Insensibility in *The Red Badge of Courage*

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WHEN HENRY FLEMING, the youth of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, charges ahead of his comrades and fearlessly carries his flag into the very jaws of death, he seems to be a romantic hero rather than the protagonist of a naturalistic novel. But for Crane appearance was seldom reality. Bearing the symbol of his country's cause, Henry is unquestionably courageous, but the underlying causes of his deeds are neither noble nor humane. Throughout his life Crane deeply respected heroic action. His attitude was, as Daniel G. Hoffman has said, that it was "among the very few means man has of achieving magnificance";[1] nevertheless, he considered courage the product of a complex of nonrational drives. The difference between the external act of courage and the internal process that leads up to that act created for Crane one of the supreme ironies of life.

The Red Badge has frequently been read as the story of how a young soldier achieves some sort of spiritual salvation. One critic sees Henry Fleming's "growth toward moral maturity";[2] another, his "redemption" through "humility and loving-kindness."[3] His initiation has been called the successful search for "spiritual and psychological order," the discovery of a "vision of pattern."[4] Some readings emphasize Henry's new sense of brotherhood and call the book the story of a young man's developing awareness of social responsibility.[5] Such views as these offer more insight than may be indicated by a brief quotation and comment, but they also tend to obscure the central irony of the novel, that of the nature of courage, by making Henry Fleming as distinctive and as individually interesting a character as, say, Raskolnikov, Huckleberry Finn, or Isabel Archer. The young soldier whom Crane seldom calls by name is, as Alfred Kazin has suggested, Everyman—or at least every man who has the potentiality for courage.[6] The chief purpose of the novel is to objectify the nature of heroism through Henry Fleming. Through witnessing his actions and changing sensations we discover the emerging paradox of courage: human courage is by its nature subhuman; in order to be courageous, a man in time of physical strife must abandon the highest of his human facilities, reason and imagination, and act instinctively, even animalistically.[7]

[1]Daniel G. Hoffman, *The Poetry of Stephen Crane* (New York, 1957), p. 150.

[2]James B. Colvert, "Structure and Theme in Stephen Crane's Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 5 (Autumn 1959), 204.

[3]Robert Wooster Stallman, introduction to *The Red Badge of Courage*, Modern Library (New York, 1951), p. xxxii.

[4]Earle Labor, "Crane and Hemingway: Anatomy of Trauma," *Renascence*, 11 (Summer 1959), 195.

[5]John E. Hart, "*The Red Badge of Courage* as Myth and Symbol," *University of Kansas City Review*, 19 (Summer 1953), 249-56. See also M. Solomon, "Stephen Crane: A Critical Study," *Mainstream*, 9 (January 1956), 25-42.

[6]Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York, 1956), p. 50.

[7]Although the focus of his article is somewhat different from the present discussion, James Trammel Cox also states this central paradox of *The Red Badge:* ". . . the selfless behavior of heroism paradoxically emerges only from the grossest, most infantile, animalistic, fiery hatred born of the vanity of

(Footnote 7 continued on following page)

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In developing and illustrating this paradoxical definition of courage, Crane used a simple structural arrangement. The novel is divided into two parts of twelve chapters each. The first twelve chapters tell of Henry Fleming's early insecurities about himself; his first battle, where he fights and then runs; his various adventures during his retreat; and finally his encounter with the fleeing soldier and then his wound. Chapter 13 begins with Henry's coming back to his own camp to begin anew, and the remainder of the book takes the reader through the battles of the next day, in which Henry fights with great courage.

The first part of the book deals with the anatomy of cowardice, which is in Henry the result of an active imagination and a disposition to think too much. Until he receives the head wound in Chapter 12, he is characterized by a romantic and thoughtful self-consciousness. In his anxiety about how he will conduct himself in combat, he speculates constantly about himself and the nature of battle: "He tried to mathematically prove to himself that he would not run from a battle" (p. 30).[8] Trying to comfort himself through reason, he makes "ceaseless calculations" for days. Finally he has to admit that "he could not sit still and with a mental slate and pencil derive an answer" (p. 35). Henry's "own eternal debate" is frequently interrupted by the terrifying images of his imagination. In the darkness he sees "visions of a thousand-tongued fear that would babble at his back and cause him to flee" (p. 44). This constant activity of Henry's reason and imagination compels him to feel isolated until he experiences a vague sense of unity with his fellows during the first battle. Here he becomes suddenly caught up in the fight almost by accident. In contrast to his insensibility in later battles, "he strenuously tried to think," but he is luckily carried along by the momentary excitement of his comrades. The first encounter with the enemy is very brief, and his courage is not seriously tested. In the second engagement, his imagination is rampant: "He began to exaggerate the endurance, the skill, and the valour of those who were coming" (p. 73). He imagines the enemy as dragons and sees himself as being "gobbled." No longer feeling enclosed in the "moving box" of his first encounter and now stimulated by wild imaginings, Henry runs in terror from the battle.

In "The Veteran," a short story written as a sequel to *The Red Badge*, Henry, now an old man, reminisces about his war experience and tells how his imagination and his reliance on reason compelled him to run: "The trouble was . . . I thought they were all shooting at me. Yes, sir, I thought every man in the other army was aiming at me in particular, and only me. And it seemed so darned unreasonable, you know. I wanted to explain to 'em what an almighty good fellow I was, because I thought then they might quit all trying to hit me."[9]

After his retreat, he wanders behind the lines, still relying upon his reason and imagination, attempting to convince himself that he is the reasonable man, "the enlightened man," who "had fled because of his superior perceptions and knowledge" (p. 81). When he comes upon the group of wounded men, he is still debating his case. He then witnesses the death of his friend Jim Conklin. But even at this point he shows

Footnote 7, cont.—
egocentrism." "The Imagery of *The Red Badge of Courage*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 5 (Autumn 1959), 219. Hoffman suggests the paradox in his treatment of Crane's indebtedness to Tolstoi: introduction to *The Red Badge of Courage and Other Stories* (New York, 1957), p. xii.

[8]Page references are to *The Work of Stephen Crane*, ed. Wilson Follett (New York, 1925), I.

[9]*Work*, I, 204.

no significant change.[10] Shortly thereafter, his imagination still controls him as he magnifies "the dangers and horrors of the engagement" from which he fled (p. 104). Until he is wounded in Chapter 12, he is still rationalizing, still trying mathematically to prove to himself that his cowardice was "in truth a symmetrical act" (p. 104).

The episode in which Henry is struck by a retreating Union soldier occurs at the center of the novel both physically and thematically. The incident has frequently been called the ironic peak of the story. A Union soldier, not the enemy, gives Henry his wound, and unlike his comrades he is wounded with the butt of a gun, not with a bullet. Upon this highly ironic "red badge" Henry builds his courage. In addition to its function as irony, the wound serves as the chief symbol of the book. Significantly, the wound is inflicted on the *head*. Almost from the moment he is struck, Henry starts to set aside his fearful and potent imagination and his reason. Symbolically, the head wound is the damage the experience of war gives to these highest human faculties. The chaos of war teaches the necessity of insensibility. After the symbolic wound, Henry finds his way back to his regiment, and the last half of the book portrays a youth initiated into the ways of courage. From here on, Henry runs from himself; he escapes his essential humanity in order to avoid running in battle.

Henry's inner voices and visions, then, are obliterated by the head wound. Through one half of the story, his mind has been tried and found wanting. Henry's wound forces his attention to his physical being. The only voices now heard are those of the body. After he returns to camp, "he made vague plans to go off into the deeper darkness and hide, but they were all destroyed by the voices of exhaustion and pain from his body" (p. 120). When he awakes, "it seemed to him that he had been asleep for a thousand years, and he felt sure that he opened his eyes upon an unexpected world" (p. 127). The Henry Fleming who before looked into the future, saw imagined horrors, and speculated constantly about himself, now thinks little of the future: "He did not give a good deal of thought to these battles that lay directly before him. It was not essential that he should plan his ways in regard to them" (p. 136). He has become instinctively aware of a truth taught by intense experience, that man can and must cultivate a dullness which will serve as armor against the stings of fear and panic. The totality of Henry's war experience thus far has helped to show him that "retribution was a laggard and blind."

In contrast to the thoughtful and romantic boy of the first part of the book, the young warrior of the last twelve chapters is capable of unreason, even self-abandon. At the first sight of the enemy, he "forgot many personal matters and became greatly enraged" (p. 141). He becomes a prideful animal, seeking the throat of the enemy with self-forgetfulness. The feelings of the imaginative young soldier, who once thought of war as a glorious Greek-like struggle, now are constantly described in terms of bestiality, unreason, and even insanity. He "lost sense of everything but his hate" (p. 148). Suspending all thought, he fights as a "barbarian, a beast . . . a pagan" (p. 150). His actions are frequently described as "wild." He is "unconsciously" out in front of the other troops, looking "to be an insane soldier." "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" (p. 160). The selflessness implied here is not self-sacrifice

[10]For an opposite opinion, see Stallman, p. xxxiii.

but insensibility, which enables Henry to escape thoughts and suspend imagination, to get outside of himself while the emotions of rage and hatred control his actions. As he cultivates personal insensibility his mental position as an observer becomes more and more pronounced: "He was deeply absorbed as a spectator; . . . he did not know that he breathed" (pp. 184-5). Henry's self-abandon spreads to the others, who were "again grown suddenly wild with an enthusiasm of unselfishness" (p. 189). Henry is no longer aware of the personal element in the danger that he faces. Now he does not think of the enemy as attempting to kill him personally. He looks upon their bullets vaguely as "things that could prevent him from reaching the place of his endeavour" (p. 189). So separated from meditation and imagination is Henry that he finds it difficult after the battle to become himself again: "It took moments for it [his mind] to cast off its battleful ways and resume its accustomed course of thought. Gradually his brain emerged from the clogged clouds, and at last he was enabled to more closely comprehend himself and circumstances" (pp. 196-7).

Henry's change is thus the result of intensely dangerous experience which reveals to him intuitively the impersonal nature of the forces that defeat men. After glimpsing the powers of "strange, squalling upheavals" he is able to control his fear. This ability comes to men not through intellectual or spiritual processes but through habit in being exposed to violence. As Henry becomes more accustomed to battle and the sight of death, he no longer thinks about the implication of these overwhelming experiences. He sinks into a subhuman dullness and is thereby able to act courageously. He does not learn to know himself, as one critic asserts,[11] but to escape himself—to make his mind blank, to become a "spectator."

Otherwise, Henry remains essentially unchanged during the course of the novel. It is a mistake to think of him as having become rejuvenated through humility or in any way changed into a better person morally. He has simply adapted himself through experience to a new and dangerous environment.[12] When the last battle is over, he is the same prideful youth, bragging on himself as he reviews his deeds of valor. The Christian references, which have so frequently been a subject of controversy, do not point to "rebirth" or "salvation" for Henry. The pattern of religious imagery built up through the use of such words as "sacrifice," "hymn," and "cathedral" is part of the pervasive irony of the book.[13] Just as Henry is not "selfless" in the usual sense of the word, neither is he "saved" in the Christian sense. It is his body that is saved, not his soul. He is trained by war to realize, in contradiction of Christian ideals, that he must desert the mind and spirit and allow his physical being —even his animal self—to dominate. Through Henry, Crane is saying with St. Matthew that whosoever will lose

[11]Norman Friedman, "Criticism and the Novel," *Antioch Review*, 18 (Fall 1958), 356-61.

[12]Crane never ceased to be interested in the molding influence of environment. His favorite situation shows man pitted against a new and quite different environment. In some cases, as in "The Blue Hotel" and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," characters find it impossible to undergo the necessary change to survive and are either destroyed or disillusioned. In *The Red Badge* as in "The Open Boat," however, the chief characters manage to adapt to the dangerous new environment and thus to survive.

[13]Two critics have made similar statements about the Christian imagery of the book: Bernard Weisbarger, "*The Red Badge of Courage*," in *Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels*, ed. Charles Shapiro (Detroit, 1958), pp. 104-105; and Cox, pp. 217-18.

his life will find it. But the Christian paradox is in direct opposition to Crane's. Henry finds and retains his physical life by losing that sensibility characteristic of the highest forms of life.

The evidence for a "naturalistic" interpretation of *The Red Badge is* overwhelming.[14] Creating, chiefly through irony, a considerable degree of aesthetic distance, Crane studies the change in the behavior of a soldier. Through half the book this character is a sensitive youth. But sensitivity is incompatible with physical courage and the ability to kill. In the center of the story occurs the symbolic head wound, which damages the youth's sensibility and causes him to rely more on the physical and instinctive, less on the mental. For the rest of the book, Henry is brave in battle, having arrived at that state of self-discipline which makes one in danger resemble more an animal than a man. An iconoclast, Crane enjoyed laughing as he destroyed the illusions of a former tradition. He does not rejoice that Henry has found courage; he does not change him into a better person. Nor does he mourn as did Wilfred Owen for the tenderness and the innocence that war destroys in those who must kill.[15] With a keen sense of the incongruity of things, he simply shows that courage has been misunderstood. In order to be a Greek (in a Greek-like struggle), one must be a barbarian.

[14]Several naturalistic interpretations are available. See, for example, Winifred Lynskey, "Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*," *Explicator*, 8 (Dec. 1949), 3; Richard Chase, introduction to Riverside Edition of *The Red Badge* (Boston, 1960); and Charles Child Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis, 1956).

[15]Owen's poem "Insensibility" is, however, a remarkably similar statement of the definition of courage:

Dullness best solves
The tease and doubt of shelling,
And Chance's strange arithmetic
Comes simpler than the reckoning of their shilling.
. . . . . .
Happy are these who lose imagination:
They have enough to carry with ammunition.
. . . . . .
Having seen all things red,
Their eyes are rid
Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever.

THE COLD passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting. As the landscape changed from brown to green, the army awakened, and began to tremble with eagerness at the noise of rumors. It cast its eyes upon the roads, which were growing from long troughs of liquid mud to proper thoroughfares. A river, amber-tinted in the shadow of its banks, purled at the army's feet; and at night, when the stream had become of a sorrowful blackness, one could see across it the red, eyelike gleam of hostile camp-fires set in the low brows of distant hills.

Stephen Crane
from *The Red Badge of Courage*