

Will the Real War Ever Get into Books?: Literary Representations of the Civil War

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Introduction

In his Civil War memoir, *Specimen Days* (1882), Walt Whitman famously noted, “The real war will never get into books” (80). While he leaves “the real war” unspecified, it can be surmised that Whitman was overwhelmed by the extraordinary brutality and violence that he witnessed while working as a nurse at a war hospital.¹ Whitman’s Civil War experience forced him to confront many dismembered bodies and dying soldiers, exposing him to a reality at odds with his previous worldview of optimism once declared in *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The above oft-quoted line might be read as registering Whitman’s concession of defeat, if we assume that an author’s primary task is to represent his or her perceptions through the power of language. Perhaps Whitman felt the immensity of the war to exceed his authorial powers to accurately represent it. More importantly, Whitman’s statement begs the question as to what makes a “real war” and whether literature is capable of representing it. This essay aims to probe the meaning of “reality” in literary representations of the Civil War by reviewing both historical scholarship and fiction.

Civil War representation in literature is an issue that continues to haunt both historians and literary critics. From Edmund Wilson’s pioneering work, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (1962), to a more recent study by Randall Fuller, *From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature* (2011), scholars from various disciplines have addressed the relationship between the war and literature from diverse perspectives. The central subjects of this review essay include two representative works of historical scholarship on Civil War literature, Daniel Aaron’s *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (1973), and David Blight’s *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001), as well as one fictional work, William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). This essay directs its attention to these particular works because they converge to explore the meaning of “the real war” in differing yet mutually illuminating ways. By placing these works in critical dialogue with one another, the present study will scrutinize the various ways in which the Civil War is portrayed in both

historical and fiction writing. In comparing the above writings by these authors with different intellectual backgrounds (Aaron is a literary historian, Blight is a historian, and Faulkner was a novelist), this essay will discuss their shared problematics of representing the “reality” of the war, as well as encourage inquiry as to the different roles that historical scholarship and literature play in our understanding of what “the real war” is.

David Blight: Realism, Romance, and Collective Oblivion

Historical scholarship has long recognized the relation between American literature and “the reality” of the Civil War as deeply conflicting. In his *Patriotic Gore*, Edmund Wilson notes, “Nobody North or South wanted by that time to be shown the realities. . . . Animosities must be forgotten; the old issues must be put to sleep with the chloroform of magazine prose” (Wilson 613). Whereas Wilson does not delve further into the question as to why these “realities” were shunned by the public, David Blight’s *Race and Reunion* tackles this very issue, illustrating a deep schism between literary realism and the postbellum public, the mass public which tended much more toward romantic idealization of the war.² The basis of his study deals with a crucial binary between reality and romance in the post-Reconstruction period. This binary or conflict between the two modes of writing is remarkable, because post-Reconstruction America witnessed the flourishing of literary realism spearheaded by William Dean Howells in the 1880s. In the introduction to his study, Blight articulates his intention to tell “a story of how in American culture romance triumphed over reality, sentimental remembrance won over ideological memory” (Blight 4). He describes the tension between reality and romance in post-Reconstruction literature, a conflict in which the latter ultimately overwhelmed the former in late nineteenth-century America. In short, “[t]he *daring* necessary to capture a full realism about war-making fit neither the tastes of Victorian America nor the growing imperatives of sectional reconciliation” (152; italics original).

Blight does note, however, that there were some authors who resisted this collective move toward romanticizing the Civil War. While “thousands of readers took a sentimental, imaginative journey Southward and into idealized war zones guided and narrated by faithful slaves,” he discusses, “[a] small but important group of dissenters, some of them veterans and some from the postwar generation, could not escape the reality of their experience and refused to allow the nation to do so” (Blight 211). Among these dissenters were Albion Tourgée and Ambrose Bierce, authors who, according to Blight’s assessment, realistically portrayed the

war in opposition to the “greater urge . . . to conceal or forget altogether the horror of the war and celebrate a reunified nation” (238-39). Despite emphasizing the presence of a few realists who dared to confront the uncomfortable realities of the Civil War, however, Blight ends up painting a negative picture of how politically powerless literary realism proved to be against romantic idealizations of the war. Noting Ulysses Grant’s popular memoirs of the 1880s, Blight observes that “[t]he war was drained of evil, and to a great extent, of cause or political meaning. A politics of forgetting attached itself readily to the Union hero’s depiction of two mystic days at Appomattox” (215). By detailing the public’s strong tendency toward reconciliationism in post-Reconstruction America, Blight argues that realist literature was politically ineffectual and unable to stop the national move toward a collective forgetting of the past. It is a historical irony that, in post-Reconstruction America, the unity among whites became increasingly fortified, and the division between whites and blacks was accordingly submerged.

In contrast to the powerlessness of realist literature, Blight underscores the strong influence that sentimental literature had on forging the collective memory: “Words . . . were mighty weapons in the myth-making that the Civil War inevitably produced” (Blight 20). For instance, Thomas Nelson Page’s novels, heavily imbued with rhetoric of sectional reunion, “satisfied many of the deepest need[s] of the Lost Cause— a reunified nation on Southern terms” (227).³ Such literature was a part of “plantation fiction,” which appealed and catered to the reconciliationist sentiments of the mass public while avoiding the portrayal of real aspects of the war, such as the writings of Tourgée and Bierce did.⁴ What emerges in Blight’s understanding of Civil War literature is the ultimate failure of realism to withstand the mass public’s strong proclivity for romance and collective amnesia.

Daniel Aaron: The Comprehensive and the Fragmentary

In *The Unwritten War*, literary historian Daniel Aaron also discusses literature’s failure to do justice to the reality of the Civil War. In his introduction, Aaron poses a pivotal question for his study: “[C]ould a civil war fought under modern conditions, and turning on such issues as negro slavery and the constitutional rights of secession inspire an epic poem or a great novel?” (Aaron xv). His answer is a categorical “No.” He argues instead that American literature has never succeeded in providing “an epic poem or a great novel” on the Civil War. *The Unwritten War* is Aaron’s attempt to explain how and why this failure occurred.

Delving into this “failure” of American literature, Aaron introduces an important binary between the “comprehensive” and the “fragmentary,” with a particular emphasis on the former as an indispensable condition of a great novel. According to Aaron, “[T]he long-anticipated ‘epic’ remained unwritten, and no philosophical poet, including Whitman, emerged to provide a *comprehensive* inspection of the War or to piece out an intelligent design from its myriad disconnected *fragments*” (Aaron 328; italics added). Here Aaron describes a great novel as the kind of a work that constructs a comprehensive vision of the Civil War out of disconnected fragmentary materials. Great literary art, Aaron contends, derives from a totalizing process through which diverse experiences of the war cohere to form a meaningful whole. In his view, American literature has always failed to perform this role, providing instead a fragmentary vision of the war that did little justice to its reality.

Aaron’s book is segmented into seven chapters, each of which addresses a group of authors who had a similar stance toward the war. For example, the chapter titled, “A Philosophical View of the Whole Affair,” covers authors who remained neutral to either side of the war’s causes, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, who “refused to align himself clearly with either the pro- or antiwar factions” (Aaron 44). By pointing out his detachment from the war, Aaron criticizes Hawthorne’s limited vision: “[H]is sectional bias and provincial outlook, his resentment against the national clamor that disrupted his privacy, prevented him from taking in the immensity of the drama as Melville and Whitman did” (53). In the chapter titled “The Malingerers,” Aaron critically discusses authors who evaded direct participation in the Civil War, such as Mark Twain, who fled the battlefield after his short involvement in a military campaign. Alternatively, in the chapter “Drawing-Room Warriors and Combatants,” Aaron addresses authors who actually participated in the war as soldiers, such as Ambrose Bierce and Albion Tourgée. By juxtaposing different groups of authors, Aaron illuminates the various ways in which they each translated their war experiences into literary form. Implicit in Aaron’s study is the idea that the greatness of Civil War literature should be determined by how directly an author *experienced* the War, not by how they *imagined* it, an unspoken premise upon which Blight’s study also stands in his discussion of Tourgée and Bierce.⁵

Aaron’s binary of the comprehensive and the fragmentary provides a worthy yet problematic frame for analyzing Civil War literature, as he himself calls into question whether such a comprehensive view of the war is ever possible in literary representation. His segmented presentation of Civil War literature, as shown above, can be seen as mirroring the very nature of the war itself. The Civil War was a site of tremendously differing political views and ideologies in which competing ideas about the cause and meaning of the war

struggled for dominance. Indeed, the Civil War was undoubtedly a divisive event that American authors experienced from different perspectives and in different contexts. The nature of the war was such that there were some authors who distanced themselves from the cause of the war (like Hawthorne), while others committed themselves to the Northern cause (like Tourgée). In a section on Mark Twain, Aaron portrays the ambivalence of the author as a Southerner who could not commit himself entirely to the Southern cause: “There are grounds for supposing that he [Twain] was unable to commit himself to either side in his home-grown civil war. The South charmed and repelled him” (Aaron 144). In his search for a great novel, Aaron inadvertently demonstrates how unmonolithic the South was, showing what differing sentiments the war aroused not only between the North and the South, but also within the South itself.

Thus, while Aaron argues that literature *failed* to provide a comprehensive view of the war, his own presentation encourages the thought that Civil War literature, taken as a whole, actually *succeeded* in doing so by presenting a wide array of perspectives on the war. Groping for a comprehensive vision, Aaron unwittingly demonstrates that the actual reality of the war was in fact a highly fragmentary collection of incomprehensive thoughts and attitudes. The failure of these authors to capture the “reality” of the war serves merely to illustrate the multiple “realities” of the war that were actually experienced. Illustratively, Blight and Aaron employ the word “reality” in the singular throughout their texts, not “realities” in the plural, which can be said to indicate the degree of their belief in discerning a single “reality.”

The Reality and the Meaning of the Civil War

Blight’s and Aaron’s studies thus ultimately converge to accentuate, though in differing ways, what they consider to be literature’s “failure” to capture the reality of the Civil War. To further understand how reality is understood by both of these authors, it is helpful to consider their interpretation of “reality” in terms of the meaning that they each read into this historical phenomenon.

In Aaron’s engagement with Civil War literature, he makes the implicit association between two keywords, *reality* and *meaning*. What he expects from literature is not only the realistic portrayal of the battle as represented by Bierce and Tourgée, but also an ideological commitment to the Northern cause of the war. For instance, Aaron demands that Civil War literature address the issue of race.⁶ In Aaron’s account, “the Negro question” (Aaron 15) is the very cause for which the war was fought in the first place, and any literary treatment of the

war that avoids this issue should not qualify as important literature. In his introduction, Aaron argues that “[o]ne would expect writers, the antennae of the race, to say something revealing about the meaning, if not the causes, of the War. This book argues implicitly throughout that, with a few notable exceptions, they did not” (xviii). Aaron’s insistence on the meaning of the war is most evident in his discussion of Herman Melville’s *Battle-Pieces* (1866), a collection of the author’s poetry on the Civil War. While crediting Melville with a certain degree of literary achievement, Aaron ultimately criticizes his limited vision: “Negroes are virtually absent in *Battle-Pieces*, and the black storm clouds scudding through the poems do not refer specifically to slavery. The War is a white man’s tragedy. . . . By portraying the War as historical tragedy, Melville defied consensus and took one further step toward popular oblivion” (90). The condemnation in this quote can also be found in regards to nearly every other author treated in Aaron’s study.⁷ Literary representations, he laments, too often neglected to address the issue of race. They thus presented a limited perspective on the “reality” of the war and failed to grasp its true “meaning.”⁸

David Blight shares Aaron’s belief that both the reality and the meaning of the Civil War should be represented in literature. Speaking of Walt Whitman, Blight argues: “Whitman’s ‘real war’ did not ultimately include the revolution in black freedom of 1863; his own myriad uses of rebirth metaphors did not encompass black equality” (Blight 21).⁹ Elsewhere, Blight juxtaposes the ideology with the reality of the war: “[T]he ideological character of the war, especially the reality of emancipation, had faded from American literature” (217). Furthermore, he argues that the “war was drained of . . . political meaning” due to sentimental literature (215). Blight maintains that postwar reconciliation was made possible only by disregarding and forgetting “the Negro question,” the central question over which the war was initially fought between the North and the South. In sum, both Aaron and Blight foreground the idea that the “reality” resides in the political and ideological meaning of the war.

William Faulkner: The “Realities” of the Civil War

This essay thus far has sought to reveal the tacit assumptions underlying Blight and Aaron’s definition of “the real war,” the most pivotal of which is that there should be a single entity of *the* reality of the war. A consideration of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) becomes important here because it is a novel that representatively unsettles the notion of a singular “reality” of the war. The primary reason for selecting *Absalom* from a vast

constellation of literary representations of the war is because it can serve as a useful counterpoint to the historians' emphasis on the single entity of the reality in Civil War literature.

The plot of *Absalom, Absalom!* revolves around the legend of Thomas Sutpen, a man who grew up in a poor white family and eventually achieved great success as a plantation owner in the Old South. Sutpen's success, however, comes to a devastating end in the wake of the Civil War. Throughout the text, mystery enshrouds Sutpen and his family, because much of what is known about them has been passed down orally and imperfectly to the present generation. Despite the novel's preoccupation with the Sutpens, however, its main protagonist is Quentin Compson, a Harvard student who endeavors to interpret the Sutpens' mysterious past from his perspective in 1909. Many other characters in the text, including Jason Compson (Quentin's father), Rosa Coldfield (Sutpen's sister-in-law), and Shreve (Quentin's roommate at Harvard), join in on Quentin's interpretive enterprise, and serve to complicate the problem of the Sutpens' past. The novel's understanding of the past is thus caught in a dense web of interactions between two historical temporalities: that of the ante- and postbellum eras (the Sutpen family), and the early twentieth century (Quentin and others).

Most pivotal in Faulkner's text is its unique way of approaching the past. Critics have typically referred to the narrative's engagement with the past as Quentin's "imaginative reconstruction" (Irwin 61), in which imagination, rather than factual information and actual experience, becomes the central force in capturing the elusive past. Since much of the Sutpen legend is shrouded in mystery, Quentin has to rely on his imagination to fill in absent gaps of information about what "really" happened in the past. This imaginative reconstruction reaches a crescendo when a "happy marriage of speaking and hearing" (*Absalom* 253) occurs between Shreve and Quentin, both of whom seek to understand the life of Charles Bon, a man who was supposedly Sutpen's unacknowledged son. Shreve and Quentin's collaborative imagining serves to reconstruct Bon's troubled relationship with his father during the Civil War period. In contradistinction to Aaron and Blight's presupposition that historical literature should arise out of an author's actual experiences, Faulkner's novel puts forward a completely opposite view: it is not experience, but imagination that matters in this regard.

The novel ultimately leaves the mystery of the Sutpens unresolved, allowing for multiple possibilities of interpretation. Various characters participate in interpreting the past, and thus the final truth is held for the reader in tantalizing suspense. In *The Unwritten War*, Aaron extensively discusses the multiplicity of historical interpretations in Faulkner's novels on the Civil War. Faulkner, Aaron contends, also failed to provide a great novel on the war

due to the following: “Faulkner’s War is multidimensional. He sees it as historical event, as a mirror reflecting personal and sectional character, and finally, and most important, as a buried experience that must be unearthed before it can be understood. Yet it defies exhumation because the reality is inseparable from the myth” (Aaron 315). According to Aaron, Faulkner’s Civil War is “multidimensional,” and his representation of the war’s reality is skewed because it is “inseparable from the myth.” Aaron further critiques Faulkner by elaborating on a binary between “truth” in the singular and “truths” in the plural:

Since the characters who allude directly or indirectly to the War, who meditate on it or attempt to interpret it, are not authorized by the author to speak for him, *the ultimate “Truth” of Faulkner’s War amounts to a residue of hundreds of partial and conflicting truths entertained by a diverse company of biased observers. . . .* Defeat can be interpreted by some as a necessary step in God’s plan for Southern redemption, by others as a bloody testament of God’s disfavor toward a cursed people. (323; italics added)

His criticism notwithstanding, Aaron here gives a very precise and illuminating recapitulation of Faulkner’s representation of the war. Aaron concludes his chapter on Faulkner by noting, “The War, like the portent of Brown himself, remained a mystery susceptible to any man’s interpretation after quickly crumbling into myth” (326). History as “a mystery susceptible to any man’s interpretation” is precisely what readers are given in Faulkner’s work, yet according to Aaron, this is what disqualifies it as a great novel on the Civil War. Aaron’s attempt to create a comprehensive view of the war is ultimately at odds with Faulkner’s literary endeavor, which is to present multiple possibilities and fragments of the past, rather than a singular, coherent whole.

The Crossroads of Historical Scholarship and Literature

In conclusion, it is worth revisiting Whitman’s statement that “the real war will never get into books” in order to better articulate historical scholarship’s and literature’s differing visions of “the real war.” Discussing Whitman, Blight introduces an interesting binary between “private” and “collective” memories: “Countless private memories began to collide, inexorably, with the politics of collective memory. Contrary to Whitman’s famous prediction, the ‘real war’ would eventually ‘get into the books’ because historians and writers have learned so much in the twentieth century about unearthing and telling the stories of real people” (Blight 19). The work of historical scholarship, Blight tacitly believes, is to bring discrete private memories into a meaningful, organized whole. As has already been discussed,

both Aaron's and Blight's studies are attempts at piecing together fragments of history into something comprehensive with a particular focus on race issues, while Faulkner's *Absalom Absalom!* resists a coherent narrative in favor of fragmentary and possible visions of the past. With a contrast between historical scholarship and literature thus established, however, this review paper has not sought to suggest that literature is superior to historical scholarship in terms of representing "the real war." The juxtaposition of both modes of writing ultimately serves to reveal that Aaron's understanding of an authentic novel on the war is a misguided dream. Aaron seeks to impose a singular "reality" upon disparate literary texts that each present their own unique "reality." While organizing fragmentary experiences into a meaningful whole appears to belong to the realm of historical scholarship, the role of literature resides in presenting different versions of "the real war" that ever diversify its complex, multi-faceted profile.

Notes

¹ Whitman's experience at a war hospital is vividly documented in Drew Gilpin Faust's study. See Faust 123-25.

² Most illustrative is the fact that the prestigious magazine *Century* started a series of Civil War memoirs written by veterans across the sectional divide. This series was called "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War," which later was compiled and sold in a book form with the same title. This series was published from 1884 through 1887 (Blight 164). According to Blight, the 1880s marked a period in which Civil War memoirs came into vogue, especially via magazines, such as *Century*, *Weekly Times*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*. As Blight's book clarifies, almost a decade after the failure of Reconstruction, soldiers across the sectional divide engaged in nostalgia about the war.

³ Complementing Blight's account of literature's political power is Randall Fuller's observation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), a novel that played a significant role in driving the nation into the Civil War: "Sectional and political animosities had been inflamed by a new national literature" (Fuller 9).

⁴ Alan Trachtenberg's study of the Gilded Age buttresses Blight's account of how realism in this era conflicted with the general public. Trachtenberg documents how William Dean Howells, in his effort to promote realist literature in the 1880s and the 90s, diverged from public taste, which eventually forced him to compromise his realist ideals: "Public taste, he [Howells] complained, remained in vassalage to false values, preferring easy pleasures of shallow 'romance' to the more exacting demands of the real" (Trachtenberg 184). Trachtenberg's argument is not directly related to the Civil War, but his reflection on the postbellum era is helpful in illuminating the strong force of the trend toward sentimentalism. Trachtenberg also gives a privileged position to Herman Melville, who, unlike Howells, tried to capture the "ragged edges" of truth (201). That Trachtenberg concludes the chapter on realism with Melville, an author who was almost forgotten in his late years, further attests to the powerlessness of realism in confronting the "ragged edges" of truth in this era.

⁵ Aaron scathingly criticizes those authors who avoided the battlefield: "The paucity of 'good' War literature was not unrelated to the paucity of novelists and poets instructed or concerned enough to write it. . . . [Their] self-appointed roles as bards and prophets removed them too effectually from the theaters of conflicts. . . . [They] disqualified themselves from military service and supported the Great Cause as soldiers of the pen" (Aaron 148). After critiquing those who evaded the direct involvement in the war, Aaron proceeds to discuss

John W. De Forest, Ambrose Bierce, and Albion Tourgée: “[They] came by choice or accident to look into the face of war and were able to convey something of its hard reality” (148). Aaron’s use of the word “reality” here is rather limited, as its meaning is confined to participation in a military campaign.

⁶ Aaron, while acknowledging his indebtedness to Edmund Wilson, takes his work to task for the neglect of race issues: “For Wilson, Negro slavery and the Union were merely rabble-rousing or pseudo-moral issues introduced to rationalize an aggressive power drive, so that he seems to reduce the War to an organized form of animal bellicosity comparable to battles waged by army ants, baboons, and birds” (Aaron 331).

⁷ As one reviewer of Aaron’s study rightly noted, “[Aaron] expects too much of that Civil War generation of writers who had not the benefit of retrospection and of more recent fictionizers whose works are colored with a sectional bias reflecting still the lingering effects of the great convulsion that tore the nation apart over a century ago” (Bloom 272).

⁸ Aaron also observes: “A striking feature of the literature I have mentioned in this book is its comparative inattention to what many once believed and still believe to be the central issue of the War—the Negro. Slavery, the presence of which contradicted democratic claims, provoked curiously inconsistent responses. . . . Only a few writers before and after 1865 appreciated the Negro’s literal and symbolic role in the War” (Aaron 332). It seems strange that despite his attention to “the Negro,” Aaron does not discuss any black writers himself in his book. Blight, however, frequently uses Frederick Douglass as an important reference point in his discussion.

⁹ On the contrary, in Blight’s account Albion Tourgée is given a privileged place because he “dissented repeatedly from sectional reconciliation if it meant the obliteration of the emancipationist meaning of the war, or for that matter, any other sense of ideology or cause” (Blight 97).

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Will the Real War Ever Get into Books?: Literary Representations of the Civil War

古井 義昭

ウォルト・ホイットマンは南北戦争について、「本当の戦争 (the real war) は決して本には書かれないだろう」と述べた。しかし、「本当の戦争」とは何か？ 南北戦争の「現実」とは何か？ これらの問題を考察するため、本レビュー・エッセイは、アメリカ文学における南北戦争の表象を扱った歴史学の文献と文学作品を比較検討する。対象となるのは、Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War* (1973)、David Blight, *Race and Reunion* (2001)、William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) の三冊である。南北戦争とアメリカ文学の関係性は、古くは Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (1962) から Randall Fuller, *From Battlefields Rising* (2011) に至るまで、様々な角度から論じられてきた。しかし、本稿は多くの文献、文学作品の中でも、特に南北戦争の「現実」という概念を探求した三冊を取り上げる。それぞれの著書における、南北戦争にまつわる「現実」という語の意味を掘り下げることにより、本稿はその多義性と多層性を考察する。さらには、歴史学という学問分野と文学作品の交叉点、あるいは相違点を明らかにすることも目指す。