This article revisits in an environmental perspective the literary perplexities raised by the unprecedented experience of modern mechanized warfare in WWI. It proposes that the dominantly agrarian economy and cultural traditions of France lent to the body of French war testimonies an ecological sensibility and expressive vocabulary that are distinct from those of their British or German counterparts, as they attempt to document the terminally damaged and poisoned environment of the trenches of the Western Front.

In 1908, a few years before going to war and meeting his death in the trenches of WWI, a young medievalist, Henri Chatelain, had presented for his doctoral thesis a critical edition of the fifteenth-century work *Le Mistère de Saint Quentin*. Commenting on the enumerations that were a favored literary device of the times, and of the work’s author in particular, and looking to illustrate his point in a way most likely to entertain his reader, he delighted in quoting the following description of medieval warfare:

N’y seront pourfendus,
Patibulés, pourbondis, pourboulis,
Matés, murdris, martelés, morfondus,
Boutés, baignés, broqués, brûlés, bruhis,
Bien bersandés, bertraudés, forbanis,
Frondiés, fichés, fourdroiés, fatrouillés,
Croquiés, hunchiés, courbatés, coustilliés,
Croquiés, hunchiés, courbatés, coustilliés,
Esservelés et bien dur castilliés,
That this would prove a tragically prescient description of exactly what the newly mechanized war of 1914-1918 would do to human bodies and psyches is now amply understood, as are the challenges, both narrative and descriptive, that the experience of mass mechanized death has posed to literature ever since.

What has been less noted from a literary perspective is the extent to which this medieval description applies to the fate of the physical and natural environment in this particular conflict, so much so, in fact, that what happened to the ecology of the theater of war can be rightly seen as the ruling force in the human experience of war in 1914-18. The Great War, it should be noted, was quickly defined and is still remembered today by all but military historians for its Western Front, a continuous system of trenches along the Belgian and French borders, rather than for its broader peripheral theaters or its naval and aerial warfare. In comparison to the ever larger and more destructive conflicts that would follow, WWI remains exemplary in its concentration of the particular conditions that made the soldiers’ life and death entirely symbiotic with that of the earth around them: the geographic concentration of hostilities; the near immobility of the main front; the reliance on heavy artillery as the principal mode of warfare; the subsequent necessity to move the troops underground; the duration of the conflict; and the first industrial use of chemical weapons.

Before describing further the ecology of these conditions and its literary implications, it matters here to make the case for a French, rather than generally Western (British, American or German) analysis of the experience of a damaged landscape. Most countries who participated in the conflict have seen notable works emerge from the Great War

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1 Works with a central interest in war and the environment are still few and mostly historical, scientific, or with a broader context of global policy. A reader interested in those could consult among others Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell’s fine collection of essays Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of Warfare; Charles E. Closmann’s War and the Environment: Military Destruction in the Modern Age, with the chapter therein by Dorothee Brantz “Environments of Death: Trench Warfare on the Western Front”; or Jurgen Brauer’s War and Nature: The Environmental Consequences of War in a Globalized World.