**All Quiet on the Western Front**

Athenaeum November 10, 2012

 Few experiences can change a man like the horror of combat. And among the long and laminable history of warfare, the carnage of WWI’s Western Front stands apart. For the first time in history the fruit of the industrial revolution, which held so much promise to enrich the lives of men, was instead employed in his most viscous pursuit. The conduct of the war was shockingly futile. New weapons like machine guns, gas, airplanes, and tanks rendered age-old military tactics obsolete and drove entire armies behind fixed entrenchments or risk certain annihilation. It is a fact after the stabilization of the front in 1914, nearly 600miles of unbroken trenches stretched from Switzerland to the English Chanel and over the next 4 years those lines did not advance in either direction more than a few miles. Generals on both sides attempted to find a formula to affect a breakthrough of the enemy’s line and achieve a rapid advance into the wide open country behind. Battles usually began with prolonged artillery shelling followed by the infantry advance. The shelling was rarely as effective as anticipated leaving defenders ready and able to pour withering fire on the advancing troops. In the rare event the attackers were successful in dislodging the defenders from their trenches, counterattacks by reserve units were more than sufficient to drive them back. The net result was a massive body count for no gain. In an attempt to win the advantage war planners schemed larger and larger engagements across a broader sweep of the front, but no breakthrough was ever achieved. Under such a stalemate, the conflict became a soul-sapping war of attrition at the cost of 4.5 million lives.

One of those soldiers was Erich Remarque. In 1916 at age 18 he was conscripted by the German army and served on the Western Front. He was wounded by shrapnel and sent to an Army hospital for the remainder of the war. His second book, *All Quiet on the Western Front,* was published in 1929. After the rise of the Nazis his works were banned and he was forced to leave Germany, eventually immigrating to the United States in 1937. *All Quiet on the Western Front* is largely autobiographical. Like Remarque, the main character, Paul Baumer is wounded on the front and sent to a hospital at the rear to recover. Unlike Remarque, Paul is eventually returned to the front where the war claims his life. His description of the conditions and the horrors of the war are brutal – scenes of men de-limbed and de-clothed by the blast of artillery shells, of living men with their skulls laid open, of lungs “pulsing” with every breath through horrific wounds, men scrambling into a shell hole with their feet blown off, “men without mouths, without jaws, without faces”. Conditions are so bad they seem better fit for the rats and lice from which there is no respite. The physical and emotional toll utterly destroys Paul. He cares for nothing but his comrades, and is suffered to watch each of them die, one by one.

The novel makes no gesture to the “romance” of war; it makes no pretence to the virtue of courage or valor or duty. He struggles to cope with the humanity of the enemy. In one of the novel’s most emotional scenes, Paul must share a shell hole with a British soldier whom he has killed. His conscience forces him to speak to the slowly dying man.

“It was the abstraction I stabbed. But now for the first time I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand grenades, your bayonet, your rifle; now I see your wife, your face, and our fellowship. Forgive me.”

 At once, he is tormented by the hopelessness of the situation. Fear of death compels him to draw blood, but immediately he is aware of his sin; his failure to heed mankind’s higher to charity and mercy. Instinct vs morality. Beast vs man. But how could anyone be expected to act differently when day after day they persist under such terrifying and bestial conditions. Earlier while assigned to a training base behind the front line he encounters Russian POWs, and again wonders why they should be enemies at all, and why murder has become his chief pursuit:

“A word of command has made these silent figures our enemies; a word of command might transform them into our friends. At some table a document is signed by some person whom none of us knows, and then for years together that very crime on which formerly the world’s condemnation and severest penalty fall, becomes our highest aim. But who can draw such a distinction when he looks at these quiet men with their childlike faces and apostles beards.”

These missives give voice to another major them e of the novel, that of betrayal. Who are these faceless men committing the country to war? Who are these men that because they are willing to wield the pen compel millions to wield the sword? They are men like Kantorek and the German-master. They are those for whom the stakes are low – for whom the war is a mere mental exercise in military strategy and whose blood and treasure is not at risk. They are an older generation condemning their sons to death. The German-master tells Paul he knows nothing of the war:

“You see only your little sector and so cannot have a general survey…the enemy line must be broken at Flanders and then rolled up from the top”

What astounding arrogance! What pathetic ignorance! Patriotic fervor runs hot in his veins, because his blood has not been chilled by the brutality of the front. Paul’s father, too, only wants to talk of Paul’s experiences not realizing that such things cannot be spoken of by those who have endured it. The very experience of the war has broken Paul of all childhood attachments – his love of books, his love of family. The sweet memories of better days seem to have left him for good like a vapor dispersed by the breeze. His youth is shattered, as if it never existed. The war claims his soul before it claims his life. Remarque’s opening dedication is perhaps the perfect synopsis of the novel; that *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a story of men, “though they may have escaped the shelling, were destroyed by the war”.