The Soldier Diary

“Civil war . . . What did those words mean? Was there any such thing as a ‘foreign war?’ Was not all warfare between men warfare between brothers?”

—Victor Hugo

By the end of 1862, English translations of Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables began to appear in North America. Though the novel, released in five volumes, received mixed reviews in the North, Southern critics were very receptive, ironic given Hugo’s staunch antislavery views (Masur 2013). John Esten Cooke, an aid to the maverick Confederate cavalry general J. E. B. Stuart, wrote, “[The novel] had been translated and published by a house in Richmond; the soldiers, in the great dearth of reading matter, had seized upon it . . . The soldiers, less familiar with the Gallic pronunciation, called the book ‘Lee’s Miserables!’ Then another step was taken. It was no longer the book, but themselves whom they referred to by that name” (Cooke, 1864). This appears to be a recognition that a narration of war requires what Elisabeth Bronfen describes as individuals (troops) standing in “for political ideas and nation . . . individuals whose personal involvement renders abstract conflicts concrete” (Bronfen 2012, 4). The personal war narratives found in Civil War epistolary forms were similar to the way that the characters in Les Misérables were stand-ins for the larger moral questions Hugo posed for a post-Napoleonic/post-Revolutionary France, as in both cases a narrative of nationhood (on a large stage) is infused with pathos by being transmitted by human participants (on a small stage).
Historical memory of past conflicts plays an important role in framing the events of Hugo’s novel (The French Revolution, Waterloo, and the July Revolution of 1830), which may, in part, explain the fascination with the novel by soldiers on both sides of the Civil War; a cultural memory of the American Revolution and, in the case of many commanders, a real memory of the Mexican-American War (1846–48) informed the attitudes of soldiers as they entered the conflict. Sixty years after the war, Henri Fescourt’s 1925 silent adaptation of Hugo’s novel featured the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo, a scene from the novel seldom featured in other screen versions. The sequence is reminiscent of the haunting battlefield landscapes in Abel Gance’s World War I film, J’accuse (1919). A large bird, hand painted onto the film strip, glides through a sky that is thick with smoke and dark rain clouds before it is eventually brought down by a lightning bolt. The film cuts to an immense wide shot of the battlefield littered with corpses. We soon see the crafty and unscrupulous M. Thenardier looting these corpses, eventually encountering and “saving” Colonel Pontmercy, establishing major plot developments that are to come. The imagery is reminiscent of photographed scenes from the American Civil War—Mathew Brady’s images of corpse harvests and blood-stained battlefields. This scene, however, also contains a key element found in both Hugo’s novel and in the diaries of the soldiers who carried the novel: memories of a real past are infused with a poetic narration, providing a story of war’s trauma with pathos.

This chapter will look at the ways soldier-witnesses during the Civil War, in their writings of diaries, letters, and postwar memoirs, foregrounded the conflict in historical memory and employed formulas of pathos to provide the narration of war with human agency. The primary texts considered here are writings of Horace Porter and Elisha Hunt Rhodes, though other notable examples from both sides will also be examined. Central to my reading of these texts are the concepts of generational memory, the process by which historical memory is repurposed by successive generations and, according to David Thelen, reconnected with “its origins in the narrative form” (Thelen 1989, 1118). Both the writings of Civil War veterans and the war films that followed find their strength in a graphic rendering of the somatic experience of war coupled with what Robert Burgoyne describes as “a