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ARE STEPHEN CRANE AND AMBROSE BIERCE THE INVENTORS OF THE AMERICAN “ANTI-WAR” STORY?

The question of anti-war literature has been one, if not most likely the, major preoccupation of my scholarly life.¹ I first became interested in it as I was writing my Rutgers dissertation on Stephen Crane; it has stayed with me as I edited, in 1996, a collection of essays on the representation of war and violence in American literature and culture entitled *Le parole e le armi*; it never abandoned me in the nearly two decades it took me to complete my book *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature*, a study whose title signals how my inquiry reached a conclusion that is as paradoxical as it is, at least to my mind, inescapable.² But to proceed in an orderly fashion, I suppose that, first, I should explain what I mean by “the question of anti-war literature.” Simply put, that question may be unpacked as follows. While we all have an intuitive understanding of what war literature is—even though this label too has become increasingly unstable, as our understanding of both “war” and “literature” has changed considerably over the last two or three decades—what is “anti-war literature” is much less clear. Of course, one could simply say that anti-war literature is the literature that paints war in a negative light. At this point, however, one would be tempted to claim that, at the very least since Shakespeare’s History Plays, it is hard to come across a literary text worthy of its name that would not cast a critical shadow over the business of men killing other men. Indeed, one of the greatest French philosophers of the twentieth century argued that one could hardly find a more uncompromising critique of war than Homer’s own *Iliad*. This text has traditionally been read (and many continue to read it) as celebrating the virtues of the Greek martial spirit, and of a civilization built around the cult of the hero, who, by dying in battle, achieved his apotheosis and a claim to immortality. According to Simon Weil, on the contrary, the *Iliad* was relentless in showing that in fact the hero “is a thing dragged in the dust behind a chariot” (1965, 6).³ And yet, regardless of whether one finds Weil’s reading of Homer persuasive or not, we can hardly ignore that, over the centuries, literature has made a significant contribution to what, for lack of a better term, I will call the war myth—the notion, that is, that no matter how brutal, bestial, and bloody, war is where some of the best qualities of man have taken shape. This is a point conceded even in what are to my mind two of the most intelligent and original anti-war manifestos of the 19th and early 20th century: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lecture, “War” (1838) and William James’s famous essay “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1910). Emerson: “War educates the senses, calls into action the will, perfects the physical constitution, brings men into such swift and close collision in critical moments that man measures man. On its own scale, on the virtues it loves, it endures no counterfeit, but shakes the whole society until every atom falls into the place its specific gravity assigns it” (1904, 153). James:

We inherit the warlike type; and for most of the capacities of heroism that the human race is full of we have to thank this cruel history. Dead men tell no tales, and if there were any tribes of other type than this they have left no survivors. Our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our

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¹ This is a slightly revised version of a text I presented on June 15, 2018 at l’université Paris Diderot, during the “A19 Symposium.” I wish to thank Cécile Roudeau and Thomas Constantinesco for the invitation to take part in their event.

² See Mariani 1992, 1996, 2015.

³ Written in the summer and fall of 1940, Weil’s “The Iliad, or The Poem of Force” was translated into English by Mary McCarthy and, after appearing in 1945 in the journal *Politics*, was reissued by the *Chicago Review* in 1965. I quote from the latter text.



bone and marrow, and thousands of years of peace won't breed it out of us. The popular imagination fairly fattens on the thought of wars (1987, 1283)

Both Emerson and James, later in their essays, try to sketch how and why human beings should break with the tradition shaped by what, in a memorable phrase, James describes as a “gory nurse.” But the point I wish to make here is simply that, as soon as one begins to delve deeper into the subject of war literature, one realizes that, however unlikely the notion of “pro-war” literature might be, the idea that all war literature can and must by definition be “anti-war” literature is equally untenable. What makes us rest comfortable in our belief that a novel, a play, or a poem about war is in some way or another also a critical statement on either war in general, or at least on a particular war, is the fact that we would not dignify with the name of literature a text that would hide, sublimate or culpably allegorize away the material havoc of war. It is something akin to this logic that, I presume, made US film director Stephen Spielberg once say that “every war film is an anti-war film.” What I take this to mean is that every honest war film, by showing the horror of warfare, cannot help but be anti-war, and this would also be the case, I suppose, of Spielberg's own *Saving Private Ryan*, a movie that may otherwise be read as drawing a rather alluring picture of US patriotism that actually reinforces rather than call into question the myth of the “Good War.”⁴ At this point one is understandably tempted to swing towards the opposite position and agree with François Truffaut's argument that “There could be never an anti-war film, as the violence in such film would inevitably excite the viewer to the point of siding with one group over the other.”⁵ I will return to Truffaut's point, but for the time being I just wish to underline that, while it continues often to be used—and often rather nonchalantly, I must say—the label “anti-war literature” does not designate textual artifacts endowed with certain objective, or relatively objective, structural, formal, or philosophical features. As the paradigmatic example of the *Iliad* shows, the exact same text can be read in strikingly different ways, and that is not so much because the text itself may be ambiguous or undecidable, but simply because there is little agreement as to what qualifies as an “anti-war” perspective. Moreover, the key terms of this debate—war, peace, pacifism, anti-warism, violence, and non-violence—are historically determined, so that we should be wary of assigning an absolute label to any given text. What seems to be clear, though, is that as Kenneth Burke put it in a page of his *Grammar of Motives*, we are simply unable to imagine the relation between war and peace in terms other than a struggle between the two terms, and not as “Peace and War at peace” (1969, 337). Thus, even a text taking an unequivocal position against war, would inevitably be caught in a form of opposition and rejection of something considered unacceptable: in a *war against war*, to quote the title of my book, which of course repeats an anti-war or pacifist slogan uttered numerous times in both literary and political discourse.

It is not rare, in fact, for anti-war stories or novels, to end with acts of defiance or open rebellion that are marked by a sort of anti-militaristic violence. Take, for example, what many still consider today one of the most classic of American anti-war novels, Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got his Gun* (1970 [1939]). After describing in excruciating and claustrophobic detail how a mutilated soldier ‘survives’ as pure consciousness in a body that is reduced to a nearly complete vegetable state, the end of the novel delivers a literal anti-war call to arms: “Make no mistake of it we will live. [...] You plan the wars, you masters of men—plan the wars and point the way and we will point the gun” (Trumbo 1970, 243). Or take the last page of William Faulkner's *A Fable*, a novel published in 1954 but devoted, like Trumbo's, to World War I. There, a disfigured French war veteran tries to disrupt the military train that follows the funeral of the Marshall, the figure the novel identifies as a veritable God of War. It's hardly surprising that Faulkner would choose to end the novel with such a scene considering that, in a preface to the novel that his editor decided to suppress, Faulkner claimed that his was not “a pacifist book,” adding that “pacifism does not work, cannot cope with the forces which produce wars.” “[T]o put an end to war,” he concluded, “the men who do not want war may have to arm themselves as for war” (as quoted in Blotner 1974, 1494).

Before turning to a reconsideration of the two authors who many would consider as the originators of the US anti-war story, let me add that, in a nutshell, what I do in my book is to trace the ways in which certain texts that are concerned to a remarkable extent with war and violence try to resist or at least make visible the risk of being themselves caught up in the violence they wish to denounce. My theoretical polar star in this critical

⁴ I have written about this in Mariani 2000.

⁵ I take the Spielberg and Truffaut quotations from Mariani 2015: 225n.



project has been the work of Kenneth Burke, whose remarks on the relation between war and peace, though somewhat scattered across many of his works, strike me as not only brilliant but also extremely useful as tools for literary analysis. The slogan that Burke coined for the epigraph of his *Grammar of Motives* (1945), *Ad Bellum Purificandum*, is the Latin version of the war-against-war concept. Burke's reasoning was that since we cannot—and perhaps we should not even try to—get rid of the disputatiousness that marks all human societies, we need find ways not to eliminate conflicts altogether, as that would simply give rise to further and perhaps even worse violence, but to educate our litigious natures to forms of non-violent confrontation. Burke was mostly preoccupied with questions of rhetoric and with the philosophy of form, of course, but even though she never mentions him, Chantal Mouffe's recent book, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically*, may well be considered as an extension of the notion that war needs to be purified, in an explicitly political direction. Mouffe's thesis is precisely that “a central task of democratic politics is to provide the institutions which will permit conflicts to take an ‘agonistic’ form, where the opponents are not enemies but adversaries among whom exists a conflictual consensus.” In what she defines as an “agonistic order,” “conflicts, although they would not disappear, would be less likely to take an antagonistic form” (2013, xii).

William James's essay “The Moral Equivalent of War” can be considered one of the founding documents in this homeopathic tradition wishing to resist violence by channeling it into forms of democratic conflict. However, it is only fair to say that the essay has also been read critically by scholars as diverse as T. J. Jackson Lears (1981) and Richard Poirier (1992). The former, in his classic and invaluable study of the rise of modern culture in turn-of-19th-century America, in a rich chapter devoted precisely to the ‘martial spirit’ that infected those decades, claims that James's essay shared many of his contemporaries' anxieties regarding the softness and meaninglessness of a modern life lacking the spur provided by fear of God or fear of enemy. Poirier, for his part, laments James's inability to stick to his pragmatism when he seems to concede that there is something ‘essentially’ pugnacious in human nature. In sum, even James's ability to fully embrace the pacifism that he advocated as vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League appears to be compromised by his inability to imagine a mental, cultural, historical, and political space that would be free of the “martial spirit” Lears (and others before and after him) have seen as one of the distinguishing traits of the age.

When, now more than three decades ago, I began exploring the representation of class and war in the work of Stephen Crane, Lears's *No Place of Grace* provided me not only with an invaluable historical reconstruction of the 1890s, but also with a welcome critical outlook. As I read and re-read *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane's war stories, and his war correspondences, along with Ambrose Bierce's Civil War stories, and the work of lesser figures such as Richard Harding Davis or Marion Crawford, who were in their days extremely popular, I could see how relevant the cult of masculine violence in these works was, and I couldn't help be surprised by the fact that, by and large, criticism seemed to have ignored the connection altogether. So, initially, my interest was, I suppose, more historical than theoretical. I wanted to investigate how a writer like Crane (and to a less extent Bierce, whose work was not my primary interest) could be understood in a different light if his texts were read along with the popular literature of the day, following Fredric Jameson's suggestion that the relationship between “high” and “mass” culture had to be understood dialectically, by paying close attention to the different ideological and rhetorical strategies texts employed to come to terms with the cultural and political anxieties of a given socio-cultural formation.⁶ However, when I began to zoom in on *The Red Badge*, what I have called the anti-war question became inescapable and acquired a relevance that went beyond an assessment of Crane's attitude vis-à-vis the culture of his time. Here was a text that was justly considered as the first great war novel of American literature, notwithstanding the fact that it was not about a war its author could not have experienced first-hand (he was born in 1871). Moreover, Crane at that point in his life had never witnessed war or military action of any kind—except for American football, a form of ‘warfare’ that, as Bill Brown (1994) has shown in his splendid book on Crane, provides one of the key metaphors of the novel. The question that interested me was not so much whether Crane personally liked or disliked war (though I must admit that in the book that grew out of my dissertation there are moments in which I lapse into this sort of biographical considerations). What was much more interesting to me was to figure out why later writers and critics often turned back to this novel and saw it—in

⁶ This is a point Jameson has made often. Classic statements of his position can be found in Jameson 1979, and Jameson 1981, 281-99.



a way analogous to what has happened to the *Iliad*—as a kind of *ur* American war novel that was also at the same time the American *ur anti-war* novel.

In a landmark introduction to Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik* penned in the early 60s, Leslie Fiedler wrote that "The chief lasting accomplishment of World War I was the invention of the Antiwar Novel." "It is certainly true"—he added—"that before the 1920s that genre did not exist, though it had been prophesied in the first two-thirds of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*" (Fiedler 1963, vi). Here Fiedler implicitly agreed with those critics of Crane who saw the ending of the novel as inconsistent with the ironic register of most of the narrative. One surmises that, if the so-called Binder edition of Crane's novel—"The Red Badge Nobody Knows" as the critic called it, published only in 1979—had been available to Fiedler, he might have concluded that the genre had been surprisingly prophesied by the *whole* of Crane's novel. In the Binder edition, as we know, the irony levelled at Henry Fleming seems to be sustained till the very last line of the text, and this would suggest that Crane's unmasking of his protagonist's supposed 'heroism' was thorough and uncompromising. But the question I raised years ago, and which I think continues to be relevant if one wishes to claim for *Red Badge* the status of anti-war novel, was whether, even assuming that the novel's critique of Fleming was sustained till the very end, that was enough to read the text as a critique of the martial spirit of the times. My answer was then—and remains even now, though I confess to having kept up with critical developments in Crane studies somewhat irregularly—that it was *not*. I argued, and would still argue, that if we continue to measure Henry's behavior through the yardstick of the twin notions of heroism and cowardice as they are defined by the novel, we have not made much progress in detaching the novel from the martial spirit of the 1890s. However, what I want to propose on this occasion, as I look back with some detachment at the somewhat presumptuous tone of what I wrote years (decades!) ago, so typical of someone fresh out of graduate school, is that it is ultimately not so important whether we agree or not that *Red Badge* is truly an anti-war novel. What matters is *where* the reader sees the anti-war features of the text as taking shape.

Let's say, for example, that we believe that the frank description of war's brutality has an important didactic value. As an early reviewer of the novel put it, "a book like this, with its vivid pictures of the realities of war, and of the way in which the heroic strife affects the individual combatant, is more likely to cool the blood of the Jingo [...] than a hundred sermons or tracts from the Peace Society" (Weatherford 1973, 105). Here we would all have to agree that Crane broke with a narrative tradition in which the mangled bodies of soldiers and the bloodiness of war were for the most part kept hidden from view (even though one must admit that in novels like *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*, Cooper did not shy away from the goriness of frontier warfare). However, this is a point on which Crane's contemporary William James begged to differ. His view was nearly opposite: "The horror makes the thrill," he wrote, going on to add that "the military party denies neither the bestiality nor the horror, nor the expense; it only says that these things tell but half the story" (James 1987, 1287-88). Twenty years later, Kenneth Burke echoed James by writing that "the greater the horror, the greater the thrill and honor of enlisting." "Horror, repugnance, hatred," he went on to argue, provided a dubious base on which to build a pacifist outlook—indeed, they "might well provide the firmest basis on which the 'heroism' a new war may be erected" (Burke 1973, 239), an insight that a work like Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1987), seems to substantiate in important ways. So, on whether Crane's "photographic realism" is anti-war or not, one may conclude that the jury is still out, though personally I would insist that as we have learned from image theorists such as John Berger and Susan Sontag, the pedagogical and political value of "photographs of agony" is at best ambivalent. On this, or on similar points, we may never reach an agreement, but I think it is important that at least we acknowledge that our dissensus stems from the fact that we disagree on whether a given formal, stylistic, or cultural feature of a text may count as evidence of its anti-war disposition.

Let me now turn to what some would consider a more likely candidate for the role of originator of the anti-war narrative in American letters. Ambrose Bierce collected his war fiction in *In the Midst of Life. Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, a book that appeared in 1891, scarcely four years before Crane's *Red Badge*. My take on Bierce, as you have probably guessed by now, is that he is not the anti-war writer many have made him out to be, notwithstanding the fact that his representation of war's brutality is unromantic and unflinching. As I noted in a short piece that appeared in *Studies in American Fiction* in 1991, and was later included in my book on Crane and American 1890s popular culture, the same critics who went as far as calling Bierce's stories "peace tracts," would also argue that Bierce "was far from being a pacifist," and that he enjoyed "the



companionship and the excitement of war” (see Mariani 1992, 126-27). In my own reading of some of his war stories, I tried to highlight this ambivalence, by insisting that in his narrative machinery there is simply no slot free from the logic of war and aggression, so that any attempt at criticizing the martial universe becomes impossible. Bierce’s irony points to the irrationality and monstrosity of war, no doubt, and yet his own ironic assaults are regulated by an ill logic that parallels the one ruling the army world. For example, in “The Coup de Grace,” the only humane thing captain Madwell can do for his horribly wounded and agonizing friend sergeant Halcrow is to thrust his sword into the latter’s breast and thus put an end to his suffering. Analogously, in “One kind of Officer,” Captain Ransom, though aware all along that he is firing on his own troops, is too much of a soldier to question the orders he has received, first, or to say a word in his defense, later, when he is sentenced to death for obeying those orders. Now, while I must say that I have not come across any sustained rebuttal of my argument, I confess to having been asked in conversation about why I left out from my discussion of Bierce’s stories the one that is not only the most frequently anthologized, but which also seems to wear on its sleeve its anti-war credentials. The question I was posed was of course rhetorical. Its subtext was that I was not engaging “Chickamauga” because it did not fit into my argument. Here was an unequivocal anti-war text I was deliberately ignoring for the simple reason that its features resisted the interpretive framework I had set up to deal with the other texts in Bierce’s collection.

While I acknowledge that “Chickamauga” is different both structurally and thematically from Bierce’s other war stories, and while I respect of course those who wish to see it as a denunciation of the utter senselessness of war (it is certainly no accident that, while emphasizing that Bierce “was no pacifist,” Lawrence Rosenwald has included the text in his prestigious anthology of American anti-war and peace writing, *War No More*, published by the Library of America in 2016), I would like to take up the challenge and explain why I would still refrain from describing “Chickamauga” as an anti-war text. Again, my aim is not to convince you that my interpretation is more adequate than others, but to attract your attention to a set of features that we may take to be broadly critical of the martial spirit and explain why I would hesitate to describe them as evidence of an anti-war position. I will begin by observing that at a first reading not only the story would seem to be unequivocally anti-war but could even be considered as providing a sort of allegorical anticipation of what would later come to be the classic war (and perhaps “anti-war”) narrative. Considered in its broad outline, the story features what appears to be an innocent boy who, his head filled with romantic notions on the chivalry of warfare, ventures into the woods to play his imaginary war games. He is ironically scared at the sight of a rabbit, and like any archetypal young soldier he is forced to discover both his fear and his at least latent cowardice. Later, however, he reaches unawares the margins of a real battlefield, where he encounters the unromantic, ugly side of war. A group of wounded, devastated soldiers are crawling on their hands and knees, but to the boy they form “a merry spectacle” (Bierce 1891, 47). He even tries to play piggyback with one of the bloodied men, the way he has been taught to do with his father’s “Negro” hands.

Since the child’s disability as a deaf-mute is revealed only at the end of the story, the scene can be read as an illustration of how ideology fashions its own version of the real. Unable to let go of his war fantasies, the child sees himself as the ‘leader’ of this strange army and it is only later, when he reaches his farm and finds the horribly mutilated body of his mother, killed by a shell, that the traumatic real world finally shatters the imaginary one in which he has taken refuge all along. Her “white face turned upward, the hands thrown out and clutched full of grass, the clothing deranged” (Bierce 1891, 52), the mother’s dead body stands for the obscene content that the war narrative cannot assimilate. At this point, the child’s disability becomes allegorically poignant. His terrifying, inhuman scream may be seen as an early example of that loss of language vis-à-vis the horror of warfare which, from Walter Benjamin’s remark on the silence of returning World War I soldiers, to Kurt Vonnegut’s laconic comment on the impossibility of saying anything intelligent about a massacre, would become a staple of war narratives. Indeed, one could argue that the child’s terrifying cries could be glossed with what is perhaps the shortest war story ever told, as reported in Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* on the Vietnam War. “Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened” (Herr 1978, 6). At the end of every war story there is traditionally something that cannot be communicated. This something may be factual, as in Herr’s case, or emotional and psychological, as in Bierce, but it is something that seems to defy language and understanding. The soldier, in “Chickamauga” as in countless other war stories, survives and makes it back home, but can he really ‘tell’ the tale any better than Bierce’s child?



Before I try to explain why, notwithstanding all I have said so far, I would still resist calling “Chickamauga” an anti-war story, let me add that it would seem to be a story capable of escaping Truffaut’s strictures on the supposedly anti-war film. Bierce’s text provides us with an illustration of the cruelty and violence of war, but it would be difficult to maintain that in so doing it encourages the reader to take a side in a war whose nature and contours are left, I think deliberately, rather vague. One may follow Bettina Hofmann’s intelligent reading of the text and agree with her that neither the boy nor his father and mother are as innocent as one may perceive them at first to be. We are told at the beginning of the story, for example, that the boy fares from a genealogy of ancestors “born to war and dominion as a heritage” (Bierce 1891, 41). Though he is way too young to be considered personally guilty, there can be no question that, equipped with his “wooden sword,” the child is cast as a symbol of that same southern mentality that made Mark Twain lay the blame of slavery and the Civil War at the feet of sir Walter Scott. As Hofmann writes, “the boy is presented as heir to a romanticized chivalric and heroic past, qualities which form an essential part of the southern myth” (2005, second paragraph)—a myth, the story subtly suggests, to which the child’s family actively contributes. The story, then, would seem to provide a critique of the martial spirit, while simultaneously also avoiding the pitfall of encouraging the reader to take a side in the war at hand. The victims—both the mother and the crawling, moribund soldiers—are southerners, but this does not trigger any anti-Northern animosity, and not only because, as we have just seen, the South may share much of the responsibility for the catastrophe of war. They elicit our sympathy precisely because their victimhood is emphasized. They evoke pity, not a desire for revenge.

Thus far I have apparently argued against myself, by trying to show how “Chickamauga” may indeed be read as a true, uncompromising anti-war story. Before I try, as it were, to undo what I have done so far, let me stress that I do not consider conferring or withdrawing the badge of “anti-war” upon a story as a sign of, respectively, moral praise or condemnation. I happen to believe that there are dozens of war novels, war stories, and war memoirs, which are interesting and praise-worthy though, to my mind, to identify them as anti-war would be to incur in a category mistake. Please allow me to repeat something I said at the beginning of this essay. I am fully aware that to write, stage, or perform anti-war sentiments is a paradoxical activity—an attempt, no matter how peaceful and non-violent, to wage war on war, so I am fully aware that, on my own terms, no anti-war sentiment or action can be thoroughly “pure.” Let me quote Kenneth Burke again. It is simply impossible to imagine “Peace and War at peace:” they *must* be at war with one another. When they are not—as in the famous Latin expression, *si vis pacem para bellum*—it is only because “peace” has been cannibalized by war. As William James put it, “Every up-to-date dictionary should say that ‘peace’ and ‘war’ mean the same thing, now in *posse*, now in *actu*” (James 1987, 1283). So, if thinking, writing, and acting against war is necessarily contradictory, on what basis can we describe a given text as more convincingly anti-war than another? In my view, based on two main criteria. 1) Does the would-be anti-war text display some awareness of its antinomic status? Is it conscious, so to speak, of its own impossibility? The more it is, the more it will prevent the reader from smugly occupying any comfortable high moral ground. 2) Does the would-be anti-war text offer a standpoint, no matter how unstable and questionable, from which something other than a war-saturated world may be imagined? Is it able, in other words, to counter the spirit of war with a set of alternative values and to be so bold as to imagine these values as able to defeat, rather than succumb to, war?

Bierce’s “Chickamauga” must be praised for breaking the conventions of war writing that had prevailed until then in 19th century America. If we exclude some of Walt Whitman’s and Herman Melville’s Civil War poetry, “the horrors of war” had largely been hidden from view by a flood of patriotic and militaristic rhetoric. By intelligently playing off the deaf-mute child’s perspective against the narrator’s viewpoint, Bierce succeeds in de-sublimating war, puncturing the chivalric ideal with a tableau of grotesque violence. Bierce was unquestionably one of the first writers to insist that war was irremediably ugly, a point that even after the bloodbath of the Civil War needed to be made if it is true that, as late as 1879, no other than General Sherman had to warn a graduating class of the Michigan Military Academy with the following words: “There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but, boys, it is all hell” (“William Tecumseh Sherman”). However, this awareness on Sherman’s part seemed to have had no mitigating effect whatsoever on his strategy of total warfare against the American Indians in the post-Civil War period. It is a sad fact, and one that may be difficult to process, but there is plenty of evidence to show that the acknowledgment of the brutality, murderousness, and unrelenting barbarity of war has rarely been enough to



stop people from waging war. Both Bierce, in his ironic portrayal of the child's fantasies, and Sherman, in his outright dismissal of the chivalric ideal, recognized the gap between the romantic myth of war and its revolting carnage, and yet neither of them seems capable of imagining a world that would not be ruled by the passions of war.

In his to me still unsurpassed *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes wrote that “Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (1972, 143). A statement of fact. War is horrible. Violence is ugly. War kills the soldier, but also, at random, the civilian. There is clarity in Bierce's description of war. It does not deny its horror, though it does not provide much of an explanation. True, there are references to a bellicose tradition of domination that continues to be handed down from parent to child and this is indeed a sign that, as Barthes observed, even “the most natural object contains a political trace, however faint and diluted, the more or less memorable presence of the human act which has produced, fitted up, used, subjected or rejected it” (Barthes 1972, 143). Bierce is in fact telling us that war is not a natural, but a man-made object, and as such, at least theoretically subject to reform. But then again, man too is part of nature, and it is no accident that war has often been ‘explained’ as the by-product of some ‘natural’ or even ‘biological’ in-born human aggressiveness. It is in this sense that, paradoxically, even the most unflinching depiction of the horror of war can make the men who are part of it ‘innocent.’ If, to quote Barthes again, one makes contingency appear eternal, historical intention turns into natural justification.

So, to conclude, the answer I can provide to the question raised in the title of this essay is both yes and no. The realism of Bierce and Crane set the ground for the emergence of the modern war story, both in the US and elsewhere, and their prose often lashed out in ironic and grotesque ways against the ‘heroic’ ideology underlying the martial spirit of their age. However, if one happens to believe—as I and others far more knowledgeable in these matters than me do—that to insist on the ugly and gruesome side of war without imagining how to actively oppose war, falls short of taking an anti-war position, then my answer can only be a resounding “no.” Moreover, the contradictions displayed by late 19th century narratives of war have been by and large inherited by the tradition that would follow in their wake. To be frank, I have often thought that, to repeat what Ralph Waldo Emerson said of man in general, the anti-war novel is a “golden impossibility” as the line such a text must walk is indeed a hair's breadth. As Bierce's “Chickamauga” itself shows, the line between the “maimed and bleeding men” scattered around the battlefield and the “merry spectacle” the deaf-mute child perceives is thinner than we may realize. As Bierce observes, “the points of the compass were reversed” (1891, 52) only once the child recognizes that the building ablaze is his own home and the body of the dead woman is that of his mother. Only when we are hit—literally—close to home we seem to take stock of the truth of war, but even acknowledging such truth, to paraphrase what Henry David Thoreau said of voting for the right, is *doing nothing* to get rid of war. The deaf-mute child's “inarticulate and indescribable cries—something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey” may well be the only immediate response to the physical and moral devastation of the blind fury of war. But let's not forget that Bierce went on to add that such was “a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil” (1891, 53). True, Bierce is to this day famous as the author of *The Devil's Dictionary*, but I doubt he meant to impart any positive value to the child's desperate reaction. Whatever the case might be, we will probably need something better than the language of a devil to resist the devil's work.

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