climate and noxious air that would render the whole family more susceptible to disease, especially Henri, who was prone to bronchial infections. Mathilde refused to winter in either Grenoble or Lyon, and announced she would return to Paris, further complicating their choices between a pension and an apartment. The former were rare, expensive, and had less privacy; and proprietors, Henri claimed, skimped on coal. But an apartment would require furniture and a domestic.

Henri eventually won the argument, but the protracted debate in their correspondence further undermined Nelly’s nerves. Once again Marcel became impossible for her to bear. The move to La Monta had put him in a “foul mood.” He also bickered constantly with Mathilde, and Mireille complained that no one could control him. Nelly complained to Henri of their son’s “disobedience, his imprudence, and his lies . . . you might reprimand him . . . but you will be no more effective than I.” In August, when they were all entrenched in the Lyon versus Grenoble argument, Mireille further described the family dynamics to her father: “At no price do I want to stay between Mathilde and Marcel, a situation that is going to become completely insane, since I have no authority over either one or the other. Moreover, I don’t know who does have authority, because Mama herself renounces it, and as soon as they see that she is not very, very sick, they go at each other. When one of them behaves well, the other picks a fight.” Mme Berthier, the masseuse, finally stepped into the vacuum of authority and told Marcel not only that he was making his mother too ill for her treatments but that his behavior would cause him to fall ill with peritonitis, typhoid fever, and cerebral congestion. Apparently, her threats had a positive effect.
Godet finally returned to his family on August 11, having been absent for fifty days. He stayed only a week and then went to Lyon to establish his new headquarters; from there, he commuted back to La Monta regularly. During this month and the next, Roussel seemed somewhat revived, but the whole family, once again “buffeted by events,” successively fell ill with a “ferocious flu” that ruined their final weeks in the Alps. They moved to Lyon on September 23.75

Lyon: The Spanish Flu

Had Nelly known that the misnamed “Spanish flu” had begun to spread in Paris when Henri was there, she would have had yet another reason to panic—she had already expressed fears about his health because of the unusual July heat. But in fact, the whole family seemed oblivious to the flu epidemic even as each member, including the Montupets while visiting La Monta, fell sick with an apparently less deadly strain. About 20 percent of the Spanish flu victims had a mild form of the illness. The more serious cases took one of two forms. The first began with ordinary flu symptoms, but within four or five days, the virus attacked the lungs, leading to severe pneumonia, which resulted in either death or a prolonged convalescence. The second, more frightening form filled victims’ lungs with fluid and killed them within hours or days. It produced brown and purple blotches over the face leading many to conclude that the disease was cholera.76

The Roussel-Godet-Montupet family’s complacency at first glance seems strange, given the high toll the disease had already wrought. In Paris alone, nearly a hundred people died in July and August—which was only the beginning of an epidemic that would take 240,000 French lives, and from 20 to perhaps 100 million worldwide. But for reasons of morale, as the flu spread through France in June, the authorities decided to wait until military victory was imminent before revealing the seriousness of the epidemic and taking preventative measures. The “hundreds of thousands” of soldiers who died of the flu on or off the battlefield were said to have died on the “field of honor.” On July 6, the Paris press finally reported the spread of the flu in Europe, saying that the disease overcame its victims suddenly, but “disappeared in about a week without serious incidents apart from exceptional cases.” The continued bombardments and threats of attack occupied the press and the minds of the Parisians. Flu deaths—especially since many were misdiagnosed—were less sensational fare.77

The Roussel-Godet-Montupet correspondence makes reference to ill relatives and friends, some of whom died. But in fact, the family knew little about the actual threat that this pandemic posed. The silence of officials, and thus of
the newspapers, explains why Henri hardly mentioned the flu while he was in Paris that summer, and why it caused no panic as the family tried to make plans for their winter residence. They moved to Lyon just before the highest number of deaths occurred, and before officials lifted censorship about flu statistics. In Lyon, they settled into a furnished apartment in the center of the city. Mathilde went ahead to help Henri set up the apartment and stayed with them for the next few weeks until they could find a new domestic. Both children registered in their respective lycées—only to discover that the flu epidemic had forced a postponement in the opening of the school year.

Only in October were measures taken in Paris and Lyon to disinfect public places and advise the public of measures to be taken: isolate the sick, wear masks, brush teeth and wash hands, and avoid both indoor and outdoor public meetings. Those who fell ill were instructed to stay in bed, take aspirin, quinine, and lemonade with rum. In Lyon, the municipality kept schools closed and canceled public events. Even with these measures and the high rate of death in Paris—700 people a day by mid October—Nelly and her family did not appear very concerned—perhaps thinking that the flu they had had while in La Monta had inoculated them. When they arrived in Lyon, Nelly believed the epidemic was already fading. Instead, the death rate there spiked dramatically during these months. Like self-fulfilling prophecies, many of Nelly’s fears about Lyon were realized. The weather was predictably cold and damp; she immediately fell ill with a cold; their apartment was mouse-infested; and their guillaume backed up, with a dead mouse in the overflow. In a very unlikely coincidence, the terror of La Balme revisited them when an explosives factory in St. Fons, eight kilometers away, blew up, in a series of explosions that shook their apartment and lit up the night sky. And by the end of October, Roussel began to understand the true impact of the flu. She became very worried when Henri traveled to Paris in October and advised that he check himself regularly for a fever. Meanwhile, she was consuming large quantities of rum, a precaution doctors recommended. But it was in short supply and very expensive—16 to 25 francs a bottle.

Despite the end of the war—completely uncelebrated or even remarked upon in Roussel’s archive—the reopening of school, and the family’s apparent escape from the flu, Roussel once again fell into deep depression toward the end of November, even though her physical symptoms had improved. She sent apologies to her mother for not having written, saying, “The truth is that my depression jumps out enthusiastically with every pretext offered to it in order to torment me more.” Nelly understood the vicious cycle of her mental state: it cut her off from people and she became more depressed in her isolation. She thus made a
conscious decision to venture out, and indeed, the city environment seemed to stimulate and cheer her. Taking up her public pen for the first time in nearly a year and a half, she wrote an article for Madeleine Vernet’s new journal, La Mère éducatrice. Meanwhile, the whole family went to a Chopin festival, in which Isadora Duncan and an “extraordinary pianist” performed. So compelling were they that even “the coldness of the Lyonnais” could not inhibit enthusiastic applause. But the experience of being in the theater—as a member of the audience rather than as a performer—animated a different passion in Roussel. In her desire for purity as both an auditor and actress, she stood up and yelled at the audience to “shut up or leave,” because they were making too much noise when the program began. She subsequently determined to resume contact with human society by seeking out and visiting a schoolteacher who had organized one of her lectures in 1912. In this same period, she also took great pleasure in studying philosophy with Mireille.

Lyon offered Roussel another theater for the revival of her public self. She attended a performance for the “People’s Theater” of Taming of the Shrew by a syndicalist troupe associated with the Bourse du travail (labor exchange). She had read and appreciated Shakespeare but had not been familiar with this play. The inherent misogyny in it drove her to give a spontaneous speech after the performance. In addition, she wrote a letter to the head of the troupe and took it to the newspaper Le Proletaire—where, by chance, she was thrilled to attend a (syndicalist) union meeting at the Bourse du travail. With these activities, Nelly wrote to her mother that she felt herself “morally resuscitated” by this rebirth in her political involvement. She then made contact with the Socialist Youth, and she gave a second speech at the Bourse du travail.

But once again events beyond Nelly’s control intervened and turned her revival into what she described as “a flash in the pan,” and “the gray cinders that embroil the soul” returned. Just as she reentered public life in Lyon in the middle of December, Mireille’s philosophy teacher came down with the flu. Initially, the silver lining to this unfortunate event loomed larger than the cloud: it prompted Mireille to suggest that the entire family return to Paris as soon as possible, since she would be unable to pursue her studies. Henri decided that he could conduct what business he had in Lyon from a distance. The family made its decision in half a day, and that night, they celebrated with their close friends the Wolfs, who were passing through Lyon. Nelly made train reservations for December 24 and tenderly wrote her mother to “put a shoe under the chimney for Christmas so that you will receive a doll,” wanting to surprise her with their beloved granddaughter’s timely arrival. In the meantime, Mireille wrote to her grandmother...
about how happy they all were to be leaving their “foggy city,” and of her “mad passion to see the streets of Paris again” and to move back into her “pretty pink room.” But, she added, “I dare not rejoice because there can always be a hitch.” Indeed, in this same letter, she mentioned that Marcel had a sore throat and fever, “symptoms of the famous flu,” and then complained, “he could have waited until we got to Paris.”

Initially, they thought that Nelly and Mireille could go to Paris as planned, leaving Henri and Clothilde, their new domestic servant, behind to care for Marcel. But four days later, Mireille too had a fever. On December 23, a doctor came to see the children, both of whom were coughing badly. “In a word,” Henri reported to the Montupets, “it’s the flu.” No one was going to Paris. Henri believed they had both contracted it at the lycée, Marcel from his English teacher, who had supposedly recovered, and Mireille from her philosophy teacher, whose flu had provided the excuse to leave Lyon in the first place. The doctor ordered a number of remedies, including quinine suppositories, tisanes, milk with rum, aspirin, and other medicines, in addition to the application of mustard plasters and suction cups. Both children had high temperatures; Marcel’s peaked at 104 degrees (40º C) by December 24. The doctor considered his case the most serious, because he detected the lung congestion characteristic of the more deadly strain. Mireille’s flu fostered the less serious secondary infection of bronchitis.

As a sign of the Montupets’ parental claim over Mireille, Godet promised he would report to them daily on the flu’s course. While he tried to assure them—“don’t worry, I am doing everything necessary”—the panic and fatigue in his letters are palpable. He took both children’s temperatures around the clock and reported them to Montupet. Because they did not want their domestic to contract this highly contagious flu, she remained shut off from the children; Henri and Nelly both tended to them, a difficult task. “You have an idea of our occupations from morning to evening, without counting the fact that Nelly still is not well and that she has just entered into her critical monthly period. Of course, I have abandoned all other occupations.” By Christmas Day, Marcel was out of danger, but his muscles had atrophied, and he could barely walk. It was only on December 29 that he was strong enough to write his grandmother about his sadness over not spending New Year’s Day with them for the first time ever. By January 11, Mireille had recovered enough to walk outside on her father’s arm. The family finally returned to Paris in mid January.

From 1914 through 1918, Nelly Roussel and her family not only endured the terrible impacts of war but suffered through her physical and mental illness. Starting in the winter of 1917–18, they experienced the bombing of their Paris
neighborhood, a spontaneous exodus and economic dislocation, and a terrifying epidemic that threatened their children’s lives. What did these events do to Nelly Roussel’s political and feminist sensibilities and the concerns that had previously driven her career?

After 1916, apart from making reference to her personal encounters with soldiers on leave, Nelly said very little about the war in her voluminous private correspondence, even though Henri often wrote about it. By cutting her venues for public speaking, the war colluded with her disease—and its misdiagnosis—to silence her and turn her sensibilities inward. These events, along with the daily physical pain she suffered, offered sufficient cause for depression, which in turn aggravated her insomnia and intestinal dysfunction. Neurasthenia was a logical diagnosis at the time. Labeling her ailment no doubt gave her hope and made her feel less guilty about her behavior. But it was also a suggestive diagnosis that may have increased her propensity for depression. The cure for it—rest—also silenced her. As her activities in Lyon suggest, she needed a public life. She hoped that returning home to Paris, to her former life and feminist colleagues, would revive her.

One of the poems she wrote after her return, however, points to the despair she continued to feel after these terrible four years. Her belief in progress, justice, and good gave way to a quasi-religious belief in “Beauty,” whose only home was the forest “cathedral.” Her poem “Invincible Croyance” (Invincible Belief) resembles the Catholic prayers of her girlhood, except that Beauty had replaced Christ in redeeming her from doubt:

\[
\text{. . . seeing that you come to my tormented heart} \smallskip \\
\text{To offer, O my forest, your enchanted sanctuary,} \smallskip \\
\text{I feel that, amidst such doubt,} \smallskip \\
\text{This weary, wounded heart, this poor, defeated heart,} \smallskip \\
\text{Will always believe in Beauty.} \\
\]

\textit{Nelly Roussel, Samoreau, October 1, 1919}

85