The Pathos of the Real

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[Show one who] shields his terrified eyes with one hand, the palm turned outwards toward the enemy, and the other hand resting on the ground to support his half raised body. Show others shrieking, open-mouthed and in flight. Show various kinds of weapons between the feet of the combatants such as broken shields and lances, broken swords and other similar things. Show dead men, some half and others completely covered with dust. [Show] the dust, as it mixes with the spilt blood turning into red mud, and the blood picked out by its colour, running its perverted course from the body into the dust.

—LEONARDO DA VINCI, “HOW TO REPRESENT A BATTLE”

Two Battlefields

In the course of his peregrinations in the tracks of destruction, the unnamed narrator of W. G. Sebald’s The Rings of Saturn comes upon the battlefield of Waterloo. The official monument of the memorial, a lion atop a pyramid, strikes him as tasteless, and he observes to his astonishment a small group, costumed as Napoleonic soldiers, moving about, seemingly without purpose, between a few stalls at the edge of the battlefield. “For a while I watched these mummers, who seemed to be in perpetual motion, as they disappeared amongst the buildings only to re-emerge elsewhere.” The sight of such pointless theatricality and the sensation of attending a production that seems to make do without an audience quickly give way, however, to the opposite impression: the battle panorama, which the narrator visits in the nearby rotunda, is emphatically intended for viewing. Quite different from the forsaken music troupe, which seems to embody Marx’s observation that history recurs as farce, the panorama purports to provide a comprehensive view of events. It simulates con-
temporaneity, immediacy, and overview. Its presentation strives to make
the events depicted entirely present, even to overwhelm the viewer, visu-
ally and affectively. This effect is achieved technically through trompe l’œil,
dramaturgically through the transgression of one of the central conven-
tions of pictorial representation: literally drawing the picture beyond its
boundaries, the panorama does away with the lateral frames of pictorial
representation. The events portrayed extend continuously 360 degrees
around the observer’s line of sight, stretching above to the sky or the hori-
zon. The space surrounding the viewer is fitted out with objects and fig-
ures from the painting, aiding in the simulation of continuity between the
pictorial world and the world of the observer—even when, as in the case
of Sebald’s narrator, this strategy misses its mark. The arrangement in the
foreground of the panorama strikes him as “a sort of landscaped prosce-
nium” (124), and the view to the horizon fills him with unease. “This then,
I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. We,
the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still
we do not know how it was” (125).³ To the observer of the late twenti-
eth century, the panorama comes to stand for a naive and uncritical con-
cept of history and its representation. Its pretensions to totality and co-
ergence seem presumptuous, its trust in the availability of past experience
naive, its suggestion of immediacy suspect. The battle panoramas are the
expression of a monumental mode of historiography, purporting to bring
past triumphs to life before the eyes of posterity.

The rejection of the claim to immediacy, perspicuity, and totality epit-
omized by the panorama of Waterloo is resumed and extended in an
episode from Austerlitz that presents us with the description of another
battle delivered by the title character’s history teacher, the eccentric André
Hilary. In his rendering of the historic battle of Austerlitz Hilary—far from
limiting himself to description in the narrow sense of the term—conjures
up moments of the battle in a quasi-dramatic fashion that is as virtuosic
as it is ironic. The vividness of his “dramatic descriptions,”⁴ which his
audience claims to remember in the greatest detail even years afterward,
seems only to be increased by the fact that “very often, probably owing
to his suffering from slipped disks, he gave them while lying on his back
on the floor” (70). The immobility of the narrating voice and the dynamic
action of the narrated events form a compelling contrast. As a narrative
counterpart to the battle panoramas, Hilary’s description strives toward

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incommensurate ideas of representation: the bird's-eye view—“surveying the entire landscape of those years from above with an eagle eye” (70), as Hilary characterizes his own reconstruction of events—and the suggestion of being on the scene, in the immediate presence of the event. Before the students’ eyes arises “a picture” (71) that is at once concrete and abstract in equal measure. The movement of the different regiments in their colored uniforms gives them an image of the battle as a kaleidoscopic play of patterns; the acoustic and atmospheric depiction of the clash of opposing cavalries and “whole ranks of men collapsing beneath the surge of the oncoming force” (71) brings a sinking feeling to the pits of the captivated listeners’ stomachs. But Hilary perpetually undermines his own virtuosity. He remarks that no rendition, no matter how systematic or complete, can do justice to the actual events:

All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us: the fallen drummer boy, the infantryman shown in the act of stabbing another, the horse’s eye starting from its socket, the invulnerable Emperor surrounded by his generals, a moment frozen still amidst the turmoil of battle. Our concern with history, so Hilary’s thesis ran, is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere. (71–72)5

Hilary’s hesitation gives weight to the fundamental difficulties of depiction. On the one hand, the problem is to some extent quantitative. “It would take an endless length of time,” the history teacher explains, “to describe the events of such a day properly” (71). On the other hand, there is the more qualitative problem of accuracy and authenticity. As the narrator of The Rings of Saturn had noted, no matter how much we are given to “see,” “we do not know how it was.” But not only is there an inevitable gap between the event and its later representations; there is also the intrusion of “preformed images already imprinted on our brains.” This realization is, in fact, something of a quote. It is based on a famous observation by Henri Beyle—that is, Stendhal—regarding the derivative and hence unreliable character of our memory: what Beyle believed to be deeply
inscribed and exact memories of Napoleon’s journey across the Alps was in fact based on an engraving. It is certainly no coincidence that the same Stendhal is invoked at the end of the Waterloo episode in *The Rings of Saturn*. There the narrator concludes his own views about the impossibility of “picturing” an actual battle, by recalling what is probably one of the most famous descriptions of a battle in modern European literature: the Waterloo episode from Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma*, which is precisely about the impossibility of obtaining a view of the battle from any single standpoint but also about the discrepancies between the battle paintings and literary descriptions that inform the charmingly hapless hero’s expectations and his actual experiences on the battlefield. Ironically, the insight in the inevitable overdetermination of memory and the imagination with prefabricated images and clichés takes itself the form of a literary reminiscence.

Sebald’s own writing can be viewed as an antidote against the ideal of transparency and against the pathos that characterize the panorama and its precursor, battle painting. In its nineteenth-century incarnation the genre of battle painting provided the paradigmatic case of a view of history that conceived of change as a fateful struggle between nations, led by heroic individuals and determined in decisive battles whose turning points the battle painters sought to capture, thus transforming carnage into iconic and ideological capital. The twentieth century also “unfolded under the paradigm of war.” But clearly, much of the art and literature of the twentieth century broke with the assumptions informing the iconography and ideology of the nineteenth-century art form, even as the idea that history unfolds under the sign of violence became ever more compelling. Sebald’s oeuvre is a case in point, both in the ways it represents and reflects (on) the historical experience of the twentieth century and in its view of history not as a matter of progression and progress but as a series of catastrophes. In his books the apparent transparency of the panorama gives way to *bricolage*, a semifictional and semidocumentary patchwork of stories and histories; and the pathos of battle painting is replaced by melancholy. Like the Benjaminian rag picker, Sebaldian narrators sift through the rubble and debris of history, tracking what Sebald has called the “natural history of destruction,” gathering evidence of a sweeping and yet largely misunderstood process of disintegration, the flip side, as it were, to the story of progress and civilization. Still, Sebald’s own

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works do not actually deal with the experience of war proper, despite the fact that he has criticized the German literature of the second half of the twentieth century for its failure to deal with one of the worst aspects of World War II, namely the air raids on German cities. The violence and destruction Sebald’s works register is in some sense both more universal and more obscure. It is what is deposited and “sedimented” in the various archives, landscapes, and settings that make up the world of his texts but also, and especially, in the life stories of the characters that his narrators encounter and whose biographies, whether fictional or nonfictional, they reconstruct. In the words of one recent commentator, what Sebald seeks to capture in his strangely documentary fictions is “the persistence of past suffering that has . . . been absorbed into the substance of lived space, into the ‘setting’ of human history.” This is why in Sebald’s “natural history of destruction” violence often figures in rather oblique ways. It is manifest not as a dramatic, eruptive force, though frequently the author mirrors man-made and natural disasters in one another, but mostly in more muted forms. Think, for example, of the violent acts with which the four protagonists of The Emigrants end their lives, belatedly implementing, it seems, the very annihilation for which the Nazis had singled them out and that they had escaped fortuitously. With very few exceptions the experience of war is not featured directly. It typically has a rather more subliminal presence, as for example in the mounds of rubble that the narrator, as a child growing up in Germany in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for the longest time took to be a “natural” element of the cityscape.

Sebald’s oeuvre is very much a meditation on how the violence of history has settled and “sedimented” in various repositories, both material and symbolic, from which it keeps unsettling and haunting the present.

Ekphrastic Writing and Iconoclasm: Picturing the Real

If war, as Alain Badiou has claimed, is one of the defining characteristics of the twentieth century, if indeed, as he puts it, “the passion of the century . . . is nothing other than war,” and more specifically still a “definitive” war, that is, “a total and final war to end all wars”—if this is the case, then which are the forms that have taken the place of the paradigmatic nineteenth-century iconography of battle painting and the panorama? How did those swept up by this “passion of the century,” those drawn into
it, whether willy-nilly or enthusiastically, account for their experiences? Which manner of representation could match the extremity of this experience? What are the modalities under which one could render the excess of the twentieth century’s “definitive,” “total,” and “final” war? As I have said, even though the aesthetics and ideology of battle painting serve as a foil for Sebald’s poetics of the natural history of destruction, war itself is not his proper subject. For an answer to these questions I therefore turn to an author whose writing consists of one unending effort to find a way to speak of this experience without succumbing to the illusion of transparency and the lure of pathos epitomized by the aesthetics of battle painting. The very difficulties cited by the Sebaldian narrators in their reflections on the representation of war are indeed reflected in an oeuvre that seems to have spent, in the words of Sebald’s André Hilary, “the endless length of time it would take to describe the events of such a day properly,” while grappling with the very questions raised apropos of battle painting.

Writing about his own experiences in World War II, Claude Simon has always insisted on the radical disorientation experienced under fire and the difficulty, noted by Stendhal, of doing justice to it retrospectively. For any retrospective account that presumes to show, to make us see “how it must have been,”13 performs the very operation that had become unavailable in that moment. Any subsequent attempt to render the radical displacement of the coordinates of perception and cognition has to restore to some degree what was lost during the moment of crisis. In this sense any rendering, precisely by virtue of being a rendering, changes the very thing it seeks to convey. Like the Sebaldian narrators, Claude Simon takes issue with the notion that the war experience is accessible and available to any straightforward rendition. His writing is very much about the inaccessibility and elusiveness of this experience, both then and now, that is to say, both on the battlefield and in the laborious process of recollection and reconstruction. The difficulty of access to and apprehension of that experience is further compounded by the other difficulty touched on in Sebald’s discussion of the panorama and the narrative depiction of battle: the fact that both the memory and the imagination are beset and distracted by the continual interference of large numbers of stock images. In Claude Simon, who, incidentally, has invoked the same Stendhal episode about the writer’s faulty memories of his participation in the Napoleonic campaigns, the
steady interference of images becomes a key part of writing about the war experience, even if this writing consists, to no small extent, in countering that interference. Resisting the notion that the past is a given that simply needs to be described, put before the reader’s eyes, as it were, the novels’ ongoing efforts to convey a sense of “how it was” take the form of a struggle with, and against, the images that continually impose themselves.

“Fragmentary Description of a Disaster” was the alternative title for Claude Simon’s best-known and most successful novel, La route des Flandres (translated into English as The Flanders Road). The book continues the tradition of battle painting and rewrites it in a quasi-iconoclastic manner. In this sense Simon’s writing could be characterized as a form of battle painting by other means, not only with respect to its reservations vis-à-vis the ideal of transparency, of ever actually being able to say, “Look, this is how it was,” but also in the way it quotes and revokes the pathos of the genre. Pathos is in play on different levels of the novels. It figures most prominently perhaps in a certain heroic iconography in which the narrative tries to mould the war experience. Scenes and episodes are assimilated to a host of standard configurations, poses, and gestures, drawn from a shared iconic repertoire and producing strange effects of déjà vu. But the desire to endow the experience with a kind of mythic and ennobling aura by inscribing it in a certain iconographic lineage is typically undercut by somatic memories that are so powerful, indeed so traumatic, that they quickly undo any such idealizations. For the most part, however, the appeal to certain iconographic formulas is driven by a sense of sarcasm and disbelief in the first place. For all the hesitation and doubt that mark their efforts to reconstruct what they have experienced, the Simonian narrators speak of their war experience with some degree of derision for the apparent need of such idealizations, their own as well as that of others. It could therefore appear as though pathos had, for the most part, merely a negative, polemical presence. But there is a less tangible and less visible pathos that sustains the unending search for understanding and, more broadly, Simon’s writing as a whole. To put it briefly: the experience of war is the experience of death, of the subject’s utter destitution and reduction. What the protagonists try to recount is the experience of having been reduced to a being selected and bound to die. In some sense it is the fortuitous, contingent survival that forms the impenetrable and opaque center of Simon’s novels and makes for the mute pathos that holds together

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his “fragmentary description of disaster,” his “iconoclastic” battle paintings.

In the following I analyze the apparent tension between the insistence on the elusive experience at the center of Simon’s novels—an experience in excess of any representation because it is the experience of the radical crisis of representation itself—and the remarkable presence of images and visual representation in the text. I argue that the investment in images, in visual representation and the visual as such—the mise en image that is the key operation of this writing—not only originates in but is also conditioned by the peculiar sense of disorientation and disconnect experienced during the war and that the continual transformation of scenes—seen, remembered, or imagined—into images speaks to the insistent desire to discern the meaning that is so patently absent from that experience. Another way of putting this is to say that, on the one hand, mise en image, the proliferation and continual displacement of images, is precisely a way of getting at, or at least registering, the traumatic real of the war experience, its nagging persistence and its elusiveness, while, on the other hand, the pictorial templates the writing mobilizes in such great numbers indicate the urge to overcome the ostensible absence of sense. But just as the insistence on the incommensurability of the experience gives way to ever-renewed attempts to detect some kind of necessity at the core of an experience marked by contingency, the search for the significance of what occurred fails; the insights the images seem to promise are never realized. I flesh out these assertions about the operations of mise en image in Claude Simon by analyzing the role played by the visual representation and the visual arts on a number of different levels: first, in the author’s poetics, grounded in what one could call the missed encounter with the real, that is to say in an experience as impossible to assimilate as it is to forget; second, in his deployment of verbal images, the metaphors and comparisons pervading the texts; and, finally, in his descriptions of a few actual artworks.

Marking his opposition to a certain notion of realism, Simon’s programmatic appeal to the visual arts is, above all, an appeal to the principles of their organization that, in the author’s view, are antithetical to the logic of narrative and plot. As such this appeal goes some way in explaining the structure of his own novels: the tension between the ostensible incoherence on the texts’ surface level and the assertion of their inner consistency and cohesion. The interest in the visual arts, in particular in mod-
ernist nonfigurative art, is also tied to the perceptual vertigo experienced under attack—an experience in which vision and intelligibility seem to become divorced and in which an agency radically different from the one at work in human action appears to assert itself, the force of matter itself. In this encounter with a world suddenly stripped of the usual frame of reference, an unsettling sense of things, appearing in their pure phenomenality, and the senseless violence of matter override any effort to comprehend what is happening.

Pictorial representation and the visual arts figure in, and shape, Claude Simon’s writing, both metaphorically and literally. There is a rich and sophisticated scholarship on how the remarkable proliferation of verbal images contributes to the “image-effect” of the Simonian text. Drawing on this research, my discussion focuses on the ways in which pictorial representation itself figures metaphorically, that is to say, how, very frequently, the events related are cast as though they were pictures or spectacles. In connection with the war this type of metaphorical mise en image often involves the appeal to a certain mythoheroic iconography that serves as a foil for the actual experience. The apparent absence of any discernible rationale for what is happening is temporarily countered and suspended by the intimation of a hidden necessity, the tokens of a higher, mythic order.

Finally, the visual arts also have a literal presence in the texts. On a number of occasions characters find themselves before actual artworks: paintings of warriors and battles that may bring to life the turmoil of the past and that the characters avidly scan for clues in their interminable search for the hidden sense of their experiences.

Perceptual Vertigo and the “Stupid and Stupefying Fury of Things”

At the core of Claude Simon’s writing is a singular experience. In the early phase of World War II he is deployed as part of the French cavalry and witnesses the near-total annihilation of his squadron in an ambush in May 1940. He survives, miraculously, and is later captured, but he eventually manages to escape the German prisoner-of-war camp in which he was held. Over a period of more than fifty years and in an oeuvre comprising more than twenty books, Simon has revisited and recounted the various episodes of his engagement in World War II with remarkable persistence: the
mobilization of the troops, their transportation to the front in Belgium, the cavalry’s winter quarters, military drills and maneuvers, riding through the war-torn landscape, the ambush, running for his life under machine-gun fire, and many others.

The most emblematic of these scenes occurs in the aftermath of the ambush. The protagonist-narrator has joined three other survivors of the attack, two officers and their orderly, all three of them still on horseback. He is assigned a horse and follows them as they ride through the battered landscape. The two officers seem utterly oblivious to what just happened but also to the threat of imminent death. As a sniper starts firing at them, one of the officers draws his saber before he is struck down. This “instinctual” and highly charged gesture imprints itself on the narrator’s memory. It will resurface time and again in his attempts to recollect and put into order his war memories as something like the epitome of folly, of a modern war experienced on horseback.

Claude Simon’s multiple versions of this drôle de guerre depart from conventional accounts of war in many respects. Battle and combat hardly seem appropriate terms for describing this experience. The enemy remains largely hidden from view. The higher-ranking officers appear ludicrously inept in dealing with the situation. The strategy of the deployment seems devoid of all sense, and soon the blatant discrepancy between the French and German resources becomes obvious in the deadly confrontation. The impulse of Simon’s writing has its origin in these discrepancies, more specifically in the exposure to an unimagined kind of violence, unleashed against a subject utterly unprepared, both mentally and materially, for what was ahead. More specifically still, this writing is launched by the need not only to bear witness to a violence that is in excess of the imagination but also to account for the miracle, and enigma, of having survived. But Simon’s writing has a second source that is no less important for understanding some of its most characteristic features. This other source of Simon’s unending roman fleuve lies in a polemical stance against the shortcomings of a certain notion of realism. It is a polemic against the notion of literature as a mode of representation that effaces itself before the reality it purports to render and against the related assumption that reality is a given that remains unchanged in the process of mediation.

One encounters this polemic in the fiction itself, but it is also on prominent display in the author’s poetological pronouncements, such as the
Nobel lecture, as well as in numerous interviews. It is not only directed against a certain image (a caricature even) of the nineteenth-century novel but also expresses the author’s reservations about any attempt (his own included) to “render the confusing, manifold and simultaneous perception of the world,” any attempt that is oblivious to the inevitable modifications brought about by the transposition of experience into language. There are many instances in his books in which the narrator or a character (or often simply a voice that only gradually assumes an identity) corrects, reworks, or even revokes the account of events provided by someone else (another voice), drawing attention to the omissions, conjectures, and distortions employed for the sake of narrative unity and coherence. The most prominent instance of this are certainly Georges and Blum, the two protagonists of La route des Flandres, who become increasingly entangled in the stories they reconstruct (or imagine) about the tragic death of their former superior, Reixach, the officer brandishing his sword as the sniper’s bullet hits him.

The polemic is on full display in Simon’s rewriting of George Orwell’s Homage to Catalonia in the fourth part of Les Géorgiques. Orwell’s book is itself a kind of reckoning with his engagement in the Spanish civil war and with the factionalism that foiled Republican efforts, so it is somewhat odd that Simon should target it. Already in his first novel about the Spanish civil war, Le palace, Simon had seemed to want to outdo his predecessor in the debunking of the youthful idealism that made both of them join the Republican forces. In the texts dealing with his own involvement in Spain, which provide another set of recurring themes and motifs of the oeuvre, Simon is at great pains to demystify his “Spanish adventure.” In the fourth part of Les Géorgiques it is Orwell’s narrative of disillusionment that is systematically demolished. It appears as though the British writer’s recognition of his mistakes and errors in judgment is not going far enough in Simon’s view. In fact, the mere attempt to account for the intellectual and existential threat Orwell experienced in Spain in narrative terms seems to prove that he has yet to fully appreciate the inevitable and unbridgeable gap between experience and its retrospective narrative organization: his hope “that in writing his adventure he will enable some coherent meaning to emerge from it” proves illusory. “Indeed, as he writes his confusion will only get worse.” Simon’s revision very much aims at undoing Orwell’s “construct” and at getting to the amorphous “magma”
of raw experience at the core of his failed engagement: the reality of dan-
ger and the terror of imminent death.¹⁸

In some way a similar kind of undoing is at work in Claude Simon’s own texts, not only on the intertextual (Orwell) and intradiegetic level—as in Blum’s carnivalistic and parodistic versions of Georges’ more “ro-
mantic” accounts of Reixach’s death¹⁹—but also in their own broader makeup. As any reader will quickly notice, Simon’s texts are multilayered and dynamic. That is to say, there is a continual and at times confusing transition between different narrative layers, some of which are quickly identifiable and assume a certain consistency and some of which remain oblique. Some strands of the novels form part of the recognizable narratives that each book seems to recycle (besides the experience of the Span-
ish civil war and World War II, it is especially the family history that comes increasingly to the fore, above all in the later works). Others often don’t seem to bear any relation to the rest. This is particularly true for many of the long descriptive passages that constitute in some sense the signature of Simon’s writing. At times the different layers of a narrative are neatly separated; at times they are entwined and fused to the point of indistinc-
tion. The experience of reading Claude Simon thus takes on a rhythm that mimics the oscillation between understanding and confusion, between a certain degree of recognition and a feeling of being utterly lost. The sense of disorderliness and disorientation, the ever-changing and shifting tec-
tonic layers that generate the texts’ remarkable dynamic, is not only due to the attempt of recreating “the confusing and manifold perception of the world” but also a consequence of the inescapable interference of memo-
ries and the imagination in that very attempt. Indeed, the work of recov-
ery and reconstruction is inevitably beset by such intrusion, continually diverting the writing from its course.

Defending himself against the charge of incoherence, of discontinuity and disregard for the conventions of plot and character, Claude Simon has often invoked a different kind of coherence and “credibility,” namely the one found in the visual arts. At first, this appeal to the visual arts might seem strange, especially in view of the author’s programmatic opposition to realism and mimetic writing. The appeal to a “different kind of verisi-
militude”²⁰ and the reference to “pictorial credibility” doesn’t point to a greater veracity but has to do with the fact that the internal organization of visual artworks is typically not accounted for in narrative terms but
rather in terms of spatial configuration, of composition, proportions, shape, color, light, and so on. In various instances Simon has, indeed, tried to describe the structure of some of his books in highly abstract often geometrical terms, presenting his work as both a meditation on, and an exercise in, the “permutation” of certain forms or movements. As formalist and, indeed, purist as such commitments may appear—Simon would later distance himself from some of these claims—the appeal to the visual arts appears to be sustained by a desire to get to the basic forms organizing human perception, a desire shared with two of the predominant intellectual and artistic trends of the writer’s youth, phenomenology and cubism. A similar tendency, though less preoccupied with basic forms than with base matter, is characteristic of some of the writer’s artist friends and acquaintances—such as Jean Dubuffet, Joan Miró, and Gastone Novelli—whose works constitute an important point of reference and with whom he has collaborated in various ways.

It would be a mistake, however, to regard the search for the primordial, as Lucien Dällenbach has called it, merely as a transposition of painterly experiments in abstraction to the art of prose. And it would be equally misleading to view this exploration of form and matter in purely polemical terms, that is to say, as a response to the reputed moralism of the existentialist novel, as Claude Simon himself has often suggested. Once more, it is the experience of war that is at the origin of the peculiar preoccupation with forms and base matter.

Throughout Simon’s texts one comes across descriptions of phenomena whose common denominator may not be evident: flocks of soaring birds swiftly shifting directions, drifting cloud formations, dust columns rising and then slowly settling on the ground, smoke hovering above the audience in a movie theater, the play of colors and shapes that form under closed eyelids, the ripples closing over a pebble tossed into a pond, eddies and swirls, the turbulences of particles in the air, the commotion of murky waters, and many others. Again, the place and function of these recurrent motifs, often described in some detail, in the economy of the text is not immediately obvious. What arrests and unsettles the gaze drawn to these sights is the continual metamorphosis, the steady dissolution and reconstitution of volumes and forms in a self-generated dynamic that seems governed by a kind of inscrutable lawfulness—chaotic, continually changing, and organized at the same time. The shifting and swirling mass, si-
multaneously light and dense, voluminous and ephemeral, troubles the operations of perceptual synthesis. Instead of allowing the identification of a stable entity or object of some kind, the gaze is confronted with ever-evolving and receding forms. It is a similar kind of perceptual disorientation and incoherence that is one of the immediate effects on the mind stunned by the bomber attacks, perceiving the world in shapes and color configurations before the consciousness slowly regains a sense of its surroundings: “then suddenly nothing more (not even feeling the shock, no pain, not even the awareness of stumbling, of falling, nothing): darkness, no noise now (or perhaps a deafening uproar canceling itself out?), deaf blind, nothing, until slowly, emerging gradually like bubbles rising to the surface of murky water, appear indeterminate spots that blur, fade out, then reappear, then grow clear: triangles, polygons, pebbles, tiny blades of grass, the stones of the road where he is now on all fours like a dog” (A, 63–64; Ac, 90).26 The war has a peculiar effect on the perception, impairing and exalting it at the same time. Fatigue, exhaustion, and a sense of futility mark the vision. In many instances a strange gap opens up between seeing and understanding, dissociating sensory perception and conceptual grasp, destabilizing the order of cause and effect. Sight and sense seem to be drifting apart. Many of the phenomena registered by the tired brigadiers assume an uncanny presence, absorbing and confounding their incredulous gaze. Seemingly emerging out of nowhere, these sights lock in the gaze but often remain thoroughly unintelligible nonetheless. The things the troopers see seem strangely out of place, stranded objects—often, quite literally, the litter and debris strewn across the devastated landscape by civilians fleeing the Germans—remnants of a domestic world from which the soldiers feel cut off and that appears increasingly unreal to them. The abandoned human artifices, objects and instruments of everyday life, assume a menacing aspect. Theirs is a strange kind of presence, an effect of the sudden displacement and disappearance of the world in which they had their place, inducing a sense of wonder and estrangement in the young recruits who have given up “that posture of the mind which consists of seeking a cause or logical explanation of what you see or what happens to you” (FR, 24; RF, 25).27

Confronted with spectacles that seem as elusive as they do ominously real, the perception, strained and on high alert at the same time, comes to realize the precariousness of its own operations. The work of synthesis it

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performs is suspended. The world appears not in its usual complexion, made up of objects that can be identified by concepts, but is fragmented and reduced to more elementary and at the same time more abstract units: basic geometrical figures (polygons, spheres, cylinders), shapes, and colors, the “stuff” out of which the mind, at least in a simple picture of its activity, constitutes the world’s familiar face. The perceptual disorder, however, stems not only from an inability to find the right terms for what the gaze takes in. It is worsened by the disturbing sense that what is seen is actually not there, that the world around us is losing its solidity, its logical and its material consistency, “as if not an army but the world itself the whole world and not only in its physical reality but even in the representation the mind can make of it . . . was actually falling apart collapsing breaking into pieces dissolving into water into nothing” (FR, 16; RF, 16).

The other dimension unveiled by the violent experience of war is that of matter. It is an encounter that takes place in the exposure both to destruction and to the elements of nature. Throughout their errance back and forth across the small stretch of territory that has seen armies come and go since time immemorial, the troops are battered by the elements. They experience extreme hardship under rain and snow. In one of the central episodes, a never-ending ride through the night, they are drenched by incessant rainfall, and their nerves and senses are stretched to the breaking point. In the winter quarters an “apocalyptic cold” descends on them. Later, in May, in the aftermath of the ambush the dazzling, glorious sunlight seems to mock their devastating defeat. But the one element with which they become most intimately familiar is the earth. The war tears into the ground, hurling up the soil, spreading layers of dust and dirt over the world. The soldiers are soon covered with it—their uniforms soaked in mud, thin layers of sweat and dirt on their faces, dust in their mouths, their eyes burning. The war seems to be revoking the creation, setting off a process of disintegration in which the earth reclaims what once issued from it. The ultimate goal of the soldiers’ progress seems to be a return to the soil, the “matrix” from which they emerged. Nowhere is this regression staged more dramatically and to greater effect than in La route des Flandres, the story, as Simon explained in an interview, of Georges’ symbolic death. The protagonist is haunted by visions of his own death superimposed and fused with the sight of a dead horse, which he passes several times.
Violence itself is repeatedly presented as an effect of material processes—a force inhabiting matter, unleashed, or rather unleashing itself, for no immediately obvious reason. The deafening sound of explosions is the manifestation of something that has nothing whatsoever to do with human agency. It is rather a phenomenon unto itself, profoundly indifferent and unrelated to the affairs of human beings:

that din (and more than din: the air, the earth shaken and ripped apart) which, even if one has experienced it already, strikes whomever it deafens with something far stronger than fear: horror, amazement, shock, the sudden revelation that it is no longer something which man has any part in but matter only, unleashed, wild, furious, indecent (the mix, the combination of a few inert dusts, of ores, of things extracted from the earth and spontaneously catching fire, as it were, with the usual extreme violence of natural elements, bursting, breaking free as if to settle a score or get even with man, in blind, insane vengeance), and he, flat on his face, crushed in this kind of cataclysm, of apocalypse. (G, 195; Gé, 289)

It is an indifference that is asserted almost gleefully at times, noting, not without some degree of satisfaction, the futility of the mind’s effort to seek any meaning in the face of “that irrefutable coherence proper to the elements and to natural laws” (A, 222; Ac, 294). Any attempt at making sense of the confrontation “with that savage and innocent violence of matter” (G, 234; Gé, 347), “the stupid and stupefying fury of things that have no need of reasons to strike” (FR, 69; RF, 84), any attempt, like Orwell’s (or Georges’ for that matter), to transpose a narrative order on what is an overwhelming and incommensurable experience runs aground on the senseless materiality of the world. Simon’s rewriting of Orwell’s account insists repeatedly on the uselessness of any of the practical knowledge that the foreign volunteer brought to his experience but also, and especially, on the irrelevance of the philosophical or ideological categories at his disposal. The contact with “taciturn, blind violence” (G, 240; Gé, 355) wipes out the system of references by which the world was organized to give way to the rule of elementary instinct, touching the “degree zero of thought” (G, 233; Gé, 346) and entering a realm of secret symbiosis with the “stupid” materiality of the world.

But the emphasis on such “art brut,” directed at the recovery of some
kind of raw, supposedly preconceptual, experience, featuring a subject reduced to its primal urges, paralyzed and spellbound by the sudden revelation of elementary forces, is somewhat misleading. Simon’s debts to the visual arts are multiple. To be sure, modernist painting serves as an important paradigm in accounting for the texts’ formalist experiments reflecting both the perceptual disorientation, the stupor experienced in the aftermath of the ambush, and the disorder of memory, the halting and precarious reconstruction of the past. But the simultaneous displacement and intensification of perception and the exposure to the brute force of matter are not the only effects of the war experience, generating the never-ending recapitulations that make for the particular rhythm and halting progression of Simon’s prose. In spite of what at times looks like a “primitivist” poetics, ostensibly seeking to return us to the basics of matter and form, in open defiance of any desire for meaning, the most salient feature of Simon’s texts is without a doubt the appeal to images.

Pictorial Metaphors and the Iconic Archives of War

Simon’s investment in images could hardly be overstated. They inform his texts on a number of levels and in multiple guises. Before attempting to delineate the various dimensions of the image, a notoriously generic term, and before taking a closer look at the work on and of images in Claude Simon’s fiction, I would like to touch on some of the most obvious reasons for this remarkable affinity. Apart from the well-known biographical circumstances and apart from the author’s routine invocation of the visual arts as a model of his poetics, the strongest appeal of the image undoubtedly resides in its putative opposition to narrative. The deployment of images challenges the narrative “flow,” introducing a different kind of dynamic for which one of the most prominent metaphors, presented apropos of La route des Flandres, is that of the artesian well, more specifically the image of the different layers through which the groundwater circulates. A dynamic of displacement, from layer to layer, and circulation supersedes the developmental model of narrative progression toward some kind of goal and resolution. The order, or rather disorder, of the image also introduces a different regime of temporality. “All the elements of the text,” as Simon explained in “Fiction Word by Word,” “are always present. Even if they are not in the foreground, they are still there,
lying behind or just beneath the surface of the text as first read, and the very components of the latter are all the time recalling the others to the reader’s memory” (42). The succession of the dramatic plot, the alternation of action and reaction, the pattern of intrigue and denouement are all replaced by a logic of simultaneity and supersession, of recapitulation and repetition. The texts’ movement consists in continually releasing images that give rise to other images giving rise to further images and so on. Privileging the image as a counterpoint to the order of narrative may thus have some plausibility on a structural level. The appeal to the image is a way of emphasizing presence, simultaneity, and repetition over against the sequentiality of narrative. But ever since Lessing, who, of course, introduced this distinction, the image is also the very paradigm of representation that Simon’s texts seek to dismantle: a representation thought to open onto the world like a window, a representation that effaces itself as medium so as to bring about the semblance of presence and immediacy. How can one reconcile the writer’s insistence on the unavoidable alterations experience undergoes in the process of recollection and writing, and the appeal to a paradigm that seems oblivious to this very difficulty? As noted before, Simon’s prose is simultaneously ekphrastic and iconoclastic, its image-effects, its investment in visual and pictorial representation, countered by a perpetual démontage. But before getting to the constitutive ambivalence that is responsible for the fascination with and the devotion to the image, its force and its fallacy, let me distinguish between the different types of images actually at work in the text.

In a very useful breakdown of the “family of images,” the picture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell has provided us with the following subdivision: graphic (pictures, statues, designs); optical (mirrors, projections); perceptual (sense data, “species,” appearances); mental (dreams, memories, ideas, fantasmata); and verbal (metaphors, descriptions). The world of Simon’s novels comprises all of these; however, their boundaries are consistently blurred. As we have seen, the images of the perception tend to be curiously unstable. Frequently, the sense of sight is extremely acute, yet the appearances are marked by uncertainty. A similar tension can be found in the mental images, as well as those of memory. Typically, past events rise before the inner eye with remarkable clarity. But the images of memory are quickly unsettled by doubt, making room for other views, both in the literal sense of giving way to other images and in the figurative sense of

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prompting other interpretations of recollections that become increasingly uncertain. As I noted earlier, often times the perception—and the same is true for the perceptual images recalled by visual memory (“mémoire qui voit,” as it is called in *La Bataille de Pharsale* [*BPh*, 87])—is supplanted by the imagination, by the images pertaining to the vast reservoir of the individual and collective imaginary. In an essay dealing with the question of description in Proust, Simon has drawn attention to the overdetermination of perception and memory by a multitude of cultural “codes,” ranging from religious and mythological iconographies to mathematical formulas and the “scripts” of drama and film. Perhaps the most conspicuous and the most abundant of these archives, on which the Simonian imaginary draws so consistently, is that of graphic images, to follow Mitchell’s classification: paintings, prints, drawings, and photographs; the imagery of advertisement; graffiti; the pictures on stamps, bills, coins; but also statues, monuments, ornamented façades; as well as the staged spectacles of the opera and theater, of the bullfight arena and the race track, the movies, and many more.

No less abundant, if perhaps slightly less conspicuous, is the last of group of Mitchell’s taxonomy, verbal images. In his comments at the first colloquium on the New Novel, comments that have been quoted very frequently ever since then in the critical literature on Claude Simon, the author himself has explained the constitutive role of metaphor for the movement that is so characteristic of his writing. Building on the ideas and observations of Roman Jakobson, Jacques Lacan, and the poet and essayist Michel Deguy, Simon has drawn attention to the semantic ambiguity of words, to their multiple and varied meanings that allow for the sudden shifts and imperceptible transitions between different diegetic levels. The author insisted that meaning was not an unequivocal property of words. Quoting Lacan, he suggested to think about words as “nœuds de significations,” nodes of meaning or semantic clusters that could point a text in unexpected directions, hence their halting and often sinuous advance.

While certain terms indeed function as pivots, the far more prominent tropes are without a doubt similes and comparisons, perhaps the most conventional type of verbal images. Unlike metaphor, which typically omits the link between *comparé* and *comparant* and sometimes even the comparé itself, comparison marks the speech act by which something is as-
simulated to something else, asserting that \(x\) is like \(y\). Metaphor does not only leave it to the ingenuity of the reader to find the tertium comparationis that allows the conjunction of two terms whose relation is not evident, both challenging and pleasing our wit, as the ancient theorists of rhetoric noted; it also drops the particle that signals the approximation. By contrast, the comparison never conceals the assimilation it performs. In the world of Simon’s fictions, such assimilation of one thing to another is ongoing, marked by the ubiquitous comme, as well as a number of other connectors, including comme si, semblable à, tel que, ainsi que, ressembler à, à la façon de, and so on. The act of comparison, the operation of assimilating something to something else, is thus stressed throughout as part of the mind’s continual efforts to organize and render its uncertain perceptions of the world. All other types of images, perceptual, mental, and graphic, are worked, formed, and transformed by the similes. The work of description, clearly the prevalent mode of this writing (incidentally also Mitchell’s other example of the verbal image), submits the world whose strange appearance it tries to convey to a constant transformation even as it, itself, is changed. “The description (construction) may be continued (or completed) more or less indefinitely depending on the exhaustiveness of the treatment, the elaboration of further metaphors, the addition of other objects, whether seen in their entirety or fragmented by wear, time, a blow (or whether only partly visible within the framework of the picture), not counting the various hypotheses to which the spectacle might lend support.”

In a series of microscopic readings, based in part on computer-generated statistical analysis, Pascal Mougin has provided us with a broad yet elaborate account of Simon’s ever-proliferating comparisons. Among the chief characteristics Mougin has identified is their accumulative and at the same time digressive nature. Many times, the sight of something strange prompts not only one comparison but entire series of similes as though the mind was anxiously trying to come upon the right one to render the specificity of the troubling appearance at hand. Typically, the comparant, that is to say, the part of the comparison that serves as the predicate to something the aspect of which none of the available expressions seems to capture, is much longer and more elaborate than the comparé, the term it is meant to complement and illustrate. The effect of this is that frequently, in the course of the elaboration of (and on) the comparant, the comparé
is eclipsed, slipping from view, as it were. At the same time, the terms used in the process of working out the comparant give rise, in turn, to other comparants, and so on. Here is an example, a cluster of similes describing the clashing and confusion of two armies (on Brueghel’s *Battle against the Philistines on the Gilboa*), part of an episode to which we will return in the next section:

. . . the forest of lances with which the mass of combatants bristles shuddering with eddies, waves, undulating like a wheat field under gusts of wind which makes the spears alternately bend and rise again, the movement spreading down the line (like those executed in the stages of music halls by those battalions of show girls raising and lowering their legs one after the other so that long ripples seem to run along the row of naked thighs, frozen smiles and coiffures), the whole of both armies in a confused melee racked with contractions, with slow and sinuous convulsions like those which tighten and dilate the intestines or those inextricable knots of intertwined reptiles in mortal combat where in the convoluted coils it is impossible to identify one or the other . . . the rolling field of helmets squeezed together (simple steel shells without crests), like domes like bubbles clustered on the surface of whirlpools of some thick black liquid circling slowly, expelling at its edges a dirty foam, a yellowish scum of rubbish and dead horses . . . (*BP*, 77–78; *BPh*, 113–14)

Another effect of this clustering technique consists in the recurring sense of fluctuation and disorientation as an ostensibly casual glance or remark can open onto an entirely different scene, the description of which may extend over several pages, leading to seemingly unrelated and yet detailed subnarratives. In some instances there is no clearly discernible *comparé* in the first place. What triggers the simile, or, as so often, a whole concatenation of similes, is not only, or not primarily, the disconcerting view of some occurrence but rather the unnameable sensation that view causes the beholder, designated vaguely as “quelque chose comme” or “something like.” Again, the principal motivation for the dizzying proliferation of comparisons and similes is to close the gap between the experience at the center of the texts and the limited vocabulary at their disposal. Yet the words and images thus mobilized unleash even more associations, calling for further specifications and adjustments. Even if the attempt of com-
ing upon *le mot juste*, of hitting on the right expression, is invariably beset by failure, the texts are thus engaged in a continual assimilation of unfamiliar and uncanny phenomena, whether seen, heard, felt, sensed, or remembered, to what is known and familiar. As Mougin has pointed out, most of Simon’s comparisons are not far-fetched; the distance, as the theorists of metaphor might put it, between *comparé* and *comparant* is never very great. That is to say that the tertium comparationis is typically not difficult to discern. In fact, the opposite is true; that is to say, for the most part the commonality between the two terms that the comparison asserts is rather evident; in fact, it is likeness in the literal sense of visual resemblance. According to Mougin, the great virtue of many of the similes consists precisely in their capacity to make us see the thing in question.

It may come as no surprise that one of the most important archives providing the material for the texts’ work of metaphor (in the sense of comparisons and similes) is that of visual representation, of the graphic images mentioned earlier. But on second thought, here as elsewhere, the appeal to the image is not a matter of course. Even the earliest readers who noted this tendency registered the peculiarity involved in this choice. In the words of Michel Deguy, Simon continuously treats “appearances as images; everything that is perceived reproduces, as it were, the typical image of the scene it represents.” Françoise van Rossum-Guyon suggested that the recourse to what she called mimesis of the second degree somehow reinforced the effect of the first mimesis, confirming the old adage that claims that art is truer than life. The appeal to some kind of generic image (as Deguy noted it is often the “typical” image of a given scene) facilitates its visualization, and at the same time it boosts the imaginary detailing of the scene. Here is a prominent example from *La route des Flandres* in which Georges tries to get Blum to remember the stop at the inn where Reixach bought them a beer, shortly before the fatal encounter with the German sniper:

Listen: it was like one of those posters for some brand of English beer, you know? The courtyard of the old inn with dark-red brick walls and the light-coloured mortar, and the leaded windows, the sashes painted white, and the girl carrying the copper mugs and the stable-boy in yellow leather leggings with tongues and turned-up buckles watering the horses while the group of cavalrymen were standing in classical postures: hips arched, one boot forward, one hand holding
the crop resting on a hip while the other raises a mug of golden beer towards an upper window where you notice half glimpse behind a curtain a face that looks as if it came out of a pastel. *(FR, 20; RF, 20)*

But before this image can even “sink in,” it is revoked—“Yes: with this difference that there was nothing of all that except the brick walls, only dirty, and the courtyard looked more like a barnyard” (ibid.)—to be replaced by another. The description that follows, presumably provided by Blum, supersedes Georges’ idealization of the scene. In fact, in *La route des Flandres* as elsewhere, the narration—both the *discours*, to use Genette’s term, and the numerous intradiegetic narratives (the stories Georges and Blum make up)—consists to a large extent of projecting images, which are then retouched, as in the process of photographic development or that of restoration.*46*

Graphic images figure on both sides of the comparisons, as both *comparé* and *comparant*. Many appear as actual objects within the fictional world (or on its margins as in the preamble to *Les Géorgiques*, which features an unfinished drawing à la David). Even more frequently they figure in the elaborate similes.*47* As these comparisons may very well take on a life of their own, the images they invoke become one of the principal vehicles by means of which the text seems to mingle and fuse its different realms, that of perception and memory, and that of the imagination.

The iconic representations thus circulating on all levels of the text can be further divided into generic images, on the one hand, and specific, identifiable works of art (individual artworks), on the other. Again, the distinction is not stable but such ambivalence points to the broader appeal of the image, the fascination and the anxiety it may inspire. Before looking at a number of actual artworks, the different battle paintings featured in *La Bataille de Pharsale*, and the enigmatic portrait of Georges’ ancestor in *La route des Flandres*, I would like to delineate the major metaphoric and iconic archives in which the war experience is reflected: heroic war imagery, war as a natural event, and war as spectacle.

There are numerous “set pieces” of war iconography that, like many of the other generic images, are conjured up in some detail only to be revoked afterward. Some parts of *L’Acacia*, for example, recount the family’s search for the lost tomb of the narrator’s father, who perished at the beginning of World War I. Although their search is inconclusive, it ends with the invocation of a fairly detailed image of the dead father, shot
through the forehead, his upper body leaning against a tree. As is soon revealed, however, there is nothing to confirm this vision, which has most likely been drawn “from the illustrations in history books or the paintings representing the death of more or less legendary warriors, almost always dying in a semi-recumbent position on the grass, head and torso more or less leaning against a tree trunk, surrounded by knights wearing coats of mail (or holding a plumed bicorne in one hand) and represented in attitudes of affliction, one knee in the dirt, concealing with one iron-gloved hand their face turned towards the ground” (A, 247; Ac, 326).

In his sustained attempt to piece together his father’s trajectory toward his anonymous death, the narrator repeatedly invokes images pertaining to the register of heroic pathos. Earlier in the book, he had pictured his father’s departure for war. Taking leave from his young wife and the baby, the figure, on horseback and in full battle gear, calls to mind a classical scene of parting for battle, Hector’s final farewell from Andromache.48 It is precisely the absence of information that fuels the son’s imagination, especially since the father’s fate appears to prefigure the son’s war experience in all but its ending. Whereas the father died, the son survived, but he cannot help looking at his experiences as reenacting the fate of his father. Thus when he is dispatched to the front, he has just one thought: “And now he was going to die” (A, 120, 143; Ac, 163, 190).

Another episode juxtaposes the conspicuous absence not only of the father but of those who died anonymously and the iconic model that takes its place. The episode features a military ceremony commemorating the annihilation of the regiment to which the father had belonged. As no one has survived to be honored, decorations will be pinned to the flag, the only remnant of the lost unit. A light rain is falling on the assembled soldiers; the flag is too wet to fly in the wind, as one would like to picture it on such an occasion. The solemn but anticlimactic event takes place under a triumphal monument, the statue of a “bronze soldier” holding “his sword up to the heavens, impassive beneath the rain, mouth open, uttering his bronze shout, frozen, with his bicorne and his bronze coat, in an attitude of energy, enthusiasm, and immortality” (A, 39; Ac, 58). Turning into a statue like this one is one of the most persistent phantasms pervading the imagination and the memories of war.49

Throughout the novels revolving around the war experience, there is a noticeable split in the depiction of its protagonists. There is, on the one
hand, the mythic and heroic register, associated, above all, with the higher officers and generals. They typically emerge either out of nowhere, in a deus-ex-machina fashion, or “straight out of . . . a painting by Cranach or Dürer” (A, 28; Ac, 44), emissaries from another world who remain strangely detached from the carnage and hardship they are about to witness and for which they bear partial responsibility. They vanish as quickly as they have materialized, producing an uncanny sense of optical illusion. Their splendid uniforms and armor liken them to “barbarian warlords out of the depths of History” (A, 39; Ac, 58). Often they appear as though they consist entirely of metal, mythic creatures, machinelike and sublime at the same time. Strange centaurs, they seem to belong to an altogether different ontological order, one their troops register with a mixture of perplexity, fear, envy, and rage. The spectral apparition of their superiors imbues the war experience with a sense of unrealness and gives them the feeling that the armored figures might actually not contain bodies at all, let alone any life.

The troopers themselves, on the other hand, are portrayed in varying imagistic registers. They, too, at times assume the form of archaic warriors, as the entire war experience itself seems but a continuation of a primal scene, periodically reenacted since time immemorial. The most spectacular instance is the description of the procession of the cavalry through the rainy night in La route des Flandres. As in a number of other episodes, their slow progression through the dark, in which a strange inversion of different sensations transpires—the night is liquefied; the rain takes on the color of black ink—ends in an image of paralysis and fragmentation:

the black air harsh as metal against their faces, so that he seemed to feel (remembering those accounts of polar expeditions where the skin was described sticking to frozen iron) the cold solidified shadows sticking to his flesh, as if the air and time itself were only a single, solid mass of chilly steel (like those dead worlds extinct for billions of years and covered with ice) in whose density they were caught, immobilized for ever, their old walking horsemeat beneath them, their spurs, their sabres, their steel weapons: everything standing and intact, like the day when he would wake and discover them through the transparent, glaucous thickness appearing like an army on the march surprised by a cataclysm and which a slow invisibly advancing glacier would restore, would spit out a hundred or two hundred years from
now pell-mell with all the old lansquenets, reiters and cuirassiers of long ago tumbling down breaking in a faint tinkle of glass. (FR, 27; RF, 30)\textsuperscript{50}

In the second part of *Les Géorgiques* the elements, in particular the extreme cold that descends onto the winter quarter, has a similar effect on the cavalrymen, transforming them into crystal-like images of themselves, congealed in a kind of “mineral apotheosis” (*G*, 95; *Gé*, 138). Frozen and transfixed, they seem to join ranks with their mythic superiors and predecessors, “projected out of History as it were” (*G*, 82; *Gé*, 119). But what appeared as a sort of apotheosis turns out to anticipate an apocalyptic shattering. The noise of such shattering is present throughout the account of that “apocalypse of the cold” (*G*, 85; *Gé*, 124) at the winter encampment. It is the noise of war, the noise of glass breaking and of deafening explosions, belying the phantasmatic images of an atemporal and indestructible realm of solidity.\textsuperscript{51}

The more conspicuous type of metamorphosis that the troopers undergo foregrounds their vulnerability and the frailty of their bodies. They are assimilated to various animals, both quarry and decoy in a large-scale hunt, or to some kind of sacrificial offering in a celebration prepared, it seems, by nature herself. The images of mythic endurance, embodied by the Pegasus-like and apocalyptic figures of their commanders, are frequently contrasted with the opposite kind of transformation, the body’s slow disintegration and degradation into the organic matter from which it arose. The image of the dead horse, in the process of decomposition, is the epitome of the alliance and secret symbiosis between war and nature to which the soldiers fall prey. We have already seen the importance of the peculiar relation between “la terre” and “la guerre,” nature and history, much discussed in the critical literature.\textsuperscript{52} The analogy between the two consists not only in the parallels continuously drawn between natural and man-made disasters but also in the cyclical recurrence of war, reminiscent of the return of seasons, the rhythms of growing and harvesting, of cultivation and consumption. What seems crucial in this apparent “naturalization” of war is less the idea of the eternal recurrence of the same than the notion of its pure facticity, rendering irrelevant any discussion of its presumed causes and objectives. In those who survived the destruction, against all odds, the perceived orderliness generates the paradoxical sense of an inscrutable purposiveness.\textsuperscript{53} It springs from the mind’s effort to come to

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terms with an experience that is in excess of its comprehension, struggling to conceive of the miraculousness and fortuitousness of survival as part of a higher order of intentionality.

There is another set of generic images that has a similar effect, that of the theater and of the spectacle. While the higher officers’ attire seems to testify to an entirely different picture of war and warfare, fabulous and heroic, on the young recruits the uniforms and weapons have a parodistic effect. The ultimate symbol of the mockery they have to suffer is the sabers they have been given: “not only the officers but the plain troopers, as if in mockery, like those convicted prisoners who in a refinement of parodic cruelty are decked out for the scaffold with marks of ranks and grotesque crowns . . . ; they had been taught how to use them, or at least how to yield them—always doubtless in the same spirit of mockery, parody and masquerade” (G, 86; Gé, 126; see also FR, 128; RF, 161). The costumelike uniforms mark them, stigmatize them as the chosen few, singled out for a triumphant sacrificial celebration. As Françoise van Rossum-Guyon has pointed out in a seminal article, “La mise en spectacle chez Claude Simon,” metaphors of theatricality and spectacle pervade the world of the novels. When it comes to the war, they crop up most frequently in two connections: in relation to movement and action, and in relation to the overall strategic schemes that seem to determine what is happening. Innumerable times movements and gestures are perceived as though they were part of a performance or as though determined by some stagecraft, strangely at odds with the laws of physics: horses and riders progressing without moving from the spot while the landscape, the world itself, seems to be slowly pivoting around them; Georges’ semihallucinatory memory of a fellow soldier being lifted from his saddle, somersaulting through the air in slow motion; the “deus-ex-machina” appearances of the higher-ranking militaries. In many cases subjects seem to have been stripped of their agency, whose source has to be located in an inaccessible beyond. A similar tendency is at work on a more general level, that of the movement of the troops. Their constant displacements are compared to a game, or a play, “one of those ballets with complicated figures, which led their participants to take up in succession, and in accordance with a carefully worked out pattern, positions abandoned by the others” (G, 73–74; Gé, 106–7). Governed by rules and hence evincing a certain internal consistency, the purpose of this “incomprehensible game” remains hidden, un-
less it is simply, as the narrator of Les Géorgiques surmises, to familiarize the soldiers with the eternal sites of death, “comings and goings, or marches, or rather pacings up and down whose only imaginable purpose . . . was perhaps to acquaint them with the monotonous theatre of past and future butcheries” (ibid.). There are hardly any explicit references to the agency orchestrating these spectacles. What does come through is a sense of ridicule and parody, devised, it seems, by the same spirit of mockery and masquerade that had furnished the young soldiers with their swords. Describing the events as though they were plotted by some kind of higher power attests once more to the desire to see an intentionality, or some sort of purposiveness, where contingency prevails. At the same time, it is a desire that mocks itself, continually undoing its own projections—“as if this time the Creator had employed this interval to perfect his work, then, facetiously, to destroy it” (A, 27; Ac, 43).

The Crack in the Picture: Gazing at “a Reality More Real Than the Real”

It is not only the recollection of the war experience that is cast in images. Often, contemplation of actual artworks gives rise, for its part, to the most vivid and painful memories. The longest such passage is a section of La Bataille de Pharsale titled “Battle.” It consists of fairly detailed descriptions of four battle paintings—one by Piero della Francesca, one by Uccello, one by Brueghel the Elder, and one by Poussin—which are interspersed with flashbacks of the ambush. As many readers have noted, the writing seems to undergo a rare kind of crescendo, growing increasingly turbulent and incoherent. The most striking feature of the passage, however, consists in the strange balance between detachment and involvement on the part of the beholder. The description itself shuttles back and forth between a minute analysis of the artworks’ compositional features and their means of creating the illusion of presence, and itself succumbing to that very illusion. In a classically ekphrastic mode the text plays with the reader’s disposition to take the scenes depicted for actual landscapes. In each instance special attention is given to the atmospheric circumstances, the light indicating the time of day, the movements of clouds and small birds, the changing colors of the sky and of the landscape. It is apropos of these colors that the description shifts almost imperceptibly to the lan-
guage of coloration, gradually revealing that the world depicted is an artistic creation, an arrangement aiming at the production of certain effects. The spectacle of battle itself that is at the center of each of the paintings is described with studied indifference as to the violence exhibited. It is as though the narration endeavored to illustrate the “lesson” of Simon’s many commentaries and explanations of his own work, namely that there is an order underlying the representation of disorder.

On the face of it the ekphrastic description is concerned, above all, with questions of perspective and of depth: proceeding from a very reduced and narrow space (in Piero della Francesca) to one of greater depth (in Uccello). A second concern is the issue of movement: arrested in a peculiar kind of paralysis in the first two paintings, somewhat less contained in Brueghel, and outright tumultuous in Poussin. As in Simon’s other descriptions, the gaze scanning the paintings is drawn to odd details. In Piero it is the immobility and inexpressiveness of the painted figures, confined “in a space so reduced . . . that the movements of the participants, as on those exiguous dance floors squeezed between the diners’ tables, have an abrupt, irregular and constrained character . . . not in attitudes of action or effort in order to deliver or evade a blow but, for the most part, upright, as if the throng, the press, permitted nothing but these slight and necessarily rigid gestures” (BP, 70–71; BPh, 103–4). This lack of expression and psychological depth is matched by the strangely material aspect of the painting’s background, the sky “as hard as mortar, as material as the blue of the steel blades, as impenetrable as the faces of the combatants” (ibid.). In Uccello’s extraordinary Battle of Romano (Florence, Galleria degli Uffizzi) the beholder is taken in by the work’s use of light (and its presumably deliberate elimination of shadows) and the spatial arrangements, “riders and horses in static positions as those taken by the supernumeraries on a stage, directed, for lack of space, not so much to perform actions as to suggest them, the effect desired (flight, depth) being obtained by means of a skillful scenic management” (BP, 74; BPh, 108–9; translation slightly modified). As in much of Simon’s elaborately descriptive prose, the attention spent on the detail and structure of visual configurations goes a long way in intensifying their effects while exposing the procedures of illusionistic representation at the same time. Shuttling back and forth between the representation and its internal organization, the descriptions unsettle the priority of content over form. Much of what he sees on the canvases
reminds the beholder of his own experiences. In Brueghel’s *Battle against the Philistines on the Gilboa* it is the sight of the two armies clashing and fusing, not only with one another but also with the surrounding landscape, merging with the elements, as it were, in a union reminiscent of the many visions of the army dissolving into, or being absorbed by, nature. The oxymoronic impression of agitated stillness, of frozen movement produced by the paintings conjures up the memories of galloping horses and their riders, stopped dead in their tracks, immobilized by some invisible power, moving without advancing. The tension reaches a sort of climax in Poussin’s *Joshua’s Victory over the Amorites*, a victory made possible by bringing time to a halt, divine intervention arresting the heavenly bodies in their course (Joshua 10:12–13).

As much as the beholder is taken by the painterly effects explored in the ekphrastic series, he seems largely unaffected by the turmoil depicted in the paintings. But there is another voice, a kind of subliminal murmur, interwoven in the ostensibly detached discourse of the amateur, the fragmentary memories of his own war experiences swelling up and finally spilling over. When he gets to Poussin, his *studium*, to use Barthes’ famous term, is suddenly undone. The sight of a body pierced by an arrow becomes the *punctum* that disrupts the beholder’s detachment, drawing him into the melee. It conjures up a graphic episode from Caesar’s *Civil Wars* that serves as a kind of leitmotif throughout the novel. (The same episode is also recounted in the book’s two other classical intertexts, Lucan’s *Pharsalia* and Plutarch’s *Lives.*) It is the image of a Roman soldier, Crassinus, who receives a sword stab (alternatively, it is an arrow or a spear) straight in the face. Confronted with the tumult on Poussin’s painting, the careful consideration of the artistic organization of disorder breaks down. The different narrative strands momentarily become virtually indistinguishable, the tone of matter-of-fact contemplation and compositional analysis gives way to a sense of vertigo, remembering, reliving the panic experienced under attack, as the narrator struggled with his saddle while his fellow soldiers were being torn off their horses. Here is an example of the form this takes:

> the whirlwinds of thick air immobilized at the same time as the sun, the light, the bodies, the sweat, the stormy sky, the armor, all of the same opaque substance solidified, checked by the brush the effect of light on the metal helmet achieved by a patch of yellowish white itself
in the center of a less brilliant gray highlight flanked by two black areas the outer curve of the helmet behind the head a glowing orange and circling endlessly between the solemn glidings of the frames and I in the center red flank mahogany the tongue of the brass buckle tore my palm I didn’t suffer dark hairs pasted down by sweat cheek against the sour smell mauve highlights then gold running over the withers dusty grayish grass over the slopes the saber guard knocked against my helmet shattering noise in my head bell filled by the furious disorder Achilles motionless . . . the uproar frozen at the paroxysmal level where it destroys itself, it too immobilized in the silence torn from his horse as if an invisible giant hand had seized him by the collar of his tunic and pulled holding him there soaring through the air suspended above me legs still spread riding an absent charger knees bent arms bent stretched out in front of him hands open to receive himself like a frog in mid-leap mouth wide in a cry but no sound features distorted twisted by terror amazement expression stupid dazed shifting yellow then black then again the sun yellow still motionless halted no longer time no morning no night time stopped no yesterday no last year ten years ago today. (BP, 80–81; BPh, 117–18; italics in the original)58

The beholder has switched his position, from the outside to the center, “and I no longer a stranger, spectator watching the elegant and barbarous condottieri . . . but now in the very center of this maelstrom: space, air itself whirling, furious, light, darkness whirling” (BP, 79; BPh, 116). Drawn into the paintings and into his own past, he is overwhelmed by the flurry of sensations, which open onto a never-ending present. The attempt to make out the order underlying the disorder does not guard against its eruptions. No amount of studium seems to be able to “fix” the past, in the double sense of coming to terms with the insistent and intractable experience by capturing it in, and as, an image (as in the development or restoration of photographs), and of keeping it at bay, relegating the terror of the past to its proper place.

La Bataille de Pharsale tells the story of such a search via the study of a host of other accounts and depictions, both narrative and pictorial. As in many of the other works, most notably its immediate precursor, Histoire, this search fails. Sifting through the cultural archive, trying to focus attention on attempts by others to come to terms with past defeats and
disasters does not lead to greater insight or better understanding. The hidden meaning of it all does not reveal itself. Thus, “The Chronology of Events,” the title of the third part of *La Bataille de Pharsale*, is never really established. What we get in lieu of an orderly narrative sequence are the same events described from different perspectives, shifting in both time and space, a model of representation epitomized by the “mobile,” the kinetic sculpture, invoked at the end of the book’s second part. In spite of the effort to impose order—“Begin again, start over from zero”; “Start over, organize. First, second, third” (*BP*, 123, 125; *BPh*, 181, 184)—the carefully crafted configuration is made to collapse, culminating in the “maelstrom” of sensations, images, and voices that is the very disorder of Claude Simon’s novels.

The paintings that actually figure in some of the novels can bring back to life the turmoil suffered in the moment of attack. But they may also enhance the sense of wonder and mystification that prevents the repeated attempts to come to terms with the war experience from ever achieving any closure. The portrait of Georges’ ancestor in *La route des Flandres* is probably the best example of this. Unlike the battle paintings that figure so prominently in *La Bataille de Pharsale*, all by well-known painters, the portrait is by an unknown artist. Different, however, from the many other works of art invoked in the novel, this one is an actual painting. It is the portrait of one of the author’s ancestors. The 1985 edition of the novel, published in Minuit’s “Collection Double,” featured the image on its cover.

*La route des Flandres* is so replete with references to artworks that there is hardly an episode that is not assimilated to some kind of image, most often, as we have seen, of a generic kind. The portrait of the ancestor is what is commonly called a “generator” in the literature on Simon, that is to say, a work of art that gives rise to elaborate intradiegetic narratives. It belongs to the images, to which the narrator, Georges, and his companion, Blum, return most obsessively in their attempts to make sense of what they have been through but also simply to entertain and distract themselves by concocting stories. As with the other salient images of the book, the contemporary Reixach’s “glorious” death and the dead horse rotting away on the roadside, there is something deeply unsettling about the portrait that is also a source of fascination. As so often, the description draws attention to a certain tension in the perception of the paint-
ing. Again, two modes of viewing are juxtaposed and collide. The painting is the picture of an aristocratic gentleman, dressed for hunting, a rifle in his arm, the bare hint of a smile on his face, gazing directly at the beholder. But just like the narrator’s incredulous visualization of the later Reixach, his cousin, drawing his saber “in the hereditary gesture of an equestrian statue,” comes undone—the “statue” collapses, “like a lead soldier beginning to melt from the feet up and leaning slowly to one side then faster and faster” (FR, 13; RF, 12)—the semblance of composure is belied by another sort of punctum: the oil paint is coming off the portrait, and the red of the canvas looks like blood flowing from a wound on the ancestor’s forehead, as if the artist had anticipated the ancestor’s end. (Reixach is supposed to have died by his own hand.) This kind of material degradation is rather typical of a number of the iconic representations conjured up in La route des Flandres and in many of the other novels. It mirrors and anticipates the coming apart of the entire world—or rather of “the representation the mind can make of it” (FR, 16; RF, 16) —which the text stages with such remarkable insistence. It’s an instance of the peculiar process of dematerialization or derealization to which the mises en image seem linked so invariably. Of course, any transformation of something into its own image entails a certain degree of dematerialization. As I noted earlier, the paradoxical effect of this operation is often a heightened sense of presence, a sense of being able to actually see the scene “pictured,” though it may appear strangely unreal and is often undone subsequently, superseded by another vision. In many instances the semblance of presence achieved by this kind of ekphrastic detailing is sustained for a bit, but ultimately it is undercut by bringing into focus some material flaw in the object, whether actually seen or just imagined, that might very well turn out to be a flaw in its representation. The corrupted picture is also an anticipation of the later Reixach’s death, a suicide in its own way, and of Georges’ agony in the ditch, when he feels he is about to die of a kind of inner corruption, an episode that is itself prefigured in the vision of the dead horse and that won’t cease to haunt him.63 The ostensible consistency of iconic representation, its supposed solidity—the portrait of the ancestor, Reixach; Reixach petrified into a statue; the nocturnal procession of the cavalry frozen in a block of ice—doesn’t escape the dissolution and liquefaction that appear not only as the pervasive effect but also as the ultimate end of war.
In spite of the material explanation for the blood oozing from the ancestor’s forehead, the red spot continues to appear as a stigma, a mark of sacrilege and damnation. The “wound” is prefigured, as so much else, in the description of the dead horse, whose blood soaks the earth, giving rise to a biblical image of miraculous fertility, water springing from a rock: “The blood was still fresh: a large red spot, bright and clotted, shiny as varnish, spreading over or rather beyond the crust of mud and sticky hair as though it were gushing not from an animal, a mere murdered beast, but from some inexpiable sacrilegious wound made by men (the way, in legends, water or wine springs out of the rock or gushes from a mountain struck with a rod) in the clayey flank of the earth” (FR, 24–25; RF, 26–27). Much later, as Georges is pressing himself against the clayey bottom of the ditch, he will perceive the “hard and purple flesh of this earth” (FR, 182; RF, 232). War transforms the soldiers into earth and the earth into an open wound.

The punctum of the portrait’s punctured forehead is not the only aspect of the painting that arrests and troubles the beholder. There is, as it were, a second “point” or “puncture” that confounds his attention: the ancestor’s gaze. The strangeness of this gaze stems in part from the fact that the man in the portrait seems so utterly oblivious to the “wound” and the blood that is dripping over the face. “With that paradoxical impassivity characteristic of martyrs in old paintings, the motionless face went on looking straight ahead with that slightly stupid, surprised, incredulous, and gentle expression people have when they suffer a violent death, as if at the last minute something had been revealed to them about which it had never occurred to them to think, in other words undoubtedly something absolutely contrary to what thought could teach them, something so astonishing, so...” (FR, 59; RF, 70). The painting gives a glimpse, then, of something it never reveals, something that cannot really be seen at all. And yet, in many ways, the secret knowledge of violent death, which the picture seems at once to offer and to withhold, constitutes something like the vanishing point of all the frantic efforts to “see,” that “avidité de voir” (RF, 142; FR, 114) that the novel stages so dramatically, superimposing and telescoping memories, imagined scenes, paintings, and photographs onto, and into, one another. All these images are refractions of a real that can only be gazed at indirectly, glimpsed in the cracks and fissures of representation, shining forth in its breakdown while never fully materializ-
ing. On the contrary, as we have seen, all visions are deceptive, elusive appearances: trompe l’œil. The “eagerness to see” is driven by the urge to grasp this incommensurable reality, by a desire to “know,” which grows increasingly urgent, the more it gets frustrated. For all the acuteness of his visions, Georges’ perception is, as I said earlier, strangely impaired, blurred by a veil of fatigue, sweat, and dirt. But the desire to know persists, stubbornly. Like an endless echo the phrase “comment savoir, comment savoir?” reverberates on the last pages of the novel. Reixach’s gaze, innocent and ominous at the same time, does not only fuel the young men’s speculations; it is not only obliquely present in the hyperprecise visualizations their descriptions produce; it is also mirrored and contrasted by the gaze of the dead and the dying Georges sees in the war. There is the empty and inexpressive look on the face of one of his comrades, torn from the saddle and hurled through the air before Georges’ eyes. As he is emerging from a brief spell of unconsciousness, the narrator is looking into the same face, its features frozen, open-mouthed, and with the “stupid” look of those surprised by death. And then there is the “sad” eye of another horse dying, surrounded and watched by a group of cavalrmen:

The huge velvety eye still reflecting the circle of soldiers but as if it were unaware of them now, as if it were looking through them at something they couldn’t see, their reduced silhouettes outlined on the moist sphere as on the surface of those bronze balls that seem to seize, to suck up in a dizzying perspective engulfing the whole of the visible world, as if the horse had already ceased to be there, as if it had abandoned, renounced the spectacle of this world to turn its gaze inward, concentrating on an interior vision more restful than the incessant agitation of life, a reality more real than the real, and Blum said then that except for the certainty of dying what is more real? (FR, 99; RF, 123; cf. also FR, 53; RF, 63)

The soldiers thus see themselves seeing in an eye that doesn’t perceive the beholders but is turned inward, contemplating “une réalité plus réelle que le réel.” The relations dramatized in this scene reflect the hermeneutic desire and frustration at work in the novel’s many episodes of intent gazing. It is a gaze that is scrutinizing the mute representations with which it is confronted for clues that would allow it to see the “reality,” to see what is hidden beneath the surface of things, of violence and death. The pictured
scenes and spectacles often seem to contain a promise, hinting at some kind of revelation. But it is a promise that is never redeemed. As much as the images commanding the characters’ attention seem to provide a glimpse of an exorbitant reality, of experiences that can’t be assimilated by any conventional frame of reference, they also consistently turn away the probing gaze. As in the portrait of the ancestor, often it is precisely the apparent closure of pictorial representation, its stillness and imper turbable permanence, that sets the imagination on its restless search. Thus, the enigmatic sights the mind seeks to penetrate and decipher trigger endless flights of the imagination. In the vortex of memories, the past that Simon’s narrative tries to recover keeps resurfacing and disappearing. Images are continually invoked as they vanish. Time and again the imagination succumbs to the peculiar semblance of presence that pictorial representation is able to achieve. Like in trompe l’œil the mind is taken in by the oxymoronic coupling of reality effect and the nimbus of unreality, absorbed and puzzled by a sense of déjà vu, and suspicious of the deceptive, inauthentic character of its visions.

The first and the last of the novels’ images is that of Reixach drawing his sword as he takes the sniper’s bullet. It encapsulates and exemplifies the double-sidedness of the narratives’ mises en image, freezing the figure into a monument (as happens with so many of the higher-ranking officers) and submitting it to a slow disintegration, collapsing, crumbling, melting away, like a lead soldier. In spite of the struggle to invest the spectacle of chaos and destruction with some kind of meaning, such disaggregation is the overriding mark of the war experience. Like no other, the image of Reixach brandishing his weapon also epitomizes the certainty of the narrator’s own imminent death, the greatest of all certainties, as Blum puts it. For all their unruly dynamism, in one way or another, the images are all about a death that seemed all but inevitable, logical even—“And now he was going to die” (A, 120; Ac, 163)—but that never occurred. In this sense, as much as these images and scenes are about the “reality” or “truth” of violent death, they are also about the enigma of that fortuitous survival. It is this experience that drives the narrator’s interminable recapitulations of the same scenes and sites/sights of the disaster he survived.