
"ALL IS HUSHED AT SHILOH": A REMINISCENCE

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On April 6-7, 1862, near Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, occurred the battle now best known by the romantic-sounding name of Shiloh. Surely there is irony in the fact that this battle took place near the small Methodist church called Shiloh, since more men died in the battle than in all the wars previously fought by citizens of the United States -- the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War. Nearly 3500 men lost their lives in the two-day encounter. Overall, almost 24,000 casualties were realized on both sides. An added irony is that the battle plan followed by the Confederate soldiers was Napoleon's plan for Waterloo, and the percentage of casualties at Shiloh was twenty-four percent, the same results as at Waterloo. But, as Shelby Foote observes in *The Civil War: A Narrative: Fort Sumter to Perryville*, "Waterloo had settled something, while this one apparently had settled nothing. When it was over the two armies were back where they started, with other Waterloos ahead" (350).

James McDonough, in his significant study of this battle, quotes Otto Eischenim as saying, "No novelist could have packed into a space of two days more action, romance and surprises than history did on that occasion" (v). Even so, in the years since Shiloh a good many literary people have seized on the happenings there as subject matter for all kinds of literary treatments.

Perhaps this battle was destined for literary immortality in part because of those who participated in it. One of the leading figures of the Union Army was the future novelist Major General Lew Wallace, whose mistake in taking the wrong road led not only to a delay in the arrival of his forces but also to the later criticism that caused him after the war -- Ancient Mariner-like -- to return annually to Shiloh in attempts to explain his delay. McDonough says, "Shiloh was to bring him much publicity and much sorrow" (96, 47). There is no surprise that Wallace's later literary triumphs included no retelling of the Shiloh story.

Another literary figure there for the two-day struggle was Sergeant Ambrose Bierce of the Ninth Indiana. Assigned in February 1862 to the Army of the Ohio under Don Carlos Buell, he joined Grant's Army of the Tennessee at Shiloh. Bierce participated in the second day of fighting on April 7, 1862, when the Ninth Indiana suffered the highest casualties of any on the Union side. Later Bierce was to recall the events in his account "What I Saw of Shiloh." As he began, he recounted the peaceful, almost idyllic setting of that Sunday morning. That serene picture soon gave way to the carnage that would serve Bierce effectively in such stories as "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and "Chickamauga."

It was the horror of war that enraged Bierce's greatest furor. His ability to imprint the destruction and devastation on the reader's mind climaxes in his account of such landmarks as the peach orchard, the Hornet's Nest, and the Bloody Pond. Many other vivid scenes rushed to his memory. Once he interrupted his efforts to say, "I can't describe it" (256). On another occasion he turned aside to investigate a ravine where an Illinois regiment had been trapped in the fighting. The area had been burned over, and Bierce said, "I obtained leave to go down into the

valley of death and gratify a reprehensible curiosity." Shocked at the horrors he encountered, he brought into play his typical cynicism: "I cannot catalogue the charms of these gallant gentlemen who had got what they enlisted for" (261-2). For all his later stories about the Civil War, Bierce never had one set at Shiloh. Although he would later draw upon some of the experiences he witnessed there, the reality was too much even for him. Carey McWilliams, his biographer, said "Bierce never forgot that first major battle...He made war story after war story based on some incident garnered from his experience at Shiloh [which] came to signify the turning point in his life. He wrote of it sadly, lovingly, as though upon its blood-drenched fields he had lost the perishable illusion of youth" (41).

Shiloh was the first Civil War battle immortalized in a ballad. In fact, the battle inspired a number of anonymous poetic tributes to bravery and loss. One such work created a folk hero that all America could identify with since no designation of either Union or Confederate army is given. "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh" tells the story of a drummer boy who met his death in the battle. The details were put in rhyme and set to music by Will Shakespeare Hays, who wrote music for a publishing firm in Louisville. Richard Harwell notes that "the sentimentality of the piece brought it immediate popularity in a period of the war when the folks at home wanted just such outlets for their emotion" (76).

On Shiloh's dark and blood ground, the dead and wounded lay.
Amongst them was a drummer boy, that beat the drum that day.
A wounded soldier raised him up, His drum was by his side.
He clasped his hands and raised his eyes and prayed before he died:
Look down upon the battle field, Oh Thou, our Heav'nly friend,
Have mercy on our sinful souls. The soldiers cried, "Amen."
For gather'd round a little group, Each brave man knelt and cried.
They listen'd to the drummer boy who prayed before he died.

"Oh Mother!" said the dying boy, "Look down from Heav'n on me."
Receive me to thy fond embrace, Oh take me home to thee.
I've loved my country as my God, To serve them both I've tried."
He smiled, shook hands. Death seized the boy who prayed before he died.

Each soldier wept then like a child, Stout hearts were they and brave.
They wrote upon a simple board these words "This is a guide
To those who mourn the drummer boy who prayed before he died." (Harwell 77)

Another ballad, "The Battle of Shiloh," collected by Cecil Sharp from the singing of Philander Fitzgerald of Nash, Virginia, obviously presents a Southern bias. Its opening call to "each loyal Southerner's heart" prepares the reader for a seemingly glorious victory of the Confederates.

Their guns and knapsacks they threw down,
They ran like hares before the hounds.
The Yankee Dutch could not withstand
The Southern charge at Shiloh.

.....
Now many a pretty maid did mourn
A lover who'll no more return;

The cruel war has from her torn;
His body lies at Shiloh. (Emrich 448-9)

Two contemporaries of the battle sought to immortalize it soon after its completion. Far from the fields surrounding Shiloh was Herman Melville, but his imagination had been touched by the events unfolding in the South. By 1862 Melville's earlier successes had waned, and he was seeking other outlets for his artistic abilities as well as other means of providing income for his family. Just three years before, Mrs. Melville had written her mother: "Herman has taken to writing poetry. You need not tell anyone, for you know how such things get around" (Hand 326). While there are no references to Melville's immediate response to Shiloh, his interest in battle sites nearer home is well-documented. According to Jay Leyda's *Melville Log*, Melville and his brother Allan arrived in Washington in April 1864 seeking a pass to visit the Army of the Potomac. Such a request was granted, and a few days later both men left Washington for the front visiting various battlefields and meeting General Grant. Jane Melville arrived in Washington and wrote her step-daughter on April 13, "We arrived here safely, but did not find the Army of the Potomac on Sunday last...We hope to see Papa tomorrow -- unless the Guerrillas have Papa and Uncle Herman" (666-7).

Out of those visits and his constant reading of war accounts, Melville composed the seventy-two poems that were included in *Battle-Pieces* when it was published in 1866. While Melville insisted there was no effort to arrange the poems in any scheme, they *are* placed in chronological order. His detailed knowledge of the war is evidenced in the numerous Civil War personalities mentioned and the many places remembered in the poems. It is little wonder that Newton Arvin would later call Melville "the Matthew Brady of Civil War verse" (qtd. in Hillway 126).

Before continuing with a discussion of Melville's treatments of Shiloh, however, notice must be given the other poet from the same period who wrote about this battle. His name was Forceythe Willson, and his work "The Old Sergeant" first appeared in the *Louisville Journal* perhaps in 1863. It was republished in 1866 and ironically was reviewed with Melville's book of Civil War verse in an unsigned review under the title "More Poetry of The War" in *Nation* on September 6, 1866. The reviewer expresses a skeptical view of most of the work inspired by the war. He places Melville in the "herd of recent versifiers." Part of the blame, he says, must be instinctive. "Nature did not make him a poet. His pages contain at best little more than the rough ore of poetry." He speaks of individual poems: "There are some...in which it is difficult to discover rhythm, measure, or consonance of rhyme. The thought is often involved and obscure. The sentiment is weakened by incongruous imagery" (Branch 390).

In contrast, this reviewer praises Willson's work as superior to Melville's:

It is a misfortune that the special events which have moved Mr. Melville to write are the same, in several instances, which have already been put into verse by other writers, and that these earlier poems, already more or less familiar to the public, are necessarily brought into comparison with his. Thus his brief verses entitled "Shiloh: A Requiem" almost inevitably suggest, by contrast, the very striking poem of Mr. Forceythe Willson's, of which a great part of the scene is laid on the battle-field of Shiloh, called "The Old Sergeant."

Finally the reviewer concludes: "We doubt if the war has inspired a narrative poem more imaginatively conceived, or more vigorously told" (390).

To give some indication of the quality of competition Melville was forced to confront, one or two stanzas of Willson's "imaginatively conceived" and "vigorously told" narrative should be quoted:

"Come a little nearer, Doctor, -- thank you, -- let me take the cup:
Draw your chair up, -- draw it closer, -- just another little sup!
May be you think I'm better; but I'm pretty well used up: --
Doctor, you've done all you could do, but I'm just a going up!

.....

"I have got my marching orders, and I'm ready now to go;
Doctor, did you say I fainted? -- but it couldn't ha' been so,
For as sure as I'm a sergeant, and was wounded at Shiloh,
I've this very night been back there, on the old field of Shiloh!

.....

"There was where Lew Wallace showed them he was of the canny kin,
There was where old Nelson thundered, and where Rousseau waded in;
There McCook sent 'em to breakfast, and we began to win --
There was where the grape-shot took me, just as we began to win." (Stedman 388-9)

Melville's "Shiloh: A Requiem" must be one of the finest literary responses to that horrible occasion. Only nineteen lines long, the poem begins and ends with the swallows flying low and skimming as if they hovered and comforted. Against the back-drop of the natural world of swallows, field, clouds, and rain, man invades with war, fighting, and death; hence, the sub-title "A Requiem" becomes appropriate. The church dominates lines nine and ten with its loneliness in the midst of fratricide. Its ineffectiveness is suggested in the lines that follow referring to "natural prayer of dying foemen." The church has not drawn these enemies together; suffering and death have done that. Their prayers are natural rather than ritual, the result of the "parting groan" of fatal wounds and injuries. There is nothing like a bullet to change one's perspective, to "undeceive" as Melville declares, to reveal in the clearest, brightest light.

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
 The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
 The forest-field of Shiloh --
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
 Around the church of Shiloh --
The church so lone, the log-built one,
That echoed so many a parting groan
 And natural prayer
 Of dying foemen mingled there --
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve --
 Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)
 But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim
 And all is hushed at Shiloh. (Warren, ed. 122)

Robert Penn Warren noted, "The Civil War made Melville a poet" (Warren, ed. 11). Perhaps the anonymous critic

was right: nature did not make him one, but war did, for as Warren said, "It gave him the right subject" (11). A battle such as that at Shiloh cannot be absorbed all at once. That was the problem Ambrose Bierce had. Melville needed not to see the blood and horror; he needed rather the restoration of a quiet and natural world to influence him to reflection. The poem opens in the present tense -- and then once more "the swallows skim,/ And all is hushed at Shiloh." Melville returns to the present tense as nature resumes her cycles.

The twentieth century has not forgotten the imaginative possibilities of that April Sunday. Stephen Vincent Benét in his *John Brown's Body* and Jesse Hill Ford in his novel *The Raider* deal with the events of that battle. Even a British novelist, Don Bannister, in a 1981 novel called *Long Day at Shiloh*, has chosen to tell the story exclusively from the perspective of the Union soldiers. Arranged in a strict chronological ordering (his chapter headings are hours beginning with Midnight April 5/6 and ending with Midnight April 6/7), Bannister neglects much of the drama of the event by ignoring the feelings shared on both sides. This work does not compare favorably in any way with the much more ambitious and much more effective novel by Shelby Foote.

Few readers could accuse Foote of not knowing his subject matter, for not only did he publish his novel *Shiloh* in 1952, he was later to follow it up with his masterpiece, a three-volume study entitled *The Civil War: A Narrative*, appearing one volume at a time in 1958, 1963, and 1974. As one reads the account of the battle at Shiloh, for instance, in the historical survey and then compares that with the fictionalized version in the novel, he is struck with the accuracy even in fiction. Foote explained his intention for the novel in a note at the end of the book: "Historical characters in this book speak the words they spoke and do the things they did at Shiloh. Many of the minor incidents also occurred, even when here they are assigned to fictional persons; I hope the weather is accurate too" (225).

Where Bannister was content to tell only one side of the struggle, Foote chooses to tell both sides with his chapters alternating between Union and Confederate participants. The historical accuracy constantly amazes the reader, but at the same time one loses himself in the drama of the story and must struggle to remember this is essentially factual.

William Faulkner said of Foote's *Shiloh* that it was "twice the book that *The Red Badge of Courage* is" (qtd. in Carter 241). That statement is true in part because the author totally immersed himself in the research for his study. He was writing more than fiction; he was determined to make history live once again. Foote said to William C. Carter, "I always remember a quote from Keats saying that 'a fact is not a truth until you love it'" (248).

From this writer's perspective, this battle offered enormous literary potential, filled as it was with an uncanny number of "ifs" -- if those torrential rains had not occurred, if Lew Wallace had arrived earlier, if Johnston had not been killed, if Beauregard and Johnston had not help opposing viewpoints on fighting this battle. And that list might be lengthened.

The importance of rains before and during the battle might have received a dominant place to a piece of fiction such as Hemingway granted in *A Farewell to Arms*. The irony of Johnston's death, caused by a stray bullet cutting an artery in his leg, is enhanced by the knowledge that his only aide present knew nothing of emergency medical help while the staff physician had been ordered by Johnston to assist wounded prisoners. Stephen Crane could have masterfully captured the twists of fate in that set of circumstances. While literature may thrive on those kinds of "Ifs," Ben C. Truman explains that "there is no poorer place in the world for [them] than on the battlefield. The results are victories or defeats for one side or the other, and no 'Ifs' can tarnish the one or repair the other" (66).

To walk over those acres attempting to envision the horror of the place becomes all but impossible, for as Bierce discovered, it is all quiet and peaceful now. Does the present reality deceive the memory? Or is there a contentment to be found in Melville's conclusion: "All is hushed at Shiloh?" Such a hush in no way suggests oblivion, for if the dead lie low the swallows still skim over the forest-field of Shiloh and the remembrance still stirs the heart.

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