In 1945 Erich Maria Remarque told a *New York Times* reporter that he was no longer a German: “For I do not think in German nor feel German, nor talk German. Even when I dream it is about America, and when I swear, it is in American.”¹ He had left Germany for Switzerland in 1933, just a day before Adolf Hitler was named chancellor. Stripped of German citizenship in 1938, Remarque had already made a new home for himself in the Swiss village of Porto Ronco near Locarno. A year later, together with his ex-wife Ilse Sambona (the two had divorced in 1930), he sailed to the United States on the *Queen Mary*. War broke out while they
were at sea, and the ship was led to port by a British cruiser. Remarque became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1947.

Remarque’s name is so closely associated with the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (the book’s title referred ironically to a recurring phrase in the Kaiser’s wartime communiqués) that it is easy to forget how his literary career extended into and beyond the 1930s and that he became something of a celebrity writer in the United States. Less reclusive than one might expect from an author who captured the existential distress of an entire generation, he consorted with an international Hollywood set that included Marlene Dietrich, Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo, Luise Rainer, Douglas Sirk, and Paulette Goddard (who later became his second wife). Still, the *New York Times* reported in Remarque’s obituary that the reputation as a “nightclubber” and frequent appearances at the Stork Club and at 21 did not really mark him as a “carouser” so much
as “a night owl with a taste for fine foods and memorable champagne.”

Los Angeles, with its colony of German exiles, seemed like a natural second home for Remarque, who turned his melancholy good looks and European sophistication to good account. “Refugees from Hitler arrived in droves,” the actor David Niven recalled. “When Erich Maria Remarque was not wrapped around Marlene Dietrich or other local beauties, he acted as a sort of liaison officer.”

But Remarque never felt comfortable in Los Angeles, an urban setting with none of the urbanity he associated with cities like Berlin, Paris, or New York. A flaneur by nature, Remarque feared that he might be arrested for loitering while taking walks in Beverly Hills, a place with no tolerance for leisurely strolls driven by the human instinct to observe others and take in (even suburban) sights. He was more invested in the other coast, and soon combined the glamour of Hollywood with the cos-
mopolitan pleasures of New York City night life. “New York! That really is a city without the melancholy and oppressive charm of the past! An explosion of life! The future!”

It did not help that the community of German refugee writers in Los Angeles had failed to embrace Remarque as one of their own. Was it professional jealousy? Intellectual snobbery? Remarque had, after all, attained a degree of international celebrity and commercial success through the publication of *All Quiet on the Western Front* that seemed to outdo Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht, luminaries in the German-speaking world—even if Mann was the writer who had secured the Nobel Prize. “Remarque has made it clear he ‘hates’ me,” Thomas Mann confided in his diary. “His boorish behavior had made that clear before.” It is hard to imagine that someone whose behavior you consider “boorish” would reciprocate with warmth. In fact, part of the boorish behavior may well have been motivated by Mann’s disdain for a writer
lacking his own trademark complexity, sophistication, and depth. Brecht was no less disparaging, offended by a compatriot who showed up at events with a “Hollywood Mexican star” on his arm and who wore tailored tuxedos (a cardinal sin in the playwright’s book). “His face lacks something, probably a monocle,” he added derisively, revealing just how deeply his contempt for the novelist ran, despite the fact that Remarque was in so many ways a kindred spirit, a writer whose books—along with works by Thomas Mann, Maxim Gorky, James Joyce, Heinrich Mann, and Brecht himself—had been tossed by the Nazis into bonfires set at the Opernplatz in Berlin on May 10, 1933.6

Erich Paul Remark was born in the German city Osnabrück in 1898. He later reverted to the original French spelling of his last name (with the hope of dissociating himself from the extravagances of the first novel he had written, the title of which he said he would refuse to divulge, “even under torture”) and added the middle name Maria, most
likely as a double homage to his mother and to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Conscripted into the German army at age eighteen in 1917, he was moved toward the Western front and served in a trench unit in Belgium based somewhere between the town of Thourout and the forest of Houthulst. Wounded during the Battle of Flanders that same year, he spent the last two years of the war in a German army hospital. In the postwar period he took a range of jobs, in advertising (writing copy) and in sales (specializing in monuments and tombstones). He also worked, with limited success, as a journalist, teacher, and editor.

Remarque’s second novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, was written in 1927 and did not immediately find a publisher. But once the *Vossische Zeitung* serialized the work to great acclaim in 1928, it was picked up by the distinguished publishing house Ullstein and became an instant bestseller, despite brisk competition from a wave of war novels appearing in the late 1920s. Remarque’s novel
captured the imagination not just of war veterans, but also of an entire civilian population. Its appeal crossed national boundaries and the volume was quickly translated into dozens of languages, with remarkably strong sales continuing over the decades. In America the book became a standard feature of high school curricula and summer reading assignments.

All Quiet on the Western Front has been called the greatest anti-war novel of all time, and, more than other war novels published in that year—most famously Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms and Frederic Manning’s The Middle Parts of Fortune—it offers a passionate indictment of the horrors of combat, showing how the machinery of war destroys bodies, shatters skulls, tears limbs from torsos, and rips away flesh to expose vital organs. Less confrontational than Ernst Friedrich’s photo album War against War! (1924), with its chilling photographs of
soldiers on battlefields and wounded veterans back home, All Quiet on the Western Front gave its readers interiority and intimacy as only fiction can, relaying the lived experience that silenced real-life veterans of that war (the loss of the storytelling instinct in the period following World War I was of deep concern to Walter Benjamin in his 1936 meditation on the storyteller). It also revealed how the fog of war is both world-shattering and word-shattering, making it impossible to build meaning and sense, and consequently producing a cascading series of crises ranging from the linguistic to the existential.

What emerged from Remarque’s war novel was a new aesthetic register that moved in the mode of the grotesque, valuing fragmentation and deformation in its representational practices. It was a register uncannily anticipated by the German Expressionists, the French Fauves, and the Italian Futurists, along with the Cubists. “The broken world that emerged from the carnage seemed to have made prophets of the Cubists,” Simon Schama
writes, in an effort to explain how the prewar avant-garde provided an aesthetic script for the era following World War I. German painters like Franz Marc affirmed that there was a certain “artistic logic” to painting a Cubist work like his Tierschick-sale “before the war, rather than their being stupid reminiscences after the war.” Remarque’s narrative style may in fact be seen as a belated form of literary modernism, less conventional than most critics have held.

The authorization of grotesque disfiguration—of an artistic strategy that Marc called both “horrifying and moving”—was also part of a program that endorsed affective engagement and sympathetic identification, perhaps in a bid to compensate for unspeakable physical injuries and the loss of bodily integrity. Bodies dead, injured, and mutilated “magnetically” draw forth our sympathy, as Sarah Cole has pointed out, and encounters with the dead are accompanied by an urge to memorialize, to invest the dead with a story. The
instinct to memorialize becomes evident when the novel’s hero, Paul Bäumer, almost as a reflex, grabs a pencil from the pocket of the Frenchman he has just killed and declares his intention to write a letter to the man’s wife. The author of All Quiet on the Western Front engages in the same form of memory work by writing the story of a combatant shot just before the war ends, on a day when, in a final ironic twist, all is said to be “quiet.”

By 1930, Remarque had sold over a million copies of his book in Germany, and two million elsewhere, and his fame quickly spread to the United States, where the Hollywood dream factory worked its magic to turn the nightmarish events in Remarque’s novel into a gripping film, directed by Lewis Milestone and released in 1930. When the film was shown in Berlin, the screening was disrupted by a “Dr. Goebbels” and three hundred of his followers, as the New York Times reported a day later on December 7, 1930.12 “Organized booing, catcalling, throwing malodorous bombs and
releasing white mice in the theatre”—this was the reaction to a film thought to betray veterans of the war by taking a pacifist stand and promoting a form of international solidarity that crossed national lines.

Remarque, in the meantime, had moved on, if not yet from Berlin, then at least with his writing. Working on *All Quiet on the Western Front*, he had, both instinctively and intellectually, set out to write “an anti-war novel,” one that ended with the narrator’s death, despite pleas from his publisher to let Paul Bäumer survive and live on in sequels. He believed that a rewrite culminating in the “triumph of survival” would have betrayed the pacifist spirit of the work and produced something akin to “an adventure yarn,” one stripped of the tragic pathos in the original work.

In later years, Remarque found himself less reluctant to experiment with narratives about the “triumph of survival,” though, tellingly, he wrote about the dark side to survival—the challenges of return-
ing from war and experiencing the shock waves of civilian life. If *All Quiet on the Western Front* gave readers scenes of horrific trench warfare and explosive scenes of human carnage, Remarque’s later work, most notably the novel *The Way Back*, tells about how new pathologies emerged in the post-war era—shell shock, battle fatigue, and war neurosis most obviously, but also all kinds of other symptoms, including perverse nostalgia for the combat zone, a need to reenact military maneuvers, and in general an inability to process the horrors of war and a lack of opportunity to talk about them.

Remarque himself discovered his own unique way back through writing, giving us accounts not only of his own war experiences, but also those of his comrades in arms. *All Quiet on the Western Front* had been a mix of autobiographical experience and stories told by fellow soldiers, as the author once explained in an interview. Even after the war, Remarque continued to document combat memories through the consciousness of veterans
returning from war and finding themselves in emotional distress—physically impaired, socially dislocated, and psychologically ill-equipped to manage a life forever disrupted by the war experience. These became the characters featured in the short stories published by Collier’s in the early 1930s.

Remarque’s presence in an American mass-circulation magazine like Collier’s in March 1930—with the story “The Enemy”—was certainly connected to the release of the film of All Quiet on the Western Front, which had its New York premiere on April 29, 1930. Remarque was a big enough name after the success of the novel to get a “story by” credit even on the poster for the film, which showed a helmeted soldier looking out of a dark background with wary eyes. He had to be, of course, a German soldier, the protagonist of the film and the novel, Paul Bäumer, played by Lew Ayres in the film—but for an American public he might have
been Remarque himself. The Collier’s story, “The Enemy,” concerned German soldiers who secretly fraternized in a friendly way, exchanging cigarettes, with the French enemy on the front. But the face of the “enemy” whom Collier’s presented to its reading public was the German enemy against whom America had fought, presented by Remarque—as in his novel—in such a way as to engage the sympathy even of those readers who represented Germany’s enemies during the past war. The question of who was actually “the enemy” thus became a puzzle of receding perspectives in a figurative hall of historical mirrors—even though that question had seemed to be definitively resolved in the actual Hall of Mirrors with the signing of the Versailles treaty in 1919, ten years before the publication of All Quiet on the Western Front.

Though All Quiet was published a full decade after the end of the war (it was by no means Remarque’s first or overwhelming literary imperative
in the 1920s), the novel had its characters living, fighting, and dying in the inescapable present tense that made the war oppressively present to the reader, as well as shockingly real. The stories that began to appear in Collier’s between 1930 and 1934 did something uncannily different: they looked back on the wartime experience as something remembered across the passage of the decade. “When I asked my school-fellow Lieutenant Ludwig Breyer what was the most vivid experience of all his war service, I expected to hear of Verdun, of the Somme or of Flanders,” wrote Remarque in the first sentence of “The Enemy,” thus framing a reminiscence that would run counter to expectation, that would refuse to trade in battlefield names that were already famous as history by 1930. Another Collier’s story from 1930, “Where Karl Had Fought” (even the tense of the title, not present, not even past, but pluperfect) involves revisiting the battlefield: “This is no longer Karl Broege, the man of the bank managership and
the football news; this is another, ten years younger, this is Sergeant Broeger.” Never mind that the war is over, it is still very real in the minds of those who survived it. These stories acknowledge the passage of time, ten years out from the peace—and (though no one knew it) ten years from the outbreak of the next war, but they also acknowledge the palpable presence of combat in the routines of ordinary life. Remarque was writing at the midpoint of what we now call the interwar period.

The 1930s was a decade that would be deeply marked by Remarque and his literary depiction of the horrors of war, and ultimately shaped by the failure of such depictions to prevent the next war from coming. The triumph of the film All Quiet on the Western Front in 1930—crowned with an Oscar at the end of the year—was supposed to mark the closing of an era with a cinematic tombstone, and not, as we would now see it, the opening sally in a failed campaign to temper the new climate of ominous militarism.
The crucial change that had taken place from 1929 (the novel *All Quiet*) to 1930 (the film *All Quiet*) was, of course, the stock market crash that marked the beginning of the American and the European Depression. In Germany Heinrich Brüning of the Center Party became chancellor in March 1930, just as “The Enemy” appeared in *Collier’s*, and Brüning began an unsuccessful effort to combat the Depression through economic austerity measures. Rising unemployment and increased political volatility led to an enormously important election in September 1930, when the hitherto insignificant Nazi Party won more than a hundred seats in the German Reichstag. It was the beginning of the end of the Weimar Republic, the political regime in which Remarque was living and writing as a now famous author. By the end of 1930 the German “enemy” might already have begun to have a different face for some political observers.

The great German cultural event of the spring of 1930, as “The Enemy” was being delivered to homes
and newsstands in America, was the production in Berlin of the landmark film by Josef von Sternberg, *The Blue Angel*, starring Emil Jannings as a petty authoritarian schoolteacher destroyed by his infatuation with the cabaret singer Lola Lola—the role that made Marlene Dietrich into an instant legend. The rowdy schoolboys who mock Jannings in *The Blue Angel* form an interesting counterpoint to the docile schoolroom of German boys obediently learning militant patriotism from their teacher in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Dietrich, who made an anthem out of the song “Falling in Love Again” ("Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss") would become Remarque’s lover later in the decade, and theirs would be an important émigré partnership as a pair of icons who outlived the Weimar culture that created them and successfully reinvented themselves in the United States. By the end of 1930 Dietrich was already in Hollywood with Sternberg, making the film *Morocco*—a film with a rather different message from that of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, as
Sternberg glamorized the military mystique of the French Foreign Legion, with Dietrich slipping off her heels to follow Gary Cooper and his military company into the desert in the final frames.

The Depression in America called for other distractions beyond the historical cinematic tragedy of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and 1930 was the year that gave the American public Betty Boop and Hostess Twinkies. A *Collier’s* cover from March 1930, the month of “The Enemy,” showed three fashionable ladies huddled over a silver coffee service, obviously gossiping about anything but World War I, while the cover from August 23, 1930, which included “Where Karl Had Fought,” showed a woman in green harem pants, a printed pink and orange kimono-style jacket, and a big multicolored beach ball. The story featured on the cover was not “Where Karl Had Fought” but something called “Sin in the Desert”—which might have fit better with Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco*. *Collier’s* did its literary duty by publishing Remarque, but—with
its readership of about one and a half million—it also had to offer other entertainments.

In 1934, when the last of these collected Remarque stories appeared in Collier’s, “On the Road,” Remarque was already writing about the Depression in progress, with a story about a man doing railroad labor and remembering a wound from a long-ago war. Between 1930 and 1934, Germany and America had both been radically transformed. Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in Washington and the New Deal had begun. Remarque’s sympathy for the war wounded may have mattered less to Collier’s now than his sympathy for a poor laborer. By 1937 he was already thinking about America when he wrote to Marlene Dietrich in Beverly Hills, “It is night and I am waiting for you to call from New York. The dogs are asleep around me and the gramophone is playing—records that I have found—easy to love—I got you under my skin . . .”13 The author of All Quiet on the Western
Remarque at Collier’s

*Front* was responding to the American rhythms of Cole Porter.

In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien offered a blueprint for the war veteran aspiring to be a writer. A chapter entitled “How to Tell a True War Story” notes, “As a first rule of thumb, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.”¹⁴ His observation explains exactly why voices fell silent in the postwar period. Why replay and reanimate the horrors of lived experience? Why fight forgetting? There may, of course, have been many good reasons to forget, but there are even better reasons to remember, as Susan Sontag tells us. “Let the atrocious images haunt us,” she writes, “even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: . . . Don’t
forget.” Remembering serves the collective good, but beyond that, as the field of psychoanalysis discovered, remembering offered a pathway to mental healing and social reintegration for those who had suffered wartime trauma. Psychoanalytic techniques and treatment for processing the past and restoring repressed memories had emerged as powerful tools in the medical arsenal at the turn of the century, but they received an unexpected boost from the collective traumatic experience of World War I combatants and civilians alike.

Some of Remarque’s Collier’s stories can be seen as astonishingly close to Freud’s case studies. They may take the form of fiction, but they are based on fact, often more solidly credible than what we find in, say, Freud and Breuer’s Studies in Hysteria, written by two male doctors analyzing female “hysterics.” Remarque gives us presenting symptoms, manifestations of a pathology, and a pathway to a cure via remembering, reenacting, and abreacting in moments of therapeutic release.
Remarque’s snapshots of war neuroses and their consequences and cures remind us that World War I vastly expanded the domain of those treatable with psychoanalysis. The British anthropologist, neurologist, and psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers (fictionally memorialized in Pat Barker’s *Regeneration*) had once decided to “go in for insanity” after trying out a number of career options. But during the war he discovered that the “insane” now included victims of shell shock, men whose symptoms included temporary blindness, memory loss, paralysis—what could, in short, by analogy with the patients of Freud and Breuer, be called male hysteria. The British had tried hard to avoid the feminizing term “hysteria,” even though combat afflictions resembled that disorder, choosing instead “shell shock,” which suggests physical rather than mental trauma and was, for that reason, favored over “anxiety neurosis,” “war strain,” and “soldier’s heart.” Astonishingly, Freud had presciently developed a cure even before the mass onset of the disorder. “Just as
Freud’s theory of the unconscious and the method of psycho-analysis founded upon it should be so hotly discussed,” Rivers noted, “there should have occurred events which have produced on an enormous scale just those considerations of paralysis and contracture, phobia and obsession, which the theory was designed to explain.”

What Rivers learned while treating, among others, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, was that Freud’s discovery of repression, his belief in the process of “active suppression of unpleasant experience” and how it leads to repetition compulsion, offered the key to recovery from shell shock. Rivers practiced at Craiglockhart, a hospital for officers, where soldiers were not subjected to the painful electric faradization or electric shock therapy and instead engaged in a talking cure with a physician trained in psychiatric practices.

If we look at the Collier’s story “Josef’s Wife,” we begin to see just how closely Remarque modeled his short stories on case studies, drawing us first
into the orbit of his protagonist’s daily life, then opening a window into his mental world. That story gives readers an account of Corporal Josef Thiedemann, a man buried alive by a trench mortar in 1918 and back home the following year, retrieved by his devoted wife. A victim of amnesia, he reenacts the wartime trauma at home: “He often suffered at night from attacks of suffocation. Then he would leap up and strike out about him and scream.” Occasionally he becomes “restless” and flings himself on the ground: “He wanted to crawl and kept ducking continually.” Josef’s wife, featured in the title, is stoically persistent and instinctively understands how to treat her husband.

What does Josef’s wife do, given the fact that her husband is unable to escape his condition with the talking cure that W. H. R. Rivers adapted from Freud and Breuer’s *Studies on Hysteria*? Rivers had written about the “natural tendency to banish the distressing or horrible,” along with “all thoughts of war” and how it could be damaging rather than
healing. He noted that many physicians advocated focusing on “beautiful scenery” or “other pleasant aspects of experience” when in fact the “cessation of repression” can relieve some of the distressing aftershocks of traumatic experience. Beyond providing support, warmth, and purposefully affectless care, Josef’s wife takes her husband back to the scene of the traumatic event with the hope of enabling him to confront, remember, and abreact, with unexpected support from scavengers searching for scrap metal on the battlefields. In the setting of a double cleanup operation, Remarque brilliantly captures the ravages of war, taking us inside a mind that has been shattered and outdoors into a landscape utterly devastated by explosive weapons.

Reenactment occasionally gives way to forms of repetition compulsion that are depleting and damaging rather than cathartic and healing, as is the case for Karl Broeger in “Where Karl Had Fought,” a witness narrative with a comrade who
reports Karl’s struggle with war trauma. Karl lives in a spatio-temporal zone that blurs the lines between past and present, war and peace, civilian life and combat. As he and the narrator embark on a “sight-seeing tour” of theaters of war, the “death-ways of yesterday” are transformed into “boulevards of respectable post-factum visitors.” When remembrance bursts in on Karl “like a whirlwind,” he becomes the “dodging, intent, cautious gliding” beast of the battlefields: “once again he leads his men through the shell holes to the assault on the town.” We are caught in a Kafkaesque eternal present, a prison house of the mind where trauma is ceaselessly repeated. As the two pass through a landscape devoted to memorialization, complete with tour guides, monuments, and fourteen thousand crosses, Karl experiences surges of what Toni Morrison called rememory, a process of invoking memory images that are both in the mind and out in the world. Armed with this kind of double vision
and double consciousness—what could be seen as layered recollections—Karl revisits a scene of battle and reenacts terror, loss, and mourning, struggling to let go of his memories to use what Rivers termed *autognosis*, the ability to achieve some kind of healing by working through war memories.

If the “case studies” published by *Collier’s* model the successes and failures of psychotherapeutic strategies for working through war trauma, the other stories published there in the 1930s offer compelling dramatizations of the consequences of combat. Set in Germany during the war and in its aftermath, they take the form of what Margot Norris has called the literary vignette, a genre that “reduces the scale and magnitude of modern war violence sufficiently to retrieve an imaginable community of victims available to empathy and identification.” These moving miniatures are also testimonials, charged
descriptions of traumatic experience that reach out and grab us, drawing us into a universe of intense suffering with their haunting accounts. If compassion and empathy can quickly succumb to defeat for combatants facing violence that spirals out of control (“We have become wild beasts,” Paul Bäumer tells us in *All Quiet on the Western Front*), they remain powerful forces for those outside the combat zone, reminders of a “spark of humanity in the midst of annihilation,” as we read in “Annette’s Love Story.”

By writing stories designed to elicit empathy, thereby promoting what separates humans from beasts, Remarque performed what he must have seen as cultural work beyond pacifism. As Elaine Scarry has pointed out, “the fact of injuring tends to be absent from strategic and political descriptions of war,” which tend to mask the fact that “the central goal of war is to out-injure the opponent.” In *Good-bye to All That*, published like *All Quiet on*
the Western Front in 1929, Robert Graves describes this disjunction and how it was effaced in the final months of the war:

*Infantry Training*, 1914, laid it down politely that the soldier’s ultimate aim was to put out of action or render ineffective the armed forces of the enemy. The War Office no longer considered this statement direct enough for war attrition. Troops learned instead that they must *hate* the Germans, and *kill* as many of them as possible. . . . “Hurt him, now! In at the belly! Tear his guts out!” they would scream. . . . “*Bite him, I say! Stick your teeth in him and worry him! Eat his heart out!*” 20

As a counterbalance to the abstractions of numbers of wounded and body counts, as well as to disquisitions on military valor and honor, Remarque used his verbal resources to put injury on display, not to incite to violence but to show the explosive effects of war machinery and weapons
on the fragile human body. In the Collier’s stories, a voice emerges, one able to say what veterans could not say, recruiting our sense of empathy, building bridges between the living and the wounded or dead, and creating small patches of light and warmth in the darkness.

In the story ironically entitled “The Enemy,” Remarque reveals the one steadying force in a soldier’s life and how comradeship sustained the men, even as it, inevitably, magnified suffering when tragedy struck. In an episode that resonates with the famous Christmas truce of 1914, when German, French, and British soldiers crossed battle lines to fraternize, the narrator reports that the war’s “most vivid experience” turns out to be, not Verdun, the Somme, or Flanders, but the tragic death of a Frenchman accidently caught in the line of fire during a cease-fire. Weapons have a transformative power, and it is the dark “magic” of weapons that turns men against each other, escalating hostilities and turning comrades into enemies. As in All Quiet
on the Western Front and in later novels, comrade-ship (Kameradschaft) became a sustaining force, and a reminder that national identity has a way of deforming human interactions, leading to antagonism where there are in fact no fundamental differences between the men on the two sides. But that camaraderie perversely backfires, for the weapons of the war quickly can work their magic in a single, random instant of betrayal. As one critic puts it, compassion becomes “an instrument of torture to those afflicted by it.”

For Remarque, writing is a response to loss, an attempt not just to recapture sensation but to mine some kind of redemptive meaning from the carnage and the ruins. “Silence,” the most melancholy of the stories in this volume, draws its wistful power from the recognition that war destroys not only worlds but also words, undoing language and its power to memorialize. “Above this pall broods the silence, and sorrow and memory,” Remarque writes, reminding readers that “beside the dead sol-
diers sleep their weapons” (the unexploded shells still on the battlefield). Scavengers searching for scrap metal on the battlefields engage in a kind of violation, one that is not without risk. Remarque’s meditation on the brooding silence of the battlefields suggests that attempts to remember and memorialize may be just as intrusive and perilous as the exploitative labors of the scavengers.

If “Silence” mutes voices and advocates hushed reverence for the dead, “I Dreamt Last Night” offers a hymn to the bonding power of music and uses the power of narrative to memorialize a dead man. Witnessing an act of compassion, the hospitalized narrator finds his way back to life through the discovery of “something else,” something above and beyond “war and destruction.” In an interesting twist, Collier’s billed the story as follows: “The author of ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ interrupts his long silence to write this grave and magnificent story.” The first-person account about Gerhart Brockman, an army officer who has been “dying
uninterruptedly for weeks,” ends as a testimony to the power of language. Though unable to halt death, the sorcery of words at least provides some kind of consolation, if only in its power to move us as we read about how others are moved by loss. The stark prose of the Collier’s English-language translations seems also to create a literary masculine association between Remarque and his American contemporary Hemingway, who was likewise committed to exploring the fictional dimensions of war.

Empathetic identification is the delivered effect in many of Remarque’s vignettes, but these redemptive moments are tempered by other stories in which “moving” comes to mean nothing more than a nomadic existence on the fringes of the social world. In “The Strange Fate of Johann Bartok,” the protagonist tenaciously holds on to the memory of his wife through the war years only to return home and discover that his wife’s memory is not as durable. Like the first-person narrator of “On the Road,” who experiences acts of kindness
and generosity in ways that are unnerving rather than empowering, Bartok moves on, searching for a way back through the distractions of work. Bartok, with his Hungarian surname, comes out of the Habsburg wartime world that we more usually associate with the fiction of Joseph Roth, who was also remembering the war in the early 1930s, most famously as the terrible culmination of the novel *Radetzky March*, which was published in 1932.

Remarque revisits the war in large part to carry some of its victims out of the combat zone and the precincts of silence into the public domain. The German war correspondent Carolin Emcke once explained why she traveled to war zones. “The experience of violence,” she wrote, “often leads to the inability to give an account of the injustice endured, to the speechlessness of the victim, to their being forgotten.” Remarque wrote the stories that the combatants themselves could not tell,
not only because some became casualties of war but also because of the language-shattering experience of violence. Violence “has no voice,” Elaine Scarry tells us, for it “resists language and destroys it, . . . reverts to the state anterior to language.”

That German readers identified with Paul Bäumer is not in the least surprising. But as we can surmise from the sale of nearly nine million copies in the United States over nine decades—never mind that the novel was also translated into sixty languages—Remarque’s novel has also built a substantial community of readers who effortlessly cross national lines to empathize with its protagonist. Mordecai Richler, to his own shocked amazement, read the book in 1944 and found that “the author had seduced me into identifying with my enemy, 19-year-old Paul Bäumer, thrust into the bloody trenches of World War I.”

Why this American solidarity with a German soldier fighting the Allied Powers? Why do we fraternize in such powerful ways with a man who
was once an enemy combatant? There is, after all, a clear difference between bonding with the war dead on your own side and identifying with the suffering of enemy combatants. For one thing, the German soldiers in Remarque’s novels and stories quickly learn that the enemy is not, say, the Frenchman with his sights trained across no-man’s-land, but generals, factory owners, even schoolteachers, and other opportunistic players from what, only following World War II, a U.S. president called the military-industrial complex. Combatants on both sides are in its iron grip, and the German *Muschkoten*, like British tommies, U.S. doughboys, and French *poilus*, are all victims. The more we are exposed to the interior lives of Remarque’s soldiers and veterans, the more we are drawn into the orbit of their sufferings in ways that might lead us to put a novel like *All Quiet on the Western Front* down, close it up, and decide, as Bob Dylan tells us he did in his 2017 Nobel acceptance speech, “I never wanted to read another war novel again, and I never
did.”26 But as the Collier’s stories reveal, there is far more to Remarque than what is told in that one novel, and the accounts of those who survived and suffered, struggled and strategized, reminisced and convalesced, deserve as much attention as the tributes to those who tragically never returned from the combat zone.

NOTES

2 Ibid.
3 Hilton Tims, Erich Maria Remarque: The Last Romantic (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003), 119.
5 Tims, Erich Maria Remarque, 119.
6 Ibid., 120.
7 Barker and Last, Erich Maria Remarque, 7.


12 “See New War Spirit in German Film Row,” *New York Times*, 7 December 1930.


18 The evocative value of testimony has been more fully explored in the context of the Holocaust by Dori Laub and Shoshana
Remarque at Collier’s


22 Norris, Writing War, 94.


