

Remarque's Abyss of Time:

Im Westen nichts Neues

Despite its great commercial success and continuing popularity, Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* has seldom received the critical attention or respect that it deserves. All too often this novel is read as a mere war novel with dubious claims to objectivity, as a political novel with questionable ideological biases, or as a psychological novel that expresses the disenchantment of an entire generation. In fact, although Remarque's novel is indeed set during the Great War, and does, obviously, contain political and psychological themes, its full significance is grasped only when these considerations are related to the novel's central problematic—the effect of World War I on the sense of temporality of the novel's main characters. The structure of the three temporal dimensions and their relationship to each other form the backbone of this novel. Once the relationship between problematic and theme is brought into clear focus, the novel's place in twentieth century literature becomes quite clear.

Im Westen nichts Neues begins on a serene and almost jocular note. The soldiers at the foreground of the novel are behind their own battlelines. They are relaxed and absorbed in menial, inoffensive routine. Yet there has already been a casualty: the future. The political and social culture of the young men has not inculcated them with values that will resist the vicissitudes of historical evolution. Thus, the young men move into the future bereft of emotional and moral anchors.

For us lads of eighteen they [their mentors] ought to have been mediators and guides to the world of maturity, the world of work, of duty, of culture, of progress—to the future. (*All Quiet* 12)

The sham guidance and hypocritical morality of the mentors do not survive even the first shells and the first deaths of the war. Paul realizes that there is a relatively superficial and an extremely serious side to his shattered future. He has never really believed in the conventional phrases and the formulas; he has, however, believed in the "authority," "greater insight," and "manlier wisdom" (12) which the leaders of his culture represent. It is this latter authority, this unconscious surge toward the future, which is destroyed by the Great War. As Paul says, "the first bombardment showed us our mistake...the world as they taught it to us broke in pieces" (12).

This sense of being deprived of a future intensifies as the novel progresses. Remarque seldom explores the external aspect of this dilemma; he is interested for the most part in analysing what it is like to have crucial, dangerous combat responsibilities and, at the same time, be incapable of believing in any conventional sense of purpose, goal, or aim.

The breath of desire...shall fill me again, melt the heavy, dead lump of lead that lies somewhere in me and wakens the impatience of the future, the quick joy in the world of thought....(10)

The chagrin expressed in these lines deepens as the war drags on. The soldiers worry not only about having lost their aims and goals, but also about ever again restructuring a system of values.

Here my thoughts stop and will not go any farther. All that meets me, all that floods over me are but feelings...but no aims....Now if we go back we will be weary, broken, burnt out, rootless, without hope. We will not be able to find our way any more. (174)

Im Westen is not, however, a novel of dejection and despair. Despite their shattered sense of purpose, despite the inevitable negative psychological development that must accompany such a traumatic experience, the young soldiers in this novel are not mere passive victims of an intransigent fate. They are capable of personal growth and insight of the deepest possible sort: they are capable of generating new values.

Remarque's novel is punctuated with surges of insight into values that could sustain life after the war. The author uses these insights to evaluate the values of Wilhelmine Germany and to evoke fresh possibilities for the future. First, the future must be devoted to avoiding war. Paul had been brought up to believe in the necessity of war. This was only possible because war had been an abstraction. Killing the French printer, G. Duval, forces him to confront the stark, odious reality of being involved in killing people. Paul realizes that rejection of killing and personal integrity condition each other in a profound and intimate way. He pledges his future to avoiding repetitions of the Great War:

But if I come out of it, comrade, I will fight against this, that has struck us both down; from you, taken life—and from me—Life also. I promise you...it shall never happen again. (138)

Second, during the war Paul comes to understand the importance of the class system in his life. Before the war he had an instinctive respect for the authority of his mentors and community leaders. He comes to realize that they are his real enemies, that class is based on arbitrary and pernicious values, and that such a system is what led the country to war. As he says,

Any non-commissioned officer is more of an enemy to a recruit, any schoolmaster to a pupil than they [the Russians] are to us. (119)

Finally, Paul begins to think in internationalist terms. He observes the kindly simplicity of the Russian prisoners and realizes that he has much in common with them: he can feel no hatred of any kind.

I know nothing of them except that they are prisoners, and that is exactly what troubles me. Their life is obscure and guiltless;—if I could know more of them....(118)

Thus, Paul projects himself into a future based on values which are different from those that he has known as a child. Anti-militarism, a rejection of the class system, and internationalism seem to him, at least as he fights in the trenches, the values which would secure a better future. He also realizes that these values are dangerous: they cannot be articulated while he is fighting; they go against the entire grain of his culture.

I am frightened: I dare think this way no more. This way leads to the abyss. It is not now the time; but I will not lose these thoughts. I will keep them, shut them away until the war is ended...this is the aim, the great, sole aim, that I have thought of in the trenches. (119)

The future is not a closed dimension for the young soldiers in this novel. They begin to articulate new values in a lucid, intelligent way. They have considerable inner reserves, untapped by the pre-war culture.

The past seems to be the tragic dimension for Remarque. Paul and his childhood friends experience the past in a fashion that is almost wholly negative and destructive. The personalities of the soldiers are significantly weakened because of the impossibility of maintaining a living, healthy relationship with the past. Remarque's analyses are psychologically precise and of considerable originality.

Rootlessness vis-à-vis the past is one of the primary characteristics of the young men described in this novel. Remarque explores this rootlessness from several different perspectives. First, the young men in a certain sense never possess a past. "There are sights there he has not forgotten because he never possessed them—perplexing yet lost to him" (61). In the context of his novel, Remarque means at least two things by this: it would seem that the soldiers do not receive much from their original environment. A few shards of moral guidance, some vague, rather banal feelings of family intimacy, and a sense of place are about all they carry with them to the front.

We young men of twenty, however, have only our parents, and some, perhaps a girl. That is not much, for at our age the influence of parents is at its weakest and girls have not yet a hold over us....And of this nothing remains. (12)

Moreover, because the soldiers are so young when they go away to war, they have had little time to assimilate personally the values of their culture. Had they stayed at home, had they had to test the conventional wisdom of their culture for themselves, they might have had time to deepen or reject their rather pathetic axiological heritage. But they don't get the chance; the war deprives them of this possibility.

We had as yet taken no root. The war swept us away. For the others, the older men, it is just an interruption. (16)

Thus, the young men of Paul's generation have their pasts undermined—retroactively.

Rootlessness in this novel is experienced as *Angst*, confusion, a kind of dread of life. The soldiers feel disoriented because the war isolates them from their already fragile past lives. They not only see the worthlessness of their past experiences; they are also "cut off" from whatever might have been of some value.

But a sense of strangeness will not leave me, I can find nothing of myself in all these things. There is my mother, there is my sister, there is my case of butterflies, and there is the mahogany piano—but I am not myself there. There is a distance, a veil between us. (16)

The fragile, suddenly distant past leaves the soldiers in a state of ontological insecurity. It is easy for them to feel bitter and cynical about the institutions that nurtured them as children and adolescents.

All I do know is that this business about professions and studies and so—it makes me sick, it is always disgusting. I don't see anything—I don't see anything at all....(56)

It's a bit better. But it's not all the same, everything they teach you. (55)

It is this rootlessness, this unnatural inner distance that causes the eerie, muffled tone of the novel. The brutal noises and the murderous flying metal of war encircle and engulf Remarque's soldiers, but the deepest damage is done to the souls of these young men. They are severed from their earliest, most tender experiences, and thus it is impossible for them to develop and mature normally.

A series of neurotic symptoms results from this existential rootlessness. The very tenor of conscious life seems to be diminished for these young soldiers. They realize that *something* of a very fundamental nature is happening to them, but they are incapable of reflecting on their experiences in a conscious, systematic manner.

My strength is exhausted as always after an attack, and so it is hard to be alone with my thoughts. They are not properly thoughts; they are memories....(74)

And these memories are mere transient images which dissolve with the light of the next shell blast. Pinioned between a horrific present and a half-assimilated past, the soldiers find it difficult to pursue these memories. Instead they develop the habit of fleeing from them. They develop an inner resistance to self-examination and contemplation. They don't *want* their own lives. They have the inner stiffness of much older people.

He is right. We are not youth any longer....We are fleeing. We fly from ourselves. From our life. We are eighteen and had begun to love life and the world; and we had to shoot it to pieces....The first explosion burst in our hearts. (75)

Consequently, the affective tenor of the lives of these frontline soldiers becomes melancholy and oddly calm.

It is strange that all the memories that come have these two qualities. They are always completely calm...and even if they are not completely calm, they become so. (75)

Their stillness is the reason why these memories of former times do not awaken desire so much as sorrow—a strange incomprehensible melancholy. (76)

This is not the calm of self-possession and mastery; it is depression which results from their lucidity; the soldiers realize that they have been cheated out of life in any real sense of the term. Moreover, they intuit that the dimness and fragility of their memories are symptomatic of a profound injustice.

Just as Paul's hope for a valuable future diminishes as the war continues into its third and fourth years, his calm and melancholy about the past turn into cynicism and hopelessness.

Once we had such desires but they return not such desires...they belong to another world that is gone from us. (76)

He realizes that a profound, definite dislocation has occurred in his life: some kind of fracture or annihilation of the very core of Paul's temporal being.

Speak to me...Life of my youth...receive me. Images float through my mind, but they do not grip me, they are mere shadows and memories. Nothing—nothing—. A terrible feeling of foreignness suddenly rises up in me. I cannot find my way back, I am shut out....(107)

The young soldiers of this novel experience not only danger in the trenches; the total experience of the war—its length, its horrors, its senselessness, its multi-faceted unfairness—victimizes the most intimate parts of their souls. Their relationship with and adhesion to the past is destroyed. Moreover, the novel contains very few passages where any affirmative sense of the past is maintained by the soldiers. Yet in these scarce passages, Remarque reveals two important qualities in his characters. First, they do try to rekindle the energy and spontaneity of the past:

The pure fragrance of the water and the melody of the wind in the poplars held our fancies. We loved them dearly, and the image of those days still makes my heart pause in its beating. (75)

Second, the young soldiers are frighteningly lucid: they realize that they are themselves battlegrounds between a deeply destructive process and a vague, almost incomprehensible surge of life.

...and it is the alarm of their silence that forces me to lay hold of my sleeve and my rifle lest I should abandon myself to the liberation and allurements in which my body would dilate and gently pass away into the still forces that lie behind these things.
(75)

In this passage, the German soldier *lives* his past; this dimension of his being is not extinguished, only maimed and suppressed by the war. He senses the power of his past but dares not explore this intuition too deeply. As we have learned, such exploration is the way to the abyss.

Remarque goes beyond the triviality of most war novels by showing that the war affects the deepest levels of the personality. The men in *Im Westen* are worthy; they endure a horrible experience. They are also punished for their endurance; their memories, their half-formed emotions, their rudimentary intuitions about life are all but effaced by the war. Moreover, Remarque has the simple, dignified audacity to show us that this punishment, this temporal mutilation, is caused only partially by battle. Society itself—its culture, its religion, its greed—is just as guilty, maybe more so.

Remarque's characters live at the apex of a shattered future and an atrophied past. Thus, the present is deprived of fullness and resilience. But, paradoxically, the present is the most complex temporal dimension in *Im Westen nichts Neues*. The present is horrific: the soldiers submit to physical agony beyond description. The present is demeaning: the war causes psychological humiliation. The present is also the temporal dimension where the true stature and dignity of these soldiers are revealed.

In order to endure life at the front, the soldiers must renounce (*aufgeben*) many important facets of themselves (17). Remarque explores this reductive psychological process in different ways. He shows that the first and most obvious effect of battle is a loss of one's sensibility: "But the shelling is stronger than anything. It wipes out the sensibilities" (20). Thus, almost immediately the men are hardened: "we become hard, suspicious, pitiless, vicious..." (20). The experience at the front oscillates between habit and brutality (71, 86). Thus, in addition to being severed from its natural, healthy relationship to the past and future, the present is further diminished by the psychological adaptation that must occur to survive the daily horrors of battle and military routine.

Remarque is careful to show that this reductive process is not temporary; it is destructive and definitive. The soldiers are not merely dulled by habit: they are reduced to being automatons.

...the earth is the background of the restless, gloomy world of automatons, our grasping is the scratching of a quill, our lips are dry, our heads are debauched with stupor—we stagger forward....(72)

...we are insensible, dead men who through some trick, some dreadful magic, are still able to run and kill. (73)

Remarque tends to explore the deeper psychological effects of the war in images and metaphor. His language is especially powerful and appropriate when he describes the inner maiming of his main characters. Early in the novel, Paul says, "Our faces are encrusted, our thoughts are devastated..." (83). Later in the novel, this kind of expression reappears in somewhat stronger form:

Our thoughts are clay, they are moulded with the changes of the days;—when we are resting they are good; under fire, they are dead. Fields of craters within and without. (162)

Thus, the soldiers have less and less personal strength with which to resist the horrors of war. They become mere reflections of the shell-blasted landscapes of the Great War. The soldiers are so worn down that they no longer perceive the passage of time: "We count the weeks no more" (161).

The destructive process becomes more and more demonic as the war continues. The themes of rage/madness/breakdown emerge early in the novel: "We have become wild beasts" (71). But at this point in the novel it is only an occasional phenomenon, connected with the frenzy of battle and self-defense. Insanity and mental breakdown become dominant traits of the experience of the late stages of the war. After he has killed G. Duval, Paul realizes that his "brain is taxed beyond endurance" (138). Paul becomes obsessed by the theme of madness and meditates on it:

Were we more subtly differentiated we must have long since have gone mad, have deserted, or have fallen...I often sit over against myself as before a stranger, and wonder how the unnameable active principle that calls itself Life has adapted itself even to this form. (163)

The latter part of the novel would suggest that Paul has only the slightest hold on life; he meditates on the fragility of the human personality and the presence of darkness:

And at night, walking out of a dream, overwhelmed, and bewitched by the crowding faces, a man perceives with alarm how slight is the support, how thin the boundary that divides him from the darkness.

Every day and every hour, every shell and every death cuts into this thin support, and the years waste it rapidly....(164)

Remarque multiplies anecdotes (the Berger incident, for example) and allusions to death, cadavers, and insanity as the novel closes. He also insists that this somber experience is punctuated by positive, affirmative perceptions and insights. New levels of understanding do emerge from the war; his characters, for all their rootlessness and trauma, do break new existential ground.

The experience of the war forces the soldiers to experience life for themselves. They feel, think, and see in a way that would have been impossible without the experience of the war. The soldiers are separated from their families, towns, and culture; thus, they are liberated from the trivialities of convention; they are also forced to discover spiritual depths in themselves. Remarque emphasizes the intensity of the front:

Our faces are neither pale nor more flushed than usual; they are not more tense nor more flabby—yet they are changed. We feel that in our blood a contact has shot home....It is the front, the consciousness of the front, that makes this contact. (36)

The intensity of this experience individualizes and, almost despite the young men, produces a profound psychological metamorphosis.

Every time it is the same. We start out for the front plain soldiers...then come the first gun-emplacements and every word of our speech has a new ring. (36)

Paul likens this experience to a mysterious whirlpool, and, in the most telling phrase of all, he wonders if it is "our inner and most secret life that shivers and falls on guard" (36).

The inner transformation is accompanied by a renewed experience of the natural world. The war sunders and destroys nature; it also forces a renewed sense of the preciousness of the earth and all its manifestations. At times, Paul expresses feelings of mystical affirmation of the earth: "O Earth, thou grantest us the great resisting surge of new-won life" (37). At times, Paul uses his intense reverence for natural phenomena as a springboard to recapture his past.

The parachute-lights shoot upwards—and I see a picture, a summer evening. I am in the cathedral cloister and look at the tall rose trees that bloom in the middle of the cloister garden....(74)

Between the meadows behind our town there stands a line of old poplars by a stream. The pure fragrance of the water and the melody of the wind in the poplars held our fancies. (75)

Paul's responsiveness to nature becomes at once obsession and metaphysical reflection:

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. (116)

Summer of 1918—Never has life in its niggardliness seemed to us so desirable as now:—the red poppies in the meadows round our billets, the smooth beetles on the blades of grass...the mysterious trees of the twilight. (170)

The war forces the soldiers to behave in an inhumane way; it also makes them able to transcend the conventional, superficial relationships of normal civilian life: "It awakened in us a strong, practical sense of *esprit de corps*, which in the field developed into the finest thing that arose out of the war—comradeship" (20). Throughout this novel, the author reserves some of his strongest, most poignant passages for this sense of frontline fraternity.

They are more to me than life, these voices, they are more than motherliness and more than fear; they are the strongest, most comforting thing there is anywhere: they are the voices of my comrades. (130)

In passage after passage, we see how Paul realizes that allegiance to his friends not only keeps him sane but also allows him to retain his self-respect.

There is yet another positive trait which the war engenders in Remarque's characters. These characters do not simply *live* the enigmatic mixture of destruction and growth that has been described here; they also think hard about what is happening to them. They grapple with the meaning of the war and what it is doing to them. Paul is extremely lucid as he realizes that he is being emotionally destroyed by the war.

—it has transformed us into unthinking animals in order to give us the weapon of instinct—it has reinforced us with dullness, so that we do not go to pieces....

Our inner forces are not exerted toward regeneration, but toward degeneration. (163)

Paul is equally lucid when he realizes that there is still life left in him—even if it is only spasmodic and wan:

—the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin....But perhaps all this that I think is more melancholy and dismay, which will fly away as dust, when I stand once again beneath the poplars and listen to the rustling of their leaves. (175)

Once again Paul attempts to understand his experience at its deepest level. This is not a mere expression of puerile nostalgia, but an attempt to understand how his future, past, and present have been transformed by the war. *Im Westen nichts Neues* is anything but a novel of disenchantment and despair: it is a phenomenological account of the way the Great War wears away at the personalities of a group of young men—without destroying their deepest engagement in life. One of the novel's final passages demonstrates perfectly this double-edged, typically Remarquian view:

Let the months and years come, they bring me nothing more, they can bring me nothing more. I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear. The life that has borne me through these year is still in my hands and my eyes. Whether I have subdued it, I know not. But so long as it is there it will seek its own way out, heedless of the will that is within me. (175)

Mögen die Monate und Jahre kommen, sie nehmen mir nichts mehr, sie können mir nichts mehr nehmen. Ich bin so allein und so ohne Erwartung, daB ich ihnen entgegensetzen kann ohne Furcht. Das Leben, das mich durch diese Jahre trug, ist noch in meinen Händen und Augen. Ob ich es überwunden habe, weiß ich nicht. Aber so lange es da ist, wird es sich seinen Weg suchen, mag dieses, das in mir "Ich" sagt, wollen oder nicht. (Im Westen, 203)

In order to determine the deepest effects of the war on Paul's life, Remarque explores the three temporal dimensions. As for the future, Paul realizes that very little of a positive nature can come to pass ("Let the months and

years come..."). The war has continued so long, it has been so physically gruelling, his pre-1914 values have so utterly shattered, that imagining any kind of positive outcome in the near future is impossible for the young soldier. Paul's attitude toward the present is one of tranquil endurance: "I am so alone and so without hope that I can confront them without fear." As for the past, it is, as we have seen, the ravished dimension. Paul refers to it without much comment, without much interest: "The life that has borne me throughout these years is still in my hands and my eyes." This somber, brooding sense of temporality is accompanied, as we have seen here, by a positive, affirmative one. Paul, as a product of a given culture, has been destroyed. Very few, if any, of the social, political, and cultural values of his childhood and adolescence endure the war. The war has, as the saying goes, caused them to become what they are. On the other hand, Paul realizes that there *is* more than these corrupt and corrupting values. The values of Western civilization are not identical with life itself:

But so long as it is there it will seek its own way out, heedless of the will that is within me.

Thus, Remarque succeeds in expressing our basic condition: although we stand for little besides domination, militarism, and disrespect for the earth, we do at times produce individuals capable of expressing a deeper, more worthy sense of life.

Im Westen nichts Neues is an extremely coherent novel. The experience of World War I, a political and social reflection of life in Wilhelmine Germany, and carefully, subtly drawn psychological analyses are all integrated into a probing, intelligent, and dignified work of art by exploring the interplay of the three temporal dimensions. By doing this, Remarque enters into a dialogue with the Greeks, with St. Augustine, and with many of the finer writers of our own age. Understanding the importance of temporality in this novel assists us in conceptualizing the deep poetic resonance that so many readers have responded to. The formula "*Im Westen nichts Neues*" is a *fait divers*: things are, as the English title tells us, quiet on the battlefield. In the context of the novel, the *fait divers* has considerable poignancy, for the novel's main character dies when the war is almost over. But *Im Westen* also signals the real scope of the novel. It is not just about Wilhelmine Germany, for the temporal shattering, rootlessness, and metaphysical disorientation which are at the heart of the novel characterize the entire West. The novel presents an image of life in the twentieth century which is rare in its rigor. For until we are capable of understanding the underlying corruption, danger, and violence residing in our finest social, moral, and religious values, there will be *nichts Neues* in the West.