

ROBERT M. MYERS

"THE SUBTLE BATTLE BROTHERHOOD"

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MILITARY DISCIPLINE IN *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*



After the battle of First Bull Run, General William Tecumseh Sherman complained, "I doubt if our democratic form of government admits of that organization and discipline without which an army is a mob."¹ Throughout the war, military discipline would remain problematic for both armies. Union Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson argued that officers faced a challenge in disciplining an army composed of individuals raised in a democratic tradition:

Three years are not long enough to overcome the settled habits of twenty years. The weak point of our volunteer service invariably lies here, that the soldier, in nine cases out of ten, utterly detests being commanded, while the officer, in his turn, equally shrinks from commanding.²

In "The Private History of a Campaign that Failed," Mark Twain recalled the frequent insubordination of the men under his command:

These camps were composed of young men who had been born and reared to a sturdy independence, and who did not know what it meant to be ordered around by Tom, Dick, and Harry, whom they had known familiarly all their lives, in the village or on the farm.

Twain went on to note that "there were those among us who afterward learned the grim trade; learned to obey like machines;

became valuable soldiers; fought all through the war, and came out at the end with excellent records.”³ The question is, by what strategies were men “reared to a sturdy independence” taught to “obey like machines”?

One possible response was to emphasize the supervisory role of the officer. Writing in 1864, Higginson insisted that the war had conclusively demonstrated the need for a well-trained corps of officers. Noting some of the derelictions that he had personally witnessed—neglect of picket duty and failure to maintain sanitary conditions—Higginson argued that the blame must always fall on the officers:

The officer makes the command, as surely, as, in educational matters, the teacher makes the school. There is not a regiment in the army so good that it could not be utterly spoiled in three months by a poor commander, nor so poor that it could not be altogether transformed in six by a good one. The difference in material is nothing,—white or black, German or Irish; so potent is military machinery that an officer who knows his business can make good soldiers out of almost anything, give him but a fair chance. (355)

For Higginson the power of this potent military machinery depended on the correct placement of the “raw material” in a system of observation and hierarchy. He insisted, “The newest recruit soon grows steady with a steady corporal at his elbow, a well-trained sergeant behind him, and a captain or a colonel whose voice means something to give commands” (355).

However, Higginson’s belief in the efficacy of the officer, a visibly placed external authority, was not the only model of military discipline in circulation by the turn of the century. Ellwood Bergey’s 1903 book, *Why Soldiers Desert from the United States Army*, attacks the system of military discipline as a threat to the American belief in the dignity of the individual:

On entering the army the young man must sacrifice every atom of manhood and dignity in order to comply with the foppish rules of the Army Regula-

tions, which are enforced with demon-like persistence. He must bow in servile obedience to the most accomplished bacchanalian that holds an army commission. No vas[s]al or slave was ever required to show greater humility to their masters than the soldiers of the United States Army are required to show toward their “superior” officers.⁴

Bergey is careful to point out that eliminating this “servile obedience” would not undermine true military discipline. Using “our great industrial establishments” as an example, Bergey suggests that the most efficient workers or soldiers are the product of internal rather than external discipline:

Observe, for instance, the railway engineers of the United States performing their difficult and exhausting labors with the most marvelous perfection. Do you think that if the engineers were under compulsion to face-front and salute every official of the road, of high or low degree, that it would increase their efficiency at the throttle? Were the railways of this country to promulgate an order requiring all employees to meekly salute the various officers of each road, it would surely be the means of driving the most intelligent and valuable men from the service. (133-34)

Indeed, in a study of the experience of the common soldier of the Civil War, Gerald F. Linderman argues that despite the lack of formal discipline, the soldiers nevertheless performed admirably where it counted most—in battle. Linderman suggests that the cultural value attached to the concept of courage provided the structure necessary for military discipline.⁵

The tension between external and internal models of military discipline is represented in *The Red Badge of Courage*. As Henry Fleming is transformed from a raw recruit to an effective soldier, his own vigilant internal gaze eliminates the need for constant supervision by his officers. Henry’s disciplining reflects a broader tension in nineteenth-century American culture between a discourse that celebrated the freedom of the autonomous

individual and a discourse that emphasized the need for effective mechanisms of social control.

Before he leaves for the war Henry's mother gives him advice that will become the foundation of his immersion in military discipline. To avoid doing anything shameful, he must always imagine that his actions are observed: "I don't want yeh to ever do anything, Henry, that yeh would be 'shamed to let me know about. Jest think as if I was a-watchin' yeh. If yeh keep that in yer mind allus, I guess yeh'll come out about right."⁶ She also encourages him to accept his place in military authority: "Yer jest one little feller amongst a hull lot of others and yeh've got to keep quiet an' do what they tell yeh" (6). This advice is especially important given Henry's romantic dreams of "Greeklake" struggles where he imagines "peoples secure in the shadow of his eagle-eyed prowess" (4-5). By the time of the Civil War, such individualistic heroics were anachronistic, if not actually counter-productive. Modern warfare required disciplined soldiers who recognize their place in the military hierarchy.

Henry's initial experiences in the army prepare him for this concept of warfare through strict regimentation: he is "drilled and drilled and reviewed, and drilled and drilled and reviewed" (7). The repetitious drill is designed to establish the instinct of obedience to the officers, and the constant review begins the process of evaluation that will properly place the men within the military hierarchy. In camp Henry begins to internalize the army's code as he becomes his own observer and evaluator. He realizes that he is an "unknown quantity," and understands that "the only way to prove himself was to go into the blaze" and then "figuratively to watch his legs to discover their merits and faults" (8, 11). As he impatiently waits for this test, he becomes frustrated over the delays, and, curiously, the text seems to link his subversive complaints with veteran status: "Sometimes his anger at the commanders reached an acute stage, and he grumbled about the camp *like a veteran*" (my emphasis, 11-12). This simile suggests that to fully develop the code of courage the soldier must have an element of insubordination.

As he approaches his first battle, the physical presence of the regiment provides a structure that contains Henry's fear: "He instantly saw that it would be impossible for him to escape from

the regiment. It inclosed him. And there were iron laws of tradition and law on four sides. He was in a moving box" (18). The representatives of military authority are visibly present: the company captain coaxes the men "in schoolmistress fashion" (26), and the lieutenant beats Henry with his sword when he seems to be "skulking" (20). During the actual fighting, Henry is reassured by the presence of his comrades about him: "He felt the subtle battle brotherhood more potent even than the cause for which they were fighting" (26). But the limitations of external mechanisms of discipline are exposed in the second engagement. When Henry mistakenly believes that his regiment is fleeing, he is left to his own, yet undeveloped, resources, and his survival instincts overwhelm his military training. The external control of the military authority, in this case, the lieutenant, is unable to stop his flight:

The lieutenant sprang forward bawling. The youth saw his features wrathfully red, and saw him make a dab with his sword. His one thought of the incident was that the lieutenant was a peculiar creature to feel interested in such matters upon this occasion. (32)

Henry's desertion is an extreme breach of military discipline, yet his thoughts reveal that his flight never removes him from the terms of military authority. Henry's initial rationalizations attempt to rewrite his cowardice as sound military strategy:

He had done a good part in saving himself, who was a little piece of the army. He had considered the time, he said, to be one in which it was the duty of every little piece to rescue itself if possible. Later the officers could fit the little pieces together again, and make a battle-front. If none of the little pieces were wise enough to save themselves from the flurry of death at such a time, why, then, where would be the army? It was all plain that he had proceeded according to very correct and commendable rules. (34)

Of course, this subversion of military discipline, which demands obedience of privates rather than discretion, is subverted by Crane's irony. As readers, we know that no such thoughts were in Henry's mind at the moment of his flight, and the absurdity of his strategy has been made apparent by the general, who is delighted that Henry's regiment has held its position (34). Likewise, Henry's later attempts to justify his behavior are undercut by his encounters with the dead man, the tattered man, and Jim Conklin. When Henry sees their bodies, visibly marked with the evidence of their obedience, he realizes the extent of his own violation of the code of courage. Lacking a wound, he believes that his cowardice is visible: "He now felt that his shame could be viewed. He was continually casting sidelong glances to see if the men were contemplating the letters of guilt he felt burned into his brow" (40-41). To Henry the tattered man's innocent questions assert "a society that probes pitilessly at secrets until all is apparent" (47). Henry's fear of detection leads him to worry that in future engagements his regiment "would try to keep watch of him to discover when he would run" (51), and he imagines himself subject to their collective gaze: "Then, as if the heads were moved by one muscle, all the faces were turned toward him with wide, derisive grins. . . . He was a slang phrase" (51). Henry's shame is not actually visible but the persistent ocular imagery makes it clear that his violation of the code of courage has made him into his own observer. His desire for escape from this imagined gaze leads him to wish for a visible mark of heroism, "a wound, a red badge of courage" (41). When he is wounded by a retreating soldier from his own army, his confidence is restored because he can now evade the gaze of the army: "He did not shrink from an encounter with the eyes of judges, and 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" (64). But Henry's thoughts make it clear that the inefficient surveillance of the army has been replaced by his own internal gaze, as his awareness of his transgression inscribes the code of courage. Henry realizes that he is still "below the standard of traditional man-hood" and feels "abashed when confronting memories of some men he had seen."⁷

Henry's three engagements on the second day complete his movement from external to internal discipline. In the first battle, his animal instincts take over and he fights viciously, even after the enemy has retreated. While he is in front of the line, fighting alone, Henry's comrades "seemed all to be engaged in staring with astonishment at him. They had become spectators" (72). Having acted heroically in the eyes of the army, Henry can now view himself as a hero:

Regarding it, he saw that it was fine, wild, and, in some ways, easy. He had been a tremendous figure, no doubt. By this struggle he had overcome obstacles which he had admitted to be mountains. They had fallen like paper peaks, and he was now what he called a hero. (72)

Even though Henry has acted in an undisciplined manner—he has pressed forward in advance of his regiment and has continued to discharge his rifle even though the enemy is no longer present—the lieutenant, a shrewd officer, reinforces Henry's newly constructed self by praising him (72). But to be a good soldier, Henry must still integrate courage and discipline. Ironically, all that is necessary to complete Henry's disciplining is a sense of resentment against his officers.

Before the next engagement Henry overhears the general dismiss his regiment as "mule drivers" who could easily be sacrificed (75). His anger at the general surfaces when the lieutenant encourages Henry to continue the stalled attack, even grappling "with him as if for a wrestling bout" (79). In frustration, and feeling "a sudden unspeakable indignation against his officer," Henry defiantly leads the charge, even picking up the flag when the color bearer is shot (79). When the attack fails, Henry is frustrated because he had hoped that his actions would force the general to re-evaluate his regiment's worth: "He had pictured red letters of curious revenge. 'We *are* mule drivers, are we?' And now he was compelled to throw them away" (82). Likewise, in the final engagement, Henry is willing to stand firm, even to his death, which would be "a poignant retaliation" upon the general:

In all the wild graspings of his mind for a unit responsible for his sufferings and commotions he always seized upon the man who had dubbed him wrongly. And it was his idea, vaguely formulated, that his corpse would be *for those eyes* a great and salt reproach. (my emphasis, 91)

The extent to which Henry's anger leads to his total immersion in military discipline is suggested by the "tranquil philosophy" he expresses after the regiment overhears the general's contemptuous dismissal (87). Henry reassures Wilson that the general "probably didn't see nothing of it at all and got mad as blazes, and concluded we were a lot of sheep, just because we didn't do what he wanted done" (87). He wishes that Grandpa Henderson had been there to witness it for "he'd have known that we did our best and fought good" (87), and he basks in the praise of the colonel and lieutenant, who label him "a jimhickey," and suggest that he should be a major-general (88). No longer concerned with larger questions of strategy, which are properly the domain of the generals, Henry submits himself to the expectations of his immediate officers. Thus, cowardly desertion produces heroism, and resentment against the officers produces passive acceptance of military hierarchy.

After the final battle, Henry scrutinizes his deeds "in spectator fashion" (96). He begins by thinking of his public displays of courage, "witnessed by his fellows," which hide "various deflections" (96). Henry recalls the "respectful comments of his fellows upon his conduct" and the lieutenant's praises (96).⁸ However, when he remembers his flight, his railings against nature, and his desertion of the tattered man, he fears that his guilt is visible: "He looked stealthily at his companions, feeling sure that they must discern in his face evidences of this pursuit" (97). Realizing that his comrades remain oblivious, Henry quiets his own conscience by considering the practical benefits of his desertion of the tattered soldier:

[H]e concluded that he saw in it quaint uses. He exclaimed that its importance in the aftertime would be great to him if it even succeeded in hindering the

workings of his egotism. It would make a sobering balance. It would become a good part of him.⁹

This “plan for the utilization of a sin” underscores the value of Henry’s cowardice (ms. 105). In the future it will serve to diminish his sense of himself as an individual and enable him to submit to the authority of military discipline.

Crane’s metaphors frequently draw parallels between the battlefield and the school. Accordingly, it is not surprising to see a similar movement from external to internal discipline in contemporary educational discourse. By the late nineteenth century, the quest for uniform education had resulted in an emphasis on strict regimentation. The 1874 *Statement of the Theory of Education in the United States*, which was endorsed by seventy-seven prominent educators, insisted that the school “is obliged to train the pupil into habits of prompt obedience to his teachers and the practice of self-control in its various forms.”¹⁰ In 1893 Joseph Meyer Rice, editor of the *Forum*, described the typical New York City primary school as

a hard, unsympathetic, mechanical-drudgery school, a school into which the light of science has not yet entered. Its characteristic feature lies in the severity of its discipline, a discipline of enforced silence, immobility, and mental passivity.¹¹

Recitation periods were opportunities for the teacher to examine closely the students to evaluate not only their comprehension of the lesson, but also the physical arrangement of their bodies:

During several daily recitation periods, each of which is from twenty to twenty-five minutes in duration, the children are obliged to stand on the line, perfectly motionless, their bodies erect, their knees and feet together, the tips of their shoes touching the edge of a board in the floor. The slightest movement on the part of a child attracts the attention of the teacher. The recitation is repeatedly interrupted with cries of ‘Stand straight,’ ‘Don’t bend

the knees,' 'Don't lean against the wall,' and so on. I heard one teacher ask a little boy: 'How can you learn anything with your knees and toes out of order?' The toes appear to play a more important role than the reasoning faculties. The teacher never forgets the toes; every few moments she casts her eyes 'toe-ward.'¹²

By the turn of the century, many educators had become concerned that these schools were not properly preparing students for the world of business. These Progressives argued that the role of education was to facilitate the natural connection between the curriculum and the child's interests. John Dewey, in *The Child & the Curriculum* (1902), insisted that the guidance of the teacher "is not external imposition. It is freeing the life-process for its own most adequate fulfillment."¹³ Likewise G. Stanley Hall, president of Clark University, and father of the child-study movement, argued that adolescents required less regimentation and more freedom to experiment. He noted that while the education of a young child should center around "arbitrary memorization, drill, habituation, with only limited appeal to the understanding," the adolescent required a fundamentally different approach.¹⁴ Since students at this age are prone to radical alterations of mood, Hall argued that the educator must allow the adolescent to experience the range of human expression in order to enable full development and internalization of the standards of civilization. The adolescent requires "greatly and sometimes suddenly widened liberty, which nevertheless needs careful supervision and wise direction, from afar and by indirect methods" (2:89-90). Accordingly, "the drill methods of the preceding period must be slowly relaxed and new appeals made to freedom and interest. . . . Individuality must have a longer tether" (2:453-54). The end result will be a successful socialization as the youth's desire for full individual expression is checked by an inner awareness of the limitations of life:

But another voice is soon heard in the soul, which says: Renounce and serve, life is short, powers and opportunities are limited, suffering is needful to perfection, so obey, find the joy of sacrifice, get

only to give, live for others, subordinate the will to live, to love, or to offspring. . . . Henceforth the race, not the self must become supreme (2:303).

Social historians have linked Progressivism to the rise of bureaucratic systems of organization in a wide variety of institutions. Recognizing that external control is always limited, late nineteenth-century culture shifted its focus to the subject's consciousness as a more effective site of discipline. In this model, undisciplined behavior is necessary to produce the internal mechanisms of discipline. Henry's desertion enables him to develop the courage necessary to be a good soldier, and granting adolescents widened liberty—that is carefully supervised—will inevitably result in properly socialized adults.

Henry's emergence as his own observer is paralleled in the reader. As spectators and judges of Henry's thoughts and performances, we participate in his disciplining, and to the extent that we concur with Henry's judgment that he has become "a man," we are complicit in the Progressive discourse of power. However, if those critics are correct who see Crane's text as fundamentally ironic throughout, (a reading which seems even more likely in the unrevised manuscript), then the relationship between Crane's novel and his culture becomes more problematic. If Henry's "plan for the utilization of a sin" indicates that he remains self-deluded, it raises serious questions about the Progressive project of discipline. Written in a period of shifting paradigms, *Red Badge* raises the possibility that the cost of effective social control is the loss of freedom to think outside the terms of Progressive ideology. In this context, the terms of the long-standing critical debate over Henry's moral growth must shift: Henry may not have become "a man," but he has certainly become a good soldier, much less likely to violate military discipline. Indeed, Henry's acceptance of military discipline would eventually result in a higher rank. In Crane's short story "The Veteran," an aged Henry Fleming is retelling the experiences of his first battle to a group of admirers. His audience is amazed by his confession of fear, especially since "they knew that he had ranked as an orderly sergeant, and so their opinion of his heroism was fixed. None, to be sure, knew how an orderly

sergeant ranked, but then it was understood to be somewhere just shy of a major-general's stars."¹⁵ ☞

NOTES

1. William T. Sherman, *Home Letters of General Sherman*, Mark De Wolfe Howe, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 211.

2. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Regular and Volunteer Officers," *Atlantic Monthly* 14 (September 1864): 360. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.

3. Mark Twain, "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed," *Mark Twain: Tales, Speeches, Essays, and Sketches*, Tom Quirk, ed. (New York: Penguin, 1994), 176-77.

4. Ellwood Bergey, *Why Soldiers Desert from the United States Army* (Philadelphia: William F. Fell, 1903), 64. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.

5. Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 43.

6. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, Donald Pizer, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 6. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.

7. These passages were deleted from the manuscript. The text can be found in Henry Binder's edition of *The Red Badge of Courage* (New York: Avon Books, 1987), 78.

8. Henry's thoughts concerning the lieutenant's praises appear in the manuscript, but not in the Appleton first edition. See the Binder edition of *Red Badge*, 118.

9. This passage appears in the manuscript but not the Appleton edition. It is reprinted in an appendix to Pizer's edition of *Red Badge* (pp. 104-05). Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical, connotated by ms. and page number.

10. Duane Doty and William T. Harris, *A Statement of the Theory of Education in the United States as Approved By Many Leading Educators* (1874), rpt. in David B. Tyack, ed., *Turning Points in American Educational History* (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell Publishing, 1967), 325.

11. Joseph M. Rice, *The Public School System of the United States* (1893), rpt. in Tyack, *Turning Points*, 330.

12. Rice, 332.

13. John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), rpt. in *John Dewey: The Middle Works 1899-1924*, Jo Ann Boydston, ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 2:281.

14. G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence* (New York: Appleton, 1904), 2:451. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical by volume and page number.
15. Stephen Crane, "The Veteran," *The Red Badge of Courage*, Donald Pizer, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 171.