Watching War

JAN MIESZKOWSKI

WITH THE MILITARIZATION OF EUROPEAN SOCIETY AT THE TURN of the nineteenth century, two distinct attitudes toward the campaigns of the day emerged.[1] On the one hand, the Napoleonic Wars were seen as total in their scope, influencing every aspect of life. No one could claim to follow these events from the outside as a neutral observer. On the other hand, battles came to be viewed as crucial sources of information about historical agency, offering unparalleled opportunities for studying the human condition. If the seemingly interminable strife was too powerful and all-consuming to process systematically, it nonetheless called for rigorous investigation.

Today we continue to be plagued by uncertainty about what it means to watch a war and what we can hope to learn by doing so. In exploring these problems, contemporary scholars have focused not simply on the challenges of accurately representing warfare visually or verbally but also on how military operations are organized by the imperative to tell their own story. Discussing some of the major novels about the Napoleonic era, Norman Bryson argues that when "Tolstoy or Stendhal describe their battles, narrative is not super-added to a scene which lacks discursive intelligibility, but is instead the repetition of a discourse which is pre-existent. War is perhaps the most ancient, and certainly one of the most powerful, of rhetorical *topoi*" (35). What implications does war's status as a rhetorical topos have for its material execution? In Bryson's terms, even the most practical—and bloody—features of military engagements are governed by standards of "visibility" and "recountability," which is why a novelist's presentation of a battle effectively reproduces a narrative dynamic internal to that battle (36). While Bryson is correct that an auto-interpretive impulse is central to military praxis, a closer look at accounts of Na-

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1648 Published online by Cambridge University Press

poleonic conflicts suggests that it is far from clear how to conceive of the relation between a battle as something processed with the senses (its "visibility") and a battle as something grasped through logical or narratological abstractions (its "recountability"). To attend the theater of war may be to engage as much with what one should see or should have seen as with what one does see. In this way, watching a war and imagining what it must be like to do so prove to be inextricably interconnected activities. The story of a combatant or bystander witnessing a battle unfold live thus becomes a testimony to the mediated quality of an event that ostensibly gains its significance from the immediacy of its physical horrors.

A hundred fifty years before Waterloo, the possibility that war is what we would today term a virtual phenomenon received its canonical formulation in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. War, declared Hobbes, consists "not of Battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battle is sufficiently known. . . . [T]he nature of War consists not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto. . . . All other time is Peace" (88–89). In these terms, war is both a series of violent conflicts designed to achieve certain effects and a state or condition of hostility in which no shots need be fired. For Hobbes, what we today refer to as the spectacle of war is not principally a matter of landscapes covered by clashing armies or the fireworks of aerial bombardments. To wage war, one must demonstrate a capacity for self-expression, an ability to make one's willingness to fight, one's intention to compete, legible to an enemy. Hobbes's war pose names the warmonger's need to manifest something metaphysical—a will—as something physical that is available to the senses. If war is the ultimate example of a series of acts with consequences, it is equally a realm of simulation, which is to say that any war is permanently under suspicion of being a phony war, in that it emerges as a political program on the basis of a sustained distinction between an act and the plan to act. In this way, war becomes as much a matter of signifying performances—declarations and threats, feints and bluffs—as hand-to-hand combat.

Hobbes sharply distinguishes between a war and any battle or group of battles waged in its name. A century later, in *Émile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau takes up this distinction as he casts a skeptical eye on the study of military history. Rousseau begins his discussion by maintaining that it is by means of history that his student will see "men from afar"; history will "show [people] in other times or other places and in such a way that [the student] can see the stage without ever being able to act on it." In this fashion, the student is to observe people as "a simple spectator, disinterested and without passion, as their judge and not as their accomplice or as their accuser" (237). On this basis, Rousseau decrees that Thucydides is the preeminent historian because "he reports the facts without judging them, but he omits none of the circumstances proper to make us judge them ourselves. He puts all he recounts before the reader's eyes. . . . The reader no longer believes he reads; he believes he sees" (239). If the value of history as a teaching tool is that it moves us from reading to seeing, from supporting or criticizing to a disinterested judging, Rousseau is quick to ask whether a historian can ever assume an observational stance that will provide access to all the relevant data. The decisive test of history's value as the theatrical stage that displays "men from afar" turns out to be a battle:

> How many times did a tree more or less, a stone to the right or to the left, a cloud of dust raised by the wind determine the result of a combat without anyone's having noticed it? Does this prevent the historian from telling you the cause of the defeat or the victory with as much assurance as if he had been everywhere? (238)

The claim to insight through observation founders because any given line of sight is

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1648 Published online by Cambridge University Press

only one among hundreds or thousands of possible views. More to the point, historians can never see the difference between what they see and what they miss seeing. A specific standpoint fails to serve as a ground of knowledge the moment it is exposed as one ground among many. In other words, the anticipated transition between watching war and telling a story to explain it never takes place. What you see is not what you can narrate.

Rousseau's reference to the "cause of the defeat or the victory" suggests that what students ought to experience is not for the eye to see. History's strength as a heuristic device is its ability to create an illusion of visual immediacy—"The reader no longer believes he reads; he believes he sees"—but it turns out that what really needs to be revealed are invisible forces. The facts, explains Rousseau, are useless if one does not know "the reason for them" (238). As long as we confine ourselves to this theater of history, the "slow and progressive causes of these facts . . . remain unknown" (239). Rousseau turns again to the military stage, and now his critique is damning. His hero, Thucydides, "unhappily . . . always speaks of war; and one sees in his narratives almost nothing but the least instructive thing in the world—that is, battles" (239). Battles are not worthy objects of inquiry, being only the symptoms or side effects of more fundamental dynamics. Rousseau elaborates: "One often finds in a battle won or lost the reason for a revolution which even before this battle had already become inevitable. War hardly does anything more than make manifest outcomes already determined by moral causes which historians rarely know how to see" (239–40). War renders visible the results of processes to which historians like Thucydides otherwise remain blind, but that very visibility encourages historians to forget about the difference between cause and effect.

I have already noted that for Hobbes posturing *is* war. On this point, Rousseau is in agreement, although he draws somewhat different conclusions from it. He fears that in attending the theater of Thucydidean history, his student will learn about postures and impostures, not about the hearts of men; the student will study poses, not the reasons for them. For Rousseau, war is inherently misleading, presenting as its own effect an inevitability that actually predates it, presenting itself as an origin rather than as a product. Thus even the most sophisticated historian may err in treating war on its own terms, as complete in itself rather than as the result of something logically or ontologically prior to it. The fatal flaw of history is that it "shows actions far more than men"; it treats what happened in isolation from the agents that caused it to happen (240). If Bryson understands war as a narrative designed to ensure its own visibility and recountability, Rousseau maintains that any war will necessarily be misrepresented, because war is a system of misrepresentation. His argument raises doubts about the efficacy of any gaze that takes a battle as its object. Even viewing military actions as a participant may not allow one to draw inferences about the agents who execute these actions or about the consequentiality of these actions.

The Napoleonic era presents a unique opportunity for evaluating the implications of Rousseau's argument: the battles of this period were distinguished by the accumulation of immense casualties within restricted spatiotemporal parameters that almost seemed designed to respect the Aristotelian unities. At Waterloo, for example, "nearly 200,000 men confronted one another on a scrap of land barely four kilometers (2.5 miles) square; never, either before or after, have such a great number of soldiers been massed on so circumscribed a battlefield" (Barbero 311). What John Keegan has described as the chessboard model of military strife, in which would-be Caesars direct their pawns on exposed fields, thus reached its grandest scale in what often looked like open-air theaters (see esp. ch. 1).

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Even with people dying all around him, reflected Carl von Clausewitz, the novice officer finds it all "almost like a play [*Schauspiel*]" (113). To this day, scholars with little inclination to poetic flights of fancy narrate these clashes in dramatic terms, complete with turning points, supporting characters, and unexpected plot twists. At the same time, improvements in the mobility and accuracy of artillery by the beginning of the nineteenth century had brought the direct collision of massed troops on open fields to the brink of tactical obsolescence. In subsequent generations, the widespread use of better rifles and machine guns would complete the antiquation of this style of combat.

On the one hand, then, Napoleonic battles were world history incarnate. One could pack lunch and take a day trip to watch the epic action unfold to its resolution, with a winner and a loser. For the philosophers of the period, these bloody performances became paradigmatic objects of inquiry, as if viewing Austerlitz or Waterloo could help them decide whether the course of human affairs was governed by agency or chance, whether a given set of acts was an autonomous dynamic or a side effect of a broader process. On the other hand, watching a battle from beginning to end hardly meant seeing it clearly. Famous paintings of brightly clad troops firing on each other are misleading, for the function of the colorful uniforms was to help the soldiers distinguish friend from foe in the clouds of smoke that covered the field. Although historians disagree as to just how poor visibility was, numerous firsthand accounts of these engagements suggest that discharge from muskets and artillery radically obscured almost everyone's view of the proceedings.[2]

Perhaps because there were considerable physical obstacles to viewing a battle, the figure of an eagle-eyed witness to the scene became a popular fantasy, most notably in the enduring legend of Napoléon Bonaparte's ability to grasp the field of combat in a single glance.[3] Indeed, contemporary military historians still tend to attribute his defeats to unanticipated disruptions of his view of the battle, as if his magic gaze were more than just a tall tale. In the nineteenth century, the idea that one could understand a battle by watching it became associated with the fantasy of observing the fight as the emperor had. Modern mass tourism had its start following Napoléon's final exile as waves of people rushed to visit the fields at Waterloo, and one of the key attractions of such excursions was the opportunity to survey the military landscape from the same observation tower where Napoléon had stood, as if one could vicariously share his scopic prowess by imagining that one was looking at hundreds of thousands of colliding soldiers.[4] Even for the casual observer, the spectacle of war was as much a matter of fantasy and of what one wanted to see as it was a question of the physical impediments to surveillance.

Napoléon himself recognized the power of the experience of following in his eyesteps. The Battle of Eylau in 1807 was the first time that the Grande Armée was seriously tested, if not fought to a draw. The French and their foes, principally Russians, both suffered enormous casualties, and neither side could claim to have destroyed the opponent's army. In the face of rumors that the French had effectively lost the engagement, Napoléon penned a bulletin designed to confirm his success:

> After the Battle of Eylau, the Emperor spent several hours daily on the battlefield. . . . To visualize the scene one must imagine, within the space of one square league, nine or ten thousand corpses; four or five thousand dead horses; rows upon rows of Russian field packs; the remnants of guns and swords; the ground covered with cannon balls, shells, and other ammunition; and twenty-four artillery pieces, near which could be seen the corpses of the drivers who were killed while trying to move them—all this sharply outlined on a background of snow. (Herold 204)

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In Napoléon's terms, the spectacle lies not in the immediacy of the unfolding action—men dismembered by swords or cavalry trampling bloodied bodies—but in the aftermath, "sharply outlined on a background of snow." Combining the perspectival logic of a landscape painting with an engineer's geometric ordering of a square field divided by rows, his description presents this aftermath as both traces of material transformation (death and destruction) and as formal units, numbered objects precisely arrayed. In the spirit of Hobbes, such abstractions are to be expected. Once acts of war are no longer self-evidently consequential—that is, once it has been accepted that war is as much the performance and interpretation of certain signifying intentions as it is the act of harming people—the concrete physical parameters of a military engagement no longer have the same organizational authority. Accordingly, it is unclear that Napoléon or anyone else can control the ensuing dynamics of simulation, no matter how well one claims to be able to see.

Napoléon's implicit argument in his bulletin about Eylau is that victory goes to the one who is left to peruse the carnage, suggesting that to win a battle it is not enough to rout the enemy with weapons; one must also prevail in the exegesis that follows. Yet the very fact that the emperor, the mythic surveyor of the scene, has to become an interpreter of what there is to be seen means that he can be second-guessed by people who were not there. It is instructive to compare Napoléon's text with Walter Scott's comments on visiting the site of the Battle of Waterloo only a few weeks after the epic day:

> To recollect, that within a short month, the man whose name had been the terror of Europe, stood on the very ground which I now occupied . . . —that the landscape, now solitary and peaceful around me, presented so lately a scene of such horrid magnificence— . . . oppressed me with sensations which I find it impossible to describe. The scene seemed to have shifted so rapidly, that even while I stood on the very stage where it was exhibited, I felt an inclination to doubt the reality of what had passed. (196–97)[5]

Scott's experience is entirely at odds with what Napoléon enjoins us to experience at Eylau. As Scott stands at the center of world history's main stage, on the very spot where the emperor stood, the indescribable disjunction between the setting and what supposedly took place there makes him skeptical about the story with which he has been presented: what he sees offers him no information about what happened. Moreover, far from following Napoléon's instructions and trying to imagine what the landscape looked like only hours after the battle, Scott is not prompted to any flight of fancy. Instead he challenges the notion that the past may be understood through a study of what persists in the present. That Waterloo the locale endures whereas Waterloo the battle came and went in less than twenty-four hours becomes a reason to doubt the significance of what transpired there on 18 June. Precisely because one can "imagine," as Napoléon would have it, the details of the battle, one can also imagine that the battle did not take place, or at least that it did not take place as narrated. Such questioning in no way diminishes the suffering and death that occurred during this period in Europe, but in both Scott's musings and Napoléon's bulletin, the power of the theater of war is as much a factor of what the mind can see as of what the eye can see. The force of a war story is therefore compromised rather than augmented the moment it is tied to a specific representation or locale. The narrative of war is not an object of empirical observation.

In April 1793, with the French revolutionary wars still in their infancy and the mammoth Napoleonic conflicts years in the future, William Godwin paused in the middle of a treatise on ethics and politics to consider the evil of war:

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1648 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> We can have no adequate idea of this evil unless we visit, at least in imagination, a field of battle. Here men deliberately destroy each other by thousands, without resentment against, or even knowledge of, each other. The plain is strewed with death in all its forms. Anguish and wounds display the diversified modes in which they can torment the human frame. Towns are burned; ships are blown up in the air, while the mangled limbs descend on every side; the fields are laid desolate; the wives of the inhabitants exposed to brutal insult; and their children driven forth to hunger and nakedness. (510)

To illustrate the horrors of war, Godwin demands that we visit a concrete incarnation of these tragedies, a field of battle. This demand is not based on his own experiences of military struggle; the visit is a thought experiment, not a review of empirical facts. While he has no shortage of past battles to exemplify his point—he could cast his gaze on the wars of the Reformation or turn to classical accounts of conflicts in Thucydides and Herodotus—he proposes that we consider war abstractly, as it happens and not as it has happened or will happen.

If the next two decades in Europe would witness forms of concentrated slaughter unprecedented in 1793, for Godwin the simple idea of war was already powerful enough that it could be unfolded in precise and terrible detail. Moreover, because he treats war first and foremost as an idea, its exposition cannot be restricted to a visual account of combat. His demonstration of a war in and of the mind quickly starts to run away—temporally and spatially—from the parameters with which it begins, moving from a field of battle to towns, to ships at sea, and finally to the long-term effects of soldiers' deaths as their children are left to perish without protection. Godwin does not propose that by describing a war he will bring its terrors home to us. We are to do this on our own, as if the singular horror that is war were universally accessible to the imaginative capacities of his readership. In the process, we are to survey the world not as a war correspondent, who would observe the manifold complexities of a battle firsthand, but as an omniscient narrator relating the fates of countless individuals across an entire society. In other words, we are asked to review extended sequences of cause and effect for which there may be no visible evidence, as if we could see months or years into the future. The power of Godwin's illustration of the evils of war lies in his invitation to his reader to become the author of a novel about war.

In all three of these passages about battlefields, the observational authority of the solitary watcher—the witness whose testimony wins credibility because of the singularity of his privileged vantage point—is undermined by the need to generalize the substance of the experience through the power of the mind so that what is not or cannot be directly viewed may be envisioned. At best, eyewitnessing is incomplete; it must be supplemented by some sort of inventive reconstruction or projection. At worst, seeing something in person—Scott's view of the field where a battle was fought—becomes a challenge to the claim that anything happened at all. Observation is not modeled here in micro-, macro-, or telescopic terms. If anything, it is conceived in contradistinction to rather than on the basis of the faculties of human perception or its technological supplements. The result is that the spatiotemporal integrity of the military event is shattered. In Napoléon's Eylau, the conflict can be grasped in its significance only by reading the traces of its aftermath; in Godwin's example, the battle becomes complete in its horrors only as one moves far beyond it. Whereas Rousseau argues that there is no way to be sure in watching a battle that one is seeing causal chains, the authors of the generation that follows him suggest that only a hypothetical or imaginary viewer could grasp the complexity and totality of the war experience. Henceforth, the story about what and how one should see when

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1648 Published online by Cambridge University Press

witnessing a military venture will be just as important as what one does see.

In nineteenth-century European literature, what the Napoleonic Wars reveal about the nature of historical experience is considered in a host of novels that dwell on the tension between the insights won by a character who witnesses a battle firsthand and the very different knowledge of the narrator who tells the story with the advantage (or mystification) of hindsight. One of the best known and most influential of such reflections is the first part of Stendhal's *La chartreuse de Parme* (1839; *The Charterhouse of Parma*), where the seventeen-year-old Fabrice leaves his home in Italy and rushes north, desperate to serve his idealized hero, the emperor of France, recently returned from exile on Elba. Fabrice's quest to become an actor in the world-historical theater of the Hundred Days quickly becomes comical as the naive young man is robbed and then arrested as a spy. Finally managing to find his way to the French army, he arrives, the narrator explains, on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo.[6] Fabrice devotes the fateful day of 18 June to trying, with limited success, to become a cog in the Napoleonic war machine. Having purchased the uniform of a hussar who recently died in jail, he attaches himself to a squad of men and simultaneously tries to sightsee and take part in the engagement. If his newfound comrades support his efforts to catch glimpses of the famous generals who pass by, they are not fooled by his impersonation of a soldier; and many cast inquisitive glances his way—as if the major thing of note that day was the disruption of an adult play by an upstart child actor. Blithely unaware of the show he is putting on, Fabrice is relieved when they are attacked: "'Aha! Now we're under fire at last. I've seen action!' he kept telling himself, with a certain satisfaction. 'Now I'm a true soldier'" ("Ah! m'y voilà donc enfin au feu! se dit-il. J'ai vu le feu! se répétait-il avec satisfaction. Me voici un vrai militaire" [43; 60]). In his youthful enthusiasm, he is committed to the notion that to see the cannonade, to be under fire, is to be "a true soldier," although he is there as an impostor, having no military training, rank, or assignment, much less any past record of fighting. His jejune understanding of military identity is immediately called into question:

> At this moment, the escort began galloping at breakneck speed, and our hero realized that these were cannonballs tearing up the earth. Though he tried to see where they were coming from, there was nothing but white smoke from the battery a great way off, and amid the continuous roaring of cannon-fire, he seemed to hear explosions much closer to him; he could make nothing of it. (43; trans. modified)[7]

> A ce moment, l'escorte allait ventre à terre, et notre héros comprit que c'étaient des boulets qui faisaient voler la terre de toutes parts. Il avait beau regarder du côté d'où venaient les boulets, il voyait la fumée blanche de la batterie à une distance énorme, et, au milieu du ronflement égal et continu produit par les coups de canon, il lui semblait entendre des décharges beaucoup plus voisines; il n'y comprenait rien du tout. (60)

If "being there" is the essence of "being a soldier," it is nonetheless no guarantee of access to reliable information about what is taking place in one's immediate surroundings. Fabrice successfully infers that gunshot is making the earth fly up; but when he then looks for its source, he cannot reconcile what he sees with what he hears, passing from preliminary comprehension ("our hero realized that these were cannonballs" ["notre héros comprit que c'étaient des boulets"]) to the utter lack thereof ("he could make nothing of it" ["il n'y comprenait rien du tout"]). His repeated emphasis on the link between location and self-identity—"here *I* am because I am *here*"—is asserted in a toposcopic lexicon of imperatives ("here is"—"look here," "there is"—"look there" ["voici"—"vois ici," "voilà"—"vois là"]). The coordination of place and sight is inter-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1648 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rupted, however, by the confusing appearance of something "much closer" ("beaucoup plus *voisines*"; emphasis mine), a contiguity in which identity becomes literally too close for comfort. At the level of the letters, *voisines* extends the chain of terms beginning with *v-o-i*, but it does so with a word whose root is the Latin *vicinus* ("neighbor") rather than *videre* (from which *voir* is derived). Putting together the sights and sounds of the novel's verbal description of Fabrice's confusion is no easier than the coordination of perceptions that Fabrice undertakes. His *baptême du feu* ("baptism by fire") introduces an uncertainty that divides his efforts at self-expression, since despite what he asserts, it is now possible that being *au feu* ("under fire") is not the same thing as seeing *le feu* ("the action")—indeed it may be that being *au feu* is the name for a situation in which one cannot see what is going on. In this combat experience, the *coup de feu* ("shot") becomes a disruptive *coup d'œil* ("glance"); it is not a glimpse but a blow to the eye that shatters the authority of vision and exposes the immediacy of combat as irremediably *après coup* ("after the fact").

From this point on, the firsthand perceptions of Fabrice will be oversights and errors: he cannot make out the figure of Napoléon passing by; he infers that he has shot a Prussian, only to learn that someone else did. As his attempts to define himself as a soldier founder, Fabrice shifts his focus from himself to the proceedings around him and asks one of his new comrades whether they are in the midst of a real battle: "'Monsieur, this is the first time I've seen a battle,' he finally said to the sergeant, 'but is this a real battle?'" ("Monsieur, c'est la première fois que j'assiste à la bataille, dit-il enfin au maréchal des logis; mais ceci est-il une véritable bataille?" [44; 61]). It is crucial to consider here whether Fabrice's inexperience and incompetence explain his uncertainty about what he is seeing and doing or whether the point of the scene is that any battlefield is bewildering. That Fabrice will be plagued by naïveté throughout the novel suggests that his confusion on this storied day in Belgium is simply an introduction to the bumbling to come. But there are indications that the difficulties of battlefield spectatorship are central to the understanding of history in *La chartreuse*. The first lines of the novel's first chapter characterize the grand entrance of Napoléon into Italy:

> On May 15, 1796, General Bonaparte entered Milan at the head of that young army which had lately crossed the Lodi Bridge and taught the world that after so many centuries Caesar and Alexander had a successor. The miracles of valor and genius Italy had witnessed in a few months awakened a slumbering nation: just eight days before the French arrived, the Milanese still regarded them as no more than a band of brigands who habitually fled before the troops of His Imperial and Royal Majesty: at least so they were told three times a week by a little news-sheet the size of a man's hand, printed on dirty paper. (3)

> Le 15 mai 1796, le général Bonaparte fit son entrée dans Milan à la tête de cette jeune armée qui venait de passer le pont de Lodi, et d'apprendre au monde qu'après tant de siècles César et Alexandre avaient un successeur. Les miracles de bravoure et de génie dont l'Italie fut témoin en quelques mois réveillèrent un peuple endormi; huit jours encore avant l'arrivée des Français, les Milanais ne voyaient en eux qu'un ramassis de brigands, habitués à fuir toujours devant les troupes de Sa Majesté Impériale et Royale: c'était du moins ce que leur répétait trois fois la semaine un petit journal grand comme la main, imprimé sur du papier sale. (21)

This opening establishes a clear standard for the world-historical events that are to unfold as revelations of truth. Mired in the falsities of news reports, the Italian populace is roused from its confusion by miracles of bravery and genius. But Fabrice at Waterloo is completely excluded from the Napoleonic pageant, unable

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1648 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to participate either as a member of a military force or as a spectator who can see the battle for what it really is. His comical spectacle of faux soldiering, like the inexorable march of Napoléon's army into Italy, gains momentum, albeit as a para- or antihistorical story. As the novel continues, members of his family try to protect him by insisting that he was not in Belgium that day in June, yet secondhand accounts will ultimately describe him as having once been "one of the bravest colonels in Napoleon's army" ("un des plus braves capitaines de l'armée de Napoléon" [482; 508]). In the end, Fabrice is "a true soldier," but by Hobbes's standards rather than his own. In his dual role as a would-be combatant (he kills no one) and a would-be spectator (he cannot even be sure that he was present at the spectacle), Fabrice is suspended in a "will to contend" that contents itself with poses and never moves from intention to action.

Is this dynamic of military posturing, which perverts the authority of the true march of history, inherent in all warfare? One could argue that Stendhal's entire novel works to undermine the logic expressed in its opening lines and that our hapless impostor at Waterloo is just the first in a series of characters who play at being what they are not. It is often observed that for large sections of *La chartreuse de Parme* Fabrice does not seem to be the principal figure in his own bildungsroman. In part, the spotlight is stolen by Gina, the duchess who assumes the role of his aunt. Alternatively, Maurice Samuels emphasizes the paradigmatic status of the prince of Parma. Modeling himself on Louis XIV, the prince turns his state "into a giant Romantic historical drama" such that the town essentially becomes a stage set and the inhabitants have to pretend that recently constructed buildings date from the Middle Ages (263). "Through the example of Fabrice and the court of Parma," argues Samuels, "the novel reveals the absurdity, as well as the danger, of looking to the past as a model," exposing "the historical obsession of the nineteenth century as a Romantic delusion, as incapable of providing a basis for the formation of either individual or national identity" (265).[8]

In the quarter century between Napoléon's final defeat and the appearance of *La chartreuse*, the Battle of Waterloo acquired considerable mythic status and was ripe for debunking. The problem with subsuming Fabrice's experience of 18 June into Samuels's broader account of the ironic logic of the novel is that Fabrice's delusions in Belgium stem not from the instability of the past as a model of self-identity but from the inability of an experience of the present to be a ground of truth, as if the scene at the start of the book, where the Italian people bear witness to the genius of the invading French, were a onetime fluke. The real key to understanding Fabrice's convoluted relation to world-historical events lies in the connection that *La chartreuse* establishes between war and reading. In the opening lines of the first chapter, reading appears as a diversion from veracity in the reference to the "little news-sheet" ("petit journal") that misleads the Italian people about the true nature of the French forces. Later, Gina explains, "You know that I had, in my private apartments in the Palazzo Dugnani, the engravings of the battles won by Napoleon: it was by studying the captions of these engravings that my nephew learned to read" ("Vous savez que j'avais, dans mon bel appartement du palais Dugnani, les estampes des batailles gagnées par Napoléon: c'est en lisant les légendes de ces gravures que mon neveu apprit à lire" [86; 102]). However idiosyncratic or naive he may be, Fabrice is not unusual in embodying the conjunction of literacy and war. The emergence of a broad readership for daily newspapers at the end of the eighteenth century meant that during these decades of prolonged military conflict the public sphere was to a large degree shaped by the widespread monitoring of the Napoleonic campaigns on a routine basis. In this

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manner, it has been argued, war became an essential feature of the modern notion of the everyday.[9] At the same time, as regular news reports made these bloody struggles a part of the daily lives of readers across the Continent, it became less clear that the experience of war was fundamentally a matter of physical proximity to battle. By 1815, nearly everyone in Europe was a war spectator, although the vast majority of the populace had never been within a hundred miles of the fighting.[10] If in the twenty-first century we speak of the dissolution of the classical battlefield, since combat is now waged as much in information networks as on physical terrain, this process was actually set in motion two hundred years ago, when reading about war became central to experiencing it.[11]

If the modern experience of war as spectacle rests on the possibility that watching war primarily means reading about war—and reading about other people watching war—Fabrice's travails do not bode well for the clarity of the discourse that emerges. The claim that our sometime protagonist learned to read by inspecting the captions of illustrations of Napoléon invites us to look more closely at his activities in the weeks following Waterloo, when he tries to put words and pictures together as he searches for some corroboration that the sights he remembers were what he hopes they were:

> During the fifteen days Fabrice spent in the Amiens inn . . . the Allies were invading France, and Fabrice became an entirely different man, so many and so deep were his reflections upon the things which had just happened to him. He remained a child only on this one point: had what he had seen been a battle and, furthermore, had this battle been Waterloo? For the first time in his life, he took pleasure in reading; he still hoped to find in the newspapers or in the accounts of battle some description that might allow him to recognize the places he had passed through with Marshal Ney's escort, and later with the other general. (73)
>
> Pendant les quinze jours que Fabrice passa dans l'auberge d'Amiens . . . les alliés envahissaient la France, et Fabrice devint comme un autre homme, tant il fit de réflexions profondes sur les choses que venaient du lui arriver. Il n'était resté enfant que sur ce point: ce qu'il avait vu, était-ce une bataille, et en second lieu, cette bataille était-elle Waterloo? Pour la première fois de sa vie il trouva du plaisir à lire; il espérait toujours trouver dans les journaux, ou dans les récits de bataille, quelque description qui lui permettrait de reconnaître les lieux qu'il avait parcourus à la suite du maréchal Ney, et plus tard avec l'autre général. (89)

Like the opening paragraph of the novel, this passage suggests a relation between world history and an individual's experience of it: the allies take France, and Fabrice's profound reflections on this event make him "an entirely different man." Yet whereas earlier the Italian people were witnesses to the immediacy of the Napoleonic force and thus learned that what they had been reading about this force was false, here the press fails to confirm that what Fabrice experienced was what he wants it to have been. Nothing in the newspapers corroborates his memories of 18 June. In the model of literacy offered by his aunt, his inability to match words with pictures means that effectively he cannot read at all.

Because these investigations generate no insight into his experiences, much later in the novel Fabrice decides to visit the site where Waterloo was fought—by then a standard tourist attraction—in order to see if the landscape there in fact includes the meadow where he remembers losing his horse. Whether his experience of the site would have produced Scott's disbelief that such an innocuous terrain could have been the scene of terrible destruction remains unknown: the visit never takes place. That the narrator of the novel states in a matter-of-fact fashion that our hero was at Waterloo does little for us. Fabrice's failed experience of a battle near the start of *La chartreuse* is uniquely disruptive, because

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we cannot be sure if it should be treated as an account or a parody of the historical event. There is no way to decide whether his Waterloo prefigures the elaborately staged forms of artificial history that will constitute the court of Parma later in the novel or whether his day in Belgium is instead an indication that no clear line can be drawn between the delusion, as Samuels terms it, of looking to the past as a model for identity and the delusion of looking to the present or future for it. In the final analysis, *La chartreuse* offers a conception of war reading that makes it impossible for us to establish whether Fabrice ever was under fire.

Fabrice's liminal, picaresque experience at an epic battle as a quasi combatant and quasi bystander is by no means unusual in nineteenth-century European fiction. Among the texts influenced by Stendhal, the most famous is Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*, which aggressively attacks the proposition that battles are won or lost because of the decisions made by great generals. The narrator labors to convince his reader that no individual, from the lowliest soldier to the grandest marshal, is in control of the events at Austerlitz or Waterloo and that to attribute authority to any person is retrospectively to impose a causal schema on events it did not govern: "After the accomplished fact, historians have brought forward cunningly devised evidences of the foresight and genius of the generals, who of all the involuntary instruments of the world's history were the most slavish and least independent agents" (861–62). Predictably, the harshest words are reserved for the paragon of military genius: Napoléon Bonaparte. The narrator deems his influence on military proceedings "purely external and fictitious" and says, "Napoleon in his activity all this time is like a child sitting in a carriage, pulling the straps within it, and fancying he is moving it along" (895, 1148). Against the notion that the leaders of armies shape the fate of their troops and the course of their campaigns, *War and Peace* entertains alternative dynamics of determination, both broad sociohistorical forces that transcend individuals and more nebulous powers such as fate or chance.

If these aspects of the novel are widely known, the argument that *War and Peace* makes about the nature of war spectatorship has largely gone unrecognized. Scholars routinely observe that Tolstoy draws heavily on the escapades of Fabrice in crafting the scene in which the nobleman Pierre Bezukhov goes to great lengths to watch the grisly Battle of Borodino firsthand. Yet in contrast to Fabrice, who is driven by youthful devotion to the French emperor, Pierre is unable to explain his motives. On the eve of the battle, when an officer asks him what a civilian nobleman is doing at the front, Pierre offers, "Oh, I want to have a look . . ." (867). Later he is confronted with the question again. "'I have come . . . you know . . . simply . . . I have come . . . it's interesting,' said Pierre, who had so many times already that day repeated that word 'interesting' but without meaning it. 'I wanted to see the battle!'" (880). His response to what was probably the bloodiest single day of the Napoleonic Wars verges on boredom. Cannonballs mow down men right next to him, and he actually ends up grappling with a French soldier, but like Fabrice, Pierre feels no anxiety about his own mortality, remaining curiously comfortable in his oblivion:

> But in spite of the unceasing fire going on there, he had no notion that this was the very center of the battle. He did not notice the bullets whizzing on all sides, and the shells flying over him; he did not see the enemy on the other side of the river, and it was a long time before he saw the killed and wounded, though many fell close to him. He gazed about him with a smile still on his face. (903)

Pierre is a spectator without expectations for the spectacle. He has no inclination to romanticize the event, no scientific or philosophical urge to explain the causal dynamics

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at work, and no desire to treat the battle sentimentally. Most important, he never regards the life-and-death struggle around him as a medium through which to reflect on his own identity. The tone of the passage is antitragic, antiepic, and antimelodramatic. That Pierre understands little—and then only long after he should—is not evidence of the sublimity of the experience, as if the scale or force of the proceedings were impossible to comprehend. He watches without the ability to judge what he sees. More than 75,000 people died at Borodino, but intensifying the irony with which Stendhal flirts, Tolstoy demonstrates that to understand a battle one must conceive of it as an event that may fail to move its onlookers if—as Napoléon, Scott, and Godwin suggest in different ways—the onlookers cannot use their own creative powers. In this respect, *War and Peace* faithfully extends the insights of Rousseau's *Émile*, which emphasizes that war spectacles acquire an appearance of autonomy from the historical dynamics of which they are a part. Sitting in the front row at the theater of world history, Pierre views what by the standard of spectacle established by Napoléon's triumphant march into Italy in the opening paragraph of *La chartreuse* is entirely unhistorical. He experiences the very impotence of experience, its inability to lay claim to some larger significance. Like Fabrice, he subsequently ponders the cataclysmic clash he witnessed as one mulls over an apparition that may never have been there.

Over the last 150 years, discussions of the modern battlefield and its bizarre conjunction of the physically devastating and the elusively virtual have largely focused on how changes in recording and communicative technologies have created new possibilities for processing the growing speed and destructiveness of military events. As the increasing velocity of ever deadlier projectiles has been matched by the increasing precision of cameras and computers, it has been argued that the experience of war has come to be defined by the interconnection of—or even the identity between—the media used to wage it and the media used to view it. In line with his larger claims about the difficulty of distinguishing between a medium and what it imparts, Jean Baudrillard has written that in the twenty-first century "there is no longer the need for 'embedded' journalists because soldiers themselves are immersed in the image—thanks to digital technology, the images are definitively integrated into the war" (87). Baudrillard's observation builds on the work of Paul Virilio, best known for his lapidary formulation "War is cinema, and cinema is war" (26). Virilio maintains that "*the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception*. In other words, war consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields" (7).

My analysis of the war spectator in the Napoleonic era suggests a number of ways to conceive of the conflicts of the period as struggles in which "a supply of images would become the equivalent of an ammunition supply" (Virilio 1). I have also shown that understanding this "immateriality of perceptual fields" necessitates conceptualizing a field as something that extends beyond the realm of sensible images. Today Fabrice and Pierre might well carry a digital camera to the front, but it would not necessarily alter either their response to the events or their subsequent reflection on them. For Napoléon, Godwin, and Stendhal, the only observers with any chance of grasping the complexity of warfare are those who give their imagination free rein. If today photography, film, and the Internet have expanded the possibilities for observing military action, these technological innovations have only confirmed the caution of Hobbes and Rousseau that we should distinguish between war and the physical operations waged in its name.

If we do not make this distinction, then despite increasing opportunities for an

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intimate engagement with the world's battlefields in the privacy of one's home or office, the contemporary Western consumer will follow Tolstoy's Pierre in repeating the word "interesting" without really meaning it. As with other forms of news and entertainment, the popular appetite for war has proved to be changeable, and the media have responded by rapidly shifting their focus from combat when sexier topics present themselves. In the first half of 2008, for example, the coverage of military operations in the Middle East by major American news services was only a fraction of what it was the year before, as election polls smoothly replaced death counts.[12] Nor does the situation change if one looks beyond mainstream news outlets. Independent documentaries about conflicts abroad continue to attract little attention, and the Iraq war in particular is regarded as "hell on the bottom line at the box office" (Garofoli).

At least since the Napoleonic era, the public's fickle, even blasé, attitude toward war has been explained by noting that an excess of information about fighting desensitizes people to its horrors, a claim that has in turn produced a host of arguments about which verbal and visual media best retain the ability to shock. In contrast, my analysis argues that a widespread indifference to the numerous opportunities to watch war is a consequence of the fact that the media's presentation of a battle imparts little or no understanding of warfare. If during the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq the major news services boasted that they would provide the public unparalleled access to soldiers under fire, it was almost inevitable that their efforts would be dismissed as producing only a "banality of images," since "for all the constant circulation of [information], there was still nothing to see" (Mirzoeff 67). At issue is not the inability of words or images to represent certain kinds of strife and suffering but a misconception about what sort of information needs to be conveyed. Where understanding war is concerned, seeing is only part of the task at hand. Many ideological forces inform the ambition (or the lack of ambition) to experience vicariously being under fire. To delineate them in their full complexity, however, it must be recognized that any representation of a battle is first and foremost a representation of the difficulty of conceptualizing the disjunction between war as a physical act of demolition and war as a set of signifying practices that perform an intent. If we ignore this difficulty, then, like Scott, we will be at risk of concluding that since there is currently nothing to see, there is probably nothing happening.

Notes

1. Historians have long identified the Napoleonic Wars as a decisive stage in the development of modern militarism. As David Bell argues, between 1792 and 1815 we see "concerted political attempts to harness entire societies—every human being, every resource—to a single, military purpose" (9). These efforts, Bell proposes, constitute the beginning of what military theorists after 1918 will term total war. On tactical innovations in fighting during this period, see Holtman; Gooch; and Rothenberg.

2. See Keegan 140 and the collection of eyewitness accounts in Brett-James.

3. As Michel Foucault describes it, "The importance, in historical mythology, of the Napoleonic character probably derives from the fact that it is at the point of junction of the monarchical, ritual exercise of sovereignty and the hierarchical, permanent exercise of indefinite discipline. He is the individual who looms over everything with a single gaze which no detail, however minute, can escape" (217).

4. Stuart Semmel explains, "If the revolutionary wars had tolled the death knell of the eighteenth-century aristocratic Grand Tour, the end of the Napoleonic wars ushered in the first hints of modern mass tourism. The months and years following Waterloo saw instant historical tourism of a rare type, comparable with the rash of Westerners unleashed on Berlin in 1989" (10). On the fascination with visiting battle sites and standing at the observation points Napoléon himself had used, see Shaw, especially chapter 2, "Exhibiting War: Battle Tours and Panoramas."

5. For another analysis of this passage, see Semmel 14.

6. For a spirited analysis of the opening of Stendhal's novel, see Chiaromonte 1–16. For a comparison of Stendhal's Waterloo and Hugo's, see Schwarz 29–45.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1648 Published online by Cambridge University Press

7. I am grateful to Hugh Hochman for his comments on this passage.

8. On *La chartreuse* as a critique of nineteenth-century engagements with a meaningful past, see also Golsan.

9. On the idea of war and the everyday in this period, see Favret.

10. For discussions of the broad daily newspaper readership across Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, see the collection of essays in Barker and Burrows.

11. The idea that in the Napoleonic era war was experienced as something that occurred elsewhere was most prevalent in Britain, whose battles were all fought on the Continent or in its colonies rather than on its own soil. But for most Europeans, the conflicts of the time did not involve mass displacement of populations, and relatively few people witnessed fighting firsthand.

12. "We're in a war—where are the media?" asked the *Boston Globe* in May 2008. The article was based on a report from the Project for Excellence in Journalism showing that "even as violence in Iraq increased, events on the ground in Iraq accounted for only 3 percent of news coverage" (Vennochi).

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1648 Published online by Cambridge University Press