

Einer ruhigen literarischen Kreuzzug gegen den Krieg: Rereading Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*

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Abstract: Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), through which he wages a 'quiet literary crusade against war' and militarism, is one of the more famous anti-belligerence works to have been ever written. Originally written in German as *Im Westen nichts Neues*, the novel, which is often read against Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) as a convincing testimony of the numerous horrors of the First World War (1914-18), is exhaustive in its depiction of the hardships and miseries that the twenty-year-old German army recruit, Paul Bäumer, and his comrades experience while fighting against the Allied troops on the Western Front. "*Einer ruhigen literarischen Kreuzzug gegen den Krieg: Rereading Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front**" seeks to offer a critical interpretation of the different aspects of Remarque's novel, much maligned for its pacifism, that have helped it to retain its readership, popularity, and relevance even after eighty three years from the date of its first serialisation in the German newspaper, *Vossische Zeitung*. Select critical views on the 1929 novel have also been mentioned in the essay.

Keywords: Remarque, Hemingway, pacifism, war, anti-belligerence mood, suffering, quietude, frustration.

In the year 1929, two of world's more famous and poignant war novels – Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (famously translated by Arthur Wesley Wheen in 1930 as 'All Quiet on the Western Front') and Ernest Miller Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* – were published – respectively in German and English. The two respective writers – Remarque (1898-1970) and Hemingway (1899-1961) – had military backgrounds and own shares of misfortune. Conscripted into the *German Armed Forces* in 1916, Remarque was transferred to the Western Front, and as a soldier of the 15th Reserve Infantry Regiment, he was grievously wounded on 31 July 1917 by shrapnel in left leg, right arm, and neck, fighting between Torhout and Houthulst, Belgium. He was immediately transferred to an army hospital in Germany where he recuperated until the First World War was over and his country had lost it. Hemingway, on the other hand, voluntarily joined the American *Red Cross* services in 1918, and on 8 July 1918, was fatally shredded in legs by mortar fire while attending to the Italian soldiers at Fossalta di Piave, near Venice. Despite his injuries, he carried a wounded Italian soldier to safety, earning for himself an *Italian Silver Medal of Bravery*. He convalesced for six months at the Milanese *Red Cross Hospital*, where he

unsuccessfully fell in love with the American nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky (1892-1984). The German writer married actress Ilse Jutta Zambona (1910-75) in 1925: a relationship, that like Hemingway and von Kurowsky's, terminated in mutual pain and frustration. He left Germany in 1931, and though his sister Elfriede Scholz (1903-43) was guillotined by the Nazis for his escape, the famous anti-war litterateur never returned to his fatherland, spending his remaining life in the United States of America and Switzerland. Significantly, Hans Wagener informs that Remarque wrote his famous anti-war novel merely to expurgate himself of his depression and desperateness which he felt while working as the editor of *Sport im Bild* and he completed the novel within six weeks (9). It is primarily because of Remarque's curtailed military service and post-war behaviour that his courage and patriotism has come to be questioned in the 21st century. Comparing him to Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), Lengel comments,

Jünger experienced a full four years of fighting but most British and German soldiers spent much less time at the front. Remarque only spent a total of two months in or near the line. [...] *All Quiet on the Western Front* is also a political book and is not necessarily more 'realistic' than *The Storm of Steel*. Many scholars reject Jünger out of hand and accept Remarque's interpretation of the war as 'realistic'. This is largely because a pessimistic view of the war is currently fashionable. I would argue, however, that Remarque's book is not only fictional but an unqualified romance; Jünger's book at least has the advantage of being ostensibly non-fictional¹.

The respective attitudes of Remarque and Hemingway to warfare and militarism becomes obvious even from the opening sections of their 1929 novels. In Hemingway's novel, Frederic Henry, an American ambulance-unit-supervisor with the Italian forces, puts the raging First World War away from Gorizia, describing instead that the region around the Italian town:

was rich with crops; there were many orchards of fruit trees and beyond the plain the mountains were brown and bare. There was fighting in the mountains and at night we could see the flashes from the artillery. (Hemingway 7).

Remarque's description, on the other hand, is dripping in irony from the very beginning as the twenty-year-old soldier-narrator, Paul Bäumer (almost identifiable with the members of the *Lost Generation* because of his perceptible feeling of rootlessness) reviews the situation when the fighting German soldiers have just had a hearty meal "of beef and haricot beans" (Remarque 1), but soon remarks,

The Prussian is not so generous. We have only a miscalculation to thank for it. Fourteen days ago we had to go up and relieve the front line. It was fairly quiet on our sector, so the quartermaster who remained in the rear had requisitioned the usual quantity of rations and provided for the full company of one hundred and fifty men. But on the last day an astonishing number of English heavies opened up on us with high-explosive, drumming ceaselessly on our position, so that we suffered severely and came back only eighty strong" (*ibid.* 2).

Corngold, rereading Bäumer's language, comments that though his conversation with other soldiers "is a bit rough or obscene", he reserves 'high literacy' for his moments of memory or reflection that float, detached, from the life he actually lives [...]" (*The Cambridge* 211).

It must also be mentioned at this point that Remarque's philosophy, as evinced in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, is markedly different from Hemingway's, which is developed in *A Farewell to Arms*. Remarque, who would further demonstrate the psychological effects of the 1914-18 war in his *Three Comrades* (1936), was a self-pronounced pacifist and socialist. Focusing on his and Hemingway's war writings, Bolton writes,

[...] Hemingway's vision of war seems less absolute. He certainly acknowledges the horrors of modern warfare [...]. Yet in so many of his depictions of soldiers, Hemingway treats war and love as closely allied fields. (76)

Helmut Liedloff, in addition, writes that quite confident about the appropriateness of his philosophy that human beings must fight whenever required to though belligerence itself is destructive, Hemingway has used symbols and various other literary techniques in his *A Farewell to Arms*, while Remarque's novel is often considered as 'not [a] serious literature' (*Bloom's Guides* 83-4). Whatever and however interpreted, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, through which Remarque wages 'einer ruhigen literarischen Kreuzzug gegen den Krieg' (that is, a quiet literary crusade against war), has come to achieve relevance and readership once again in the background of the current bellicose atmosphere all around the world, aggravated by the Egyptian mutiny, the Libyan confrontation, and the Syrian unrest. Remarque's pronounced anti-war stance in *All Quiet on the Western Front* might have been accentuated by the fact that the Germans comprehended their own precarious position within one year of the initiation of the Great War. By 1917, the *Central Powers*, comprising of the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria, were pitted against the *Allied or Entente Powers*, which consisted of at least thirteen powerful countries, including the British Empire, France, the United States of America, and Italy. The 1914-18 war killed around two million German soldiers and maimed another four million armymen. The Prussians were not only outnumbered, but also their armament supplies were being severely depleted on a daily basis. Their generals – especially Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934), Erich von Falkenhayn (1861-1922), and Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937) – were efficient commanders but the sheer strength of the combined Allied forces scarcely allowed them to direct successful offensives. In background of such inclemencies, German military recruits like Remarque and his spokesperson, Bäumer, could straightforwardly comprehend their fate to be destroyed in the war, and hence their disillusionment and stoicism. Hopelessly confined to the Western Front trenches, they use the metaphor of quietude to indicate their predicaments. 'All quiet' does not indicate the cessation of military activities on the Western Front – rather it indicates that the usual mass slaughters of common soldiers were being perpetrated. In the

ultimate chapter, Bäumer ironically 'enjoys' quietude for fourteen days after "swallow[ing] a bit of [poison] gas" (Remarque:293) and convalescing, but the silence is brought about through the deaths of his comrades like Detering, Tjaden, Albert Kropp, Fredrich Müller, and Stanislaus Katczinsky. This quietude almost continues until Bäumer is annihilated:

He fell in October 1918, on a day that was so quiet and still on the whole front, that the army report confined itself to the single sentence: All quiet on the Western Front. He had fallen forward and lay on the earth as though sleeping. Turning him over one saw that he could not have suffered long; his face had an expression of calm, as though almost glad the end had come. (296)

The deceitful silence, which leads to the death of Bäumer, had, in reality, led the English and German soldiers on the Western Front to believe in the cessation of hostilities during the famous *Christmas Truce* of December 1914. However, it would soon be rudely broken by the German Zeppelin attacks on England on 18 January 1915, torpedoing of Allied ships from February 1915 onwards, and initiation of poison gas assaults at Ypres on 22 April 1915. Similarly, when Bäumer, Kropp and Müller defecate by sitting idly on special 'boxes' kept in an open field of poppies and playing skat, they wilfully ignore the conformation raging in the Western Frontline:

These are wonderfully carefree hours. Over us is the blue sky. On the horizon float the bright yellow, sunlit observation-balloons, and the many little white clouds of the anti-aircraft shells. Often they rise in a sheaf as they follow after an airman. We hear the muffled rumble of the front only as very distant thunder, bumblebees droning by quite drown it. Around us stretches the flowery meadow. (*ibid.* 9)

Remarque posits this voluntary act of relaxed defecation against the unconscious excretion by the 'fair-headed recruit in utter terror' of the fourth chapter. As the Germans face a fatal Allied barrage, the inexperienced combatant defecates in his trousers: an act, which is sympathetically reviewed by Bäumer (61-2). Reviewing the occurrence of similar instances in different war writings, Santanu Das comments, "In everyday trench life, the boundaries of the body can no longer be policed, as bodily fluids are perpetually on the brink of spillage. [...] Winterbourne defecates in his trousers in [Richard Aldington's] *Death of a Hero* as does the young boy in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*" (52). In Remarque's 1929 publication, the reveries of the relaxed German soldiers in poppy field are interrupted by their remembrances of their immediate German military superiors—Kantorek and Himmelstoss – and of the death of Joseph Behm who gets "hit in the eye during an attack" (Remarque 10-1, 12). Moreover, Bäumer, Kropp and Müller are further appalled at the sight of Franz Kemmerich, who is dying in an army hospital with an amputated leg (*ibid.* 13-7). In the unfriendly and unsympathetic world of combatants, Bäumer and his comrades, who remember how Kemmerich's mother piteously wept before his departure by train for the front, have to 'purchase' morphine for their

wounded acquaintance by 'bribing' a hospital orderly with a few army cigarettes (*ibid.* 15, 17). The day, which has had started with the German soldiers conversing leisurely among themselves, ends with Bäumer lamenting his lost youth and recalling the pre-war period when he used to compose poems and attempted completing a play, *Saul* – perceptively with religious connotations (*ibid.* 18-9). Reflecting on the easy amalgamation of diversified scenes of serenity and brutality, Norris writes,

invented in *All Quiet on the Western Front* a necrological poetics capable of illuminating not only the phenomenology of the 'death world' but also its profound ontological effect on the subject steeped in killing and dying. A focus on Remarque's generic and rhetorical strategies in animating the fate of the body in battle allows me to penetrate innovations for which the term 'irony' may finally be too coarse and imprecise. (80)

The novelist begins pointing out the debilitations of the martial vocation when he makes Bäumer reflect on the time he and his schoolmates enlisted for military service, erroneously concluding that "a bright button is weightier than four volumes of Schopenhauer" (Remarque 21). The young narrator of the novel thereafter refers to the hardships of German military training by focussing especially on the sadistic trainings and tortures meted out to him and his friends Kropp, Müller, and Tjaden, by Himmelstoss (23-6). Ingenious and intelligent ideas, Remarque implies, are neither encouraged nor entertained in military service: "Albert Kropp [...] [is] the clearest thinker among us and therefore only a lance corporal" (3). Rather, hapless patients of nocturnal enuresis like Tjaden are alternatively put on the barrack bunks alternatively below and above others suffering from similar ailment: Himmelstoss pairs Tjaden with Kindervater (46). What Remarque implies is that such behaviours and attitudes merely result in animosity between the draftees and their superiors, and Bäumer, Haie Westhus and Tjaden unobtrusively ambush and physically abuse Himmelstoss when he is returning to his barrack alone (47-50). Later, when Bäumer discovers him shrinking from a charge and pretending to be wounded lying back in a lately-abandoned trench, he grabs his former commander by neck and tries to shove him out (131-2). The horrors experienced by the warring soldiers are exhaustively described in the tenth chapter, where Remarque portrays the interiors of a Catholic hospital where the mutilated Germans are transferred and are ruthlessly treated (242-64).

What distinguishes *All Quiet on the Western Front* from the other popular First World War novels like Arnold Zweig's *The Case of Sergeant Grischa* (1927), Charles Harrison's *Generals die in Bed* (1930), Efstratios Stamatopoulos's *Life in the Tomb* (1930), William March's *Company K* (1933), and Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny got his Gun* (1939) – and even Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, which is much too detached – is its uncommon portrayal of the horrors of war and miseries of trench life. Modern trench warfare, as John Ellis opines, began and matured with the Great War – in October 1914 (8). Though they initially provided support to the infantry, the inapplicability of trenches, from which

thousands of soldiers rushed out only to be mowed down by weltering machinegun fire, became obvious during the Battles of Verdun (21 February-18 December 1916), Somme (1 July-18 November 1916), and Passchendaele (31 July-6 November 1917). As Griffith implies, such mass slaughters served to indicate the futility of trench warfare: it rather became symbolic of the futility of the global belligerence itself (5). Remarque's depiction of this particular military technique is only too realistic though apocalyptic. His description of the entrenched Western Front almost parallels John Milton's of the sparsely-lighted hell in the first book of *Paradise Lost*:

An uncertain red glow spreads along the skyline from one end to the other. It is in perpetual movement, punctuated with bursts of flame from the nozzles of the batteries. Ball of light rise up high above it, silver and red spheres which explode and rain down in showers of red, white, and green stars. French rockets go up, which unfold a silk parachute to the air and drift slowly down. They light up everything as bright as day, their lights shine on us and we see our shadows sharply outlined on the ground. (Remarque 58)

Following a period of intense Allied artillery shelling, the Germans are obliged to destroy their wounded horses (*ibid.* 84). The shelled horses symbolise the gradual change of twentieth century warfare from dependence on beasts of burden to mechanical devices. The animals, traditionally associated with the chivalric world of knights, cry in anguish and pain as if to signify the termination of a period when militarism abided by numerous behavioural codes. The First World War, in contrast, was a continuous and arbitrarily-conducted belligerence: this causes the homebound Germans come under a second spell of shelling around three in the morning, near a graveyard. In a satiric reversal of roles, the perplexed and terrorised combatants are protected by confined corpses as poison gas is released on them (66-70). The condition of Bäumer being almost asphyxiated by gas is similar to that of the affected English soldiers in Wilfred Owen's 1917 poem, "Dulce Et Decorum Est", or the column of blinded combatants in John Sargent's 1918 painting, "Gassed". Similarly, the instance of heavy rain interfering with the German soldiers' returning to barracks (73) appears to evoke the misery of the drenched Italian soldiers and Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*. In the sixth chapter, the soldier-litterateur graphically describes a face-to-face confrontation between the Prussians and the French, which continues for approximately twenty hours and accentuates the loathsomeness of belligerence. Bäumer describes:

We have become wild beasts. We do not fight; we defend ourselves against annihilation. It is not against men that we fling our bombs, what do we know of men in this moment when Death is hunting us down – now, for the first time in three days we can see his face, now for the first time in three days we can oppose him; we feel a mad anger. [...] A young Frenchman lags behind, he is overtaken, he puts up his hands, in one he still holds his revolver – does he mean to shoot or to give himself! – a blow from a spade cleaves through his face. A second

sees it and tries to run farther; a bayonet jabs into his back. [...] With the butt of his rifle Kat smashes to pulp the face of one of the unwounded machine gunners. We bayonet the others before they have time to get out their bombs. Then we thirstily we drink the water they have for cooling the gun" (113, 116-7).

Remarque also realistically portrays the miseries of trench life. Rats and lice made trenches places of horror to common soldiers (Sauvain 17), and Remarque, in Chapters Five and Six, grimly describes how his comrades kill 'different breeds of lice' while waiting in dugouts, and tackle the menace of trench rats by killing them with spades (75, 101-3). Interestingly, most of the rat-killers are annihilated by belligerence by the time the novel concludes in the twelfth chapter.

What also distinguishes Remarque's portrayal of the Great War from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is its libidinal under-representation of the combatants, while Henry and his physician friend, Lieutenant Rinaldi, are shown engaged in heterosexual relationships. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, women are either absent, or fleetingly present, mostly in photographs, and as nuns or guardians. The most eloquent absence is that of the girl "in a light summer dress, with a red patent-leather belt around her hips" whose poster Bäumer and his friends watch outside an army theatre in the seventh chapter. While the poster symbolises not only the frustrations and unfulfilment of the First World War German soldiers but also segregates them from the aristocrats and bourgeoisie: "We looked askance at one another. There's not much to boast of here – two ragged, stained, and dirty uniforms. It is hopeless to compete" (*ibid.* 142). In their indignation, they tear off the picture of the sailor beside the girl while Leer and Tjaden fantasise about her. The sexually-famished soldiers soon swim across a canal – which is symbolically transformed into River Styx – to reach three French women, who pragmatically offer themselves in exchange of bread loafs, cigarettes, and liver-sausages. In Bäumer's mind, the brunette French woman is transformed into the 'poster girl' as he unites with her (150). If in the fifth chapter Westhus attempts to forget the perils of belligerence by nostalgically imagining peacetime when he would unite with "some good buxom dame, some real kitchen wench with plenty to get hold of" (78), the three women also allow the soldiers to forget the dangers of annihilation, though momentarily. The novelist depicts libidinal camaraderie among such soldiers when, convalescing at a Catholic hospital, they tend the child of Marja Lewandowski as she temporarily unites with her wounded Polish soldier-husband, Johann Lewandowski (*ibid.* 266-7). *All Quiet in the Western Front*, unlike *A Farewell to Arms*, depicts that soldiers, even after withstanding numerous dangers and barbarism in trenches, do not become insensitive automatons. Having had served in the First World War, Tjaden can appreciate the physical features of Westhus's fiancée without ever seeing her (126-7), and Bäumer can exclaim:

Earth with thy folds, and hollows, and holes, into which a man may fling himself and crouch down. In the spasm of terror, under the hailing of annihilation, in the bellowing depth of explosions, O Earth,

thou grantest us the greatest resisting surge of new-won life" (55).

Santanu Das interprets this as:

[...] Remarque's account is more cynical for his soldier's sense of renewed life is fleeting and illusory [...]. The earth, for Remarque, both enwombs and entombs. If in the previous accounts of the 'sucking' mud, the soldier is figured implicitly as the nipple, here the earth in turn is imagined as the maternal breast ('bite into thee with our lips') (46).

Significantly, the soldiers' emotions and sensitivity often prove to be counterproductive. In the seventh chapter, Bäumer cannot enjoy his leave because of his emotional attachment to his ailing mother and even a minor confrontation with a haughty military major "ruins the evening for [...] [him]". He rather feels: "What is leave? – A pause that only makes everything after it so much worse" (Remarque 163, 179). This completes the picture of soldiers' sufferings and explicates Remarque's anti-war message. Stanley Corngold, while comparing *All Quiet on the Western Front* to other German fictional or prosaic commemorations of the Great War, including Georg Kaiser's *The Burghers of Calais* (1914), Thomas Mann's *Reflections of a Non-political Man* (1918), Jünger's *The Storm of Steel* (1920), Arnold Zweig's *The Case of Sergeant Grischa* (1927), and Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* (1930–42), writes in details about how Remarque's pacifist stance came to be criticised by both the German nationalists and the leftists:

Its pacifist pathos moved a core of non-politicised readers but also became a political football for the extremes of the proto-Nazi and Communist press. For the Nazis, the book, which lacks propagandistic idealism, dishonoured the German war dead and disgracefully erased in advance the possibility of future German military vengeance. For the Communists, the book was inert, unmobilisable, since its perspective was limited to that of the unenlightened petit bourgeois incapable of thinking through the social contradictions that had led to the war and would continue to lead to war. (*The Cambridge* 201)

Numerous criticisms notwithstanding, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which identifiably lacks in symbolism except Kemmerich's military boots that, passing from him to Müller and thereafter to Bäumer, satirically indicates the durability of objects over lives during belligerence, sold 2.5 million copies in 25 languages within one and half years of its first printing. Remarque followed it in 1931 with *Der Weg zurück* ('The Road Back'), detailing the resettlement of the front-returned soldiers, but the sequel failed to elicit favourable response. Within a year of its first publication, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was made into an American film with the same title by Lewis Milestone (1895–1980), and won the 1930 *Academy Awards for Best Picture* and *Best Director*. Even in Wheen's English translation, readers can scarcely miss Remarque's mastery of language: he deftly manipulates his German (and English) to suit rapid shifts of tone, characterisation, and theme, depending on his varying needs for graphic, blunt description, lyricism, dialogue, or lamentation. Even as he principally uses the first person narrative mode, the novelist is exhaustive in his coverage of the

numerous miseries and futilities of belligerence. His pronounced pacifist stance has had resulted in the fact that even after eight two years of its first publication, *All Quiet on the Western Front* continues to be read all around the world as one of the more powerful anti-bellucose testimonies to have been ever written.

Notes:

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