

Aladár Komlós, “Remarque’s novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*,” *Nyugat* no. 10 (1929).

Remarque’s contemporaries, those in whom the memory of the battlefield was so ingrained during the tender years of their youth, just like their loves: they have long been yearning after a book that could conjure up those years now turned to dust. People devote time and tribute to the worst periods of life, too. We have also now come to love our memories of the war. This is consistent with principled hatred of militarism. We hate war, but no longer the war gone by, which has become not hostile fate, but a part of our past. For years we have been craving a true, beautiful war book. What do we expect from it? What we expect from every artistic work. In our imagination we want to repeat what we once experienced, but this time awake, with eyes open, we want to take in the experiences in whose darkness we could once only blindly burrow forward headfirst.

But war very grudgingly yields form and substance to the writer. In form: episodes loosely placed side by side in random order. In substance: instead of capturing imagination of a person’s character and affairs best of all—which cannot be important in a work if it wants to be a war novel—it is capturing the extraordinary experiences of the modern battlefield. Truly extraordinary: think about it, the most significant role in a war novel cannot be given to love, from which most narrative art gets its tension; the battlefield atmosphere is intense, but very elemental, murky, because it is made up of sensations that have not yet been analyzed and scarcely even can be, something primitive to our being, in its animal layer, where body and mind are still very closely connected. A person who has been on the battlefield immediately senses if a description of the atmosphere is not right. The most recognizable and most common blunder committed by the uninformed is to depict the soldier always in the middle of battles, in a paroxysm of fear and murderous fever (see Dezső Szabó, *A village swept away*; Gábor Oláh, *Black angel*; the young highland writer Viktor Egry’s *Sunrise*, a novel in which incessant fighting goes on for no less than 150 kilometers). Remarque, whose *All Quiet on the Western Front* has now been published in Hungarian in Marcell Benedek’s pleasantly smooth translation, has a feel for the proper atmosphere: “Our faces are neither paler nor more flushed than usual,” he writes, “they are not more tense nor more flabby—and yet they are changed. We feel that in our blood a contact has shot home [been switched on]. This is no figure of speech; it is fact. It is the front, the consciousness of the front, that makes this contact. The moment that the first shells whistle over and the air is rent with the explosions, there is suddenly in our veins, in our hands, in our eyes, a tense waiting, a watching, a profound growth, a strange sharpening of the senses. The body with one bound is in full readiness.”* No news of paroxysm in this. Never the baser life! The battlefield novel takes place in spheres octaves lower than any other average narrative work; the battlefield novel is more physiological than psychological in nature, it primarily describes stomach and nerve processes, and the soldier’s physical relationship to the objects among which he lives, to the sounds banging above and around him, to the weather, to meals, to his uniform, which he might not take off for weeks at a time, to his comrades and to the enemy his every hour depends upon but cannot be seen, his relationship to the trenches whose every corner and pebble become so intimately familiar over time that sometimes you are amazed at it. It describes how fondly he stops at each moment between the mud walls all splattered with blood and brains (as if at home strolling down some street of a small town on a Sunday morning), his

* Quotations taken from the English translation of Remarque, p. 36.

relationship to the land, which Remarque sees exquisitely: “To no man does the earth mean so much as to the soldier. When he presses himself down upon her, long and powerfully, when he buries his face and his limbs deep in her from the fear of death by shell-fire, then she is his only friend, his brother, his mother; he stifles his terror and his cries in her silence and her security; she shelters him and gives him a new lease of ten seconds of life, receives him again and often for ever.”

For those writers who do not want to serve in the war the battlefield novel has a major problem: artistic portrayal by its very nature unintentionally conjures the beautiful out of the ugliest things; will it not make the battlefield attractive as well? An example: Leonid Andreev’s “Red laughter” [1904] piles up the horrors of war one upon the other, but precisely for this reason he inadvertently makes his subject interesting and stimulating to the imagination. Oscar Wilde found the only correct solution to this problem: “You must show that war,” he wrote somewhere, “is boring and it will immediately lose its charm.” [Wilde actually wrote, “As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination. When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular.”] I do not measure the goodness of a war novel from the viewpoint of pacifist propaganda, but I am glad Remarque managed the paradoxical miracle: writing an artistic work without ordaining the things depicted as themselves artistic. Indeed, there is no more effective refutation of the silly and frivolous conception that endorses war for “magnificent and varied” experiences than to show the brutal baseness of battlefield life. Every manifestation of the human gives sustenance here; it is abject animal misery that the hero turns out to be afraid and would like calm, either grubs or would like to be grubbing.[§] In peacetime there is no grocer so low that his life couldn’t afford him more ideals and higher exultation [than the soldier].

But how difficult it is to see and demonstrate bodily sensations, to observe and remember them! How much more fluently we can talk about Einstein’s theory than about semi-vegetative processes whose differences our unpracticed eyes can scarcely notice when training their attention on them. Remarque can be nuanced, rich, and interesting in depicting these sensations. Yet he does not stay in the domain of bodily life in general, but narrowing the scope of battlefield features even further, he primarily deals with feelings of fear. The hours of fear that at first glance seem to be prolonged indivisibly into agony, these he can fill with a multitude of conscious thoughts. The pages in which he describes the battles are powerfully portrayed, the liveliest parts of the book. And of course the most gripping as well, for what is more exciting than the vision of a man caught up in mortal danger? But in depicting fear as well Remarque stays within the measured proportions of a healthy person. And just one deviation in the direction of the great ghostly, romantic terror, and the battlefield would have excited the imagination and become aestheticized.

No sooner does a work favor the aspirations some people stand for than they immediately feel the work is theirs, and because it is theirs they also regard it as a great work. Such people are crass and selfish. I do not know whether we would fall into their error if I were to welcome Remarque’s book more enthusiastically than necessary and without reservation. This book unearths only a very small portion of the possibilities hidden in the material of the war. Although

[§] Echoing Bertolt Brecht’s famous saying from *Three-Penny Opera* (1928), “Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral” (Grub first, then morals).

he casts a mere fleeting glance each at fraternal feeling (this gets the most), at the hospital, at the moods of the soldier on leave, at the figures of the hinterland, these glances are truly very fleeting. Besides this, what is left out of the writer's view is the soldier's relationship to the enemy and to his superiors, and command [structures] and the secrets of vulnerability do not distract. He does not acknowledge the pleasures of victorious advance, the alarm of retreat and collapse, or the great marches, he does not dare paint the monotonous endlessness of the long quiet stalemate, which, it is true, cannot be held together in a round of interesting episodes, and could only be depicted with a technique similar to raindrops falling incessantly, but without which the picture of modern war is incomplete and even false. Surprisingly few people are seen, and although he paints competent vivid portraits of each of them, none of them gets a greater sophistication or depth in their depiction (as if only the power of bodily sensations under observation would balance out the meanness [mediocrity] in higher psychology). It is a talented, accurate, true book, and those who are uncomfortably affected by its faithful description of their favorite war will bare their teeth at it in impotent rage. It is an interesting, good, and useful book, and perhaps better than all of its predecessors it is on the way to grasping the reality of the battlefield: but it is still not the Novel of the War.

Translation: KH