Constance Fenimore Woolson and John Hay: Reconstruction through Poetry

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Reconstruction was a period of reinvention for America. If Garry Wills is correct in asserting that Lincoln began remodeling America in the Gettysburg Address, then the president's assassination left the country to figure out the ramifications of that remodeling during reconstruction. The difficult questions included: how quickly to end military rule in the conquered South; when and under what circumstances former Confederate states would again be represented in Congress; and exactly what civil rights would be extended to the emancipated slaves. The search for reunification and the lingering divisions were reflected in the short stories of the popular press as Kathleen Diffley has shown. Even more generically conventional than the short story, poems published in the popular press also explored the depth of national division and attempted to find a common ground for a post-Civil War national life.

Personally as well as nationally, reconstruction was a time of processing the excitement and grief of the past years, and a time of determining what the war would mean in the life of the nation. For those who lived through it the Civil War marked the turning point in their lives and their sense of life. George Ticknor noted that it marked "a great gulf between what happened before in our century and what has happened since, or what is likely to happen hereafter. It does not seem to me as if I were living in the country in which I was born" (quoted in Battle Cry of Freedom, 861.) Even though Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840-1894) and her friend and fellow writer John Hay (1838-1905) would look forward to the twentieth century and struggle with the meaning of modernity in their later writings, in the 1870s before they were even acquainted with each other, they looked backward to when they could say with Oliver Wendell Holmes: "We have shared the incommunicable experience of war. In our youths, our hearts were touched with fire." (Memorial Day Address, 1884)

In Woolson's "Kentucky Belle" and Hay's "Banty Tim", one of his Pike County Ballads, the authors struggle to contain within Victorian poetic conventions first, a nostalgia for the war and the simpler ante-bellum society and second, attempt to construct a basis for living in a much more complicated world that must reconstruct itself. The conventional structural overlay shows the importance of the unity that Woolson and Hay desired, while simultaneously creating a safe space within which to make more subversive claims. In Woolson's case, this is a claim for complete and equal reunification, but one that does not forget the sacrifices made by all who lived through the war. For Hay it gives him the opportunity to promote black suffrage and integration, serious, potentially inflammatory subjects, in a context of humor and comradeship.

Both writers urge reunion based on the shared war experience, even though they were noncombatants. It was in fact one of the things they shared. As Woolson wrote to Paul Hamilton Hayne: "What days they were! After all we lived then. It is in vain for our generation to hope to be any other than 'people who remember'. (see my CW paper for source)

"Banty Tim" and "Kentucky Belle" embed the war within personal narratives that further embed the narrative of wartime events within contemporary frames. The personal voice is engaged in an act of public discourse, emphasizing the national import of the stories. In each case the authors recreate their generation's sense that they had lived in two different epochs.

The frame devices envision a reunified national life, lived out with "malice toward none"; while the internal civil war stories require that the past, individual, personal not be forgotten as the heroic basis on which that new life can be built. Within these rather different poems, Hay and Woolson attempt to direct the country forward to an inclusive reunion, but not at the expense of the memory of the past. The poems illustrate on both the national and personal level George Eliot's instructive at the end of Middlemarch: "... that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." (George Eliot, Middlemarch, 1871-2) Across the Atlantic, Woolson and Hay, like Eliot, saw the significance of unsung individuals whose lives would be unremembered but for the resurrection of their voices in the authors' poetry, a place where the hidden becomes known in order to better reconstruct a nation.

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Woolson provides a subtitle for “Kentucky Belle” that indicates the nesting of a Civil War narrative within a more contemporary discourse. “Kentucky Belle: Told in an Ohio Farmhouse 1868” was published in 1873 and concerns events of the summer of 1863, the time of Morgan’s raid into Ohio. Although we and the participants in the frame narrative know the outcome of the war, the buried Civil War narrative takes place at the moment of greatest danger and uncertainty for the North—the same month in fact that Grant would finally take Vicksburg and Lee turned out of Pennsylvania at Gettysburg. In spite of those great Southern losses Woolson once again turns the tables and commemorates a tiny Southern victory. The poems recreate that mood of uncertainty as they move the reader from conventional expectation to more subversive content. Woolson emphasizes the uncertainty with the present of John Hunt Morgan and his raiders. In the summer of 1862 Morgan and his men “first achieved fame... with a thousand-mile raid through Kentucky and middle Tennessee that captured 1,200 prisoners and tons of supplies” (McPherson 513-14). The next summer Morgan and his men would make it out of the border states into Ohio, Woolson’s homestate. One can only imagine the fear and excitement his exploits created there. He figures prominently in her Civil War writings. He has something of a mythic status even during the war due to his unbelievable rides and his daring prison break after being captured in Ohio. For Woolson he seems to represent all that was exciting, and romantic about the war. His apparently free movement across borders as well as his oxymoronic status as outlaw soldier makes him emblematic for this romantic yet irregular poem.

We are not given the occasion for the telling of the story just told by the female protagonist to an unnamed male listener. She tells of the day Morgan’s men came riding through looking for fresh horses to steal as they tried to outrun the Union cavalry. The speaker’s husband is away for the day leaving her alone with their young son. She takes her cherished horse, Kentucky Belle, a wedding present from her father when she left the Bluegrass Country to move to Ohio, and hides her in a ravine just before the raiders arrive. She locks eyes with Morgan for a moment, whose eyes are described as those of a devil, “like live coals,” and thinks she has escaped. Just as she thinks the danger is over one of the troopers asks for a drink of water. He fants out of the saddle after they find out that they’re both from the same border state area. She takes him inside and nurses him for the rest of the day. The Michigan calvary rides past in search of Morgan. In the evening she changes the boy’s uniform for some of her husband’s clothes, puts him on Kentucky Belle and points him southward. After the war she receives a letter telling her that the boy and the horse made it home safely.

The poem contains a number of reversals from the expected patterns, reversals that are suggestive in their meaning for the contemporary 1870s audience. Woolson has the South win this skirmish, the brave young soldier requires help from the helpless woman, the war takes place in Northern territory, the woman ends up fearing the Union and saving the raider.

While the presence of Morgan typically in Woolson’s other Civil War writings signals romance, this scenario too involves another reversal. For the woman alone with the young man is not his lover, but identifies herself with his mother.

“Only sixteen he was, sir—a fond mother’s only son—
Off and away with Morgan before his life had begun”

She too is the mother of an only son and when her husband comes home to find her crying the picture recalls the scenes in many a household after the death of a soldier son: the worn uniform hangs on the wall, the woman grieving.

However the male-female relationships in this poem still tell us much about reconciliation. For at the end the woman doesn’t run off with the young boy, but stays and makes a successful life with her husband. Now their house is larger, their son still thrives and Conrad accepts and understands what his wife did, including giving away what was probably their single-most valuable possession. This marriage suggests that the Union must continue, but that doesn’t ever deny the reality of the sacrifice made by the South. Her act was heroic, and she has lost all that remained of her former life. In effect this is the ‘they’ve suffered enough; let bygones be bygones’ approach to reconstruction, no further punishment is necessary. However it’s not the simply glib generosity of the winner, for the poem gives full weight to the import of her sacrifice. This is not to be forgotten even as the new life begins.

While this narrative is difficult to categorize, containing elements of Old Homestead, Romance and Adventure, the closing frame with its focus on the speaker’s marriage insists we examine the Romance genre for models. Kathleen Difflay says of the Romance stories published in magazines, the “genre...allows for the
social changes that Reconstruction provoked...[and] could absorb the civil responsibilities that a newly emerging nation imposed.” (60) In this case however, we find Woolson as we so often do giving a conventional genre a different spin. The marriage here does indeed serve as a metaphor for “the terms on which the national household would come together after the Civil War” (Diffley 54) Unlike the young lovers of the stories Diffley analyzes Woolson’s more mature, already married couple are not “too young to be limited by what they had inherited and too protean to be defined by what they had lost.” (60) In fact, it is specifically by the loss of Kentucky Belle that the speaker defines herself, more than by the markers of husband, farm or child.

The multiple reversals signal the coming of a new-world order. The retelling of the tale of this heroic, noncombatant with mixed loyalties insists that she too is worthy of inclusion in that order on the basis of her heroism and sacrifice. The subtitle date of 1868 placed midway in the distance separating the publication date (1873) and the date of the embedded events 1863 indicates its purpose The poem would do the work of providing the two things necessary for successful reconstruction the solid foundation found in the nested narrative and the new future of the frame narrative. “Popular narratives made war make sense by representing both the pull of older ties and the terms upon which a new nation could be imagined”(xlvi) The poem holds a middle ground between endlessly reliving and refighting the war, and completely forgetting it in the whirlwind of social transformation.

Like “Kentucky Belle,” John Hay’s “Banty Tim” makes use of reversal, and the nested narrative and uses shared memories of the war as a common ground for social rebuilding. The poem is probably the best example of Hay’s early progressive, even radical, views on integration and black suffrage. (see Clymer, “Hay and Race”). The poem’s speaker Tilmont Joy addresses the White Man’s Committee of Spunky Point, Illinois. He refuses to let Banty Tim be bullied out of town or worse and he tells them why. Tim saved his life when he was wounded and dying on the battlefield at Vicksburg. Tilmont Joy threatens with death anyone who dares endanger Tim now.

The poem criticizes and openly names the Democrats for their anti-black sentiments (see Foner). At this point Hay’s loyalty was to the Republican party as the party of abolition and integration. Later in life, he would become more conservative and support the Republicans as the party of private property and the protection of capital over labor. Here Hay is still able to identify with his middle-class, midwestern roots through the use of dialect and the heroic elevation of common people like Banty Tim and Tilmont Joy.

Though Hay does not identify the occasion for the poem, the narrator’s mention, twice, of party politics and voting practices suggests that Tim may have tried to vote in Spunky Point. Certainly Hay yokes the idea of Tim’s bravery to organized politics.

The dual setting of the poem makes for some interesting juxtapositions. The Civil War portion is set during the Vicksburg Campaign of 1863 and may more narrowly concern the rushes for the city in May, preceding the grim summer’s siege. The timing is roughly the same as “Kentucky Belle” that fateful summer of 1863. In his memoirs, Grant records the actions on the left of the line (where Tilmont says he was) carried out by Logan’s division the afternoon of May 12 “ In this battle McPherson lost 66 killed, 339 wounded, and 37 missing—nearly or quite all from Logan’s division”. (261) He had earlier described that division “composed generally of men from the southern part of Illinois and from Missouri” (247) In other words, men from the Pike County area. Tilmont Joy begins his recollection with “You know that ungodly day/When our left struck Vicksburg Heights.” The plural pronoun suggests that Tilmont and the members of the White Man’s Committee with whom he now argues were at one time members of the same fighting unit.

From a distance nearly a decade later, Hay telescopes some events. To my knowledge African American troops were not part of those rushes, but were first tested and approved in the Vicksburg campaign. The former slaves under Lorenzo Thomas fought for and held Grant’s supply line at Millikan’s Bend, Louisiana. Though they were new recruits, some of which had only been enrolled a few days, and though the Confederates were able to reach the Union works, witnesses had nothing but praise for the African Brigade. Commanding officer Brigadier General Elias S. Dennis reported that “it is impossible for men to show greater gallantry than the Negro troops in this fight.” (Before Glory”, Vicksburg National Military Park site, 2) A few days earlier other African-American troops had assaulted Fort Hudson at the southern end of 200 miles of Confederate-controlled river. There the Native Guard faced four assaults under direct fire and crossfire”, six men died for the honor of carrying the flags. (“The Price of Freedom”, Vicksburg NMP site)
Hay links the bravery of African-American soldiers to the Vicksburg Campaign. Of course this was also the proving ground of General Grant and his ability to delivery victories to his commander in chief, Hay's boss. So Grant serves as commander of the Vicksburg campaign in the Civil War portion and was the president attempting to oversee reconstruction during the contemporary portion of the poem. At the time the poem was published (1871), Congress was adopting several new reconstruction measures designed to ensure black citizens their civil rights and to curb the Ku Klux Klan's reign of terror. Sherman likened it to a second Civil War, "I am willing to...again appeal to the power of the nation to crush, as we once before have done, this organized civil war." (Foner 454). The nested narratives of Hay’s poem complement the dual battles at Vicksburg in 1863 and in Congress in 1871 for meaningful black freedom, all under U.S. Grant.

These congressional acts attempted to prevent actions taken by Democrats in Northern cities as well as by Southern terrorists. By setting the poem in southern Illinois (which during the war was as much a border area as Kentucky), Hay gives “Bantu Tim” a national application, urging the rights of African Americans as proven citizens of the United States. In the most telling reversal of all, it is Tim who carries the white soldier to freedom, not just the white soldiers who purchased freedom for the black. Hay believed that the freedom of every citizen depended on freedom of all citizens. One of the most powerful passages of Hay’s White House diary records the cabinet’s response when Lincoln first read the Emancipation Proclamation to them: “They all seemed to feel a sort of new and exhilarated life; they breathed freer; the Pres. Procn. Had freed them all as well as the slaves.” (24 September 1862, Wednesday, pg 41)

As Hay’s thoughts on the war and reconstruction were so obviously formed by his attachment to Lincoln, it’s not too much to say that Hay shared the President’s belief that emancipation and integration were “the greatest question ever presented to practical statesmanship.” (Diary 21 July 1863, Friday, 69) For Hay the war must come to mean through reconciliation the fulfillment of Lincoln’s purpose of “a new birth of freedom.”

Woolson and Hay, each of whom would do much more important work in their lives than these minor poems, express in these works one of the major concerns of writers and politicians, of thinking people in the United States, how does one rebuild a country torn in half, and more universally how do we move forward with the inevitable pull of the future without forgetting those that carried us here? In their sentimental poems, Woolson and Hay ask us on our journey forward to remember to visit the nearly forgotten heros' tombs.