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JEAN RENOIR'S *LA GRANDE ILLUSION*

> "In 1914, man's spirit had not yet been falsified by totalitarian religions and racism. In some respects that world war was still a war of respectable people, of well-bred people. I almost dare say, of gentlemen. That does not excuse it. Good manners, even chivalry, do not excuse a massacre."
>
> —Jean Renoir

THE idea for *La Grande Illusion* had its origin, Renoir tells us, in his rediscovery of an old comrade of World War I, Pinsard, become a general and commander of the air base at Istres near Martigues where Renoir was shooting *Toni* in 1934.

"I saw him again and that reminded me of his escapes. I said to Pinsard, 'Well, old chap, tell me your stories of escape. Maybe I could make a film of them.'" But Renoir has also said, "I am no good with a new idea. I have to digest an idea before being able to do something with it. I have to carry it for years." So he wrote down Pinsard's tales, talked to other men who had been prisoners during the war, remembered his own experiences in the cavalry and as pilot of a reconnaissance plane in World War I. He wrote a scenario for *Les Evasions de Capitaine Maréchal* but didn't much like it—as he often does not much like his first version of screen plays. Meanwhile he was making other films, and digesting the idea.

At some point in the process, Renoir took his story to Charles

Spaak and asked him to collaborate on the scenario. A new version emerged which pleased Spaak and Renoir, and also Jean Gabin, a friend of Spaak who became a companion of Renoir with the shooting of *The Lower Depths* in 1936. The script was offered to the producer of *The Lower Depths,* Kamenka, but he did not like it at all. Renoir says, "If it weren't for Gabin, I could never have made *La Grande Illusion.* Fortunately, he loved the story and the role of Maréchal; so we went together all over Paris looking for a producer. I don't know how many offices we tried, French, American, Italian. They all refused. 'No more war stories,' they said. Or, 'You can't raise these delicate questions in a film,' or they didn't like it because it wasn't much of a love story. Nobody wanted it. Finally we found somebody who was interested, a man named Albert Pinkovich, who was the assistant to a financier, Rolmer. Rolmer had dreams of doing something in the movies. Pinkovich and Rolmer made *La Grande Illusion,* I am sure, only because they weren't in the cinema. All the professionals were sure it couldn't be a success."

In the years that Renoir had carried the idea, both he and the world had changed. As the world plunged toward a new war, what started as an adventure story became, as Renoir once put it, "simply a cry, the affirmation of a conviction. I had the desire to show that even in wartime the combatants can remain men." The early treatment published by Truffaut in Bazin's *Jean Renoir* contains many scenes that we find in the finished film, though neither von Rauffenstein nor Rosenthal have yet appeared, but the tone of this version is much harsher than that of the film we know, and it ends on a scene of disillusionment which perhaps originally gave point to the title, *La Grande Illusion*: Maréchal and a companion, Dolette, have escaped from the fortress and reached Switzerland. Safely there, they agree to celebrate the next Christmas Eve together at Maxim's. The final scene occurs at Maxim's, where in the midst of the revelry marking the first Christmas after the war an empty table awaits two men who never appear, Maréchal and Dolette. As the world became ever more sharply divided perhaps this scene, which suggests that even the wartime companionship of two individuals is an illusion, seemed inappropriate to a film which insisted on the humanity of men. The scene disappeared, though the idea

would find expression twenty-five years later in *The Elusive Corporal.* And without this scene the title became more ambiguous, leading critics to wonder what the great illusion might be. Even Renoir later remarked that he had chosen that title because he didn't want to say anything precise.

On a Renoir film the script is a starting point, not a blueprint; changes keep occurring during the shooting. But this time the last-minute changes were to be cataclysmic, altering not mere detail but the whole shape of the film. For as Renoir was preparing to shoot his exterior scenes in Alsace, Eric von Stroheim, recently returned to Europe hoping to salvage a career that seemed at its end in Hollywood, became available and was offered a part in *La Grande Illusion.* Until then the German career officer played a minor part in the film, but Renoir, with his great admiration for Stroheim, immediately set about creating a role more worthy of his talents. Stroheim had ideas of his own; from his collaboration with Renoir, von Rauffenstein was born, giving to *La Grande Illusion* a new balance and center of interest. Heretofore the relationship between Maréchal and Boeldieu had dominated the script and carried its theme, but now a whole new dimension arose in the interaction of Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein, allowing a much more complex pattern of associations and a much more profound exploration of the theme of human union and separation.

The addition of von Stroheim to the cast moved *La Grande Illusion* some way toward finally finding its dramatic form. But the shooting brought even more changes. Like von Rauffenstein, Rosenthal also looms much larger in the film than he did in the shooting script. About this change, Renoir says, "Well, the assistant to the producer was a very interesting and intelligent man, Albert Pinkovich. He was a Jew—he had once studied to be a rabbi—and he had an understanding of Jewish ways and traits. He was always on the set, and when we were shooting he would come and stand by me and tell me how a Jew would act and what he would say in that situation. He was very good and he did it only to amuse me, but he was so authentic that I soon began to think that I should use what he told me in my film. That's how Dalio's part began to grow."

As usual other chance events had their impact. In the script

of *La Grande Illusion* there are some thirty shots of airplanes, air fields, aerial combat; none of this remains in the film. When I asked Renoir about this, I received a familiar sort of response: "No, none of that was ever shot. We couldn't get the planes for it. One day the producer told me that he just couldn't get them; he was happy because they would have been very expensive—but I was furious. Only I thought it over a little and by the next day I saw that the film would be better without them. I often have fortunate accidents like that. If I had shot those scenes and spent all that money, I probably would have used them. And, you know, the film changed so much in the shooting that I didn't know how it should end. I didn't decide how to do the last scene until the exterior shooting was almost all over—maybe I had even edited some. It was only then that I saw how the end should be. By then I was over my shooting schedule, and there was no more snow. So the last scene was shot with a big white sheet for a backdrop."

And, Renoir adds, the film had changed so much that his collaborator didn't know it: "Spaak helped me with the script, of course, but he was never on the set. Then when I showed him the final cut he didn't recognize the film he had written. It was so different that he said I shouldn't leave his name in the credits. But I left it, of course."

The film took shape in the shooting, but other problems persisted. Renoir spent four weeks shooting exteriors in Alsace, that part of France which most resembled the German setting of these scenes. Renoir has said, "Of course shooting in Germany was out of the question for me in 1937. I shot these scenes in certain parts of Alsace extremely influenced by the Germans during the period which followed the war of 1870. The quarters, the barracks in which we shot, were artillery barracks constructed by Wilhelm II at Colmar. The last chateau is a chateau constructed by Wilhelm II, the Haut Koenigsberg. These are buildings of an absolutely German influence." But during the time Renoir was shooting these scenes his amateur producers might have been talking to the professionals. For they then expressed doubt that the film should go on. Renoir stopped to edit some of the scenes already shot, hoping to convince his producers that he should be allowed to continue. He succeeded and was then able to complete

the shooting with four or five more weeks of interiors in the studios.

Narrative and Treatment

La Grande Illusion is Renoir's most popular and best known film; a sketch of the narrative line should suffice as a reminder:

Lieutenant Maréchal (Jean Gabin) and Captain de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), shot down behind the German lines by Captain von Rauffenstein (Eric von Stroheim), are invited to dine with Rauffenstein's squadron before being taken to a prisoner-of-war camp. Later, in the *Offizierslager* at Hallbach, Maréchal and Boeldieu are quartered with an engineer (Gaston Modot), an actor (Julien Carette), a teacher (Jean Dasté) and Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio), son of a rich banking family whose parcels now feed them all. Each night they work at digging a tunnel, hoping to escape; each day they smuggle out the dirt to dump in the garden. With costumes sent from Paris, the prisoners in the camp plan a revue for their own entertainment but on the eve of the performance, their captors celebrate the German capture of the fortress of Douaumont, so they decide to invite the camp commander and his officers to their show. But during the revue Maréchal interrupts to announce the recapture of Douaumont. Put into solitary confinement, Maréchal does not return to his comrades until their tunnel is almost complete. A few days later they all await nightfall to escape, but their plans crumble when the German guard orders them to pack their bags, for all officers are changing camp that day.

Many months and several camps later, Maréchal and Boeldieu rejoin Rosenthal at the *Offizierslager* at Wintersborn, a fortress high on a mountaintop, reserved for prisoners who have escaped from other camps. Von Rauffenstein, too seriously wounded to remain in combat, serves as camp commander. He makes a confidant of Boeldieu, fellow aristocrat and career officer, sharing with him his gloomy view of the future of their class. Maréchal, Boeldieu, and Rosenthal talk of escape. After an incident among the Russian prisoners, Boeldieu conceives a plan; he takes it upon himself to create the situation in which Maréchal and Rosenthal can get away. A noisy disturbance in the camp leads to a general

roll-call; Boeldieu does not answer to his name but appears high in the fortress, playing a flute and leading the guards a chase until Rauffenstein pleads with him to return and then, reluctantly, shoots him. As Rauffenstein turns away from this act, he learns that Maréchal and Rosenthal have escaped. Boeldieu dies in Rauffenstein's room.

Maréchal and Rosenthal make their way across the country, cold, hungry, hiding in ditches, avoiding all signs of life. Rosenthal injures his ankle, slowing their progress. They grow bitter, argue; Maréchal marches off alone, then returns and they go on together. Taking refuge in a barn they are discovered by Elsa (Dita Parlo), a farm wife whose husband and brothers have all been killed in the war. She feeds them and shelters them while Rosenthal's ankle mends. On Christmas Eve they make a crèche for Lotte, Elsa's daughter; when the evening ends Maréchal and Elsa discover they are in love. But the war goes on; Maréchal and Rosenthal must complete their escape. They leave and cross safely into Switzerland.

"I made *La Grande Illusion* because I am a pacifist," wrote Jean Renoir in 1938, when pacifism was equated with cowardice, defeatism, even treason, not only by fascists but by many across the political barricades as well. Still, the public response exceeded that accorded any other Renoir film—a smash hit in France, an international triumph, *La Grande Illusion* even received a special jury prize at Venice where it would have embarrassed both Renoir and the Italian dictator to award the film the Mussolini Cup. Banned by Hitler, praised by Franklin Roosevelt—"Every democrat in the world should see this film"—the success of *La Grande Illusion*, like the failure of *La Regle du jeu* two years later, seems detached from at least some of its intentions, and due perhaps more to its hopeful tone, the depth of human sympathy expressed, and the quality of its performances than to any general acceptance or even recognition of a pacifist theme. For, like every other Renoir film, it fits only awkwardly the categories it tempts us to assign. A war film, as the *New York Times* reviewer called it? An escape story? A pacifist film? Yes—and no.

The war lurks there somewhere, of course; almost every frame acknowledges its existence. And yet . . . no trenches, no mud,

no exploding shells. Idle heroes and no villains—especially no villains. Indeed, as the film unfolds the war seems only to provide a background which recedes physically even further from the scene; it still breathes heavily on the men at Hallbach but has become a dismal memory and a distant fact at Elsa's farm. The protagonists, who begin as combatants, are reduced—or elevated—to being mere men. Still, on another, deeper plane the film reverses this movement; the war grows ever closer until the final scene thrusts it to the foreground again, calling the whole hopeful development of the film into question.

This physical distance from battle deprives Renoir's pacifism of its clichés. Many anti-war films make their plea by providing a surfeit of the horrors of war; Renoir's does not. Nor does he win our allegiance to peace by grasping our attention with thrilling combat scenes. As James Kerans has said, he does not fight the war for peace. Rather he provides some glimpses of brave and honorable men—citizens, soldiers—interacting within the vague ambiance of the conflict, leaving us to find and feel in this display of life the futility and wastefulness of war. Unlike Renoir's earlier film, *La Vie est à nous*, *La Grande Illusion* neither proclaims nor sings its message; hence an Italian writer can denounce it both for being "defeatist, quietist, and anti-heroic" and for failing to reveal this content to most of its viewers, while a French critic from the Right praises Renoir for "exalting that which constitutes for us the essence of intelligent nationalism." Obviously, *La Grande Illusion* offers more than doctrinaire pacifism.

From Pinsard's description of a series of escapes, Renoir might have drawn a picaresque film, tied together by the continuity of its hero's action in his quest for freedom. *The Elusive Corporal* would approach this in 1962. But far different winds were blowing in 1937. Escape remains a major motif, but Pinsard's adventures survive in *La Grande Illusion* only in the brief interchange when Rauffenstein welcomes Boeldieu and Maréchal to Wintersborn: "Captain de Boeldieu, four attempts to escape . . . Lieutenant Maréchal, five attempts to escape . . . "—almost like a footnote to remind Renoir how far this work had come from its original idea, and reaffirm what is evident throughout the film, a concern with character and situation rather than action.

Memory and history, hope and pride converge in the currents from Renoir's life and work that flow together in this film. Pinsard's reminiscence aroused old memories of camaraderie in arms; in the film's opening shot Gabin wears the very uniform that Renoir had worn in 1918. Camaraderie had recently become a major theme in Renoir's work, imparting to the films of 1934-36 more warmth than had been evident before. This camaraderie of shared work or kindred temperament posed no problems; it showed the sustaining spirit of unity without questioning its possibility. But the very insistence of *La Vie est à nous* on its message: "Comrade, you are not alone," creates that question. And the dormitory of *The Lower Depths*, where men without work live together but remain alone, offered perhaps so negative an answer that Renoir turned aside to find the fellowship he needed in a fraternity of thieves. But now, he says, "I discovered that if you put some men together in a room and keep them there, you can do lots of interesting things." So the gambit declined in *The Lower Depths* was accepted for *La Grande Illusion*; the story of escapes becomes instead a study of men in confinement, facing up to the question of camaraderie.

But an *Offizierslager* is not the lower depths, of course. The flop-house of *The Lower Depths* defined the lives of its inhabitants, but an *Oflag* merely holds its captives in suspension from their "real" life in the inaccessible world. Unlike criminals they have no sins to repent, no rehabilitation to achieve; they need only await war's end. For most, this period comprises an unreal, inadmissable portion of life; their thought and talk must evade it and turn to the past or future, or the present elsewhere, to seem relevant. Hence the PW camp, the *Oflag*, may, like Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain become a reflecting surface for the world, a metaphor for history.

The fortuitous conjunction of two Renoir projects probably influenced both at this time. *La Marseillaise*, that "chronicle of some events contributing to the fall of the monarchy," was planned before the shooting of *La Grande Illusion*. The finished films, set some century and a quarter apart, appear as two points in a single sweep of history, with the social upheaval initiated in 1789 finally finding its completion in Rauffenstein's prophecy in 1917 that "whoever wins this war, the end of it will be the

end of the Rauffensteins and Boeldieus."

Some of this history Renoir had lived through, of course. He had known Europe both before and after 1914 and served in World War I as an officer in both cavalry and air force—the two romantic services where one could still imagine oneself a descendant of knights in armor. Perhaps this, with his eternal search for balance, helped shape that treatment of his aristocrats which suggests some regret at their passing. But here again Renoir's love has individuals as its object; the social cost of the aristocratic regimes seems apparent enough.

La Marseillaise makes its historical claims openly; in *La Grande Illusion* they are a matter more of resonance than direct statement, are achieved through the interaction of fictional characters rather than the reconstruction of actual events. Hence, however much its historical perspective may add to the depth of *La Grande Illusion*, this history remains subordinate within the film both to character development and to the concrete exploration of the more abstract theme of human union and separateness.

The 1914 war did mark the end of the Europe of *la belle époque*, its conventions and illusions giving way to new ones as the aristocracy ceded its power and its place—the change that Rauffenstein laments. Some critics take this lament for the substance of the film, finding support for this view in the power of Stroheim's performance. But this interpretation diminishes the film; for one of the achievements of *La Grande Illusion* is precisely that it transcends the heroics of its middle section and in doing so affirms the value of more tranquil virtues. Then, as happens frequently in Renoir films, a temptation toward sentimentality dissolves in the irony or honesty of the admission at film's end that these virtues, too, may fail to affect the contemporary world.

Elsewhere Renoir's irony provides a frequent counterpoint to the optimistic surface of the film, functioning as one aspect of the richness in detail which offsets a simplicity of dramatic structure. On its surface *La Grande Illusion* moves in a straightforward linear development, without distraction of sub-plots or secondary complications. Two brief initial sequences form a prologue which introduces the context and the central characters, with a single dissolve sufficing to transform Maréchal and Boeldieu from combatants to prisoners of war. The film then

divides into three sections, each presenting a different form of community. The scenes at Hallbach, essentially "some men together in a room," repeatedly combine cooperation and individuality in an interplay of nationalism and human sympathy which carries two parallel developments: the escape plan which fails and the gradual drawing of Boeldieu into the inclusive unity whose possibility this portion of the film displays. At Wintersborn, in scenes dominated by the relationship of Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein, the exclusive community of this pair points up the separateness which prevails. This escape succeeds, but only at the cost of Boeldieu's life. *La Grande Illusion's* final third finds Maréchal and Rosenthal, without uniforms or confining walls, separate and reunite, then come together with Elsa and Lotte in a simple union dependent upon neither nation nor class—a community created by the war and destroyed by its shadow; so that the final scene sends Maréchal and Rosenthal back toward the beginning: "You'll go back to a squadron, me to a battery." "Someone's got to finish this whore of a war—let's hope it's the last."

The scenes at Hallbach begin with an appearance of distrust and strict discipline. Weary prisoners stand in line, guarded by old soldiers with fixed bayonets. In harsh French a German officer reads the camp regulations: " . . . here you are under the authority of German law . . . German discipline. . . . It is strictly forbidden to dress in a slovenly manner, to gather in groups, to speak loudly of matter injurious to the German nation. . . . It is strictly forbidden to talk to the guards." At his side the camp commander punctuates this reading by intoning, "*Streng verboten!*" Behind them soldiers come and go, saluting the backs of the German officers before passing by. In a moment an English officer about to be searched will snap, "Take your hands away! Don't touch me! You want my watch?", drop his watch to the floor, and grind it under his heel. And Boeldieu will complain that the search could be carried out more politely. But between these scenes Renoir inserts four shots which show that life in the camp hardly conforms to this first appearance. Sloppily dressed French soldiers stand in a group and sing at the top of their voices, warning the new prisoners to hide their gold. The German officer who had just barked the regulations waves

the singers away without rancor. Soon we shall learn that the French prisoners call him "Arthur," with some fondness, and that he tells them how the cabbage served as prison food to guards and prisoners alike sits on his stomach. So much for regulations!

After this introduction every scene at Hallbach speaks more of brotherhood than enmity, shows the conditions common to guards and prisoners more than their differences. Distinctions of nation, race, and class are facts in this world, but so is human sympathy; and at Hallbach it frequently prevails. The guards are guards, of course; they will celebrate a German victory and will beat or shoot a prisoner who escapes. But most of them are old; they are weary of the war and tired of eating food that tastes like old shoes. And they know their captives are men. The guard who finds Maréchal despondent in solitary confinement, his food untouched, waits patiently through an outburst of rage and frustration, leans his rifle against the wall and sits beside Maréchal on his bunk, searching his pockets for some offering that will restore this prisoner's sense of connection with the human world. He finds three cigarettes, then a harmonica; silently leaves these on the bunk. Absent-mindedly Maréchal picks up the harmonica; outside the cell the old guard listens, smiles as he hears the first few notes, then walks away singing "Frou-Frou"—the same song Maréchal sang in the film's opening shot. Sympathy and humanity do penetrate the barriers of nation and language.

The symbols of fellowship are familiar: cigarettes, food, music. If for Renoir a proffered cigarette seems a tentative move toward community, shared food often marks its achievement and music its celebration. The party in *Le Crime de M. Lange* is merely the most obvious example. *La Chienne* begins with a banquet; *La Vie est à nous* ends in song. Even the Lestingois's unplayed piano in *Boudu Saved from Drowning* remains an indication of music's role in human community—and its silence one more symbol of the bourgeois failure to achieve it.

Success seems closer in *La Grande Illusion*; at Hallbach both French and Germans eat and sing together. Among the prisoners, Renoir's "men in a room," a common nationality and tongue underlie a camaraderie in which differences of class and métier

become complementary rather than divisive. Men may talk of a personal past, but they act in concert toward present reality. Only Boeldieu resists absorption in this brotherhood; in a group where every action is cooperative, he plays solitaire. One difference, of course, is that a career officer finds a prisoner-of-war camp a normal part of his world. Boeldieu accepts this present life, never talks of the outside, pre-war world, but keeps up the conventions, insisting on his rights, maintaining his proper distance from others. He needs no reason for escape, "For me the question doesn't arise. What's a golf course for? To play golf. A tennis court, for tennis. Well, a prison camp is for escape." The others do have reasons, reasons tied to that "real" world they try to recreate in their revue which, by chance, occurs at just the time when the nationalism aroused by the fall of Douaumont has undermined the sympathy that usually unites guards and prisoners at Hallbach. Characteristically, Boeldieu, the "realist," does not attend the revue; so he is not even present at the musical climax of this segment of the film, when the recapture of Douaumont evokes a singing of "*La Marseillaise.*" This spontaneous chorus of the French national anthem, serious, joyous, defiant, does poignantly express the feelings aroused at such a moment, but Renoir renders it ironic and ambiguous by the execrable pronunciation of the British soldier who requests, "The Marseillaise, please"—reminding us that the Allied prisoners are also separated by nation and language—and by having some of these singers still dressed as chorus girls, thus comparing this musical event to those that preceded it. The comparison casts no doubt on the genuineness of the momentary unity felt by the prisoners, nor the sincerity of the patriotic song. It does, perhaps, question its value. For though "*La Marseillaise*" marks the moment of greatest solidarity among the prisoners, it also marks the deepest penetration of the war into this place, dividing the room into two hostile groups. The German officers hastily confer and leave; armed guards hurry through the streets. But the music of the revue had excluded no one, drawing German and Ally alike into its warm nostalgia and producing a moment of open affection between prisoner and guard, which André Bazin calls an "inspired instant of pure cinema," when the Actor flips his coat-tails at a "chorus girl," then calls to the *Feldwebel*, "*Tu piges*, Arthur?"

The following scene underlines the question; as guards carry Maréchal back into his cell after his dash for freedom, the bells announce the German reconquest of Douaumont. But now no one cares; both guards and prisoners read the bulletin without emotion. And the simple music of a harmonica will show that the sympathy between guards and prisoners has survived. By now it is clear that whoever holds Douaumont, the war will go on—the difference it makes will emerge only later in the film, when Elsa shows Maréchal and Rosenthal a picture: "My husband—killed at Verdun."

The terrible ambiguity of war, which arouses both the worst and the best in men and engenders both the greatest hate and the deepest love, underlies the ambiguity which runs through *La Grande Illusion*. At Hallbach the distance of the prisoners from their own "real" world makes dreams of escape inevitable, and the persistent memory of patriotism makes attempts at escape seem necessary. Yet, like the Baron of *The Lower Depths*, they have already escaped—both the war which imposed its violent reality on them and the narrow confines of their old lives. Hence in some ways one may feel that life is more not less real here and that the relationships which evolve are more natural and genuine—a suggestion expressed, not surprisingly, in Renoir's central symbol of community when the Teacher declares, "I have never eaten so well in my life." One illusion holds that escape will be to something better. But what? Back to the *Bouffes du Nord*, or an unfaithful wife? Hence these scenes contain a suicidal, self-destructive note, twice clearly struck. The Teacher returns from his reconnaissance to report that an escaped prisoner has been caught and killed "in the garden behind the buildings"—precisely where their tunnel will emerge. The prisoners look serious—and go on with their plan. Later, when emptying the dirt from their digging, Maréchal asks the Engineer what he is planting. The latter replies, "Dandelions. I dream of having a salad of dandelions with bacon." But the French idiom, *manger des pissenlits par la racine*, equivalent to the American "pushing up daisies," is here intimated, suggesting a sort of death wish in the persistent effort to escape. Hence the concluding scenes at Hallbach have their own ambiguity. With the tunnel complete, Arthur appears to announce the change of camp, frustrating the

escape attempt but perhaps thus doing more than the prisoners to assure the fulfillment of his wish that they shall soon return to their wives. Seen in this light, Arthur's reappearance here may be the culmination of the theme of cooperation between guards and prisoners rather than its reversal.

Travelling dissolves and travelling music bridge the months between Hallbach and Wintersborn, the flow suggesting that from camp to camp life does not change. But the first image at Wintersborn bears no resemblance to the opening shots of Hallbach: instead of weary prisoners, a crucifix hangs before a Gothic window. This symbol of compassion precedes the introduction of new prisoners to the camp and, indeed, they are greeted compassionately. Von Rauffenstein bows, extends his hand to Boeldieu, "Delighted to see you again, Boeldieu." Then, with great sincerity, "I am very sorry to see you here." The official business transpires in relaxed, not very formal, talk. Rauffenstein sits on his desk, smoking, hands copies of the regulations to the three prisoners, remarks, "They make good bedtime reading." He leads a tour of the fortress, chatting with Boeldieu about old times along the way. Demolder admires the ancient architecture; Maréchal avers that among "Maxim's" he prefers the restaurant to the machine gun. Rauffenstein regrets that he cannot offer Boeldieu a private room; Boeldieu regrets that he could not accept it.

How much more humanized these first formalities appear. But again Renoir includes another image to contradict a first appearance. Behind Rauffenstein's cordial demeanor we glimpse cold stone walls, guns and patrolling dogs, with no singing prisoners in view. As at Hallbach these secondary images prove more revealing. Here sympathy and cooperation do not prevail; rather each man's private world tends to exclude the others. Boeldieu's cards and Demolder's dictionaries compete for the space of the table; the Senegalese works on his painting but when he finishes, Maréchal and Rosenthal hardly glance at it, then turn away. Most significantly, perhaps, Wintersborn is the only locale in *La Grande Illusion* which has no shot of men eating together: Rauffenstein eats alone and the Russians' promise of a shared repast becomes an angry conflagration from which Demolder is forcibly ejected. And, except for the improvised concert of the

escape, Wintersborn is the only locale in *La Grande Illusion* whose sounds do not include music.

Denied the symbols of community, Wintersborn also lacks its substance. The scenes in the fortress form a negative counterpart to those at Hallbach, with a thematic reversal finding expression in a reversal of action. Fellowship hardly flourishes here; its very existence seems dependent upon ties with the past rather than a spontaneous fellow-feeling. The contrast of nature and convention, a recurrent Renoir theme, receives in *La Grande Illusion* a much more subtle elaboration than the simple confrontation of *Boudu*. The conventional distinctions that separate men yield to natural sympathy at Hallbach; at Wintersborn the other pole of this dichotomy seems dominant. Appropriately, then, the central relationship here involves the two most highly formal characters yet encountered in a Renoir film, Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, two men for whom life without style and order is unthinkable. The sympathetic brotherhood begun at Hallbach still unites Maréchal and Rosenthal, and they alone at Wintersborn seem firmly oriented toward the future. For Boeldieu and Rauffenstein the common code and culture of their international elite weighs more than sentiment in a fraternity that looks to the past. "This is war; sentiment is out of the question," Boeldieu declares at Hallbach just when sentiment had finally broken through his shell of cold reserve. At Wintersborn he denies his sentimental tie to Maréchal at the moment when his action confirms it. Once again the climax brings all the prisoners together for a musical event, but now Boeldieu, absent at the Hallbach revue, holds the spotlight and provides the music—assuming the role of the Actor whom Boeldieu disdained at Hallbach. Maréchal and Rosenthal escape, but the stars of the performance are Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, and the rules of their game decree that Rauffenstein must kill the one he loves while those he disdains are freed.

In Elsa's barn Maréchal stands tensely by the door, grasping a thick club. Woe to he who enters. But once more the first impression of a new locale proves false. A cow comes through the door, followed by Elsa, frail, blonde, unafraid, more concerned that Rosenthal's ankle is *kaput* than that these two strange men should suddenly appear. One of her first gestures offers food to them; one of her last provides a package for the road. Like

Rauffenstein, she describes *les richesses* that the war has brought her and both early and late in this last segment of the film the image of Lotte alone at the big table conveys the cost of those "greatest victories." Elsa shares with Arthur and Rauffenstein the role of keeper of a *propriété* but one whose points of interest are not guns and walls and prowling dogs but rather a cow, a water-pail and a blue-eyed child. The prisoners, now confined by Rosenthal's injury rather than a captor's arms, here fully share in the community they find. Elsa enforces no regulations, German or French, makes no demands, but merely offers warmth, safety and finally love. The familiar pattern repeats: these characters gather; music is played; soon some will depart. But a celebration, not a performance, occurs this time and no antagonisms result from this event—love, not death, prevails. Once more Renoir touches lightly on a deeply-rooted cultural symbol when Lotte asks if she can eat the Christ-child; and indeed for a moment the communion of this little group seems beyond the reach of the war and the world. But only for a moment; the final departure confirms the presence of the world and the necessity of confronting it.

Perhaps only here can we discern the full contours of the movement which lies at the thematic heart of *La Grande Illusion.* At Hallbach a shared condition moves men toward fraternity, but the context of nations at war defeats this flow. The departure scene, appropriately, is one of frustration, with French, German, and British remaining quite apart. In this portion of the film effective fraternity, ultimately, is national. At Wintersborn national solidarity breaks down as differences of métier separate man from man among both French and Germans. The camaraderie begun at Hallbach falters as the presence of Rauffenstein draws Boeldieu away: despite his attachment to Maréchal, the only scenes in which Boeldieu seems really comfortable are those with Rauffenstein. But international unity also fails: the Russian invitation comes to naught; Boeldieu and Rauffenstein are eternally separated by the very code of the profession which unites them. Appropriately again, the final moments here are of despair, expressed in Rauffenstein's romantic gesture of clipping his geranium.

The divisiveness of Wintersborn persists through the moment

when Maréchal and Rosenthal separate, to the accompaniment of the same music which had separated them from Boeldieu. Only with Maréchal's silent return does true community emerge, a movement culminating on that Christmas Eve in a union in which differences of métier, nation, language, and race all dissolve. Hence departure from Elsa's, no longer escape, brings both hope and pain—hope in that this little community has shown the conditions in which, indeed, this "whore of a war" might be the last; pain in that this possibility requires separation from the community to fight for its extension. Hence, too, the power of the final shot, two small figures bobbing through a field of snow, where the "conventional" Swiss border is real enough to halt pursuers' bullets, yet the unmarked sweep of snow suggests a world in which such potent fictions need not be, but where the love these figures now embody will suffice to turn away wrath and war.

As in *Le Crime de M. Lange*, the final image, two lone figures receding in vast open space, conveys possibility more than achievement, hope more than happiness—a hope which, in 1937, was a grand illusion, but also a grand affirmation of the only human answer to despair.

Characterization

Renoir's original conception of this film, as a tale of a soldier in a series of adventures, seems evident in the title of his first script. The transformation of *Les Evasions de Capitaine Maréchal* into *La Grande Illusion* began with Renoir's decision to adopt a familiar literary device and "double" his hero, thus creating two characters, Maréchal and Boeldieu, highly differentiated yet indissolubly linked together, sharing the adventures. Given Renoir's concern for characters more than story, and his own dual career in the French Army, this development may have been inevitable. But not the next. When Eric von Stroheim joined the cast a second, unplanned doubling occurred—as Boeldieu is a second Maréchal, Rauffenstein becomes a second Boeldieu—and again the linking of character provides a dual perspective on their common situation. The last term in this schema grew from Albert Pinkovich's camera-side chats with Renoir which oc-

casioned the final doubling of the first pair, Maréchal and Boeldieu, into two pairs, Rauffenstein and Boeldieu, Maréchal and Rosenthal. This unusual doubling and redoubling, "accidental" as it seems, shapes the central dramatic structure of *La Grande Illusion* and underlies the richness of characterization which lifts this film far above normal cinematic fare. It also underlies our strong sense of the equality of the characters in the world of the film—a sense which runs counter to our usual experience in cinema.

The role of Maréchal provides the one great deviation in Jean Gabin's career as the tragic hero of French cinema in the late thirties. In a film with two tragic heroes, Maréchal stands on the side of an affirmation of life and the saving power of love. He shares some positive characteristics with the Gabin tragic heroes, but wholly lacks the "metaphysical cap of desperation and defeat" which fits them so tightly. If the ill-starred heroes of *Quai des Brumes* and *Le Jour se Lève* symbolize the hopelessness of the ordinary man's common aspirations, Maréchal affirms the resiliency of these aspirations and the inestimable value of the common men who share them.

With exemplary economy, Renoir requires just four shots—two minutes—to introduce both Maréchal and Boeldieu and develop the contrast between them. *La Grande Illusion* opens in a French *bar d'escadrille*: first, a close-up of a phonograph record; from this black disc the camera tilts up to the head of Lieutenant Maréchal, who leans over the machine, coat unbuttoned, hat on the back of his head, rapt, softly singing, "Frou-frou, frou-frou" to the music, lost not so much in thought as in the movement of the spinning disk. He wanders through the room, asks for a ride to Epernay to see "Josephine," grumbles, "Well—I say—it's the wrong time" when told by Captain Ringis, "There's a fellow from the General Staff. You'll have to take him out." But he quickly shrugs off his disappointment, "So—she'll wait. At your orders, Captain."

In Ringis' office Boeldieu stands, erect, hat straight on his head, monocle in eye, an aerial photo held in a gloved hand. He speaks coldly, with a haughty air, never moves. When Maréchal and Ringis disagree about the photo, Boeldieu's response drips with irony, "Touching unanimity! This precision gives a rich idea of the perfection of our photographic work."

In every movement and word Maréchal appears casual, relaxed, spontaneous. He speaks in the familiar "tu" form, his broken sentences sprinkled with slang. Moved by impulse, by his momentary experience, without serious plan or set purpose, he drifts through time as he drifts through the bar, showing little more concern for his casual affair than for "Frou-frou." Open and direct, he looks squarely at the men he addresses, uses the same tone to a truck driver and his squadron commander.

In contrast, precision marks Boeldieu's every gesture and phrase; his speech matches his carriage and appearance, being equally formal and correct, without superlatives or slang. He speaks with biting wit and a superior air. Cold, impersonal, immaculate, he treats Maréchal and Ringis as mere information sources. Hardly glancing at them as he speaks, he regards the photo as he utters his ironic barbs. Perhaps Boeldieu's view of the world, as much as of the photograph, finds expression in his remark, "It is that gray smudge that troubles me"; in his life he conceals all the gray smudges of impulse and sentiment under a meticulous style, an air of cold efficiency and an irony which displays both his scorn for almost everything and a rejection of all the imperfections of life. His manner is that of the dandy, of whom Baudelaire wrote, "The characteristic beauty of the dandy consists, above all, in his air of reserve, which in turn arises from his unshakable resolve not to feel any emotion."

In his first appearance von Rauffenstein seems to fall somewhere between these two. Entering the German equivalent of the *bar d' escadrille,* hatless, cigarette in mouth, helmet slung over his shoulder, he tilts backward to down his drink in one gulp, scratches his ear, calls for music, requests a bowl of Herr Freissler's famous punch to celebrate his second kill. When Boeldieu and Maréchal arrive, Rauffenstein becomes the gracious host. On seeing Maréchal's wounded arm he murmurs, "*Je regrette,*" and though he may recognize Boeldieu as "one of us," until they are seated he is more solicitous of Maréchal than Boeldieu. Boeldieu remains properly military; when Rauffenstein extends his hand, Boeldieu salutes, then hesitantly shakes hands. Maréchal appears confused in this context, more human than military. He shakes Rauffenstein's hand without hesitation, bows to the officers, acknowledges Rauffenstein's regret with the slightest nod, seems

rather ill at ease until he discovers a fellow mechanic from Lyons at the table.

Through this scene Rauffenstein acts with assurance, at ease with his men, friendly but without the informality of Maréchal's squadron. Always military in his bearing, he seems yet more relaxed than Boeldieu and allows a great range of expressive intonation in his voice: very warm as he calls, "Herr Bredow," colder and clipped when giving orders, jovial as he calls for a celebration, soft with regret to Maréchal. In both speech and action he seems more natural and human than Boeldieu, more formal than Maréchal. Rauffenstein appears here generous, gallant, sympathetic, but strictly military in a romantic vein, with notions of knightly honor, perhaps, and of respect for a brave enemy. International in his language and experience, he assumes without question his connection of common class and experience with Boeldieu; yet remains proud of being a combatant for his nation. Boeldieu apparently shares few of these traits; his attitude to the war seems coldly practical rather than romantic; he remains rather distant with Rauffenstein, though less so than he had been with Ringis and Maréchal.

In the opening sections of *La Grande Illusion* Maréchal, Boeldieu, and Rauffenstein each have, as it were, a separate entrance, with each first seen alone in the frame in close-up or medium shot. But Rosenthal first appears at Hallbach as one of a group of prisoners, inconspicuous among the singers, and throughout this section of the film he remains essentially just one of the men together in the room. This difference does weigh in characterization; for, unlike Boeldieu or Rauffenstein, Rosenthal is deeply social and gregarious, more anxious to affirm his identity with others than his separateness from them. His role in the two major communal events we see at Hallbach underlines this aspect of his character: he acts as host at the dinner and provides the costumes for the revue. All his actions are tied to the group, even the reception of the goods he gets in the mail becomes a collective activity. The suggestions of anti-semitism in remarks by Boeldieu and the Actor, which tend to separate Rosenthal from the group, obviously wound him. He undertakes to give with bravado an account of his international background and his ties to France, but utters the words with his back to his

hearers and grows progressively more agitated as he speaks. Open, warm, and sympathetic, not one to hide his feelings, it is he, Rosenthal, who can voice the group's concern for attempting their escape without Maréchal—prompting even Boeldieu to admit that he can be touched by emotion.

Significantly, where Maréchal had seemed ill at ease at Rauffenstein's table, Boeldieu's haughty air seems out of place at Rosenthal's. The scenes at Hallbach develop this opposition between Maréchal and Boeldieu, but also bring them closer together. Maréchal immediately becomes one of the group of prisoners; Boeldieu's aloofness creates suspicion. Hence the Engineer must ask Maréchal if "*ton copain capitaine*" can be trusted, before revealing the existence of the tunnel. Maréchal's assurance allows the work to go on, but does not much change Boeldieu's relation to the group. At night, when the digging starts, Maréchal watches with interest, asks questions and, chafing under the restraint of his wounded arm, assumes for himself the post of listening by the window. Boeldieu sits on his bed playing solitaire, doing his best to ignore the Actor's antics. He does ask if the tunnel is solid, but refrains from seeming interested, does not notice the signal though it falls right beside him and does not move from his bed to lend a hand until the Actor is dragged feet first from the hole. He agrees to join the digging next night, but even then in a manner which belittles the effort: "I've heard that crawling is very wholesome exercise."

Henceforth Boeldieu becomes part of the group, though never fully participating in its life, as Maréchal does. Boeldieu withdraws completely from the preparation for the revue, looks out the window while the others work on costumes, does not even attend the performance. But, after the fall of Douaumont, he does accord to Maréchal his words of highest praise, "*Très chic*," when the latter suggests they invite the German officers to the performance. Still, the degree of Boeldieu's commitment to these men and the strength of his feeling for Maréchal is revealed only after Maréchal's solitary confinement, and then, as it were, involuntary. The prisoners talk of the impending escape and Rosenthal says, sadly, "For me, there's one thing I'll always regret; that's to leave without Maréchal." Boeldieu looks up from his cards and, for once, allows himself to admit some feeling,

"That's very painful for me, too. Indeed, it troubles me." Then he throws down his card and resumes his mask of indifference, "But this is war—sentiment is out of the question." But when a dirty, exhausted Maréchal comes through the door a moment later, though Rosenthal sheds a tear, it is Boeldieu, whose every action has heretofore been deliberate, who first reaches his side, and the words of greeting which tumble out lack their usual cold precision.

Maréchal wears no mask; he hides neither the naive optimism which prompts his belief that the war will soon end nor his ignorance of the Rosenthals or the meaning of *cadastre*. His human feeling shows through in every scene—from his amused tolerance at being searched to his cry of despair in the dungeon. In the theater, when Maisonneuve dons wig and dress, Maréchal expresses the wonder which strikes them all immobile and silent: "Oh—a real girl!" And it is he who demonstrates the transcendence of nationalism over mere fellow-feeling by disrupting the harmony of the revue to shout, "We've retaken Douaumont!" and stand glaring defiantly at the German officers.

When Boeldieu and Maréchal arrive at Wintersborn, the year they have spent together has had some effect. Maréchal now speaks with a touch of irony, while a shade of warmth can be heard in Boeldieu's voice. Maréchal has lost his optimism; Boeldieu has learned to value his lower-class comrades. And the attachment between these two has obviously deepened, though it is not a subject on which Boeldieu will permit discussion. Rosenthal now works alone, drawing his map; in the fortress from which "no one escapes" he maintains his hope of eluding his captors.

Rauffenstein, of course, has suffered from the war; as the symbol of his experience a chin plate and steel corset hold his shattered body together—a bit of costume suggested to Renoir by Stroheim. Physically these make no apparent difference. Rauffenstein's neck is no stiffer, his back no straighter at Wintersborn than they had been in his opening scene. However, they mark the change from combatant to prisoner which once again allows him to meet Boeldieu as an equal. But the terms of Rauffenstein's imprisonment are harsher than Boeldieu's; when the war ends the stone walls will no longer confine Boeldieu, but Rauffenstein will remain forever encased in his steel fortress.

Hence those aspects of the dandy which were not apparent in his first scene are accentuated now. As Henri Agel has written, "Dandyism is the last state of heroism in decadence."

Fifteen years earlier, in such films as *Foolish Wives*, Stroheim had become the embodiment in cinema of a certain incarnation of the dandy, the cynical Prussian officer, cold, pitiless, self-centered, sensual, engaged in a ritual of elegance which kept him aloof and untouched by the cares and emotions of ordinary men. Even earlier, in propaganda films of World War I, Stroheim's portrayal of the Prussian officer had made him the essence of "German brutality" (*la barbarie allemande*), billed everywhere as "The man you love to hate." Renoir recalls this career in *La Grande Illusion* when Rauffenstein tells the new prisoners that at Wintersborn he applies French regulations, "*Pour que l'on n'accuse pas la barbarie allemande*"—recalls it both to remind us of the stereotype created by Stroheim and to insist that this will not be merely repeated here. Rauffenstein, like Boeldieu, does perform the rituals of the dandy, though he explains his white gloves as necessary because he has been burned all over, and he shows his fine contempt for "*un Maréchal et un Rosenthal*" and the French revolution which bred them. But he is neither pitiless nor cold. He shows sympathy for his men; his voice retains its great range of emotive intonation; he expresses openly to Boeldieu his feelings about the world and his position in it. If the credo of the dandy is never to be astonished and never to be moved, Rauffenstein fails on both counts: he is genuinely astonished at Boeldieu's promenade along the ramparts, and he is often moved.

Now the primary object of this emotion is, of course, Boeldieu. Merely a gallant foe and a fellow aristocrat in their first encounter, at Wintersborn Boeldieu represents much more to a Rauffenstein whose former life is beyond recovery, whatever else the war may bring. When Rauffenstein laments that he was a combatant but is now "*un fonctionnaire, un policier*," he mourns more than his role in the war. His cavalry life of international equestrian competition, with its attendant café society, has been shattered with his spine. Forever inaccessible, it yet appears again in the person of Boeldieu, who can chat in English of the Prince of Wales Cup and remembers Fifi at Maxim's. For a moment,

in his prison, as they smoke and talk of Blue Minnie and Count Edmond de Boeldieu, Rauffenstein can regain the pre-war life which will never return. Need we ask why he makes "*une exception*" of Boeldieu?

In the single long tracking shot which first reveals his presence at Wintersborn, Renoir encapsulates Rauffenstein's character. To the background sound of a lone bugle, the camera descends from a gaunt crucifix before a Gothic window to an altar where stands a portrait of Kaiser Wilhelm II, then moves past a small cabinet holding a single geranium and across the table where cluster the personal effects of this yet unseen Commandant: a champagne bucket and bottle, a pistol resting on a leather-bound copy of *Casanova*, a watch, a photograph of a woman, a volume of Heine, a nude statuette, binoculars, an atomizer, whips and spurs, swords. . . . As the camera comes upon an emaciated orderly blowing into a pair of white gloves, an off-screen voice complains in harsh German, "Open the window. It stinks in here—enough to make you vomit!" The orderly springs to attention, opens the window, then reports respectfully, "We have only two pairs of white gloves left." The off-screen voice, less harsh, replies, "It's too complicated to get more. Try and make them last until the war is over." The camera follows the orderly as he offers "Herr Major" more coffee, then tilts from a white-gloved hand up to Rauffenstein's face, supported by his chin-plate. His voice now warm and gentle, he responds, "Since you baptize this slop with the name of coffee, I resign myself. It'll warm my guts." The shot ends as the orderly hands Rauffenstein the list of new prisoners, including the name "Boeldieu." The capping gesture to this catalogue of effects and intonations, seen through the door a moment later as the new prisoners wait, is the image of Rauffenstein spraying himself with perfume before going out to greet Boeldieu.

The crucifix with which the tracking shot begins is, as I have said, a symbol of compassion, but the rest of the shot complicates its meaning here; for it reveals the command post of a military prison established in a chapel. One may see this as the dandy's defiance, setting up his profane ménage in God's domain, or alternately, an appropriation of the chapel to the romantic,

aristocratic nationalism of the Junkers—a confident assertion of "*Gott mit Uns.*" Or, with Rauffenstein, as both.

Though Eric von Stroheim had created cinema's image of the dandy, in *La Grande Illusion* it is rather Pierre Fresnay who brings this role to its perfection. The emotion which Rauffenstein openly displays, Boeldieu insistently denies. Though his cold style never falters, he preserves a latent, inner fire discernible only in his irony until the moment arrives for his final heroic gesture. His credentials as a snob were firmly established at Hallbach, yet now he assures Rauffenstein that the word of a Rosenthal or a Maréchal is "as good as ours." He will risk his life to help Maréchal and Rosenthal escape, still he firmly rebuffs every effort by Maréchal to express his feelings—"I'm doing nothing for you personally. We risk getting sentimental"—and engages him instead in the ritual of elegance, washing his white gloves. When Maréchal complains that, after eighteen months together, they still speak with the formal *vous,* Boeldieu coolly replies, "I say *vous* to my wife and *vous* to my mother." This remark rejects the familiarity Maréchal seeks, yet still allows that Boeldieu's relation to Maréchal may be as deep as that to his wife or mother—deep enough, it proves, to claim his life. Maréchal's plaintive, "You can't do anything like the rest of us do," identifies, of course, a mark of the dandy, who, above all else, will not be ordinary.

The escape plan Boeldieu devises remains wholly within this vein—bizarre in its outward appearance and singularly complex in its motivations. This man of icy reserve, who shuns display and whose "competence in theatrical matters is highly debatable," will perform in the glare of spotlights with more style and finesse than the Actor's turn in the revue. The man who declared at Hallbach, "I hate fifes," will offer a solo concert, piping a children's song on a pennywhistle flute. Should we wonder at Rauffenstein's amazement?

Though "duty is duty," the context of this performance reaches further than the proprieties of war and Boeldieu's relation to Maréchal. It includes, of course, the dying class of the Rauffensteins and the Boeldieus. Rauffenstein speaks with regret of their passing from the world, but Boeldieu merely responds, "Perhaps there is no longer a need for us." He is, as he claims, a realist,

willing to face the end of his world without complaint, but also without concession—to find for himself a "*bonne solution*" and choose his identity and his fate, thus making explicit in his performance the implicit suicidal undertone of the Hallbach escape attempt.

In the script of *La Grande Illusion* in the Harvard Library, a few pages, perhaps carried over from an earlier script, spell Boeldieu's name "Bois le Dieu." Even more strikingly, on the page where Boeldieu and Maréchal wash the white gloves, what appears to be Renoir's marginal change uses this same spelling. Bois le Dieu: God of the Woods! A familiar figure in Renoir films, of course, but who would expect to find him here, concealed within the consummate figure of the dandy, the least natural of men! A reversal of this concealment had been hinted at in *Boudu*, when Lestingois dresses Boudu in a frock coat, the ritual vestment of Baudelaire's dandy. But where Boudu had laughingly rejected the garment, Boeldieu chooses the woodland god's instrument to play his dying song.

Renoir's nature god is a god of love, whose piping stirs an erotic flow within the human breast. But when the god becomes the dandy, love and death mingle in his tune. Perhaps his power is perverted by the social context of his life, which drives him to deny sentiment, enthrone style, and treat the contest of nature and convention as a holy war. Love does occur around Boeldieu. His own love for Maréchal finds expression at last in the thin tones of "*Le Petit Navire*," but this act of love and of duty is also Boeldieu's own means of escape into death. He has observed the affection between Maréchal and Rosenthal—"I know your preference"—so his action may be tinged by the reaction of a rejected lover, as in its completion it becomes an action rejecting the love so patently offered by Rauffenstein.

For Renoir the nature-god figure signifies freedom from conventional restraint. And "Bois le Dieu" does play this role in the escape. His action frees Maréchal and Rosenthal, and as he stands atop the fortress it brings Rauffenstein to plead that they face each other as mere men. Where Boeldieu's expression of love came in the sound of a flute, Rauffenstein's declaration is made in a foreign tongue, English, the language of *their* world: "I beg you, man to man, come back." Renoir says that he told Stroheim

to speak these lines like a man pleading with his mistress to return. But Boeldieu's style will not permit him to turn back: "It's damn nice of you, Rauffenstein, but it's impossible!" And Rauffenstein's honor as a marksman will not allow him to miss. So the chapel becomes an infirmary where the final act of the performance plays. A dying Boeldieu can be softer: "*Français ou Allemande, le devoir, c'est le devoir.*" " . . . *Pour un homme du peuple, c'est terrible de mourir à la guerre. Pour vous et moi, c'était une bonne solution.*" Despite the god of love, in the world of gray smudges the dandy must choose death. Hence, in this context, the final image of Rauffenstein cutting his geranium becomes not merely "the supreme expression of a ritual of elegance" or a sentimental romantic gesture expressing Rauffenstein's grief, but a precisely appropriate sacrifice of nature at the death of the nature god become victim of the conventions he embraced.

Boeldieu and Rauffenstein are heroes; their training and temperament demand it. Maréchal and Rosenthal are not; if they perform heroically, it will be in response to men, not style. So, while the aristocrats play out their game of death, the common men gamble for life. Amidst the separateness of Wintersborn, they work together, braiding their cord, smoking, openly avowing their mutual regard. Rosenthal defends Boeldieu as "*épatant*" (splendid); Maréchal, agreeing, says, "But we don't have the same education. Listen, if you and I happen to fall into the shit, we'd just be a couple of poor stiffs—but whatever happened to him he'd still be *Monsieur* de Boeldieu." Rosenthal describes his "family" background in terms quite different from the catalogue of properties defensively cited at Hallbach: "I'm very proud of my rich family. When I invite you to my table, that gives me an occasion to show them off. People think that our great fault is avarice. Grievous error; we are often too generous. Alas, in the face of that quality Jehovah has overly endowed us with the sin of pride." Maréchal responds, "Oh, that's all bunk. Me, I don't give a damn for Jehovah. All I see is that you've been a good pal."

This amity carries them through the escape. Free of the fortress, they huddle together against the cold, move cautiously through the bleak frozen countryside, disagreeing about how to go. In *La Grande Illusion* the path to the final test leads through

the reduction, or ascent, from combatant to prisoner to mere man. At its end Boeldieu and Rauffenstein could not shake their identification with their world of noble status and war, could not overcome the habits of adherence to the conventional values of the fortress, duty, honor, ascetic denial. Maréchal and Rosenthal have less to overcome but that renders the test no less severe.

Starved, frozen, their movement all but stopped by Rosenthal's ankle, they rage at each other:

"You slipped! We know you slipped. And if we get nabbed, dragging along like this, you can explain that you slipped! Clumsy! We've got nothing left to eat; might as well give up right now!"

"Gladly! For I'm fed up, too. Fed up! Fed up! If you only knew how I detest you!"

"I swear that it's mutual! Shall I tell you what you are to me? A burden! A ball and chain tied to my leg! For a start, I never could stand Jews—you hear?"

"A little late to find that out. Shove off then! Why are you waiting to get rid of me? You're dying to!"

"You won't have to tell me that twice!"

"Clear out—clear out! Quick! So I won't have to see your ugly mug any more!"

"Fine! I'm off! Try to shift for yourself. So long!"

"Good-bye! I could sing, I'm so happy!"

Ugly with frustration and exhaustion, they glare at each other, then Maréchal strides away, each absurdly chanting Boeldieu's song of love, "*Le Petit Navire.*" But the words die in Maréchal's throat. Cut to Rosenthal, seated on his rock: shattered, abandoned, his desperate bluster dissolved, he weeps pitifully; the skirt of Maréchal's black coat edges silently into the frame. Rage spent, both the voices and the words have changed. Plaintively, Rosenthal asks, "Why did you come back?" Tenderly, Maréchal replies, "Let's go. Come on, mate," as he helps Rosenthal to his feet.

The crisis past, the other values of mere men can oppose those of the fortress: loyalty, humor, brotherhood. Now each acts with concern for the other, Maréchal wanting to stop, Rosenthal insisting he can go on. At the sound of a step in Elsa's barn each tries to protect the other.

Maréchal's colloquy with the cow captures the spirit of life

at the farm: "Don't be afraid, it's me. You don't give a damn if a Frenchman feeds you, hey? You smell like my grandfather's cow—that's a good smell here. You were born in Wurtemberg and me, in the 20th in Paris, but that doesn't keep us from being pals, you see. You're a poor cow and me, a poor soldier—but we each do our best, don't we?"

Those values of ordinary men thus far little noticed in the film, home and work, wife and child, joy and tenderness, now make their stand against the fortress. At Wintersborn the great crucifix hangs unnoticed over its altar; here Rosenthal's potato-Jesus delights a child, his Jewishness can be fondly asserted—"*mon frère de race*"—and the bells in the valley sound of Sunday morning calm. The actions are simple and most unheroic: Maréchal feeds a cow and chucks a hatchet into a chopping block; Elsa scrubs the floors; Lotte counts her fingers; Rosenthal winds a phonograph. The insignificant pursuits of peace—but in them the drifting Maréchal finds a compass and his good-fellowship blossoms into tenderness. Though we are left at film's end with only a forlorn hope that Maréchal will, indeed, ever return to Elsa, we cannot doubt the depth and truth of his feelings. The gulf between the fortress and the farm, the militaristic world of the past and that humane vision of Maréchal's, and Renoir's, hope for the future, finds direct expression in the words of love that are evoked in each, in the contrast between Rauffenstein, smartly uniformed, gun in hand, calling to a distant figure in the darkness, "'I beg you, man to man, come back," and the simplicity by which Maréchal, in his nondescript refugee clothes, child in his arms, conveys all his love, his hope, his gratitude: "*Lotte hat blaue Augen.*"

The performances of Fresnay and Stroheim, Gabin and Dalio, in these roles seem little short of perfect. Given the comparative rigidity entailed in their commitment to a "noble" style, the characters Boeldieu and Rauffenstein are built of nuances whereby an inner life shows through the style: the tilt of an eyebrow, the slight upturn at the corner of a mouth, the minute ways in which Fresnay conveys Boeldieu's repugnance at being touched—so that when he extends his hand to Maréchal before the escape it becomes an extraordinary act of deep attachment. Stroheim's voice achieves subtleties of expression in three languages, from

his agonized plea to Boeldieu in English to the harshest German in the film a moment later as he orders the pursuit of the fugitives—this flexibility of voice provides a counterpoint to the stiffness of body throughout the role.

For Maréchal and Rosenthal a much greater range of physical reaction is permissible, hence Gabin and Dalio indulge in broader gestures, construct their characters more of actions than intimations. Maréchal's overt expressions range from despair and rage to the joy and tenderness with which he regards Elsa on Christmas morning. Not that these performances lack nuance, but here the nuances add depth to the characterization rather than being its primary constituent. Dalio's success in creating the warm, generous, slightly defensive but wholly sympathetic Rosenthal is perhaps measured by the virulence of the attack on the film and this character by the French anti-semite Céline in *Bagatelles pour un massacre.*

The second tier of characters, Elsa and Lotte, Demolder, the other men in the room, have the same authenticity, the same feel of actual life, as the central quartet. Gaston Modot's Engineer, judicious in his actions, reasonable and rather careful in thought and speech, yet claims to be moved by the 'spirit of contradiction." Carette's Actor, whose performance in the revue demonstrates how far he stands from the top of his profession, nevertheless acts at every moment, any word or event providing an occasion for the outbursts which are his mode of combatting boredom for both himself and his comrades. At Hallbach the Actor and Boeldieu create two poles of stylization of self, effusive and reticent, against which the naturalness of the others shows itself. Jean Dasté, as the Teacher, creates a character who is at once the most sensitive and the most ineffectual of the prisoners, unsophisticated, unadventurous, a bit inept, yet thoughtful, considerate, tolerant. It has been said that Dita Parlo does not look like a farm wife, but her performance, I think, is unexceptionable with her speech simple, clear and direct, her stance and movements slightly lacking in grace. Her face, with its eloquent pale beauty, shows both the sadness of her lonely life and the cheer Maréchal and Rosenthal bring to it. And, in a film in which love speaks obliquely and in a foreign tongue, its most joyful expression is Elsa's hesitant, smiling, shy, "*Le . . café . . est . . prêt.*"

Form and Style

Before *La Grande Illusion* Jean Renoir had shown a tendency to shape his films into cyclical or symmetrical wholes, with the symmetry usually involving both cinematic form and narrative content. But he had also often included in these films matching or parallel sequences, characters, actions or shots and, frequently, repetitions of a phrase, a gesture, a composition or a camera movement in ways which established a network of internal references within the film and helped to create the density and richness which distinguish these works.

This use of parallels and repetitions, heretofore an important but subordinate element in the totality of a Renoir film, in *La Grande Illusion* becomes the organizing principle of the whole: two parallel introductory scenes; three large parallel central sections; one pair of characters splitting into two parallel pairs, with a complex variety of smaller parallels and repetitions both within and cutting across the several sections of the film, and where the repetitions are often also reversals, a repeated form with a contrast in meaning. There are perhaps twenty parallels in the film and as many repetitions and internal references. I shall note only a few.

The parallel of the introductory scenes lies not so much in its presentation of characters as in its depiction of the two opposing sides in this war. The predominant moral perception of the film, that men on both sides of the line are equally human, finds its first expression in the juxtaposition of these two scenes, and most simply in two images: two rooms traversed by a moving camera. These two rooms, arranged for men to eat together, share music and drink, a white-clad barman stationed by the door, nearly identical phonographs and very similar pictures tacked carelessly on the wall. But the French sit scattered in groups of three or four, while the German room holds a single large table. And the German side shows no counterpart of the mocking poster tacked to the French bar, proclaiming: "Alcohol kills. Alcohol drives you mad. The squadron leader drinks it."

Rauffenstein's lunch connects, of course, with the meal at Hallbach and this parallel pair of convivial scenes stands in contrast

to two later images *à table*, Rauffenstein eating alone while his orderly stands by and Lotte alone at the big table at Elsa's. We may note too how Rauffenstein's drink at the beginning of his role matches that at its end, not only in the tilt of his body backward rather than bending his neck, but also that each drink follows an action of shooting down Boeldieu, though the first is taken in celebration and the second as fortification against death.

I have already noted the parallel openings of the three central sections, each followed by several scenes of interaction among the characters, then by a departure from this locale. These parallel developments allow for a rich array of contrasts and cross-references: The Engineer asking Maréchal if Boeldieu can be trusted; Rauffenstein asking Boeldieu, "The word of a Maréchal?" where Boeldieu has replied to his request for assurance with a "diplomat's truth" which preserves both his honor and his comrade's hope of escape, since the forbidden cord is not literally in the room. . . . Two scenes of unpacking a crate, each followed by a moment of stunned silence, where here even these incursions from the outer world reinforce the difference between Hallbach and Wintersborn, of unity and division. . . . Soldiers before a bulletin board announcing the fall of Douaumont; Elsa, Maréchal and Rosenthal before a wall with pictures of her dead husband and brothers, where we shall miss the parallel if we cannot identify Douaumont as the fort whose fall marked the opening of the battle of Verdun, in which more than half a million men were killed or wounded. . . . Boeldieu telling Rauffenstein "Duty is duty," thus justifying his own death; a German soldier in the window telling Elsa, "Duty is duty," thus leaving Maréchal and Rosenthal free to continue their escape. . . . Three scenes with talk of departure while leaving someone else behind, at Hallbach with regret, at Wintersborn with embarrassment, at Elsa's with tears and a promise to return.

The central formal structure of three parallel developments reflects, of course, the central theme of three possible forms of human community. If *La Grande Illusion* appears richer and deeper on a fourth or tenth viewing, its intricate texture of

parallels and repetitions, references and reversals, must contribute to this.

The familiar Renoir visual style, developed since *Tire au flanc*, shows no radical transformations in *La Grande Illusion* but rather complete mastery. Long takes in deep focus with characters ranged in depth through the space, large and supple camera movements, dynamic compositions which form and reform as the camera glides, a total integration of characters and setting, few close-ups or shot-countershot exchanges, a rhythmic flow of movement that appears completely uncontrived—*La Grande Illusion* looks so natural and sweeps so smoothly past our eye our impression is that no one would think of doing it any other way. But this appearance veils a dozen or more shots brilliant enough to stand out as virtuoso pieces if our engagement with characters and action did not make the technique seem inevitable and necessary and therefore unexceptional. Typically, though not exclusively, these shots open a scene, presenting and exploring setting, people and situation simultaneously. Some are epitomizing shots which summarize a character or context in a single moving image. One such, obviously, is the long travelling shot which first reveals Rauffenstein in his chapel/chamber at Wintersborn.

Almost the whole of *La Grande Illusion* is a model of economy in development, and several of these brilliant single shots demonstrate the falsity of the widely held view that the condensation of time in cinema always occurs in the cutting, while the actions conveyed in a single shot must have the same duration as they would in the real world. The first shot of Maréchal in solitary confinement provides such an example: Maréchal works patiently gouging a divot the size of a half-dollar in the wall with his spoon; the old guard enters and watches in puzzlement, then asks, "What are you doing there?" Maréchal answers calmly and seriously, "There? A hole! Yes, I'm digging a hole to escape," and gestures to show himself disappearing out the hole. The astonished guard leans forward; Maréchal pushes him aside and dashes out the open door, closing it as he leaves. Rather than cut outside with Maréchal, Renoir lets his camera run on in the cell where the old guard now stands, back to the camera, looking through the little window in the door. We hear Maréchal, "*Foutez-moi la paix . . .* " and the sound of scuffling. The old guard

stands aside; the door opens again and four guards carry an unconscious Maréchal to his bunk as the bells announce the recapture of Douaumont. This whole scene takes sixty-five seconds, accomplished, of course, by conveying the major action of the shot only by sound, thus allowing our imagination to apprehend in twelve seconds events which would take many times that long in the world.

In the single shot which contains almost all the preparations for digging the tunnel as well as Maréchal's warning of the sound outside, all in one minute and forty-five seconds, camera movement rather than sound becomes Renoir's instrument of condensation. The camera restlessly prowls about the room, changing direction a dozen times, so that we see fragments of actions and assume them to be completed while we look away—but this fragmentation occurs without the experienced discontinuity of cutting.

For economy, consider all that is conveyed in two minutes and forty-five seconds, in the theatre when the costumes arrive: The scene begins with a moving camera surveying a rather absurd chorus line of British soldiers singing "Tipperary," an orchestra assembling, various soldiers working on sets and props, before coming to rest on Arthur inspecting the crate of costumes while Rosenthal and his friends wait. Arthur holds up a corset as the Actor asks, familiarly, "Well, Arthur, you found nothing?" "No, I found nothing. Amuse yourselves," and Arthur departs. The prisoners crowd around the crate; Rosenthal holds a dress against himself, saying, "Be careful! These are objects one must handle cautiously, and with closed eyes." As they pull items from the case the dialogue reveals the duration and weight of their imprisonment: "Real dresses, mates!" " . . . How short it is. A little girl's dress." " . . . Eh! Say, you don't know that women wear short skirts now?" " . . . Just below the knee!" " . . . It's true! My old woman wrote me, but I didn't believe it."

Maréchal tells the Actor, "Put one on—so we can see how it looks," but Rosenthal objects, "He's not shaved," and hands a dress to a young soldier. "Here, you, Maisonneuve, with your angel face." Maisonneuve goes off with the dress as they continue to rummage in the case: "Corsets!" " . . . Easy! Easy!" " . . . It's not only dresses that are short. They cut their hair, too." " . . . Short hair! Oh—one must imagine he's going to bed with

a boy!" " . . . Really, when we're not there to watch them, women act like fools." " . . . I'm sure mine hasn't cut her hair. Bah! All those tricks are for high class whores." (This discussion will later be continued in Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* and then again in Renoir's novel, *Les Cahiers du Capitaine Georges*.) "Oh, shoes!" " . . . We'd forgotten how small they are." " . . . Stockings!" " . . . Of silk like I've never touched."

Maisonneuve calls in a falsetto, "Fellows, I'm ready." Maréchal replies, "Let us dream a while. If we see you, that'll spoil what we imagine." But Maisonneuve emerges, in blond wig and dress; Maréchal says softly, "It's a real girl!" The ambient hubbub gradually subsides as Maisonneuve walks slowly forward, a vision of a lost world, evoking memories and dreams. The camera pans across the faces of soldiers frozen in silence, to end with a long shot of Maisonneuve gesturing weakly in the center of the group. The final twenty seconds pass in absolute silence except for Maisonneuve's repeated, soft, plaintive, "It's funny. . . . It's funny, isn't it?"

Such scenes in Renoir's usual unfragmented style add impact to those few which deviate from it. Most prominent in *La Grande Illusion* is the escape scene, where about fifty shots fill only seven minutes, with added chase music to intensify the pace. Here, in a passage very unusual for Renoir, screen-time and action-time exactly coincide, that is, the running time of the sequence is identical with the length of dramatic time which passes within the world of the film. Boeldieu has promised Maréchal five minutes to escape and this sequence runs exactly five minutes and fifteen seconds from the first sound of Boeldieu's flute to Rauffenstein's shot. Oddly, perhaps, here where there is none, the fragmentation makes us feel that the time is condensed, where in the scenes of greatest condensation we seem to witness the whole event.

Renoir usually shoots conversations in medium or three-quarter group or two-shots with little cutting. The three exceptions to this in *La Grande Illusion*, shifting to shot-countershot format, all have an expressive basis. When the Engineer, washing Maréchal's feet, leans forward to ask if Boeldieu can be trusted, Renoir cuts from two-shot to shot-countershot close-ups, then shows the two united in the same frame again after the assurance

has been given. Similarly, when Rauffenstein performs his official task of citing the escape records of his new prisoners, Renoir shifts to this style, but uses group shots for the rest of this otherwise informal welcome. But the major scene employing the conventional shot-countershot style is the conversation in the chapel/chamber between Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, the two most stylized characters in the film. Here the form not only fits the characters, but this conversation articulates a central theme of the film and gains impact from cutting and close-ups that it would not have if the whole film were in this style. This two minute and forty-five second scene takes twenty shots; by comparison, Renoir uses only three shots for the two minutes and twenty seconds of the equally important conversation between Maréchal and Boeldieu before the escape.

As usual the most important and effective music in this Renoir film is internal, produced and heard within the world of the film. This includes not only the revue, *Le Petit Navire*, and the Christmas music at Elsa's but also much of the background sound at Hallbach. Here a few scattered shots and a continuity of sound create a whole new dimension of the war. Drill field commands echoing across flat open space, the sound of marching feet, male voices singing as they march; with two lines of dialogue—an old woman's "Poor kids," and Boeldieu's, "On one side, children playing at soldiers"—these sounds surround the prisoners at Hallbach with young men who will soon fill up the trenches and the graves at Verdun.

La Grande Illusion does contain background music, rather sparsely, and with most of it supportive and unobtrusive. What may appear as the only flaws in the film were probably not noticeable in 1937: the music accompanying the escape seems somewhat too mechanical and insistent, and, more importantly perhaps, the music which swells as Rauffenstein contemplates cutting his geranium tends to divert the sentimentality of his gesture from the character to the film.

I have left until last the most radical innovation of *La Grande Illusion*, so radical that thirty years later an American studio would proudly announce they had done it for the first time. In its uses of language *La Grande Illusion* may still remain unique, not merely a multilingual film but one in which language becomes

a major dimension of subject-matter. Beyond being a mere element in Renoir's realism, his insistence that each character speak his own tongue proves essential insofar as a major theme in the film concerns the role of language in human affairs.

In the contest of nature and convention, language is a convention become natural; hence it stands on both sides of the division. Speech is as natural to man as walking, but each separate language imposes its own conventions on us, uniting some in a linguistic community which divides them from others, and sustaining all the other conventions which constitute our distinct cultures. And for most of us most of the time nothing plays so decisive a role in our perception of character as how, and what, an individual speaks. These familiar facts take dramatic form in *La Grande Illusion*, which explores many facets of our life as talking animals, and speaks itself, of course, for the common humanity which underlies our linguistic differences.

Maréchal and Boeldieu are separated by the language they share, as they finally acknowledge—"*Tout nous sépare.*" Boeldieu and Rauffenstein distinguish themselves from their fellows, French and German, by the third language, English, which bridges for them the chasm of the war. In the parallel conversations at Rauffenstein's table early in the film, Rauffenstein switches from French to English without question or explanation, knowing that a "de Boeldieu" will of course understand; beside them Maréchal is surprised to find his neighbor speaking French and seeks an explanation. The moments when Boeldieu and Rauffenstein speak English are quite distinct and always have reference to the prewar world of their class—until the final moment when Rauffenstein calls in English, "Boeldieu, have you really gone mad?" futilely evoking that world in his appeal for Boeldieu's return. Their common language drives Maréchal and Rosenthal apart when they translate frustration into attacks on each other; they come together again in silence. The camp commandant at Hallbach repeats in German, "*Streng verboten*," even though he apparently understands French well enough to know when this injunction is appropriate; the language confirms the ascendance of German authority here. The English officer who has dropped his suitcase replies, "I don't speak French," to Maréchal's frantic efforts to inform him of the tunnel.

In all these cases language proves as much an instrument of division as of unification. But it also serves to create an instant bond between the new prisoners at Hallbach and the old hands, and to establish Maréchal immediately as one of the men together in the room—the same speech patterns which separate him from Boeldieu unite him with the Actor and the Engineer. And Maréchal in his dungeon feels the despair of one cut off from the sounds of his own speech.

Among the facts that most interest Renoir is that love can transcend the barriers of language. And repeatedly, late in the film, he employs the most divisive aspects of language—the fact that different languages *are* different and mutually unintelligible, and the fact that a common language may be used to create barriers rather than destroy them—to express the closest ties developed in the film. The camp commandant's harsh, "*Streng verboten,*" repeated mockingly by Maréchal through the film, becomes an expression of love and pure joy when Lotte wants to eat the baby Jesus. Almost no avowal of love occurs in the speaker's native language, but they are made and understood. Maréchal and Elsa sit side by side, each speaking words the other cannot understand to convey the emotion evoked by the necessity of parting, but each hears the love and pain expressed—and recaptures it again at the moment of leavetaking in simpler terms: "*Lotte hat blaue Augen.*" " . . . *Blaue Augen.*" And finally Maréchal's whole journey in understanding and his growth in love is summarized in an ugly phrase made joyful by experience and affection, "*Au revoir, sale juif.*"

The first image of *La Grande Illusion* is of a phonograph record, the last, of a field buried in snow. Tone changes from black to white; perspective, from close-up to extreme long shot; movement, from a spinning in place to the slow forward progress of two men moving together. These changes might be seen as symbolic of the distance covered in the film, in the life of its hero, in the world portrayed. And the greatest illusion may be that it cannot be, that we must forever spin in place, that this is merely a hopeful dream from a world long dead.