

**Literary Monuments to the Millions Slain:
New times, New birds.
By Yisroel Shtern¹ (1930)**

Translated by Renata Singer (2006)

The last 10 to 15 years have brought new birds to the world. Our generation has seen these atrocious flying creatures. Shrapnel flew through the air and where it landed blackened forests were uprooted, green fields became red infernos, barns blessed with grain overflowing were congealed into cinders, while smoke choked the cities and villages. Poisonous coals floated overhead, before smashing people's skulls. These same hovering birds of horror pulled out the marrow from human skulls with their steel beaks and piled the battlefields with skeletons. Eighteen year-old boys and 40-year-old fathers, dead and sometimes still half-alive, were thrown like so many cat carcasses into hastily dug mass graves, until the space between sky and earth was full of crying and wailing – as the great German poet Elsa Lasker-Schuler² said: “So much lamentation in the world
As if God himself had died...”

Could literature, ever alert to the greatest and humblest experience, keep silent about such events? No! Literature watches and trembles over human suffering, like a mother over her beloved children. Remember that literature's loveliest and most fragile children are: poverty, loneliness, dejection, sorrow and pain; longings and doubts, struggles and bitternesses and great disappointments; as well as homelessness and sorrowful experiences of all kinds.

That is not to say that art is concerned exclusively with troubles and suffering, or relies on a foundation of pessimism. No, such a view would be quite mistaken. The case is altogether different. Art, which is after all created by people for people, can never afford to overlook the living human being, to whom it is directed and who will have to respond to it. But coming into contact with people, one must, willingly or unwillingly, encounter great clashes, severe struggle and conflict.

I don't want to be one-sided. Let me put this more precisely, so I may be understood quite clearly. I mean just this:

¹ (Ed.): published in 1930 in the Warsaw “Yugntveker”, a Bundist magazine, under the pseudonym Avigdor Ts. Dunkin. Three other of Shtern's essays appeared there that year under this name: *When the Revolution Comes*; *A Book That Battles Against War – Stefan Zweig's "Jeremiah"*; and *Edgar Allen Poe*.

(all footnotes following are by the Translator).

² Elsa Lasker-Schuler (1899-1945): Poet, Essayist, Playwright, Graphic Artist, Performance Artist. Active in Germany, Switzerland, Continental Europe; Palestine, Middle East.

A writer creates a work. Let us dispassionately try to ponder what makes him do what he does. Why does he gather so many details? And why does he then discard some of them like useless creatures, whilst caressing and patting and playing with the remainder? Why does an author try so hard to be evocative? He depicts people and animals and landscapes, not only using existing depictions but trying especially to develop new ones of his own. Why does he fritter whole days away shaping and reshaping characters; devising situations – which may be simple, straightforward and intelligible or weird, complex and clouded – that hold his story (fable) together and make it progress? What makes a person squander so much brain-power, so much industriousness, so much technical and people know-how, so much patience and so much skill?

What are all these for?

Here there can't be one answer, but two. It's one or the other: either the writer is in love with beauty regardless of how it is expressed, where it comes from or where it's headed; or the writer has a specific intention in composing the work, in which case he's in love with an idea.

In the first case the author's sole concern is the play of colours that make up the whole picture, the harmonious matching of sounds that make the melody. He is quite content so long as a character is successfully portrayed, no matter what kind of person it is: a good or a bad one, a child or a child-murderer, a pimp or a saint.

Well, if all his ambition is employed just to show types, to present people as they are, quite naked, then of course, the author has to deal with suffering. Because, let's face it, 80 per cent of a person's life is made up of nonsense, of trivial rushing about, of petty intrigues, hopes of wind and sand, empty dreams, foolish delusions, exaggerated sensitivities, and baseless insults.

In the second case, the writer wants his book to bring out a particular idea, and so he commits all his artistic means to the struggle. Now where there's a battle, a conflict situation, there's an enemy to fight against. And with an idea-focused work of art, the stronger, the more effective, more sparkling, more emotional it is – the more violent and obstinate, the more inflamed and risky is the struggle. An artist devotes all his skills to showing at every opportunity how bad it is, that his beloved idea is making no impact on life, how much gloom and woe is about and how many folk are miserable as a result. And *vice versa* – if his idea were adopted, how much sunnier and more supportive it would be everywhere, how much more freely and easily everyone would breathe, how much bliss and redemption this would bring!

Thus either way, it's quite impossible to avoid dealing with human suffering. How right is the Italian man of letters Settembrini, in Thomas Mann's "Magic Mountain", when he says that suffering is the most beloved theme seized upon by fiction writers.

Well, if so, is any subject so demanding and attractive for a writer as war? War, with all its terror and turbulence, mud, fire, blood and horror, with all its slashed throats and death-fears, with all its hells?

We do have the War to thank (though there's not much to thank the War for...) for some significant books.

Here I want to draw attention to something curious. The earlier writers, the known European writers, lacked the proper feeling to appreciate the violent upheavals of the past few years. They overlooked, or barely saw, the tragedy that the War brought with it.

Not a single popular writer of the older generation has given us a book about which we can say: here is a superb literary monument to the millions of innocent slain.

It's as if in the face of the War, they were left helpless and frightened, too afraid to get near it, and ended up avoiding the subject altogether.

And if somewhere in their work the World War does come up, it's insubstantial, conveys nothing of its monumental significance, and leaves no lasting impression.

There are some war books which are splendidly concise in form and rich in content. These come not from the well-known old literary lions but from fresh spirits, whom we've come to know these last few years.

Evidently even the most rewarding topic cannot be used by everyone (even if that "everyone" is a person of great talent) but must await that master to whom the topic truly belongs – for whom it was as if specially created.

It turns out that there is truth in the saying: *new times bring new birds*. Our great new time has thrown up great new talents.

Had anyone previously heard of the writer Henri Barbusse?³ Not until his book about trench warfare, depicting a suffering, thoughtful and creative, humane freedom-fighting Frenchman – his *Under Fire* – inflamed thousands of readers' hearts.

Erich Maria Remarque⁴, who dragged himself and his manuscript from one publisher to another, would probably never have lived to see a million copies of his book, if his hadn't been the voice for millions of lives that the World War gobbled up so greedily.

Who knew the English playwright Sherriff⁵ – the author of *Journey's End*? No-one, not even in England itself.

One mustn't overgeneralize, of course. There are certainly writers who had earlier earned substantial merit for their literature, and who did produce substantial works inspired by the War. But these are mostly not about the War itself, but written *around* the War; and they treat it either symbolically, or in a historical perspective.

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³ Henri Barbusse (1873 – 1935) was a French novelist and journalist. He became famous on the publication of his novel *Le Feu (Under Fire)* in 1916, which was based on his experiences during World War I. The book won the Prix Goncourt.

⁴ Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970) German writer, who became famous with his novel *Im Westen Nichts Neues 1929* (tr. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929), which depicted the horrors of war from the point of view of the ordinary soldiers. After initially being rejected for publication, , the novel sold 1.2 million copies in its first year.

⁵ R. C. Sherriff (1896-1975). English playwright. *Journey's End* was first performed in 1928. Among his other plays is *The White Carnation* (1953). He also wrote screenplays including *Goodbye Mr Chips* (1933) and *The Dam Busters* (1955).