Ten Years of the Dayton Literary Peace Prize
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Accords: Peace, War, and the Arts

Spring 2015

Research Poster Sample

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Richard Bausch's World War II novel Peace is set during a stifling, difficult moment in the Allied campaign to drive German soldiers out of Italy during the winter of 1944. Allied troops had landed in Salerno in September 1943, and had moved steadily up the Italian peninsula throughout the fall of 1943, with the eventual goal of reaching and taking Rome (“Fifth Army”). But this drive was stopped by German reinforcements at what became known as the Winter Line, a line of reinforcements running across the mountainous territory of central Italy. The official Army history describes the problem concisely: “Each mountain had to be taken, each valley cleared, and then there were more mountains ahead and still another main defense line to be broken.” In his comprehensive history of the campaign, The Day of Battle, historian Rick Atkinson describes how this campaign became bogged down by rainy weather in the winter of 1944: “Beginning in late February, rain fell day after dreary day. [Fifth Army meteorologist David Ludlum] studied his weather charts from dawn until midnight only to report yet again: more rain. A week passed, then another” (43). This rain became a particular problem around the key site of Cassino, where the Allies had bombed a monastery earlier in the winter. Here, the mountains became nearly impossible to pass in the rain, even as the Germans maintained machine guns and other armaments in the mountains.

Bausch captures the tedium, difficulty, and paranoia of the ground soldier’s position in this conflict. He repeatedly calls attention to the tenuous weather, delivered in Bausch’s minimalist style: “On the side of the mountain in the rain, Marson and Moir were awake” (46) and “Corporal Marson, the only one awake in the freezing darkness” (61). “On the cold hillside—or mountain—Corporal Marson of the freezing hour pass, dreaming of home” (73). Peace attempts to convey the tempest and desolation of this difficult moment in the war. He seems to have chosen this historical moment deliberately because of its stasis. Tactically, the winter weather delays the bombing of Cassino; psychologically, the steady rain symbolizes the relentlessness and entrapment of combat. The mountains also posed problems for the army as a whole, but, as Bausch’s narrative, on the difficulty of moving forward in wartime.

According to Atkinson, though not without losses, the Allied forces made relatively rapid progress in southern Italy, particularly on the island of Sicily and the lower part of Italy. Atkinson observes that by September 1943, only 8,000 Germans occupied “the foot of the Italian boot” (178). While Salerno was a difficult battle, the Germans retreated from Naples after losing that city (Atkinson 239). Throughout 1943, then, the Allied forces moved up Italy quickly, but were stalled at the Winter Line. Bausch emphasizes the deadliness of both progress and winter by contrasting the mountain with Palermo (albeit ironically): “Corporal Marson, half as high up the mountain as the others, was looking out at the panorama of Cassino, remembered how hot it had been in Palermo, and how much he hated it” (46). Bausch captures the awkwardness of the men’s position by contrasting the scene with flashbacks to Palermo, where Marson and the other men relax and socialize with locals, in particular the energetic Mario, who brings the men “the best wine. Primitivo” and talks with them about baseball (52). Marson also attends mass at Palermo (49) and talks endlessly about home (87). Bausch’s novel, then, reflects the historical sense of stasis that greeted Allied forces at the Winter Line.

Peace’s Intervention into History

If the Italian campaign was designed, according to Winston Churchill, to pierce the “soft underbelly” of the Axis, Bausch depicts this undertaking as anything but straightforward (“The Bombing of Monte Cassino”). Taking rich advantage of his historical setting, Bausch uses the historical moment of the assault on the Gustave line to depict the dilemma and terror of war. Marson and the other men continually reflect on their entrapment:

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Marson’s bodily pain here, even as he experiences a psychological strain that “overmasters” his physical pain. While he doesn’t depict maimed bodies or widespread bloodshed, Bausch works in what literary critic Susan Cole calls the “disenchanted” mode of the campaigning soldier of war (1636). In favor of “hom[e][g]ing in on a moment of bodily injury, stressing the force of that infuriative violation and intimating ghastly consequences for the future” (1636). There is nothing purifying or cathartic about Marson’s pain: if not “ghastly,” it is terrible in its stasis. Few readers coming across this passage will view in the perception of soft underbellies of the Axis. Instead, they are likely to be repulsed by the awfulness of Marson’s situation. Peace as a whole trades in this stasis. Very little time passes, and very little ground is covered throughout the novel’s 171 pages. Of course, Bausch accomplishes this disenchanted effect in part through his narrative choices. He tells us little about the larger arc of the war, and even the atrocities committed by German soldiers are heard from a distance. This makes it difficult for readers to balance the terror of war with its larger purposes. It’s interesting, in this sense, to contrast the tone of Peace with a book like A Hymn for guided missiles. This book’s publication in 1993, appearing in its accounts of casualties. The Day of Battle is far more interested in a view of the war from a general’s point of view than the from an enlisted soldier’s point of view. As a work of narrative literature, Peace provides a useful companion to the straight history of a work like The Day of Battle, forcing readers to endure the plodding movement of an infantry up a mountain instead of a rapidly-moving arrow across a map.

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