

TWO CRANES, TWO HENRYS



Seven years ago I published a book in which I tried to say one big thing about Stephen Crane and his work.<sup>1</sup> I claimed that Crane lived his life backwards: instead of writing about his experience, as most writers do, Crane first wrote stories, then he tried to live them. Having written a book about war, he set out to experience real war. Having written about a girl of the streets, he set up housekeeping with a brothel madam. Having written about shipwrecks, he managed to find himself on board a foundering ship. And so on.

I pointed out that Crane's characters also tend to base their behavior on written narratives. Henry Fleming tries to match his experience of war to the war stories he's read, with their "Greek-like struggles." Maggie wants her romance with Pete to be worthy of the melodramas he takes her to see. ("She wondered if the culture and refinement she had seen imitated . . . by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory").<sup>2</sup> And the unfortunate Swede forces the people in and around the Blue Hotel to act like people in dime novels, with predictably grim results.

I suggested two cultural bases for such a relation between art and life in the case of Stephen Crane. First, Crane's early and intense exposure to Methodism gave him one model of living one's life by the book—the Good Book, that is. Second, Crane came of age in a newspaper culture that believed as much in making the news as reporting it. This cultural ethos is perfectly captured in Hearst's supposed remark to Remington during the Spanish-American War: "Give me the pictures and I'll give you the war."

The Bible and the newspaper were the two most important literary “sources” of Crane’s work; both suggested to him ways in which one first got the narrative straight, then tried to live according to it.

Of course, not every reader was convinced of this “double life” I ascribed to Crane, but I don’t intend to defend my argument here. I said my big thing in my book, and I have only a few little things—two, to be exact—to add here.

The first thing I want to address is a pattern I see in the reception of my book and several others.<sup>3</sup> This pattern, centering on debates about the person of Stephen Crane, recapitulates to a remarkable degree debates about the person of Henry Fleming, hero of *The Red Badge of Courage*. The second thing I want to discuss is the title of Crane’s war book, and what I take to be its literary source. These two subjects—first, the parallels between interpretations of Crane and Fleming, and second, the title of Crane’s most famous book—are related, though a bit tenuously.

I knew from the start that my version of Crane would meet with some resistance. I was imputing something artificial and overly deliberate to Crane’s manner of living; there was even something “postmodern” about my claim that Crane took the pattern of his life from novels and newspapers.

An early warning sign was a piece I wrote about Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino’s excellent edition of Crane’s letters. In that review, published in the *New York Review of Books*, I aired some of my ideas about the relation between Crane’s life and work.<sup>4</sup> I also suggested that the real subject of *Red Badge* was not the nature of, or attainment of, courage, but rather the invasion of privacy, and the question of whether Fleming could get away with his little subterfuge about his friendly-fire wound.<sup>5</sup>

At the *New York Review*, as at many magazines, writers do not provide titles for their reviews. When my piece was published, it carried the title “The Courage of Stephen Crane.” I had written nothing at all about Crane’s courage; indeed, I wasn’t really sure where in his life such courage might be readily discovered—in his defense of Dora Clark perhaps, or in the open boat? I found myself wondering why people wanted to think of Crane as courageous, and I decided it had something to do with the *New York Review* editors’ suggestion that I say something about Crane as a newspaper writer. Crane—as I now know and should have

known better all along—is a hero among newspaper writers and editors, just as Wallace Stevens is a hero among literate lawyers.

This image of Crane as hero has many sources. The old con man Thomas Beer is the primary suspect, with his (to my mind accurate) claim that Crane “made his body a testing ground for all sensations of living.”<sup>6</sup> Beer has Crane dismiss the idea of the reporter as hero, then spends a chapter developing the notion with Crane in the starring role. Beer is especially attentive to Crane’s conspicuous bravery, or his death wish, under fire in Cuba: “Crane seemed to want to be hit and talked academically of locations on his person for a bullet’s entry. He certainly went about the business of risking a wound with extraordinary and scientific zeal.”<sup>7</sup>

But here, as always with Beer, we begin to suspect something fishy. Beer, as we all know by now—thanks to Wertheim, Sorrentino, and John Clendenning—was a bad biographer. I would only add that he was a good critic, who translated his critical insights into biographical fabrications. In Beer’s account, Stephen Crane’s own longing for a wound sounds a bit too much like Henry Fleming’s.

Joseph Conrad and H.G. Wells contributed mightily to the legend of Crane’s courage, not so much with regard to his battleground behavior as to his writing amid extreme conditions, especially those imposed by his illness (his real “red badge,” perhaps) and his wife.<sup>8</sup> And John Berryman, in the first paragraph of his biography, mentions “the heroic character” and “generalship” of Crane’s life; “it seems often less like an author’s,” writes Berryman, “than like the profound, marvelous lives of the most interesting and effective persons the country has till now produced, Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln.”<sup>9</sup>

But there is a contrasting and competing image to that of Crane as courageous hero. The first indications of this counter-image have to do with Crane’s relation to the Civil War, and the early jokes—at the *Philistine* dinner, for example—about his having served at Antietam, and so on. The paradox of having written the greatest war novel in our literature without having experienced war has been the single greatest element of the Crane myth (it is mentioned in Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American* and in many other places, and it obviously bothered Ernest Hemingway). Crane himself was aware of it. “They all insist,” he wrote

John Hilliard circa 1897, "that I am a veteran of the Civil War, whereas the fact is, as you know, I never smelled even the powder of a sham battle."<sup>10</sup> Here the whiff of artifice is palpable, as it is in Crane's suggestion in the same letter that he got his sense of "the rage of conflict" by playing football. Here and elsewhere, we aren't quite sure whether it's a source of embarrassment or pride to Crane that he became known as the war writer who had seen no war.

But in the last decade or so this notion of Crane as poseur and pretender has intensified. Wertheim and Sorrentino called attention to the extraordinary 1897 photographs of Crane and Cora in war correspondent costumes, sitting on artificial rocks in an Athens studio. The letters they reprint in which Crane gave the same version of his life, almost verbatim, to editors and reviewers also suggest a man extremely conscious of image and self-advertisement.<sup>11</sup> And recent critical work on Crane, by Michael Fried, for example, argues that Crane was obsessed by other things (his own initials, according to Fried) than war or the human condition.<sup>12</sup>

I won't waste much time making my second point, that this ambivalence about Crane as hero or pretender is the same ambivalence that marks debate about Henry Fleming, the hero or anti-hero of *Red Badge*. My favorite example of this split arose in John Huston's ill-fated attempt to make a film of the book. Huston thought *Red Badge* was essentially a comedy; he remarked that if a grown man ran from battle it was a tragedy, but if a youngster turned tail it was funny. But that interesting insight didn't prevent Huston from signing up a *real* war hero, Audie Murphy, for the part of Henry Fleming.<sup>13</sup>

As you all know, the most intense debate about the character of Henry Fleming flared up around the publication in 1979, at Hershel Parker's instigation, of the manuscript version of the novel. Henry Binder, in his essay "*The Red Badge of Courage* Nobody Knows," argued that Crane scholars had been wasting their ink arguing about whether the ending of the novel, with its claims about Henry's growth into manhood and serenity, was ironic or straightforward. If they'd just been reading Crane's "real" text, that is his manuscript text, instead of the editorially "maimed" published text, they would have seen Crane's unmistakably ironic intent, especially in such phrases as Henry's longing

for "a wound, a *little* red badge of courage" ("little" was deleted in the published version), or in the phrase "He had been to touch the great death and found that, after all, it was but the great death *and was for others*" (where the last four words were deleted [both italics mine]).

"No other Crane character, either before or after *Red Badge*," Binder argued, "has so lively a talent for elaborate excuse-making" as Henry Fleming.<sup>14</sup> Binder summarized the issue of Fleming's heroism as follows:

Henry's hope of ascending to manhood through heroism in battle is treated ironically in that Henry does become a hero but does so without gaining a mature understanding of life or a change in his character that would be commensurate with such understanding.<sup>15</sup>

The "story of the novel," according to Binder, is "Henry's failure to gain any real understanding of himself or compassion for others."<sup>16</sup>

So there you have it. Stephen Crane was either the intrepid and heroic reporter, or the master of pretense and pose. His best known character, Henry Fleming, was either the battle-scarred veteran raised by experience into maturity, or the conniving adolescent who has successfully hidden the embarrassing truth that his wound, his "red badge," is the result of a particularly humiliating episode of what we now call "friendly fire." Heroes or pretenders? Real or sham?

I have no intention of resolving these issues, short of saying that my book was an attempt to make sense of the two-sidedness of Crane; I continue to think of Crane as a hero of the imagination, not necessarily of the life. (The first of his "double lives," the life of the imagination, is the one that counts, and that makes Crane Crane.) As for Henry Fleming, I prefer how he comes across in the edited version of *Red Badge*, as opposed to the manuscript. I like the confusing mix of self-congratulation and self-doubt, the adolescent lurking under the veteran. I like the baffling ending for the same reason that I like the oddly similar ending of Kate Chopin's *Awakening*, with its unresolved issues of courage and capitulation.

But I want to close with another, and I think related, issue, namely the title of *The Red Badge of Courage*. The genius of Crane's title is that it so perfectly resumes the tensions inherent in the book, in particular the tug of war between straightforward and ironic readings. Does Henry get his badge—his red badge, his little red badge?

*The Red Badge of Courage* is surely among the most familiar and most frequently quoted titles in all of American literature. Like very few others—Twain and Warner's *The Gilded Age* comes to mind, Heller's *Catch-22*, London's *Call of the Wild*—it has achieved an idiomatic status; people quote it, as they might say “to the manner born” or “that is the question,” without knowing the source. In recent compendia of familiar quotations, such as Justin Kaplan's revision of Bartlett's, “the red badge of courage” stands alone as itself a “familiar quotation.”<sup>17</sup> No cross-reference is given there for an earlier variant or source of the phrase. Crane's critics and biographers have given scant attention to the literary provenance or inspiration for the title.<sup>18</sup> I want to suggest such a source here.

The passage I have in mind is from Shakespeare, the ultimate source of so many of the ready-made phrases in our language. It occurs in *Henry IV, Part Two*, Act IV, scene iii. Sir John Falstaff is, as he does so often, extolling the virtues of wine. Abstemious young men “are generally fools and cowards,” the boastful soldier maintains, “which some of us should be too, but for inflammation.” His analysis continues. “A good sherris-sack [a good dry sherry, that is] hath a twofold operation in it.” The first property, Falstaff explains, is that it makes a man witty. He goes on:

The second property of your excellent sherris is the warming of the blood, which, before cold and settled, left the liver white and pale, which *is the badge of pusillanimity and cowardice*. But the sherris warms it and makes it course from the inwards to the parts extremes. It illumineth the face, which as a beacon gives warning to all the rest of this little kingdom, man, to arm, and then the vital commoners and inland petty spirits muster me all to their captain, the heart, who, great and puffed up with this retinue,

doth any deed of *courage*, and this valor comes of sherris. So that skill in the weapon is nothing without sack. . . . Herof comes it that Prince Harry is valiant . . . [my italics]

And so on.

I will not insist on the two soldiers named Henry here—Henry Fleming and Prince Hal (three counting Henry Hotspur, four counting Prince Hal's father, Henry IV himself). Nor will I harp on the fact that Shakespeare too is writing about a civil war, or that Crane is clearly familiar, in his portrayal of Private Wilson, with the convention of the "braggart soldier," a convention so robustly embodied by Falstaff. Nor will I insist on Falstaff's own flight from battle in *Part One*, his pretense of being dead, and his famous claim, so similar to Henry Fleming's self-justifications, that "The better part of valor is discretion." But three other facts seem to suggest that this may be a plausible source for Crane's title.

First, like many of Falstaff's eruptive speeches the passage is well known, even if the play—at least relative to the far more popular *Part One*—is less so. The passage is included in many familiar quotations volumes, including early editions of the *Oxford* collection of familiar quotations.<sup>19</sup> (It may also have been current, as George Monteiro suggested to me in a conversation in 1995, within the Temperance circles Crane's mother moved in.)

Second, Crane's father, the Reverend Jonathan Townley Crane, had a well-known interest in liquor and its effects. His *Arts of Intoxication* (1870), despite the "how-to" suggestion of its title, is a passionate attack on the evils of alcohol. Stephen Crane shared his father's interest in alcohol, of course, though from the perspective of an avid consumer. The Shakespeare passage is in line with the clubman buffoonery about wine, women, and song that Crane imbibed during his New York years. In such circles, Falstaff was regarded as one of the patron saints of witty drinkers.<sup>20</sup> If Crane is invoking Falstaff in his title, however obliquely, it gives his already ironic title a further twist.

Third, while Falstaff makes no mention of the *color* of the badges of cowardice and courage—a damning omission surely, if this is assumed to be Crane's source—it is interesting to note that Crane himself made the following comment in a letter from

Galveston (March 8, 1895) to his editor Ripley Hitchcock, who had evidently complained about the title: "As to the name I am unable to see what to do with it unless the word 'Red' is cut out perhaps. That would shorten it."<sup>21</sup> I take it Crane was joking, but the fact that the adjective was, in his mind, detachable, gives further credence to his familiarity with the Falstaff speech. (Personally, I would trace the "red" to *The Scarlet Letter*, which Richard Brodhead convincingly links to Fleming's fear that his shame is somehow legible.<sup>22</sup> Have others heard the "scar" in the "scarlet letter"?)

Of course there are reasons to hesitate about this attribution of Crane's title to *Henry IV*. Crane's reading was famously spotty. John Berryman noted, "It is not easy to think of another important prose writer or poet so ignorant of traditional literature in English as Stephen Crane was and remained," though Berryman carefully excepted from the realm of Crane's ignorance "the unavoidable master Shakespeare."<sup>23</sup> While there was a copy of Shakespeare's works in Brede Place, Crane's writing is not heavily laced with allusions to Shakespeare. It is also quite possible that there is a little known intermediary source, based on the Shakespeare passage and familiar to Crane. If that is the case, we can still regard the Falstaff speech as the ultimate source.

Does it really matter where Crane "got" the phrase, since he himself found the turn and the setting—the masterful mix of doubtful heroism and heroic doubt—to make it memorable? Perhaps not. But there is something satisfying to me at least in tracing Crane's phrase to this Shakespearean nexus of liquor and wit and war and great writing—the same web from which Crane's great novel emerged. ☞

## NOTES

1. Christopher Benfey, *The Double Life of Stephen Crane* (New York: Knopf, 1992).
2. J.C. Levenson, editor, *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 37.
3. For example, Michael Fried's *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

4. Christopher Benfey, "The Courage of Stephen Crane," *New York Review of Books* (March 16, 1989).
5. On the theme of privacy in war see Ralph Ellison, "Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of American Fiction," in *Shadow and Act* (orig. 1964; rpt. in New York: Vintage International, 1995), 69: "But war is nothing if not an invasion of privacy . . ."
6. Thomas Beer, *Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters* (New York: Knopf, 1923), 195.
7. Beer, 190.
8. See Conrad's introduction to the Beer biography, 33, and H.G. Wells, "Stephen Crane from an English Standpoint," in Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, ed. Sculley Bradley et al. (New York: Norton, 1962).
9. John Berrymen, *Stephen Crane: A Critical Biography* (revised edition, New York: Meridian, 1962), 3.
10. Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, eds., *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 322.
11. See, e.g., *Correspondence*, 99, 165-7, 204-5.
12. See Fried, 147 (and *Passim*) on Crane's "predilection for pairs of words beginning with the letters 's' and 'c.'"
13. See Lillian Ross, "Picture," in *Reporting* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981), 223-442.
14. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, restoration and introduction by Henry Binder (New York: Avon, 1983), 153.
15. Binder, 151.
16. Binder, 164.
17. John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, Justin Kaplan, ed. 16th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992).
18. Paul Sorrentino has pointed out some precursors to me. In 1950, Abraham Feldman suggested that the title was based on Shakespeare's phrase "murder's crimson badge" in *Henry VI, Part 3*. Perhaps it should not be surprising to find other critics looking at Shakespeare for possible sources. Such formulations as "the x of y," where x is a concrete noun and y is an abstraction, are quite common in Shakespeare; "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" is merely among the most familiar of them. A decade later, though, Cecil D. Eby, Jr. questioned Feldman's attribution: "Knowing something of Crane's impatient and often unsympathetic reading tastes, we find it difficult to imagine his laboring through the unwieldy [sic] drama [i.e., *Henry VI*], though it is not impossible that he struck upon the line by accident" (205). Eby counters with another source, claiming that the phrase "red badge of courage" would have reminded any Union veteran who had served in Virginia of "the New Jersey general, Philip Kearny, and his

famous 'red badge' (also called 'red diamond' and 'red patch') division of the Third Corps, Army of the Potomac" (205). Though Eby quotes Kearny's biographer, who called the patch "a patch of honor," his other documentation suggests that "patch" was the more common term in Kearny's division. Later in the same article Eby comments that "Ironically, Henry's wound, inflicted by a fellow Union soldier, is a private badge of cowardice which passes as a public badge of courage"—exactly Falstaff's opposition. See Eby, Cecil D. Jr. "The Source of Crane's Metaphor, '*The Red Badge of Courage*,'" *American Literature* 32 (May 1960): 204-7 and Feldman, Abraham. "Crane's Title from Shakespeare." *American Notes & Queries*, 8 (1950): 185-86.

19. See for example *Oxford Dictionary of Familiar Quotations*, Alice May Smyth, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 380.

20. *Quotations for Occasions* (New York: Century, 1897), compiled for wits and toastmasters by Katharine B. Wood, is laced with quotations from *Henry VI, Part 2*, including a passage in praise of sherry ("With excellent endeavour of drinking good and good store of fertile sherris.") from later in the same Falstaff speech from which I derive Crane's title (98).

21. *Correspondence*, 100.

22. Richard Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

23. Berryman, 24.