

NATURALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY: AMBROSE BIERCE'S STYLIZATION OF THE CIVIL WAR

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Historical narratives are not only models of past events and processes, but also metaphorical statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types that we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings.

Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*.

It is by now a widely accepted assumption among historians that their attempts at refamiliarizing us with the events of the past are not solely dependent upon the documented facts they gather. History scholars have learnt that the shapes of the relationships that they necessarily project on past events in order to make sense of them are as important as the information allowing them to determine «what really happened.» Certainly, no historical account would bear much light on that information if it were not configured according to the precepts of one of the pregeneric plot structures conventionally used in our culture. There is therefore a peremptory need in all historical accounts –not unlike the one active in works of fiction– to make use of a language appropriate to «emplot» the given sequences of historical events into coherent wholes.¹ Historians have found little resort in the technical language of the sciences in this regard, and so they have accommodated the reported events to a figurative language

1. Cf. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), especially its introduction.

that mediates between them and the above mentioned plot structures. As White (1978, 91) has rightly contended,

It is this mediative function that permits us to speak of a historical narrative as an extended metaphor. As a symbolic structure, the historical narrative does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences. [His italics]

If this is the case with all historical narratives, we must conclude that they will inevitably display some of the modes and styles typical of literary discourses.

In this contribution I intend to demonstrate that the clear-cut distinction often established between the disciplines of history and narrative fiction does not hold when we consider the techniques and stylistic resources that they use. It will be remarked that, in fact, historical discourse borrows as heavily from the tropological strategies and modes of presentation of figurative language as literature does.² In order to support this hypothesis, I have chosen to analyze a number of autobiographical sketches by American naturalist author Ambrose Bierce which, according to historian Napier Wilt (1929, 284), «are always presented with historical accuracy.» In this handful of brief historical accounts, Bierce covers with a reporter-like precision some of the major engagements of the Civil War in which he took an active part. As shall become evident soon, however, these writings –which the writer himself looked upon as reports of his experiences rather than imaginative narratives– exhibit very much the same characteristic features as Bierce's better-known war fictions. By drawing some comparisons between Bierce's «Bits of Autobiography» and his literary pieces, we shall observe that the distance existing between the two kinds of discourses is minimal. As a matter of fact, the types of tropes and devices used in both are so much alike that it is often difficult to think of the former as mere chronicles or «exact statements of facts» (Wilt 1929, 261). Like all historians, Bierce was subject to the restrictions of the plot structures that he chose to configure his memoirs of the Civil War and, consequently, bound to become the most outstanding American writer to produce a naturalist history of the contest.

Eric Solomon (1982, 182) has declared that «only Stephen Crane has written as powerfully as Bierce about the shock of recognition brought on by the Civil War.» Truly, with the exception of *The Red Badge of Courage*, it is difficult to find any factual or fictional account that could even come close to render the experience of the national conflict with the vividness and brutal vigor with which it emerges on Bierce's pages.³ Story after story, he filled his war fiction with the frustration and the absurdity

2. One of the first supporters of this thesis was Professor R.G. Collingwood. See particularly *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

3. Although at some distance from Crane and Bierce, perhaps Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes and John W. de Forest also deserve some recognition as significant dramatizers of the Civil War.

that he must have undoubtedly felt more than once on the battlefield. As several scholars have remarked, he becomes in some instances excessively grim and pessimistic, since he chose those war episodes that disclosed most prominently the hopelessness of human predicament in that context. Robert Little (1924, 177) complained on this point that «the cruelty and irony of the war seemed to have warped his sense of the real; nothing happens casually, spontaneously, irrelevantly; all is subordinate to the final twist or trick. . .» Although there may be some truth in the observation that his war years must have contributed to his dark vision and misanthropic attitude, it was probably his conspicuously naturalist outlook on reality that constrained most decisively his perceptions. Influenced by Darwin's theories on natural selection and his strict Calvinist upbringing, Bierce came to apprehend the universe as a chaos of random forces totally indifferent to the conditions and desires of human beings.⁴ I would argue that it is primarily for this reason that he found that the war context perfectly suited what William McCann (1956, iv) has referred to as «his crisply evocative descriptions, and the compassionless recital of events.»

If one were to delineate the most remarkable features of Bierce's style in his fiction, they would be those that we tend to associate with the naturalist literary trend in the late 19th century. A mere glance at stories like «Chickamauga» or «An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge» will reveal that he was a consummate craftsman of expression, always striving for precise diction and great syntactical economy. Mary Grenander (1971, 79) has explained in this regard that.

The key to his technique is that it compresses much in narrow compass. He was a master of a fluid and limpid prose, often intentionally ambivalent, in which exactly the right words are chosen to convey precise shades of meaning. . . Bierce's style is stark and stripped, without excess verbiage but freighted with vast implications.

It is by virtue of the extreme starkness of his voice that some specialists have accused Bierce of becoming often almost conceited and epigrammatic. However, the fact is that much of the realism and intensity that the reader experiences in his works derive precisely from this «military quality» (Wilson 1962, 632) of his prose. Moreover, apart from the clarity and conciseness of his style, there is a second element that added great effectiveness to his narrative voice. Always detached and impersonal in his depictions of reality, he selected the mode of irony as the most cogent one to portray the absurd mishaps and fatal coincidences that become the currency in army life. The main source of the irony—frequently verging on satire—in his tales is the reversal of his characters' and the readers' expectations as they fail to see that the workings of the universe are heedless to their puny dreams.⁵

4. Cf. Carey McWilliams, *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1929).

5. See Davidson (1984), especially Chapter 2, pp. 24-55.

Before I proceed to illustrate the above mentioned characteristics in Bierce's historico-autobiographical writings, it is important to introduce succinctly three other formal aspects of his war stories that, although less explicitly, will also appear in those accounts. Deeply connected with the «cosmic irony» (Solomon 1982, 182) present in his works, Bierce's idiosyncratic treatment of time is fundamental for the generation of the kind of baffling effects that he intended to provoke. His manipulation of time sequences in his tales gives them a certain sense of ineffability which often troubles the reader. Cathy Davidson (1984, 2) has correctly observed that

Techniques such as the dislocation of linear plot lines, the subjectification of time, and the juxtaposition of multiple points of view allow Bierce to provide a creative exposition of the distractions and refractions influencing subjective consciousness.

Of course, neither these innovative narratological devices nor the objectives sought by their use are typical in historical narratives; and yet, we shall see that Bierce used them consistently in the reports of his military experiences. Finally, the remaining two features covered in this paper are perhaps the most characteristically naturalist elements to be found in Bierce's literary (and historical) discourse. On the one hand, there is a process of animism in his works by which objects and phenomena are presented as if they had a will or a soul of their own.⁶ Most commonly, though, this process is reversed to depict human beings as parts of a great military machinery or as lower creatures. Solomon (1982, 189) has explained that in Bierce's works «man is dehumanized, referred to either in terms of animals or machines.» On the other hand, there is the naturalist's fondness of the grotesque and the macabre. Quite clearly, the intention behind some of the revolting scenes Bierce brings in front of his audience's eyes is to substitute this sardonically debauched image of humanity for the romantic and glowing hopes that had prevailed in earlier battle narratives. Several critics have pointed out that his realism in fiction writing «has its origin in his artistic purpose of presenting man and human nature as they appear to him, to tell the truth about what he has observed» (Bahr 1963, 163), and naturally no less than this should be affirmed about his personal reports of the major battles in the Civil War.

Of the six «Bits of Autobiography» that Ambrose Bierce compiled in the first volume of his *Collected Works* (1909-1913), I refer here only to four since the narrative formulae deployed in all of them are broadly the same. The titles of these historical accounts are «On the Mountain» (1889), «What I Saw of Shiloh» (1898), «A Little of Chickamauga» (1898), and «What Occurred at Franklin» (1906) and, as the headings already suggest, they cover the peaks of Bierce's military career.⁷ The incidents review-

6. Cf. Charles C. Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

7. All the page references after the quotations from Bierce's «Bits of Autobiography» correspond to William McCann's (1957) edition of his war writings.

wed in these accounts are not simply the personal impressions of the writer since, as Wilt has shown, Bierce carried out a thorough research of the Official Rolls and Records of both armies and several military narratives and articles written by other contestants. Nevertheless, Wilt (1929, 284) also underscores repeatedly that «from them he took a few necessary points of the battles, as few as possible to make the action understandable, and then wrote a swift, vivid, and effective account of the main action.» Thus, while preserving the accuracy of the narrated events, it is clear that Bierce is emplotting them in new figurative ways more in accord to his own *Weltanschauung*, that is, a primarily naturalist one. His chronicles respond then to White's (1978, 96) definition of all historical narratives as

... a process of decodation and recodation in which an original perception is clarified by being cast in a figurative mode different from that in which it has come encoded by convention, authority or custom.

Let me begin my exemplification of Bierce's naturalist emplotment of his Civil War memories and acquired knowledge by presenting some evidence of the last two stylistic and formal elements I have referred to above. Instances in which we see Federal and Confederate soldiers dehumanized and behaving like machines in these reports are abundant; in fact, there are only few references to individual servicemen in them. In most cases, the impersonal observer speaks of columns, platoons, skirmishers, or merely of «mutable and tumultuous blurs of color» (68) moving according to some invisible and irrational design. On other occasions, troops are presented as low creatures like beetles or snails dragging themselves across desolate fields.⁸ «What I Saw of Shiloh» offers a number of such descriptions when Bierce tells of his division's progress through almost impassable swamp roads. At another point in the story, he reports: «our black, sinuous line, creeping like a giant serpent beneath the trees, was apparently interminable» (19). Conversely, military machinery and weaponry frequently take up traits that are ordinarily applied only to human beings. In the confusing and ominous war scenario, a gun can turn into your best brother-in-arms, as becomes evident in the following lines:

There is something that inspires confidence in the way a gun dashes up to the front, shoving fifty or a hundred men to one side as if it said, «Permit me!» Then it squares its shoulders, calmly dislocates a joint in the back, sends away its twenty-four legs and settles down with a quiet rattle which says as plainly as possible, «I've come to stay.» There is a superb scorn in its grimly defiant attitude, with its nose in the air; it appears not so much to threaten the enemy as to deride him. (20-21)

8. There are also innumerable examples of this type of dehumanization in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1894).

More often, however, the infernal instrumental of death is presented as a fierce force that goes out of control and imperils the lives of fellow soldiers and enemies alike.

As far as the use of grotesque elements in these memoirs is concerned, it is definitely more scarce than in his fictions. It must be pointed out, though, that every time Bierce finds a chance to introduce his gloomiest vision of man's existence he does so. Some scholars have even claimed that «it is [this] dark side of Bitter Bierce that finds a hospitable welcome in the history of American literature viewed after World War II» (Wiggins 1971, 3). Anyhow, what seems quite unquestionable is that these macabre brushstrokes form an integral part of his naturalist worldview, and that therefore he could not easily exclude them from his attempts at historicizing his army life. Take, for instance, the following passage:

... a Federal sergeant, variously hurt, who had been a fine giant in his time. He lay face upward, taking in his breath the convulsive, rattling snorts, and blowing out in sputters of froth which crawled creamily down his cheeks, piling itself alongside his neck and ears. A bullet had clipped a groove in his skull, above the temple; from this the brain protruded in bosses, dropping off in flakes and strings. I had not previously known one could get on, even in this unsatisfactory fashion, with so little brain. (22-23)

Evidently, both the disgusting details of the pathetic conditions of the wounded sergeant and the highly sardonic closing remark about his lack of brains would be hard at ease in any conventional history of a war. And yet, these seem to be precisely some of the stylistic devices that make Bierce's account most true to the kind of nonsense and human degeneration that he perceived on the battlefield. Another climatic expression of these macabre notes in his chronicles we find at the end of «On a Mountain.» On the day after one of his first engagements, Bierce walks by a group of his companions' corpses to find that «their expression had an added blankness –they had no faces» (8). A few minutes afterwards, the head of his straggling column shoots down a herd of swine which, the reader is made to assume, had had quite a banquet the night before at the expense of Bierce's fallen fellow soldiers.

The next aspect to be considered here is not more likely to be considered typical of a historical discourse than Bierce's dehumanization of his characters or his fondness of the grotesque. Traditionally, histories have presented events following a very strict chronological order that organized those happenings along the temporal axis by drawing straight cause-effect relations between them.⁹ Some of the incidents may certainly be granted more relevance than others but, in general, the lineal succession is respected and only very rarely dislocated. No such thing can be said about

9. See Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), particularly Chapters 3 and 4, pp. 57-106.

Bierce's historical sketches which frequently give up that neat conventional arrangement for the sake of the shock they are meant to cause. Wilt (1929, 269) has rightly observed about the rendition of some important details in «On the Mountain» that «he does not give them in chronological order, because he does not wish to spoil the climax of the sketch by putting them between the two episodes of the dead soldiers.» In fact, this is not an unusual manoeuvre in Bierce's accounts for, above anything else, he was interested in a response to them that would blend both a cognitive and an emotional reaction. It is not a coincidence, for instance, that he procrastinates until the very last stages of his narratives in revealing some ironic facts or commentaries that throw a different light on the events already told. Close to the end of «A Little of Chickamauga,» he relates *a posteriori* one of those random occurrences which changed the direction of the contest in significant ways:

Had the Confederates made one more general attack we should have had to meet them with the bayonet alone. I don't know why they did not; probably they were short of ammunition. I know, though, that while the sun was taking its own to set we lived through the agony of at least one death each, waiting for them to come on. (36-37)

Like in his fictional works, the object of these manipulations of the temporal line in his reports is to achieve the «totality of effect» (Miller 1932, 137) that –following his literary forerunner, Edgar Allan Poe– he always sought to accomplish in them.

Finally, I will comment on the two stylistic devices that, in my opinion, were more conducive to Bierce's choice of a naturalist kind of «emplotment» for his historical writings. It has already been anticipated that the author of *The Devil's Dictionary* held a long-lasting crusade against the grandiloquent and shiny registers that previous generations had used to sentimentalize and turn heroic the crude reality of wars. There is little doubt that one of his main aims was to strip war of all those false connotations and to present it with all the poignancy with which he himself had lived it.¹⁰ As Van Wyck Brooks (1952, 208) explains in his insightful book *The Confident Years*, «nothing could have been more realistic than some of Bierce's battle pieces.» In his attempts to portray the bare and bleak facts of the armed conflict, he was greatly helped by, first, his work as military topographer and, then, his experience as newsreporter. These two offices compelled him to develop an incredibly acute eye able to pinpoint and retain the most crucial details of each scene.¹¹ Let me quote at some length

10. His definition of BATTLE in his dark and cynical wordbook is a telling example of what he felt about armed conflicts: «n. A method of untying with the teeth a political knot that would not yield to the tongue.»

11. Cf. Paul Fatout, «Ambrose Bierce, Civil War Topographer,» *American Literature* 26 (November 1954): 391-400.

here a passage from «What Occurred at Franklin» that illustrates this fact –and bear in mind that he wrote these reminiscences over forty years after the events:

Franklin lies –or at that time did lie; I know not what exploration might now disclose– on the south bank of a small river, the Harpeth by name. For two miles southward was a nearly flat, open plain, extending to a range of low hills through which passed the turnpike by which we had come. From some bluffs on the precipitous north bank of the river was a commanding overlook of all this open ground, which, although more than a mile away, seemed almost at one's feet. On this elevated ground the wagon-train had been parked and General Schofield had stationed himself– the former for security, the latter for outlook. Both were guarded by General Wood's infantry division, of which my brigade was a part. (64-65)

Given the accuracy of his vision and his memory, on the one hand, and the ease with which he transcribed those pictures into a precise and flowing prose, on the other, it is not surprising that some historians should claim that «one can get a better and clearer idea of the battles of Shiloh, Chickamauga, Franklin, etc. from Bierce's descriptions than from any other accounts on those battles» (Wilt 1929, 284). No doubt, the neutrality and inordinate precision of his naturalist outlook had a great deal to do with his proficiency as historical reporter.

Out of the four major modes of presentation, namely, metaphor, metonymy, *sinecdоче*, or irony that a writer may choose from in order to endow the presented events with meaning, it is more than clear that Bierce favoured the ironic one. This mode is particularly *à propos* to the kind of history that he wished to produce for various reasons, but the most important among them was that it suited perfectly his views on what the human condition was all about. He believed that humankind was doomed to live in a universe where forces of different sorts –nature, fate, humans' own folly– would continually prey on it.¹² It is a fact that the ironic coincidences he brought into his stories and «Bits of Autobiography» were occasionally overfetched as, for example, when in the «On a Mountain» sketch, he recollects the «unusual taking off» of a chap named Abbott belonging to his company:

He was lying flat upon his stomach and was killed by being struck in the side by a nearly spent cannon-shot that came rolling in among us. The shot remained in him until removed. It was a solid round-shot, evidently cast in some private foundry, whose proprietor, setting the laws of thrift above those of ballistics, had put his «imprint» upon it: it bore, in slightly sunken letters, the name «Abbott.» (5-6)

12. For an enlightening discussion of the naturalist perception of the universe, see John J. Conder, *Naturalism in American Fiction: The Classic Phase* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984). Conder holds, nevertheless, that the naturalist paradigm gave significant relevance to human will.

Yet, on the other hand, it is also true that these unlikely coincidences and fatal reversals of luck are among the most effective means Bierce used to make conspicuous the meaninglessness of human existence in a world governed by chaotic laws. It can be argued that these extremely ironic twists were the most powerful antidote that he found to attack the romanticized and insipid versions of the war and, in general, of reality that some of his contemporaries preferred to offer.

To conclude, it has been my intention in this brief discussion to show that, notwithstanding Ambrose Bierce's impressive accuracy and reliability as a chronicler of the Civil War, it must be admitted that his historical accounts—as all other histories—are heavily conditioned and colored by the kind of figurative discourse that he used to mediate between the events and his configuration of them into a narrative. It should have become clear that despite the realism and the vigor of his descriptions, his naturalist stylization of the facts does definitely govern the reader's understanding and evaluation of those facts. This, as I have argued from the beginning, is quite inevitable since no historian is free from the principles—and therefore the limitations—of some specific discursive practice. His selection, arrangement of, and judgment on the events will be a function of the language that he uses to vertebrate them. Or, again, as White (1978, 129) has phrased this idea: «The peculiar dialectic of historical discourse . . . comes from the effort of the author to mediate between alternative modes of emplotment and explanation, which means finally, *mediating between alternative modes of language use and tropological strategies.*» [His italics]

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