

Novelist Breaks with Past

Melbourne Age (Melbourne, VI, AUS)

16.03.1946, Seite 8

Original:

Signatur: R-A 2.1.015/006/005

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Erich Maria Remarque – – Legion of Lost Authors

Erich Maria Remarque is one of a legion of »lost« authors. Dispossessed of citizenship by his native Germany, he has lost not only much of his rich background, but he has also lost complete freedom of choice of his subjects for the future. He cannot write about Germany because he no longer knows the country. He prefers not to write about European refugees because the public is growing tired of this subject, and he will not write about the American scene because he does not know it sufficiently well. At 48 years of age he is compelled by fate and fortune to make a break with the past and commence anew.

By »The Age« Special Correspondent in New York

»The Arch of Triumph«, at present one of America's best sellers, has proved that Remarque can still write with the same vivid style which attracted world attention to »All Quiet on the Western Front,« but it is the last of its kind to come from his pen. »I wrote this because I wanted to tell the story,« he explains. »But there will not be another. People do not want to hear about refugees any more.«

Remarque intends to call on his memory to write fiction based on European life. When, in Berlin on May 10, 1933, a uniformed Nazi student stepped towards a bonfire saying: »Against treachery toward German soldiers of World War I., I give to the flames the works of Erich Maria Remarque,« he destroyed not only books of great literature merit, but he robbed a fellow German of a chance of writing about his native country.

»And,« said Remarque, »I feel an author only writes really well about his own country. Conrad and Hemingway are the only exceptions I know of, and they are not really exceptions. Conrad was away from Poland for many years before he started to write, and Hemingway always has American characters in a foreign setting. I could write about Germans in America, but who would be interested?«

Remarque is not the sinister-looking character so popularly portrayed in publisher's photographs. He assumes a rather stern, forbidding expression when he lowers his wide bushy eyebrows, but mostly his face is lighted by a broad smile.

I found him sitting in his luxurious hotel suite overlooking fashionable Park Avenue, surrounded by his magnificent collection of van Goghs, Renoirs, Degas and Cezannes.

Without a Country

He spoke with a heavy German guttural, and frequently was searching for the correct English phrase. He wished to talk only of literature and art. »How can I know of other things?« he asked. »The Germany I knew no longer exists. I am a man without a country – at the moment.«

Remarque hopes to become an American citizen some time this year, but the mere process of naturalization cannot restore to him all that he has lost. »I would be incapable of writing about the American scene,« he announced, with an almost violent shrug of his shoulders. »American writers can do that so much better. I have spent 42 years in Europe and only six in America, so how can I know? I know Americans only in war time. A man writes best about his own country, and I have lost mine.«

The man who fought as a private in the German army in World War I., and who had his German citizenship taken away from him by Hitler, is rapidly adjusting himself to changes, and already has laid the foundations for his new form of writing.

»All Quiet on the Western Front,« he says candidly, »was a freak – one of those lovely freaks. I was documentary writing, and it was easy because I had the most perfect background. Always the reviewers will say: It is not an ›All Quiet on the Western Front.«

»The Road Back« did not reach the same heights,« continued Remarque, staring straight head, without seeking either agreement or disagreement. »That was because I was relying on the same background.

»Flotsam« was a semi-documentary book about refugees, but it was no good. You have the choice of going on writing documentary books or writing fiction, and if you have not background you must make a break toward fiction. I made a break in ›Arch of Triumph«. You must have a character and plot.«

Not All Fiction

Remarque gestured wildly, as he did almost throughout the interview, then leaned forward, and said, quietly. »›Arch of Triumph« is not all fiction. Some of the scenes are absolutely true – I myself lived through them in Paris. Ravic is a German refugee doctor prohibited by French law from openly practicing in Paris. He was really a man who is living today in New York. I do not want to tell his name while he is living, but I know him well. Some people say the book is no good as fiction because it is too sensational, and that is understandable. Life lived by refugees is sensational and almost too fantastic to be believed.«

Remarque, who writes his manuscripts in long hand in German, and rarely attempts to read the English translation, has made his decision, and now feels more contented in himself. »It is not easy for a writer who has lost his country to know what to write about,« he explains. »My problem is material but one must be practical. I will write fiction about Europe.«

As soon as conditions permit, Remarque intends visiting England, France and probably Switzerland, where he owns a home, but he says he will never return to Germany.

Contrary to much that has been written previously. Remarque did not leave Germany because of the Nazis, but merely took a trip to Switzerland in order hastily to complete a manuscript for an impatient American publisher. That was in January, 1933. But by the time the Nazis were in power, and, as he says, it was wise not to return.

Born in Osnabruck, he served with the German army on the Western Front in World War I., and drifted through several occupations to writing. At the time of the change from high-pressure motor car types to balloon tyres he served as a test driver. During this time, he said: »I hit my head a few times when my cars turned over.« Later he became a partner in a tombstone business.

After writing »All Quiet on the Western Front,« in 1929, he lived mostly in Berlin, where he did not feel the impact of the coming Nazi regime.

»Berlin was a big city,« he explains, with a wry smile, »and the Nazis were not apparent everywhere. We did not take Hitler seriously – and thought it was just a matter of letting him wear out. I did not realize the strength of the Nazi movement until I was driving to Switzerland and saw men, women and children in small villages raising their hands in the Nazi salute. It

was just luck I had to get to Switzerland to write that manuscript, otherwise I probably would not be here.«

Between Masterpieces

Remarque, having settled his personal writing problem, is not going to rush things. He is going to write only when he feels he has a story to tell. »Goethe,« he said, »wrote when he felt like it, and wrote what suited him. Between his masterpieces he produced some rubbish. Do not get the impression I am likening myself to Goethe,« he said laughingly, »but I know we can learn from old masters.«

Financially Remarque will have nothing to worry about. The »Arch of Triumph« is a best seller, and soon Hollywood producers will start filming it.

David Lewis, associate producer of an independent company which bought the film rights for 200,000 dollar plus a percentage of the film's eventual net earnings, said: »It was the biggest bargain I or anyone else ever got.« He visualizes Ravić a man with Laurence Olivier's and Humphrey Bogart's grit and Spencer Tracy's introspection.

In addition, Remarque is still receiving royalties from »All Quiet on the Western Front,« which recently was reprinted in German for German prisoners of war in America. Remarque is typical of vast numbers of German authors and artists who were forced to leave their own country, but he is among the luckiest one – he has solved his problem and he is happy.