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Kyle Crews

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An “Unreligious” Affair: (Re) Reading the American Civil War in Shelby Foote’s Shiloh and Robert Penn Warren’s Wilderness

KYLE CREWS

Given Robert Penn Warren’s extensive sphere of influence in the American and European literary community, it would be reasonable to assume that he and Shelby Foote interacted with one another as Warren did with most other notable literary and academic figures of his time. Such an assumption, however, is not *entirely* accurate. Warren did not have a great friendship with Foote as he did with other Southern writers; the two had met only at official functions, and they were both founding members of The Fellowship of Southern Writers, established in 1987. Aside from these official connections, the two writers maintained their distance from one another. When Warren learned that Ken Burns was planning an extensive documentary on the American Civil War, however, he advised the filmmaker to contact Shelby Foote. Burns followed Warren’s advice and contacted Foote, who agreed to participate since the referral came from Warren. It is worth quoting C. Stuart Chapman at length as he describes the relationship between Warren and Foote as it relates to Ken Burns’ series on the Civil War:

Burns had started work on his new series soon after the completion of *Huey Long*. In preparation for the new film, he assembled a group of prominent Civil War historians, including C. Vann Woodward, Eric Foner, and Barbara Fields. Foote was not among the group; at this point, in fact, Ken Burns knew Foote’s name as “just one among many who had written on the Civil War.” Robert Penn Warren changed all of that with a phone call one night in early 1986. As Ken Burns remembers the call, “In that great Southern voice of his, Warren said, ‘Thinking about the Civil War, Ken. If you’re going to do it right, you need to contact Shelby Foote.’” [...] Warren knew and admired Foote’s trilogy, and his appreciation of the *The Civil War: A Narrative* led him to place the call to Burns. Still

not having read Foote at the time, all Burns knew was that “when Red Warren tells you what to do, you do it.”¹

The connection between Foote and Warren, tenuous though it may be, nonetheless indicates an important theoretical connection between the two fiction writers and students of history. Both men ruminated on the complexity of the American Civil War, and both men attempted to register that complexity from a fictional vantage point. In *The Legacy of the Civil War*, Warren describes the early 1860s as our “Homeric period,” with figures that “loom up only a little less than gods.”² Warren appeared to recognize the “Homeric” quality of Foote’s trilogy (described by Walker Percy as *the American Iliad*) and thus recommended him to Burns as the most capable of capturing this sentiment in the documentary.

But the relationship between the two writers does not end at Warren’s admiration for Foote’s historical trilogy, and his subsequent referral of Foote to Ken Burns. Rather, the two share an almost perfectly unified philosophy of history and a nearly identical understanding of the Civil War. *Shiloh*, published by Foote in 1952, and *Wilderness*, published by Warren in 1961, best demonstrate the similar historiography that both writers advocate. From a narratological standpoint, the stories are very different; however, the underlying theme is the same: the Civil War as an “unreligious” episode in American history—a label that amplifies the complexity of an often oversimplified period in the nation’s history.³

Shiloh is a historical novel that utilizes seventeen narrators to “penetrate” the “confusion” of the battle of Shiloh.⁴ Sergeant Polly, Private Dade, and Lieutenant Palmer Metcalfe speak for the Southern experience. Captain Fountain, Private Flickner, and twelve members of an Indiana regiment represent the Northern side. Following in the tradition of Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* and Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Foote uses alternating

¹ C. Stuart Chapman, *Shelby Foote: A Writer’s Life* (Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 2003), 258-259.

² Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1998), 82.

³ Shelby Foote, *Shiloh* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 80.

⁴ Shelby Foote, “A Colloquium with Shelby Foote,” in *Conversations with Shelby Foote*, ed. William C. Carter (Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1989), 200.

monologues to represent the same battle from several perspectives. His use of this narrative technique goes beyond mimesis, though, as Foote appropriates this form as a way of defining *his* particular historical methodology. One narrator from the Indiana regiment at Shiloh succinctly captures Foote's theory of military history: "A book about war, to be read by men, ought to tell what each of the twelve of us saw in our own little corner. Then it would be the way it was – not to God but to us."⁵ Foote renders the battle through the prism of individual experience and thus seamlessly moves from one "corner" to the next. Helen White and Redding S. Sugg acknowledge the absence of "authorial manipulation" and argue that Foote "creates artfully assorted and deployed individual points of view."⁶ The polyphony of voices in *Shiloh* is also a means of contesting received versions and opinions of the war. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the "polyphonic novel" in his work on Dostoevsky, it can be said that Foote presents the battle of Shiloh "within several fields of vision, each full and of equal worth; and it is not the material directly but these worlds, their consciousnesses with their individual fields of vision that combine in a higher unity, a unity, so to speak, of the second order, the unity of a polyphonic novel."⁷ Foote does not elevate the Northern or Southern point of view, but rather he allows several autonomous speakers on both sides to articulate their perspective. In a way, Warren's novel follows this same pattern since he chose, during the composition of *Wilderness*, to focus on the multiple voices in the "rich context" of the Civil War with Adam as a "*mere* observer."⁸ But the primary monologue, of course, is delivered by Adam, who filters the events around him through his intellect.

Foote and Warren depend on historical data to construct their respective narratives. A note at the end of *Shiloh* informs the reader that "historical characters in the book [spoke] the words they spoke

⁵ Foote, *Shiloh*, 164.

⁶ Redding S. Sugg and Helen White, *Shelby Foote* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 70.

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), 16.

⁸ Robert Penn Warren, "Robert Penn Warren: An Interview," in *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews, 1950-1978*, ed. John T. Hiers and Floyd C. Watkins (New York: Random House, 1980), 187.

and [did] the things they did at Shiloh.”⁹ Adam Rosenzweig’s journey to the wilderness of Virginia is well documented by Warren and consistent with the historicity of both Gettysburg and the Wilderness battle. The infusion of historical fact and imaginative qualities is just the kind of mixture that Warren and Foote consciously chose for their Civil War novels. In *Shelby Foote and the Art of History*, James Panabaker argues that “historical detail underpins the fictional subject matter and fictional techniques enrich and enliven the history.”¹⁰ For Warren and Foote, history is not simply about the past; it is also “the imaginative past.”¹¹

Critics are quick to denounce the philosophy of history that Warren and Foote embrace. In the preface to James McDonough’s historical treatise on Shiloh, the author writes: “One novel had appeared [prior to my historical treatment of the battle]—Shelby Foote’s *Shiloh*—which is interesting and well written, but a novel cannot take the place of a full, documented work when a reader desires to separate fact from fiction.”¹² Foote addresses this type of criticism in his *Paris Review* interview, “The Art of Fiction”: “My book falls between two stools: academic historians are upset because there are no footnotes, and novel readers don’t want to study history.”¹³ Although he is responding to criticism of his Civil War trilogy, the comment is applicable to *Shiloh*. Neither Warren nor Foote is willing to separate fact from fiction, history from literature, the documented past from the imaginative past. When asked about the tension between the novelist and historian, Warren responded:

The materials that go into a piece of fiction may be drawn from history or human experience, but their factuality gives them no special privilege, as contrasted with imagined materials. They have, as “materials” for it, the same status, and nothing more

⁹ Foote, *Shiloh*, 225.

¹⁰ James Panabaker, *Shelby Foote and the Art of History: Two Gates to the City* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2004), xi.

¹¹ Robert Penn Warren, “The Uses of History in Fiction,” in *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews, 1950-1978*, ed. John T. Hiers and Floyd C. Watkins (New York: Random House, 1980), 92.

¹² James Lee McDonough, *Shiloh—In Hell before Night* (U of Tennessee P, 1977), vii.

¹³ Shelby Foote, “Shelby Foote: The Art of Fiction CLVII,” *The Paris Review* 151 (1999):

than that. But they come in with all the recalcitrances and the weights and the passions of the real world.¹⁴

A novelist's philosophy of history does not "privilege" fact over "imagined materials." Foote and Warren assign the "same status" to fiction as they do to the historical data that buttresses their novels. Foote, in fact, reiterates Warren's assessment of history and fiction:

There is no great difference between writing novels and writing histories other than this: if you have a character named Lincoln in a novel who's not Abraham Lincoln, you can give him any color eyes you want. But if you want to describe the color of Abraham Lincoln's [...] eyes, you have to know what color they were. They were gray. So you're working with facts that came out of documents, just as in a novel you are working with facts that come out of your head or most likely out of your memory.¹⁵

Foote's fiction has received serious attention and more scholarly analysis in France because of greater fascination with the interplay between his novels and history. White and Sugg note that French scholars "are intrigued with Foote's acting upon the belief that all history is narration and that the distinction between novel and history is obliterated in the art of writing."¹⁶ Warren and Foote are willing to obliterate the traditional opposition between history and fiction, though *not* as a postmodern critique of history as just another narrative, whose paradigm structures are no better than fiction; they refute the distinction because, as they assert, the novelist and historian are after the same thing: truth. As Warren says, "The historian is after this truth, and it's a good truth. So is the novelist."¹⁷ And Foote elsewhere writes: "Both are seeking the same thing: truth—not a different truth: the same truth – only they reach it, or try to reach it, by different routes."¹⁸ Pursuing the truth, however, is not an easy task given the enormous complexity of

¹⁴ Warren, "The Uses of History in Fiction," 93.

¹⁵ Shelby Foote, "The Novelist's View of History," *Mississippi Quarterly* 17 (Fall 1964): 56-57.

¹⁶ Sugg and White, *Shelby Foote*, i.

¹⁷ Warren, "The Uses of History in Fiction," 95.

¹⁸ Foote, "The Novelist's View of History," 219.

history. Randy Hendricks correctly observes that “Warren’s vision of America says *no* to easy interpretations of its history.”¹⁹

Shiloh and *Wilderness* illuminate Warren and Foote’s philosophy of history while simultaneously applying it to the complexity of the Civil War. The Wilderness is a densely wooded region, remarkable for its brooding and dismal woods. This battle provided Warren “with an excellent image of his philosophy of history and nature—man struggling with the confused blankness and horror that everywhere confront him in the wasteland of history and nature.”²⁰ In *Shiloh*, Captain Fountain from Ohio describes the unusual terrain in Southeastern Tennessee: “Oaks and sycamores and all the other trees common to this region were so thickly clustered here that even at midday, by skirting the open fields and small farms scattered there, you could walk from the Landing three miles inland without stepping into sunlight.”²¹ Foote and Warren attempt to penetrate the confusion of Civil War history in order to expose the meaning of this American experience.

Much of what Warren and Foote expose in *Shiloh* and *Wilderness* is the myth of Civil War history. In *Patriotic Gore*, Edmund Wilson describes *the* salient myth that much of America still assumes:

The action of the Washington government in preventing the South from seceding was not prompted by the motives that have often been assumed. The myth that it was fighting to free the slaves is everywhere except in the South firmly fixed in the American popular mind; and it is true, of course, that slavery in the Southern states was embarrassing to many people—in the South as well as in the North; but many other people thoroughly approved of it—in the North as well as the South.²²

Viewing the moral differences between the North and South this dichotomously began with the literature written during and immediately after the war. In “Battle Hymn of the Republic,”

¹⁹ Randy J. Hendricks, “Warren’s *Wilderness* and the Defining ‘If,’” *Mississippi Quarterly* 48 (1994–1995): 115.

²⁰ L. Hugh Moore, Jr., *Robert Penn Warren and History* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton & Co., 1970), 159.

²¹ Foote, *Shiloh*, 43.

²² Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Norton, 1994), xv.

for instance, Julia Ward Howe describes the “fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel” to suggest that God intends to deliver his holy message through the “steel” musket and bayonet of the Union soldier. Furthermore, she trumpets the Union cause by implying that as Christ “died to make men holy,” the Northern soldiers will valiantly die to “make men free.”²³ Henry Timrod, the Poet Laureate of the Confederacy, inverts Howe’s religious rhetoric to suggest that God has chosen the South as his privileged people. In “Ethnogenesis” he writes:

Our foes should fling us down their mortal gage,
And with hostile step profane our sod!
We shall not shrink, my brothers, but go forth
To meet them, marshaled by the Lord of Hosts.²⁴

Timrod describes an invasion of the South by Northern aggressors as “profane” or blasphemous; the “Lord of Hosts” will surely defend against this invasion of sacred “sod.” Julia Ward Howe and Henry Timrod clearly delineate the opposite ends of the religio-political spectrum. “Confident pronouncements,” writes Mark Noll, “about what God was ‘doing’ in and through the war arose in profusion from all points on the theological compass.”²⁵

Herman Melville, on the other hand, critiques the “songs about glory and God” in *Battle-Pieces*.²⁶ “Shiloh,” published in 1866, alludes to the meaninglessness of jingoistic rhetoric during combat: “Fame or country least their care: / (What like a bullet can undecieve!)”²⁷ The love of “country” and desire for “heroic” fame is worthless at the point of death. Moreover, the rhetoric of abolitionists in the North and fire-eaters in the South no longer deceives the endangered soldier. Unlike his contemporaries— who often viewed the war as a “purifying

²³ Julia Ward Howe, “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” in *Civil War Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Paul Negri (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), 1.

²⁴ Henry Timrod, “Ethnogenesis,” in *Civil War Poetry: An Anthology*, 4.

²⁵ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006), 4-5.

²⁶ Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, xv.

²⁷ Herman Melville, “Shiloh,” in *Civil War Poetry: An Anthology*, 41.

crusade”²⁸—Melville viewed the war as wasteful “tragedy.”²⁹ Similarly, Foote uses Private Dade to describe the wounded and dying soldiers at Shiloh as an accumulation of disfigured men—dropped to the earth—that failed to meet God’s standards during His creative process. When Dade sees a mortally wounded soldier running downhill despite his imminent death, he describes the scene in Melvillean terms: “But it seemed so wrong, so scandalous, somehow so *unreligious* for a dead man to have to keep on fighting—or running, anyhow—that it made me sick to my stomach.”³⁰ Far from being a way for God to spread his message in “burnished rows of steel,” or for the “Lord of Hosts” to prevent the desecration of sacred Southern soil, the war is an “*unreligious*” episode in American history that has been distorted by the myth of a righteous North fighting to free the slaves in the xenophobic South. Foote’s penetrating historiography exposes this myth and amplifies the horror of the Civil War; it is “no longer, or never was, a chivalric tournament.”³¹

Warren consistently maintains “that the war was no crusade for freedom and that the North by no means had all the right on its side.”³² The New York draft riots that Adam first encounters when he arrives in America demonstrate Warren’s characterization of the North as equally racist and solidly segregationist. He likewise explores the moral ambiguity of this period in American history by creating characters that demonstrate both nobility and profound cruelty. Jedeen Hawksworth, for instance, wore a mixture of ragged clothing on the lower half of his body, and higher quality clothing on the upper half. “The lower half of Jedeen Hawksworth,” Warren writes, “seemed adapted to the dreary grind of life and brute work of the world. He was kind of centaur, a centaur with the animal part drearily plow-broke and spavined, but the upper half affirming some dignity and aspiration, some human hope.”³³ The moral ambivalence of Hawksworth also resonates in Foote’s depiction

²⁸ Robert Milder, *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2006), 175.

²⁹ Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 271.

³⁰ Foote, *Shiloh*, 80.

³¹ Panabaker, *Foote and the Art of History*, 172.

³² Moore, *Warren and History*, 164.

³³ Robert Penn Warren, *Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2001), 96.

of U. S. Grant and Nathan Bedford Forrest in *Shiloh*. Grant was neither for nor against slavery; and, as Foote observes, “though his father had been an Abolitionist [...] his wife kept her two [slaves].”³⁴ Forrest’s motivation for raising a Calvary, furthermore, was simply to have “a heap of fun and to kill some Yankees.”³⁵ L. Hugh Moore observes that, in *Wilderness*, “men can easily become cruel men.”³⁶ Warren and Foote illuminate the cruelty of the war through fiction and history to eradicate the sanitary version of history that lived, and still lives, in the American mind.

Although *Shiloh* and *Wilderness* expose the cruelty of men, the two authors are no less concerned with that other element in human nature: nobility. History demonstrates the “irony of good and evil interfused in our nature.”³⁷ The Civil War dramatizes the larger American experience which explains, perhaps, why Foote and Warren chose this complex subject matter for their novels. That war, despite the savagery that characterized those four years, also “offers a dazzling array of figures, noble in proportion yet human, caught out of Time as in a frieze, in stances so profoundly touching and powerfully mythic that they move us in a way no mere consideration of ‘historical importance’ ever could.”³⁸

³⁴ Foote, *Shiloh*, 51.

³⁵ Foote, *Shiloh*, 159.

³⁶ Moore, *Warren and History*, 157.

³⁷ Robert Penn Warren, “The Use of the Past,” in *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1980), 37.

³⁸ Warren, *Legacy*, 81.