ARSÈNE LUPIN GOES TO WAR

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The Great War generated an enormous amount of writing and literary scholars and cultural historians have generated an enormous amount of writing about that writing. Much of their interest has focused on the war’s role in fostering a new sensibility and its intersection with the crisis of representation that gave rise to modernism and the European avant-garde.[[1]](#endnote-1) More recently, within French studies, the combat novel and the récit de guerre have also been the subject of sustained critical attention.[[2]](#endnote-2) As of yet, however, there has been little work on the relationship between French crime fiction and the First World War. Crime serials flourished in France during the Belle Époque, when superdetectives such as Gaston Leroux’s Joseph Rouletabille and flamboyant criminals such as Arsène Lupin, gentleman-thief, proliferated. The *roman policier archaïque* has been the object of a number of important studies[[3]](#endnote-3) and is firmly entrenched in the established historiography of French detective fiction. That historiography tends to jump from the Belle Époque to the inter-war period, which saw the apotheosis of the *récit d’énigme* and the emergence of Simenon, and then to the development of the *roman noir* in the wake of the Second World War.[[4]](#endnote-4) This conventional periodization elides the Great War itself. But the outbreak of the war did not discontinue the production of the crime serials that had been so successful in the Belle Époque: new stories featuring characters such as Rouletabille and Arsène Lupin continued to appear. How then did the war inflect such stories?

In so far as this question has been considered, the standard answer is that it did not do so in a dramatic way. Popular culture, it has been averred, underwent no crisis of representation similar to that which wracked high culture in the period. Thus Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites write in their conclusion to an edited collection on culture in the Great War that: ‘Nothing was easier than to convert the old themes of Nick Carter and Maurice Leblanc […] into wartime espionage or sabotage adventures, which neatly combined propaganda and entertainment’.[[5]](#endnote-5) Benjamin Gilles, in his study of the reading habits of French soldiers during the war, likewise notes that *romans-feuilleton* could easily be adapted for the war years: ‘Ces romans font […] l’amalgame entre les thèmes à succès des années 1900 et un discours sur l’héroïsme et le sacrifice des combattants et des civils […]. Ces romans-feuilletons créent une représentation de la guerre originale, qui incorpore toutefois certains cadres pré-existants.’[[6]](#endnote-6) Gilles emphasizes that in the case of popular fiction, there is no sudden rupture between the cultural production of the Belle Époque and that of the war years. Certainly the war brought with it new motifs and new story-lines, but these could be integrated into the existing structure of the popular novel without, it is implied, too much trouble.

At first blush, this is indeed the case. On the opening pages of Leroux’s 1917 *Rouletabille chez Krupp*, for example, the eponymous hero, roving reporter and detective, returns to Paris from the front line, enchanted to find that life in the capital appears to go on much as before the outbreak of war. He has been summoned by his editor to a meeting with the Minister of the Interior where he will be entrusted with a secret mission. At this news, Rouletabille is elated:

Depuis la guerre, il avait, comme tant d’autres, rempli obscurément son devoir, risqué cent fois sa vie dans une besogne anonyme de défense nationale qui était pleine de grandeur, certes! mais qu’il eût voulue plus…disons le mot qui était au fond de sa pensée «plus amusante».[[7]](#endnote-7)

Here the text identifies itself as a work of escapism, but escape not from the horror of war but its tedium. In this respect the text seems to perform what George L. Mosse calls the ‘trivialization’ of the Great War, a process he identifies as occurring on the home front through the proliferation of war-themed bric-à-brac and boys’ own fiction inter alia.[[8]](#endnote-8) In Leroux’s text, the feigned hesitation in characterizing the war as boring implies a deliberately irreverent attitude towards it. The escapist and trivializing tendencies in the text are combined with a vehement anti-German sentiment, as Rouletabille’s mission behind enemy lines to the Krupp factory in Essen is described as a descent into the Underworld.

This combination of escapism, trivialization and jingoism is obviously unappealing for the modern reader. The literary scholar, trained to relish ambiguity and decode encrypted meaning, is unlikely to think that such texts offer much grist to her critical mill. This article will test that theory through examining the three Arsène Lupin novels set during the First World War: *L’Éclat d’Obus* (1915), *Le Triangle d’or* (1918) and *L’Île aux trente cercueils* (published in 1919 but set during 1917). My contention is that a close reading of these novels reveals that they register the trauma of the First World War in unexpected and unexpectedly sensitive ways; far from incorporating the war with ease, the novels repeatedly betray their own difficulty in representing it, a difficulty expressed in an aesthetics of the uncanny which marks a radical break with the pre-war Lupin stories. Before embarking on a study of Leblanc’s triptych of war novels, therefore, it is first necessary to sketch out the basic axioms of the Lupinian universe as it was established in the early stories.

Jean-Paul Sartre, recalling in his autobiography his childhood reading habits, writes of Leblanc’s hero: ‘J’adorais le Cyrano de la pègre, Arsène Lupin, sans savoir qu’il devait sa force herculéenne, son courage narquois, son intelligence bien française à notre déculottée de 1870.’[[9]](#endnote-9) The suggestion that Lupin functioned as a compensatory fantasy soothing wounded French pride is echoed by historian of education Paul Gerbod, who mentions Lupin when discussing a widespread obsession with heroism in France in the years after the Franco-Prussian War. As a result of this ‘contagion héroïque’ a somewhat eclectic pantheon of national heroes was established in the cultural imaginary, in which Lupin rubbed shoulders with Joan of Arc, Vercingétorix and Danton, amongst others.[[10]](#endnote-10)

But what were the qualities that made Lupin a heroic figure? In addition to those identified by Sartre, Lupin enjoys a specific relation to time and space, quite unlike that of other characters in the books or his readers. He seems to exist in a more plastic universe. For Lupin no space is impenetrable or inescapable, as established in the early short story ‘Arsène Lupin en prison’, in which he commits a burglary while locked in a prison cell, and its sequel, ‘L’Évasion d’Arsène Lupin’, in which he escapes from that cell. The motif of porousness is linked to the motif of speed. As the title of the story ‘Herlock Sholmès arrive trop tard makes clear’, Lupin is always one step ahead. His conquest of time is a function both of his preternatural rapidity of thought and of technology - he has at his disposal automobiles, aeroplanes, the whole panoply of high-speed technologies. But as Jean-Claude Vareille points out, despite Lupin’s love of gadgetry, he is more traditionalist than neoteric: ‘Lupin, en dépit de son amour pour la vitesse […] appartient au passé comme beaucoup de héros feuilletonesques; c’est un des derniers héros épiques; il «rétablit»; chaque roman dessine un cercle’.[[11]](#endnote-11) This idea of restitution functions in the Lupin stories at both ideological and narratological levels. Narratologically, the stories, qua detective stories, invariably involve a dual plot, as Vareille explains: ‘dans le roman policier, on trouvera l’imbrication d’une série temporelle qui aboutit à la découverte du criminel (l’enquête) avec une autre, permettant de remonter dans la durée, et narrant, elle, la genèse du crime’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Thus the origin of the *fabula* is revealed only at the end of the *syuzhet* and accordingly *la boucle est bouclée*. But Lupin is also a figure whose actions tend to restitution: he often restores property to its rightful owners (as in ‘Le Collier de la Reine’) or recovers knowledge thought to have been lost (normally during the Revolution, as in ‘Herlock Sholmès arrive trop tard’ or *L’Aiguille creuse*). Central to the ideological work performed by the texts, therefore, is the knitting together of past and present to produce an image of historical continuity. But this notion of continuity, like the other basic laws of the Lupin universe, was called into question, as we shall now see, by the war.

The most striking aspect of Leblanc’s wartime novels is the marginal role that Lupin himself plays in all three of them. In fact, *L’Éclat d’Obus*, when it first appeared, was not a Lupin story at all. The hero of the novel is Paul Delroze, a brave officer who embarks on a daredevil solo mission in the process of which he discovers and ultimately destroys a 10km long tunnel running under the Franco-German border, used by the Germans to smuggle soldiers and armaments behind enemy lines. Paul uses the tunnel to rescue his wife, kidnapped by a German officer, and avenge the death of his father, murdered when he was a child by the same German officer. He then destroys the tunnel, cutting off a major German supply route. His filial, marital and patriotic duty all align. A revised edition of the novel was published in 1924 in which Lupin does appear fleetingly, gently pushing Paul towards the discovery of the tunnel, and it has subsequently always been included in the *Aventures Extraordinaires*. Even in the original edition of the novel there is, in fact, one reference to Lupin. When Paul explains to his brother-in-law, Bernard, that he has discovered the existence of a secret tunnel, the latter is impressed by his detective work and asks him jokily whether he has been spending time with Sherlock Holmes. ‘Pas même Arsène Lupin’, Paul replies.[[13]](#endnote-13) Thus Lupin is invoked in the text only for his absence therefrom to be emphasized. In fact the reference to Lupin serves here to create a reality effect, segregating the world of popular fiction and the world of the war. This universe of the story is not Lupin’s usual one, populated by superheroes and criminal geniuses, but one in which an ordinary French soldier is called upon to perform the role of hero. That Leblanc should have initially chosen to create a new hero for the novel rather than send his most famous character to war is thus readily explicable as a patriotic gesture. But it also indicates that, against the reality of industrialized war, the fantasy of a superman was too brittle to be exposed to mortars and mustard gas, a point to which we shall later return.

Nonetheless *L’Éclat d’obus* remains, in terms of its thematics and narrative structure, very close to the Lupin stories, as the fact that it could later be so easily incorporated into the *Aventures extraordinaires* demonstrates. This does suggest that, as scholars such as Gilles and Roshwald and Stites have argued, if the war generated new content for the popular novel, it did not fundamentally alter its structure. In fact, however, the climactic episode of *L’Éclat d’obus* draws attention to the fact that the new content generated by the war was incompatible with the formal narrative demands of the popular novel. This episode occurs in the underground lair of Paul’s German archenemy, a lair to which Paul gains access through the tunnel he has discovered. There, Paul is reminded of other important sites in the book: ‘[Il] se rappela les ruines du vieux phare au bord de l’Yser et le tunnel d’Ornequin à Ebrecourt. Ainsi, la lutte se continuait sous terre. Guerre de tranchées et guerre de caves, guerre d’espionnage et guerre de ruse, c’étaient toujours les mêmes procédés sournois, honteux, équivoques, criminels.’[[14]](#endnote-14) This is the first and only reference to trenches in the text, much of the action of which takes place before the Battle of Yser ended the period of open warfare. Following that battle, Paul embarks on his solo mission. At the moment, therefore, when in reality French soldiers were digging in, Paul finds himself not in a trench but in a tunnel. But by narrative subterfuge the novel assimilates the tunnel to the paradigm of the trench. This stratagem is possible because of the structural similarities between tunnels and trenches and necessary because of the functional differences between them. Trenches are not conducive to narrative; tunnels are. Trenches are designed to obstruct progress, to act as a barrier; tunnels are designed to make the impermeable permeable. Trenches are sites of stasis and boredom; tunnels facilitate movement and adventure.

Initially, therefore, the fictional narrative of *L’Éclat d’obus* is grafted on to a factual rootstock - the battles in which Paul fights were real battles in which real men took part. But there is a point at which the fiction is no longer rooted in reality, because reality - the stalemate of trench warfare - can no longer sustain an exciting narrative. Trench warfare is a square peg difficult to fit into the round holes of popular fiction. Similarly, the novel’s attempts to squeeze the war into the mould of the *roman policier*, clearly announced in the title of the opening chapter, ‘Un crime a été commis’, become less and less convincing over the course of the book. The mystery element is sketched out in the opening chapter, which is taken up with a conversation between Paul and his bride, Élisabeth, in which the former recounts a traumatic incident from his childhood. As a boy, Paul accompanied his father, a veteran of the 1870 war, on a pilgrimage across France, revisiting the sites at which his father had fought. While hiking in the Vosges, they come face to face with Kaiser Wilhelm II emerging from a dilapidated chapel in the company of a woman. The Kaiser and his companion quickly depart and Paul and his father visit the chapel. A short while later, however, the woman returns and fatally stabs Paul’s father. This crime will be solved by Paul over the course of the novel.

The starting point for Leblanc’s First World War story is therefore a crime rooted, in an obscure way, in the events of 1870 and the use of the *passé composé* in the title of the chapter emphasizes this link between past and present. The superimposition of the image of the Franco-Prussian War on to the First World War is quite consonant with Leblanc’s long-held revanchist sympathies.[[15]](#endnote-15) But quite apart from its ideological implications, it creates a curious tone in the book. For the opening chapter does not just narrate the crime that took place years ago, but speculates about a crime that might be about to be committed: the declaration of war. It is Élisabeth who fears the outbreak of European conflict; Paul is rather more optimistic and comforts his wife by saying that only a ‘criminel odieux’ would declare war.[[16]](#endnote-16) The title of the chapter thus becomes ambiguous, as it might allude either to the murder of Paul’s father or to the declaration of war.

Turning the *roman policier* into a *roman de guerre* by presenting the war as a crime has several advantages. First, of course, it enables the text to pin all blame for the war on to the Kaiser. It also enables a specific representation of death in the text. This becomes clear when Paul and Bernard stumble on the corpses of two fellow soldiers murdered by their mysterious nemesis, whom they presume to be the woman who murdered Paul’s father and continues to occupy a position of trust close to the Kaiser. Upon the discovery of the murdered men, the narrator comments:

Jamais la mort, dont ils avaient tant de fois déjà senti le souffle au cours des batailles, ne leur était apparue sous un aspect plus sinistre et plus odieux.

La mort! Ils la voyaient, non pas comme un mal sournois qui frappe au hasard, mais comme un spectre qui se glisse dans l’ombre, épie l’adversaire, choisit son moment, et lève le bras dans une intention déterminée.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The personification of death which we find here is, according to Martin Hurcombe, typical of the combat novel in general. Hurcombe notes that the motif of a physically embodied death is a throwback to medieval culture, resurfacing as a ‘spatial expression’ of ‘the sense that death is a constant possibility awaiting man on the horizon of war’.[[18]](#endnote-18) It is thus part of the sense of the Absurd that Hurcombe identifies as the keynote of the combat novel: ‘at any point man’s presence can be terminated by the interruption of death’.[[19]](#endnote-19) But here the personification of death enables it to be presented as something not random, but willed, and the representation of death as an intentional agent acting to achieve an identifiable goal might be, in a strange way, comforting, when set against the indiscriminate slaughter of the battlefield. At the same time, assimilating a war story to the model of a murder mystery generates certain problems, which become apparent in the final line of the novel, which describes a French child whose hands have been amputated reaching out imploringly.[[20]](#endnote-20) This ending frustrates the reader’s expectations of narrative closure; the central mystery in the text is solved, but the war continues. The narrative structure of *L’Éclat d’obus* does not describe a perfect circle.

This points to a specific experience of time in the novel which is very different from that found in previous Lupin stories. For Paul, at the beginning of the novel, only one crime has come to pass - his father’s murder. The other crime he mentions, the outbreak of war, is imagined only as a future possibility. For the reader, however, the latter is already in the past. An important aspect of the early Lupin texts is the fact that for Lupin, nothing is ever too late. His rapidity of thought and movement means that he is able to stretch time and thus forestall apparently unavoidable catastrophes. From the opening pages of *L’Éclat d’Obus*, however, it is already too late; a fatalism hangs over the book. Certainly the novel, in common with previous Lupin stories, seeks to establish continuity in the place of apparent rupture. In pre-war Lupin stories such as *L’Aiguille Creuse* and ‘Herlock Sholmès arrive trop tard’ establishing continuity involved the recovery of something believed to be lost - a secret tunnel in the case of the latter; a treasury in the former - and the consequent enrichment of the present (or at least the enrichment of Lupin). In *L’Éclat d’Obus*, however, the process is reversed. Solving his father’s murder enables Paul to establish a sequence of events leading to the First World War. Thus he explains to Bernard: ‘Assassiner et espionner, c’est pour [les Allemands] les formes naturelles et permises de la guerre, et d’une guerre qu’ils avaient commencée en pleine période de paix. […] Le meurtre de mon père fut le début du drame.’[[21]](#endnote-21) Here the present is projected back into the past, as the outbreak of war in 1914 is presented as simply one event in an ongoing campaign of hostility.

In presenting the murder of Delroze’s father as the beginning of the war, *L’Éclat d’obus* obviously performs what we might call, adapting Mosse’s idea, a personalizing function. As already noted, Delroze’s filial, marital and patriotic duties are tied together in the novel. But its ending shows that Delroze’s personal narrative is not isomorphic with the larger narrative of the war. The second wartime Lupin novel, *Le Triangle d’or*, emphasizes this. Indeed, if *L’Éclat d’obus* seeks to camouflage the structural fissures and cracks that are caused by trying to force the war into the mould of the detective novel, *Le Triangle d’or* openly displays those cracks, incorporating them as part of its very architecture. Again there is a war plot and a sentimental plot, but the two are not neatly tied together. The protagonist is Patrice Belval, an amputee who is being rehabilitated in a nursing home in Paris, where he falls in love with his nurse, Coralie, unhappily married to Essarès Bey, an influential financier. Although a naturalized French citizen, Essarès Bey’s sympathies lie in his native land of Turkey. As Coralie suspects, he is thus funnelling France’s gold reserves out of the country and to Istanbul. As a result of his involvement in criminal activity and treason, Essarès Bey is murdered, holding in his hand a scrap of paper on which is written ‘le triangle d’or’. The police become involved in the murder investigation, with the aim of recovering the 300 million francs worth of gold that they believe still remains in France. But the death of Essarès Bey also introduces a second mystery. Found at the residence of the dead financier is a photograph album with images of both Patrice and Coralie as children and young adults. Yet Patrice and Coralie grew up far apart, have no memory of ever meeting each other before and no mutual acquaintances. This mysterious connection is confirmed when, as the police search the property for the hidden gold, various inscriptions of the names Patrice and Coralie are discovered. The central moment of the first half of the text, in which the mystery is elaborated, comes when Patrice and Coralie discover in the garden of the property a headstone bearing their own names and stating they were murdered in 1895. This supremely unsettling moment is followed soon after by an apparent re-enactment of the events of 1895, as an attempt is made on their lives. The intervention of Lupin saves them and he goes on to unravel the mystery of their past and locate the hidden gold.

*Le Triangle d’or* is in some respects a mirror image of *L’Éclat d’obus*. Whereas the latter disavows its own status as a Lupin novel, the former flaunts it. The first reference to Lupin in the text comes when Belval suggests that he will need somebody’s help to solve the mystery of his relationship with Coralie and the crime of 1895. The police, he notes, are unable to provide such help: ‘en temps de guerre elle a autre chose à faire’.[[22]](#endnote-22) So opaque is the mystery that it requires the intervention of ‘un type exceptionel […] un génie, un demi-dieu’.[[23]](#endnote-23) His sidekick, a Senegalese *tirailleur* called Ya-Bon, suggests that Lupin could be of assistance and that he knows how to contact him. Belval is incredulous that Ya-Bon should be personally acquainted with the hero:

Patrice se souvint alors que le Sénégalais passait ses journées à l’hôpital à se faire lire par des camarades de bonne volonté toutes les aventures d’Arsène Lupin, et il ricana:

«Oui, tu le connais comme on connaît quelqu’un dont on a lu l’histoire.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Here the Lupin stories are presented as a form of escapism, appropriate reading for soldiers convalescing in hospital. In thus preparing Lupin’s entrance, the text ensures that when he appears in the story he does so as an ostentatiously fictional hero. Patrice wonders ‘comment un tel miracle s’est-il produit?’,[[25]](#endnote-25) emphasizing that he is a deus ex machina. The miracle that Lupin effects involves solving the double mystery, bringing together the sentimental plot and the war plot. Lupin thus unites the two halves of the story, which are otherwise kept separate: Patrice is interested only in Coralie and not in the gold; the police are interested only in the gold, not in Coralie.

In *Le Triangle*, therefore, Lupin performs the role he is called upon to play throughout the *Aventures extraordinaires* and to act as a figure of wholeness. He is the hero whose aid Patrice invokes, ‘qui réunisse toutes les qualités’.[[26]](#endnote-26) But this notion of wholeness functions in a specific way in a book that focuses on *mutilés de guerre*. The decision to cast an amputee in the role of hero enables Leblanc to set his story in a space that is contiguous to the front but clearly distinct from it and to normalize the image of disabled ex-servicemen, who, the text is careful to tell us, ‘ne se considèrent pas comme des parias, des malchanceux, des disgraciés, mais comme des hommes absolument normaux’.[[27]](#endnote-27) This explicitly normalizing discourse is complemented by a general tendency to minimize the seriousness of the injuries sustained by the servicemen. On the opening page, for example, we are introduced to two amputees, one missing his right leg and the other his left arm. The emphasis on the symmetry of the wounds acts as an anodyne for the reader. There is, however, one exception to this, namely the figure of Ya-Bon, who is described for the first time in the following terms:

Ya-Bon avait eu une joue, un côté de la mâchoire, la moitié de la bouche et le palais fracassés par un éclat d’obus. L’autre moitié de cette bouche se fendait jusqu’à l’oreille en un rire qui ne semblait jamais s’interrompre et qui étonnait d’autant plus que la partie blessée de la face, raccommodée tant bien que mal, et recouverte d’une peau greffée, demeurait impassible.[[28]](#endnote-28)

This is the most graphic description of a war wound in the text and the only facial injury described. It is the closest the text approaches to the violent reality of war; nowhere else is physical trauma depicted so unblinkingly. And yet this is also an example of the text at its crudest and crassest, as the representation of the wide-grinning Ya-Bon draws on a tradition of racist iconography - the same iconography used in the now notorious Banania advertising campaign which dates from the First World War and in reference to which Ya-Bon is, one initially presumes, named.[[29]](#endnote-29) Just as Ya-Bon’s face is split in two, so the description of his face is split between crude stereotyping and a much more realist form of representation. The combination is sufficiently jarring for his grin to take on a grotesque character and a reader might hesitate for a moment over whether it is also a result of injury, another mutilation. It becomes clear it is not a result of physical violence but of a different kind of violence, namely the reductive discursive strategies of stereotyping. Tellingly, Ya-Bon’s injury has left him almost entirely mute, able to articulate only the words ‘Ya-Bon’. Within the diegesis his sobriquet is a result of the violence he has suffered, not just a reference to the Banania advertising campaign. In the description of Ya-Bon, therefore, the text offers a brief, flickering glimpse of the horror of war, one which is quickly overwritten with clichés of advertising and the conventional tropes of popular culture.

The text cleaves to the representation of the First World War as ‘une aventure merveilleuse’,[[30]](#endnote-30) silencing the voice of Ya-Bon, which might tell a rather different story. But the repressed material does resurface in the book, not in the war plot proper (the mystery of where the gold is secreted) but in the sentimental plot, concerned with Patrice and Coralie. They are in the position of the individual Freud describes in his essay on ‘The Uncanny’, who ‘wanders about in a dark, strange room, looking for the door or the electric switch and collides time after time with the same piece of furniture’.[[31]](#endnote-31) As they search for clues to their shared past, they collide time and time again with evidence of the tragic fate of their unknown doubles. The frisson of uncanniness elicited by the idea of the double is unmistakeable when they discover the headstone with their own names inscribed and reaches a crescendo when they find themselves trapped in a pavilion which doubles as a gas chamber, on the wall of which is an account written by the original Patrice and Coralie in the last moments of their lives describing their plight.

This element of uncanniness speaks to the fact that, in some ways, the nightmarish experiences of Patrice and Coralie are similar to those of soldiers in the Great War, experiences which the text does not acknowledge openly. The idea of gassing can of course be read as a *clin d’œil* to the use of chemical weapons and Patrice and Coralie, locked in the gas chamber, must confront the fact that their death is imminent and they are powerless to prevent it. They also suffer from what Martin Hurcombe identifies as one of the keynote afflictions of combatants in the First World War, ‘temporal alienation’.[[32]](#endnote-32) Hurcombe notes that time and time again the combat novel emphasizes a ‘feeling of divorce from the usual passage of time’ linked to bafflement generated by the sense of an ‘absence in the causal chain’,[[33]](#endnote-33) as soldiers were threatened by an invisible enemy. Similarly, Patrice and Coralie are unable to understand how they have come to find themselves in the situation in which they are helplessly flailing around. They are estranged from their own past and unable to envisage a future, until Lupin’s arrival in the text.

In *Le Triangle d’or* therefore, physical trauma is apparent in Ya-Bon’s split face and psychological trauma in the aesthetics of uncanniness that the text develops. This is even more marked in the final wartime Lupin novel, *L’Île aux trente cerceuils*, an extraordinarily strange book. Indeed, its preface acknowledges the bizarreness of the story, but notes that the war has created new narrative protocols:

La guerre a compliqué l’existence au point que des événements qui se passent en dehors d’elle […] empruntent au grand drame quelque chose d’anormal, d’illogique et, parfois, de miraculeux. Il faut toute l’éclatante lumière de la vérité pour rendre a ces événements toute la marque d’une réalité, somme toute assez simple.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The preface therefore insists that although the plot has nothing to do with the First World War, the novel does nonetheless refract the experience of the war. It opens with the heroine, Véronique d’Hergemont, visiting Brittany, a part of France to which she has never previously been. The visit is prompted by a supremely uncanny experience. One day, while watching a film set in Brittany, she is bewildered to see, in the background of one scene, her distinctive monogram carved into a bench. This monogram is one that she used as a young woman, before a disastrous marriage to an abusive and unstable Prussian called Vorski, whom she now believes, erroneously as it turns out, to be dead. This experience is doubly uncanny, both because it belongs to ‘that class of frightening which leads us back to what is known of old and once familiar’,[[35]](#endnote-35) and because it takes place in a cinema, which for Nicholas Royle is an irreducibly uncanny space since ‘film is in its essence a world of doubles’.[[36]](#endnote-36) Véronique therefore travels to Brittany to unravel this mystery and finds herself on an island called Sarek (the entire population of which is killed at the beginning of the novel). There she encounters Vorski and her son François, whom she also believed to be dead. Véronique and François are subjected to a campaign of terror by Vorski, who believes that he is destined to find on Sarek the mythical ‘pierre Dieu’, once worshipped by Druids for its magical powers, and through harnessing those powers to become a superman. To fulfil this prophecy, Vorski has to complete a series of rituals, culminating in the crucifixion of his wife. The extreme sadism attributed to Vorski and the threat of sexual violence which hangs over Véronique for much of the novel recall the stories of German atrocities which circulated during the war.[[37]](#endnote-37) Lupin intervenes to save her and succeeds in locating the fabled stone, whose power he identifies as its radioactivity.

Uncanniness pervades the text, in which the idea of the double features promienently: Véronique has a double in the form of Vorski’s second wife, Elfride, and François in the form of his second son, Raynald. But not the least disconcerting aspect of the text is the fact Vorski can be read as a double of Lupin. Both of them have apparently come back from the grave, having found it expedient to stage their own deaths (Lupin at the end of *813*). Both of them have, or claim to have, unusual parentage: Lupin is the son of a peasant father and aristocratic mother and Vorski is the son of a Bohemian fortune-teller and believes himself to be an illegitimate scion of the house of Hohenzollern. Vorski is described as having ‘attitudes théâtrales’, which recalls Lupin’s fondness for staging *coups de théâtre*, such as his appearance disguised as a druid, ‘[un] personnage funambulesque’.[[38]](#endnote-38) Vorski’s plan to use the god-stone to achieve world domination is reminiscent of Lupin’s scheme in *L’Aiguille creuse* to use the lost treasury of the Bourbons to gain power. Both of them are janus-faced. Vorski, when preparing to complete his ritual, proclaims portentously: ‘Ou bien tu n’es que le dernier des aventuriers […], ou bien tu es vraiment le prophète illuminé que les dieux couronnent de gloire. Surhomme ou bandit. Voici l’arrêt du destin’.[[39]](#endnote-39) The words ‘aventurier’, ‘surhomme’ and ‘bandit’ are all words that are associated throughout the *Aventures extraordinaires* with Lupin himself. The idea that they are doubles is most explicit when they encounter each other towards the end of the novel. Vorski’s response is described as follows:

Croyant aux sortilèges et aux prodiges, il avait l’impression que l’homme du Destin qu’était Vorski se trouvait déchu de sa mission et remplacé par un nouvel élu du Destin. Il y avait, l’une en face de l’autre, deux forces miraculeuses, l’une émanant de lui, Vorski, l’autre émanant du vieux Druide, et la seconde absorbait la première.[[40]](#endnote-40)

This is the moment at which the idea of Vorski as Lupin’s dark twin is most clearly stated, but it is also the moment at which it is dismissed by the text. It is Vorski who sees himself as Lupin’s double and that belief is presented by the narrator as a symptom of his derangement. Vorski’s superstition and mysticism are his most salient characteristics: he is obsessed throughout the text with ‘sortilèges’, ‘prodiges’ and ‘forces miraculeuses’. He lives in an atmosphere of madness, lost in lunatic dreams, and for much of the novel, until Lupin finally appears, both Véronique and the reader are forced to breathe that same atmosphere. At one point, bewildered by the terrors that she everywhere encounters, Véronique entertains the idea that the Sarek islanders, deeply superstitious, might have been right to suspect supernatural agency at work there. This suspicion is presented as a result of nervous exhaustion; she is ‘ébranlée par des secousses nerveuses trop violentes’.[[41]](#endnote-41) In these words it is possible to hear a distant echo of shell bombardments, literal ‘secousses violentes’ which were also of course ‘secousses nerveuses’. The spectre of madness, linked to the war, haunts the text and Lupin’s role in it is to act as an arch-rationalist and sceptic. He demystifies Vorski through ridicule, mocking his ‘rêves stupides’[[42]](#endnote-42) and solves the mystery of the god-stone, demonstrating that far from requiring ‘explications surnaturelles’ it is simply a ‘phénomène naturel’,[[43]](#endnote-43) namely radioactivity.

The text therefore ultimately presents Lupin and Vorski as opposites rather than doubles, disavowing their kinship. It is specifically the discourse of exceptionalism, of being destined for greatness, which is rejected here, even though elsewhere in the Lupin canon it is wrapped around Lupin himself.[[44]](#endnote-44) This anti-destinarianism intersects with an important aspect of the book, which is the role of Vorski’s son, François. At the end of the novel, François is given by Lupin a false birth certificate, on which his father is listed as a M. Maroux. This is the surname of his tutor Stéphane, whom, it is hinted, Véronique will marry. His German heritage is thus legally erased. The text seems in this respect to be a belated intervention in a debate which raged in 1915 as to whether anti-abortion laws should be suspended to enable women who had been raped by German soldiers to terminate their pregnancy.[[45]](#endnote-45) The issue was not about women’s psychological distress, needless to say, but about whether children conceived through rape would ever be able to become truly French, or whether they were congenitally tainted. Leblanc’s novel supports the maternalist position which emphasized that children fathered by Germans could be redeemed through the education system. Lupin is confident that François, raised by his tutor and mother, will never follow in Vorski’s steps. The rejection of the idea of destiny, the flipside of heredity, enables the novel to end on an optimistic note, with the promise of change.

At the same time, the rejection of the discourse of exceptionalism points to the fact that the very concept of individual heroism was called into question by the First World War.[[46]](#endnote-46) The power of the god-stone cannot be used to create a superhero, but it can be used by scientists, as Lupin points out, for radiotherapy. The crisis of heroism that the First World War effected is legible in the Lupin war novels. It is with almost an audible sigh of relief that at the beginning of *Les Dents du tigre*, the first installment to be written and published after the war, Lupin, ‘que ses chefs appelaient tout court «le héros»’,[[47]](#endnote-47) takes centre stage once more. We learn that during the war he had been in Africa, performing feats of heroism: ‘On publia les rapports et les ordres du jour qui le concernaient. Et ce que l’on appela «L’Épopée du héros» se constitua en une sorte de livre d‘or dont chaque page racontait la plus folle et la plus invraisemblable des prouesses.’[[48]](#endnote-48) Retrospectively Lupin’s wartime adventures are presented as having offered simple entertainment to French readers. But this martial epic remains imaginary; the novels that Leblanc wrote during the war are far odder and more troubling. Far from being immune from the crisis of representation that beset the arts during the First World War, Leblanc’s stories are themselves in crisis, as the fictional universe they had established before the war buckled and twisted under the weight of history.

1. For a pan-European perspective on the relationship between the war and the modernist crisis of representation see Mordris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Doubleday, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Luc Rasson, *Écrire contre la guerre: littérature et pacifismes 1916-1938* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), Martin Hurcombe, *Novelists in Conflict: Ideology and the Absurd in the French Combat Novel of the Great War* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), and Pierre Schoentjes, *Fictions de la Grande Guerre: Variations littéraires sur 14-18* (Paris: Garnier, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for example: Jean-Paul Colin, *Le roman policier archaïque: un essai de lecture groupée* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1984); Jean-Claude Vareille, *L’homme masqué, le justicier et le détective* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1989), and Elsa de Lavergne, *La Naissance du roman policier français: du Second Empire à la Première Guerre mondiale* (Paris: Garnier, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See for example Marc Lits, *Le Roman policier: introduction à la théorie et à l’histoire d’un genre littéraire* (Liège: Céfal, 1999), pp. 39-72 and Claire Gorrara, ‘Introduction’, in *French Crime Fiction*, ed. by Claire Gorrara(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 1-13 (pp. 5-7), as well as David Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime: Reading Modern French Crime Fiction* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites, ‘Conclusion’ in *European Culture in the Great War: the arts, entertainment, and propaganda, 1914-1918*, ed. by Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 349-58 (p. 356). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Benjamin Gilles, *Lectures de poilus 1914-1918: livres et journaux dans les tranchées* (Paris: Autrement, 2013), p. 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gaston Leroux, *Rouletabille chez Krupp* (Paris: Lafitte, 1933), p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*, in *Les Mots et autres écrits autobiographiques*, ed. by Jean-François Louette, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp. 1-139 (p. 64). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Paul Gerbod, ‘L’éthique héroïque en France (1870-1914)’, *Revue Historique*, 544 (Oct-Nov 1982), 409-30 (p. 418).  [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Vareille, p. 148. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Vareille, p. 45. Vareille is of course following Tzvetan Todorov’s analysis of the duality of the detective story as expounded in ‘La Typologie du roman policier’, in Todorov, *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp. 55-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Maurice Leblanc, *L’Éclat d’obus* (Paris: Lafitte, 1921), p. 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Leblanc, *L’Éclat*, p. 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. On Leblanc’s revanchism, see Jacques Derouard, *Maurice Leblanc: Arsène Lupin malgré lui* (Paris: Séguier, 1989), pp. 339-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Leblanc, *L’Éclat*, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Leblanc, *L’Éclat*, p. 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hurcombe, p. 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Hurcombe, p. 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For contemporary accounts of civilians having their hands severed by German soldiers, see *Le Livre rouge allemand: les atrocités allemandes en France* (Paris: Godin-Menard, 1915), pp. 1-3 and pp. 10-12. For a critical examination of such accounts see John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 196-225. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Leblanc, *L’Éclat*, p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Maurice Leblanc, *Le Triangle d’or* (Paris: Lafitte, 1919), pp. 105-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Leblanc, *Triangle*, p. 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Leblanc, *Triangle*, p. 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Leblanc, *Triangle*, p. 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Leblanc, *Triangle*, p. 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Leblanc, *Triangle,* pp. 19-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Leblanc, *Triangle*, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. On the history of the Banania *tirailleur*, see Brett A. Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), pp. 10-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Leblanc, *Le Triangle*, p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Sigmund Freud,‘The Uncanny’, trans. by Alix Strachey, in *Art and Literature: The Penguin Freud Library Vol 14*, ed. by Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 335-76 (p. 359). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Hurcombe, pp. 84-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Hurcombe, p. 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Maurice Leblanc, *L’Île aux trente cercueils* (Paris: Lafitte, 1922), p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Freud, p. 340. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. See *Le Livre rouge allemand par l’ image* (Paris: Le Magazine, 1916). This collection of 40 sketches by Jean-Gabriel Domergue illustrating German atrocities includes one of the crucifixion of a Canadian soldier (no. 34). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Leblanc, *L’Île*, p. 189. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Leblanc, *L’Île*, p. 167. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Leblanc, *L’Île*, p. 189. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Leblanc, *L’Île*, p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Leblanc, *L’Île*, p. 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Leblanc, *L’Île*, p. 243. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. See for example, Maurice Leblanc, *La Comtesse de Cagliostro* (Paris: Lafitte, 1933), pp. 11-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. See Horne and Kramer, pp. 303-06. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Robin Prior, ‘The Heroic Image of the Warrior in the First World War’, *War and Society*, 23 (2005), 43-51. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Maurice Leblanc, *Les Dents du tigre* (Paris: Lafitte, 1921), 2 vols, I, p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Leblanc, *Les Dents*, I, p. 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)