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Modern War*

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LIKE every other reader old enough to have felt the stress and distortions, the spiritual flushes and depressions of the Great War, I have followed with unflagging interest the strange courses of war literature. It is hard to remember how we felt, what we were, in 1914 and 1918, but the books written then are still here; and they are no longer our thoughts and our books.

The first phase of war literature was lyric and individual. It was a literature of courage and regret, and most of all of dazed astonishment. There was no philosophy in it, but only the strong instinctive emotions of men whose life had suddenly been seized and twisted away from its foundations. The best of it was in poetry.

The second phase was philosophical, and while most of its books were sheer propaganda, it was far more sincere than it seems now. The fact of war, once realized, sent men back to their creeds of living. The great guns of argument began to boom, and historical principles were dragged from the text books and flung across fluttering acres of print. We were—and I take to describe it a line from Thucydides which I borrowed myself for one of the innumerable essays written at the time—being educated by violence. The great abstract forces, autocracy, democracy, had become incarnate in the struggle, which was to be resolved, not by defeat or victory in arms, but by some reversal in world thinking, some new abstraction of world peace or world coördination, which would swallow up the other abstractions and live happily forever afterwards. It was not man against man so much as idea against idea.

The third phase (not necessarily chronological) was personification. The correspondents who had written home of vast floods of field-gray uniforms sweeping over Belgium, and pictured the Western front as two menacing barriers of eruptive steel, began to see looming figures behind the dust and smoke of war. It was the Kaiser now who personified the issues of the war for us, Von Hindenburg became a legend; the "Tommy," the "boche," the "poilu," and, later, "the doughboy," became types for massed humanity in the fight itself. Man was now struggling with man, but still more with suffering, fright, and the weather. He was pathetic or exalted. War became a mode of life by which the civilian world was fascinated. War narratives spread through every language.

Some of them were humorous and exciting, as if war were a kind of picnic, with moments of heroism, and hardships to be remembered in tranquillity. This phase has lingered on in many recent American books of a superficial kind which capitalize this mood for the purposes of fiction. Others, like Barbusse's "Le Feu," were sordid and terrible, depicting a slavery in which the steel whip hung always over the flinching body; and from these a prayer went up to abolish this monster war in which was only baseness and cruelty and the frustration of every good instinct.

The "glory" books and the funny books leave a bad taste in the mouth now. They were whistling to keep one's spirits up, or (more often) whistling to draw on the others. But the dismal narratives

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*THE PATH TO GLORY. By George Blake. New York: Harper & Bros. 1929.

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*ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT. By Erich Maria Remarque. Boston: Little Brown & Co. 1929.

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are quite as unsatisfying. They seem now to have been written by men too regardful of the habits of ordinary life, or too soft, or too logical. Their worst horrors were true, but they seem now to tell of some specialized race of men, from whom adventure, loyalty, and the delights of courage and sacrifice had been bred out. They deal with a war which was just a war, not a life with the rounded experience of at least some good with much evil which every life must possess. And yet it was Barbusse and his followers who gave to us behind the lines, and here in America, where as yet we only read of war, the first idea of what lay underneath the stolid quiet of men who came back from the front.

The fourth phase was, indeed, silence. After the war, we grew sick of war quickly, both those who had been in it and those who had not. The febrile civilian hysteria which mounted to such brittle heights in America in the fall of 1918, when a malignity possessed gentle souls such as one never found at St. Mihiel or in Flanders, and ardent commercialists foamed with hate while money ran into their pockets, quickly subsided. In October of 1918 it was unsafe for a returned soldier or correspondent to talk of war's irresistible fatigue and inevitable ending. Patriots of the civilian ranks were eager to have war time go on forever. Their withers were unwrung; their blood was pleasantly excited. Liberty bonds (their war sacrifice) were in every cupboard. But by 1919 they were bored by talk of fighting, and so was literature. For years afterward we heard much of politics, economics, and social change, but little of the war.

The fifth phase began, as everyone knows, a little while ago with a flood of war reminiscences—some fact, some drama and fiction—suddenly released. Most of them, like most reminiscences, were trivial though interesting. Many were frankly commercialized, excitement makers for a new generation to whom the war (like the Wild West) was a glamorous past. But in the real books, the real plays, those philosophical abstracts, which in the earlier books had lined up like the gods on Olympus, had disappeared entirely, as had the personifications of Kaisers and Generals, and the types of "poilu," "doughboy," and "boche." Man, plain man was the hero, and now he was neither the musketeer nor the slave. He enjoyed war sometimes, much more often he hated it. We looked back at last through theories and propaganda, got away from the first hundred thousand flushed with patriotism, and the devil-dog marines, to the only element of which real literature could be made—civilized, normal man in a new and great experience.

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A group of books published this year has been most helpful in seeing what it all really meant to the man inside the soldier. There was Blunden's "Undertones of War" and Chalif's "Journey's End," where the educated gentleman, neither a brute nor a coward, neither eager nor unwilling to fight, sets down his sense of futility, of waste, of terror, lightened by heroism and the exaltation of duty done. Rudolf Binding's "A Fatalist at War" was another such book, German made, but in the identical mood and spirit. In "The Case of Sergeant Grischa," the great abstract forces of state and theory, which obsessed us in the first years, beat upon a single human heart and are turned to absurdity. There is the pathetic narrative of George Blake's, "The Path to Glory," a tale unquestionably typical of the simple man, his brain in a mist, carried on by necessity and a few strong instincts down an unreturning path at whose end death is accepted as meekly as a bullock's. Here, as in all these later stories, the enemy scarcely figures. He is the only real abstraction left, feared but not hated, thought of only in terms of barrages and machine guns, appearing only in the surprising

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revelation of battered, beaten men, as simple and as puzzled as their captors. The terrible Turks of Blake's Dardanelles are, once seen, "meek and frightened men of middle-age."

But to me the most illuminating books of all are two, both translated from foreign tongues, both curiously familiar, the one to our present, the other, which does not deal with our great war at all, to our memories, prejudices, and illusions held over from a (fortunately) irretrievable past.

"All Quiet on the Western Front," by Erich Maria Remarque, has had a phenomena[1] circulation in its native Germany, and elsewhere in Europe, and is likely to have a wide reading here also. It is fiction, but of that kind of fiction more convincing than many alleged autobiographies. Here the resolution between man and idea, the abstract and the concrete in war, is complete. The hero is educated, sensitive, but neither a super-patriot, nor a pacifist; in other words, like most of us. He has gone, not too willingly, but not by force to war. He has fought four years, the whole of his mature youth, and is proud of his skill and competence. War is his home. War is the lot of his generation. He has been educated, literally, by violence. And in his lucid, not unhumorous narrative, the friendship of a group of soldiers, their experiences with horror and with the poor comforts behind the line, their casual loves, their satisfied hungers, are so much more important than the seldom seen enemy, that the war absurdly becomes, not a conflict at all —and never for an instant a struggle between Great Principles—but rather an existence, to be described as one might describe any other hazardous occupation, such as coal mining.

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The balance hangs true in Remarque. Pacifism is a theory, militarism is a theory, war is a necessity —not in its causes, for who really hates the enemy! —but because for this doomed generation it is a fact. War for these men is normal, which does not mean that they like it. The abnormal, for them, is the warped emotion of the home town when they go back for vacation—an atmosphere of vengeance and greed and ideas of grandeur, which has no place in the real world of war as it is at the front, even though the cause of all war is in its miasmas.

And hence these youths, who, like hostages kept in some barbarous tribe, are civilized men living the life of barbarians, have a strange lucidity of judgment. They are a wasted generation, but because they are outcasts from civilization, they see its cracks and tensions at home. They can be happy there no longer. Home is the ultimate cause of their miseries. Its blindness, its greed, its moral ruthlessness they escape in action; and when the schoolmaster who had driven militarism into them in training camp comes up to the front, they beat humility into his stiff hide.

But the action which purges them is itself miserable, a horror, at its best disgusting to man. They take no satisfaction in it. What relieves their souls of rancor and rapacity, reduces their bodies to swinishness, makes brutality, manslaughter in self-defense, an occupation, an existence.

Already it has become somewhat lighter. Steps hasten over me. The first. Gone. Again, another. The rattle of machine-guns becomes an unbroken chain. Just as I am about to turn round a little, something heavy stumbles, and with a crash a body falls over me into the shell-hole, slips down, and lies across me——

I do not think at all, I make no decision— I strike madly home, and feel only how the body suddenly convulses, then becomes limp, and collapses. When I recover myself, my hand is sticky and wet.

The man gurgles. It sounds to me as though he bellows, every gasping breath is like a cry, a thunder—but it is only my heart pounding. I want to stop his mouth, stuff it with earth, stab him again, he must be quiet, he is be-

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traying me; now at last I regain control of myself, but have become so feeble that I cannot any more lift my hand against him.

So I crawl away to the farthest corner and stay there, my eyes glued on him, my hand grasping the knife—ready, if he stirs, to spring at him again. But he won't do so any more, I can hear that already in his gurgling.

I can see him indistinctly. I have but one desire, to get away. If it is not soon it will be too light; it will be difficult enough now. Then as I try to raise up my head I see it is impossible already. The machine-gun fire so sweeps the ground that I would be shot through and through before I could make one jump.

I test it once with my helmet, which I take off and hold up to find out the level of the shots. The next moment it is knocked out of my hand by a bullet. The fire is sweeping very low over the ground. I am not far enough from the enemy line to escape being picked off by one of the snipers if I attempt to get away. . . .

It is early morning, clear and gray. The gurgling continues. I stop my ears, but soon take my fingers away again, because then I cannot hear the other sound.

The figure opposite me moves. I shrink together and involuntarily look at it. Then my eyes remain glued to it. A man with a small pointed beard lies there, his head is fallen to one side, one arm is half-bent, his head rests helplessly upon it. The other hand lies on his chest, it is bloody.

He is dead, I say to myself, he must be dead, he doesn't feel anything any more; it is only the body that is gurgling there. Then the head tries to raise itself, for a moment the groaning becomes louder, his forehead sinks back upon his arm. The man is not dead, he is dying, but he is not dead. I drag myself toward him, hesitate, support myself on my hands, creep a bit farther, wait, again a terrible journey of three yards, a long, a terrible journey. At last I am beside him.

Then he opens his eyes. He must have heard me and gazes at me with a look of utter terror. The body lies still, but in the eyes there is such an extraordinary expression of flight that for a moment I think they have power enough to carry the body off with them. Hundreds of miles away with one bound. The body is still, perfectly still, without sound, the gurgle has ceased, but the eyes cry out, yell, all the life is gathered together in them for one tremendous effort to flee, gathered together there in a dreadful terror of death, of me.

My legs give way and I drop on my elbows. "No, no," I whisper.

The eyes follow me. I am powerless to move so long as they are there.

Then his hand slips slowly from his breast, only a little bit, it sinks just a few inches, but this movement breaks the power of the eyes. I bend forward, shake my head and whisper: "No, no, no." I raise one hand, I must show him that I want to help him, I stroke his forehead.

The eyes shrink back as the hand comes, then they lose their stare, the eyelids droop lower, the tension is past. I open his collar and place his head more comfortably upright.

His mouth stands half open, it tries to form words. The lips are dry. My water bottle is not there. I have not brought it with me. But there is water in the mud, down at the bottom of the crater. I climb down, take out my handkerchief, spread it out, push it under and scoop up the yellow water that strains through into the hollow of my hand.

He gulps it down. I fetch some more. Then I unbutton his tunic in order to bandage him if it is possible. In any case I must do it, so that if the fellows over there capture me they will see that I wanted to help him, and so will not shoot me. He tries to resist, but his hand is too feeble. The shirt is stuck and will not come away, it is buttoned at the back. So there is nothing for it but to cut it off.

I look for the knife and find it again. But when I begin to cut the shirt the eyes open once more and the cry is in them again and the demented expression, so that I must close them, press them shut and whisper: "I want to help you, Comrade, camerade, camerade, camerade—" eagerly repeating the word, to make him understand.

There are three stabs. My field dressing covers them, the blood runs out under it, I press it tighter; there; he groans.

That is all I can do. Now we must wait, wait.

"It is better," says Müller, one of the companions, "that the war is here instead of in Germany. Just you take a look at the shell-holes."

"True," assents Tjaden, "but no war at all would be better still."

This is comprehensible war for a real soldier: plenty of horses, plenty of women who stab each other but love easily, loot to take home to the wife and children, an existence that is also a business far better than the life of an under dog, a business

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that satisfies the instincts of barbarous man. And death when it comes, comes quickly, with no imagination to keep it hovering over you beforehand, and no future, if you escape it, as good as the gaudy present. Here in revolutionary Mexico is the last good war!

And as one reads this brutal, vivid story, which is contemporary, and yet belongs to the Crusades, to the Mongol invasions, to the Roman Conquests, what the new war books are telling begins to be clear: the change is not in war, which science has made more terrible but not more incorrigible than before, but with the soldier it calls forth now in the place of the Mexican Demetrio. He is no longer inflamed by greed for gold watches and easy women, for he has not been starved and suppressed at home. His humanitarianism inhibits the joy of killing, his developed imagination makes danger more menacing, the loot (which he seldom gets now) and the freedom to be cruel and lustful are not worth the price of modern, machine-like war, while the ideals of national glory, once he is in the trenches, are as meaningless to him as to Demetrio. A creature of great adaptiveness, man has nevertheless become unadapted to war at the moment when war has become impersonal, a thing of gas and steel with machines and projectiles not men for enemies, and requires for its successful prosecution almost the unconsciousness of mechanism. The dog turned wolf again becomes a cur yapping in packs from the trenches. Machines do the fighting.

And the "gloire," the greed, the vanity, the sense of predatory might, which sent the real soldier to war, these have become delusions of economics and politics, have been translated into territories, mineral resources, trade, and national ideals, and become the property, not of the soldier, but of the very civilizations which have humanized him.

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