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# Symbolism and Psychological Realism in *The Red Badge of Courage*

JOHN J. MCDERMOTT

IN choosing as protagonist for *The Red Badge of Courage* an unsophisticated, inarticulate farm boy, and in attempting convincingly to depict in this protagonist a complicated, only partially rational, psychological change, Stephen Crane obviously set for himself a task of formidable artistic difficulty. One of the devices he uses to overcome this difficulty is the series of thematically related incidents with which he opens his novel. Together these incidents form an appropriate backdrop against which the drama of Henry Fleming's private struggle for manhood may be presented.

A juxtaposition of no more than the title, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and some opening lines of the work indicates that Crane's novel is enriched with complicating ironies. For the first badge of virtue we see in the novel is a deceptive one: a "tall soldier" (who we later learn is Jim Conklin, the most conventionally courageous soldier in the novel) having "developed virtues," decides, as a first practical result of his new-found virtues, to wash his dirty shirt.<sup>1</sup> While laundering he naively absorbs an inaccurate rumor which he feels compelled to share with his fellows. He then waves his freshly cleaned "bannerlike" shirt aloft and rushes back to camp. There he repeats the tale which he has just heard, only to have it immediately and with partial accuracy identified by one of his listeners as "'a thunderin' lie!'" (5). Conventional virtue, then,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Red Badge of Courage: an Annotated Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism*, ed. Sculley Bradley, et al. (New York, 1962), p. 5. All quotations from *The Red Badge of Courage* in this article have been taken from this edition. Subsequent page references will be given in the body of the text.

Crane announces as his work opens, may well lead only to trivial actions, and its flaunted banners may herald only partial truths.

The specific virtue of courage in battle is soon introduced in similarly mocking contexts. Even before the battle begins, veteran soldiers tell Henry Fleming that the enemy may be advancing while “chewing tobacco with unspeakable valor” (10). As the army moves to a confrontation with the enemy, Bill Smithers, one of the men in Henry’s regiment, stumbles and falls, and as he lies sprawling one of his own comrades treads on his hand. We later learn Smithers has three fingers crushed so badly by this accident that a doctor wants to amputate them. But at the time of the trampling the rest of the men in the ranks merely laugh as Smithers swears in pain, the first among them to be wounded (16, 27). And as the regiment continues its march toward the battle lines the men satirically cheer the first opponent they encounter, a “dauntless” young girl who fights with a fat private for possession of her horse: “They jeered the piratical private, and called attention to various defects in his personal appearance; and they were wildly enthusiastic in support of the young girl” (17). So Crane skillfully dramatizes an external reality which challenges the simple-minded notions of heroism which his naive protagonist has brought with him to the army.

In addition to the device of these carefully selected opening incidents, Crane uses thematic symbols to help overcome the technical difficulty of dramatizing a complex mental development within his largely inarticulate hero. Jim Conklin, simple, loyal, and limited, continues to function as a reference point for the reader in assessing Henry Fleming’s search for courageous manhood. Henry goes to their tent and stretches himself alongside the “tall soldier.” As he lies awake filled with “visions of a thousand-tongued fear,” Conklin sleeps, one of the men who “remain stolid and deaf” (19). Henry’s moral relationship to Conklin, then, is an ambiguous one: in one scale of measurement he is less than Conklin, and Conklin’s tallness seems clearly to be an analogue for some kind of moral stature. But Conklin is also “stolid and deaf”; through no merit of his own, and even perhaps because of his limitations, he is simply immune to the doubts which assail Fleming. He sleeps while Henry lies awake staring “at the red, shivering reflection of a fire on the white wall of his tent . . .” (19–20). This image is literally a piece of reddened fabric against a white background: a

neat equivalent for the compromised, evanescent badge Fleming must ultimately pursue. (By contrast the simplistic Conklin in the first battle action will effortlessly produce “a red handkerchief of some kind” which he will “knit about his throat with exquisite attention to its position” [29].)

So as he opens his novel Crane gradually exposes the limitations of Henry’s conventional conception of courage. Hackneyed moral notions and their contextual badge (as virtuous Jim Conklin waves aloft his newly washed shirt one thinks of the most fatuous saw of them all—“Cleanliness is next to godliness”) are mocked in the first incident of the novel. The first reported wound, that of a bumbling soldier clumsily trod upon by one of his own comrades, is absurd despite its seriousness. The first encounter with an enemy, a farm maiden, is farcical. And by his suggestive use of imagery Crane subtly foreshadows Fleming’s future complex development which must be preceded by the maturing of his naive idealism.

Crane’s iconoclastic viewpoint in the opening chapters remains steady as he focuses on his protagonist at the battle lines. As the central action of the novel begins, the untried young Henry Fleming is only too capable of a certain facile breed of irrational courage. With witless bravado, by dissolving his humanity and becoming “not a man but a member,” he mimics his fellows and stands firm with them against the first enemy onslaught. But the next battle action exposes the inadequacy for him of this mindless shortcut to virtue. The enemy resumes the charge so recently and successfully repulsed by the regiment, and as Fleming now watches nearby soldiers flee in panic, their example unhinges him. He too turns and runs. He becomes “like a proverbial chicken,” presumably with its head cut off, as he discovers it is as easy for him to relinquish his humanity in the direction of cowardice as shortly before he has relinquished it in the direction of simplistic courage (36).

It is important that we see that Henry’s desertion is all of a piece with the plot incidents which have preceded it, and that the entire opening section of the novel which it climaxes is a unified totality. For the whole point of Henry’s desertion is that it is precipitated by precisely the same values which had given him apparent success in the first battle action; his resulting cowardliness is the proof of the inadequacy of his embryonic, conventional notions of courage. And Crane had carefully prepared the reader for a debunking

analysis of these notions by implicitly mocking their unreality in the preludial incidents we have examined.

The central section of the novel, presenting the period during which Henry deserts his regiment, is structured upon Fleming's acquisition of a special kind of wound, a reduplicated red badge of courage. This multiple wound reveals the full complexity of the problem of human valor and it gives witness to the double threats of moral death and physical death which wait upon Fleming's performance in war.

Robert Stallman was the first critic to identify Fleming's "letters of guilt [which] he felt burned into his brow" (47) after his cowardly desertion, as the youth's real "red badge of courage."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately Stallman's discovery has been largely ignored in the subsequent rather noisy controversy over his more debatable identifications of Jim Conklin as a Christ-figure and the famous "red sun . . . pasted in the sky" of Chapter ix as a communion wafer. Leaving aside the controversy over Conklin's identity and the sun imagery, I would like to redirect attention to Stallman's convincing identification of Fleming's psychic wound. And I would like to develop further Stallman's notion, perhaps too little noted by others because it was mentioned only very briefly by Stallman himself, and then in only some of the printed versions of his essay on *The Red Badge*, that Fleming is in part a literary descendant of Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.<sup>3</sup>

That Fleming's "letters of guilt" were visualized as "burned" into him suggests that they are red: both from the initial glow of a branding iron, and, to continue the metaphor, from their imagined consequent emergence as scars on sorely wounded skin. Even as Henry becomes agonizingly aware of these letters of guilt which are burned into him, he wishes ironically "that he, too, had a wound, a red badge of courage," the first time in the novel that Crane explains his title (47). And soon this suggested paradoxical identification of Fleming's psychic wound with the novel's title is confirmed. For instead of a red badge of courage, Crane states that Henry has now begun to wear "the sore badge of his dishonor" (58).

<sup>2</sup> "Introduction" to *The Red Badge of Courage*, by Stephen Crane (New York, 1951), pp. v-xxxvii; and, "Introduction" to *The Red Badge of Courage* in *Stephen Crane: an Omnibus* (New York, 1952), pp. 175-224.

<sup>3</sup> Stallman, *Stephen Crane: an Omnibus*, p. 198; *The Houses that James Built* (East Lansing, 1961), p. 94.

The resemblance of this hidden wound of Fleming's to Hawthorne's scarlet letter is, of course, extraordinary. And whether consciously or unconsciously, it is impossible to say, Crane seems to have used Hawthorne's novel in constructing his own red alphabetic symbol of his protagonist's moral guilt. Indeed, the significance of Fleming's wound may be understood completely only if it is examined as both a uniquely created literary symbol and as a descendant of its prototype in *The Scarlet Letter*.

In his novel Hawthorne establishes a dichotomy between the redemptive potentialities of self-admitted frailty and the utterly destructive nature of guilt which the sinner lacks the courage to acknowledge. So by openly admitting her evil Hester Prynne can begin to rise gloriously above the sometimes hypocritical standards of her fellows. Her co-sinner Arthur Dimmesdale, on the other hand, is narrowly saved from moral self-annihilation, and in fact is physically destroyed, by his contrasting attempt to conceal his own scarlet letter and with it the guilt which it represents. Dimmesdale's letter is mysteriously imprinted on the skin of his chest, where it is depicted by Hawthorne as an "unhealed wound," a "red stigma," and a "burning torture" for its possessor.<sup>4</sup> Dimmesdale's inability to cope with the presence of his mark of guilt he specifically ascribes to his lack of courage.<sup>5</sup>

Like Arthur Dimmesdale, Henry Fleming is offered the temptation, in Crane's words, to "keep his crime concealed in his bosom" (54). And in Crane's novel as the tattered soldier sidles up to Fleming he suggests that wounds such as Henry has, though invisible, can still cause death:

"I see' a feller git hit plum in th' head when my reg'ment was a-standin' at ease onct. An' everybody yelled out to 'im: Hurt, John? Are yeh hurt much? "No," ses he. He looked kinder surprised, an' he went on tellin' 'em how he felt. He sed he didn't feel nothin'. But, by dad, th' first thing that feller knowed he was dead. Yes, he was dead—stone dead. So, yeh wanta watch out. Yeh might have some queer kind 'a hurt yer-self. Yeh can't never tell" (53).

Crane's careful irony here causes the statement of the tattered soldier to be only too accurate: unless Henry Fleming acknowledges the psychic wound derived from his moral guilt, unless he

<sup>4</sup> *The Scarlet Letter* (New York, 1950), pp. 228, 290, 292.

<sup>5</sup> *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 226.

reconciles his ideals with his actions, he may indeed experience a kind of death: a moral death of belief in himself. Like Arthur Dimmesdale he may be annihilated if he does not identify and admit to his hidden badge. It is worth noting also that Crane images the pointed questions of Henry's comrades as themselves a kind of badge, perhaps meant to suggest a threatening white banner of surrender. By asking Henry embarrassing questions the men are, in Crane's words, "upraising the ghost of shame on the stick of their curiosity" (53).

But this account of Fleming's psychic wound incompletely reports what happens to the young soldier during the period of his desertion. For as he wanders shamefully away from the procession of wounded men, suddenly he is in the midst of a full-scale retreat of Union forces. Men rush past him in terror and the bewildered boy twice grasps at one of them to ask an ultimate question: "Why?" Each time, as he asks, his overwhelmingly important question is reduced to absurdity by the involuntary, doubling stutter with which he asks it: "Why—why— . . . Why—why—" (60). And with a kind of cosmic playfulness, the world delivers the boy its only answer: the retreating Union soldier hits him on the head with a rifle, giving him at last a visible "red badge of courage."

Stumbling back into camp, Henry lies about his new, visible wound, saying he has been shot in battle. His newfound comrades then greet him with undeserved honor. One of them offers him his own canteen of coffee to drink from and his precious blanket to sleep in. The wound receives tender if amateurish first aid, and with unsuspecting irony one of the soldiers remarks, "Yer a good un, Henry. . . . [A] shot in th' head ain't foolin' business" (67).

The total symbol of Fleming's wound, meticulously constructed by Crane in this central portion of the novel, thus becomes the principal device by which he manages to embody the complicated development of his unsophisticated hero. If Crane had attempted to present too directly the necessarily confused thoughts of his rather inarticulate and intellectually limited character he might well have had to make the difficult artistic choice between a dull, awkward narrative and an unrealistic psychological portrait. But in its multiplicity his symbol is the perfect vehicle to convey gracefully the complexities and ironies of his limited character's psychological development. On the one hand it is a hidden badge of cowardice which shall help drive Fleming to courage, for part of Henry's



subsequent heroism will derive from his attempts to exorcise the indelible memory of his shame. On the other hand the visible dimension of the wound neatly embodies in its tawdry origin the partially synthetic heroism Fleming is pursuing. And at the same time, in its dubious splendor the visible portion of Fleming's wound is a real help to him in coping with the imperfect world around him.

In the concluding third of the novel Fleming moves from sham heroics to genuine heroics for immature reasons, to a final pattern of courageous action performed primarily in response to his own matured demands on himself. At the final point in the story, heroic action and mature motivation have at last converged in Fleming's character; in symbolic terms his inner and his outer red badges have coalesced into a complex but coherent unity, and as the novel closes he is a very human but nonetheless triumphant embodiment of the virtue of courage. And, of course, in the context of the novel it is this achievement which has conferred manhood upon him.

The morning after Henry has received his multiple wound he takes part in a series of attacks on the enemy. In each of these charges he makes a personal advance toward manliness. Crane caustically describes Fleming as beginning the morning as an insufferable poseur who is at first unable to face the truth of his recent cowardice: "[He] allowed no thoughts of his own to keep him from an attitude of manfulness. He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man" (73). This pose is quickly punctured by a sarcastic remark from one of the men and, his brain in turmoil, Henry goes on to fight well in the morning's first engagement. Then he overhears the brigadier general describing his regiment as "a lot 'a mule drivers" and in a second charge he fights bravely in order to silence the scorn of himself which he ascribes to the general (84, 91). During this charge Henry decisively grasps the national flag from the regiment's dying color sergeant. The flag itself is for Fleming an ambivalent object, both "red and white," which he imagines to be simultaneously "hating and loving" him (90). But he nonetheless determinedly grasps it and openly identifies himself with it. And when the regiment's action is subsequently assessed contemptuously by the general after this second charge Crane announces that the boy has now "developed a tranquil philosophy for these moments of irritation" (97).

After Fleming has voluntarily become the color-bearer for his



regiment he takes part in one more engagement with the enemy. Now he is simultaneously capable of ironic detachment and committed selflessness. Unurged he leads the men to the enemy and a significant tactical victory.

Crane, however, shows his protagonist still partly misled as the novel closes. Fresh from his heroic charges Henry has thoughts which are optimistically inflated as he marches with his regiment to the rear and momentary safety. But it is an inappropriately cynical reading of the novel to see Henry as ignorant at the novel's close as he was at its opening. For Crane's final view of his protagonist simply is part of his consistent, unflinching psychological realism. Crane has had to dramatize a complicated and partly irrational mental process as it has taken place in a farm boy incapable of sophisticated self-articulation. Now as the novel closes Henry consistently remains a person of mixed motives and partial insights. But the fundamental thrust of his character has been set: he has discovered and developed within himself a capacity for a detached spirit of self-sacrifice based on an imperfect but nonetheless profound self-knowledge. He has matured; he has become a man. But he appropriately remains a dramatically specified man with a particular set of limitations. And Crane's careful use of symbolism has provided an appropriate means for conveying his character's complex development with psychological realism.