

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE: HENRY FLEMING'S BATTLES WITH READERS AND LITERARY CRITICS

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The Red Badge of Courage (1895) is undoubtedly the most controversial work in the canon of Stephen Crane, an author who has always been difficult to classify for literary historians—for some Crane is an impressionist, for others a realist, for others a naturalist, an imagist, an ironist, a modernist. As I intend to show in this essay, *The Red Badge* has been the object of much critical discussion and critics and readers have interpreted it from a wide range of perspectives. Crane's best novel has always infuriated many of my students of American literature, who are troubled and puzzled by a story they find fragmented, elusive, without coherence or continuity. In this sense, the plight of the reader trying desperately to wrench coherent meaning and sense of continuity out of the story is very similar to that of the protagonist, who cannot find adequate explanations for the battles he finds himself immersed in and is alienated by a rapid succession of events which persistently deny the disclosure of significance. It is as if Crane had decided to have both his protagonist and his readers grope through the persistent fog, the smoke, the dust and the trees that literally cloud Henry Fleming's vision from the beginning to the end of a novel with blurred outlines, with persistent and dislocating irony, and without explicit evaluations, a novel written by an author who never takes for granted the mind's ability to perceive and evaluate reality clearly, and for whom absolutes and certainties no longer exist. After all, *The Red Badge* was written and published at a time when Mendel, Marx, Darwin and Freud had already shown that man was trapped, that he was the unsuspecting victim of hereditary, economic, evolutionary, and psychological forces. By the end of the nineteenth century the myth of heroism and the American belief in personal self-control and self-improvement were still noisily promoted by romantic fiction and the popular press, but they had become increasingly difficult to sustain, as they depended on the conception of an integrated society with economic and sexual hierarchies, with natural and supernatural controls and points of reference.

The Red Badge of Courage bears all the marks of a rich gold mine for Reception theorists. The number of favourable reviews with which this immensely successful novel was received both in England and in America, where it went through ten editions in its first year alone, was unusual for a book by a living writer. A fascinating question for Reception theorists to answer is how could Crane's contemporaries have read so avidly a novel that, from our own perspective, subverts and contradicts so many of their assumptions, a novel that violated most of the criteria for popular success, at a time when romances with a moral purpose and lofty style were being devoured by the American reading public. Can the success of the novel be accounted for by the readers' desire for something new and more substantial than the prevailing romantic escapism? Or are we to suppose that most initial readers, as many others have done since, saw Henry Fleming in conventional terms, according to the generic expectations of a romantic war hero, that they failed to perceive Crane's irony in the final chapter, that they were as deluded as the protagonist himself is, and read conventional pieties and sentimentality into Crane's text?

Literary theorists have amply demonstrated and analyzed the complex interaction between readers and texts, and I am sure that Crane knew too well that the reader brings to the text a whole load of ideological and literary assumptions that influence evaluation and interpretation. Hans Robert Jauss's theory of literary reception recognizes the existence of intra- and extra-literary horizons of expectations. The *intraliterary horizon* is the background of literary genres, forms, and themes against which a text is read at any moment in the course of history. The text can either conform to or disappoint these expectations and, if it disappoints them, it can bring about a change in the content of the horizon.¹

To understand *The Red Badge*, then, we have to take into account the traditional literary conventions that Crane used and modified in writing it. The genre that dominated war fiction during the first half of the nineteenth century was the historical romance. In most historical romances war is an idealized setting in which the protagonist attains glory. The common soldier does not have much of a show in the historical romance, which reserves the role of the brave hero for the officers. Any barbarities or atrocities in the battle descriptions are attributed to the cruelty of the enemy. The romantic novel of war is mocked and parodied by Crane in the very second paragraph of *The Red Badge*, where he uses some of the stylistic clichés of the medieval romance to describe the commonplace activity of a soldier doing his laundry:

Once a certain tall soldier developed virtues and went resolutely to wash a shirt. He came back from a brook waving his garment bannerlike.²

The soldier comes back with "a tale", the rumour he has heard that the army is, at last, going to advance. The pose he adopts, "the important air of a herald in red and gold", has been deflated in the previous sentence, in which his "tale" is

described in terms of village gossip, "heard from a reliable friend, who had heard it from a truthful cavalryman, who had heard it from his trustworthy brother, one of the orderlies at division headquarters" (pp. 1-2). It seems as if Crane were in this passage not only parodying romantic stories of war but also suggesting the inadequacy of tales and stories to anticipate and to give expression to the fate of soldier in war. In fact, the "tale" that they are going to move proves to be false and it is a long time before the regiment goes into action.

The conventions of the historical romance persisted throughout most of the nineteenth century, but after the Civil War many war novels began to modify the convention and to give more realistic detail. The realistic war novel, which made its appearance with Tolstoy's *Sebastopol* (1854-55; English transl., 1897), marked a departure from the conventions of the historical romance. In the former the protagonist is not a courageous officer but a common soldier with commonplace weaknesses. This soldier does not have inborn courage, is afraid in battle, and later becomes brave. As Eric Solomon says,

By the time American novelists began writing about the Civil War, a European tradition of irony and realism, and a motif of the development, through war, from innocence to maturity, had been established through the war fiction of De Vigny, Stendhal, Zola, and Tolstoy. For the most part, however, American war fiction was hardly realistic.³

The realistic war novel established a new plot convention, according to which the protagonist is transformed in the crucible of war and goes from innocence to maturity, from cowardice to courage, from inexperience to manhood, from ignorance to enlightenment⁴. This became the interpretive convention with which most contemporary reviewers, and presumably the readers they wrote for, approached the text of *The Red Badge of Courage*. They read it as a realistic war novel in the tradition of Tolstoy, perhaps unique in its psychological accuracy and its impressionistic technique, but completely traditional in its use of the convention of initiation and growth in the protagonist. The same pattern was read into the novel by Eric Solomon and many other critics, who either ignored Crane's irony altogether or read the first half of the book as an ironic portrayal of Henry and the second half as a realistic presentation. I should state at this point that I place myself on the side of those who contend that the novel is ironic from beginning to end, that it rejects both the conventions of the historical romance and the convention of initiation and change, and that Henry Fleming experiences no growth, no substantial movement from innocence to maturity. I will obviously discuss this question in detail later in this essay.

That *The Red Badge of Courage* is a war novel is undeniable, but it is an anomalous and unconventional war novel in many ways. It is certainly paradoxical that the novel that continues to be *the* classic American Civil War novel says very little about that war. Crane, who had not even been born when the war ended, left

historical, political, and ideological questions out of his novel in a period when American historians were looking back on the Civil War as the decisive moment in the nation's "coming of age", as the event that shaped America in numerous and profound ways. By apparently excluding from his book moral and ideological questions such as the abolition of slavery and the union of the country as well as principles that gave configuration to a nation, Crane was threatening and "assaulting" both the American essence and the American character. No wonder then that in April 1896 General Alexander McClurg wrote a letter to the *Chicago Dial*, owned by his own publishing firm, saying that "the look is a vicious satire upon American soldiers and American armies. The hero of the book (if such he can be called — 'the youth' the author styles him) is an ignorant and stupid country lad... without a spark of patriotic feeling, or even of soldierly ambition..." The General complains that "there is absolutely no story" in the whole book and that the protagonist "is throughout an idiot or a maniac, and betrays no trace of the reasoning being. No thrill of patriotic devotion to cause or country ever moves his breast and not even an emotion of manly courage." General McClurg is enraged because "nowhere are seen the quiet, manly, self-respecting, and patriotic men, influenced by the highest sense of duty, who in reality fought our battles" and, since the book "is the work of a young man", he is convinced that "so of course (it) must be a mere work of diseased imagination."⁵

Crane was neither interested in an apology for the virtues traditionally included in war novels —the ones the General missed so badly— nor did he intend his book to be an explicit denunciation of the excesses of war. Crane did not feel the appeal of a war that historians would deal with to find continuity and significance. What he put into his novel was a series of discontinuous events in which the main —and the reader— can never find a coherent significance. Henry Fleming can never achieve a comprehensive reading of the many scenes that leave marks on his memory. What Crane is interested in is the dramatization of what people perceive and feel when involved in the dangers of war. In his fictional world the senses perceive smell, colour, and shape, fragmented impressions which make it extremely difficult to assign meaning to the whole. The events of Crane's Civil War are not framed by an ideological context; the battles, the officers and the soldiers have no names, and the enemy is almost never seen. The author's purpose was to give us a sense of the direct experience of war, and he knew that soldiers immersed in the fray of battle are not guided by the will; he knew that the preoccupations that fill their minds are not political or ideological, but instinctive strategies to secure survival. Once he decided to write a best-selling war novel that would put an end to his poverty, Crane turned for materials to the first-person accounts in *Century Magazine's* once-popular series on "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War". But he soon became so bored by what were lifeless chronicles of facts, numbers, and names that he exclaimed: "I wonder that *some* of these fellows don't tell how they *felt* in those scraps!"; "They spout eternally of what they *did*, but they are as emotionless as rocks!"⁶ When Crane was

in Cuba covering the Spanish-American War for a newspaper, he said to a fellow correspondent: "The interesting thing is the mental attitude of the men."⁷ Crane wrote a popular war novel, but he wrote it in his own way, in the free indirect speech that reveals impressions firsthand, that allows for the direct dramatization of the protagonist's experiences, instead of a neutral description of events. The mind of Henry Fleming is like a stage in front of which the reader is admitted to see the drama of war, the drama that history books never tell.

It is nowadays a well-known fact that the interpretive work of readers and critics plays a central role in literary history. The history of a given literary work is the history of what Ingarden calls its "concretizations", that is, the different realizations which result from individual readings of the text throughout history. As Jauss says, "a literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue."⁸ Jauss rejects the idea "that literature is timelessly present and that it has objective meaning, determined once and for all and directly open to the interpreter at any time."⁹ Different "concretizations" are made possible by that fundamental openness of literary texts which provides the basis for the concept and the complex process of reception. Traditional literary history has paid little attention to the active role played by interpretive conventions in evaluation and interpretation during different historical periods, forgetting that it is the interpretive activity that to a considerable extent produces meaning and value.

Most critical interpretations of *The Red Badge of Courage* focus on two genre conventions and the use Crane made of them: the growth or change of the protagonist and the attitude of the narrator towards his characters. One problem in particular which has occupied almost all critics is the narrator's relationship to Henry Fleming at the end of the story. The question is whether Henry's conviction in the final chapter, that he has changed, is shared by the narrator, or if this change is undercut by irony, and Henry continues to delude himself as he has been doing throughout the novel.

The large number of critical opinions about *The Red Badge of Courage* can be divided roughly into four groups. The first would comprise those who conclude that the protagonist changes and grows in the course of the novel and that the narrator's attitude towards him moves from ironic undercutting to approval at the end. I will come back to this group later in this essay.

In the second group we find those who cannot make sense of the text because they see it as inconsistent and contradictory. Most critics in this group fail to see irony in the final paragraphs. Reading the penultimate sentence non-ironically ("He turned now with a lover's thirst to image of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks —an existence of soft and eternal peace"), John W. Shroeder says that "Crane seems to have forgotten everything that has gone before in his own book."¹⁰ James B. Colvert complains that "the problems raised in the story are not clearly defined or resolved. As a consequence the ending is confused and unconvincing".

This critic fails to read the ending ironically and believes that Crane was following the traditional genre convention of growth for the main character, which is why Colvert objects that “we are told that Henry Fleming is a changed man, but we are not told how he is supposed to have met the conditions implicitly required of him in the first sixteen chapters.”¹¹ The third group is constituted by those who, like Charles Child Walcutt, Jay Martin, Henry Binder, and Howard C. Horsford, conclude that the protagonist experiences no growth, that the narrator’s attitude towards Henry Fleming is consistently ironic to the very end, and that the book is, therefore, a study of man’s tendency to delude himself under any circumstances.¹² I will later demonstrate my alignment with this “minority group” which is nowadays becoming a majority by discussing some passages from the novel and by analysing Crane’s anti-romantic treatment of courage and heroism.

The fourth group is formed by those who take the middle road and consider that Crane intended the ending to be ambiguous and ambivalent, which means that Henry both learns and remains deluded. These critics would agree with John Berryman’s hypothesis that “probably [Crane] intended to have his cake and eat it too —irony to the end, but heroism too.”¹³ This hypothesis does not seem to be far-fetched if we consider that Crane intended to write a novel that would bring in money and go down well with his contemporaries, most of whom would presumably approach it with the assumption that the protagonist of a war novel changes from cowardice to heroism. The most influential of the critics who take the middle road is Stanley B. Greenfield, who, in his essay “The Unmistakable Stephen Crane” argues that this author expresses a view of life as an experience in which the individual can both learn and remain deluded, that at the end Henry has gained from his experience but he is nevertheless mistaken in his appreciation of what he has gained. According to Greenfield, Crane’s tone is characterized by a complex mixture of sympathetic identification and irony.¹⁴

The majority of critics of *The Red Badge of Courage* fall into the first category mentioned above. They interpret Crane’s text according to the traditional conventions of the nineteenth century realistic war novel and, therefore, see Henry Fleming as growing in the course of his war experience. The realistic war novel is a specific version of a very influential pattern, the pattern followed by widely famous novels of “education”, like *Tom Jones* or *Emma* or *Great Expectations*, which have created a powerful tradition that leads us to expect that protagonists will change and reach maturity and self-knowledge, even though there is no inherent necessity for these stories to end in resolution and initiation.

There is a wide range of critical opinions concerning the terms and the extent of Henry’s change and growth. For those critics who view *The Red Badge of Courage* as a war novel in the narrowest sense Henry grows from cowardice to courage; he changes from a cowardly civilian to a brave soldier. Most contemporary reviewers belonged to this group. Joseph Conrad, in his 1925 preface to the novel, talks about Crane’s “war book” and “the problem of courage”, and sees Henry as a

“symbol of all untried men.”¹⁵ Lars Ahnebrink spoke in 1950 of Henry’s “development into a real war hero” and about “the process of conquering fear” dealt with in the novel.¹⁶ Other critics in this group argue that Henry moves from illusion to enlightenment, from ignorance to (self-)knowledge. They see the protagonist as growing during the novel in his understanding of social and moral reality, as moving from self-centred isolation to group acceptance, loyalty and duty.¹⁷

The supposed change of Henry Fleming has also been interpreted in symbolic terms. John E. Hart reads the novel as a myth of initiation in which Fleming changes ritually his character in the confrontation with the dragon-gods of war; he dies symbolically to his selfish individuality and is reborn into the fellowship of men in the society of the regiment. Hart’s thesis is that “following the general pattern of myth with peculiar individual variations, Crane has shown how the moral and spiritual strength of the individual springs from the group, and how, through the identification of self with group, the individual can be ‘reborn in identity with the whole meaning of the universe’.”¹⁸ This argument has all the shortcomings of myth-criticism, a method which often becomes excessively monotonous because of its tendency to homogenize individual works by forcing on them the same theoretical straitjacket, the result being the damaging elimination from literature of that most precious element of surprise.¹⁹

The best-known and also the most controversial reading of *The Red Badge of Courage* is that of R. W. Stallman, who interprets Henry’s experience in religious terms, and interpretation that continues to go down well with students initiated into the exciting ritual of symbol-hunting. Stallman is one of those critics who, probably influenced by the Freudian distinction between the latent and the manifest content in dreams, consider the literal action of a novel as its apparent or surface meaning, and go in search of a deeper or hidden significance, of the “figure in the carpet” that constitutes the true meaning. Thus, Stallman holds that *The Red Badge of Courage* should not be read as a merely “realistic” novel, and that “beneath its surface drama lies a concealed meaning”, as “no work of art is what it appears to be.”²⁰ Back in the 1950s, Stallman considered that American literary historians were mistaken to say that Crane had written the first American realistic war novel or the first American ironic novel. According to Stallman, “the realistic detail [of Crane] is not realism for realism’s sake: it is used as basis for a symbol” (179).

Stallman picked up from a “perceptive” anonymous reviewer —significantly “unnoticed” for twenty-five years— who said in *The Spectator* (27 June 1896) that Henry Fleming’s encounter with the wounded men in chapter eight is his salvation, that “he got back with them to the body of the regiment [which is not true!], and the sight of his comrades, notably the heroic death of one of them, made a beginning of the end in his egoism.”²¹ For Stallman the dominant symbolism of the novel is religious and “the theme is that man’s salvation [in the fight of life] lies in change, in spiritual growth” (193). Since “man must lose his soul in order to save it”, Stallman finds the confirmation that “the youth develops into a veteran” in the following

sentence of the final chapter: "So it came to pass that as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath his soul changed." It is paradoxical that a critic so "perceptive", who reads hidden symbolic meaning, fails to notice Crane's parody of biblical language and his continuous ironic tone. Stallman reads the sentence as if it were a direct statement from the omniscient narrator, whereas I read it as focused on the point of view of Henry, an inconsistent moody soldier with a marked tendency to self-delusion and to distort reality.

Whereas most other critics say that the change in Henry takes place when he emerges from battle in the final chapters, Stallman situates the change earlier and maintains that Henry is already a new man when he returns to battle in the second half of the story. For Stallman, "Henry's generation is brought about by the death of Jim Conklin" and "there are unmistakable hints—in such descriptive details about him as his wound in the side, his torn body and his gory hand, and even the initials of his name, Jim Conklin—that he is intended to represent Jesus Christ" (199). But the most effective touch of Stallman's interpretation comes when he makes the image that closes chapter IX—"the red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer"—"the key to the symbolism of the whole novel" (199). "The heavens signify his [Conklin's] death—the red sun bleeds with the passion of his wounds" (199), and Stallman does not have any doubt that "Crane intended to suggest here the sacrificial death celebrated in communion" and that Henry, whose "spiritual rebirth" begins at this point, "partakes of the sacramental blood and body of Christ" (200).

No matter how ingenious Stallman's reading is, or was in the early 1950s, the truth seems to be that it simply does not fit the facts, it does not agree with the literal events of the plot, and it is just one more in a long line of forced readings which derive not from the facts in the story but from the assumptions and the clarity and fixity of the determining pattern in the critic's mind. It is often the case that the critic who searches for subtleties and hidden meanings neglects what the author was written plainly on the page.

Behind the interpretation of Stallman and of so many others who read a coherent line of character development and change there seems to be at work interpretive convention that heroes in realistic war novels grow and that outward heroism in battle is the indication of internal change and maturation. These critics are affected by the desire to recover the continuity, the integrity, the coherence and the significance that Henry cannot find in the muddle of events he goes through, by the desire to avoid the fragmentation and the lack of consistent univocal meaning that many readers of our time find in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Stallman and others read into the novel many of the virtues and concepts whose absence had filled General McClurg with indignation. If Crane had intended the death of Jim Conklin to be the cause of Henry's salvation, he would have written his novel differently. But in the story Crane wrote Henry does not return to his regiment out of his outrage at seeing his friend's death, nor does he realize that his desertion might have had something to do with Conklins's tragedy. As a matter of fact, deliberate moral choice



has nothing to do with Henry's going back to his regiment, as he is simply led there entirely passively, by the mysterious cheery man. In the story Crane wrote, soon after Jim Conklin's "sacrificial" death, Henry turns down the first opportunity offered him to "redeem" himself when he shamefully abandons the tattered soldier, who is badly in need of help and approaching death. In the story Crane wrote Henry lies to his fellow soldiers about his desertion from battle the day before, and he persists in making them believe that he got his wound by getting shot in battle. In the story Crane wrote Henry remains self-absorbed until the end of the story and he thinks of his dead comrade only once; he simply mentions Jim Conklin's death to Wilson in a very brief and unemotional way. Instead of beginning to redeem himself by taking example from the loud soldier who has become the humble soldier—which is what Stallman says the protagonist does—, Henry persists in his ridiculous arrogance and cynically rejoices in the possession of the letters Wilson had given him the previous day in a moment of weakness and panic.

In order to show the Henry Fleming I think Crane created in *The Red Badge of Courage* I would like to follow the protagonist into the forest in chapter VII, after he has run from combat, to go with him into battle in chapters 17-23, and finally to march with him away from the fray in the final chapter.

In chapter VII Henry goes alone into the depths of the forest, after he has escaped from battle and moments later learnt that his regiment has resisted the attack. The episode is a perfect example of the continuous movement going on in the protagonist's mind, of his vanity and inconsistency, of the pervasive unreliability of his contradictory ideas about himself, about his actions and about external reality. What the chapter proves is that Walcott is right when he says that Henry is throughout "an emotional puppet controlled by whatever sight he sees at the moment."²² After learning that the regiment has held the attack, Henry thinks of himself as betrayed and wronged by "the imbecile line" that "had remained and had become victors" (p. 57). Henry tries to justify himself by ludicrous self-praise and tells himself that "his actions had been sagacious things. They had been full of strategy" (p. 57), that "he, the enlightened man who looks afar in the dark, had fled because of his superior perception and knowledge" (p. 58). But, as usual, Henry's concern for self-justification becomes concern for what others are going to think of him: "He wondered what they would remark when later he appeared in camp. His mind heard howls of derision" (p. 58), which, ironically, never happens. Henry then succumbs to the pathetic fallacy and conceives of nature as a benevolent mother who condones and approves his escaping from battle:

This landscape gave him assurance. A fair field holding life. It was the religion of peace. It would die if its timid eyes were compelled to see blood. He conceived Nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy (p. 59).

When Henry sees the squirrel running to avoid the pine cone he has thrown, he feels triumphant in his conviction that "Nature had given him a sign" (p. 59) and is

assured “that Nature was of his mind” (p. 60) and approves of his escape in the face of danger. But, significantly, Henry fails to read any meaning in the episode which the proverbial ironist Stephen Crane immediately juxtaposes. In this scene Henry sees “out at some black water, a small animal pounce in and emerge directly with a gleaming fish” (p. 60). But “Mother Nature” holds still one more surprise for Henry after he reaches a place in which he imagines the trees to make a peaceful chapel to comfort him. In one of the most powerful scenes in the novel, Henry realizes that

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the grey skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip (pp. 60-61).

Mother Nature here blocks Henry’s attempt to have it endorse his cowardly behaviour and shows him that it sanctions both peace and war, that it seems to require death and decay for its fertility, that it inevitably assimilates man, as the colour green of the uniform that was blue seems to indicate. The ants running over the corpse manifest the processes of life are totally indifferent to human dignity. But in Crane’s works man always tries to conform indifferent nature to his internal moods, and makes it malevolent or benevolent according to the emotional needs of the moment. Everything Henry sees is given a meaning by his imagination and, thus, *The Red Badge of Courage* shows that there is no such thing as neutral perception or objective description of reality, that the means of perception of the observing subject define the essence of the object, that knowledge is a subjective construction of our minds, that human language does not respect the integrity of the objects it describes—in fact, it makes the branches of trees into a metaphorical—, and does not remember that a dead man simply does not see.

As we have seen, Crane’s unremitting irony is constantly undercutting Henry’s perceptions of himself and of external reality by making them appear blatantly ridiculous to the reader, and by the juxtaposition of mutually contradicting episodes. It would be illogical to expect a skeptical ironist like Crane to believe in abstractions and big words such as “altruism”, “courage” or “heroism”. I think that the book is about war and courage, but in it Crane shows that courage and heroism have nature very different from what people had traditionally thought. If Crane had intended to write a conventional story of heroism he would not have kept his hero anonymous for most of the novel, and he would not have chosen a protagonist who, from beginning to end, seems to be the most self-centered man in the regiment. In fact, the notion of courage is deflated even before Henry proves to be a “hero” in battle. And the end of chapter XV, after the incident in which he shamefully blackmails his

friend Wilson with the letters in order to avoid being questioned about his desertion, Henry

felt quite competent to return home and make the hearts of the people glow with stories of war. He could see himself in a room of warm tints telling tales to listeners (p. 112).

He pictures himself as the central figure of the impressive stories and imagines

the consternation and the ejaculations of his mother and the young lady at the seminary as they drank his recitals. Their vague feminine formula for beloved ones doing brave deeds on the field of battle without risk of life would be destroyed. (p. 112).

Part of the irony of this conception of the war hero resides in the fact that it is a man's view of the female view, which the text itself has already denied through the anti-romantic attitude of Henry's mother and his own disappointment at it. From the flashback scene with his mother Henry already knows that women do not hold that romantic vision of war and seems to forget that it was he himself who used to cherish that ideal notion.²³ But the irony does not end here, as Crane is implying that heroism is all a question of tales and stories; it is what people read and hear about ("heroes" are legendary and the meaning of the latin word *legenda* is "things to read"). The country lad that Henry is can become a hero —the same as the protagonists of classic epic poems and historical romances— but he becomes a hero when he is praised by his officers and his fellow soldiers, which means that in his case courage —like cowardice— is constituted by what others will think and say about him.

Ironically enough, Henry's red badge of courage, which gives the book its title, is a wound he receives after escaping from battle from a wonder soldier of his own army who does not want to be bothered with questions. And when Henry fights like a madman in the next battle he is not thinking about saving his country or anything of the kind. He does not even know why he fights so fiercely. He cannot control himself and is driven by rage and fury. Henry wants to avenge himself on an officer who has called the members of his regiment a bunch of "mule drivers" and "mud diggers", an officer who, as Henry has overheard, sends them into battle knowing that it is probable that they will all get massacred. The protagonist, who thinks of himself as the centre of the universe, takes the insult personally and adopts the infantile he-will-be-sorry attitude of the suicide when he pictures the sight of his dead body as a reproach to the eyes of the officer. This hero does not fight moved by any altruistic motive, only to avenge himself, to appease his conscience, and to maintain his self-respect among his fellow soldiers. Henry and his friends are moved mechanically by the shouts and insults of the officers. They fight like savages because they are angry at the repeated attacks of the enemy tribe, and they convert

their fear of death into hatred and aggressiveness. Courage and heroism are paradoxical and dubious in origin, and men in battle become demonic children when they lose consciousness of self and fight like animals moved by instinct. For a better understanding of Crane's psychology of courage, let us turn to a significant passage from chapter XIX:

But there was a frenzy made from this furious rush. The men, pitching forward insanely, had burst into cheerings, moblike and barbaric, but tuned in strange keys that can arouse the dullard and the stoic. It made a mad enthusiasm that, it seemed, would be incapable of checking itself before granite and brass. There was the delirium that encounters despair and death, and is heedless and blind to the odds. It is a temporary but sublime absence of selfishness. And because it was of this order was the reason, perhaps, why the youth wondered, afterwards, what reasons he could have had for being there (p. 133).

What the passage, I think, implicitly shows is that humans become heroes when they regress to the savage state, that the frame of mind required for heroic action is defined by the religious enthusiasm of the savage worshiper and warrior, that men immerse in battle lack the self-consciousness necessary to exercise their free will. Significantly, in the very next paragraph, when the regiment stops its advance for a while, the men "returned to caution" and, the narrator adds, "they were become men again". And if bravery is not volitional but instinctive, praise would be as irrelevant as condemnation of instinctive running from danger.

It is very paradoxical that Henry fights his fear of death precisely by exposing himself to the very thing he fears. To avoid the panic and the danger of destruction, he plunges into the destructive element of battle. The protagonist is now too frightened to be a coward. Crane said that he had intended his novel as a psychological study of fear, and fear is, paradoxically, the source of both cowardice and courage. The same panic and the same self-preservation instinct that make Henry "run like a rabbit" the first day of battle will make him fight "like a wild cat" the next day.

And the first and the second half of the novel are in opposition—the first deals with cowardice, the second with bravery—and, at the same time, they are similar in the sense that in both action is caused by instinct, by unwilling impulse. So courage and cowardice are deeply interrelated: they are simply opposite ways of dealing with panic, and the result is the subversion of the binary opposition courage/cowardice. What *The Red Badge of Courage* implies is that the creature we call "man" is considered a "superman" when he is most an animal, that the selfless behaviour of heroism has its source in the infantile and animalistic hatred that springs from selfishness and hurt pride. Crane hints that men become heroes because they do not want to appear as cowards, which means that selfishness is the source of both cowardice and courage. Both desertion and bravery depend on chance events, like

the sight of others escaping or the insult that comes at the right moment from the officer who happens to be nearby. Henry's heroism just happens to him, as "he was now what he called a hero. And he had not been aware of the process" (p. 124).

The central action of the novel concludes in chapter XXIII, and in the final chapter—chapter XIV—the protagonist evaluates his own experiences. This is the same method Crane used in some other works of his—a final scene in which one or several of the characters "interpret" the action by looking back. And this scene in which the characters make an apparently realistic after-the-fact assessment is usually pervaded by an intense dramatic irony. Crane handles the irony in a way that allows the reader to understand that the character's interpretation is presentious, subjective and limited or misconceived. In fact, one of the most characteristic tenets of Crane's view of life is man's tendency to misjudgement when he interprets himself and the world. And the Henry Fleming who in the final chapter evaluates his recent experiences succeeds in deluding himself and has succeeded in deluding many readers and critics, who apparently took for granted that Crane dropped his ironic treatment of the protagonist in the final chapter and confused Henry's viewpoint with the narrator's. I am of the persuasion that to interpret Henry's thoughts in the final paragraphs literally would be the equivalent or ignoring everything that comes before. As Walcutt says, "if there is any one point that has been made it is that Henry has never been able to evaluate his conduct."²⁴

Henry Fleming continues to be as concerned about his public image as ever and in "his procession of memory" he sees "his public deeds ... paraded in great and shining prominence" (p. 166). It is true that the gilded images of [his] memory" (p. 166) are clouded by the memory of his desertion of the tattered soldier, "yet gradually he mustered force to put the sin at a distance" (p. 168). Henry "knew that he would no more quail before his guides wherever they should point" (p. 169) but, as Horsford reminds us, "he has been similarly positive before when it served his need, notably when he fled: He *knew* the battle was lost, he *knew* it could be proven that all who did not flee were fools, he *knew* that any who advanced rather than retreated were as good as dead."²⁵ When Henry tries to put the horror of war at a distance with the offhand tautological remark that "he had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death" (p. 169), he seems to forget two of the most traumatic experiences he has gone through: the heart-rending death of Jim Conklin and the appalling sight of the corpse in the forest.

Henry is now convinced that "he was a man" (p. 169), but the conviction has already been undermined both earlier in the morning when he thought "he was still a man" because "he had performed his mistakes in the dark" (p. 110), and when he became a "man" by fighting like a savage and an animal. Significantly, the narrator has identified him as "the youth" throughout. Henry goes out of the novel as self-deluded as he has been all along; he thinks that "he had rid himself of the red sickness of battle" (p. 169), but the simple truth is that the war is far from over. As a matter of fact, in this final chapter we see the regiment going back to the river it had

crossed before the battle, as if they had fought for nothing and the whole thing might start again any moment. Thinking that he has earned some relief, Henry turns “with a lover’s thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace” (p. 169), but he sounds like another naive Huck Finn in the long American tradition of “lighting out for the territory”. Henry does not seem to know that one local battle does not end a war. And I am sure that the small battle I here conclude will not put an end to the fruitful critical war about that elusive something we call the “meaning” of *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Notes

- ¹ For a clear exposition and evaluation of Jauss’s theories, see Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 53-82.
- ² Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1960), pp. 1-2. All further citations of *The Red Badge* in the text refer to this edition.
- ³ Eric Solomon, *Stephen Crane: From Parody to Realism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1966), p. 69.
- ⁴ For my description of the conventions of the historical romance and the realistic war novel I am indebted to Steven Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Pr., 1982), pp. 162-64.
- ⁵ The quotations from General McClurg’s letter are taken from Richard M. Weatherford, ed. *Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1973), pp. 140-41.
- ⁶ C. K. Linsom, *My Stephen Crane*, ed. Edwin H. Cady (Syracuse Univ. Pr., 1958), p. 37. I took the quotations from Lee Clark Mitchell, ed. *New Essays on “The Red Badge of Courage”* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1986), p. 4.
- ⁷ Robert Wooster Stallman, “Introduction” to this edition *Stephen Crane: An Omnibus* (1952, rpt., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 187-88.
- ⁸ Hans Robert Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory”, *New Literary History*, 2 (Autumn 1970), p. 10.
- ⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 19.
- ¹⁰ John W. Shroeder, “Stephen Crane Embattled”, *University of Kansas City Review*, 17 (1950), pp. 123-28.
- ¹¹ James B. Colvert, “Stephen Crane’s Magic Mountain”, in Maurice Bassan, ed. *Stephen Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 95-96.
- ¹² Charles Child Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (1956, rpt., Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973); Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967); Henry Binder, “*The Red Badge of Courage* Nobody Knows”, *Studies in the Novel*, 10 (Spring 1978), pp. 9-47; Howard C. Horsford, “He Was a Man”, in Lee Clark Mitchell, ed. *New Essays*, pp. 109-27.
- ¹³ John Berryman, “Stephen Crane: *The Red Badge of Courage*”, in Wallace Stegner, ed. *The American Novel: From James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), pp. 86-96.
- ¹⁴ Stanley B. Greenfield, “The Unmistakable Stephen Crane”, *PMLA*, 73 (December 1958), pp. 562-72.
- ¹⁵ Joseph Conrad, “His War Book”, a preface to Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (London: Heinemann, 1925), pp. v-xii.
- ¹⁶ Lars Ahnebrink, *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction, 1891-1903* (1950, rpt., New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), p. 351.

- ¹⁷ James B. Colvert, "Structure and Theme in Stephen Crane's Fiction", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 5 (Autumn 1959), pp. 199-208; Eric Solomon, "The Structure of *The Red Badge of Courage*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 5 (Autumn 1959), pp. 220-34, and *Stephen Crane: From Parody to Realism*, pp. 82, 87, 89; John Fraser, "Crime and Forgiveness: *The Red Badge* in Time of War", *Criticism*, 9 (Summer 1967), pp. 243-56; Marston LaFrance, *A Reading of Stephen Crane* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).
- ¹⁸ John E. Hart, "*The Red Badge of Courage* as Myth and Symbol", *University of Kansas City Review*, 19 (Summer 1953), pp. 249-56. My quotation from the essay is taken from Sculley Bradley et al., eds. *A Norton Critical Edition of "The Red Badge of Courage"*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 214.
- ¹⁹ William Righter, in a critique of the excesses of myth criticism, observes that this practice is largely an American phenomenon, due to the favourable climate provided by the overtly symbolic and allegoric mode of much nineteenth-century American literature. See W. Righter, "Myth and Interpretation", *New Literary History*, 3 (Winter 1972), pp. 319-44.
- ²⁰ R. W. Stallman, "Introduction" to his edition *Stephen Crane: An Omnibus* (1952, rpt., New York: Knopf, 1961), pp. 175-76. All further citations of Stallman's analysis will be from this edition; page numbers will be indicated parenthetically in my text.
- ²¹ The unsigned review is reprinted in Richard M. Weatherford, ed. *Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 130-32.
- ²² Charles C. Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism*, p. 79.
- ²³ See Christine Brooke-Rose, "Ill Logics of Irony", in Lee Clark Mitchell, ed. *New Essays*, pp. 132-33.
- ²⁴ Charles C. Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism*, p. 81.
- ²⁵ Howard C. Horsford, "He Was a Man", p. 126.