

## The Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train: A Love Story

THE HUGE EXPLOSIONS COULD BE heard more than twenty miles away. A Union major named James Connolly lay asleep on the ground, exhausted after the day's fighting, when he and his men "were aroused by sound of distant explosions away off to the North."<sup>1</sup> General William Tecumseh Sherman, encamped nearby and leading the Union army, uneasily heard the sound of shells exploding in the direction of Atlanta just after midnight. He and his aides debated what the blasts meant and woke a nearby farmer, who said that the battles around Atlanta sounded like that. Still, no one was sure. The sounds died down but then renewed at 4:00 a.m., this time louder and longer than before, "with the thump and crump and muttering finality of a massive coup de grâce."<sup>2</sup>

The next day the truth was revealed. Confederate General John Bell Hood, leading the Confederate forces defending Atlanta, had found his main supply line cut off and had ordered that his own munitions train be blown up so that it would not fall into Union hands. In a massive self-destruction that helped cover their retreat, the Confederates torched five locomotives and eighty-one railroad cars full of their own ammunition. This was the sound that Sherman and his men heard. It was the night of September 1, 1864.

Within days, Sherman's official campaign photographer George Barnard was at the scene of the explosions. Accompanying Sherman and his men on their destructive march from Nashville to Charleston, Barnard would ultimately assemble sixty-one of his large wet-collodion plates into a deluxe publication, *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign*, published in New York in 1866. *Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train* is plate 44 (fig. 1).

At the center of the photograph stands a lone man (fig. 2). We cannot tell who he is—the title does not identify him. Likely he is a civilian, a figure

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ABSTRACT How is something that is not there still present in a photograph? What is the importance of seeing a photograph in this way? Looking at George Barnard's Civil War photograph *Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train*, this essay meditates on the operations of imagination in historical images. REPRESENTATIONS 140. Fall 2017 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 84–100. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2017.140.6.84>.



FIGURE 1. George Barnard, *Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train*, 1864. Plate 44 from *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign* (1866). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pfeiffer and Rogers Funds, 1970.

exempted from military ritual and allowed a place of solitude. Back to us, clad in dark clothes, he is a man of shaken contour, either slightly aquiver in the breeze or impatient with having to stand still during the exposure, or both. His feet make a wispy fishtail pattern. One imagines him as an associate of the photographer who has walked from Barnard's position, down the trash-strewn hilly foreground at lower left, further down the gulley at the foot of the hill, and up onto the rail bed, where he could respond to the photographer's commands about where to stand and for how long. He is within hailing distance.

The man stands within a circle of soot. Although the circle may not have been the epicenter of the explosions, the missing track suggests that the nature of the fire here was different than the one further in the distance. So do the sideways-flung rail carriage wheels to the left of the soot. Further back, the wheels still sit on the rails, implying that there the blaze consumed

the wooden cars in steady flame. But nearer to our vantage, in the circle of ash where the lone man stands, a huge detonation likely blew things sideways and burned extra hot. Barnard's photograph shows a flat volcano. The man is at the crater, at ground zero.



FIGURE 2. Barnard, *Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train* (detail).

Standing there, the man seems to verify what happened. Like a journalist, he is on the spot, the embers barely cooled. Following the uncertainty of those cataclysmic sounds—the booms that awakened and disturbed Sherman and his men—the lone man confirms the truth of Hood's defeat. Standing on the ash imprints the reportorial truth of the scene as much as the light hitting the photographic plate. The weightiness of the shadowed man, even if he flutters unsteadily, surpasses the conjecture of an artist's drawing of a few weeks later that shows the exploding ammunition train. Unlike the fabulist with his pencil, the photographer and his associate occupy the actual scene, letting it be stamped on them, a predicate of there-ness and truthfulness.

The verification was timely. A few days earlier, George B. McClellan had accepted the Democratic Party's nomination for president, running on the party platform that the North should sue for peace with the South and end the war, slavery intact. A cartoon by Thomas Nast, appearing in *Harper's Weekly* on September 3, 1864, shows the disastrous implications of such a peace: a defeated Union soldier, his sacrifice a waste, slumps to shake hands with a triumphant Jefferson Davis. "One party seems to want peace," wrote Major Connolly to his wife, ending the same letter in which he had described hearing the explosions. "That suits us here. We want peace too, *honorable* peace, won in the full light of day, at the cannon's mouth and the

bayonet's point, with our grand old flag flying over us as we negotiate it, instead of cowardly peace purchased at the price of national dishonor."<sup>3</sup>

Barnard's photograph, taken in those same days, says that Atlanta is taken, that Sherman is victorious, and that the war needs to be fought to its conclusion. The proof is in the photographic glass, in the stone and rail and wood, and in the man at the center of the ash. Neither black nor white (it is impossible to tell his race), he solemnly acknowledges the massive destruction of the southern war machine and makes the case implicitly for more of the same violence as the only way to bring peace. In *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign*, true enough, there will be many scenes of obliteration still to come after the *Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train*. Relentlessly, the rebellion will be flattened to the ground. When it is not flattened, picturesque windows will be left in its broken walls only so that the viewer can examine how little of the defeated place still exists. On September 12, Sherman wrote to the mayor of Atlanta, who had implored him to stop bombarding the city: "You might as well appeal against the thunder storm as against these terrible hardships of war."<sup>4</sup>

But the solitary man goes beyond the news cycle. Four prominent chimneys repeat his upright form, multiplying his solitude and extending it to the heavens. He stands before these chimneys like a shepherd before the columns of a ruined Roman temple in the romantic paintings that Barnard admired. The Old South, the photograph says, is a fallen empire, a ruined civilization. But the chimneys also lift the man into the skies, as if he were part of the black smoke that once emanated from this building, an iron mill destroyed in the explosions. Organizing his photograph not just so that the lone man would be at the center, but so that the chimneys would rise into the clouds, Barnard aligns the man's contemplation not just with the events of the day but with an eternal churn of time. That Barnard "combination printed" the clouds from another negative—his photograph would otherwise show the sky only as a blank gray—creates the image's mysteriously otherworldly sky and the lone contemplator's relation to it. The windswept and light-stained clouds come not only from another negative but seemingly from another world, as if a passing planet had allowed Barnard to borrow its atmosphere. They rhyme with the flutter of the man's black coat and trousers, the shifting of his knees. The sky's main echo on the ground is the soot on which he stands, a flattened cloud of cinders that resembles the heavens' light gray. The lone man courses with a rhythm of sun and cloud, the full flow of romantic history—empires rising and falling but also some otherworldly time, some timeless time—that the historian internalizes within his own small body.<sup>5</sup>

Standing there, the man aligns with not just flow but frozenness. The diagonal of the tracks implies far-off movement, but no trains will run on

them for some time. Where the blast was, where he is, time has stopped. The historian pauses at the location where the momentum of events ceases. There the motionless wheel-carriages suggest the arrested force of his own observations. The massive mill wheel between the chimneys has likewise run into the ground. Aligned to these signs, the historian likewise freezes the action of the day—like the photographer, he keeps the world from rolling. Their mutual hope is that in stillness the significance of an event will become cryptically clear. The earth itself still turns, the clouds still scud across the sky, but the historian feels no contradiction. In Barnard's romantic view, the historian feels the fixation of a moment in time and the relation of that moment to eternity. The lone man's shadow looks like an oil stain on the soot, but it also charts the path of the sun.

It is proper that all this destruction leaves a lasting mark on the historian. He does not glide by the scene of violence, even if his presence there is of short duration. Rather, like the photographer's plate, he allows the scene to imprint itself on him. To his dying day he will retain the record of what he saw. Even if he forgets his place, losing the memory of having stood on the tracks, the place will not forget him. It will be in his consciousness like a possession buried in the earth, like the belongings that the citizens of Atlanta interred for safekeeping as they departed the city. Even if he forgets that it was him in the photograph, remembering only that he actually stood beneath a pastel-blue sky on that spot or, conversely, if his presence in the photograph is all that he recalls, the pastel-blue sky having been forgotten, the confusion of experiences will not dissipate his sense of having been there. Transfer the man to a heady scene of Broadway in New York, bright on a summer's day, with everyone else happy and prancing beneath parasols and top hats, and he would still walk in the cloud of his shaken contours.

Damage, to judge by the photograph, is the historian's proper element. Barnard's contemporary J. T. Trowbridge wrote of looking out a railway car window in Atlanta on a rainy morning just after the war, seeing the "windrows of bent railroad iron by the track; piles of brick; a small mountain of old bones from the battle-fields, foul and wet with the drizzle; a heavy coffin-box, marked 'glass,' on the platform, with mud and litter all around."<sup>6</sup> Trowbridge let the sights impress him, then wrote liquid descriptions that impress the reader. In the same way, Barnard's sole observer becomes a photographic plate, allowing the grit of the sand and clay and pebbly wasteland to imprint itself on him until he, too, sensitively registers the scene. The pathological stillness of his contemplation registers the aftershocks of violence as only a slight fluctuation in his trembling clothes. Alone, he keeps the landscape from breaking apart.

It is a depressing scene, even if it shows the demise of the Confederacy. The photograph has all the hallmarks of a victory parade except the people and the motion and the joy. What, if anything, redeems the emptiness?

My own answer is imagination. Adrift in the wasted world, either the historian traces the wreckage, speaking in a voice of dejection and outrage, or the historian can invent from those same woebegone feelings. In the latter case, something new emerges from the destruction and violence. That something new is not an asinine version of progress—of forward-looking and backward-forgetting. It is always committed to the recollection that allows it to come into being. Instead of flying away, the historian's invention owes allegiance to the particular topography in which it finds itself. Down every gully, across each desolate rock pile and sandpit, the imagination must trace its way, divagating the broken tracks, stumbling down the shallow hillsides, taking an exact impression at each point of what is not itself. The imagination works like lava, flowing across the terrain, making a mold of what it streams over. The imagination clamps to memory like Barnard's sky to the earth. The imagination depicts unbelievable things—it is imported from other scenes, "combination printed" into a first picture in which it does not belong. Yet somehow it does belong. And it makes us look again, and look longer, at a photograph we might barely have noticed otherwise.

What does the imagination trace in *Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train*? The answer will be different for each viewer. I can give only my own account.<sup>7</sup> Improbably, I imagine the photograph as a story of love. I say this because General John Bell Hood, the commander who ordered that the ordnance train be blown up, was deeply in love at the time. Any reader of Mary Chesnut's Civil War diaries knows that.

Chesnut, writing from Richmond during the war, described how Hood fell in love with a young woman named Sally Buchanan "Buck" Preston after meeting her there in Richmond in late 1862 or early 1863. He was thirty-one. She was twenty. They met when Hood gallantly dismounted from his horse to present a Bible to Sally's mother, with Sally standing next to her, as the two watched Hood's command of ten thousand men march out of the city. Hood took the Bible from his pocket and carefully unwrapped it, according to Chesnut, then pressed a flower inside it as he gave it to Mrs. Preston, Sally watching neutrally. The troops passing down the road good-naturedly kidded their leader, saying, "Ah, general! Is that the matter with you? All right, we know how it is ourselves."<sup>8</sup>

About a year later, Hood was back in Richmond, much changed. Shell fragments at the Battle of Gettysburg had rendered his left arm permanently useless in July 1863, and two months later, at the Battle of Chickamauga, a Minié ball struck his right leg, which was then amputated four inches below

the hip that same day. Returning to the Confederate capital at Christmastime in 1863, the gallant Bible-presenting man of the previous winter now had to be lifted out of a carriage and carried inside Chesnut's home, where he paid a visit.

There, set on a sofa with a carriage blanket placed over him, Hood suffered the sympathy of a gathering that had extended scarcely a note of concern for him until he was actually present. Then all the ladies in the room were "all condolence and tears," according to Chesnut. "It was 'leg,' 'leg,' 'leg.'" Sally Preston was there, Chesnut reports, "tears not quite in her eyes but audible in her voice." Hood noticed, and on December 21 he asked a friend how a man knows he is in love. The friend responded: "When you see her, your breath is apt to come short. If it amounts to mild strangulation, you have got it bad." The friend continued: "You are stupidly jealous, glowering with jealousy, and a gloomy, fixed conviction that she likes every fool you meet better than she does you." Sally, present at the outing where Hood asked the question, casually mentioned that Richmond gossips were saying that she is engaged to several men, including Hood. The glowering general, limping along on his crutch, then said "viciously," according to Chesnut: "I think I will set a mantrap near your door and break some of those young fellows' legs."<sup>9</sup>

Sally was coy. She allowed Hood to make his feelings known, but she kept her distance. Earlier that Christmas season she told Chesnut privately "in her sweetest, mildest, sleepest way" that she "never cared particularly about him. . . . I would not marry him if he had a thousand legs instead of having just lost one." Worse, at a dinner party with Hood present, Sally told a person in another room, exclaiming loud enough for Hood to hear, "Engaged to that man! Never!" Hood's brow darkened as he listened, according to the person who was with him. Then, with "the bitterness of death in his tone for a *moment*," he described how he would not flinch on the battlefield, even with his injuries: "Why wince when you would thank God for a ball to go through your heart and be done with it all?"<sup>10</sup>

Even so, he was undeterred. Attending a play at the St. Ives Theater in Richmond with a group of ladies including Sally, Hood sat in his seat only to discover that she chose to sit behind him, not next to him. He then began "twisting his neck off, looking back," until Sally reluctantly agreed to sit next to him.<sup>11</sup> Later in his convalescence, he and Sally went out for a ride, side by side on their horses. The general asked her to marry him, sticking out his hand: "Say yes or say no. I will not be satisfied with less. Yes—or no, is it?" Since Sally did not say yes or no, Hood kept holding his hand out until, embarrassed at the spectacle, she placed her hand in his. "Heavens, what a change came over his face," she later told Chesnut. "I pulled my hand away by main strength." Hood, thrilled, wasted no time: "Now I will speak to your

father.” Sally’s parents, consulted, agreed to the engagement but then privately “wept in despair.” Hood, for his part, glowed. Although Sally at the conclusion of their engagement ride “yawned in his face,” Hood saw nothing but his happiness. “He is so preposterously sanguine and happy. He is actually alarming,” wrote Chesnut, who noted that Hood told her, “I am so proud. So grateful. The sun never shone on a happier man! Such a noble girl—a queen among women!” Added Chesnut, “He did not notice that I answered never a word.”<sup>12</sup>

Seven months later Hood was in Atlanta, having been given the responsibility of defending the city from Sherman’s relentless march. When at midnight on September 1 he gave the order to blow up his munitions train and withdraw, Hood started a chain of bitter personal defeats. His remnant army fought and lost later that year at Nashville and at Franklin, Tennessee, suffering disastrous losses because of his own tactical decisions. When he next saw Chesnut, in Columbia, South Carolina, in February 1865, she noted “how plainly he spoke out these dreadful words: ‘My defeat and discomfiture’—‘My army is destroyed’—‘My losses’—&c&c. He said he had nobody to blame but himself.” One of the company tried to tell a funny story to distract him, but “he did not hear a word she was saying. He had forgotten us all.” Chesnut then slipped outside with a friend, the two of them unable to endure his grief any longer, as each commented on the general’s mien:

“Did you notice how he stared in the fire. And the livid spots which came out on his face and the huge drops of perspiration that stood out on his forehead?” . . .

“. . . When he looks in the fire and forgets me and seems going through in his own mind the torture of the damned—I get up and come out, as I did just now.”<sup>13</sup>

It was curious how Sally was mixed up in all this. “There seemed a spell upon her lovers—so many were killed or died of the effects of wounds,” Chesnut said. She named five such ill-fated wooers (none named Hood) and noted that she then asked her nephew Johnny if he liked Sally. “No, never,” Johnny replied. “They say So-and-So is awfully in love with Miss S. P. Then I say, look out! You will see his name next in the list of killed and wounded.” Noted one of her suitors, “In her army, the death roll has been awful.” Sally herself observed that Hood was always lucky until he fell in love with her, when he was shot in the arm and leg.<sup>14</sup> They broke their engagement in 1865. Three years later Sally married a man named Rawlins Lowndes. That same year Hood married a woman named Anna Marie Hennen.

In my imagination, Barnard’s photograph portrays not just Hood’s military defeat but his failed romance. It shows the great combustible self-destructive love that the man with a useless arm and a cork leg conceived

for a flirty beauty from Richmond. The two tracks going in different directions, so close, side by side, both destroyed; the lone shadow of a man (evoking the haunted Hood) revisiting as if for eternity the wreckage of his failures. Fate, the flames of passion, the lovers so afire that the world itself goes up in the flames that consume them. Romance and soldiering went together for Hood: before the war, he had received marital advice from Robert E. Lee himself, conferred while the two men rode on patrol through Texas as members of the United States Army: "Never marry unless you can do so into a family which will enable your children to feel proud of both sides of the house," the aristocratic Lee had told his younger subordinate, mindful of Hood's youthful interest in "country lasses."<sup>15</sup> Hood had heeded the fatherly Lee's advice—Sally was a society lady—but what had it gotten him? "Since I saw *you* . . . my battle cry has been 'God, my country, and *you!*'" he said to her.<sup>16</sup> Headlong impulse led to headlong defeat. Had he seen Barnard's *Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train*, Hood might have burst into tears.

Something in the times let the romance of lovers play out on the epic scale of war. In *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Charles Dickens figures Sydney Carton's doomed love for Lucie Manette in the blasted countryside around him: "Far and wide lay a ruined country, yielding nothing but desolation." Even when Dickens imagines Carton's last thoughts on the scaffold—"I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss"—his sacrifice amid the violence of revolution endures.<sup>17</sup> And in *War and Peace* (1863–68), Prince Andrei enlists to fight against Napoleon partly because he wants to escape his adoring and beautiful wife, Liza, pregnant with their first child. At Austerlitz, he suffers a serious wound and falls on his back. There, prone, he looks up and sees the sky—"the lofty sky," Tolstoy writes, "not clear, but still immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds slowly creeping across it," a "lofty, infinite sky." It is a sky that Prince Andrei feels he has never seen before in his life, a vision of other worlds that his youthful cynicism and immaturity had previously kept at bay.

The vision stays with him as he returns home to recuperate and finds that Liza is in desperate pain as she tries to deliver their baby. Her pretty lips surmounted as always in fine black hair, she cannot speak because she is in such agony. But with her eyes she says, "I expected help from you, and there's nothing, nothing." When five minutes later she is dead, the baby having been born, she lies in the same position in which he had just seen her, and with her eyes, with her whole face, she says to Prince Andrei: "I loved you . . . and did nothing bad to anybody, and what have you done to me?" And at the funeral, dead in the coffin, her eyes now closed, her face still seems to say, "Ah, what have you done to me?"<sup>18</sup> Prince Andrei's epiphany on the battlefield—his

wounded stare up at the infinite sky, his childlike whimpering—predicts the sorrow of his wife’s death. The two events of his marriage and his battle, her childbirth and his wound, both open out mysteriously to other worlds, other states of consciousness. Barnard’s photograph, imagined through Hood’s failed romance, is a fit touchstone for Tolstoy’s words.

It is strange that September 1, 1864—the night Hood blew up his ordnance train—is probably the greatest date in the lexicon of love and war. “The world became an inferno of noise and flame and trembling earth as one explosion followed another in ear-splitting succession,” writes Margaret Mitchell in *Gone with the Wind*, describing the night that Rhett Butler and Scarlett O’Hara make their escape from fiery Atlanta. The flashes and booms seem like Yankee artillery—“Torrents of sparks shot to the sky and descended slowly, lazily, through blood-colored clouds of smoke”—but Prissy screams at Scarlett that the explosions are not Yankee shells but the Confederates’ own ammunition trains: “dem sebenty freight cahs of cannon balls an’ gunpowder an’ Jesus, we’s all gwine ter buhn up!”

The city is on fire and, in Mitchell’s crude terms, so are Scarlett and Rhett—a passion well caught in William Cameron Menzies’s storyboard illustrations for David O. Selznick’s epic film of 1939 (fig. 3):

There was a crash of falling timbers near by and Scarlett saw a thin tongue of flame lick up over the roof of the warehouse in whose sheltering shadow they sat.

And

A glare brighter than a dozen suns dazzled their eyes, scorching heat seared their skins and the roaring, cracking and crashing beat upon their ears in painful waves. For an eternity, it seemed, they were in the midst of flaming torment and then abruptly they were in semidarkness again.

And

This was hell and she was in it. . . . [Scarlett] shrank closer to Rhett, took his arm in fingers that trembled and looked up at him for words, for comfort, for something reassuring. In the unholy crimson glow that bathed them, his dark profile stood out as clearly as the head on an ancient coin, beautiful, cruel and decadent.

Then a further huge detonation—the one that Sherman would have heard at 4:00 a.m.:

As Rhett jerked the horse’s head and turned him into another street, another deafening explosion tore the air and a monstrous skyrocket of flame and smoke shot up in the west.

“That must be the last of the ammunition trains,” Rhett said calmly. “Why didn’t they get them out this morning, the fools! There was plenty of time.”<sup>19</sup>



FIGURE 3. William Cameron Menzies, *Gone with the Wind* storyboards for the burning of Atlanta, ca. 1938. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Barnard's photograph might have been a template for Mitchell in her historical research—a sign of the times before the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills had replaced the old Atlanta Rolling Mill that went up in flames that night. Looking at *Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train*, imagining herself back in time, Mitchell may well have been thinking of Scarlett and Rhett, plotting their love by the blight of what Barnard recorded. In 1949 she would be buried in the city's Oakland Cemetery, not far from the scene of the explosion she had written about (the cemetery is a short distance from the right edge of the photograph). On the first graves in that burial ground, established just before the war, fragments of artillery projectiles and locomotive parts had rained down in 1864 as if at the end of time, loud enough to wake the dead as at Armageddon. And now, in a confusion of times, Mitchell came to rest at that same place, able finally to gather first-hand intelligence from the dead, who could describe for her, too little, too late, what the experience of that night by the railroad had been like.

Barnard's photograph is about none of this. Yet the vacancy of the image opens it to associations, and this opening seems a part of the photographer's aim. His job would be to find a cleared space, the more explosive the better, so that his viewers could enter into it with their personal reflections. The photograph, so conceived, would be a readied emptiness, designed in just the right ceremonial array. It would portion out the dust and bent rails, the shivered pines and derelict structures. It would spread the sand in planar banks, all so that the empathetic mind, wandering, could imagine the individual lives lit by all this destruction.

"ROMANCE, *n.* Fiction that owes no allegiance to the God of Things as They Are." The definition is from *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911), written by Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914), a veteran of Sherman's Georgia campaign. By "romance," Bierce means more than realist fiction, as he is quick to point out in his definition: "In the novel the writer's thought is tethered to probability, as a domestic horse to the hitching-post, but in romance it ranges at will over the entire region of the imagination—free, lawless, immune to bit and rein." He goes on, "There are great novels, for great writers have 'laid waste their powers' to write them, but it remains true that far and away the most fascinating fiction that we have is 'The Thousand and One Nights.'"<sup>20</sup>

Bierce, who was seriously wounded at Kennesaw Mountain on June 23, 1864, a day before his twenty-second birthday, missed the conquest of Atlanta and the destruction of Hood's ordnance train. A bullet struck his left temple and lodged behind his left ear, leaving his head "broken like a walnut," he later said, and he would not return to action until that October.<sup>21</sup> The Georgia campaign figures prominently in his celebrated *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891), and one of these stories, "Killed at Resaca," tells of love and war in terms that John Bell Hood and Sally Preston would have recognized. In the story, Union Lieutenant Herman Brayle risks death in outlandish and foolish terms, daring the Confederates to kill him as he exposes himself constantly to enemy fire. "He would sit his horse like an equestrian statue, in a storm of bullets and grape, in the most exposed places." Finally, Brayle is shot to death at Resaca, one of the Georgia battles of spring 1864. The reason for his crazed bravery? A young woman had once idly reproached him because she had heard he was afraid on the battlefield. "I could bear to hear of my soldier lover's death, but not of his cowardice."<sup>22</sup>

Resaca, where Brayle was killed (and where Bierce fought), brings Barnard and Bierce together under the light of ROMANCE, *n.* In Resaca, or "Resacca," as he called it, Barnard made four photographs on a return trip to Georgia in 1866. They appear as plates 19–22 in *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign*. True to form, nothing much happens in any of these



FIGURE 4. George Barnard, *Battle Ground of Resacca, Georgia No. 1*, 1866. Plate 19 from *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign* (1866). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pfeiffer and Rogers Funds, 1970.

pictures. Partly this is the nothing of retrospect. Visiting the site two years after the battle, Barnard portrays what Herman Melville called “the after-quiet” at such places, the dead trees and abandoned earthworks. Partly it is the peculiar nothingness of Resaca itself, a place created only in the 1850s, when a railroad junction was built there and the railway workers named it after a town they had known in Mexico while serving in the previous decade’s Mexican-American War. Resaca, which in Spanish means hangover, is even to this day a disorienting place, retaining a curious remoteness from itself. (Unlike many major battle sites, there is no national park at Resaca.) But partly the nothing in Barnard’s Resaca photographs is the stuff of romance.

That is because in these empty pictures Barnard sets the stage for any act of imagination that might invest the place with something new. Consider the first of the photographs (fig. 4). As much as the retrospective imagination might conjure the ghosts of the soldiers who fought there, populating the thick clay foreground and the dipping middle ground with phantom men, the postwar image also clears these fields, scouring whatever happened there so that they might be filled with a force that the landscape (in a period of



FIGURE 5. George Barnard, *Battle Ground of Resacca, Georgia No. 4*, 1866. Plate 22 from *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign* (1866). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pfeiffer and Rogers Funds, 1970.

postwar healing) needs. Nothingness is a precondition of possibility, a ritualistic emptying-out, as if Barnard went around beforehand making sure that every swirl of dust was tamped down, every tree properly withered or broken in half. Nothing of previous life could remain. Then, like a carpet of sod rolled before the walker, the ground was prepared for a new experience.

This romantic enchantment would not be redemptive, and it would not be progressive. No one was talking about forgetting anything. Rather, the act of imagination would follow the contours of what was not there, succumbing to its grooves and fallen trees, granularly ingesting the swales of grass, showing a topographical appetite for the vacancy it would fill. Imagination would be to emptiness as the sky is to the earth: a transfiguration of it, a new possibility emergent from loss. In the last of Barnard's Resaca photographs, the combination-printed heavens arise out of nowhere, a pure invention (fig. 5). The improbable clouds shed sun on the churned red earth, though it is not this sky's sun but another one, the glow of a different day, that lights the clay. The improbable heaven, compartmentalized from the ground, nevertheless seems lifted from the earth, extracted from it as if



FIGURE 6. George Barnard, *South Carolina Cherubs (after Raphael)*, ca. 1874. Albumen stereograph, 3 3/8 x 6 7/8 in. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2005.27.224. Photo credit: Thomas Palmer.



FIGURE 7. Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*, 1512-13. Oil on canvas, 104 x 77 in. Gemaeldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, Germany. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

by evaporation, as if all the rain that would save the parched earth came from the very ground that seems beyond saving.

The following year, in 1867, Barnard settled in Charleston, South Carolina, where he made a stereographic photograph of two black children in the postures of the downcast cherubs in Raphael's famous *Sistine Madonna* (figs. 6–7).

Clouds and imagination meet again here. In this example of post-Lincoln racial kitsch (the little boys implicitly mourn the dead president), we see only the cherubs, not anything else—not Lincoln, not the Virgin Mary. But we know Raphael’s Virgin is there. And, looking up, the little boys expressively contemplate what we and they cannot see. They persuade us completely—by virtue of their imagining minds—that what is not present is there.

More than an outright divinity, specifically shaped and named in sermons and textbooks, the being they imagine has no contour, no outline. It lifts directly from the boys’ rough-hewn plight, from the mock tomb where they grieve. None of their mordancy, none of their downwardness, disappears in their forward and upward gazes. The two boys remain bound by gravity. The littler boy’s bowling-pin forearms are always knocked down. But they envision something lifted from the world that lowers them.

And if we dispense with the vision of an apotheosized Lincoln rising above them, if we imagine instead Raphael’s sweet-faced Madonna hovering there, then it is a final oddity that a white woman should be their saving grace. Or maybe it is not odd at all. As if in a final accounting of history, after the last shot had been fired (at least of *that* war), the combatants had all lost their allegiances and begun to worship one another, bound by an encompassing atmosphere of loss. Sally Buchanan Preston floating above the battlefield, the belle of the ball, Raphael having sailed to Richmond to paint a ROMANCE, *n.* of a special kind—the cotton-ball clouds, the raining of Hood’s tears, the laments of those he and Sally enslaved, all coming together in a weather of common mourning. In that sky the grief-stricken would drop their allegiances and come together, all fascinated by what was not there, watching the Madonnas rise over the battlefields. Wrote General Sherman to the Mayor of Atlanta, “We must have *Peace*, not only at Atlanta, but in All America.”

## Notes

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1. James A. Connolly to Mary Dunn Connolly, September 11, 1864, in Aaron Sheehan-Dean, ed., *The Civil War: The Final Year Told by Those Who Lived It* (New York, 2014), 381.
2. Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: From Red River to Appomattox* (New York, 1974), 528–29.
3. J. A. Connolly to M. D. Connolly, in Sheehan-Dean, *The Civil War*, 382–83.
4. William T. Sherman to James M. Calhoun and others, in Sheehan-Dean, *The Civil War*, 385.
5. “Barnard’s vision of the defeated South in *Photographic Views of Sherman’s Campaign* reflected the era’s moralistic interpretation of history. It was commonly understood that the fall of Greece and Rome had been caused by malaise, pride, and injustice. Parallels were regularly drawn between these fallen

- empires and the Confederacy”; Keith Davis, *George N. Barnard: Photographer of Sherman’s Campaign* (Kansas City, MO, 1990), 175.
6. J. T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of Its Battlefields and Ruined Cities* (Hartford, CT, 1866), 460.
  7. I agree with the art historian Jaś Elsner when he writes that art history “is nothing other than ekphrasis, or more precisely an extended argument built on ekphrasis.” For Elsner, art history is not a science, and it is not even history. It is instead “the tendentious application of rhetorical description to the work of art (or to several works of art or even to whole categories of art) for the purpose of making an argument of some kind to suit the author’s prior intent.” That describes what I do in this essay. So does Elsner’s idea that “the role of ekphrasis—and of art history itself—is to make the reader or the listener ‘see’ more than they saw before, when they encounter the object next. That search for words to make us ‘see’ is at the heart of the creative struggle against the ways in which what we have learnt can go stale, and it is an attempt to open to the new”; Jaś Elsner, “Art History as Ekphrasis,” *Art History* 33 (February 2010): 11, 26.
  8. Mary Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New Haven, 1981), 442–43.
  9. *Ibid.*, 502–3 and 509–10.
  10. *Ibid.*, 509–10, 492, 559–60.
  11. Steven E. Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West* (Lawrence, KS, 1990); quoted in Brian Craig Miller, *John Bell Hood and the Fight for Civil War Memory* (Knoxville, 2010), 102.
  12. Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, 561–62.
  13. *Ibid.*, 708.
  14. *Ibid.*, 430–31, 709, 555.
  15. J. B. Hood, *Advance and Retreat: Personal Experiences in the United States and Confederate Armies* (New Orleans, 1880), 8.
  16. Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, 559.
  17. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* [1859] (New York, 2003), 229, 381.
  18. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, 2008), 281, 326–28.
  19. Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* [1936] (New York, 1964), 360–61, 367–68.
  20. Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*, in *The Devil’s Dictionary, Tales, & Memoirs*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York, 2011), 606.
  21. Bierce, quoted in Christopher Kiernan Coleman, *Ambrose Bierce and the Period of Honorable Strife: The Civil War and the Emergence of an American Writer* (Knoxville, 2016), 180.
  22. Bierce, “Killed at Resaca,” in *The Devil’s Dictionary, Tales, & Memoirs*, 47, 51.