

JOHN NEAL, AMERICA'S UNKNOWN WAR NOVELIST

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Abstract: My article focuses on John Neal's *Seventy-Six or, Love and Battle* (1823), set during the American Revolution and considered to be among the first American war novels ever written. John Neal created his own literary model which put an emphasis on the American setting, colloquial language and particularly on the emotions of his characters. Neal believed that placing of passionate characters into American setting and adding a few realistic and historically accurate battle scenes would be sufficient for keeping reader's attention. However, he was not successful and his literary model did not inspire other writers to follow.

Key words: war novel, American Revolution, John Neal, battlefield realism

The beginnings of American writing about war date back to the 1820s, when the first novels dealing with the War of Independence appeared. The Revolution was used as a setting for a handful of gothic or sentimental novels, but until the publication of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (1821), no work appeared that could be described as a war novel. Two years later, John Neal wrote his *Seventy-Six or, Love and Battle* and it is this work I will discuss in my paper. Literary critics deem both works to be historical novels. According to Ernst E. Leisy (Miller, 1970: 9), "a historical novel is a novel the action of which is laid in an earlier time—how much earlier remains an open question, but it must be readily identifiable past time." That more than thirty years had elapsed between the end of the War of Independence and the publication of the novels seems to be a sufficient time to consider them to be historical novels. The fact is that beginning with Cooper's and Neal's work, the reader is exclusively dependent on the historical novel for a fictional interpretation of war.

John Neal was an interesting figure of American literary scene of the early nineteenth century. This prolific author, today almost forgotten, was for a brief period more widely known abroad than any other American writer probably with the exception of Washington Irving. Although before he turned forty he penned nine novels, a tragedy, two long poems and co-authored a history of American Revolution, only one novel was ever reprinted. Nowadays, Neal figures in literary biographies as a minor writer of undisciplined energies and the

“discoverer” of Edgar Allan Poe (Martin, 1959: 455). His most famous work is *Logan, The Mingo Chief* (1822) where he used the frontier setting and Native American characters a few years earlier than James Fenimore Cooper. Neal was the first American author who in his works depicted brutal violence and pornography which became typical features of sensational novels in 1840s. According to David Reynolds (1989: 212) was Neal also “the first American writer to recognize woman’s strong sexual drives.”

Important fact for the purpose of this paper is that among the Neal’s several novels is *Seventy-Six or, Love and Battle*. Neal himself described the novel as „an experiment to do what nobody else had done, or would have the impudence to attempt“ (Reynolds, 1989: 203) Similarly to Cooper, Neal used the setting of the American Revolution with which he was pretty familiar since in 1819 he co-authored a work named *History of the American Revolution*.

By writing *Seventy-Six*, John Neal became a representative of second of the two models of American historical prose which characterized the period of early decades of the nineteenth century. The first model was inspired by Sir Walter Scott’s historical romances and its most famous representative was Cooper with novels such as *The Spy*, *The Pilot* or *Lionel Lincoln*. The difference between Neal and Cooper was that Neal refused European influences and attempted to create a literary model which would be distinctly American. He frequently criticized Cooper for clinging to European literary conventions and considered him to be an imitator of Scott. He had only a mixed praise for Cooper’s *The Spy*, which he did not believe to be “altogether American” and he severely criticized *Lionel Lincoln*:

It is not such a book, as we might have, and shall have, we do hope yet; a brave, hearty, original book, brimful of descriptive truth – of historical and familiar truth; crowded with real American character; alive with American peculiarities; got up after no model, however excellent; wove to no pattern, however beautiful; in imitation of nobody; however great (Ringe, 1977: 353).

According to Neal, Cooper’s works are not sufficiently realistic. He complained that Cooper’s most serious fault is his lack of “courage to describe that which he sees; to record that, as it is – that, which he has power enough to see, as it is“ (Ringe, 1977: 353). For this reason, Neal highly values Cooper’s battlefield scenes from *Lionel Lincoln* but on the other hand, he sharply criticizes both the characters and the language they speak.

Seventy-Six was Neal's response to Cooper's works. Neal's opinion was that the novel should not be an imitation of European works but an original, distinct American novel. It should be American in more than setting; it must also have an American style and characters who speak American colloquial language, the language of real feelings (Martin, 1959: 462). However, Neal's prose puts such an extreme emphasis on characters' feelings so that his novel lacks any kind of coherence. He denies the role of reason and lets his characters to decide with their hearts. According to his own words, his characters are "free from cultivation and the artificial dominion of intellect" (Ringe, 1977: 354). Neal believed that placing such characters into realistic setting would be enough to attract reader's attention.

The result of such combination is a novel which besides coherence also lacks logic and form. The main character, Jonathan Oadley, a veteran of the Revolution narrates his story to his children. Together with his father, Brother Archibald and Cousin Arthur they decide to enlist and fight against the British. During the course of the war, they participate in several battles in which particularly Jonathan and Archibald achieve fame, respect from their commanders and promotions. But similarly to Cooper's early novels, historical and fictional parts of the novel are not well-balanced, because besides fighting battles and spending time in military camps are male characters lost in constant courting to ladies from their native town. Since Neal pays a lot of attention to the feelings and passions, his female characters react to almost all situations (meetings, good-byes, courting, even to ordinary small talk) with tears and frequent fainting. Jonathan and Archibald who perform in battles with valor and courage similarly respond to non-violent situations with mutual embraces and flows of tears. In David Reynolds' words (1989: 204), Neal in his novel leaps between "gory war scenes, weird visions, and feverish erotic escapades."

What Neal did not realize was that in historical novel, it is not sufficient to describe few battles realistically and add a few more real historical personalities. Historical and fictional parts have to be integrated in order to form a coherent whole and give the work a meaning. Neal failed to understand this fact. His characters only "respond to external stimuli and the dictates of their passions until, toward the end of the book, the war is simply dropped and attention is focused on the absurd posturing of a Byronic character and the girl he loves" (Ringe, 1977: 354).

The reason why I even discuss this peculiar author and his unsuccessful novel is his extremely brutal battle scenes which none of his literary contemporaries could equal and in 19th century only John William De Forest in his *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* was able to approach. Similarly to Cooper, majority of the battle scenes are written in so called "conventionally splendid mode," but there are few factors that distinguish Neal's battle scenes from those written by Fenimore Cooper. Cooper pays almost no attention to the feelings of his soldiers. On the other hand, Neal lets his hero describe his feelings after his first engagement: "First there was a rush of fierce, terrible delight; and then a brief alarm in my heart, followed by a sort of religious fervor, exceeding wrath and indignation, tranquilised and subdued, as if God and his angels were fighting with us"(Neal, 1840: 26). Not until Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* were the emotions of war so well realized.

From time to time, Neal successfully describes the confusion of battlefield and following scene can be considered representative:

We were instantly among them, disordered, it is true, and utterly broken up by our own impetuosity, and the nature of the ground; but the enemy were more so, their horses were weaker, and less accustomed to the snow: they stumbled at every step, fell, and rolled over us, and about us in every direction. Not a shot was fired now, every man joined battle, sword in hand, with whoever was nearest to him: and such was our tremendous desperation, that twice, before I could suspend the blow, or see my man, I exchanged a cut with one of our own troop (Neal, 1840: 27).

Reynolds (1989: 203) even thinks that by describing the extreme distortions of perspective created by the battle smoke and flame Neal introduced a device that would be in greater extent featured by Stephen Crane.

After the battle, Neal describes the state of his main character in a detail that neither Cooper nor any other author in following decades was able to approach: "When I came to my recollection I was smeared all over with the blood and brains of a poor fellow upon whom I had fallen. I arose and attempted to stand. There were at least thirty or forty human beings about me, dead and dying: the snow all stained and trodden" (Neal, 1840: 27). In his first battle scene, Neal hints the direction he will follow in further descriptions of battles in the novel.

The first battle scene is not based on any real historical battle, but in describing other engagements, Neal relied on his knowledge of American Revolution since, as I mentioned earlier, he co-authored a history of the Revolution. With and accuracy of historian, Neal depicts the battles of Trenton or Brandywine in which his characters fight, kill and are wounded. Here Neal graphically describes the violence and gore of the battle: "Wheel and charge!" repeated a hundred voices in our rear; wheel and charge!" We obeyed – and the snow flew – and the swords flashed; and the next moment a hundred of the enemy, the whole of his first rank, were trampled to death before us; and twenty human heads rolled upon the ground, under the feet of our horses" (Neal, 1840: 45).

In his war novel, Neal deliberately experiments with a new and American style of writing. Neal believed that the best language for prose is the language of feeling, and the language of feeling is most freely and fully expressed in talk; good prose is, therefore, colloquial prose (Martin, 1959: 462). His aim was to "talk on paper." His soldiers speak vernacular language, and what is surprising for the early nineteenth century, their speech is enlivened with profanities and oaths. In following example, fire-eating Clinton recounts the skirmish in which he was wounded:

It was there" said he, "there, exactly where that horse is passing now, that they first fired upon me. I set off at speed up that hill, but, finding nine of the party there, I determined to dash over that elevation in front; I attempted it, but shot after shot was fired after me until I preferred making one desperate attempt, sword in hand, to being shot, like a fat goose, upon a broken gallop. I wheeled, made a dead set at the son-of-a-bitch in my rear, unhorsed him, and actually broke through the line (Neal, 1840: 52).

Not until John William DeForest's Civil War novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* was such a freedom allowed a writer, and Neal's frankness was rebuked by the critics who blamed him for attributing profanities to the speech of honorable soldiers (Sears, 1978: 46).

During the course of the war Jonathan and Arthur meet and befriend a number of real historical characters such as Marquis LaFayette, General Pulaski or George Washington himself. I need to mention here that Neal glorifies Washington in far more extent than Cooper in *The Spy*. Washington in *Seventy-Six* is a demi-god which becomes clear during his first

appearance in the novel: “and at the end of about five minutes Washington appeared, a little in advance of several young officers, superbly mounted upon a magnificent white charger, whose hoofs rang, when they struck the frozen ground, like the blow of a battle-axe” (Neal, 1840: 35). Besides the battle scenes, Neal truthfully renders the Valley Forge winter encampment where Washington’s army spent the winter of 1777-78. He describes the conditions which the army had to survive with all the diseases, hunger and barefoot troops with no place to get warm. With his detailed war scenes, Neal was ahead of his time, but these scenes play no role in the development of his characters and they have no meaning for the plot. Neal’s attempt to create distinct American prose style thus remains unsuccessful.

Despite their differences, Neal’s and Cooper’s war novels have certain common features. Both authors relied on thorough research and used many of the important events of the Revolution as a background, and sometimes even foreground, for the actions of their characters. In their novels, important personalities of the Revolution (George Washington, Lafayette or the British generals Clinton or Burgoyne) appear. Both authors glorify General Washington, Neal even treats him as a demi-god. But what is most important is that in both works battles are seen as heroic and glorious. For the change of such a perception, a war that divided the whole nation, the Civil War, which broke out in 1861, was needed.

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