“The art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads . . . and a story written by a measuring worm.”

—Ambrose Bierce

ENG 3620, American Literature II
From the Civil War to the Present

Spring 2020, michael wutz

• (1) The Gilded Age, Realism, and Naturalism, 1865-1914
  The Gilded Age / Reconstructing America / The Literary Marketplace / Forms of Realism / The “Woman Question” / Unseen Forces / The New American Empire

• (2) American (Literary) Modernism, 1914-1945

• (3) Contemporary American Literature, 1945-present
ENG 3620, American Literature II — From the Civil War to the Present
A Bird’s Eye View 😊
Trauma as a Great Divide?
Literary History, Rupture, and/or Continuity?
Realist Precedents in Antebellum Literature

- Historical Thresholds and Literary Periodization
  - 9/11 — The Vietnam War — World War II — World War I
  - The Civil War
  "American Literature to 1865"/ “American Literature after 1865”

(1) What if “an event in literary history [the Civil War] is both a rupture and an occasion for extension?”
  Christopher Hager & Cody Marrs, “Against 1865: Reperiodizing the Nineteenth-Century.”

(2) The (unstudied/uncanonized) literature of in-between: popular and highbrow forms, frontline news, accounts of emancipation, patriotic songs: Home Front: Daily Life in the Civil War North
  https://www.newberry.org/home-front-daily-life-civil-war-north
American transcendentalism is essentially a kind of practice by which the world of facts and the categories of common sense are temporarily exchanged for the world of ideas and the categories of imagination. The point of this exchange is to make life better by lifting us above the conflicts and struggles that weigh on our souls.

- Immigration and rapid population growth
- The new kids on the block: science, industry, transportation and technology
- Gone is the “Frontier”
- The trauma of the Civil War – angst about the future – incertitude and lack of optimism . . . .
What is truly astonishing about the Civil War is how little demonstrable impact it had on American literature. The one great novel ever inspired by it was published thirty years afterward—Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Whitman and Dickinson’s war poetry is no better or worse than the poetry they wrote before or after. . . . No one would dispute that a war that took more than 620,000 lives and tore a nation apart must have darkened the vision of all Americans, including its writers. Far more surprising is that the war left a reunited nation still sharing an optimistic faith, richly tempered by fire and suffering. The Civil War saved the union and ended slavery. In the end, it appeared to virtually all of the great writers who survived it, and to those who followed them, as a great national tragedy that had ended . . . with its protagonist reborn—better, deeper, wiser than before.

The Civil War matters to us today because it ended slavery and helped to define the meanings of freedom, citizenship, and equality. It established a newly centralized nation-state and launched it on a trajectory of economic expansion and world influence. But for those Americans who lived in and through the Civil War, the texture of the experience, its warp and woof, was the presence of death. At war's end this shared suffering would override persisting differences about the meanings of race, citizenship, and nationhood to establish sacrifice and its memorialization as the ground on which North and South would ultimately reunite. Even in our own time this fundamentally elegiac understanding of the Civil War retains a powerful hold.

Literature & and the New Media Ecology
The Civil War, Mathew Brady & Co., Photography
Portraiture, cartes de visite

I don’t know that I have any favorite portrait of myself; but I have thought that if I looked like any of the likenesses of me that have been taken, I look most like that one.

“You cannot tell how soon it may be too late”
Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us that terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it. . . . Crowds of people are constantly going up the stairs; follow them...there is a terrible fascination about it that draws one near these pictures, and makes you loath to leave them. You will see hushed, reverend groups standing around these weird copies of carnage, bending down to look in the pale faces of the dead, chained by the strange spell that dwells in dead men's eyes . . . .

There is one side of the picture that the sun did not catch, one phase that has escaped photographic skill. It is the background of widows and orphans, torn from the bosom of their natural protectors, by the red remorseless hand of Battle, and thrown upon the fatherhood of God. Homes have been made desolate, and the light of life in thousands of hearts has been quenched forever. All of this desolation imagination must paint—broken hearts cannot be photographed.

—”Pictures of the Dead of Antietam,” NYT, 20 October 1862
In the 1880s 334,000 people were crammed into a single square mile of the Lower East Side, making it the most densely populated place on earth. They were packed into filthy, disease-ridden tenements, 10 or 15 to a room, and the well-off knew nothing about them and cared less.

— Robert Hughes, *American Visions*

... a way had been discovered to take pictures by flashlight. The darkest corner might be photographed that way.

— Riis, in Alland, *The Making of An American*

Recently a man, well qualified to pass judgment, alluded to Mr. Jacob A. Riis as "the most useful citizen of New York". Those fellow citizens of Mr. Riis who best know his work will be most apt to agree with this statement. The countless evils which lurk in the dark corners of our civic institutions, which stalk abroad in the slums, and have their permanent abode in the crowded tenement houses, have met in Mr. Riis the most formidable opponent ever encountered by them in New York City.

— Theodore Roosevelt
• It has always been one of the primary tasks of art to create a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come. The history of every art form has critical periods in which the particular form strains after effects which can be easily achieved only with a changed technical standard—that is to say, in a new art form.

  —Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*

• Print put itself out of print, as it were, not because it failed but because it succeed too well in creating in readers a taste for the real that only nonverbal media could satisfy.

  —Joseph Tabbi & Michael Wutz, *Reading Matters*

• To go where no novel has gone before: “The effort to describe more, if not everything, in a far more ‘life-like,’ complex, and detailed way than literature had ever done before was an attempt to incorporate, mimic or co-opt the achievements of competing electric media”

  —Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, “Undead Networks”
Photography & Literary Realism
The Image as New Ground Zero of the Real

Photographic” literature is good literature

• In these *Leaves of Grass* everything is literally photographed, nothing is poeticized, not a stop, not an inch, nothing for beauty’s sake.
  —Walt Whitman, 1880s

• *The Red Room* (1879) will contain nothing but “photographic descriptions of the lives of writers and artists."
  —August Strindberg

• “everywhere your pen falls it leaves a photograph.”
  —Twain to William Dean Howells (1879)
Photography & Literary Realism
The New Portraiture

- I can’t be anonymous by reason of your confounded photographs
  —Alfred, Lord Tennyson to Julia Margaret Cameron

- No photograph ever was good, yet of anybody—hunger and thirst and utter wretchedness overtake the outlaw who invented it.
  —Mark Twain

- Daguerreotype: “What the devel [sic] of an unspellable word.”
  —Herman Melville, 1851
Photography & Literary Realism
American Naturalism and Photography—Frank Norris II

• Photographic surface vs. textual depth

The realist novel only notes “the surface of things. For it Beauty is not even skin-deep, but only a geometrical plane, without dimensions of depth, a mere outside.” The naturalist novel, by contrast, exceeds “the incontestable precision of the photograph” (or “the meticulous science of the phonograph”) because it probes “the unplumbed depth of the human heart.”

—Frank Norris, Criticism

Zola’s writings reach beyond “the truthfulness of a camera” and go “straight through the clothes and tissues and wrappings of flesh down deep into the red, living heart of things.”

—Frank Norris, Criticism
Thank you.

Future installments
- Literary Realism and the typewriter
- Literary Realism and sound recording