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UNREAL WAR IN *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*



A few months after the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage* in the early fall of 1895, Stephen Crane was famous on both sides of the Atlantic as the author of the most realistic war novel in our literature. Most of its first reviewers, unaware that the twenty-four-year-old writer had never been closer to a battlefield than the parade ground of his military prep school, assumed that *Red Badge* was, as the *Saturday Review* noted in April, 1896, "not unnaturally . . . the work of a man of more than middle age who had been under fire in the great Civil War in America, and simply recorded the vivid impressions of actual experience." The writer took this "extraordinary instance" as "another proof of the fact that the imagination can enter into and realize the actualities of life so vividly and deeply as to surpass in realism the records of experience."¹ The journalist-novelist Harold Frederic, aware that its author had never seen real war and intrigued by what he felt to be the compelling authority of the book, tested this claim for the power of the imagination in a somewhat elaborate experiment. Rereading the "renowned" battle descriptions of such "big men" as Tolstoy, Zola, Hugo, and Mérimée, he found to his "surprise" that *Red Badge* made those great writers, all veterans of the real thing, seem "all wrong." Crane had bested them as a realist, Frederic suggested, precisely *because* he had never seen war. The "actual sight of battle," he theorized, "has some dynamic quality in it which overwhelms and crushes the literary faculty in the observer. At best, he gives us a conventional account of what happened . . . not what he really saw, but what all his reading has taught him that he must have seen."² Like many of the novel's early readers, T.W. Higginson marveled that Crane was "able to go behind [the stories of old soldiers], and give an account of

their [lives], not only more vivid than they themselves have ever given, but more accurate.”³

Clearly, the book’s purported realism was the main thing to these reviewers. A few hinted that they were aware that much of the feeling of the reality in *Red Badge* was attributable to Crane’s vivid representations of his hero’s psychological response to war rather than to the facts and conditions of war per se, an insight that anticipates a major premise of later criticism. Nancy Huston Banks came very close to discovering the radical significance of this focus on Henry Fleming’s interior life. “There is virtually but one figure, [Henry Fleming],” Banks wrote, “and his sensations and observations during the conflict fill the volume with thoughts and images as unreal as a feverish dream,”⁴ an observation not intended, incidentally, as a compliment to Crane’s art, so strong was her presumption that he had tried and failed to picture the battlefield as it really was.

The reviewer who came closest to discovering how important this mode of the “feverish dream” is for the basic design of *Red Badge* was George Wyndham, a veteran who had experienced the harrowing reality of the battlefield in his campaigning in Egypt as an officer in the Coldstream Guards. In his brilliant review, Wyndham anticipated more fully than any other contemporary critic the fundamental premises of twentieth-century criticism of *Red Badge*. To this astute reader, Crane’s realism was unmistakably centered in its representation of his hero’s mental life, and to Wyndham this was a virtue, not a fault, as it was to Banks. Henry Fleming, he wrote, “super-sensitive to every pin-prick of sensation” is “a delicate meter of emotion and fancy,” registering “waves of feeling [that] take exaggerated curves[,] and hallucination [that haunts] the brain.” In all his battlefield descriptions and reports, Wyndham noted, Crane “confines himself only to such things as that youth heard and saw, and, of these, only to such as influenced his emotions.”⁵

Wyndham’s insight into the wide-ranging effects of Crane’s ingenious use of an extremely limited third-person point of view, one of the several features that mark the novel’s radical originality, has been fully explored by such modern critics as J.C. Levenson, Frank Bergon, Jean Cazemajou, Sergio Perosa, and James Nagel, to name a few of the best. By screening out the objective world that is the focus of traditional war narratives, this

powerful, innovative device gives full play to Henry's distorted and sometimes hallucinatory interpretation of the things he sees, or thinks he sees, on the battlefield. The "real" war, in this narrative arrangement, is Henry's fantastic, incoherent visions of things and events engendered by his acute mental distress. The keenness of Wyndham's appreciation for the expressive power of Crane's narrative method and his superb use of striking images and metaphors to depict his hero's psychological turmoil is attested by the critic's own highly descriptive language:

[T]o read these pages is in itself an experience of breathless, lambent detonating life. So brilliant and detached are the images evoked that like illuminated bodies actually seen, they leave their fever-bright phantasms floating before the brain. . . . The book is full of sensuous impressions that leap out from the picture: of gestures, attitudes, grimaces, that flash into portentous definition, like faces from the climbing clouds of nightmare. . . . It leaves, in short, such indelible traces as are left by the actual experience of war.⁶

No one has described more clearly or succinctly the essential characteristic of the innovative realism of *Red Badge*. The war writings of Zola, Hinman, DeForest, and Tolstoy, which have been thoroughly combed for parallels of plot and characters, images, and descriptive details that might account for Crane's apparent military expertise, belong obviously to a different order of narrative. He was undoubtedly much indebted in various ways to these writers and others, to Tolstoy for the uses of irony, to Kipling for hints about tone and color, and, as Stanley Wertheim has demonstrated, to several earlier Civil War writers for certain conventional plot devices and information about equipment, training, and marching. But the significance of these influences seems relatively slight considered in the context of Wyndham's brilliant description of Crane's impressively original method and style.

Oddly, after laying out his exemplary interpretive scheme, Wyndham succumbed like many readers then and later to the notion that *Red Badge* is a classic instance of normative realism, a

lapse that demonstrates that even the most independent-minded critic is not altogether immune to biases imposed by established contemporary literary norms (or by the critic's historical perception of such norms). A minor fault in the book, he wrote, is that the author's overemphasis on "the sharp, crashing of rifles" neglects the real sound of a bullet, its "long chromatic whine defining [its] invisible arc in the air, and [its] fretful snatch a few feet from the listener's head."⁷

The standard of realism Wyndham tacitly invokes in this momentary lapse in insight is commonly encountered in a century of writing about *Red Badge*. Even the astute John Berryman seems to have thought of it occasionally as a naturalistic representation of war, as when he observes in passing that "some authority has got to be allowed [Crane], and identified, since professional military men were surprised to learn that he was not one."⁸ A scholar writing more recently thinks that this authority derives at least partly from Crane's "mental reconstruction" in early 1893 of the actual plans of attacks and counterattacks at Chancellorsville and of Stonewall Jackson's "brilliant fifteen-mile flanking action"—an assumption that seems hopelessly irrelevant to what we actually find in the text of *Red Badge*.⁹ Even so notable a critic as Harold Bloom has lately declared that any reader "who has gone through warfare from 1895 to the present could testify to the uncanny accuracy of [Crane's] representation of battle."¹⁰

As I have obviously been suggesting, such views of *Red Badge* lead us in a wrong direction. They implicitly rationalize Henry's poetic madness and impose upon Crane's book the clarity and order of such realistic accounts of war as Tolstoy's wonderful memoirs of the siege of Sebastopol, or Joseph Kirkland's vivid and authentic, *The Captain of Company K*, or William DeForest's stark account of the battlefields of Louisiana. But as I have noted, the purposes, methods, and imaginative groundings of these and other nineteenth-century realists of war were radically different from Crane's, and their books are probably not as important in the history of his novel as historians (including the present writer) have sometimes claimed. The true imaginative history of *Red Badge* begins, I believe, with the wonderfully fanciful Sullivan County sketches Crane wrote in the early nineties, eerie anecdotal pieces about the farcical adventures

of four men fishing, hunting, and camping in the wilds of Sullivan County, New York. All of these "little grotesque tales of the woods," as Crane once referred to them,¹¹ were written before 1892, and several were published in the summer of that year in the *New York Tribune*. By 1893 Crane felt that he had outgrown them and tried to repudiate them as objectionably "clever" shortly before he began writing *Red Badge* in the spring:

It seemed to me [he wrote Lily Brandon Munroe, referring to the tales] that there must be something more in life than to sit and cudgel one's brains for clever and witty expedients. So I developed all alone a little creed of art which I thought was a good one. Later I discovered that my creed was identical with the one of Howells and Garland and in this way I became involved in the beautiful war between those who say that art is man's substitute for nature and that we are the most successful in art when we approach the nearest to nature and truth, and those who say well, I don't know what they say.¹²

At this time Crane probably knew in the casual way in which he always entertained theories, literary or otherwise, that Garland's "creed of art" ("Veritism") supported in principle what he was about to do in *Red Badge*, but his language suggests that he was thinking vaguely of realism as most literary-minded people (reviewers like Banks, for example) understood it in the mid-nineties. In any case, it is hard to see how he might have supposed that the radical and seminal book he would write over the next few months was in any way related in either theory or practice to Howellsian realism. What seems clear, despite his disclaimer, is that Crane never actually abandoned the motifs, compositional patterns, and narrative method he developed in the Sullivan County tales. The characters, themes, and above all the images and metaphors of the haunted Sullivan County landscape he discovered in writing these broadly drawn sketches served as a rich resource for much of his later war writing, not only in *Red Badge*, *The Little Regiment*, and *Wounds in the Rain*, but in some of the newspaper reports of real war he filed from the battlefields of

Greece and Cuba. In these early sketches are the familiar animistic landscapes, with their menacing mountains, glowering red suns and flickering twilight shadows, their dark caves, night-cloaked mysteries, and—in dramatic ironic contrast—their sunny vales, dappled blue skies, fair fields, and other images of pastoral benignity.¹³

The unnamed hero of the tales is the outrageously conceited, almost anonymous, “little man” (occasionally addressed as “Billie” by his comrades), who is clearly the fictional ancestor of the apprehensive and vainglorious Henry Fleming of *Red Badge*. Like Henry, the little man is beguiled by impossible heroic dreams, and again like Henry is victimized by his almost hysterical fear of what he characteristically perceives as the dark, threatening powers of an alien landscape, the rugged, disordered wilderness of Sullivan County. Like his descendant Henry, the little man detects in the fields, hills and streams living presences, intimations of mystery and threat, manifestations, as he perceives them, of the dark powers of an inscrutable nature. A looming mountain (in “The Mesmeric Mountain”) seems to exude a brooding malevolence, like the menace of the low-browed hills in the famous opening paragraphs of *Red Badge*. Fishing the depths of a lazy, sleeping lake, the little man uneasily discerns “millions of fern branches [that] quivered and hid mysteries,”¹⁴ just as Henry, crossing a stream with his regiment, detects in its black waters the gaze of uncanny “white bubble eyes.”¹⁵ Approaching a forest, Henry fears that he “might be fearfully assaulted from the caves of the lowering woods” and thrills with unease when he sees dark columns of troops on the slopes of distant hills crawling like monsters from the “caves of night.” In “Across the Covered Pit,” a “gloomy and forbidding” cave challenges an amateur spelunker “to tread its dark mysteries and explore its unknown recesses,”¹⁶ and the animistic cavern in “Four Men in a Cave” strikes terror into the hearts of the little man and his comrades.

In both the sketches and the novel, the hero perceives in the landscape baffling ambiguities. Its apparent malignity can dissolve instantly into aspects that seem benign and sympathetic, serene and pastoral. The surface of the lake that conceals mysteries in its murky depths is dappled with merry sunbeams, a contradiction that suggest a fundamental disorder in the very

scheme of things, a constantly recurring motif in the fantasy world Henry conjures up in the novel. In one famous paragraph Henry, looking up from the desperate work of a firefight, "felt a flash of astonishment at the blue, pure sky and the sun gleamings on the trees and fields" and wonders "that Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment" (116). His world—shadowy, menacing, monstrous, but also cheerful, pastoral, and innocent—shifts meanings with the ebb and flow of his emotions, and mirrors back to him his disquieting sense of a pervasive moral and psychological uncertainty.

Although discontinuous, incoherent fantasy is fundamental to the structure of *Red Badge*, Crane's narrative style occasionally presents another kind of perceptual deviation. Hallucination may seem on occasion to give way to its opposite, an unclouded perception of detailed objective fact, but actually there is very little objectivity in *Red Badge*, not even in those passages that have sometimes been cited as models of naturalistic description. An example is the much-noted description of the corpse Henry encounters in a little cathedral-like bower, notable for its flat delineation of a number of gruesome details:

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip. (126)

But even at this crucial moment, when Henry's perception seems to break the boundaries of its normally exclusive inferiority and to see things in the unfiltered light of objective reality, we detect a certain disordering hysteria. The exaggerated clarity of the image, with the usual shadowy ambiguity momentarily suspended to permit the seen thing to leap to the mind in a fullness of unqualified detail, suggests strong psychological

tensions. In the middle ground between subjective distortion and obsessive discrimination of detail we may expect to find a persuasive objectivity, but we may also be aware, as Donald Pease notes, that what is represented in *Red Badge* is never wholly stable, never wholly fixed in a coherent context. A sudden change in Henry's emotional state may instantly return any momentary perception of truth to a state of eerie unreality.

This mode of representation creates a world far removed from those of conventional realists. If Crane was looking for compositional models in the memoirs of soldiers in the copies of *Century Magazine* he borrowed from his friend C.W. Linson, he very likely saw Pvt. David L. Thompson's memorable eye-witness description of the large-scale deployment of Federal forces on September 14, 1862, for the Battle of Antietam. From a position on a slope overlooking the valley of Middletown lying far below, Thompson observed long columns of Federal troops as they crossed the valley and disappeared over the farther ridge:

. . . backward and downward, across the valley and up the farther slope, [a column] stretched with scarcely a gap, every curve and zigzag of the way defined more sharply by its somber presence. Here, too, on all the distant portions of the line, motion was imperceptible, but could be inferred from the casual glint of sunlight on a musket barrel miles away. It was 3 o'clock when we resumed our march, turning our backs upon the beautiful, impressive picture—each column a monstrous, crawling, blue-black snake, miles long, quilted with the silver slant of muskets at a “shoulder,” its sluggish tail writhing slowly up over the distant eastern ridge, its bruised head weltering in the roar and smoke upon the crest above. . . .¹⁷

We can easily imagine Crane's fascination with the unusual perspective in the description. Such visual oddities are evident everywhere in his writing, especially in *Red Badge*, as in his curious image, to cite a single example, of Henry's view of the harried movements of distant artillery: “Once he saw a tiny battery go dashing along the line of the horizon. The tiny riders

were beating the tiny horses" (116). But we can also imagine quite as easily that he would have found Thompson's vivid description useless as a guide for composition in *Red Badge*. Implicit in Thompson's account, of course, is normal perception; his description gives no hint, as does Crane's representation of Henry's deviant perception, that distance actually diminishes the size of observed objects. Crane's imagery seems closer to the distorted perceptions of the little man in the Sullivan County sketches than to any model of realism he might have encountered in contemporary war literature. Thompson's realistic description of the snake-like column of infantry becomes in *Red Badge* Henry's hallucinatory perception of monsters, the "red and green dragons" of his haunted imagination:

When the sunrays at last struck full and mellowingly upon the earth, the youth saw that the landscape was streaked with two long, thin, black columns which disappeared on the brow of a hill in front and rearward vanished in a wood. They were like two serpents crawling from the cavern of the night. (94)

The unreality of war in *Red Badge* becomes even clearer when we imagine the effect of substituting one of Joseph Kirkland's realistic descriptions of an artillery action in *The Captain of Company K* for one of Crane's in *Red Badge*. This is Kirkland's account:

[A] flash in the opposite woods sent across the cornfield a slight gleam visible in spite of the sunshine. Soon followed the roar of a distant field-piece, and, almost at the same instant with the sound, the shriek of a near shell passing over. . . . [T]hen among the trees behind . . . there was another great bang as the shell burst; then a humming, as of a hundred gigantic bees, from the fragments of the shell as they flew through the air. . . . The men dropped flat down as if they had been struck by lightning. It seemed impossible for human nature to stand up before and beneath the yelling, flying beast. Fargeon [the company com-

mander] . . . felt as if he could not hug mother earth closely enough—he would have liked to dig a hole, with his nails, to hide in.¹⁸

Such sustained clarity of perception is impossible for Henry Fleming. The careful delineation of time and space—the observer’s detection of the flash and roar of the distant gun, the slightly delayed passing of the screaming shell, the following explosion in the trees to the rear, then the deadly hum of the scattering shrapnel—is grounded in a rational perspective totally alien to the mercurial mind of Crane’s hero. In the context of Kirkland’s rational perception, the figurative characterization of the shell as a “yelling, flying beast” seems, like Thompson’s metaphor of the snake, merely illustrative.

Whereas Kirkland’s description is focused outwardly, Crane’s, in a passage as nearly equivalent to Kirkland’s as any in *Red Badge*, is obviously focused on his hero’s emotional state. Henry, his mind aswarm with images of dragons and demons, has just deserted his regiment:

As he, leading, went across a little field, he found himself in a region of shells. They hurtled over his head with long wild screams. As he listened he imagined them to have rows of cruel teeth that grinned at him. Once one lit before him and the livid lightning of the explosion effectually barred the way in his chosen direction. He groveled on the ground and then springing up went careering off through some bushes. (120)

There is no hint here of the perspectives of time and space so clearly depicted in Kirkland’s description. All reality seems collapsed, as it is typically throughout *Red Badge*, into the narrow domain of Henry’s consciousness. In the context of his characteristic perception of a monster-haunted world, the hallucinatory image of the shells as creatures with “rows of cruel teethe” unlike Kirkland’s illustrative simile, is a vivid sign of Henry’s intense psychological stress.¹⁹

It has not always been clear to readers from William Dean Howells’ time to our own that war in *Red Badge* is *necessarily* unreal,

that its unreality, as reflected in Henry's distorted visions, is in fact central to the novel's argument. Howells' notion that the dream-like evocation of war is Crane's unsuccessful attempt to bring the battlefield into the common light of day is proof that he did not understand the book. He believed, in accordance with his doctrinaire theory of realism, that Crane's metaphoric war is evidence that he "lost himself in a whirl of wild guesses at the fact from the ground of insufficient witness," that his figures and images of war are symptoms of "an art failing with material to which it could not render an absolute devotion from an absolute knowledge."²⁰ Howells tried to show the book's failure by referencing it to the criteria of naive literary realism, and readers from Nancy Banks to Harold Bloom have tried to validate it by the same measure. Perhaps one reason is that the overall feeling of realism readers get from its vivid imagery, its ironic deflation of the heroic ideal, and its uncanny insights into the psychology of the suffering hero compels them to restore unconsciously to his brooding fantasies the reality they distort.

But the book, after all, is about the moral consequences of Henry's flawed view of himself and the world, and in *Red Badge* that world is war. Crane's realism, newer than Howells's and Garland's and already pointing toward the expressionism of the approaching new century, is in its credible portrayal of Henry's distorting moral and psychological anguish. Howells' sense that Crane's "floundering" attempt to portray real war resulted in merely "a huddled and confused effect" ironically verified its success.²¹ For in the design of Crane's great novel, wrought consciously or not, war could not have been anything but unreal. ☞

NOTES

1. Richard M. Weatherford, ed., *Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1973), 99-100.
2. Harold Frederic, rev. of *The Red Badge of Courage*, by Stephen Crane, in Weatherford, 118-119.
3. T.W. Higginson, rev. of *The Red Badge of Courage*, by Stephen Crane, in *Philistine* (July 1896), rpt. in Weatherford, 135.

4. Nancy Huston Banks, "The Review of Two Journalists," rev. of *A Daughter of the Tenements*, by Edward Townsend and *The Red Badge of Courage*, by Stephen Crane, *Bookman* (2 November 1895: 217-20, rpt. in Weatherford, 96-98.
5. George Wyndham, rev. of *The Red Badge of Courage*, by Stephen Crane, *New Review* (14 January 1896): 30-40, rpt in Weatherford, 110, 112.
6. Wyndham, rpt in Weatherford, 110-111.
7. Wyndham, rpt. in Weatherford, 111.
8. John Berryman, "Stephen Crane: *The Red Badge of Courage*," *The American Novel From James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner*, ed. by Wallace Stegner (New York: BasicBooks, 1965), 86-96.
9. Harold Beaver, "Stephen Crane: The Hero as Victim," *Heroes and the Heroic*, special issue of *The Yearbook of English Studies* 12 (1982): 186-193.
10. Harold Bloom, Introduction, *Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 1-6.
11. Stephen Crane, *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane*, Vol. 1, Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
12. Crane, *Correspondence*, 31.
13. Almost as if by agreement, nineteenth-century war writers set their scenes of violence against gentle, benign landscapes, as Crane does all the way through *Red Badge* and in most of his later war writings, including his war dispatches. To cite a single example, Tolstoy in *Sebastopol*, in the translation Crane probably read, describes wounded soldiers abandoned on the battlefield:

"Hundreds of mutilated, freshly bleeding bodies . . . lay with stiffened limbs in the flowery and dew-bathed valley. . . . They crawled, they turned on their sides, and some were abandoned among the corpses of the blossom strewn valley. . . . Notwithstanding all this, the heavens shed their morning light over Mount Spain . . . the sparkling stars grew pale, a white mist rose from the somber and plaintively swelling sea, the east grew purple with the dawn, and long, flame-colored clouds stretched along the blue horizon." Count Leo Tolstoy, *Sebastopol*, trans. by Frank D. Miller (New York: Harper, 1887), 110-111.
14. Stephen Crane, "The Octopus," *New York Tribune* (10 July 1892), part 2: 17. Rpt. in *Sullivan County Tales and Sketches*, R.W. Stallman, ed. 86.

15. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 99. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
16. Stephen Crane, "Across the Covered Pit," "Stephen Crane: Some New Stories," Part III, R.W. Stallman, ed., *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 61 (January 1957): 39-41. Rpt. in *Sullivan County Tales and Sketches*, R.W. Stallman, (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press), 79-83.
17. David L. Thompson, "All about us grew pennyroyal," *Battle and Leaders of the Civil War*, Ned Bradford, ed. (New York: Appleton, 1956), 237.
18. Joseph Kirkland, *The Captain of Company K*, 1891, American in Fiction Series (Ridgewood, New Jersey: Gregg, 1968), 117.
19. It should be noted, however, that this compositional scheme is not perfectly realized in *Red Badge*. One of the most interesting lapses in "narrative logic" is Crane's descriptions of guns, which seem to have little relevance to the world of dark powers Henry usually perceives under mental stress. All but two of the more than twenty passages describe the guns as comical personifications, as great orators delivering thunderous speech at their Confederate counterparts, as "squatting savage chiefs" arguing with "abrupt violence" in a "grim pow-wow" of war, as petulant children who sullenly poke their noses at the ground when they are dragged suddenly away from their firing positions, as bad boys who misbehave in church, and as stout, proud comrades standing heroically shoulder to shoulder as they face their enemy. They are sometimes exceedingly bad tempered. Once when Henry passes a battery in action he imagines them "shaking in a black rage," belching and howling like "brass devils guarding a gate." Henry is clearly the authority for this humorous humanizing of the guns, but the satirical playfulness of his thought seems incongruous, given his great mental suffering at the time he supposedly makes these observations. In any case it seems clear that Crane's treatment of guns in the novel gives no hint of a realistic intent.
20. William D. Howells, "Frank Norris," *North American Review* 175 (December 1902): 770.
21. William D. Howells, "New York Low Life in Fiction," *New York World* 26 (July 1896): 273.