Let me start with a literary anecdote from another war and another country, to illustrate some of the relations between war, trauma, and language that are the topic of this paper. The notorious writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline, in his *Journey to the End of the Night*, narrates his experiences as a French soldier during World War I. The main character of the novel, Bardamu (bearing some, but mostly a deceptive resemblance to Céline) was duped into army service by following a parade through Paris soon after the outbreak of the Great War, happy to be honoured by streets full of ‘civilians and their wives cheering us as we passed, and throwing flowers at us.’ Soon after he arrived at the front-line, his enthusiasm waned; Bardamu was desperately finding ways to get wounded or be taken prisoner (by either side, for whatever reason) in order to get out. The continuous threat to be killed by German soldiers or the French military police – ‘The only uncertain thing in the whole business was what uniform one’s executioner would wear’ – had completely undermined his morale. So had the continuous abuse by his superiors, the poor quality of the food and lack of sleep and shelter, and his utter disbelief in the higher purposes of the war had completely undermined his morale. He envied the deadly sick horses of his troupe, all with large open wounds on their back, raw and running with pus, because they were not required to approve of the war or to believe in it. He loathed to be cannon fodder in service of some patriotic ideals he did not subscribe to and, in addition, to be ebullient about his condition at the same time. The horses suffered but were free. ‘Enthusiasm’, however, ‘was our dirty prerogative, reserved for us!’

After being wounded, Bardamu returned to Paris, where he encountered the complicity of the medical establishment to the war effort. The first few weeks, he appeared to be in good spirits. However,
it did not take very long before increasingly intense memories of the war started to plague him. Obsessive thoughts kept intruding whatever he did to find distraction. One evening, he suddenly stood up in a chic restaurant, screaming ‘Run, all of you! Get out! They are going to fire!’ He was taken to a hospital ‘especially organized to receive cases like myself, whose patriotic ideals had either been slightly shaken or else entirely warped.’ The doctors were kind when questioning the patients, while ‘in the most charming way in the world dangled our death warrants in front of our noses.’ There were only three ways out of the hospital: the front line, the firing squad, or the insane asylum. Fortunately, Bardamu was placed in the last. The asylum (the Bicêtre) was led by an energetic psychiatrist who derived many new insights from his treatment of shell shock. According to him, the war acted ‘as wonderful revealer of the human spirit…. We have broken into the innermost precincts of Man’s mind, painfully, it is true, but as far as science is concerned, providentially, decisively.’ This psychiatrist had developed a new psychotherapeutic regime in order to restore patriotism ‘by electrical treatment of the body and strenuous doses of the ethics of patriotism for the soul, by absolute injections of revitalizing morale.’ Bardamu nodded with feigned enthusiasm and in a whim of melancholy realized that he was ‘twenty years old and already had nothing but the past.’

In order to please their physicians and visitors – and in order to delay their return to the front lines – the patients of the Bicêtre started to imitate one particular patient who had received honourable attention for praising the Fatherland during an epileptic attack. In a short time, the clinic became known as a center of intense patriotic fervor. Several well-known high-society visitors came to visit the clinic, while the patients attempted to out-do each other in singing the praises of the glorious war. Bardamu, eager to please an attractive actress, provided ‘so many and such vivid and highly colored details, that from the moment he started she never took her eyes off me.’ In order to keep the attention of visitors, the patients fabricated increasingly fantastic heroic war stories; they all vied with each other to see who could invent even more sublime records of the war in which they themselves played fabulously heroic parts. These stories were only a thinly veiled cover-up for their real emotions: ‘We were living a tremendous saga in the skin of fantastic characters, deep down we ourselves derisively trembled in every corner of our heart and soul.’ The actress asked Bardamu permission to have his experiences memorialized as poetry by a sickly poet-friend of hers. On one of those many official events celebrating the honour of the