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EXPERIENCE AND IMAGINATION

CONFLUENCE IN THE WAR FICTION OF STEPHEN CRANE
AND AMBROSE BIERCE



Writers emerging from the training grounds of journalism in the late nineteenth century began to change the nature of narrative from what has long been described as “the genteel tradition” to one with decidedly harder and rawer edges. The development of Realism in fiction exhibits these changes dramatically, for experience began to compete with the literary imagination for a stronger role in the process of literary composition. For a brief period, the literary traditions of England and the United States touched with the fiction of Howells and James as well as some of the popular fiction, but just as quickly it separated. Established families and universities would not become the source of most American writers for the end of the nineteenth century and the next half-century as had been the tradition in England. Representative of the tensions in the creative process brought about by these changes are the writings of Stephen Crane and Ambrose Bierce.

Both writers emphasized experience as a basic element of their composition, including that which could be transferred from one to another, especially observed in Crane. The writer’s being a part of the story begins early in Crane’s school days-journalism. Yet he wrote an astounding novel of war drawn on his readings, viewings of prints, and remembered conversations of veterans. The nature of Crane’s Realism, as a result, suggests elements of impressionism. Bierce, however, did experience combat during the Civil War. Moreover, he survived a serious head wound. His war fiction—stories—have also been described with the term *impressionistic*.

By examining Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* and Bierce’s Civil War tales from the perspective of realism and its contexts,

we should be able to see how the imagination functions amid the artistic demands for faithful portraits of actual experience, how the results might be termed Impressionistic, and how one writer's appreciation of the other (Crane) might, indeed, complicate the process.

Crane's ability to imagine physical conflict may, indeed, be anchored in the sports play of youth, especially football, although he was more widely known for his participation in baseball. In a letter, he noted, "I believe that I got my sense of the rage of conflict on the football field."¹ Football, however, has been cited in several disciplines and in the words of some combat veterans as being the closest experience they had had to combat prior to the actual experience. Crane's literary imagination also has a support extending from the romantic tradition in American letters. Emerson writes in "Circles," "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cypher of the world."² It is this combination of vision and experience that marks Crane, who wrote "I am a wanderer now and I must see enough."³

An early example of Crane's imagined conflict comes in a news story—more a story—which he wrote for the *New York Tribune* in 1891 when he was a stringer. "Great Bugs in Onondaga" describes a swarm of predatory insects "of great size" with armored shells that blocked the track of a train.⁴ R.W. Stallman refers to Crane's conversion of caterpillars in a quarry to "the incredible Onondaga Bugs."⁵ The hoax fooled many, including me. In contrast, when Crane writes "An Experiment in Misery," he writes from the experience of entering the Bowery, but here too Crane is inventive, for he creates fiction within the parameters of journalistic style.

And yet Crane was an ardent admirer of the objective, the documentary; the camera provided both device and metaphor for this experience. Crane, as a journalist, was aware of the growing power of the camera in his own field, but he was somewhat naïve about its ability to manipulate truth. In this exchange with Harold Frederic, one can observe the awareness of the camera and its effect on the vocabulary and thought of these writers. Frederic writes, "Like the camera which exposed the romantic distortions of generations of battle painters, Crane's 'photo-

graphic revelations' suddenly illumined the authentic face of war." Crane subsequently compared Frederic's work and approach to a "sensitive plate exposed to the sunlight of '61-'65."⁶

The problem of objectivity for Crane lay in the very sources that he used, both journalistic and popular histories. The North and the South developed substantial liaisons with journalists during the war and employed them to advantage. General Beauregard gave Felix de Fontaine permission to send stories of the Sumter bombardment to the New York *Herald*. B.S. Osbon, a signal officer on the US Cutter *Harriet*, filed a report to *The World* on observing the bombardment. He then accompanied the fort's defeated commander on board the *Baltic* and "helped him polish his official report." US Navy Secretary Gideon Welles recognized what Osbon, now naval editor for the New York *Herald*, could do for the cause and gave him "a roving commission to accompany naval expeditions in the South," orders that allowed him to be appointed "in any staff capacity." Henry Raymond of the New York *Times* actually became a personal advisor to Union General Burnside during the aftermath of Fredericksburg.⁷

The tension between the subjective and the objective is evident in the May 5, 1863 edition of the New York *Times* when Henry Raymond, we think, wrote this account of part of the action at Chancellorsville:

In the morning we stood on the balcony of Chancellor's House, the attention was aroused by a sharp rattle of musketry coming from a column of rebels coming up by the main Fredericksburg plank road, directly in front of us. Knapp's battery, however, which was planted directly in front of the position, opened upon them, and after a few rounds caused them to retire. . . . Subsequently, a reconnoissance was sent . . . on the same road . . . for the purpose of feeling their strength. They went out on the plank road, deployed on both sides in the form of a letter V, chased the rebel skirmishers a couple of miles, till they came to a heavy double line of battle, with artillery in position, when they retired bringing us that intelligence.⁸

Raymond offers us an eye-witness account of this engagement with no embarrassment at including himself. He places himself on the field as an observer in the company of Union officers and some of the original female inhabitants of the house. Furthermore, he identifies with the reconnaissance unit, the command structure, and the mission by using the phrase "Bringing us that intelligence."

Crane had been exposed, as Joseph J. Kwiatt noted, to Impressionist painters in New York, so when he examined the woodcuts in the newspapers and histories, he saw a familiar relation of light and dark and foreground and background, studies in contrasts that captured the truth of the event at the expense of superficial realities.⁹ One frequently reprinted woodcut of the battle of Chancellorsville views an engagement from the Union side with the defenders standing and firing against a relentless double battle line of advancing Confederate troops.¹⁰ The eight dark figures in the foreground reveal a weakening position with one soldier down, another being hit, and a third nervously reloading. The Confederates, led by an officer on foot in full light emerge from the frame of a dark tree line. The feeling of this print is entirely different from the popular panorama styled paintings of battles, in which the individual and his situation were sublimated to the epic qualities of the scene.

The United States government, early on, had given permission to Mathew Brady to hire teams of photographers to cover the war. Often photographers not only arranged light, focus, and perspective, but they set the scenes they would shoot. Perhaps, the most famous of these is Brady assistant Timothy O'Sullivan's photograph of the dead Confederate sharpshooter at Devil's Den, Gettysburg. The body of the soldier was dragged about forty yards and placed on his back. Furthermore, according to David Madden, a regular issue rifle, not a sniper's weapon, was placed against the rocks.¹¹

How do these lines of objective intent, imagination, and translated experience meet in *Red Badge*? In the close of Chapter III, Crane gives us this description that seems to bring together so many of the elements forming his imagination, including the recollections of veterans and his own childhood war games:

The skirmish fire increased to a long clattering sound. With it was mingled far away cheering. A Battery spoke.

Directly the youth could see the skirmishers running. They were pursued by the sound of musketry fire. After a time, the hot, dangerous flashes of the rifles were visible. Smoke clouds went slowly and insolently across the fields like observant phantoms. The din became crescendo, like the roar of an oncoming train.

A brigade ahead of them and on the right went into action with a rending roar. It was as if it had exploded. And thereafter it lay stretched in the distance behind a long gray wall, that one was obliged to look twice at to make sure that it was smoke.¹²

Here as in so many other scenes we observe Crane's emphasis on the sound of battle that wraps around and penetrates the individual, the visual order that he created from the confusion of the scene imagined, and the selected details becoming images that give meaning to the scene. The tension between what the narrator observes and what the youth sees underscores the subjective-objective tension. Crane's writing is a sustained exercise of the literary imagination.

Unlike Crane, Ambrose Bierce not only had the experience of combat but also that of being wounded in battle. At eighteen, he rescued a wounded comrade under fire at Laurel Hill in Western Virginia at the outset of the Civil War. Three years later, a sharpshooter shot him in the head during preparations for the battle of Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia. Bierce received commendations for bravery on both occasions. Like Crane, he became a journalist who sought experience for his writing.¹³ Bierce provided both fictional and non-fictional interpretations of the experience of war. Stylistically, both writers provided ample evidence of irony and satire in their fiction, Bierce's being the darker of the two.

While the word *mystery* has often turned up in studies of Crane's literary imagination, studies of Bierce seem content with the power of his experience in the inspiration if not the formula-

tion of his war narratives. If Crane could be convinced about the viability of *Red Badge* as a war novel after his subsequently having been a war correspondent, then this occurrence recommends the realism he attempted to achieve. His own appreciation of Bierce's war narratives further amplifies the claim for the power of imagination.

Bierce's experience as a topographical engineer officer contributed greatly to his ability to see and interpret terrain in the context of battle and logistics. Using natural sight enabled him to gauge the relation of objects on the field; sight aided by binoculars not only presented close views, but it also provided a dramatic arrangement or distorted depth of elevations. It also enabled him to transfer analytical skills directed to one part of nature into those required for inquiry into the landscape of human nature. Accordingly, Cathy Davidson observes, "He especially analyzes differences: differences between the mind's eye (or 'I') which conceives events and the eyes which perceive them; between the words which express a consciously formulated reaction and the subverbal language that betrays a repressed one; between the static dualities of the conjectured world and the amorphous chaos of the experienced one."¹⁴ Like Crane, he felt that vision came with breaking the rules of the genteel tradition of realism and with reading an innovative writer like Guy de Maupassant, whose reputation, as Richard Fusco has written, stood for brevity, madness, gothicism, and "last minute surprises" in plot.¹⁵ The influence of Edgar Allan Poe's gothic and psychological fiction has been long acknowledged.

His factual accounts of the Civil War came years afterwards as memoirs. They have a linear, episodic quality, with occasional visual and aural flashes of battle scenes or details. In "A Little of Chickamauga," he writes, "A moment later the field was gray with confederates in pursuit." He closes with an account of the rebel yell:

It was the ugliest sound that any mortal ever heard—even a mortal exhausted and unnerved by two days of hard fighting, without sleep, without rest, without food and without hope.¹⁶

Bierce places himself into the accounts, but they do not turn on him, rather they turn on what he saw and heard, with the grotesque and deadly dominating his memories. These writings despite the subjective elements have reportorial and interpretive edges.

In Bierce's fiction, the authority of being there and his imaginative power make for a sustained literary intensity. He begins "Chickamauga" like a child's happy tale: "One sunny autumn afternoon a child strayed away from its rude home in a small field and entered a forest unobserved" (99). The smooth uninterrupted description is like a sweep of a field glass over the landscape, as it merges with a characteristic beginning of childhood stories. His play turns into a horror of reality as what he thinks is a bear turns out to be the first of a mass of severely wounded men: "They crept upon their hands and knees. They used their hands only, dragging their legs. They used their knees only, their arms hanging idle at their sides. They strove to rise to their feet but fell prone in the attempt" (102). Still not comprehending, the child, a deaf mute attempts unsuccessfully to play with one:

The man sank upon his breast . . . then turned upon him a face that lacked a lower jaw— from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone. (103)

Bierce shapes his stories with a visual coherence that stacks scene upon scene in the same way that an impressionist painter applied paint—in strokes, thickly with texture catching the available light—to place the darkness of war in the foreground.

In answer to a friend, Bierce wrote,

When I ask myself what has become of Ambrose Bierce the youth, who fought at Chickamauga, I am bound to answer that he is dead. Some little of him survives in my memory, but many of him are absolutely dead and gone.¹⁷

That is the essential difference in the acquisition of artistic vision by Bierce and Crane—experience, for it provides a power that

overwhelms even a shaper of fiction like Bierce. The wonder of Crane is that his imagination and translated experiences of individual conflict gave him a vision comparable to a combatant's but without the losses. ☞

NOTES

1. Stephen Crane, Letter to John Northern Hilliard, in Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage: An Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Sources Criticism*, eds. Sculley Bradley et al. Second edition. (New York, 1976), 131.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Stephen E. Whicher, ed. (Boston, 1960), 168.
3. Stephen Crane, Letter to William Crane, *Stephen Crane: An Omnibus*, Robert W. Stallman, ed. (New York, 1952), 663.
4. Quoted in Thomas Bonner, Jr. "Crane's 'An Experiment in Misery,'" *The Explicator* XXXIV (1976): [1,3]. See also Clarence O. Johnson's "Experiment in Misery," *The Explicator* XXXV (1977): 20-21.
5. R.W. Stallman, *Stephen Crane: A Critical Biography* (Ames, 1972), 31.
6. Carol Shloss, *Invisible Light: Photography and the American Writer: 1840-1940* (New York, 1987), 17-18.
7. Information and quotations from Thomas Bonner, Jr.'s "Dangerous Liaisons: The Press and the Military," presented at the National Defense Colloquium: Freedom of the Press vs. Military Necessity, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado, September 17, 1991.
8. *New York Times*, May 5, 1863: 1.
9. Joseph J. Kwiatt, "Stephen Crane and Painting," *American Quarterly*, IV (1952): 331-38.
10. John Wagman, ed., *Civil War Front Pages* (New York, 1989): [8].
11. Conversation with David Madden, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 24, 1994. See David Madden, "Retracing My Steps," *Xavier Review* XIV (1994): 4.
12. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage: An Authoritative Text* (New York, 1976), 25-26.
13. Biographical information from William McCann, Introduction to *Ambrose Bierce's Civil War* (Washington, 1956), i-xi and Richard C. O'Connor, *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography* (Boston, 1967).
14. Cathy Davidson, *The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce* (Lincoln, 1984), 2.
15. See Richard Fusco, *Maupassant and the American Short Story* (University Park, 1994), 104-105.

16. Ambrose Bierce, *Ambrose Bierce's Civil War* (Washington, 1956), 33, 37. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
17. Letter. *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*. 12 Vols. (New York, 1909-1912), Vol. II.