

All is Not Quiet: Reading Remarque in a Warzone

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Famed literary critic Harold Bloom offered what is probably the strongest denunciation to date of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). In his preface to a volume of essays on the book, Bloom cites Oscar Wilde's critical maxim that "everything matters in art, except the subject, and all bad literature is sincere." Bloom then asserts that "what matters most in *All Quiet on the Western Front* indeed is the subject, World War I, and the book is very sincere. It is therefore not a work of art, but a period piece and a historical document." He even adds that while "it remains an effective enough anti-war tract," it "hardly competes with Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* or even with Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*."¹

Ironically, these last two are books that I happened to read while serving. At the time, which was 2004, the height of the Second Intifada, or popular Palestinian uprising, I was deployed with the Israeli Infantry in the Occupied Territories, where we were hardly engaging in the kind of skirmishes or derring-do raids that Hemingway and Mailer describe. In fact, most of our work involved guarding and repressing a deservedly hostile civilian population. The truth of the matter, however, is that neither Hemingway nor Mailer did much more than that in their own military engagements. Certainly, Hemingway risked his life on the Italian Front while dodging shells in an ambulance—for which he was critically injured. Yet he spent only two months on the line and served primarily in a medical capacity—feats, which while incredibly admirable, hardly give credence to the deeds expressed in *Farewell to Arms* (1929). While his exact roles in the

¹ Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Interpretations: Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front*. Broomall: Chelsea, 2001. Print.

Spanish Civil War and World War II are still debated, some scholars, such as Kenneth Lynn, have claimed he actually inflated his role during the Normandy Invasion.² This is not to denigrate Hemingway, but merely to suggest that his own acts of bravado largely pale in comparison to those described in his literature. Mailer, for his part, served primarily as a cook in the Philippines, and his own flirtations with violence are questionable at best.³ Again, this is in no way to get into a chest-bumping match with modern war's greatest chroniclers, but it is to suggest that the violence they decry—and perhaps simultaneously lionize—has little to do with their actual lives.

Erich Maria Remarque was wounded by shrapnel in five places, including his left leg, his arm, and his neck. On two separate occasions, he carried men to safety through gunfire. Like Hemingway, his own service on the line was fairly limited, which is probably why he lived, and he spent the bulk of the war recuperating. Unlike Hemingway, however, and importantly for understanding his ethos, Remarque had not chosen to serve. Like millions of other Germans, he was drafted and sent up as cannon fodder, or what Baumer, Remarque's largely autobiographical protagonist in the novel,⁴ calls “sheep” who “flock together” and get “mown down.”⁵ Bloom in particular criticizes Baumer for “[lacking] significant personality or mind,” lamenting that he “doubtless was meant to be a kind of everyman, but he is as drab as he is desperate, and his yearnings are too commonplace to be interesting.”⁶ Putting aside for a second what passes for

² Lynn, Kenneth. *Hemingway*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1987. Print.

³ Excluding Mailer's stabbing of his wife at a party.

⁴ To be fair, many critics have debated just how autobiographical *All Quiet* really is and to what extent the character of Baumer actually mirrors Remarque.

William K. Pfeiler, for instance, points out that most of the book consists of reflections, rather than detailed descriptions of the front, which, in his view, “leaves little doubt that many of his situations are fictitious.” Pfeiler, William K. “Remarque and Other Men of Feeling.” In Bloom, 4.

⁵ Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. 1929. Trans. Arthur Wesley Wheen. New York: Ballantine, 1996. Print.

⁶ Bloom 1.

motivation, let alone dialogue, in *Farewell to Arms*, what Bloom fails to recognize is that millions of readers, especially veterans coming out of the First and Second World Wars, found Baumer's motivations interesting precisely because they could relate to them.

I was one of these veterans. I first picked up Remarque's "novel"—and Bloom is correct in that it is more a testament than an aesthetic endeavor—in 2011, about six years after I'd served, though I found the descriptions shocking, if only because I felt I had been to this front once before. Indeed, anyone who has endured basic training will likely recognize "the smell of tar, of summer, and of sweaty feet," as Baumer calls it.⁷ Even more compelling are the descriptions of the soldier's psyche. In one telling moment near the end, for example, Baumer returns from battle, having earned a brief respite. He partakes in a company drill, where he notices the "beautiful" woods with "their line of birch trees," and adds: "I often become so lost in the play of soft light and transparent shadow, that I almost fail to hear the commands. It is when one is alone that one begins to observe Nature and to love her."⁸ Certainly anyone who's found communion with nature can relate to the experience, though it is for the soldier, who is forced to stand guard and generally live in such conditions, that nature's beauty takes on its own special resonance.

I'll never forget pacing on a sunbaked slab of cement seven miles south of Lebanon, where I was engaged in my first week of training. I was sweating profusely, removing sharp crumbs of gravel from my knuckles, in which they had lodged during pushups, when the First Sergeant said we could eat. Stumbling towards the mess hall, an equally appealing structure of poured cement walls and grey stucco, I noticed the wood planters outside, each housing lilies or some orange blossom, which glistened in the sun. As the others filed in for their porridge—yes, we actually ate porridge for breakfast—I marveled at how

⁷ Remarque 40.

⁸ Remarque 188.

beautiful these lilies really were, not just as a contrast to the mildewing walls, or the grime that was smeared on my face, but as something eternally gorgeous. I was afraid that the First Sergeant or others would see me, so I filed in for my grub.

Months later, when I was camped out on an ambush in the central West Bank, perched on a cold heap of mud layered with rocks, I remember feeling the thin blades of grass in my hands, what few emerged from this hillock, and I was actually reminded not of Remarque, whom I hadn't yet read, but of a scene in Terrence Malick's epic film, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), where a shell-shocked American private, surrounded by carnage and a cavalcade of bombs, notices a folding leaf. In fact, one of my colleagues in literature, Mark Irwin, who attended West Point and is now a noted poet, remarked to me recently how stirring he found this scene, and he commented that while he was completing his training, he too found an astonishing beauty in nature, a "return to green," as he put it. Terrace Malick understood, and arguably James Jones⁹ did as well.¹⁰ Certainly, Tim O'Brien touches on it when he says, in "How to Tell a True War Story," that, "in truth war is also beauty," remarking:

At the hour of dusk you sit at your foxhole and look out on a wide river turning pinkish red, and at the mountains beyond, and although in the morning you must cross the river and go into the mountains and do terrible things and maybe die, even so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you feel wonder and awe at the setting of the

⁹ Jones' *The Thin Red Line* (1962), on which the film is based, does not depict this exact scene, nor does it offer the same general appreciation for nature that John Toll's wondrous cinematography allows, but the book does contain strong elements of natural aestheticism, albeit coupled with a foreboding gloom. Jones describes, for example, the "moonlight shining tranquilly down into the beautiful if deadly coconut groves," where much killing has occurred.

¹⁰ Jones, James. *The Thin Red Line*. New York: Dial, 1998. Print.

sun, and you are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not.¹¹

Whether Remarque captures the splendor of nature is questionable, certainly not with the language and effusive beauty of Hemingway—though arguably more than Mailer, whose greatest contribution is: “in the deep jungle, it was always as dark as the sky before a summer thunderstorm, and no air ever stirred. Everything was damp and rife and hot . . . Heat licked at everything, and the foliage, responding, grew to prodigious sizes.”¹² Regardless of whose descriptions are better, however, what all these writers—Mailer, Hemingway, Jones, O'Brien, and even Remarque—share is a belief in war's capacity to expose an individual to nature's rawest edge. Baumer is indeed everyman, but everyman, as every man knows, develops a strange synchronicity with the jungle, with the large heaps of mud and the green growing grass. At least the infantry do there, and that helps to explain, at least in part, why Remarque's book, despite its varied reception, continues to resonate with readers, especially grunts like myself.

The point, though, is not to make a sweeping characterization about what a war book must or must not do to accurately describe war. There are a thousand variations on the theme, and unlike Bloom, I hesitate to say what a book should do to attain the eternal status of art. What Bloom does do, however, is ignore the extent to which an accurate and realistic telling can achieve such a pinnacle—without focus on character, wordplay, or deep inner turmoil of the sort he extols. After all, the deep psychology of war has been amply characterized, time and time again, by works like *The Red Badge of Courage*, *War and Peace*, *The Red and the Black*, even *Don Quixote*. What is missing from the canon, albeit present to some extent in these works, as well, is the combative everyman, the man who's drafted, the man who serves, the man who appreciates porridge in the morning

¹¹ O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Mariner, 2009. Print.

¹² Mailer, Norman. *The Naked and the Dead*. New York: Picador, 1996. Print.

and not the greater workings of art. These are the men who enlist. Rarely, if ever, are they writers. And in today's day and age, they rarely read.

Yet I would challenge every veteran to pick up *All Quiet*, read the thing through—not the *Spark Notes*—and find a single passage to which they cannot relate, or at least on some level conceive of. Of course, those who have trouble delving into “high literature” might find Baumer's own admission consoling. “I want to feel the same powerful, nameless urge that I used to feel when I turned to my books,” he exclaims. “Words, Words, Words—they do not reach me. Slowly I place the books back in the shelves.”¹³

If there has ever been an argument for literature, for the very importance of communication and actively retelling what we feel, this is it. Shrouded in a world of lies, Remarque reflects:

I see how peoples are set against one another, and in silence, unknowingly, foolishly, obediently, innocently slay one another. I see that the keenest brains of the world invent weapons and words to make it yet more refined and enduring. And all men of my age, here and over there, throughout the whole world see these things.¹⁴

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Ten years after the launching of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where hundreds of thousands have died—250,000 by the latest conservative estimates—it's clear very little has changed. And this is precisely why Remarque finds it so grievous that veterans cannot talk, much less give voice to their viewpoints. Describing the men at the front, who are all mutedly shell-shocked, he notes: “There is in each of us a feeling of constraint. We are all sensible of it; it needs no words to communicate it. It might easily have happened that we should not be sitting here on our boxes to-day.”¹⁵

¹³ Remarque 171.

¹⁴ Remarque 263.

¹⁵ Remarque 10.

For generations, critics like Bloom, Aldous Huxley,¹⁶ and Poul Henningsen¹⁷ have read Remarque's book as an “anti-war tract.” What these readings fail to account for, however, is the broader intent, which is not exactly political, much less condemnatory of war, but simply lamenting. Veterans, in Remarque's account, are shells of human beings, and the gravest offense war commits is not that it kills them, but that it silences them, plainly—hence his famous dedication, a line which, remarkably enough, few have taken at face value:

This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war.

Yet literature, he argues, is the antidote, the very antithesis to combat, the very voice men seek in a war. That literature does not have to be expressly pro-war or against. It simply has to be honest, communicative at most, caustic at worst, and undoubtedly sincere, a fact for which Harold Bloom chides it. Yet Bloom doesn't acknowledge that that sincerity—that willingness to speak—is remarkably absent in war, as well as times of peace more generally. And while Bloom dismisses the work for being a “document,” it's worth pointing out that such documents, including Remarque's, were ritually thrown to the fire.

To a large extent, they still are. High-octane thrillers like *Act of Valor* (2012), or their literary equivalent, Tom Clancy novels, are what give Americans—and English speakers generally—their conception of war. This stuff isn't just false. It's unimaginatively false, even when it's filmed with real people, as *Act of Valor*

¹⁶ Huxley, Aldous. *The Complete Essays, Vol. 1: 1920-1925*. Lanham: Ivan Dee, 2005. Print.

¹⁷ To be exact, Henningsen deems *The Road Back*, Remarque's next work, to be a “superior” tract. P.H. *Christian Century*. 8 July 1931. Cited in *The Fortunes of German Writers in America: Studies in Literary Reception*. Wolfgang Iffe, James N. Hardin, and Günther Holst, eds. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1992. Print.

purportedly was, or even when it resonates with millions of readers, much like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*. What veterans need are not video games or purported forms of entertainment—which are more opiates than anything—but a wake-up call and a willingness to relate what they've seen. Remarque does that, even if his book is “sincere.”

And yet, perhaps Bloom has a point insofar as something broader is needed to combat war's silencing. Bloom claims, for example, that Lew Ayres, who portrayed Baumer in the 1931 film version of *All Quiet*, “invested the character with more integrity and stubborn honor than Remarque had been able to suggest,”¹⁸ implying that, at the very least, a basic heroism could warrant some interest in the subject.

Interestingly, these very traits—integrity and stubborn honor—are the same ones that Lionel Trilling ascribed to George Orwell, one of Remarque's greatest admirers and another great chronicler of war. In his famous preface to *Homage to Catalonia* (1952),¹⁹ Orwell's memoir of the Spanish Civil War, Trilling notes—and not at all derisively—that Orwell was not a “genius.” Quite the contrary, Trilling says: “If we ask what it is that he stands for, what he is the figure of, the answer is: the virtue of not being a genius, of fronting the world with nothing more than one's simple, direct, undeceived intelligence, and a respect for the powers one does have, and the work one undertakes to do.”²⁰ Christopher Hitchens, who himself wrote a book about Orwell, along with countless articles, sums up Trilling's quip:

Orwell was physically brave in Spain but not heroically so. He did no more than countless other volunteer soldiers and suffered very much less

¹⁸ Bloom 2.

¹⁹ The first version came out in Britain in 1938, while Trilling wrote the preface to the American edition of 1952

²⁰ Trilling, Lionel. “Introduction.” *Homage to Catalonia*. By George Orwell. Orlando: Harcourt, 1952. Print.

than many of them. But when he was put to the test and stumbled across an important chunk of evidence, he had to confront the strong pressure either to lie or to keep silent.²¹

In this case, Hitchens is referring to Orwell's willingness to speak out against the atrocities committed by the Left, on whose side Orwell had volunteered to fight in Spain. Of course, for Hitchens, that injunction translates into the need to question the contemporary Left, particularly for what he saw as its silence in the face of "Islamofascism," as he called it. One does not have to support the War on Terror, however, much less side with Hitchens, to cede his point, which is that an everyman mentality, a sort of populist intellectualism, to the extent there can be such a thing, underlies Orwell. I would argue that the same applies to Remarque, whose *All Quiet* appeared a decade prior to *Homage*.²²

In fact, it's not even clear that Remarque would have been offended by the characterization that his work lacked artistic merit. As he lamented, shortly after his novel's widespread acclaim and record-breaking sales, "I knew only too well, this book could just as well have been written by anyone else."²³ Orwell couldn't have put it better himself.

The difference between Orwell and Remarque, however—and this is where Bloom's characterization is relevant—is that Remarque, at least in *All Quiet*, arguably retains a belief in that everyman and in the power of literature to triumph over war. Although the work ends with a literal quietness and a

²¹ Hitchens, Christopher. "The Unfolded Lie." *Los Angeles Times*. 15 July 2001. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

²² In fact, both books were banned, and both writers were publicly denounced in their home countries. In Orwell's case, he was tried *in absentia* by the "Tribunal for Espionage & High Treason," a Spanish court intent on rooting out Trotskyist elements. Orwell's British publisher, Victor Gollancz, a Party sympathizer, rejected the work, and only an Italian translation was published during his lifetime. In Remarque's case, *All Quiet* was of course famously burned by the Nazis, and his sister, among others, was guillotined.

²³ Quoted in Tims, Hilton. *Erich Maria Remarque: The Last Romantic*. New York: Carol and Graf, 2003. Print.

protagonist left “without hope,”²⁴ the overriding goal, as the dedication states, is “to tell of a generation” and thereby to convey a basic hope—if not in progress, then at the very least in the power of written words.

Orwell, for his part, remained ambivalent about that capacity. In “Inside the Whale,” his 1940 review of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), he specifically cites Remarque's book as the first of the epic Great War novels to depict the “ordinary man,” or what Orwell aptly terms the “victims” of that conflict.²⁵ For Orwell, Miller's book, like those of Remarque, Sassoon, Hemingway, and Graves, embodies “a voice from the crowd, from the underling, from the third-class carriage, from the ordinary, non-political, non-moral, passive man,” whom, Orwell thought, war had immobilized.²⁶ Of course, those who are unfamiliar with Orwell's classic piece will find it strangely aggravating that a writer who risked his life to defy fascism, Stalinism, and various forms of oppression—indeed took a bullet in the neck while defending Republican Spain—would succumb to the quietist view, a view which he incorrectly, I think, assigns to Remarque.

Orwell, however, had reason. He thought Remarque's book, like the other works of the Great War, effectively asks “What the hell is all this about? God knows. All we can do is to endure.”²⁷ And that is an attitude that Orwell found especially appealing in light of what he saw as the increasing politicization of literature, specifically a party-line dogma pervading art in the 30s, and against which stands Henry Miller, albeit in self-imposed seclusion in his preference for sexual over political revolution. Other writers, especially Salman Rushdie, would later take Orwell to task for this supposed abandonment of politics in art,

²⁴ Remarque 295.

²⁵ Orwell, George. *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.

²⁶ Orwell 19.

²⁷ Orwell 18.

accusing him of retreat.²⁸ Regardless of which side one falls on in this debate, it's clear that Orwell, at least in 1940 and with Europe ablaze, doubted the capacity of literature to triumph or even effectively emerge “until the world has shaken itself into its new shape,” as he put it.²⁹

Yet, herein lies the ordeal. Is Baumer a mere “victim”? On the surface, he dies, but his voice carries on, and so too does Orwell's, albeit belatedly. That “endurance,” as Orwell had it, or “stubborn integrity,” as Bloom might see it, helps to explain, at least in part, why works like *All Quiet* and *Homage* remain crowd-pleasers and continual best-sellers, even to this day. War books of literary flourish, such as *The Enormous Room* (1922), which established e.e. cummings' reputation, Faulkner's *A Fable* (1954), which won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, or David Jones' *In Parenthesis* (1937), which T.S. Eliot called a “work of genius”³⁰ and W. H. Auden deemed “a masterpiece,” as well as “the greatest work of literature in English on war,”³¹ are barely in print now and hardly known outside of academic circles. That's not to say they aren't marvelous achievements in their own right. But Modernist abstraction doesn't quite capture the masses like an old-fashioned trench fight in clear, lucid prose. Ask Hemingway or Orwell.

And this, as Bloom would point out, could be part of the problem. In an interview with *The Onion*, of all places, where he was asked about violence in literature, as well as his general taste, Bloom praised Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) as a work of “genius.” He also explained that “the violence is the book. The Judge is the book, and the Judge is, short of Moby Dick, the most monstrous apparition in all of American literature. The Judge is violence

²⁸ Rushdie, Salman. “Outside the Whale.” *Granta* 11 (1984): 50. Print.

²⁹ Orwell, *Inside the Whale*, 50.

³⁰ Eliot, T.S. “A Note of Introduction.” *In Parenthesis*. By David Jones. London: Faber, 1961. Print.

³¹ Auden, W.H. “The Geste Says This and the Man Who Was on the Field.” *Mid-Century Review* 39 (1962): 12-13. Print.

incarnate. The Judge stands for incessant warfare for its own sake.” Ironically, in the same interview, Bloom faults McCarthy for mimicking Faulkner in *Suttree* (1979), and he lambasts Faulkner himself for “produc[ing] a beastly book like *A Fable*,” which was evidently “involved in moral judgments.”³² In truth, Bloom has never been terribly clear about what he defines as genius, or aesthetically pleasing—a fact which James Woods notably points out.³³

Yet it's clear that Bloom favors a sort of non-politicized, art-for-its-own-sake approach. He cites four “living American novelists” who, in his estimation, are worthy of “praise”: DeLillo, Roth, Pynchon, and McCarthy.³⁴ Would it be an exaggeration to assume that what he likes about them, aside from their aesthetics, is the seemingly “amoral” stance that they take, as evidenced by *Blood Meridian*? If so, it's not hard to see how he would disdain a work like *All Quiet*, which, while not expressly political or moral, obviously has a clear, communicative intent: conveying the brutality of warfare. More broadly, Bloom probably sees that warfare as endemic to human nature, much as McCarthy, Melville, and to a certain extent Faulkner—barring *A Fable*—all did. What we are left with then, at least in Bloom's eyes, is not a need for cheap moralizing or sermonizing tracts about the horrors of combat, but genuine art, whatever that entails, and however it is presented—as long as it isn't moral, or involved.

To some extent, Bloom's approach echoes Orwell in “Inside the Whale,” but probably stems more from Blake, whose aesthetics, in contrast to Ruskin's and Arnold's, serve a purely non-didactic, non-utilitarian end, namely art itself. This view, of course, would find fruition in Wilde and the Decadence Movement. Regardless of how we characterize it, however, Bloom's ethos is decidedly

³² Pierce, Leonard. “Interview: Harold Bloom on *Blood Meridian*.” *The Onion A. V. Club*. 15 June 2009. Web. 12 Mar. 2012.

³³ Woods, James. “The Misreader.” *The New Republic*. 1 May 2006. Web. 12 Mar. 2012.

³⁴ Bloom, Harold. “Dumbing Down American Readers.” *Boston Globe*. 24 Sept. 2003. Web. 1 June 2012.

different from Remarque's in that it values pure "genius," a value which Remarque, like Orwell and Trilling, abhors, or at the very least finds impertinent. Which returns us to the question we started with. Is it really enough, as Trilling claims, to "[front] the world with nothing more than one's simple, direct, undeceived intelligence, and a respect for the powers one does have, and the work one undertakes to do"? Or is effecting any change futile, in which case an aesthetic commitment, and one probably more invested in wordplay, flourish, and literary style than cold, clear reportage, should take precedence? In other words, should we strive for genius, as Bloom wants, or "try simply to tell," as *All Quiet* seeks?

In my own writing, I've tried to do both. Like most writers, I wrestle with the question of both what to tell and how to tell it, which admittedly should not be separate aims, but often are. Style above substance, substance above style. Perhaps the style is the substance, as Wilde had it. Or perhaps the substance is the style, as arguably Remarque had it. Clearly, it's difficult to break all of these works down into one element or another, as even *All Quiet* contains outbursts of remarkable literary profusion, Bloom's critique notwithstanding. My favorite is Baumer's final and solemn reflection:

But perhaps all this that I think is mere melancholy and dismay, which will fly away as the dust, when I stand once again beneath the poplars and listen to the rustling of their leaves. It cannot be that it has gone, the yearning that made our blood unquiet, the unknown, the perplexing, the oncoming things, the thousand faces of the future, the melodies from dreams and from books, the whispers and divinations of women; it cannot be that this has vanished in bombardment, in despair, in brothels.³⁵

³⁵ Remarque 295.

There is an underlying resilience in this passage, something almost timeless, and dare I say rare in its uniting of linguistic courage and form. In these phrases, the writer's unconscious soars—seven years after *Ulysses* (1922), but nevertheless powerful for a work of this time, and for an honest retelling of combat. How many veterans, including the bulk of those reading, have scribbled down endless pages of notes, only to find them awash in meaning and devoid of any form? There is something almost strange, if not gifted, in this rare confluence of feeling and structure, the sense that the writer is both talking from the heart and doing it intelligently. It may not be genius on Bloom's scale, but I think it is for those of us who have tried it. Whether that's enough to supplant war, though, I cannot say. At the very least, it allows us to bask in the poplars.

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