

## THE MEANING OF HENRY FLEMING'S INITIATION IN THE COMPLETE *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*

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This study is an interpretation of the complete text of Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. The 1895 Appleton edition, on which all studies of the work and its protagonist have been based until recently, is complete. The cuts made in this published rendition of the manuscript fill the Appleton edition with ambiguities of meaning and development; indeed, it differs so from Crane's text that we can speak of two different novels. Here, I shall center my attention on an analysis of the novel's protagonist: Henry Fleming.

*The Red Badge of Courage* is a novel of initiation which departs from tradition in several fundamental ways. First, there is no growth in its hero from cowardice to courage, from innocence to positive manhood. Secondly, Crane's character lacks the moral qualities of the traditional hero of this type of novel. While Henry is a romantic rebel, the universe viewed through his eyes is naturalistic. This blend is peculiar to Crane's brand of naturalism, and it is only fully comprehensible and intellectually coherent when the text includes chapter XII, deleted from the Appleton edition of the work.

Henry is confronted by the problems of individual courage and group membership. His wound, in his mind, becomes the proof of valor that will insure his acceptance. Thus, he allows the consequences of a minor blow to be interpreted by all as the results of a bullet. As far as his fellows are concerned, Henry has lived according to the code, he is a hero. By the beginning of the crucial chapter XVI, Henry has evolved a conclusion that permits him to function as a fully accepted member of the community: obligations can be avoided, moral retribution is "laggard and blind" and, as long as sins are kept in the dark, he will "be a man." In reality, his shortcomings, that he ran from battle and abandoned a comrade to his death, no longer pose moral/ethical dilemmas for Henry. With his view of human existence, he seems himself as one of the chosen in the Darwinian universe. He will leave rebellion to the downtrodden. The universal scheme of things, as he sees it, is fine.

Although the protagonist does show moments of valor in latter battles, the novel presents courage as nothing more than a naturalistic response by the

individual to imposed circumstances. Henry, the survivor and hero, rationalizes his earlier rebellious conduct as part of his growing up, and his moments of shame as positive factors that will protect him from his ripe ego. Henry's formula for acceptance in society is a bleak one: commit your sins in the dark and parade your shining deeds under the sun. The protagonist is amoral. He manifests no positive growth, and that is what makes *The Red Badge of Courage*, in its integral form, anything but a traditional novel of initiation.

*The Red Badge of Courage*, generally acknowledged as an American classic, has received, since its publication in 1895, a great deal of critical attention. Acclaimed as the first great American war novel, its influence can be detected and has been traced in many subsequent works of that subgenre, in writers as different and distant in time as Dos Passos, Hemingway, James Jones and some writers of novels of the Vietnam War. The theme of the novel, the question of "what it is all about" had been discussed from the date of its publication to recent studies of the late seventies and early eighties. Plot, structure, style, technique and meaning have been studied through the years, also. And yet, even at this late date, the controversy surrounding the interpretation of *The Red Badge of Courage* is by no means closed. It is a controversy that has arisen from the fact that the novel published by Appleton in 1895 was not complete, and not until a fairly recent date have critics had access to what Crane really wrote. Because of cuts effected in the original manuscript, the novel was rendered ambiguous in its meaning, and this ambiguity gave rise to a number of different and often contradictory critical interpretations of the work.

It is not my purpose to give a detailed textual history of *The Red Badge of Courage*, a task exhaustively performed by at least two prominent scholars.<sup>1</sup> But it must be pointed out that the cuts inflicted on the original version of the novel are so important that we may safely say that in dealing with the two texts we are speaking of two different literary works. I will therefore limit myself to an interpretation of the novel as it was originally written, centering on the character of its controversial protagonist. The text to which all references will be made is Henry Binder's edition which follows the manuscript kept in the Barret Collection of the University of Virginia Library, and which includes the original chapter XII of Crane's work, deleted from the Appleton version, and all the subsequent cuts inflicted on the original text. Thus *The Red Badge of Courage* has twenty-five chapters instead of the twenty-four that appeared in the 1895 Appleton edition and in all later printings of the novel.<sup>2</sup> Most of the passages cut, and all of the original and the later deleted chapter XII consist of interior monologues which give us a unique insight into Henry Fleming's mind and psychology. It is through the deleted passages that the novel attains its final, clear meaning since it is through them that we know the workings of Henry's mind. In them the youth's thoughts are fully expressed, as are his doubts, his tendency to self pity, and his disillusions and rebellions. From the structural point of view, the originally deleted parts of the work effectively give balance to the battle scenes, establishing a perfect equilibrium between the two levels of the story. The until recently obscure and controversial ending of *The Red Badge of Courage* becomes in its complete version the logical



conclusion to what Crane was expressing in the previous chapters, clear in meaning and perfectly consistent in the revelation of the meaning of the novel.

Referring to the cuts, Binder, rightly I think, concludes that those passages in which Fleming questions cosmic justice may have struck the Appleton editor as unacceptable.<sup>3</sup> Levenson takes the opposite view. He maintains that "Crane might never have parted with passages in which he had spent so much of himself if he had not, since the early months of 1894, been writing poems which conveyed, far better, the ironic posturings of man as he sets himself against the arrayed forces of the universe".<sup>4</sup> It seems more logical to assume the opposite, that Crane obviously preoccupied at this time with certain issues, present both in the poems and the novel, would be dealing with them in both works and would be reluctant to voluntarily change either. We know that he had problems with the publication of the poems in their original form,<sup>5</sup> and it is more than possible, as Binder argues, that he made the cuts in *The Red Badge of Courage* because of editorial pressures. Crane said that in the poems he aimed "to give (his) ideas of life as a whole",<sup>6</sup> and the complete version of the novel is much more consistent with the views of human existence as presented in the poetry.

*The Red Badge of Courage* is a realistic war novel, part of that tradition inaugurated by Tolstoy's *Sebastopol* (1854-1855), which has at its center not the heroic actions of gallant officers drawn in epic proportions, but the strugglings of a fallible antihero, the until then unsung soldier. Where Crane departs from this tradition is in the fact that the convention of the realistic war novel establishes as its plot the growth of the youth from cowardice and inexperience to courage and manhood, that is, the young hero achieves a positive maturity. Battle is the test from which the hero emerges into serene manhood and his courage is a manifestation of a positive moral growth. Although this is the reading traditionally given to *The Red Badge of Courage*, many critics, due to ambiguity of the Appleton text, have not seen the question as clear cut.<sup>7</sup> And it is a reading which is not sustained by the text of the original version of the novel. Binder, in his examination of this text, departs from previous criticism and affirms that "Crane wrote an ironic story in which the central character does not undergo any positive growth",<sup>8</sup> a statement with which I partially agree, but that I hope to qualify.

*The Red Badge of Courage* is a story of initiation. We may take as working definition the one Ihab Hassan gives of what initiation is. He defines it "...as the first existential ordeal, crisis or encounter with experience in the life of a youth. Its ideal aim is knowledge, recognition and confirmation in the world to which the actions of the initiate, however painful, must tend. It is, quite simply, the viable mode of confronting adult realities."<sup>9</sup> A story of initiation will therefore give us not only the psychological development of the youth who undergoes the experience, but also the view of life as he (and presumably the author) views, since the end outcome of the test is to find a viable mode in which to confront such reality. These are precisely the questions *The Red Badge of Courage* deals with and in the version of the novel we are examining they are clearly and explicitly explored, leaving no doubt as to the final meaning of the text.

*The Red Badge of Courage* moves on two levels: the actual battle of Chancellorsville, Henry Fleming's testing ground, which is paralleled by the upheavals taking place in the youth's mind. We must remember that the original title of the novel was *Henry Fleming: His Various Battles*, a title which suggests the double plane of conflict portrayed in the book. Furthermore, the construction of the novel is based on a play of contrasts that take place at the two levels of the story.<sup>10</sup> Just as in the physical war scenes of movement and upheaval, of battle and deafening noise alternate with brief tableaux of claim and silence, in the struggle taking place in Henry's mind the youth alternates between hope and despair, doubts and self-assurance. Since what we see in the novel is a projection of Henry's mind, a transcription of his apprehension of reality, and since that mind is in a state of flux and turmoil, that is the vision we receive of the world surrounding the protagonist. It is not only, as Ahnebrink maintains, that Tolstoy and Crane saw war as something illogical, as a situation in which "things happen because incomprehensible forces were at work."<sup>11</sup> It is also that, with the complete, original text before us, the picture of war is given from the inside. Here, war is not only the ideal metaphor, but also the outward manifestation, the mirror/parallel of the battle taking place in Henry's mind. And, it is a mind which holds a naturalistic approach to life, seeing it in terms of illogical, uncontrollable events in which man is helplessly trapped. *The Red Badge of Courage* becomes thus, and even more so in its original form, a sustained examination of conflict through contrast in a single character.

The play of contrasts on which the novel is built, appears from the very first chapter. In the lovely opening scene the army and the world wake up and soon all is hustle and bustle. Conflicting rumors as to the likelihood of going into battle begin to circulate, and in the midst of this bubbling cauldron of gossip, the "youthful private" retires to his tent to mull over his thoughts. The pattern movement/stillness, comradeship/isolation is thus established and we are given the first insight into Henry's mind. He is presented through his thoughts as the familiar, romantic youth who pictures war as a heroic struggle in which glorious deeds take place, a picture which will be shattered by the grim reality of armed conflict. Crane is here setting another pattern so often present in his works, that of the contrast between truth and illusion. Things are seldom what they seem to be; self delusion, at all levels, is rampant in many of Crane's characters and the result is a superb irony. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, the early images present Henry as a loner, a self involved youth much given to mental ruminations centered on himself.

One further contrast is presented by the image of the down to earth mother who with her sensible remarks intrudes into Fleming's romantic dreams. She gives us a hint as to her son's rebellious, egoistical nature when she advises him: "Yer jest one little feller mongst a hull lot of others an' yeh've got t'keep quiet and do what they tell yeh. I know how you are, Henry." (p. 4) Binder has said that Henry "never accepts the real source of his frustration, his own insignificance to nature."<sup>12</sup> And, on the other plane on which the narrative develops, he will not accept his insignificance within the army either.

The real problem confronting Fleming now is that of courage, of whether he will fight well or run from battle. In a conventional novel of initiation, his behaviour in the battlefield should ultimately become the outward sign of his moral stature. But this is no simple novel of initiation because, although Henry recognizes that "as far as war was concerned, he knew nothing of himself," (p. 7) he is also a youth who had never "(challenged) his belief in ultimate success" nor "(bothered) about means and roads." In the basic picture Crane is drawing of Fleming there is more than a suggestion of egotism, self doubt and lack of ethical considerations. At this point Henry rightly realizes that he is "an unknown quantity" (p. 7). Of course, he knows nothing of himself not only as far as war, but also as far as life is concerned.

In the following chapter, viewing the situation from a naturalistic point of view, Henry is convinced that only the actual test, likened to a chemical experiment, will give him the answer he is seeking. Annoyed at the postponement of the battle, his arrogance flares up. He is furious with the general because "It was unendurable the way these affairs were managed" (p. 9). He will find out later, of course, that it is he, Henry Fleming, who knows better. Now, Feeling utterly lonely and sorry for himself, he lies on the grass and "...the whole mood of the darkness, he thought, was one of sympathy for himself in his distress" (p. 13). Constantly projecting his feelings onto his surroundings, he now finds a loving, sympathetic soul in the enveloping night. But, two pages on in the test, at a moment when fear has taken control of him, he regards nature as threatening. If at one moment, at the end of chapter one, a conversation with John Conklin, who admits he might also run from battle, convinces Henry that he is like everyone else, and reassures him, a later chat with the loud soldier makes him see himself as unique, as "a mental outcast", the only one to have problems.

Through these early chapters of the novel Crane is weaving and unweaving the threads that make up Henry's personality, paving the way for the manner in which he will later behave. He appears as an insecure but at the same time arrogant young man, who, convinced of his own uniqueness, believes the officers to be fools and feels that he must "harangue his comrades" (p. 18). At the same time that his sense of uniqueness makes him despise not only the officers but also his own, to his mind, mistaken comrades, he yearns to be like everybody else. It all amounts to a mixture of egotism and self delusion. What Henry does is to find justification for everything (his doubts, fears and egotism) in something or somebody outside himself. It is basically a naturalistic outlook, as are naturalistic Henry's mental waverings according to the circumstances of the moment. But in his arrogance, and later in his rebellion, Henry Fleming is also a romantic. Peter Jones has accurately noted how *The Red Badge of Courage* blends "a romantic protagonist with naturalistic action"<sup>13</sup> a seemingly impossible mixture, made possible in this novel. This possibility is rooted in the fact that as Pizer has noted, American naturalism differs from its European counterpart in that, being free from the worst of the extremes of determinism, it endows its characters with emotions and the possibility of survival or defeat.<sup>14</sup> It is within this American form of naturalism that Crane

must be viewed, keeping in mind Walcott's assertion that his works contain many non-naturalistic elements, but are nevertheless entirely consistent and coherent with the basic tenets of naturalism.<sup>15</sup>

It is with this naturalistic outlook that Crane's protagonist sees himself as the victim of outside, uncontrollable forces and, terrified of the impending battle, believes "that he had never wished to go to war. He had not enlisted of his own free will..." (p. 17) The image of the regiment which the youth sees as an inclosing "moving box" is also naturalistic, and this mood is carried on through the battle in chapter V, where Henry becomes "not a man, but a member" and his task is the furious, thoughtless act of mechanically shooting. Here Crane introduces another significant element, the image of men drawn into battle, being carried away by circumstances and behaving irrationally, almost unaware of what they are doing. Henry will later, on two different occasions, behave in battle in a similar manner. Thus, courage becomes not the outward manifestation of a moral attitude, but the basic, naturalistic answer to circumstances.

In chapter VI, the youth, basking in the warmth of his admirable behaviour during the preceding events, is pleased with himself. Following a pattern that remains constant through the novel, Henry's view of himself and of the universe depends entirely on circumstances. He is incapable of objective detachment and, in true naturalistic fashion, incapable of finding his own self, varies with the events of the movement of the plot.

Later, Henry flees from battle when he is convinced that the regiment will be defeated. When he turns out to have been wrong, and realizes that he is a coward, he immediately, rather than recognize his mistake, tries to find something, or somebody to blame. At first the target of his fury is his comrades who put him in the wrong "by their lack of sense in holding the position, when intelligent deliberation could have convinced them that it was impossible." (p. 35). He then characteristically rebels against "his fellows, war in the abstract and fate." (p. 35). Dejected he walks into the forest where he soon finds in nature the assurance he seeks and in the flight of the squirrel running at the thrust of a pine cone, justification of his own flight. Reality, however, intrudes in the form of the corpses covered with ants. Jolted into awareness by the awful vision, Henry understands that "all life (exists) upon death, eating ravenously, stuffing itself with the hopes of the dead" (p. 38). The vision is Darwinian and set as it is in the cathedral-like peace of the forest, underlines the contrast, so dear to Crane, between appearance and reality.

Continuing with the already established pattern of contrasts on which the novel is built, the stillness of the forest is suddenly broken by the roar of battle. Spurred by curiosity, Henry runs towards the noise and, after stumbling over a field covered with corpses, encounters a grim column of wounded soldiers. In this and the next chapter (VIII and IX) Fleming briefly attempts to rejoin society but it will prove to be but a short interval before he returns to his former insolation. He now merges with the column of wounded soldiers, where one of them, the tattered man, assuming that Henry is one of the casualties, questions him as to where he

was hit. The youth, terrified that his flight from battle will be discovered, runs away from the questioning man and rejoins the column further down the road. There, "amid wounds", he feels like an outsider and he envies the injured men. In his desire to belong "he wishes that he, too, had a wound, a little red badge of courage" (p. 42).

Chapter IX describes the terrible scene of the death of Jim Conklin, whom Fleming discovers when he rejoins the column of wounded men. The tattered man is again at their side and, much to Henry's horror, is also on the verge of death. It is now that Henry will commit the second and greater of his sins, driven by his infinite egotism. The tattered soldier, in spite of his sufferings, is still concerned about the youth and again asks him where he was hit. Fleming's reactions to the man's questions is one of fury and ignoring his friend's pleas for help, he abandons him to his death concerned only with concealing his cowardice and his flight from battle. Totally unconcerned with the plight of his friend, he sees himself as "an innocent victim", the victim of fate, and his only preoccupation is that his cowardice might eventually be discovered by a society that "probes pitilessly at secrets until all is apparent" (p. 48). True to his character, Henry tries again to find justification for his acts and he sees himself on the one hand as the naturalistic victim of fate and on the other, as the romantic, unique being who alone in his powers of perception is aware of how nature, the usual culprit, snares unknowing men to their death with dreams of glory.

Henry then has again withdrawn from society and for the next two chapters, XI and the deleted XII, he will remain physically and psychologically isolated, although as it will be seen, the novel moves on smoothly to Fleming's return to society in chapter XIII.

The two thoughts that at this point are uppermost in the youth's mind are his desire to be proved right in his flight from battle and his equally strong desire to belong, to be like the others. Spying a column of marching men, he is elated at the thought that they are retreating and that he was after all wise in fleeing from a hopeless situation. But, seconds later, he is dejected when he realizes that they are going to the front and he is again filled with envy for those men who are part of society: "He felt that he was regarding a procession of chosen beings. The separation was as great to him as if they had marched with weapons of flame and banners of light" (p. 50). But rather than join them he finds all sorts of excuses not to do so and, as usual, he searches for something, somebody, to blame for his pitiful situation. He still hopes for a possible defeat of the army in which case somebody, possibly a general, would be blamed. He would be exonerated and although "It would be very unfortunate..., in this case a general was of no consequence to the youth" (p. 52).

What is interesting in chapter XI is, in the first place, that the question of real courage has been gradually superseded in the youth's mind by his efforts to find justification for his acts and above all by his desire to belong. In the second place, it is important to note that at this point in the novel, although Fleming is obsessed with deflecting blame from himself, he still desperately needs a moral vindication.

On page 53 we are told that “without salve he could not, he thought, wear the sore badge of his dishonor through life. With his heart continually assuring him that he was despicable, he could not exist without making it, through his actions, apparent to all men. “That is, at this point Henry Fleming still yearns for a moral vindication that will assure him of an accomodation between his moral stature and his behaviour and will therefore give him the right to belong.

A subtle change begins to take place in the protagonist at the end of the chapter XI that will become more evident in chapter XII, and fully clear in chapter XVI. Fleming now begins to hesitatingly consider the possibility of inventing “a tale” to cover his sins.

It is the original chapter XII that is most revealing of Fleming’s psychological make up, in his mixture of naturalism and, as it turns out, false romanticism. Chapter XII explains and clarifies Henry’s later position and actions. Without it, much of what follows in the novel remains obscure and unexplained. This chapter marks the end of smooth transition to intermediate chapters XIII, XIV and XV that in turn lead to the pivotal chapter XVI, and to what is in effect the second part of the novel. In chapter XII the seeds to Henry’s subsequent behaviour are subtly planted. Henry, convinced of his own uniqueness, considers that “laws that might be just to ordinary men, were, when applied to him, peculiar and galling outrages” (p. 54). He recognizes the existence of powerful laws that control the universe and his own insignificance within it, but he begins to conceive of the situation as a magnificent struggle in which he is pitted —and expected to fight— against the arrayed forces of the universe. Thus, in a mixture of naturalism and romanticism “he saw that he was a speck, raising his minute arms against all posible forces and fates which are swelling upon him in black tempest” (p. 54). The universe appears as ruled by a superior law life as an unending contest in which a terrible war must take place: “Nature fought for her system, individuals fought for their liberty to breathe” (p. 54). The existence of a naturalistic universe is never doubted by Crane’s protagonist, but it does not imply that man must submit to its rules without fighting. What is more, Henry is convinced that “nature did not expect submission. On the contrary, it was his business to kick and bite and give blows a strippling in the hands of a murderer” (p. 55).

The image of the struggling, tiny men fighting against powerful forces appears frequently in the poems Crane was writing about this time. What lies behind it is a naturalistic view of the universe which does not deny the right and the obligation of the individual to fight and rebel. The difference is that in the novel Fleming’s belief in his obligation to contest fate is not the result of a purely romantic, idealistic creed of individual freedom. In chapter XII of *The Red Badge of Courage* Fleming uses the argument as a proof of his right to survive and therefore to flee from battle. In this way, his flight “was not a fault, a shameful thing; it was an act obedient to a law” (p. 55).

In this egotistical mood he sees himself as “the growing prophet of a world reconstruction” (p. 55) bent on teaching the world and changing all mistaken traditions and beliefs —changing everything, except himself. Significantly Fleming

decides that in this personal crusade "there were many personal advantages" (p. 55). But soon he falls, in his thoughts, from his pinnacle of romantic glory and decides that the world will never see things his way, and he might as well "abandon it to its devices" (p. 56). The problem of course is that then he will not be vindicated, so seeing himself "grinded beneath stone feet which he despises" (p. 56) he returns to his naturalistic approach to the universe and tries to find "the Great Responsibility" on which to blame his ills. Nature is once more the culprit and seeing himself as a romantic "unfit (who) did not come into the scheme of further life", Fleming views the universe as engaged in a Darwinian struggle, "a barbarous process, with affection for the man and the oak and no sympathy for the rabbit and the weed", a world in which he is "tossed like a pebble" (p. 56).

However, now, for the first time in the work, Henry will find a solution to the dilemma presented by his view of himself as a unique being, a romantic rebel trapped in what he sees as an all powerful naturalistic universe bent on destroying him. And so "admitting that he was powerless and at the will of law, he yet planned to escape; menaced by fatality, he schemed to avoid it" (p. 57). Henry is after all no romantic hero, except briefly and then only in his own eyes; he will not fight fate, but avoid it. A scene from his youth comes to his mind in which he hid from his searching playmates in a flour barrel, that way avoiding capture. He will now equally hide from fate.

The last paragraph in this revealing chapter begins in a misleading romantic tone. It is misleading only because we see the situation through Henry's eyes, and he is, of course, totally self-deluded. So we read: "There was in him a creed of freedom which no contemplation of inexorable law could destroy" (p. 57). The next sentence, however destroys the romantic tone of the preceding one and reveals the character of Henry's new found solution: "He saw himself living in watchfulness, frustrating the plans of the unchangeable, making of fate a fool." He had always, he thought of working (it) out..." (p. 57). Henry's view of the universe as ruled by fate remains naturalistic but all romantic rebellion has disappeared from his present attitude. In the solution he has found to come out of the alienating situation in which his previous actions had placed him, there is no intention of fighting circumstances. He will avoid fate rather than fight it, he will create "a secure spot where an all powerful stick will fail to bruise his life" (p. 57). In the context of the previous image of the hiding spot in the flour barrel, it is evident that his aim will be achieved through concealment—there of his physical self, later of his moral self. This will of course be made clear in the second part of the novel because as it turns out circumstances will work in Henry's favor and he will take full advantage of them.

It is therefore only under the light of the deleted chapter XII that Henry's subsequent actions make sense and become clear. Not forgetting of course the original ending of the novel, to which I will refer later. The novel in this, its complete version, moves smoothly along through its first part where circumstances are set in motion and Henry's moral dilemma is explained in full. Here also we find the beginnings of a solution to the second part of the work where his

transformation takes full shape. All this leads us to an end fully consistent with everything that comes before it. But there is one more side to Henry Fleming's complex personality, and there-in lies the clue to the final meaning of the complete version of *The Red Badge of Courage*. We are dealing with a novel of initiation in which the youthful protagonist must find a viable mode of fitting into the society around him. It has been pointed out before how Fleming, while convinced of his own uniqueness, at the same time yearns to be like everybody else. This is what we may call Henry's social side and it is connected to his worries as to his behaviour in society. The problem of courage is related to his behaviour in society. The problem of courage is related to his social view of himself in as much as courage is an outward (for Henry) way of behavior. At the beginning of the work, he is troubled that he might be the only one to run from battle, that is, that he might be the only one not to behave according to the code that the warlike frame of social circumstances demands. In chapter IX, contemplating the column of wounded soldiers, the initiated, Henry "wishes that he, too, had a wound, a little red badge of courage" (p. 42). It is significant that both a wound and a badge are visible signs. Courage, then, is not purely a moral issue, but a social question. The wound/badge becomes the pass with which Henry will form part of the group. It will allow him to belong to the group.

That this is the way in which Henry Fleming views the situation becomes even more evident in later chapters. When in chapter XIII the protagonist tries to stop a fleeing soldier and is hit with a rifle, he, without a qualm, accepts the help accorded to the wounded and in chapter XIV he explains to Willson that he was shot. He is taken care of by his companions and, without the slightest trace of remorse, Henry falls peacefully asleep. He has been accepted. He is socially one of the chosen because he has the outward sign of courage, the badge that shows that he lived up to the established code of conduct in a war context. Of course, and in this Henry departs from the traditional image of the hero, he has not the moral content to go with the outward sign of courage, a sign which he does not even deserve. But this is a fact that does not bother Henry, and it is a fact that is, of course, unknown to his fellow soldiers.

We have come now to what is the turning point of the novel. Up to this point, Fleming has appeared as a rather muddled young man, who moves in a naturalistic universe, but, in his youthful insecurity, sees himself as unique and as a rebel. The possession of the red badge of courage, of the outward sign of accepted behaviour, is going to change Henry. In this context, chapter XVI is a crucial one, establishing as it does a parallel with the final chapter of the novel and fully explaining the subtle change that, because of the events described in the three previous chapters, has taken place in the protagonist.

Henry has found security and self-assurance in the possession of the red badge of courage, but the existence of his previous faults is very much in his mind. It is their possible discovery by the other soldiers, rather than the fact of having committed them, that bothers Fleming. So, he derives further self confidence from the bundle of letters that Willson, in a moment of weakness, had given him. The



letters are a weapon he will use if too closely cross-examined about his whereabouts during the battle. The fact that he abandoned the tattered soldier to his death in chapter IX also haunts Henry but only because his shameful deed may be disclosed. Armed with the letters which he could always use to silence his accuser, in possession of the badge of courage, Henry feels that "He was master." An element of cynical deceit enters into his social side, of the image he can maintain to face other men. He arrives at a conclusion that is the key to the meaning of the complete version of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Henry concludes that "he had performed his mistake in the dark, so he was still a man" (p. 71). This cynical, unethical conclusion produces in Henry Fleming a sense of tranquility.

His panting agonies of the past he put out of his sight. The long tirades against nature he now believed to be foolish compositions born out of his condition... Let the unfortunate rail; the others may play marbles.

p. 71

Now that Henry sees himself as one of the "chosen of the Gods," one of the winners in his naturalistic world, everything is all right with the universal scheme. He considers himself a man of experience and that experience is translated into the knowledge of some very unpalatable things. Henry is not worried that other battles lay ahead of him because "he had been taught that many obligations of life were easily avoided... the lessons of yesterday were that retribution was laggard and blind" (p. 72). The two levels of the novel are united in this statement; in battle as in life, moral obligations are avoidable and of no consequence and moral justice is, at best, inefficient. At this point, Henry, in a conscious achievement of self-delusion, turns his faults of the past into virtues. He convinces himself that "he had fled with discretion and dignity." Crane maintains his ironic stance by simply, through the narrator, transcribing Henry's thoughts.

The new Fleming will not direct his scorn only against what he feels to be foolish, inefficient and unfair officers. His rebellion, his railings against fate and the uncontrollable forces of the universe are forgotten, since he is one of the chosen, one of the winners in this Darwinian scheme of things. Blind to the real virtues of the other soldiers, Fleming sees himself as one of them, and is in fact accepted as such. He becomes an active member of the regiment, a man of action rather than the previous man of thought. Henry's new self-assurance leads him to fight with pride and valour. In fact, Henry will become a war hero.

Do we then have, after all, a traditional story of initiation? Chapter XVI suggests that such is not really the case. The final key is, of course, the ending of the last chapter of the novel, made ambiguous in previous editions both by the innumerable deletions in earlier chapters of the novel, and by the elimination of all of chapter XII. At the conclusion of the complete version of the work, the protagonist, remembering his behaviour in the preceding battle, feels happy and "unregretful" because in that procession of memory "his public deeds were paraded in great and shining prominence. Those performances which had been

witnessed by his fellows, marched now in wide purple and gold, hiding various deflections” (p. 106). The significance of the quote lies of course in the visibility of Henry’s glorious deeds that help create his public and social image, hiding his true moral nature. The memory of his flight bothers Henry, but he coldly and consciously justifies it, as well as his previous railings against fate, as a necessary step in his growth to maturity. A reassuring thought that is only blighted by the memory of the wounded soldier he abandoned to his death. But again, as in chapter XVI, his main preoccupation is that the awful deed may be discovered by his comrades. The commission of the sin itself gives Henry no worry. In any case, he puts the experience to a positive use by rationalizing upon it. Fleming decides that the memory of the happening will help him check his egotism. He cynically concludes that this was “the best sentiment he could formulate under the circumstances and when it was combined with his success, or public deed, he knew that he was quite contented” (p. 108). Henry Fleming has found the formula to achieve that “knowledge, recognition and confirmation in the world” which Ihab Hassan speaks of in his definition of the process of initiation. Of course on moral problem bothers Henry because he is the real survivor in his naturalistic universe.

Fleming, in the full version of *The Red Badge of Courage*, has been developing consistently along certain lines that were present since the earliest chapters in the novel. Following the traditional lines of the novel of initiation, he has encountered his first existential ordeal, his first confrontation with experience from which he must emerge either alienated or an accepted member of the social order. To achieve the latter, Henry must find (again, in Hassan’s words) “the viable mode of confronting adult realities.” Henry has grown, but not positively so; he has found the formula to be accepted, and that formula implies a bleak, amoral view of reality. Fleming’s “initiation” really is achieved in chapter XVI, where he realizes the dichotomy between one’s moral self and one’s outward persona, where he becomes aware of the fact that as long as one’s mistakes are performed in the dark, the undeserved but visible badge is the sign of belonging.

Pizer argues that in *The Red Badge of Courage* “courage exists only relatively, by virtues of the men’s opinion.”<sup>16</sup> This is only partially true. Fleming’s first badge of courage was undeserved, but his behaviour in the final battle was, at one level, really valiant. What is important about this question, and it is here that Crane departs from tradition, is that Henry’s courage has nothing to do with moral qualities. Fleming is not a traditional hero, and what remains at the end of the novel is the dichotomy between his selfish, cowardly moral self and the public self of the youth who later fights bravely. In the dichotomy and in the fact that it is through his public image that Henry is viewed by his peers Crane’s superb and bitter irony.

Images of tranquility pervade the end of the final chapter of *The Red Badge of Courage*. But it is not because, as Binder believes, Henry wrongly thinks that war, both in the literal and the figurative sense, “is something behind him.”<sup>17</sup> It is obvious that the Civil War is not over and in fact the soldiers are marching on at

the end of the chapter. What are, however, over are Henry's self doubts, his spiritual war which he has fought and solved. Nor is he, as Binder insists, self deluded. Rather, Henry Fleming has consciously found a satisfying compromise between his inner and his public self, between public behaviour and his secret deeds. The protagonist emerges from his first encounter with experience in the belief that obligations can be avoided and the glorious public image preserved as long as sins are committed in the dark. Armed with that knowledge, Henry Fleming is ready for battle—and for life.

### Notes

1. See: Fredson Bowers, ed., *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1975), II. 183-203.
2. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, ed. Henry Binder (New York: Norton, 1982).
3. Binder, p. 12.
4. J.C. Levenson, Introduction, *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1975), II. p. LXXX.
5. Stephen Crane wrote to Copeland and Day: "In the first place, I should absolutely refuse to have my poems printed without many of those which you just absolutely mark "No." It seems to me that you cut all the ethical sense out of the book." September 9, 1984. In *Letters*, R.W. Stallman, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1949), pp. 39.40.
6. Stephen Crane to *De Mores's Family Magazine*, XXXII (May 1896), 399-400, in Joseph Kratz, ed., *The Complete Poems of Stephen Crane* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. XI.
7. Steven Mailloux, "'The Red Badge of Courage' and Interpretative Conventions: Critical Responses to a Maimed Text", *Studies in the Novel*, 10, n° 1 (1978), 48-64.
8. Binder, p. 9.
9. I. Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 41.
10. R.W. Stallman, Introduction, *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane (New York: Random House, 1951), pp. XXII-XXXVII.
11. Lars Ahnebrink, *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), p. 101.
12. Binder, p. 9.
13. Peter G. Jones, *War and the Novelist* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), pp. 5-6.
14. Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in 19th Century American Literature* (New York: Russell, 1976), pp. 13-14.
15. C. Child Walcutt, *American Naturalism: A Divided Stream* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 68.
16. Pizer, p. 29.
17. Binder, p. 31.