

Beyond Documentary: Blazing Trails Between Romanticism and Realism in American War Novel

[Review of Jozef Pecina, *The Representation of War in Nineteenth-Century American Novels*. Trnava: Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, 2015. 116 p. ISBN 978-80-8105-731-1]

War plays a seminal role in the formation of American identity. The whole post-Columbian history of America is a history of war. It is then of no coincidence that literature of United States pays a close attention to the issue of war, especially in the period of 19th century, when the truly American self begins to crystalize. The reviewed monograph, *The Representation of War in Nineteenth-Century American Novels*, tackles the issue of the representation of war in US literature in a truly trailblazing way, however, providing not only a comprehensive overview of war, but leaving still a space for readers to tie loose ends themselves, which may also be the volume's pitfall.

Quite surprisingly, Jozef Pecina does not focus primarily on the representation of war as delivered by the well-known mainstream novelists, (e.g.) Stephen Crane or James Fenimore Cooper, but introduces less known writers, such as John Neal, John William De Forest, or John Esten Cooke. The monograph revolves around the degree of authenticity in which the war is treated in novels; in other words, the methodology of the research lies in the prism of battlefield representation of each author present in the study. The monograph's main aim is "to provide an insightful look on the battlefields"¹ and discuss the degree of authenticity bestowed by the 19th century US novel.

The monograph is divided into five chapters plus the introduction. The introduction itself focuses on authenticity, believability of war depictions, and clarifies the issue between "fact and truth,"² and proceeds to illustrate the dichotomy of the oeuvre of James Fenimore Cooper and John Neal, an interesting juxtaposition indeed. This chapter deals with the Romantic representation of war as treated by both authors, yet provides a deeper contextualizing perspective, which appears highly practical in the case of the second analyzed author, John Neal. Pecina here draws persuasive parallels and still is able to pinpoint chief differences between both examined writers. Each subchapter discusses one particular novel. James Fenimore Cooper is represented by *The Spy* and *Lionel Lincoln* to argue that Cooper as a Romantic writer tended to mix historical aspects with fictional touches, leaving its authenticity frequently in the background.

While treating John Neal's writing, Pecina highlights his hyperrealistic rendering of the brutality of war with a tendency to glorify certain characters, such as Neal's rendering of George Washington "as a demi-god."³ Overall, the chapter vividly reveals the contrasting nature of the high diction of Cooper's Romantic voice and low-brow odes concerning the issue of war in its pre-Civil War era.

The next chapter treats the work of John William de Forest, who stands out as a dominating pioneer in transition from Romanticism to Realism. This chapter, although discussing treatment of

1 Jozef Pecina, *The Representation of War in Nineteenth-Century American Novels* (Trnava: Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, 2015), 7.

2 Pecina, *The Representation of War*, 5.

3 Pecina, *The Representation of War*, 35.

war, stands out as an insightful probe into a rather unaddressed author, as well as the beginnings of literary documentarism on war in its authentic manner. Pecina, however, presents the author as an ambiguous figure, a pioneer of war narrative on the one hand, and on the other hand a failing author, who by presenting first-hand the horrors of war, as a result, experiences a rather lukewarm reception of his books. Furthermore, De Forest thus stands as an example manifesting growing distance between raving critics and panning audiences.

The trajectory of the following chapter veers towards the south and examines another lesser-known author, John Esten Cooke. Unlike in previous chapters, Pecina provides here a rather more general treatment of Cooke, considering his literary non-education and certain uprootedness (or even outsiderism) from the canonical names of US literature. Rather than war, the chapter discusses his placement within the literary nostalgia of the period South. In its length, this chapter is slightly briefer; this still would suffice in its general appeal, but the focus on war could have been explored in greater depth.

Chapter five provides a multiplicity of names and approaches to writing on war starting with Mark Twain, Henry Adams, William Dean Howells, and finishing with Henry James. This eclectic mosaic on the one hand brings up refreshingly original parallels, but on the other hand, almost collapses in finding any unifying elements. The large scope of the chapter also forces Pecina to remain too general. I would again suggest extension of the chapter or perhaps breaking the chapter into two more complex and developed chapters. Yet, this part initiates a somewhat more critical reading by Pecina, which is a welcoming and refreshing approach missing in previous chapters.

The last chapter scrutinizes “the best Civil War novel ever written,”⁴ *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane. In its size and depth, the chapter presents the most complex of Pecina’s argument and constitutes a true climax to the book. Pecina departs from the reasoning that despite Crane’s provable inability to participate in the war personally, Crane’s stylistic devices dealing with the conflict are often well beyond realism. Furthermore, Pecina reflects upon all the previous authors and reaches a persuasive conclusion as to why Crane’s literary qualities surpass the other writers present in the volume. However, this is the only conclusive attempt, leaving readers space to reason for themselves rather than providing an isolated conclusion properly. Considering the ambitious and original scope of the book as well as the tone of the introduction itself, the absence of any conclusion is a great drawback of the whole, otherwise trailblazing book.

To capture the turbulent time of the formative years of American society is not simple, nor is it easy to discuss comprehensively an issue as dynamic as war. Pecina accomplishes both, yet with certain caveats. Arguably, there are many positive aspects to the book – its scope is original and sufficiently narrowed down. Pecina presents facts and arguments, no matter how complex, in a highly structured, logical and readable way. The synthesis and analyses are clear and undoubtedly contribute to American literary studies discourse. The greatest flaw of the monograph is a certain imbalance between the size and depth of individual chapters, especially, and more importantly, the absence of a clearly argued conclusion. The main idea of the author, however, is communicated clearly: the novels of the given period tend to go beyond purely documentary means.

4 Pecina, *The Representation of War*, 77.

The question is, then, who the target audiences are: the book serves both as an insightful and inspiring, albeit sometimes rather superficial, probe into 19th century American war discourse, as well as a clear student's introduction. In the first case, the book would require greater depth and a unifying structure to the chapters, in the second case, as a student's guide, richer context discussing not only historical background, but issues such as patriotism, heroism and valour in greater scope and complexity. Still, even in its liminal position, Jozef Pecina's *The Representation of War in Nineteenth-Century American Novels* constitutes a volume that should not be missing from any bookshelf of an Anglicist or war literature aficionado.

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