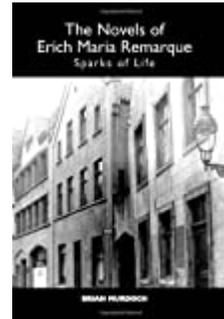




**Brian Murdoch.** *The Novels of Erich Maria Remarque: Sparks of Life.* Rochester: Camden House, 2006. 264 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-328-1.



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**Published on** H-German (June, 2008)

## The Impotent Observer

Erich Maria Remarque is certainly one of the twentieth-century's most influential writers. *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929), presumably the first international bestseller, is still inspiring for the ways it represents and remembers World War I. In their portrayal of the aggressive warrior as a helpless victim of his (physical, social, and cultural) surroundings, Remarque's reflections on the war provided a powerful image and a compelling characterization of modern experience. His popularity and influence on western culture notwithstanding, scholars of German literature have commonly shied away from a thorough, systematic study of his novels. Brian Murdoch indicates several reasons for the absence of an extensive study—and teaching—of Remarque's fifteen novels. The two initial "errors [that] have been prevalent in the past Remarque studies" (pp. ix-x) originated, ironically, from the enthusiastic reception of his first war novel: the assumption that Remarque is an author of "banal" literature (*Trivilliteratur*), which lacks the stylistic sophistication and the gravity of a "great novel" (p. 2); and the belief that he is a "one-novel writer"—or, at least, a writer of a single "important" novel. This introductory survey seeks to overcome these errors and to provide the

foundation for a systematic, comparative analysis of Remarque's works in their cultural and political contexts.

In order to typify Remarque's distinctiveness, Brian Murdoch suggests that the difficulties with the critics were not based solely on his stylistic choices but also on his seemingly vague ideological convictions. Remarque's protagonists (for instance, during the Spanish Civil War in *Arc de Triomphe*) exhibit passionate opposition to fascism, but equally resent its communist adversaries. Murdoch identifies Remarque's vague ideological approach with his uncompromising realist style: "politics as such are by no means as clear-cut as some critics would have liked Remarque ... to believe" (p. 115). Nonetheless, Remarque's position is not only "negative" in its rejection of absolutist ideologies, but can be also associated with a "positive" *Weltanschauung*: the progressive-liberal (often dubbed "humanist") creed contemplated by many European intellectuals in the interwar period. The "new liberalism" of the post-World War I years sought to preserve the privileged role of the individual within the social formation, but resented prewar bourgeois conservatism, replaced the principle of *laissez-faire* economy

with the ideal of “social justice” and highlighted the need in an “objective” mechanism of arbitration to prevent future war.[1] Including Remarque within this ideological framework corresponds with his repeatedly cited statement that his ideology is one of the “individualist,” who cherishes “independence and tolerance” (p. 3).

Writing in retrospect in the 1950s, Remarque reflected with bitter nostalgia on the “fabulous years” of the Weimar Republic, in which “we believed in ... humanity, justice, and tolerance, and ... that one world war might surely be a sufficient lesson” (p. 69). This arguably naïve belief in “justice” fits the characterization of Remarque as representative of intellectuals who sought to reintroduce liberalism to the post-World War I “disillusioned” discourse. As Murdoch justly notes, the pacifist tendency and “intentional internationalism” of Remarque’s antiwar novels does not eliminate patriotism (p. 47). Instead, similar to the position of other European “new liberals” (such as Walther Schickel, Alfred Zimmern, John Maynard Keynes, or Albert Einstein), it underlines the inevitable victimization of the individual in a political culture that encourages international wars and social injustice, a culture that fails to challenge the unlimited sovereignty of the state and is blind to social injustice. Evidently, this interpretation of the ideological framework of Remarque’s works is limited. Murdoch’s assertion that Remarque’s novels were conceived in various political, cultural and ideological contexts is undeniably true. It seems to me, however, that associating him with the “new liberals” opens the novels to a richer discursive analysis than Murdoch’s emphasis on Remarque’s affinity for “twentieth-century existentialism ... the philosophy of a life based upon personal decisions by the isolated individual” (p. 195-196).

Situating Remarque within this ideological framework might also explain the duality of the “universal” and “German” perspectives in his novels. This duality stands at the core of Murdoch’s survey, the main premise of which is that Remarque should be read as a “German chronicler of the twentieth century,” that is, a narrator of the “defining political themes” of the twentieth century from the point of view of a “German” and a “humanist” (p. 219). Murdoch’s Remarque is a diligent observer, “not the completely detached outsider, but often the impotent, occasionally enraged observer” (p. 219).

It seems as if Remarque’s biography predetermined this status of an “isolated chronicler.” Born in 1898, a member of the “lost generation” that matured during the Great War, he briefly tasted the remnants of the prewar

German bohemian life in his home town, Osnabrück, before being drafted in 1916. Returning from the war to an essentially new social reality, he trained to become a teacher, but was attracted instead to a career as a writer and as an editor of a sports magazine. Before publishing his bestseller war novel, he had even changed his name on a few occasions. He was recognized as a pacifist and forced into exile from Germany after January 1933, but—even though he successfully integrated himself into American popular culture (as scriptwriter, novelist, and celebrity playboy)—he was relatively isolated within the circles of exiled intellectuals. All these experiences are reflected in his novels, frequently by the actions and experiences of the main protagonist. Remarque himself also noted the autobiographical sources in his novels on several occasions (p. 100). Nevertheless, as Murdoch repeatedly accentuates, personal experiences inspired Remarque only to a limited extent and an analysis of his novels should not be based on his personal life: “the appreciation of the work[s] gains little from this additional knowledge” (p. 13). Put simply, Murdoch’s interest lies less in the life that stimulated Remarque’s narratives, and more in the ideas that shaped his depiction of the century’s major conflicts, and the stylistic choices that formulated his intriguing, undervalued perspective.

For this reason the book is organized according to the chronology of the depicted events—an order that often correlates with comparable themes and stories—rather than according to the chronological order of their writing. The analysis offered in Murdoch’s book is by no means exclusive or complete; it is a starting point for the study of Remarque’s novels as it highlights the conceptual links between the works and the development of the author’s worldview. It also documents the development and changes in Remarque’s narrative techniques and the formation of his writing style. Remarque’s experimenting period is marked especially in his early works, such as *Die Traumbunde* (1920) and *Gam* (written in 1923-24, first published in 1998). In his analysis of these early novels, Murdoch emphasizes the “excessive use of diminutives ... overdone attempts to play with sounds ... [and] equally overdone use of pauses” (p. 14). These beginner’s ailments disappear in later novels, which adhere to the stylistic biases of the “neue Sachlichkeit,” the “shocking realis[t] ... quasi-documentary” style. In the works from the late 1920s onwards, “[t]he structure is episodic ... holding the interest by moving rapidly from one scene to another” (p. 37). This markedly cinematic style would become a hallmark of Remarque’s works, and seemingly a reason for the critics’ scorn.

Murdoch's observation regarding the development of Remarque's "historical" perspective is revealing. From his initial, 1920 publication, in which he recalls the prewar German bohemian milieu, to his final novel, *Schatten im Paradies* (1971)—which narrates the troubles of wartime German exiles in America—Remarque's narratives reflect on events of the recent past. However, only in his late 1920s war novels did he first develop fully the dual perspective that characterizes most of his works: the depiction of the past in a way with urgent implications (moral, political, and so on) to readers at time of publications. "Die Traumbunde" exemplifies the tendency of the early novels to depict a lost world, a reality where the war was still unknown. According to Murdoch, the prewar setting was perceived by readers as irrelevant to the conflicts and challenges of 1920s reality. This assertion, which accepts portrayals of the Great War as an unbridgeable break with the "innocent" past, of course, is debatable. Nonetheless, Murdoch's differentiation between the nostalgic tone of the early novels and the irony-laden depictions of the past in the later novels is noteworthy. Equally significant is Murdoch's identification of the challenging nature of the later works, comparing to the escapism of the novels written before *Im Westen nichts Neues*, which portray "a world where the war never existed" (pp. 14-15, 21).

Episodic narration is apparent in Remarque's second, unfinished novel, *Gam*. It is worth mentioning that here the cinematic style is accompanied with a "cinematic" narrative: a woman in a search of her "authentic self" sets off for a journey around the globe, encounters various types of men, and finally returns to her European bourgeois apartment to recognize her genuine identity there. This storyline, with slight variations, was a common pattern in Weimar popular adventure films (most notably in Joe May's film series, "Herrin der Welt" [1919-20]). These films shared with Remarque's work the portrayal of the progressive urban middle class, instead of the national community, as the essential group with which the protagonist identifies. Like Remarque, makers of early Weimar adventure films sought to formulate a new notion of subjectivity that would match the new urban surroundings that sprang up in post-World War I Germany, and to envision a modern reality in which the ethics of the liberal bourgeoisie correspond with everyday experience. This similarity is another indication of Remarque's "new liberal" worldview and ambitions.

Remarque's internationalist biases are evident, naturally, in his pacifist novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929) and its presumed sequel, *Der Weg zurÄck* (1931). Mur-

doch terms the narrator's position in these novels "the frog's perspective" in order to differentiate it from the silence and shortsightedness implied by the customary term used to describe the narrator's position in these works ("the worm's-eye view"). This perspective enables presentation of direct, realist reports from the trenches. It also disregards questions and doubts that could be investigated from a more distanced perspective: the protagonists of these novels share no responsibility for the war, have no desire to expose its causes, and have no definite prospects for postwar reality. Moreover, they give no answers to these provocative questions, so that "the burden of finding answers is thus placed upon the readers" (p. 34). Scholars of World War I commemoration in the Weimar Republic—in novels, monuments, films, and so on—have frequently noted a common reluctance to address the subject of German responsibility to (and in) the war and the final defeat. This reluctance is often interpreted as a result of nationalist sentiment, cynicism, and/or marketing strategies (such as the one Murdoch identifies in Remarque's works). It can be argued, however, that Remarque—like several liberal filmmakers of the Weimar Republic—actually believed that the ideology of nationalism was responsible for the war, and therefore the question of German guilt was secondary. A soldier, from the "frog's perspective," is a soldier, a victim of his nation-state, regardless of his particular nationality. For understandable reasons, after 1933 this criticism of nationalism turned to a more specific target, totalitarian states—as, for instance, in *Drei Kameraden* (1936) and *Der schwarze Obelisk* (1956).

The novels of the late Weimar years already address the main themes that characterize all of Remarque's later works, such as the search for identity and maturity in interwar Germany, and the inability of the ordinary person to overcome the menace of the great ideologies of the twentieth century. Another motive developed here is emphasized further in the later novels: the role of sheer chance in life and death. Similarly to its apparent determination of the survival and later the death of the protagonist in *Im Westen nichts Neues*, chance plays a decisive role in the experiences, and the escape from death, of the exiled protagonists in novels such as *Liebe deine Nächsten* (written 1938-39) and *Arc de Triomphe* (written 1940-45). The emphasis on chance is probably related to a liberal distaste for institutionalized religion (the protagonist of *Drei Kameraden* asserts that "too much blood had been spilt" for the belief in "heavenly father" [p. 88]). It also functions, however, as a recurring reminder of Remarque's question for authentic identity and the justice.

In one of his particularly interesting and forgotten novels, *Der Funke Leben* (written 1946-51), this theme is clarified when a group of Nazi concentration camp prisoners toward the end of the war meets German refugees fleeing from bombed cities. In face of the arbitrariness of death, the prisoners “are aware that fate strikes the innocent more often than the guilty,” but they do not feel hatred and revenge (p. 167). Instead, they want to restore “the laws of life itself,” which, according to Remarque, are often called “God,” but their meaning is “humanity” (p. 168). Murdoch rightly dissociates this reference to God from the belief in the heavenly father. Nevertheless, whereas he interprets this reference as a “real emphasis upon human existence” (p. 168), it might be more accurate to treat it as an emphasis on a particular kind of human relations. (As mentioned above, even when Remarque identifies himself as “individualist” he couples it with “tolerance,” which indicates a specific kind of social interrelations.) This humanity–tolerance, awareness of the sufferings of others, inability to understand this suffering, and a sense of belonging to a community—is what Remarque’s protagonists are persistently seeking. The rule of chance and the inevitability of death are apparent in Remarque’s entire work, and their roles in the novels are similar: just as the omnipresence of death galvanizes the will, and the struggle, to live and lightens the “spark of life,” so the ultimate rule of chance stimulates the search for humanity.

The comparative survey offered by Murdoch highlights some further significant similarities and links between the novels. Thus, for example, in many of the novels the protagonist can be understood both as a distinctive individual and as a representative of his contemporaries (or, of a well determined group among his contemporaries—young soldiers, immigrants, etc.). For this reason, the protagonist of *Der Weg zur Å½ck* is not the same as that of *Im Westen nichts Neues*, but—as Murdoch stresses—he could have been: the latter is “living the post-war experiences that [the former would] have had ...; they are both representative members of the same generation” (p. 49). This duality within the protagonists is one of principles that enabled Remarque to construct a complex set of mirrors, in which different novels reflect each other and add meaning to one another—sometimes even explain one another—without a definite, causal, connection between them. Thus, for instance, the protagonists of *Drei Kameraden* and *Der schwarze Obelisk* are both veterans, have similar appearances, and go through similar experiences. As Murdoch notes, even though they are not identified as the same protagonist, the 1936 novel can

be read as a continuation of the 1956 one. At the same time, the retrospective irony of the post-World War II *Der schwarze Obelisk* injects the earlier novel with specific political meanings (pp. 78-79, 89).

Similar protagonists who face similar experiences in a slightly changed setting occur frequently in Remarque’s novels: in *Liebe deine NÃ¼chsten* and *Arc de Triomphe* the protagonists, exiled immigrants, encounter other helpless immigrants in a hotel and try to survive their fate (the influence of Joseph Roth’s *Hotel Savoy* (1924) on these novels is striking, and apparently related to Remarque’s repeating depiction of World War I, and its end, as the source of all later miseries). Arguably, the mirroring of the different novels onto one another and the vague sense of continuity between them is also reflected in the protagonist’s ability to “exchange” identities. In *Die Nacht von Lissabon* a dying refugee’s name is given to another German refugee in order to ensure his escape from Nazi Germany, and so on (the story of the second person is similar to the one of the protagonists of *Liebe deine NÃ¼chsten*). The change of names seems to indicate a change in the identity of its carrier: as Murdoch asserts, “the loss of names is an expression of the loss of identity” (p. 131). Remarque’s protagonists are different from each other, but still similar, because of the massive loss of identity, which he stages as one of the major “theme[s] of the twentieth century” (p. 3). This multi-faceted, reciprocal mirroring of the novels and the development of the recurring themes of isolation and emigration are underlined and effectively exemplified in Murdoch’s book. Murdoch’s argument that Remarque should be studied and taught as a “serious” German novelist, with a genuine and intriguing perspective on the defining experiences of the twentieth century, is well-taken. This book offers a concise survey of Remarque’s novels that underscores the values of his novels that have been previously overlooked. As an introductory survey, it will be an important contribution to the teaching of Remarque’s works. It might even instigate a thorough study that will contextualize Remarque within the European intellectual discourse of the interwar years, and will reconsider the transformations of this discourse through the experience of exile, and its influences on Cold War ideologies. Murdoch’s book demonstrates the urgency of such a study.

#### Note

[1]. See, for instance, David Long and Peter Wilson, eds., *Thinkers of the Twenty Years’ Crisis: Inter-war Realism Reassessed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 303-328.

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**Citation:** Ofer Ashkenazi. Review of Murdoch, Brian, *The Novels of Erich Maria Remarque: Sparks of Life*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14608>

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