

# LOOKING FOR A NEW ERICH MARIA REMARQUE

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Where is he today? The world has descended into yet another dark age. And by that I don't mean the pandemic, or only or mostly the pandemic. Although that, too, resonates with the Spanish flu (İspanyol nezlesi) of 1918-1920 that infected around 500 million and killed maybe 20-50 million of them. But no, I am thinking especially of our exiles, outcasts, refugees. Remarque wrote about those in the 1920s and 30s. The 21st century promises to be a century of immigration — and of resistance to it. Everywhere masses of people are fleeing disaster societies. And everywhere doors are closing in their face. Walls are built to keep them out (or keep them in and keep them separate). Nationalism, racism, xenophobia are marshalled to demonize and ostracize them. Why can't we have another, a modern Erich Maria Remarque to bring, for example, the recreate the lives of Turkey's five million Syrian refugees and bring them home to all of us?

I read him in my teens. When I was reading anything and everything that I could get my hands on. The rented flat in İzmir where (I was told) I had been born, and which holds all my memories until I was 17 and about to leave for the US, had a peculiar ground plan which embodied a massive, a glorious waste of space. Through the outside door you entered a large square hall, which led into my parents' bedroom straight ahead, as well as a seemingly endless corridor stretching left (13 metres long, as I found when I learned to count the floor tiles), which in turn opened into a living room, a dining room, my grandparents' room, and my own corner room, all arranged in single file, one after the other, and with enormously high ceilings, so high that if your balloon escaped there was really no way to get it down. As for the entrance hall, it held our noisy ancient fridge that rumbled and gurgled perpetually like a car trying to get started but not quite succeeding, as well as a tall red cupboard or cabinet that was the one big treasure chest in our household. In addition to my mother's architectural drawing kits, T-rulers, stencils, compasses etc, it held all the books in the universe, so it seemed to my childhood imagination. It was in that mysterious treasure chest that I went hunting and exploring, and where I first encountered the French and the Russians: Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, plus Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Lermontov. As well as Erich Maria Remarque. In Turkish, of course, starting with Garp Cephesinde Yeni Bir Şey Yok (Im Westen nichts Neues; All Quiet on the Western Front), and continuing into the softly romantic Interwar narratives, mostly translated by Burhan Arpad: Üç Arkadaş (Drei Kamaraden; Three Comrades); İnsanları Seveceksin (Liebe deinen Nächsten; Flotsam); Zafer Tâkı (Arc de Triomphe; Arch of Triumph).

Thinking back on it, even at that young age I was wholly absorbed by that pathos, the pathos of all those marginal, excluded, persecuted characters, sometimes stateless, always destitute, yet not giving up: still hoping, still struggling, still capable of caring for others, extending affection and protection, and even of falling in love desperate though it might be. When I was 14 or 15 I wouldn't have been able to put it into so many words, but above all it was the sad and gently human halo Remarque enveloped them in that swept me off my feet. Fast forward by sixty years: when I was designing HUM 406 (The Twentieth Century in European Art and Literature), for how Fascism and Nazism impacted on ordinary people's lives: the likes of Auden's *Unknown Citizen* or Orhan Veli's Süleyman Efendi, it was *The Black Obelisk's* Ludwig, or Otto Köster, Gottfried Lenz, and Robert Lohkamp plus Patricia Hollmann in *Three Comrades*, or Joseph Steiner and Marie, and Kern and Ruth in *Flotsam*, or Ravic and Joan in *Arch of Triumph*, that I immediately thought of. It has stimulated some interesting discussions. I asked my class about who they most identified with, and the votes came out rather evenly divided between two figures who, in the face of their own hardships and tragedies, persist in helping and caring for others: Otto Köster and Joseph Steiner. I liked that; for similar reasons Joseph Steiner, the tough yet tolerant Jewish exile in *Flotsam*, reminiscent of the experienced old soldier Kaczkynski in *All Quiet* who is the "fixer" for Paul Baumer's much younger crowd of former high school students, has always been my favorite. More specifically, here is what one of them, Ms Elif Gülyeşil, had to say as she systematically explored (in notes that I have partially edited and corrected) "Common themes between *Flotsam* and *Arch of Triumph*" :

First there is a dominant theme of drifting along without any legal documents, any permanent residence or passport. In both novels, leading figures or chief couples have to flee and hide from the police or other authorities. They are ordinary, average, innocent human beings who are being treated like criminals. They can neither get a passport nor stay in any country. Instead, they have to be on the run all the time.

Another joint topic is about the difficulty of finding safe and steady jobs. In *Arch of Triumph*, Ravic works at a Paris clinic as a ghost surgeon, and he also provides medical examinations for prostitutes in brothels. In *Flotsam*, Kern is looking for jobs nonstop. At one point he finds a job in an amusement park in Vienna, which seems relatively promising compared with the others.

Curiously, in both novels there is an element of the theatre. Even in more affluent places in peaceful times, being an actress or engaging in theatrical work seems unstable and not necessarily promising. Generally speaking, all the jobs available to the refugees in these books could be anything from housekeeping to street-peddling selling cheap third-class things. At the same time, Remarque's repeated theatre-and-actress motifs made me think that either he must himself had had a theatre experience, [from here on, this is what I have added – HB] or that he regards it as a most fragile occupation, or perhaps that he is using this stage or drama motif to echo and to sharpen our sense of the drama that is taking place in real life.

Some primary female figures — Ruth and Joan — stand out from among other women (and men) with their skilled and educationally qualified attributes. Joan is an actress with a good attention span and a little mystery surrounding her. Ruth is a student who carries thick books and has a hard time letting them go even for the sake of survival. They are strong, autonomous, independent.

This upheaval also includes romance. They need something, somebody, to hold on to. They have such small lives and harmless desires that it seems absurd for them to be treated like villains. All they want is to have a home to live in, to not worry about tomorrow, to be able to make plans for just one week — and to be able to love someone without the fear of being inconstant due to camps or imprisonment, to be able to come home and find their loved ones safe and sound, to be able to think of having a baby, of having ordinary family nights filled with small talk, laughter and champagne. Instead, in Flotsam Ruth and Kern come to a point where they have to rent a room at a brothel just to sleep safely. They are in their bed next to each other, homesick and downcast, but the couple in the next room are loudly making love. It is a striking contrast.

Or consider this conversation, in Arch of Triumph, between Ravic and Joan, where Joan is attempting to leave and Ravic begs for togetherness out of a very sweet and innocent urge: one more night to shoulder her sleeping head:

Ravic put his glass down. “You know you would leave me again — tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, sometime —” he said. Joan lowered her head. “Yes.” “And if you returned — you know you would always go again —” “Yes.” She raised her face. It was flooded with tears. “What is it, Ravic? What is it?” “I don’t know either.” He smiled. “Sometimes love is not very gay, is it?” “No.” She looked at him. “Why is it this way with us, Ravic?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know that either, Joan. Maybe because we have nothing left to hold onto. Before, one had many things — security, background, faith, aims — all of them friendly railings to which we could hold when love shook us. Nowadays we don’t have anything — at best a little despair, a little courage, and otherwise strangeness within and without. Then if love is in, it is like a torch on dry straw. One doesn’t have anything but love — that makes it different — wilder, more important, and more destructive.”

Also significant in this regard is how men behave with regard to their beloveds. This is yet another common point, which may come from Eric Maria Remarque’s own personality. They are gentle and protective but not superior. Both Ravic and Kern are loyal to their loved ones even when they are in brothels or similar places from time to time. In fact we never witness promiscuous masculinity or physical pleasure, even though it might serve as a great defence mechanism for men in times of trouble. It is important for men to feel potent and in control, and to seek a relationship in which they can dominate women who they perceive to be weaker; hence they tend to fall into the trap of becoming less humane, less empathetic and more narcissistic. I will turn again to the brothel scene, which was really remarkable to me because while we get a sense of “only and only flesh” kind of uncleanness from the sounds of love-making next door, we don’t see it affecting Kern in any way. Instead of being led into his own sexual fantasies, he simply hugs Ruth and dreams of a better tomorrow. Also when Ravic understands that Joan is leaving, all he wants is “one more night” to see her sleeping on his shoulder. No feeling of oppressive anger at a woman because she is leaving; no dominating sexual desires, no rigid feelings, no unhealthy defense mechanisms. It is almost feminine.

And yet, there is a difference. Arch of Triumph becomes different through Ravic. He takes his revenge against a Gestapo agent, and even though Haake has tortured Ravic himself and caused his beloved Sibylla to commit suicide, Ravic is filled with dark and heavy feelings for having killed this murderer. This kind of violence and vengeance leads me into pessimism about human life, and also colors my entire feelings for Ravic. On the other hand, with Kern I feel rather hopeful and at ease. Compared with Ravic, Kern does not even interfere violently in the fist fight that erupts around Ruth and the Jewish identity problem. He just wants to save her and leave the scene of the accident. He and Ruth are obviously facing great problems which they may never overcome, but are nevertheless likely to find a way to live for tomorrow.

Good work. This is what close reading and participation should be like.

