

The Painters of Modern Life: Stephen Crane, Edward Garnett and Henry Lawson

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The first time I saw the painting *The Flax Weavers* by the Berlin impressionist Max Liebermann, in the *Alte Nationale Galerie* in Berlin, I had the strange feeling that, somehow, I was already familiar with it; that in a sense, I had seen it before.

The Flax Weavers was painted in 1887 and depicts a group of women in a wooden workshop space weaving together long plats of flax, a plant that was an indispensable component of rope and canvas making during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Flax grew in vast swathes on the Baltic coast north of Berlin, and the harvesting and the fabrication of it into important military and commercial items was a mainstay of the area's economy. Max Liebermann, native to the area, became best known for his calm impressionist meditations on the gardens around his villa by the shores of a lake near the Prussian capital, but like a number of other Berlin artists of the time, he also shared a concern with the everyday realism of working class life, even if his depictions of this life found impressionist, rather than harder-edged realist form.

Liebermann's flax-weavers mostly inhabit the right-hand foreground of the painting, pulling their strands of grass across the surface of the image from the left hand side, the background details of the workshop triangulating away from the human forms as per the established rules of visual perspective that dominated European image-making at the time. A blue-grey light suffuses the canvas, seeping in from the windows at the side of the workshop and colouring the working women's white hats and aprons the dull tone of the seemingly always-overcast North German sky. For an Australian, in terms of cultural familiarity there does not seem much that is familiar here at first glance. Yet immediately upon looking at this painting I had a powerful feeling of recognition. Indeed, my experience of viewing *The Flax Weavers* was a classic example of what Sigmund Freud identified as the uncanny, *das Unheimlich*, where the familiar is presented to us in a new or strange or unfamiliar way. Because, after looking at Max Liebermann's painting for some time I realised that in one sense I *had* seen it before; or at least, there was one level on which it was in fact familiar to me. What I had registered quite unconsciously, as I took in the details of this German painting, was its striking similarity (in terms of form, structure, subject matter and general affect) to one of Australia's most iconic images: Tom Roberts' famous *Shearing the Rams*, painted between 1888 and 1890. Here, in Berlin's Old National Gallery, in the classically Freudian sense, I was feeling the familiar made strange.

At first glance the specific details of the subject matter of each work differs. In one a group of women stand upright twining long strands of plant material. In the other bearded shearers grapple with fat, woolly jumbucks, the powerful yellow light that bathes their workspace completely at odds with the pale hues of the flax factory. But in terms of spatial organisation there are striking similarities between the two works, with the shearing shed enclosing the men and their labour in exactly the same way that the wooden shed backgrounds the weavers. Structurally in fact the two images are almost

identical: the point of view is the same in each case; the structural makeup of the image is the same, and the style (late nineteenth century impressionism) is also the same, even though the colour spectrums are different. There are clear historical and technological reasons for these similarities: for example, the manner in which both images are laid out on the canvas is entirely the result of the mathematical system of perspective developed in Italian painting in the Renaissance and dominant in European and Colonial painting right up until the end of the 19th century (Kemp 335-336). Similarly, the impressionist stylistics through which the paint has found form on the canvas are the product of both an Enlightenment science-based understanding of vision as an ‘effect’ of light, as well as the need for painting to go beyond realism now that photography could do that job. Thematically meanwhile, the overall rationale for the content—the depiction of low-density rural industry—is very much the product of modernity’s will to remember its agrarian past, even as the newer and constantly expanding industries of engineering, transport and chemicals obliterated it.

Despite these structural similarities though, at the level of incidental detail the two paintings remain strikingly evocative of the two very different nations in which they were created: the shearers go about their labour on the sunlit plains extended, while the flax weavers’ clogs speak volumes about the soggy chill of the Baltic coast. Now, while Tom Roberts was familiar with the contents of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, I do not know that he made it to Berlin to study Liebermann’s work. Nor do I imagine that Liebermann was much exposed to Australian Impressionism. But the need for such a hypothetical antecedence for either painter is irrelevant, as neither of the two men actually needed to be influenced by the other, because the social, political and economic forces propelling cultural production at the end of the nineteenth century in both Germany and Europe and in Britain and Australia, meant that both painters drew on the same repertoire of established techniques and forms in order to produce their own particular and distinctive national visions.

I have taken this detour through art history because I hope it illustrates (literally) in clear terms the manner in which a comparison of certain kinds of cultural texts can often provoke this experience of the uncanny. Indeed, such structural similarities across national and geographic space are no by no means limited to examples from the field of painting, but rather pervade most varieties of modernity’s textual output. And on a very basic level the reason for this is quite clear-cut: the more ‘global’ culture became on the back of an industrialising colonial and then post-colonial world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the more such similarities of form and style came to dominate many areas of cultural production.

It is with these considerations in mind that I reflect on my experience of reading Stephen Crane’s American novella of 1895, *The Red Badge of Courage*, which gave me a similar sense of the ‘already recognised’ as did my encounter with Max Liebermann’s *Flax Weavers*. Crane’s story follows Henry Fleming, a young volunteer in a Union infantry regiment at the Civil War battle of Chancellorsville. Like many of his comrades, Fleming runs away in terror from his first encounter with the Confederate army, and wanders in a disoriented daze amongst the retreating throngs of his own side. At one point he recognises a soldier from his hometown and attempts to detain him and talk to him, but the panic-stricken, crazed man smashes Fleming in the head with his rifle butt and continues on in his blind stampede to the Rear. When Fleming wakes up on the ground a little while later he finds he has a profusely bleeding head. Without

any clear sense of direction he eventually makes his way back to his regiment, where his buddies bandage his wound and enthusiastically assume it is a gunshot graze. Through this possession of his own 'red badge of courage' Fleming then finds himself transformed into a hero who had obviously stood fast when all around him had broken and fled. Cast as a brave man, in his next battle Fleming finds himself forced to act like one.

In works covering the history of American Literature, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* is often cited as a turning point in the development of modern American writing. In fact, Crane is sometimes even said to have 'invented' a new form of realist immediacy within the pages of his short novel. Perhaps such an assertion is not an exaggeration in the American context, as *The Red Badge of Courage* can be understood as a key turning point in the development of a recognisably 'twentieth century' type of American fiction. But at the same time for me — an Australian — the irony, bleak humour and cynicism of the story, all simultaneously tempered by a romantic degree of faith in the redemptive decency of the ordinary man, cannot help but evoke the work of Henry Lawson as much as the fields and farms of Virginia. Because Lawson, at the very same time that Crane was working in New York, was mining a similar vein of contradictory emotions and nationalist feeling in his depictions of the struggles of Australian rural life.

Stephen Crane was born in New Jersey in 1871, the son of a Methodist minister, but by his early twenties he had drifted into journalism and a hard-drinking, bohemian life in Lower Manhattan. Henry Lawson was born in 1867 in Grenfell and by the time he was in his early twenties he had drifted into journalism and a hard-drinking bohemian life in inner Sydney. Neither writer had the opportunity to be influenced by the other though, because the work they were producing was growing directly out of the worlds they saw and felt around them, worlds they both seemed compelled to chronicle, as Crane put it, 'plainly and unmistakably, so that all men might understand'.

Like many creative young people in the nineteenth century, Crane and Lawson had both begun writing poetry in their teenage years. Their mutual desire to make of writing a profession rather than a pastime pushed both boys towards the prose of the journalist, the occupation that they both also adopted as young adults. There was really nothing very unusual in this progression, as it was, at the time, the most common way for anyone born outside the upper class to gain access to the world of the writer. At the same time, the last decades of the 1800s were the highpoint of realism as an international style, and for many the 'objective' techniques of the reporter seemed the ideal vehicle for a bold new literature of Truth. Perhaps as a direct result of their shared journalistic heritage, both Lawson and Crane produced more fragments than lengthier works, though Crane was much more capable than Lawson of concentrating for more than a few pages. Possibly this was because Crane had a far less fraught relationship with the middle class than Lawson, and the access it provided to cultural capital. As the son of a Minister, Crane had received a good formal education, but this was an asset that was denied Lawson.

Colin Roderick has detailed how Lawson encountered American frontier writing at quite a young age. After he had decided to 'give up poetry for a while and try prose', the young Lawson adopted 'the form of the condensed novel that Bret Harte had popularised' for the structure of his first piece of short fiction, which he sent to *The*

Bulletin in late 1888 (Roderick 54). As an eleven-year-old on a visit to see his aunts at Wallerawang, Lawson had been given a volume of Harte's work, which he read on the trip back to Sapling Gully, later observing that it brought 'a new light, a new world' into his life (26). Harte was best known for his stories depicting life on the Californian goldfields. Written during the 1870s, Harte's work relied heavily on a use of the vernacular as a device for exploring the everyday life of the people scratching a living out of the Californian earth. The tales were a great success with readers, both domestic and international, who responded to the style of the writing and the 'honesty' of both the characters and language with enthusiasm, as evinced by Lawson's adoption of Harte's formal technique. Later though, after he began to find his own success as a writer, Lawson became annoyed about continued comparisons of his own work to that of his former inspiration, and sort to distance himself and his writing from Harte's (110). Meanwhile, in the United States Harte's reputation was called into question, with Mark Twain charging him with 'lack of conscience, lack of sensitivity, lack of sincerity' (Duckett 4).

Inevitably, Bret Harte was something of an influence on the young Crane as well, though he certainly was not the only one. Ambrose Bierce, for example, stands out as a clear reference point in the formulation of Stephen Crane's literary style. Born three decades earlier than Crane, Bierce had actually fought in the Civil War, and his own, often grotesque, sketches predated Crane's use of bleak irony and detached cynicism in evocation of the anomic squalor of the battlefield. Crane took this style, initially perfected in *The Red Badge of Courage*, into his later stories, and so we can definitely cite Bierce as a lasting influence on his work. I am not sure though how much, if any, of Ambrose Bierce's work Lawson got to read in his formative years, so it is difficult to definitively posit Bierce as an influence on both men. The key point here though is that, as with Liebermann and Roberts' paintings, we do not actually need to find a host of common and citable literary ancestors for both Crane and Lawson in order to explain the fact that, stylistically, they were both producing comparable work at the same time, albeit on different sides of the world. Essentially, Crane and Lawson were working in an increasingly globalised world of both industry and letters, the cultural logic of which was pushing both of them into a refinement of the form of post-journalistic mixture of realism and romanticism that, at this point in world history, constituted the cutting edge of popular international prose. A brief examination of two of their short stories, which were both written in the late 1890s, one in New York, the other in Sydney, can illustrate this point well.

Stephen Crane's 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky' tells of Jack Potter, Marshal of the town of Yellow Sky in Texas, and his return from San Antonio with his new bride. Potter's face was 'reddened from many days in the wind and sun', and he sat in a carriage of the train taking him home with 'a hand on each knee, like a man waiting in a barber's shop. The glances he devoted to other passengers were furtive and shy.' His bride meanwhile 'was not pretty, nor was she very young', and the 'blushes caused by the careless scrutiny of some passengers as she had entered the car were strange to see upon this plain, under-class countenance, which was drawn in placid, almost emotionless lines.' Potter is looking forward to the quiet life, but waiting for him in Yellow Sky is the drunken gunslinger Scratchy Wilson, 'the last of the old gang that used to hang out along the river'. A Westerner of the Old School, Scratchy is planning a definitive showdown with the Marshal, and as Mr and Mrs Potter turn the dusty corner around which lies the Marshal's house, they find the red-shirted gunslinger

loading one of his two pistols. On seeing the pair he drops the unloaded gun while simultaneously pulling the other from its holster, telling the marshal its ‘time to settle’. But Potter is unarmed: ‘I’ve got no gun because I’ve just come from San Anton with my wife. I’m Married’. “Well,” says Wilson ‘at last, slowly, “I s’pose it’s all off now”’, and he wanders away, his feet making ‘funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand’ (Crane 155).

The funnel-shaped tracks of the last sentence of the story have been interpreted as a metaphor for sand running through an hourglass, suggesting that ‘the gunslinger belongs to an old order whose time has passed’ (Scharnhorst xix). The Marshall’s wife who, importantly, is a mature woman rather than a girl, is as an ‘avatar’ of East Coast order, with the domestic, civilising force she embodies announcing that the days of Scratchy and the Wild West are over, a fate the gunman seems resigned to accept as he trudges off alone. ‘The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky’ is one of Crane’s most admired pieces, and it stands as a fine example of both his sharp, minimalist style and his concern with literature as a form of social and historical record. But at the same time, while it may be an illustrative piece of late nineteenth century American fiction, anyone familiar with the work of Henry Lawson will also recognise a striking similarity in the dominant tone of ironic melancholy present in the poignant resolution of Crane’s tale.

Interestingly, in terms of American connections, Lawson actually makes reference to Mark Twain in the first few paragraphs of one of his most effective and well-known stories, ‘Joe Wilson’s Courtship’. While setting up the action in the first few paragraphs, Lawson has his narrator compare a married man’s state of dreary security — the same state that had of course saved Crane’s Marshall Jack Potter from being drilled full of holes — to Twain’s admission in relation to the Mississippi that, ‘he lost all the beauty of the river when he saw it with a pilot’s eye’ (Lawson 273).

Edgar Allan Poe, another obvious influence on both Crane and Lawson (his mother Louisa having read Poe’s gothic stories to him as a child), had argued that the short story was the perfect literary form for the modern world. The rapid reorganisation of the material nature of social and technological forms in Europe and North America during the nineteenth century — what we have come to understand as the experience of modernity — had produced a great speeding up of so many of life’s processes and experiences, along with a growing demand for immediacy in terms of access to objects and ideas. Poe, amongst others, declared the novel an antiquated device, and reified instead the short story form which, he argued, with its capacity to provide the reader with a single and digestible idea in a single sitting, provided access to contemporary experience in a way no other textual form could. Crane and Lawson both subscribed to this dictum to an extent, though it also helped that this was the form of fiction they were best at writing.

The immediacy of the writing is even embodied in the titles: ‘Joe Wilson’s Courtship’, just like ‘The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky’, narrates its entire story in a single image. Joe Wilson is the quintessential Lawsonian hero, fully schooled in the Old Bush Ways, nostalgic for the days when ‘a boy is naked and in his natural state for a warm climate like Australia, with three or four of his schoolmates, under the shade of the creek-oaks in the bend where there’s a good clear pool with a sandy bottom. When his father buys him a gun, and he starts out after kangaroos or ‘possums. When he gets a horse, saddle, and bridle, of his own. When he has his arm in splints or a stich in his head—he’s

proud then, the proudest boy in the district' (272). As the narrative commences, bush carpenter Joe, along with his mate Jack, is building a new stable for Black, a squatter, on his property a few miles out of Solong. Joe fancies Mary Brand, a young domestic worker at the homestead, and after some prompting from Jack he commences to court her. When the racially suspect shearer Romany casts doubt on both singing voice and her virtue, Joe 'goes him'. Neither of them know anything about fighting however, and they stumble around landing clumsy blows on one another until Romany trips over, twists his ankle, says he has had enough, and then limps over to his horse and rides off. It is a bumbling, anticlimactic resolution, but at least Mary agrees to become Mrs. Wilson on the strength of Joe's attempts to defend her honour.

At one point Joe tells the reader a little about Mary's background. Her father had been 'an old mate of Black's, a younger son of a well-to-do English family', who had been 'sent out to Australia with a thousand pounds to make his way.' But as Joe observes, he was much like many others of his ilk, who blow their thousand pounds in Sydney or Melbourne, and 'don't make anymore nowadays, for the Roarin' Days have been dead these thirty years' (285).

The work of literature often carries within it an account of cultural history, and it is around their examination of the 'coming of a new age' that the histories embedded in Lawson's and Crane's stories intersect. As Lawson says, by the time of 'Joe Wilson's Courtship' the Roarin' Days were long gone, and perhaps they're even parodied in Joe and Romany's clumsy, unresolved confrontation. Meanwhile, the casual violence that had sustained the Old West is dissipated in the shifting sands under the feet of Crane's lonely gunfighter, whom Progress has simply left behind. A few years earlier, in his definitive poetic exploration of the 'Roarin' Days', Lawson had done as much as was possible to symbolise the coming of modernity in a single image, when he had observed that the 'mighty bush' had been tethered to the world with 'iron rails'. Both 'Joe Wilson's Courtship' and 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky' continue in this same vein, detailing the everyday consequences of the impact of modernity on what were previously the wild edges of the post-European world. In Crane's opening scene, Marshall Potter's wife is travelling to town in a comfortable passenger carriage, riding on those same iron rails that were 'civilising' the Australian Bush. In fact, on one level the key theme of both stories is the way in which the transforming forces of modernity are literally embodied by women. This was a prescient observation by both men, as, over the next few decades, a significant and pervasive form of modernist mass culture would increasingly be understood as a predominantly feminine phenomenon (Huyssen 47).

While Crane's and Lawson's stories clearly overlap in terms of style and concerns, they also literally came together in the person of the English literary personality Edward Garnett. Born a year after Lawson and two years before Crane, Edward Garnett was the son of Robert Garnett, the Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum. As the son of Britain's chief librarian, Edward Garnett's adoption of a literary life was as straightforward as Henry Lawson's was fraught. As a youth Garnett desired to write novels himself, but as he came to manhood he also came to realise that he was much more talented as a reader than he was as a writer. He went on to become the very embodiment of the Edwardian man of letters: he was principal reader and editor with T.F. Unwin, Methuen, Duckworth and with Jonathan Cape. He was also a literary

entrepreneur, and was instrumental in the promotion of the careers of Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence and H.E. Bates.

As important though as his efforts as an editor and facilitator were, Garnett grew to be an influential literary critic too. In fact, his first piece of published criticism, in the literary journal *Academy* in 1898, was an analysis of what he called Stephen Crane's 'impressionism'. Garnett had befriended Crane when he had moved to England, but the young American was barely known as a writer by the English. For Garnett though, Crane's 'art was unique', because he was 'the perfect artist and interpreter of the surfaces of life.' The 'rare thing about Mr. Crane's art', Garnett continued, was that 'he keeps closer to the surface than any living writer, and, like the great-portrait painters, to a great extent makes the surface betray the depths.' In a 'few swift strokes', Crane provided 'amazing insight into what the individual life is', a capacity which made him, the 'chief impressionist of his age' (Garnett, 1973 225).

The other unknown young writer from the former Colonies who Garnett chose to promote was Henry Lawson. Despite the fact that by 1900 he was making a reasonable income from his work in Australia, Lawson was determined that if he was really going to make a reputation on the page, then he needed to make it at the centre of the Empire, not on the periphery (Roderick 204). When Lawson arrived in London in 1900 he linked up with Garnett, who at this point 'had a reputation for finding new authors' (224). Garnett then introduced Lawson to the man who would become his London literary agent, James B. Pinker. Lawson also received a celebratory review by Garnett in *Academy*, as had Crane. Lawson, through his 'journalistic tales', said Garnett, 'interprets the life of the Australian people, typifies the average life for us, and takes us beneath the surface ... His pictures of life convey to us a great sense of the background of the whole of the people's life; their struggles and cares, their humour and outlook, live in his pages' (Garnett, 1972 121). Lawson had 'the great strength of the writer writing simply as one of the democracy, and of one who does not have to climb down from a class fence in order to understand the nature of the majority of his fellow men'. Not even Tolstoy, Whitman, Zola or Gorky had written anything that so 'absolutely' took us inside 'life' as 'Joe Wilson's Courtship', wrote Garnett.

Lawson had a lot to do with Garnett during his time in London, but for the English critic's biographer the standout incident was when the wild colonial took the genteel Englishman home for dinner: 'without warning Bertha Henry brought Garnett back to their rooms for a meal. Bertha was in a flutter. Although finances had improved, they were still very poor. But she did the best she could. She hashed up a meal of corned beef, fried potatoes, and cabbage, with bread, and jam, and tea. Garnett accepted it with good grace. Indeed it only confirmed his belief, in the genuineness of Lawson's democratic outlook' (Jefferson 93).

Perhaps Australian letters can be grateful for Edward Garnett's sense of grace. As a reviewer and arbiter of taste operating at the centre of the English literary world, Garnett was a key agent of the growing modernist, internationalist critical sensibility. He applied this new critical paradigm with enthusiasm to the works of both Crane and Lawson, and interestingly, he called their stories 'pictures' and 'paintings'. They were 'impressionist', said Garnett, and through this impressionism they depicted the 'truth' of the details of 'modern life'. Here in Edward Garnett's assessments in *Academy*, art criticism and literary criticism meet up, with the thematic and stylistic constants in the

stories of both Crane and Lawson corresponding to the work of the painters of modern life. While Garnett nominates no specific painters, the impressionist renderings of daily life, like those of Max Liebermann and Tom Roberts, are clearly the sort of images he has in mind.

In terms of affect then, it seems that both of these forms of textual production — the painterly and the literary — are at this point becoming interchangeable, and it is remarkable that Garnett, a literary critic, should have adopted the analytical language of the visual arts to champion these important new writers. It is as if Garnett is declaring that the sort of writing that will best represent the modern world is best spoken about in visual rather than linguistic metaphors. Given the way the visual would come to dominate global culture in the twentieth century, this seems no accidental point.

Both writers are also essentially ‘democratic’, says Garnett, with their writings displaying the internal workings of the world of the common man. Again, as with the idealisation of the visual form, the ideal of the common man, whether the citizen of a liberal democracy, a fascist state or the soviet empire, would come to dominate international culture and politics in the first few decades of the twentieth century. And importantly, according to Garnett, the way both writers illuminated the workings of the system was through their use of the interplay of surface and depth—a key critical concept that figured as one of the most important elements of modernist literary criticism.

Unlike the two young writers whose work he championed, Edward Garnett lived a long and prosperous life. Stephen Crane on the other hand died at 29 of tuberculosis; a condition contracted in the course of a life lived mostly on the edge. Henry Lawson lasted longer than Crane, but he too still succumbed to an early death, the result of the reckless way he had also lived his life. So neither was alive in the 1930s when historians and critics began to ponder the ways in which the cultural forces of modernity had ended up celebrating, in aesthetic terms, the iconic elements of the social forms they had displaced. In Europe Walter Benjamin saw Progress as a storm blowing the angel of history backwards into the future, as wreckage piled up at its feet (Benjamin 392). Less poetically, but no less effectively in terms of analysis, in Brazil Gilberto Freyre speculated on the middle class passion for Brazilian faux plantation architecture, now that the great era of the plantations was over, and the great houses had become an anachronism (Freyre 27).

Stephen Crane and Henry Lawson have come to play definitive roles in the literary histories of the two nations in which they originated; Crane as the chronicler of America’s loss of wide-eyed innocence, both in the killing fields of the civil war and on the disappearing frontier; Lawson as the poet watching the seep of anomie throughout the once mighty Australian Bush. In this sense both were very national writers. But at the same time, in the broad sweep of the cultural history of modernity, the experiences of which Lawson and Crane told were also very much part of a shared story. This is why Edward Garnett could, despite their specific national foci, champion both writers as the harbingers of a new, democratic realism, one that depicted modern life with a force and vitality that matched dynamism of the modern world.

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