

Not Quiet for Remarque on Any Western Front

The Waco News-Tribune (Waco, TX, USA)

18.10.1929, Seite 4

Original:

Signatur: R-A 2.1.009/007

Not Quiet for Remarque on Any Western Front

(From »Letters and Art,« Literary Digest)

He ran away from his success, this young man Remarque, whose book »All Quiet on the Western Front,« has sold 1,571,000 copies. That is the last available calculation. Probably the number has gone soaring up, for every country in Europe as well as the United States is reading it. Germany has bought 800,000 copies; the United States up to June 1, 240,000; France, 219,000; and England, 195,000. But storms began to rise in his native land, and Remarque fled to Davos, Switzerland. »It all depressed me,« he is reported in the Manchester Guardian to have said, »and I had to escape from Berlin and come here.« There he spent his time answering letters. »I feel it is my duty to those comrades who suffered like myself. I will answer all those letters before I do anything else. To write another book after such an astounding success will be a difficult task. Perhaps I shall never write anything more.« His aim in writing the book was not to give a picture of the war so much as its effect on the young men described in it. This is enlarged in an interview by Axel Eggebrecht in *Die Literarische Welt* (Berlin), and translated for the Boston Transcript.

»Our generation has grown up in a different way from all others before and afterward. Their one great and most important experience was the war. No matter whether they approved or rejected it; whether they understood it from a nationalistic, pacifistic, adventurous, religious, or stoic point of view. They saw blood, horror, annihilation, struggle, and death. That was the general human experience of all. And I have confined myself intentionally to this one experience. The war is presupposed as a fact sufficiently well known. The few reflections which are to be found in the book occupy themselves with this purely human experience of the war. I avoided taking sides from every political, social, religious or other point of view. I consider myself just as little competent to do this as to write a history of the war. I have spoken only of the terror, of the horror, of the desperate, often brutal impulses of self-preservation, of the tenacious hold on life, face to face with death and annihilation.

»The situations described in my book are true, and have been really experienced; they are neither exaggerated nor overdrawn.

»The generation of young people which, no matter from what motive, has been living through this period must necessarily have developed differently from all former generations.«

»You call them in your preface »destroyed,« said the interviewer. »This designation has been often disputed.« Then:

»Of course the experience of the war has been for hundreds of thousands like water running off a duck's back. Others have come out of it at least without a break; some have become so accustomed to it that afterward they could not get along without the war. But important are all the others, the innumerable men whose lives have been, so to speak, torn asunder; those who are liable to be impressed deeply by the events, and who have become the unwilling victims of such events. These are the ones who are only beginning now to find themselves again. A proof of the fact that the war as an event touching the life of the individual has not been overcome as

yet, must surely be found in the fact that for almost 10 years nobody cared to speak about or hear others discuss the events of the war. It was not possible nor desired to write about the war. Only as a momentum of political discussion it was condemned, defended, or glorified. The young men of our generation, on the other hand, were far from having digested the personal experiences of the war. The past events worked in them in a dull manner. It remained as an indistinct nightmare, a state of unrest, of skepticism, of harshness, or of a vacillating lack of a final goal.«

These ideas, provoked by remembrance, asked the interviewer, »did they oppress you in such manner that you wanted to rid yourself of them by recording them, or, if not, in what manner did this recording originate?« We get this answer:

»Not the impressions, not the visions of what I have gone through oppress me, but the general conditions of emptiness, of skepticism, of restlessness. Formerly I had never thought of writing about the war. At that time – that is, in the spring of last year – I was busy with work of quite a different kind. I was employed as a ›picture editor‹ of a periodical. The evenings I devoted to a variety of things. Thus, for instance, I made a number of attempts to write a play, but I never was very successful in that. I suffered from rather violent attacks of despair. When attempting to overcome these attacks, it happened that gradually, with full consciousness and systematically, I began to look for the cause of my depressions; in consequence of this intentional analysis my mind reverted to my experiences during the war. I was able to observe quite similar phenomena in my acquaintances and friends. We all were – and are often to the present day – the victims of restlessness; we lack a final object; at times we are supersensitive, at times indifferent, but over and above all we are bereft of any joy. The shadows of the war oppress us, and particularly so when we did not think of it at all. On the very day on which these ideas swept over me I began to write, without lengthy reflection. This was continued for six weeks – every evening when I returned from the office – and by that time the book had been completed ...

»In the beginning, I had no confidence whatsoever in my work as a literary product, because it was the first time that I had written in such a style. Formerly my method had been quite a different one; formerly, I had, so to speak, lost myself in experiments and tortured my mind to find a definite style, but everything remained dull and colorless, and I failed to be satisfied. Most likely this must have been due to the fact that I had been entirely on the wrong track. For almost six months the manuscript remained in my desk, without my making any attempt to offer it anywhere. I finally did so, solely upon the urgent recommendation of other. After that everything was realized rapidly; the success was quite surprising to me.«

The book, despite its success in Germany, has had a run something of a gantlet, as the continuing record furnishing by Herr Remarque shows:

»They asserted that my name was Kramer, and this was condemned as a crime, just as if no pseudonyms had ever occurred in German literature. My name has never been Kramer. Others, who for their purposes found the name Remarque more convenient, declared without further ado I was a French Jew. Others again asserted positively that I had first conceived my book as a nationalistic tendency novel, and that I had offered the manuscript to a publisher belonging to the conservative party and that, after it had been declined by him I had revised it on a pacifistic basis, for the Ullstein Publishing house. There was a whole sting of things. Sometimes the errors involved were due to honest misconceptions, but in the majority of cases the assertions made were nothing but direct inventions for purposes only too easily understood. Thus they stated my age was only 25 years now, and that I had never served; they also stated that I had served in the war as a Frenchman, and not in the west.

»Above all, however, they designated me as a man whose service had been exclusively confined to Germany, who had never served at the front, and therefore, I naturally could not have known anything of the experiences of active soldiers serving at the age of 20 years, and,

furthermore, that my present age was 55 years. These people declared that I had edited the diary of a comrade killed in the war and that, incidentally speaking, I had written some novel, the subject of which had been life in a brothel. None of these assertions had any basis. I went into the war when I was 18; I was only a common soldier at the western front, where I was wounded repeatedly, once in such a manner that I am still suffering from the consequences.«