

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

The Real Prayer and the Imagined: The War against Romanticism in Twain, Howells, and Bierce

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2215m9ts>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 1(1)

Author

Edwards, Tim

Publication Date

2009-02-16

DOI

10.5070/T811006965

Peer reviewed

The Real Prayer and the Imagined: The War Against Romanticism in Twain, Howells, and Bierce

Tim EDWARDS

Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer" rehearses and recasts a dynamic which we find operating in other realist texts that work to unmask the face of war. Emerson's famous—and perhaps easily satirized—transparent eyeball image, of course, provides the central metaphor of American Romanticism. This clarity of spiritual vision, though, seems almost naïve in light of the blind jingoism that marked the early stages of the American Civil War and the run up to the Spanish-American War. Such a short-sighted vision of the realities of war is not lost on Twain, himself a failed campaigner in the Confederate-sympathizing Missouri State Guard, an experience that inspired another of his anti-war pieces, "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed." Nor are other realist writers blind to the harsh truths about warfare, for as if proceeding from the same set of premises, Ambrose Bierce and W. D. Howells campaign against romanticism in two of their important short works: Bierce's "Chickamauga" and Howells's "Editha."

The concluding scene of Ambrose Bierce's short story "Chickamauga," a terrifying vision of what we now call the "collateral damage" of war, is emblematic of how these stories expose war for what it is: a child standing over the sprawled and broken body of a woman, her skull shattered by "the work of a shell" (23). Bierce's aim in the story is to explode romantic and naïve notions about war by showing us its brutal realities: he does so with grim success in this scene. Bierce's work, then, seems to present in some respects a sort of war against romanticism—a war in which realists such as Mark Twain and William Dean Howells are equally engaged in their short anti-war pieces "The War-Prayer" and "The Private History of a Campaign that Failed," and "Editha," respectively. Deploying the language of romanticism against itself in startling, sometimes even surreal ways, these works descend from the heights of flowery romanticism to the darkest abysses of the gothic—all in the name of presenting a realist's vision of war.

In Ambrose Bierce's story, of course, a young boy plays at war until discovering the appalling realities of combat. The levels on which Bierce's story works to dismantle romanticism are indeed legion: the romantic child, for instance, becomes a child of violence, "born to war" (18) and clutching his toy sword "in unconscious sympathy with his martial environment" (22) as he sleeps through the battle of Chickamauga; and nature itself, that

most privileged vehicle of romanticism, is reconfigured as yet another antagonist, “unconscious of the pity” of the child’s plight as he wanders lost amid “the tangled undergrowth,” “his tender skin torn cruelly by brambles” (19). Despite the boy’s martial spirit, Bierce’s narrator emphasizes the child’s limited perception. But the young boy of Bierce’s tale is naïve not only because of his age and disability (he is hearing-impaired and speech-impaired), but also because he carries with him, thanks to “the engraver’s art” (18), a phony notion of war being as artificial as the toy wooden sword he bears—a notion, significantly enough, derived from the “military books and pictures” his father loved (18). Moreover, such romanticized “pictures” of war serve as a connecting thread with all four of the texts we are examining. And in each case, the realist writer works hard to shatter these idealized portraits in order to expose the true face of war lurking beneath.

The climax of Mark Twain’s “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed” presents another disturbing portrait of the face of war. Having lain in ambush for what they take to be the approaching enemy—either Union forces or pro-Union militia—Twain’s narrator and his comrades loose a volley against an obscure “man on horseback” who seemed to be trailed by other riders: “Somebody said ‘Fire!’ I pulled the trigger. I seemed to see a hundred flashes and hear a hundred reports; then I saw the man fall down out of the saddle” (158). The initial jubilation of the small victory, however, contorts into grief and remorse as the militiamen creep forward to observe their lone victim. What they find reveals, again, like a Matthew Brady photograph, the dreadful reality of combat: “When we got to him, the moonlight revealed him distinctly. He was lying on his back, with his arms abroad; his mouth was open and his chest was heaving with long gasps, and his white shirt-front was all splashed with blood. . . . He muttered and mumbled like a dreamer in his sleep about his wife and child; and I thought with a new despair, ‘This thing does not end with him: it falls upon *them* too, and they never did me any harm, any more than he’” (159). Significantly, Twain’s narrator assures us that his campaign began in a fog of romantic excitement: that fog clears all too horribly when the smoke of the ambush dissipates, and it is then that the young narrator finds that he has had his fill of war.

W. D. Howells’s “Editha” shifts the scene to the home front, where idealized visions of war are much more easily preserved. Nevertheless, the foolish romanticism of the main character ends in tragedy for her young suitor, George Gearson. With inflated notions that her future husband should “do something worthy to have won her—be a hero, her hero” (413), she manipulates George into volunteering for service in the upcoming conflict (the Spanish-American War). George himself, despite his anti-war stance, is soon caught up in the jingoism of the day, but it is Editha, with her romantic vision of the war, who serves

as Howells's embodiment of romanticism: when George is killed in one of the opening skirmishes, Editha responds as would a character in her favorite sentimental novel: "Then there was a lapse into depths out of which it seemed she could never rise again; then a lift into clouds far above all grief, black clouds, that blotted out the sun, but where she soared with him, with George! George! She had the fever she expected of herself, but she did not die of it; she was not even delirious, and it did not last long" (421). When Editha visits George's mother in Iowa, Mrs. Gearson, virulently opposed to all war after her husband's Civil War experiences, unmasks Editha for the deluded—and dangerous—romantic that she is: "Let me see you! Stand round where the light can strike on your face" (422). What follows is a harrowing confrontation as the aging and sickly woman rises with indignation, threatening to unveil Editha even more dramatically: "What you got that black on for?" She lifted herself by her powerful arms so high that her helpless body seemed to hang limp its full length. "Take it off, take it off, before I tear it from your back!" (423).

Much like these other realist texts, Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer," uses the tools of romanticism *against* romanticism, to *dismantle* romanticism. Indeed, even the plot of this brief story seems more suited to a romantic tale by Hawthorne. Yet another of Twain's mysterious strangers invades an all too comfortable community—in this case a local church congregation—and proceeds to upset the status quo by revealing the dark secrets beneath the veneer of civilization and righteousness (or in this case, self-righteousness). The dark secret is the truth behind the prayer for victory uttered by the congregation's minister, a prayer couched in romanticized and idealized rhetorical visions of glorious combat. In fact, throughout the story Twain's narrative voice employs the dazzling and romanticized rhetoric we might find Twain himself satirizing in "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses":

Sunday morning came—next day the battalions would leave for the front; the church was filled; the volunteers were there, their young faces alight with martial dreams—visions of the stern advance, the gathering momentum, the rushing charge, the flashing sabers, the flight of the foe, the tumult, the enveloping smoke, the fierce pursuit, the surrender!—then home from the war, bronzed heroes, welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory! (218)

When Twain's stranger enters the chapel, though, "The War-Prayer" turns a hard and factual eye on the realities of war. The minister's uttered prayer, the prayer for blessing and victory, we might regard as the romantic prayer, as it gilds the horrid details of war with pious effusions of patriotism and the righteousness of the cause. When Twain's stranger recasts the prayer in realistic terms, shifting to a gruesomely detailed index of war's actual

effects, “The War-Prayer” focuses an uncompromising eye on the issue of combat: “O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain. . . .” (220). Just as Mrs. Gearson threatens to strip Editha of her mourning black, Twain’s stranger exposes the truth behind the rhetorical mask of the minister’s prayer. But like Editha herself, the congregation fail to heed or understand the stranger’s message, for to them, “there was no sense in what he said” (221).

Given the current global climate, these anti-war texts, brief though they are, remain as relevant today as they were a century or more ago—for there is indeed much sense in what they say. The celebratory nationalism that marked the outbreak of World War I indicates how easily nations and individuals forget how horrible war truly is—and how dire is the need for writers such as Twain and Bierce and Howells to remind us of that bitter truth.

Works Cited

- Bierce, Ambrose. “Chickamauga.” *The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce*. 3rd ed. New York: Citadel, 1946. 18-23.
- Howells, William Dean. “Editha.” *The Portable American Realism Reader*. Ed. James Nagel and Tom Quirk. New York: Penguin, 1997. 412-24.
- Twain, Mark. “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed.” *Great Short Works of Mark Twain*. New York: Harper, 1967. 144-62.
- . “The War-Prayer.” *Great Short Works of Mark Twain*. New York: Harper, 1967. 218-21.