

MICHAEL ROBERTSON

STEPHEN CRANE'S *OTHER WAR MASTERPIECE*



In July 1899 Lady Jennie Randolph Churchill, the glamorous American-born aristocrat, wrote to Stephen Crane asking him for a contribution to her recently established quarterly journal, *The Anglo-Saxon Review*. She suggested to Crane an article of six to ten thousand words on his experiences as a war correspondent in Greece or Cuba. Seemingly dazzled by the invitation, Crane eagerly accepted, even though no payment was offered and he was, at the time, desperately short of money.¹ The prospect of writing for Churchill's prestigious new journal, combined with the noncommercial aspect of the assignment, seems to have liberated Crane artistically. He produced an autobiographical essay of nearly twenty thousand words—twice the suggested length—about his experiences in Cuba during the Spanish-American War the previous year. His essay, "War Memories," is exceptional not only for its length but for its artistic daring. Crane used the essay as a stylistic testing ground; the piece is an extended linguistic experiment, a technically innovative text that marks a new phase in his work. Seldom reprinted in collections of Crane's writing and given little attention by critics, "War Memories" deserves to stand beside *The Red Badge of Courage* as Stephen Crane's *other* war masterpiece.

One of the reasons that "War Memories" is so little known, aside from its length, is that the work is difficult to classify. Caught awkwardly between story and book length, it falls with equal awkwardness between familiar genres. Is "War Memories" fiction or nonfiction? Story or autobiography? Journalism or memoir? The inability to pin down the work's genre seems to have caused critics and teachers to shy away from the text.²

The generic instability of "War Memories" is evident from the work's opening page. The narrator of "War Memories" uses first person and appears to be Stephen Crane. All the incidents he describes are consistent with what we know from other sources about Crane's Spanish-American War experiences, and throughout the piece he uses the verifiable names of battles, military officers, and correspondents. So far, so good—the piece appears to be a nonfiction memoir. Yet in the opening paragraph the narrator refers in the third person to "Vernall, the war correspondent," while later in the piece the narrator, speaking in first person, says that an officer addresses him as "Mr. Vernall."³ Crane's use of this *nom de guerre* seems to add a fictional touch to the work. Or does it? "Vernall" may suggest the Latin word *veritas*, truth. Does the name imply that the narrative is "all true"? Alternatively, the name may recall the word "vernal," suggesting that Vernall is a "green," untried young man plunged into a war that disorients him and renders him an unreliable narrator. Or is Crane simply being playful? For Vernall, it turns out, was the name of Crane's cook at his home in England.⁴ "War Memories" appears to blur deliberately the lines between fact and fiction, in much the same way as does Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War narrative, *The Things They Carried* (1990), a work that features a character named Tim O'Brien, who may or may not be identical with the author, who may or may not have undergone the experiences described in the book.

If "War Memories" appears to us now to be a precursor of postmodern Vietnam War narratives, on its original publication it was read in the context of other summary accounts of the Spanish-American War. The most popular of these was Richard Harding Davis' *The Cuban and Porto Rican Campaigns* (1898), rushed into print soon after the war's end. Davis' book is a smoothly written overview of the war's major events. Davis follows the war in chronological order, from the declaration of war on April 22, 1898 to the August 12 cease-fire. He analyzes military strategy, singles out a few officers for praise, and offers an extended critique of commanding General William R. Shafter's shortcomings. He sums up the war and his book with an optimistic view of the future of US imperialism: "Peace came with Porto Rico occupied by our troops and with the Porto Ricans blessing our flags, which must never leave the island. . . . The

course of empire to-day takes its way to all points of the compass."⁵

"War Memories" can be seen as the direct antithesis of Davis' book. Where Davis is impersonal and analytic, Crane is personal and subjective. In place of Davis' rational, chronological summary of major events, Crane offers an assortment of anecdotes, their structure determined less by chronology than by the vagaries of memory, their content often trivial or absurd. Whereas Davis ends his book with a tribute to US imperialism that justifies the war and summarizes its future significance, Crane rejects any totalizing interpretation, whether analysis of strategy or encomium to the benign paternal role that the United States will play in Spain's former colonies.

"War Memories" rejects not only conventional postwar analyses such as Davis' but also Crane's own earlier Spanish-American War dispatches. Written during the fervor of America's first war on foreign soil, Crane's 1898 dispatches have much in common with his fellow correspondents' articles, including jingoism. For example, Crane's first dispatch, written from Key West before he departed for Cuba, is a bellicose attack on the cowardly captain of a captured Spanish ship. Crane turns the captain of the Spanish passenger ship, who had boasted about his disdain for the American navy before leaving New York, into a symbol of old, decadent, cowardly Spain. "His face was yellow and lined like an ape's," Crane writes. The climax of the article occurs when the captain stumbles as he is led ashore, his weak knees betraying his fear; thus, the article concludes, New York is "avenged."⁶ None of Crane's subsequent dispatches contains such an ugly, personalized attack on the Spanish, but virtually all contain some degree of patriotic trumpeting. His account of the famous charge up San Juan Hill is representative. Here is Crane's description of the event, published in the *New York World*:

[S]uddenly somebody yelled: "By God, there go our boys up the hill!"

There is many a good American who would give an arm to get the thrill of patriotic insanity that coursed through us when we heard that yell.

Yes, they were going up the hill, up the hill. It was the best moment of anybody's life.⁷

Although modern readers may be surprised by the frank partisanship of Crane's war dispatches, his work fits squarely into the conventions of 1890s war correspondence. Accustomed to the mutual suspicion that characterizes relations between the military and the press in the post-Vietnam era, we need to recall that Spanish-American War correspondents considered themselves to be military participants. All American correspondents were armed, and they frequently assisted US forces. Crane, for example, served as an aide to the commanding officer in one battle and was cited in the official report. Given their intense identification with the US military, it is not surprising that correspondents shared the jingoistic perspective common among Americans in 1898.⁸

What is surprising is that by the time he came to write "War Memories," a year after the war's end, Crane had totally rejected the jingoism of his war dispatches. "War Memories" displaces jingoism onto the US public and onto an unnamed, voiceless interlocutor who appears occasionally throughout the text. It is this interlocutor who, the text implies, initially calls the Spanish soldiers "enemies" in a passage describing Crane's first battle:

In this valley there was a thicket—a big thicket—and this thicket seemed to be crowded with a mysterious class of persons who were evidently trying to kill us. Our enemies? Yes—perhaps—I suppose so. Leave that to the people in the streets at home. (245)

The narrator here, as in much of "War Memories," assumes the role of naif absorbed by the mystery of war. When the interlocutor evidently calls the "mysterious" persons "enemies," the narrator agrees only reluctantly. Struggling to convey the existential reality of war, the narrator has no patience with the language of patriotism that must classify combatants as friends or enemies.

Throughout "War Memories," Crane avoids the patriotic, imperialistic discourse that Richard Harding Davis uses to signify the meaning of the Spanish-American War. Instead, he offers one individual's recollections, and the structure of "War Memo-

ries” mimics the highly subjective sequence of memory. For example, in one tour-de-force passage the interlocutor keeps asking to hear about the war’s most famous battles—Las Guásimas, where Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders first came under fire, and the climactic Battle of San Juan Hill. But the narrator resists this pressure to deliver a straightforward narrative and veers off into one digression after another. Deferring his representation of the war’s famous battles, Crane instead presents a narrative battle between the interlocutor, who wants to hear about the war’s celebrated events, and the narrator, who finds the true significance of the war to lie not in objective summaries of dramatic engagements but in subjective anecdotes about seemingly mundane events. For example, after describing the landing of the US Army troops in Cuba, the narrator tells how one morning he had breakfast with two officers, Greene and Exton of the 20th Infantry, and afterwards, to his shame, saw the officers washing the breakfast dishes:

I walked away, blushing. What? The battles? Yes, I saw something of all of them. I made up my mind that the next time I met Greene and Exton, I’d say: “Look here; why didn’t you tell me you had to wash your own dishes that morning, so that I could have helped?”. . . But I never saw Captain Green again. . . . The next time I saw Exton—what? Yes, La Guasimas [*sic*]. That was the “rough-rider fight.” . . . But if ever I meet Greene or Exton again—even if it should be twenty years—I am going to say, first thing: “Why—” What? Yes. Roosevelt’s regiment and the First and Tenth Regular Cavalry. I’ll say, first thing: “Say, why didn’t you tell me you had to wash your own dishes, that morning, so that I could have helped?” My stupidity will be on my conscience until I die, if, before that, I do not meet either Greene or Exton. Oh yes, you are howling for blood, but I tell you it is more emphatic that I lost my tooth-brush. Did I tell you that? Well, I lost it, you see, and I thought of it for ten hours at a stretch. (267-68)

Before the narrator obliges his interlocutor with an account of the Battle of San Juan Hill, he goes through numerous similar digressions. Crane's quirky narrative structure emphasizes that the reality of war is to be communicated not through broad strategic analyses but through the minor details of one individual's experience.

The focus on individual experience in "War Memories" is, of course, also characteristic of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Countless critics have pointed out that *Red Badge* rejects the comprehensive perspective of the general officer in favor of Private Fleming's limited view. Thus "War Memories" could be seen as a continuation of the narrative techniques Crane first used in *Red Badge*. However, "War Memories" goes beyond *Red Badge* in both thematic and formal terms. For although both works attempt to convey one person's experience of war, "War Memories" declares that to be an impossible goal. "War Memories" is only in part about war; its other subject is the inability of language to communicate experience.

"War Memories" opens with an explicit announcement of its linguistic concerns. "But to get the real thing!" it begins. "It seems impossible! It is because war is neither magnificent nor squalid; it is simply life, and an expression of life can always evade us. We can never tell life, one to another, although sometimes we think we can" (229). Crane employs an arsenal of innovative techniques that draw our attention to the limits of narrative and of language itself. Some of the techniques have already been mentioned: jumbled chronology, digressions, and the narrator's disputes with his interlocutor over what event he should cover next. Crane's opening exclamations about the impossibility of telling "the real thing" are followed by an episode that confirms his narrative despair. "War Memories" begins with a trivial incident that takes place aboard a newspaper dispatch boat as four correspondents leave Key West. When the boat hits heavy seas, a bunch of bananas hung in the correspondents' cabin starts swinging wildly and knocks the men out of their cabin. "You see?" the narrator asks at the end of the anecdote. "War! A bunch of bananas rampant because the ship rolled" (230). From this point on, "a bunch of bananas" becomes a tagline used to conclude the narrator's accounts of his experiences, anecdotes that frequently mix violence and the commonplace in an absurd,

incomprehensible brew. For example, after describing a dinner aboard a Navy warship when a young officer played the piano while the ship shelled a column of Spanish cavalry, Crane concludes, "The piano's clattering of the popular air was often interrupted by the boom of a four-inch gun. A bunch of bananas!" (237). "A bunch of bananas," along with similar taglines, recurs throughout "War Memories." These phrases serve as free-floating signifiers, their brevity and banality emphasizing the limits of language.

In its content as well as its form, "War Memories" emphasizes the difficulties of communicating experience. The piece is filled with episodes of miscommunication. As described earlier, the narrator and his interlocutor are constantly at cross-purposes; while the interlocutor is howling for tales of blood, the narrator wants to talk about his lost toothbrush. The narrator has equally small success communicating with the other characters in his narrative. Repeatedly, he describes his frustration when, after some dramatic life-threatening experience, he is unable to convey what he has just gone through. For example, after a battle in the Cuzco Hills, when two hundred Marines engaged a Spanish force in the war's first US victory, the narrator can find no one to whom he can tell his experience. Fresh from his "life's most fiery time," ready to shout out "with mingled awe and joy," he wants to recount his adventures to his fellow correspondents and their dispatch boat's crew but is met with indifference (252-53). Abashed, he retreats into silence.

Silence is a central motif of "War Memories." More than anything else, it is the piece's emphasis on silence that distinguishes it from *The Red Badge of Courage*. *Red Badge* consists in large part of Henry Fleming's voluble interior monologue, and much of the novel's power derives from its fluent transcription of a private soldier's stream of consciousness. In contrast, the narrator of "War Memories" repeatedly draws attention to the fact that he has no idea what goes on in the minds of the soldiers he observes. Walking among Marines going into battle, he says, "As they trudged slowly in single file they were reflecting upon—what? I don't know" (242). "I don't know"; "I cannot imagine"—these repeated phrases serve as signifiers pointing to the inscrutable silence that, the narrator insists, is at the heart of war. The narrator repeats one story after another that has silence at its

climax: the silence of men about to engage in battle; the terrible muteness of the wounded; the silence of civilians who observe wounded men filing off a ship; the hush with which a crowd of soldiers spontaneously salutes returning prisoners of war. Moved by these moments of silence, the narrator at times treats language as a betrayal; for example, he says that when the soldiers start cheering for the prisoners of war, "the whole scene went to rubbish" (298). In scenes of greatest emotional impact, the text fights against its linguistic limits and tries to achieve the unachievable condition of silence. Crane's account of the famous battle of San Juan, where US soldiers charged into massive Spanish rifle fire and took a seemingly impregnable position, is terse in the extreme. He describes the battle with seeming reluctance, as if giving in to the pressure of the interlocutor's demands. And he ends his account of the soldiers' action by saying, "One cannot speak of it—the spectacle of the common man serenely doing his work. . . . One pays them the tribute of the toast of silence" (281).

"War Memories" concludes in taunting, puzzling fashion: "And you can depend upon it that I have told you nothing at all, nothing at all, nothing at all" (308). In his final sentence, the narrator once again pushes up against the limits of language, directly addressing his reader, attempting to engage us in the construction of elusive meaning. But with his triply repeated negative, he reminds us of the impossibility of comprehending the reality his words represent; war is, finally, unknowable, and the truest response is a reiterated phrase of denial that trails off into silence.

"Nothing at all." The conclusion of "War Memories" may suggest that Crane had reached an artistic dead end—as if, eighty years ahead of his time, he had become the most pessimistic of deconstructionists, conscious of language's inherent unreferentiality but unable to take any pleasure in the free play of signifiers. But, of course, Crane continued writing after "War Memories," and he thought enough of the piece to republish it in *Wounds in the Rain*. His twenty-thousand-word narrative is more than a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing at all. "War Memories" has much to tell us about both art and war.

Artistically, "War Memories" leapfrogs modernism, landing on postmodernist ground. It is as if Crane knew already

the project of his most prominent artistic successor and set out to undermine it; that successor is Ernest Hemingway, Crane's self-acknowledged literary offspring, who wrote that his own artistic intention was to get "the real thing" in writing.⁹ The opening sentence of "War Memories" suggests that Hemingway's project is naive. To get "the real thing," Vernal/Crane cries, is "impossible," because language is always inadequate to communicate experience: "We can never tell life, one to another, although sometimes we think we can."

Crane rejects Hemingway's positivist view of language, yet the two writers share a commitment to the representation of war as a central artistic goal. In many ways "War Memories" prefigures *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Crane's narrative can be seen as an extended gloss on the famous passage in *A Farewell to Arms* that rejects abstract words—"honor," "courage"—in favor of the concrete names of villages and rivers.¹⁰ Crane repudiates the Richard Harding Davis honor-and-courage approach to the Spanish-American War and remains silent about the topics that absorb Davis' attention: strategies, victories, the glories of US imperialism. Within the text of "War Memories," the interlocutor is portrayed as an avid reader of Davis-like accounts who wants to hear romantic stories about the celebrated battles, whereas the narrator insists on recounting seemingly trivial but personally significant events. Like *A Farewell to Arms*, "War Memories" rejects the abstract, manipulative rhetoric of general officers, politicians, and newspapers in favor of concrete, subjective narrative.

However, "War Memories" is not, one needs to add, an antiwar work. While Crane shows war to be a brutal process whose product is injured bodies, he never questions the necessity or justice of the Spanish-American War, and he regards the private soldiers of the regular Army as heroes.¹¹ Although the narrator of "War Memories" says that war is "death, and a plague of the lack of small things, and toil," at the same time he is always conscious of the glamour of war (254). Immediately after the passage just quoted, Crane cannot resist telling an anecdote in which he figures as a comic yet romantic figure: when he goes straight from the battlefield to a cable station in Jamaica and from there to a swank hotel, he overhears a woman in the hotel lobby ask, "Who is that chap in the very dirty jack-boots?" (254).

Michael Herr could be speaking of Stephen Crane when he says that he never knew anyone who was insensible to the glamour that resulted "when the words 'war' and 'correspondent' got joined."¹²

In its frank acknowledgment of war's linked brutality and glamour, in its postmodern foregrounding of the limitations of language, "War Memories" is closer to Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) than it is to Hemingway's work. The two works have hauntingly similar endings: Crane's "I have told you nothing at all, nothing at all, nothing at all" is echoed in Herr's "Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there."¹³ Both endings move beyond rationality, beyond referentiality in an effort to invoke the hallucinatory, incantatory powers of language. Both Crane and Herr establish a personalist epistemology, rejecting abstract analysis in favor of an intensely subjective recording of their own experience. Philip Biedler could be referring to "War Memories" when he writes that a text's "real terrain . . . is the terrain of consciousness itself"; the comment is actually about *Dispatches*.¹⁴

While "War Memories" has received scant critical comment, critics have lavished commentary on *Dispatches*. Along with much praise for its postmodernist brilliance, *Dispatches* has also received significant criticism. Some of that criticism can be applied to "War Memories" as well. For example, John Carlos Rowe has argued that the personalist epistemology privileged in *Dispatches* and other Vietnam War literature reflects American mythologizing of the special value of direct experience and displaces the serious political and historical analysis necessary to understand the Vietnam War.¹⁵ "War Memories" is, unquestionably, limited to a personalist epistemology that neglects political analysis. However, it also neglects the rationales for imperialism that dominate other contemporary narratives of the Spanish-American War—including Crane's own war correspondence. Amy Kaplan argues convincingly that Crane's newspaper dispatch about the Battle of San Juan inscribes not only the US military victory but also the racist, imperialist postwar American agenda.¹⁶ The same cannot be said of "War Memories." In its intense subjectivity and commitment to experiential immediacy, the text of "War Memories" conspicuously refuses to contribute to the discourse of imperialism; the narrator is so wary of abstract

conclusions that he rejects even his interlocutor's attempt to label Spanish soldiers as "enemies."

"War Memories" represents a departure not only from Crane's war correspondence but also from his earlier work. Ever since Crane's death at the age of twenty-eight, a favorite game among his readers has been to speculate about the works he might have written had he lived. "War Memories" points to some fascinating new directions. This lengthy memoir—the only significant autobiographical writing Crane ever did outside of his letters—suggests new authorial stances for a writer who, before this point, had fiercely adhered to Flaubert's dictum that the artist should be as invisible within his work as God within his creation. "War Memories" shows Crane experimenting with autobiographical techniques as rich and complex as those of Michael Herr. It shows Crane experimenting also with a variety of other stylistic techniques, mentioned earlier: a structure based on the vagaries of memory, the interweaving of absurdist taglines in complex motifs, the use of an interlocutor, and self-reflexive foregrounding of the text's linguistic limitations. We are accustomed to hailing the experimental works written at the same time as "War Memories" by Crane's fellow expatriate and friend, Henry James; in its own way, "War Memories" is as daring and as successful as James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897), which Crane praised.¹⁷ Crane's death a few months after the piece came into print means that we can only speculate whether "War Memories" might have heralded Stephen Crane's own "major phase." ☞

NOTES

1. *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane*, Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press), 2: 491, 493.
2. The only critic to have analyzed "War Memories" at length is Marston LaFrance, who places it among Crane's "finest work"; see *A Reading of Stephen Crane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 25, 232-38.
3. Stephen Crane, "War Memories," *Wounds in the Rain* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1900), pp. 229, 248. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical. I use the *Wounds in the Rain* publication of "War Memories" because the version published in *The Anglo-Saxon Review* was heavily cut.

4. Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, *The Crane Log: A Documentary Life of Stephen Crane 1871-1900* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1994), 361.
5. Richard Harding Davis, *The Cuban and Porto Rican Campaigns* (New York: Scribner's, 1898), 289.
6. Stephen Crane, "The Terrible Captain of the Captured Panama," *New York World*, 28 April 1898, 3.
7. Stephen Crane, "Stephen Crane's Vivid Story of the Battle of San Juan," *New York World*, 14 July 1898, 3.
8. On Spanish-American War correspondents, see Charles H. Brown, *The Correspondents' War: Journalists in the Spanish-American War* (New York: Scribner's, 1967); and Joyce Milton, *The Yellow Kids: Foreign Correspondents in the Heyday of Yellow Journalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
9. Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), 2. Hemingway's tribute to Crane is in *Green Hills of Africa* (New York: Scribner's, 1935), 22.
10. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner's, 1929), 185.
11. Elaine Scarry analyzes war as a process for the production of injured bodies in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
12. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977; New York: Vintage, 1991), 187.
13. Herr, *Dispatches*, 260.
14. Philip Biedler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 142.
15. John Carlos Rowe, "Eye-Witness: Documentary Styles in the Representation of Vietnam." *Cultural Critique* 3 (1986): 126-50.
16. Amy Kaplan, "Black and Blue on San Juan Hill," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 219-36.
17. Stephen Crane, "Concerning the English 'Academy,'" *The Bookman* 7 (March 1898): 22-24.