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Erich Maria Remarque Devotee of Beautiful

›Arch of Triumph‹ Author Tells Philosophy; Plans to Become Citizen of United States

By Alice Dixon Bond

›A human being,‹ said Erich Maria Remarque, whose newest novel, ›Arch of Triumph‹ has already reached fabulous sales, ›is the only creature on earth who can laugh and cry, can create beauty and commit suicide; the only one who has fantasy and with, knows complete misery, can have despair of life and yet turn that despair, through fantasy, into the most beautiful thing in the world.

›The power of imagination is limitless: with Hitler it reached the depths of evil and was most beautiful with Leonardo. It is imagination which distinguishes the writer from the one who does not write. The writer has a film behind his eyes. His imagination snaps the shutter and the negative is his forever.‹

Effect of First World War

We had been talking of his early life in Germany, of the first World War and its emotional and spiritual effect upon him, and of his ›Arch of Triumph‹ on which he had been working for the past five years.

We were sitting in his beautiful corner suite, in the Hotel Ambassador in New York, where he lives. The room is ample but not particularly large, and yet there is a sense of distance and of wide horizons.

The reason is to be found, I think, in the paintings which line his walls: the Cezannes and Degas, the Daumiers, Renoirs and Van Goghs (the latter's famous ›Railroad Viaduct‹ with its one red signal light piercing the somber greys hangs over the fireplace); to be found, perhaps in the exquisite bronzes, some of them 5000 years old, in the ancient Chinese vase of rare patina; in the ivory dancing girls; the bold strong lines of the Persian horses and the Grecian picture which is thousands of years old and which portrays a delicately lovely girl whose great eyes seem to follow you about the room.

It is they which open up what St. Exupery called man's inner distance. It is their beauty which transcends the bounds of time or space, which gives spiritual length and breadth to physical measurements.

Conception of Beauty

»Beauty,« said Remarque, »is the perfections, which, like infinity, we try to meet but never succeed in doing. It goes far beyond just being beautiful. In creating it the artist has given me eternity to hold on my walls and floors.

»The first moment I had money,« he continued, »I bought paintings and rugs (his Persian collections alone is extraordinary), thus putting my bank account where I could see it. Yet I will not be possessed, even by these things.

»You see, the one thing that we cannot collect interest on is our own life. We must pay a day from the capital each day that we live. Therefore I put that which enriches my life and endows it with wonder and meaning here beside me in my home where it is visible in order that each day may be filled to the brim with beauty, without using up my time journeying to a museum.«

At one end of the room was a large table piled high with records of the finest music the world has to offer, while nearby stood a large radio-victrola. Music, of course, one cannot do without. And everywhere there were books: in cases and on the chairs, on tables and the window sills and on the huge davenport. They, too give wings to the soul.

Five Times Wounded

»I have tried to write always,« he said, »but I was late in finding myself as a writer.« War was a great retarder as well as a great instigator and he knew both angles. A graduate of the Catholic gymnasium in his town he was plunged into war at seventeen and a half and was demobilized when he was 20, after being five times wounded, the last time very seriously.

»But that war, with all its horror and stupidity and its courage, taught me the value of individual life,« he went on. »By getting out of it unscathed, I felt that I had a duty to make something of what I had saved, i. e., myself.

»But somehow I didn't. My mother had died in 1917, and after the war I took a teacher's course, which the government offered to discharged soldiers and then taught for some months in a little town on the Westphalian moors near the Dutch border.«

But then the restlessness which was the aftermath of war and the bitterness of defeat intensified by his own abounding energy and rootless existence, led him for the next two years into a number of odd jobs which seemed to change as the swift seasons rolled.

The times were not easy, inflation and unemployment were painting a darker and darker Germany and he had to eat to live. He still wanted to write, but, as he put it, »I was so hungry for life, that I was as a starved person and, in sitting alone, writing, seemed to me very wasteful of that commodity.«

Stonecutter in Cemetery

At one time he was as a stonecutter in the cemetery of his own town of Osnabrück, and later became a test driver for a Berlin tire company and still later a tester of racing cars. He made automobile road maps and road signs, often driving six or seven hundred miles a day. (Today he has no car and he misses it.)

Then he began to write articles for a Swiss automobile magazine, did advertising copy writing, covered performances at the local Stadttheater (until he was beaten up by a group of

dissatisfied actors) and eventually ended up as assistant editor of Sportbild, an illustrated sports magazine. While working at the latter, he used his nights to develop a book which was, he said, »simply a collection of the best stories I and my friends told each other as we relived the war over our drinks.«

Sensation Over Night

»Finally, finding I was getting nowhere at all with it, I took off six weeks and completed ›All Quiet on the Western Front.««

It went its round of publishers, this simple, direct and achingly poignant novel, which showed war face to face and not »in a glass darkly« and was at last reluctantly accepted by one of them and became a sensation practically over night. The very first year it sold a million and two hundred thousand copies in Germany alone.

Yet the author's only reaction when he heard of its acceptance was the joyful realization that now he could buy the red racing car which he had wanted for so long.

»I used the money,« said Remarque, »to grab at life.«

But he had built himself a monument more lasting than bronze. The nazis recognized the book as a tremendous force against them, and when it appeared as a motion picture, organized resistance flared in the form of riots, speeches and editorials and edicts preventing its showing. Goebbels made a speech against it, stinkbombs were released in the theaters, and white mice were let loose in the aisles.

Later they were to burn his books and to deny him German citizenship, but long before that he had made good his escape from their vicious and grasping hands, although there were moments when the Three Sisters held their shears with unsteady hands.

Sought Peace in Alps

As early as 1931 he had retired from the deafening reverberations of fame and had sought solitude and peace in Switzerland on the shores of Lake Maggiore, where, in 1932, he built himself a lovely house, a picture of which hangs among his masterpieces in that long room where he talked.

He had returned occasionally to Germany, becoming, as the Nazis cemented their power, an object of increasing suspicion, and aversion and soon his temporary exile became permanent. His final escape came when his agent found him after a night of search, sitting in a cafe around four o'clock in the morning and urged him to get away to Switzerland.

Remarque called the waiter for a last drink and then waited. He called again, without effect, and then decided to get in his car and do as requested, which is why the Nazis found only an empty apartment when they came to get him.

Early in 1939, after a year in Paris, he came to the United States and soon will become an American citizen. »America,« he said, »is the only country which has the tradition of immigration. Here I, too, can feel like an American. I do not want to go back to Germany, and I know no one who does.«

Nazism Not Dead

He is convinced that Nazism is not dead in Germany or in the world, and he hopes through his books to keep men mindful of its aims and fearful attainments so that they may understand its perfidy, depravity and danger.

»If I wrote about youth«, he said, »I would be torn to pieces. I have no little memories to draw on. In ›Arch of Triumph‹ I put in the problem of the refugees, the derooted who felt in their bones what would happen and were unable to avoid it. They were also the means by which I tried to show the universal longing of man to get something out of life before the end. On my wall is a framed poem of Goethe's, dated Weimar, 30 March, 1816. I gave a copy to a refugee, but his one I take with me everywhere. Translated, it reads:

›Who comes into the world builds a new house
He goes and leaves it to the next one
Who will transform it to his liking
But no one will finish it.‘

»An author must see the continuity of life as well as the individual expression. He must also have balance. He has got to see life in that way, weighing the inner against the external. The first thing an author must have is proportion.«

Life a Precious Thing

»You never learn anything by saying over and over the same thing. I know so many things of the dark side of life and I cannot neglect that, but I also want to know that life is worthwhile to live, I want to realize, as I didn't, when I came from the battles, still alive, that life is a precious thing.

»My father once said, ›When you start to hate things, you had better decide to like them. It is easier.‹ I have made a tremendous effort to do that. I have forced myself never to look back.

»Each day I think, ›It is inevitable that I die‹, so it makes me an optimist and changes my whole life.«

»I regret only what I did not do,« he added with a slightly wry smile. »For 20 years I have not gone to bed before 6 A. M. Now I have made it 5. A. M.«

»I do not think it is good for a writer to be cut off for long periods from what is usual or what we call normal. People must see and hear what happens in individual terms for their imaginations do not know accepts facts in the mass, they do not know how to count. A disaster takes five million lives and it means nothing – the figure is blank. But if I make you see one man in his completeness, see his faith, his hopes and his difficulties and then show you how he died, it is written in your mind forever.«

So this tall, well-knit and handsome man, cosmopolite, sophisticate and devotee of beauty, realist and dreamer, artist and mystic, has learned through his years of living to appreciate the peculiar treasure which is life, but now he is translating into positive terms the compulsion of making that life count which was upon him when he came back from the Western Front.

He is making us see the inner qualities of man, revealing his troubled heart, sifting through the filter of his perceptive observation and astute judgment the human values which are true and real, setting them in a world which has cried havoc and against which we must be warned.