• “The marrow of the tragedy is concentrated in the hospitals” (Walt Whitman)
• “a hospital alone shows what war is” (Erich Maria Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front)
THE FORBIDDEN ZONE: A Nurse’s Impressions of the First World War
¡ZONA PROHIBIDA!

MARY BORDEN
UNA ENFERMERA NORTEAMERICANA EN LA GRAN GUERRA

TERESA GÓMEZ REUS, ed.
The biographical context

• In 1914, Mary Borden was 28, a rich, young heiress from Chicago, an aspiring writer and mother of 3 small children
• After WWI broke out, she volunteered with the French Red Cross
• She had no nursing experience and little French
• “I had come to the war out of egotism and a spirit of adventure, to enjoy myself” (Mary Borden, *Journey Down a Blind Ally*, 1946)

• The war was an opportunity to put to test her capabilities as a woman. She also became one of the most daring writers of war trauma.
The biographical context

• Started in a makeshift hospital in a former Dunkirk casino. Conditions were appalling:

“The sick lay helpless under the great tarnished chandeliers of the gaming rooms, the rows of dingy beds were reflected to infinity in the vast gilded mirrors [...]. There were no nurses until we arrived and nothing to nurse with. We did what we could for them, but it was a heartbreaking business.” (Mary Borden, *Journey Down a Blind Ally*, 1946)
The biographical context

- Borden wrote to General Joffre offering to fund and to manage her own field hospital to care for the French wounded near the battlefront.
- In July 1915, she established *L’Hospital Chirurgical Mobile* Nº 1 in Flanders.
The biographical context

• She moved several times along the front during the war
• During the Somme offensive she relocated to Bray-sur-Somme, within range of enemy fire
• Resources were tight: with only a team of 12 nurses she tended countless badly wounded men
• She estimated that in the first six weeks alone the hospital received some 25,000 wounded
The Forbidden Zone

• Arose from the need to bear witness to the trauma of combat nursing
• Partly written during the war, in rare snatches of time between shifts and during short stays in Paris
• Tried to publish it during the war, but no publisher would accept it
The Forbidden Zone

- Published in 1929, the *annus mirabilis* of war literature, when the true stories of war began to emerge

- The book is a collection of memories, prose poems and stories about her hospital service at the Western Front
The Forbidden Zone

- The book has an important autobiographical element (see Preface).
- It testifies to the chaotic medical arena within which she fought to ward off death.

“This is the second battlefield. The battle now is going on over the helpless bodies of these men. It is we who are doing the fighting now, with their real enemies” (The Forbidden Zone)
• I don’t know how I got to Bray-sur-Somme in 1916, but the scene is vivid. I imagine that I can still hear the thunder of the guns, the endless rumble of trucks passing our flimsy hospital gate, and the smell of gas gangrene [...]. I see myself sitting in my cubicle with sodden feet on an iron stove. My apron is stained with mud and blood; I am too tired to take it off (*Journey Down a Blind Ally*, 1946)
The Forbidden Zone: The Style

• Her writing is:
  - non-linear and disjointed, giving voice to the harrowing experience in field hospitals inundated by a relentless flow of broken bodies from the battlefield
  - The tone is lapidary and detached, her phrases laconic, and the overall form of her book is fragmentary, a style that engages with the broken and senseless quality of that ‘great war’
The writing

• These clipped sentences and the relentless repetitions convey a sense of a hallucinatory world of macabre routines, which leaves behind any notion of time, place or purpose
• “At midnight we always have cocoa in there, next to the operating room... We push back the drums of clean dressings and the litter of soiled bandages, and drink our cocoa standing round the table. Sometimes there isn’t much room. Sometimes legs and arms wrapped in clothes have to be pushed out of the way. We throw them on the floor –they belong to no one and are of no interest to anyone – and drink our cocoa. The cocoa tastes very good. It is part of the routine.” (“Moonlight”, The Forbidden Zone)
In her Preface, Borden described her book as “a collection of fragments”.

The effect was deliberate: the war itself was such a “great confusion” that any attempt to order it would have been dishonest.
• “... To those who find these impressions confused, I would say that they are fragments of a great confusion. Any attempt to reduce them to order would require artifice on my part and would falsify them.” (Mary Borden, Preface to The Forbidden Zone)
• Concerned with carrying “a terrible knowledge” to the civilian population that seemed totally removed from a true understanding of the war experience
• Thus Borden’s text has much in common with combatant writing
• Both connect “seeing” with “knowing” in wartime (See Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Docorum Est”)

• “I have dared to dedicate these pages to the poilus who passed through our hands during the war ... But the book is not meant for them. They know, not only everything that is contained in it, but all the rest that cannot be written” (Preface, emphasis added)
• The common ground Borden finds with combatants derives from an implied shared but unspoken traumatic knowledge in an environment where men and women are brought together because of war: the hospital ward
Content and style

• What literary tools could an observer use to depict the dreadful injuries and mutilations he/she witnessed?

Could writers fall back on the language of tradition to depict this unfathomable war and the effects the new weapons were creating?
“The war has used up words, they have weakened; they have deteriorated like motor-car tyres; they have, like millions of other things, been knocked about and shattered about...”

(Henry James, press interview, 1915)
• In Borden’s text, integral to the telling is revealing something that, paradoxically, cannot be told:

“To those ... who find [the stories] unbearably plain, I would say that I have blurred the bare horrors of facts ... not because I wished to do so, but because I was incapable of a nearer approach to the truth” (Mary Borden, “Preface”)
When dealing with WWI writing we have to be aware of...

- Coexistence of two literary styles between 1914 and 1918:
  “One rhetoric is marked by the big, capitalized abstractions. The other, the alternative rhetoric, is plain, descriptive, emptied of value statement; it names the broken fragments of the trench world, as though reality consisted only in the ruins of things” (Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, 1990)
“Cities? None. Towns? No whole ones. But there is plenty of mud, and a thin silent rain falling to make more mud—mud with things lying in it, wheels, broken motors, parts of houses, graves.
This is what is left of Belgium. Come, I’ll show you.” (“Belgium”, from the *Forbidden Zone*)
“The accounts are composed mainly of things – shells, pieces of equipment, mounds of torn earth, disfigured and fragmented human bodies – all randomly disposed, and all rendered without judgement or expressed emotion, as though boot, helmet and human face, heaped earth and bodies, telephones and decapitated heads were all morally equal parts of a chaos. There is no attempt at a Big Picture, no order from which to infer meaning” (Samuel Hynes, A War Imagined)
Recent research on WWI writing

• “The stories often lack closure and project an eerie sense of incompleteness and ambiguity” (Laurie Kaplan)

“Writers of war produce pieces of texts, like parts of a body that will never be whole” (Jane Marcus)
• Until the wake of the 1990s it was believed that only those who had experienced the trenches and seen combat could adequately represent the trauma of WWI.

• In the last two decades or so, scholars such as Margaret Higonnet have argued in favour of recovering literary texts written by women who were witnesses in the carnage of war. They contend that while women could not directly attest to the experience of the trenches, they could explore its wider effects.