

A D A M H . W O O D

“Crimson Blotches on the Pages of the Past”:
Histories of Violence in Stephen Crane’s
The Red Badge of Courage

Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background, the countless minor scenes and interiors of the secession war; and it is best they should not. The real war will never get in the books.

—Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days*

We saw the lightning and that was the guns and then we heard the thunder and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped.

—Harriet Tubman, from a postwar speech in Charleston

A GREAT DEAL OF CRITICAL ATTENTION HAS BEEN PUT to identifying the historical actualities of Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War*. The seminal essay of this “historical” approach is surely Harold R. Hungerford’s “‘That Was at Chancellorsville’: The Factual Framework of *The Red Badge of Courage*,” which argues that Crane’s story

of an aged Henry Fleming, “The Veteran,” (published only a year after the novel) clearly establishes Chancellorsville as “a factual framework within to represent the perplexities of his young hero.” And surely Hungerford’s conclusion is the correct one: indeed, as Hungerford notes, “If we turn to military history,” much like Crane himself is said to have done in his perusal of *The Battles and Leaders* series, “we find that the evidence of place and time points directly to Chancellorsville.”²⁵ Hungerford’s research, too, is surely accurate in its discussion of the times, places, and movements of troops in the battle of Chancellorsville. And since the publication of Hungerford’s essay, the factuality of his findings have little been questioned. Nor, I would suggest, should they be. If we put Crane’s novel to the test of times and places, we will surely be led to agree that Hungerford is indeed correct. As Hungerford points out and even evidences in his article’s title, it is a much older Henry himself who declares, in a moment of recollection to a youthful, post-Civil War audience, “that was at Chancellorsville.”

The question that follows for us, though, is to what use is such historical material put? Or, perhaps, what purpose does isolating Crane’s war novel into a single, specific event-frame serve? Or, again, what is at stake in attempting to prove that Crane’s novel is *historical* and, certainly more importantly, what is the impetus of this particular style of historicism? That much of the time and place of *The Red Badge of Courage* may be—since I have no desire to argue against this position—based in the battle of Chancellorsville tells us what? Does it explain the function of the novel? Certainly the narrative itself—the singular perception of a young Henry Fleming in the midst of war—has little to do with a place called Chancellorsville. Were we to believe that Crane’s extensive pouring over popular books and reports on the “factualities” of the Civil War influenced what Hungerford terms the “framework” of the novel and that this subject *requires* such extensive study as Hungerford’s, we would have to ask why Crane offers up so little proof *within the novel* to lead to such specificities of time and place.

The desire to distill *Red Badge* to an essential set of “historical” facts can also be read as a desire to isolate the novel—to pigeonhole it—as a *specific* episode of *the Civil War* and not as indicative of the violence of war generally. That is, Crane’s lack of acknowledgement of specific times and places—rather, his denial of them—seems of more crucial concern than what Crane knew but refused to admit into the narrative. This absence of history of time and place (of record, of “public” history) draws our attention to specifics because we seek to isolate it; we desire to put history *purely in the past*. In a sense, we might think of this as the reification of historical moments—the separation of events from any continued historical meaning and

the subsequent categorization within an historical (c)age. What Hungerford's essay really urges us to do, then, is to ignore the *movement* of the narrative—its terror, violence, and trauma—in lieu of the moment of the “framework.” Indeed, in many ways Hungerford's analysis does exactly what Crane's novel sought to undo. In Crane's own words, “the books won't tell me what I want to know.” What is it, then, that Crane wants to know? Or, even more directly to our point here, to what extent does Crane have access to the “real” Civil War and, by extension, what role does *Red Badge* play in the construction of this history? Let's begin with another question: to what extent can “real” war be accessible? Surely, the annals of history are filled with war—any perusal of any given history book will certainly remind us of the import of wars in the course of human development. But perhaps that is not even sufficient enough to say; were we to invert the previous phrase, we might more likely arrive at the role of war in history. The course of human development is predicated on the role of war. (We might here borrow a phrase attributed to Mussolini: “blood alone moves the wheels of history.”) Were we in a particularly dialectical mood, we might even go so far as to suggest that human development is virtually impossible without war. While this is most certainly not the position maintained here is largely not the point and, as well, this position refuses to offer us any insight. For the question is not to what extent war is part and parcel of human development, it is rather to what extent “real” war is accessible.

Histories of War, War Fictions, and the Space Between

There are, in effect, two distinct and disparate popular histories of the Civil War functioning, intermingling, and ultimately conflicting with each other in *Red Badge*. The first, as already hinted at, is the proliferation of Civil War “primary material.” Embodied most thoroughly, and, we might add, most officially, by the *Battles and Leaders* series, this primary material is presented as the ultimate reference to the real war; this series, and others like it, attempt to present the Civil War both *subjectively* in interviews with soldiers and *objectively* in both the Generals' accounts and the new genre of photography. That is, a sense of coherence is imposed on the Civil War in that the selected subjective and objective accounts serve to justify, to “real”-ize, each other. But these “complete” accounts serve not so much to present the war as it was—the “real” war—but rather to present the war as a complete whole: an event beyond further discussion. This ideological impetus is even made clear in the introduction to the *Battles and Leaders* series:

For the most part, each side has confined controversy to its own ranks, and both have emphasized the benefit as well as the glory of the issue. Coincident with the progress of the series during the past three years, may be noted a marked increase in the number of fraternal meetings between Union and Confederate veterans, enforcing the conviction that the nation is restored in spirit as in fact, and that each side is contributing its share to the new heritage of manhood and peace.³

Thus, as has been aptly pointed out by Amy Kaplan, these “histories” seek to present a sense of national post-war unity; indeed, as Kaplan argues, a great deal of these histories “excised political conflict from the collective memory of the war.”⁴ Or, to twist Kaplan’s phrasing, we might suggest that the excision of political conflict functions to impose a collective memory of the war; that the war was, in fact, predicated on political conflict is erased in view of a post-war desire for national coherence and unity. This imposed unity serves two distinct purposes: 1) to establish the Civil War as a closed system, an event (ideologically) completed and, less our concern here (though it is largely Kaplan’s concern), 2) to bolster nationalism in the face of an expanding American capitalistic imperialism and the resulting international wars.⁵

But Crane’s novel endorses neither of these positions. Rather, what we might say Crane takes or borrows from histories such as *Great Battles and Leaders* is a matter of sheer location. That is, the uses to which Crane’s primary textual research are put are essentially limited to descriptions of place. In point of fact, the conjecture that the central battle in *Red Badge* is considered to be modeled on the battle of Chancellorsville is based almost entirely on the placement of objects (rivers, roads, etc.) and the placement of troops. Thus, while we may rightly assume that the (literal) backdrop of the novel is the battle of Chancellorsville, this knowledge provides little insight into the actual subject matter of the novel. Even discussions of the Generals in *Red Badge* fail to reflect their representation in *Battles and Leaders*; what readers encounter of the Generals is almost entirely from the mouths of the nearly anonymous soldiers and, more importantly, presented in a less than positive tone. For example, Henry’s understanding of the process of war attributes nothing to the Generals themselves: “well, then, if we fight like the devil an’ don’t ever whip, it must be the general’s fault [. . .] And I don’t see any sense in fighting and fighting and fighting, yet always losing through some derved old lunkhead of a general” (89).⁶ Clearly, Crane is not interested in presenting the Civil War in the same manner as the *Battles and Leaders* series. Further, given the lack of

attention put to the Generals in *Red Badge* in lieu of the attention put to the single soldier Henry (in direct contrast to the structure of *Battles and Leaders*), we must recognize that Crane's novel should not be seen as ideologically coherent with the dominant mode of reading the Civil War in the late 1890s.

The other "popular" representations of the Civil War that we may likely assume Crane had at least a familiarity with are the 19th century sentimental novels which, like Crane's novel, use the Civil War as a backdrop. These novels, though extremely popular and prolific, work in many ways to ideologically seal the Civil War in much the same fashion as many of the histories. Indeed, in an excellent review of much of this type of sentimental fiction, Kathleen Diffley, in her essay "The Roots of Tara: Making War Civil," argues that "Like the magazine fiction during and just after the war, these novels represent the postwar Union as a marriage between Northern hero and Southern heroine."⁷ The purpose for representing the War in such romantic terms is quite clear for Diffley—a position quite agreed with here: "When it came time to shape the Civil War in popular culture, that ideal was in the ascendant."⁸ That is, Diffley suggests that the sentimental fiction of the Civil War had, as its ultimate goal, to present the war in purely domestic terms, to present the war *as a necessity* to the ultimate union—read here as marriage—between the North and the South.

Crane's familiarity with such romantic, sentimentalized fiction is clear from the early pages of *Red Badge*. As the youth recalls leaving his small, hometown environment,

there was [. . .] a darker [haired] girl whom he had gazed at steadfastly, and he thought she grew demure and sad at the sight of his blue and brass. As he had walked down the path between the row of oaks, he had turned his head and detected her at a window watching his departure. As he perceived her, she had immediately begun to stare up through the high tree branches at the sky. He had seen a good deal of flurry and haste in her movement as she changed her attitude. (6)

And while Crane tells us that "He often thought of her," this "darker girl" appears only once more and in a fantasy of *telling* a war story: "he imagined [. . .] the ejaculations of his mother and the young lady at the seminary as they drank his recitals" (86). Even Henry's belief in the "good deal of flurry" she displayed is augmented by the distorted line of vision Henry has: what he remembers seeing is merely what he desired to see.

There is a second—and perhaps more important—consideration of the romantic subplot a bit further into the novel when, more in line with Diffley’s discussion, a young, southern woman appears. It is not, though, the sentimental affectation that Diffley identifies as the union of the northern hero and the southern heroine: “A rather fat soldier attempted to pilfer a horse from a dooryard [. . .] He was escaping with his prize when a young [southern] girl rushed from the house and grabbed the animal’s mane. The young girl, with pink cheeks and shining eyes, stood like a dauntless statue” (15). And while Crane may, indeed, be playing on certain romantic notions by describing this young girl “with pink cheeks and shining eyes”—and image often associated with the flush of romance—her actions are anything but romantic. Thus, even though we are told that “The observant regiment, standing at rest in the roadway, whooped at once, and entered whole-souled upon the side of the maiden” (15), once again Crane sidesteps the romantic notion by adding that the regiment’s support of the southern girl is less to her benefit than it is to belittle the fat soldier. Further, the novel debunks the romantic aspect by reminding the reader that this distraction is, in fact, just that: “The men became so engrossed in this affair that they entirely ceased to remember *their own large war*” (my emphasis 15). But, mere paragraphs later, the regiment returns to its military service. This brief section therefore inverts the tendencies of the popular, romantic Civil War novel: the romantic novel eschews the “large war”—that is, the actual war itself—in lieu of the romantic sub-plot while *Red Badge* introduces the northern/southern romantic subplot as a farce. Indeed, it is momentary distraction, and “real” romance is nowhere to be seen.⁹

That popular representations in the 1890s of the Civil War are either mired in a historicity of simple time and place or distracted by sentimentalized and romantic subplots may all be seen to function within an ideology of national (re)unification. Both types of accounts, then, are of interest not for what they tell us about the Civil War but rather for what they fail or refuse to tell us about it, what they “write out” of the history of the war: *the actual violence of war itself*. This phenomenon of omission has been effectively analyzed by Elaine Scarry in an excellent essay entitled “Injury and the Structure of War” where she argues that histories of war (both properly historical and literary) must exorcise violence (or, to use her term, injury) from representation in order to present war as “an outcome [that] cannot be (or should not, or must not be) contested.”¹⁰ In a lengthy paragraph that bears reproducing here, Scarry outlines the structure of war and the (necessitated) omission of violence:

The main purpose of war is injuring. Though this fact is too self-evident and massive ever to be directly contested, it can be indirectly contested by many means and can disappear from view along many separated paths. It may disappear from view simply by being omitted: one can read many pages of an historic or strategic account of a particular military campaign [...] without encountering the acknowledgement that the purpose of the event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves. In any given instance, omission may occur out of the sense that this activity is too self-evident to require articulation; it may instead originate in a failure of perception on the part of the describer; again [and this is largely Scarry's position] it may arise out of an active desire to misrepresent the central content of war's activity [...].¹¹

Examining the multiple ways in which this misrepresentation by omission functions, Scarry argues that the predominant tendency of military histories is to alter or remove the language of the individuals in war and to substitute it with a meta-language *of* war:

the intricacies and complications of the massive geographical interactions between two armies of opposing [sides] tend to be represented without frequent reference to the actual injuries occurring to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers involved: the movements and actions of the armies are emptied of human content and occur as a rarefied choreography of disembodied events.¹²

And this realization of omission is not lost on Crane. As Henry recalls the weeks before he enlisted, he remembers that “The newspapers, the gossip of the village, his own picturings, had aroused him to an uncheckable degree. They were *in truth* fighting finely down there. Almost every day the newspapers printed accounts of a decisive victory” (4, my emphasis). What Henry “hears” about the war—from the newspapers and local gossip, largely fueled, of course, by the local papers—is distinctly non-corporeal. As J. Cutler Andrews notes in his study *The North Reports the Civil War*, because of “the excited state of the public mind [...] both press and government [felt] that it was neither wise nor safe to reveal the exact truth of [a] disgraceful episode.”¹³ As a result, Cutler continues, “[m]ost Northerners so

thoroughly believed that the South was playing a game of bluster and bluff that they fancied the war still might be won by a display of force and with a minimum of bloodshed” and, further, that the Northern press was quick to omit any Northern defeat and casualties “and to look forward to the future instead for victories yet to be one.”⁴ Not only is Henry’s “side” (the North) well on its way to a “decisive victory,” from these accounts there appears to be no wounded, virtually no deaths whatsoever.

Further, and still quite in line with Scarry’s structuration of war, are what in the previous quote are identified as Henry’s “own picturings.” Just a page earlier in the novel, we are given view of what these picturings are—though we may rightly assert that they are not, in fact, merely his own individual picturings:

He had, of course, dreamed of battles all his life—of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire. In visions he had seen himself in many struggles. He had imagined peoples secure in the shadow of his eagle-eyed prowess. But awake he had regarded battles as crimson blotches on the pages of the past. He had put them as things of the bygone with his thought-images of heavy crowns and high castles. There was a portion of the world’s history which he had regarded as the time of wars, but it, he thought, had been long gone over the horizon and had disappeared forever. (3)

The source(s) for these romanticized picturings are fairly obvious. Whether we want to locate the source in the Homeric myth-structure (as Warren D. Anderson has⁵) or Arthurian legends or any other romanticized representation of war, the effect is quite clear: while Henry does see blood in these struggles, it is always “vague” and absent. Actual violence and injury are surpassed by the “Greeklike struggle”: “They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them” (3).

Thus, the first sign of actual death in *Red Badge* doesn’t occur until the third chapter, and when it does, it is presented without blood and only after the fact of violence—that is, “the line encountered the body of a dead soldier” (22). What is unique, though, about this soldier’s death is that Crane doesn’t necessarily attribute the soldier’s death to battle; there is no mention of blood, no mention of a wound of any kind. Instead, “it was as if fate had betrayed the soldier” (22). This betrayal, as Henry appears to read it, removes any chivalry or honor from the death. It is, Crane tells us, incapable of telling Henry (or the reader) anything about the nature of war: “He [Henry] vaguely desired walk around and around the body and stare;

the impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question” (22). What, exactly, the “Question” is, though, Crane never tells us. Instead, he simply moves on to the next paragraph, leaving the image of the dead man behind.

The first real instance of battle *proper* doesn’t occur until the sixth chapter in *Red Badge*, and in it is most certainly not chivalry or heroism. In the moment of battle, Henry’s perceptions—up until this point largely mere conjecture as to how he might act in this moment—take what many critics have described as a distinctly impressionistic feel: Crane writes, “He began to exaggerate the endurance, the skill, and the valor of those who were coming. Himself reeling from exhaustion, he was astonished beyond measure at such persistency. They must be machines of steel” (39). As the tension increases, so does the impressionism: “To the youth it was an onslaught of redoubtable dragons [. . .] He waited in a sort of horrified, listening attitude. He seemed to shut his eyes and wait to be gobbled” (39). What Crane appears to be working towards here is clear; with the increase in tension, in fear, in the “unknown,” metaphors become more impressionistic.¹⁶ This increase in abstraction of meaning can be read as the increased difficulty Henry has in making any sort of sense for (and of) himself in the moment of battle. That is, Henry’s resorting to the image of the dragon leads us back to the discussions of the Homeric or Arthurian sense of battle; clearly, though, the chivalry with which he once viewed such tales is ultimately inaccessible in this moment.

Paralleling Henry is another soldier, obviously in the same state of mortal peril, “whose face had borne an expression of exalted courage, the majesty of he who dares give his life, was, at an instant, smitten abject” (39). Once this other soldier “blanched like one who has come to the edge of a cliff at midnight and is suddenly made aware” (39), Crane largely abandons the surreal metaphors and opts for a more direct observation of action, not sensory perception: “There was a revelation. He, too, threw down his gun and fled. There was no shame in his face” (39). It should be noted that the “awareness” that this soldier appears to display is modified by the use of “like”: Crane is not suggesting that this soldier, in fact, *did* become aware of something, but rather that his behavior, his *expression* is indescribable. There is no shame on his face to speak of because shame is an emotion that can occur retrospectively, in reading the moment (an issue I will address below). What this soldier experiences—as Crane writes—is the abject, the *inexpressible*: as Julia Kristeva posits in *Powers of Horror*,

The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the

fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.¹⁷

Thus, the “trance” that Henry “shakes” as he, too, begins to run is that of an attempt to make meaning out of what amounts to, in the moment, a meaningless situation or, rather, a situation which is *contrary* to meaning. What was on his face, Crane tells us, “was the horror of those things which he imagined” (40). What he imagined, though, Crane won’t—or, perhaps, can’t—tell us. It is as if what runs through Henry’s mind at this moment, like that which is reflected on his comrade’s face, is also abject, also beyond representation.

Further, the second scene of death provides little more meaning than the first. In fact, against Henry’s initial chivalric notions of war, we are told that “[t]here was a singular absence of heroic poses,” and even the officers—those who should, ideally, be the exemplars of heroism—“neglected to stand in picturesque attitudes” (34). The captain of Henry’s regiment, Crane writes, “had been killed in an early part of the action”:

His body lay stretched out in the position of a tired man resting, but upon his face there was an astonished and sorrowful look, as if he thought some friend had done him an ill turn. [. . .] Another grunted suddenly as if he had been struck by a club in the stomach. In his eyes was there was a mute, indefinite reproach. (35)

These two victims (though we don’t really know if the second, in fact, died) work to reinforce the lesson of the dead man stumbled upon. Or, rather, they serve to reinforce that with death there is no lesson at all. The captain’s face only provides an “astonished and sorrowful” look, and the second victim, similarly, displays only “a mute, indefinite reproach”—certainly not the grand meaning Henry hopes he should find in death. (It should be noted here that Crane reminds us of the *disunion* of the war in the phrase “as if [. . .] some friend had done him an ill turn”: this is quite reminiscent of the cliché that the Civil War pitted brother against brother). A few paragraphs later, after the enemy “charge has been repulsed,” the soldiers—Henry among them—are left “silent”: “Apparently they were *trying* to contemplate themselves” (35, my emphasis). Again, Crane points out that the meaning of the event—of a series of deaths—is absent. That these representations occur so early

in the novel is not peculiar; indeed, the entirety of the rest of the novel works predominantly to debunk such overly romantic notions of chivalry and glory.

It should be clear, then, that *Red Badge* acknowledges but ultimately refuses to merely reiterate dominant conceptions of the Civil War as presented in both popular histories and popular fictional accounts. Instead, what I will argue below, is that Crane's narrative works to reintroduce—to *reanimate*—the horror, the violence, and the injury of the Civil War that was largely omitted by stepping outside of any representation of the war that seeks to present it as a closed system, an historically isolated system, a system without the bodies and minds of the individuals—and the violence they enact and is enacted upon them—without which war itself would be an impossibility.

Reanimating Blood and Guts; or, a Different Kind of Specifics

“Nothing so delighted him,” Alfred Kazin tells us, “as the conviction held by Civil War Veterans that Stephen Crane had been in the Civil War himself.”¹⁸ Thus, while many early critics of *Red Badge* charged Crane with anti-nationalism in his depictions of American soldiers as cowards (see the controversy within the pages of the *Dial* magazine, most notably the vicious response by Civil War veteran General Alexander C. McClurg¹⁹), obviously Crane's imagination had led him to something quintessential about the nature of the individual in the face of battle. Where Crane got his information, given that it has been established that this “information” is not from the histories, romance novels, or soldier's journals, we will likely never truly know. It is possible, perhaps, that Crane interviewed veterans, posing questions to them that had not been posed before; it is also possible, as Lars Ahnebrink suggests, that the “source” of the narrative derives largely from the influence of Tolstoy and Zola; or, as a third option, we might be led to agree with Larzer Ziff who suggests that “He would supply this from his imagination.”²⁰ All of these are good possibilities but none of them account for his accuracy and, more importantly, specifics.

If, as I've argued above, Crane is little concerned with the specifics of time and place in terms of representing the Civil War, then we must look to a different kind of specifics. In an essay largely dedicated to the fiction of the Vietnam War, “War Stories: ‘Truth’ and Particulars,” Sean M. Braswell asserts that authors of war stories, “somehow, through words, [. . .] might impress the impact of [. . .] experience on the very nerves of their listeners and make them understand what [the soldier in war] felt.”²¹ Further, Braswell poses a question we may likely assume Crane would have asked of a post-Civil War generation: “how can people truly

understand something they have never themselves experienced?”²² The answer, as Braswell sees it, is not in relating *verifiable* facts and events—times, places, names—but is instead in being able to convey exactly what times, places, and names can’t get to: “the sheer unfamiliarity of it [. . .] the complete otherness of war.”²³ In essence, Braswell suggests, in order to convey the “truth” of war (his term of use), the author must essentially defamiliarize and disrupt any preconceived notions about war in its entirety.²⁴

In a little cited and discussed late essay, “Concerning the Accounts Given by the Residents of Hiroshima,” Georges Bataille addresses what might be considered the central problem in *representing* “the truth” of war and the atrocities contained therein. And while Bataille’s focus is obviously World War II and the hydrogen bomb that provided the closing “bracket” for that war, his essay suggests a more general phenomena: the disparity between accounts given in the moment (by those in the actuality and “action” of the war) and post-war accounts that attempt to render a certain (ideological) coherence or meaning to the moments of war. For those “in the action” of war (soldiers and civilians, victors and victims)—those actually existing between the concussions of bombs and discharges of firearms—the immediacy of war becomes (obviously, by means of necessity and the “death drive”) the only available perspective. That is, according to Bataille, “it is in isolation and in complete ignorance of [the material violence of war that] was suddenly upon them, that the revelation—the meager, shattering unending revelation—began for each of them.”²⁵ It is this “revelation” that Crane identifies within Henry. The revelation, though, is not a revelation of understanding—Henry here *does not* understand anything about the war or his place in it—but, rather, a revelation about the simple fact of death itself.

For the inhabitants of Hiroshima, Bataille continues, the largesse of the hydrogen bomb was lost in the attempts to make meaning in and only in that particular moment. It was not a moment of historic proportions for those who witnessed it—those who were *subject* to it—because “the individual in the streets [. . .] learned nothing from the colossal explosion. He submitted to it like an animal, not even knowing its gigantic scope. On the ground, for the isolated man, a bomb had exploded right near by; there was no momentous event, no leap into the future.”²⁶ What the “individual on the ground” witnessed, then, was not a moment of history but rather a moment without history: a moment momentarily outside of history and, by extension, *outside of meaning*. It is of little surprise, then, that Henry’s musings suggest that the nature of war—of history itself—seems to be beyond him. “For a time he had to labor to make himself believe,” Crane writes, “He could not

accept with assurance that he was about to mingle in one of those great affairs of the earth" (3). Henry cannot fathom himself as an agent of history because, at least in his own mind, as of yet, this moment has not been made historical.

The Red Badge of Courage is not a retelling of the events of the Civil War—as Hungerford and others have attempted to cast it—it is a “look at war, the red animal—war, the blood-swollen god” (23). The novel, then, must be read not as referencing some pre-existing written history, but (as Henry feels his place in war) the novel is “doomed alone to unwritten responsibilities” (23). And though I have no intention of suggesting that Henry is Crane or vice versa, we may apply this sense to what Crane felt his purpose was in writing the novel: to return to the history of war what had been up until then (and is still the case today in the 21st century) largely unwritten—violence, death, and chaos. While all of the historical accounts discussed above mention death, it is almost always presented in a highly abstracted form; indeed, even the most official of accounts—the *Battles and Leaders* texts—have, as the final entry, statistics on the death tolls and the causes (killed in action, died from wounds, etc.) but have *nothing* on the actual violence of combat. These numbers, therefore, can tell the reader nothing about battle.

We might be led, then, to assume that Crane’s narrative fails to truly convey the horror and atrocity of war. This, however, is not the case. In order to understand the function of Crane’s narrative, we may return to Braswell. For just as Braswell considers Vietnam war journalist Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, we can consider *Red Badge*: “He constructs no framework that a civilized reader can use to put the experience of war in perspective. Instead he allows the images and the soldiers to speak for themselves, bringing a surreal intensity to the events.”²⁷ It is not the time and place of a battle that is of central import, then; it is what cannot be codified by history books and romantic revisions. Thus, what Crane’s narrative attempts to convey—much like Herr’s book—is what historical specificities cannot achieve: the perceptions of the soldiers in *the moment of violence*.

Attempting to return to his regiment after his flight from battle, Henry stumbles upon a procession of wounded soldiers, finding himself caught within a moment of violence: “The youth joined this crowd and marched along with it. The torn bodies expressed the awful machinery in which the men had been entangled” (50). This description of the “awful machinery” which functions *solely* by its “produc[tion of] corpses” is, in essence, what marks Crane’s narrative as unique; war is not presented as an end result—a teleological system—but as a system of violent insatiability. War does not produce heroes; it produces mangled bodies. Of particular focus here is the soldier Crane identifies as “the tattered man,” who is first presented as simply as

bearing “an expression of awe and admiration” for a “bearded sergeant” (50). This initial image certainly seems to play off of the heroic nature of war until we realize that what initially appears to Henry as the “awe and admiration” for heroism is, most likely, a state of shock. As the tattered man attempts to talk with Henry, the violence this man has encountered becomes abundantly clear:

After a time he began to sidle near to the youth, and in a different way try to make him a friend. His voice was gentle as a girl’s voice and his eyes were pleading. The youth saw with surprise that the soldier had two wounds, one in the head, bound with a blood-soaked rag, and the other in the arm, making that member dangle like a broken bough. (50-51)

Again, the sheer corporeal violence enacted here works to de-romanticize the heroism of war. The tattered man’s voice—not the heroic, masculinized ballast of wartime oaths and declarations—is presented as “gentle as a girl’s.” More importantly is Henry’s realization of the actual violence sustained in battle of blood-soaked rags and dangling, near-amputated limbs, or, as Crane reemphasizes, “the bloody and grim figure” of the man (51).

Upon abandoning the tattered soldier (an equally unromantic move) and returning to his regiment—now with his own wound—Henry discovers that the violence of war he saw enacted on the tattered man is not exclusive to this single soldier. Indeed, Crane presents this image not as a peculiarity of war, but of the commonplace:

About him were the rows and groups of men that he had dimly seen the previous night. They were getting a last draught of sleep before the awakening. The gaunt, careworn features and dusty figures were made plain by this quaint light at the dawning, but it dressed the skin of the men in corpselike hues and made the tangled limbs appear pulseless and dead. [. . .] He believed for an instant that he was in the house of the dead, and he did not dare to move lest these corpses start up, squalling and squawking. [. . .] He saw that this somber picture was not a fact of the present, but a mere prophecy. (79)

The imagery here is strikingly similar to that of the tattered man—the corpselike appearance, the dangling, near-severed limbs. The similarity draws our attention not so much to the similarity *per se* but to the *reality* of the image, the insistence of

the image. Thus, that Crane tells us that “this somber picture was not a fact of the present” takes nothing away from reading this as *the moment of violence*, but rather that this moment is one that seems to repeat itself *ad nauseum*. That it is “a mere prophecy” is not a future projection—for Henry, for anyone—as much as it is the irrepressible *truth* of war itself: it is “the pitiless monotony of conflicts” (118).

Meaning in Death; or, the Problem of Teleology

There are, of course, numerous images of the viscerality of violence scattered through the pages of *Red Badge* and, most, if not all, are also an examination of death itself. Two of the most moving, though, are quite similar in their depiction of death and the collapse of meaning. The first occurs after Henry’s flight from battle. Attempting to find some sort of refuge (both physical and mental), Henry stumbles into what he perceives to be a sanctuary: “At length he reached place where the high, arching boughs made a chapel. [. . .] There was a religious half light” (46). This image of chapel implies a place of revelation, of, perhaps, the metaphysical understanding Henry so desperately seeks. Deliverance, though, is not to be found:

Near the threshold he stopped, horror-stricken at the sight of a thing. 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 bundle along the upper lip. (46)

Far from providing Henry with the spiritual solace and understanding he seeks—it is Henry’s own mind that transforms the forest into a chapel—the image of this dead soldier deconstructs any religious (and, we should note, nationalistic) symbolism. That is, Crane’s descriptions certainly play off of religious, Christian imagery but ultimately fail to conjure any sense of piety. The dead man—seated as he is as God is often perceived between heavenly columns—is “faded,” “melancholy,” and “dull,” not imbued with the glorious light of the heavens. Further, this dead man can offer no salvation. Holy words do not emanate from his open mouth; all that this dead man can express is death itself. Even the color of the mouth, once

the red imagery of the saving blood of the Lord, is merely an “appalling yellow.” To more fully understand the import of this image, we may return to Kristeva, “[a] wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. [. . .] The corpse, seen without God [. . .] is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.”²⁸ This dead body can provide no salvation for Henry; it can provide no meaning to the events he bears witness to.

The second image of a mouth incapable of expression occurs during the next battle. “The orderly sergeant of the youth’s company was shot through the cheeks,” Crane writes, “Its supports being injured, his jaw hung afar down, disclosing in the wide cavern of his mouth a pulsing mass of blood and teeth. And with it all he made attempts to cry out. In his endeavor there was a dreadful earnestness, as if he conceived that one great shriek would make him well” (121). Again, on the face of death there is only death; from the mouth of the sergeant—the authority, the “leader”—comes only corporeal material, blood, teeth. And despite his attempts to cry out—to express, to expurgate—he emits only silence. There is no ascension, no deliverance. The only movement, Crane describes, is “[t]he youth saw him presently go rearward” (121). This “rearward,” is not a movement up to an understanding Heaven or even down to an equally understanding Hell, it is simply back, out of sight, out of meaning itself.

On this desire for death to have meaning, we may look to Bataille in his essay “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice” where he formulates the fundamental problem of seeking meaning in death: “In order for Man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living—watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self-) consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being.”²⁹ The possibility of this, obviously, is highly problematic. For death to have meaning it must be experienced by the individual who seeks this meaning but, if actually dead, no meaning for the individual can occur. The way around this, Bataille suggests, is through the subterfuge of the sacrifice: by imposing death on another animal body, “the sacrificer identifies himself with the animal that is struck down dead. And so he dies in seeing himself die [. . .] But it is a comedy! At least it would be a comedy if some other method existed which could reveal to the living the invasion of death [. . .].”³⁰ That is, the “knowledge,” the “understanding” that is acquired in this subterfuge is not, in fact, the knowledge of death that is ultimately sought. For the individual soldier, the man on the ground in the moment of violence, there can be no genuine meaning whatsoever. Meaning in death—like any meaning constructed linguistically—can only occur by a negation of the individual (the

erasure of difference) and an imposition of a totalizing meaning: *a meaning the same for all*.

Conclusion: Public Meaning, Private Memories

As I have attempted to establish, there is a conflict within *Red Badge* between what amounts to violence devoid of coherent meaning and the (later) imposition of meaning—of history—onto that violence. Tied to this, of course, is the central discrepancy of the perspective of the individual in the moment which is rooted in (and only in) the violence that is war and the imposed historical teleology that seeks, by omission, to negate the role of both violence and the individual. The omission of violence—of death itself—from the history of the Civil War is (as it is for any war) in many ways not terribly surprising. For the individual, the man on the ground, the omission of the visceral, corporeal, violence—in short, *the atrocity that is war*—is excised out of a need for survival. But it is now for a survival *beyond the moment*. That is, as Richard Holmes describes in *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle*, many soldiers upon exiting the realm of battle lock traumatic memories “away like an album of horrible photographs [. . .] viewed only with pain and reluctance: indeed, a few of the images may be so hideous that they are excised altogether.”³¹ But, of course, as Freud would outline more than fifty years after the Civil War, such trauma can never fully excised: There is, always, the return of the repressed. Most often, though, those who actually experienced the trauma of war are incapable of representing their trauma, their history. It is, as Cathy Carruth argues in her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, “the traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”³²

That the subject of trauma becomes a “symptom” of history leads us to understand the omission of their perspectives from what becomes, only after the fact, history itself. That is, as with *The Battles and Leaders* series with which I began this analysis, what does not conform to a history that reduces war strictly to its political aftereffects—which, of course, seek to present the war as a closed system, a system already established in a meaning of (re)union—must be presented, if presented at all, as abhorrent. How, then, do we situate the war novel? Or, perhaps more accurately phrased, how do we read a novel with such specific historical connotations? The relationship between the war as event and the war as narrative—by “sheer volume” or intensity we might say—must be understood in terms specific to the unique place (as moment and discourse) that (the) war occupies. We must then pose a new set of questions to this unique historical and aesthetic relationship: To what extent

is the war, in fact, the subject? Or is the subject simply placed in the setting of war? To what extent is historical accuracy taken and, perhaps more importantly, which historical discourse(s) are prioritized (the victor or the victim, victor as moral victim, victim as moral victor)? How does the specific aesthetic form respond to and reanimate the event(s) to which it must ultimately claim as “source?” And, lastly, what function does the novel play in the (furthering) development of discourses of war and violence generally? *The Red Badge of Courage*, I have attempted to display, works to reanimate the abject, to return to war its essential aspects of violence—its injury, its death—in order to remind us, as readers, as secondary subjects of war: that the voices of those who cannot speak or are silenced may still be heard and, thus, may alter our awareness of a violent historical past and, more importantly, our ambivalence about our own violent present and potential future. *The Red Badge of Courage* functions, then, as Crane himself wrote, to reanimate those “crimson blotches on the pages of the past.”

Notes

1. Harold R. Hungerford, “That Was at Chancellorsville: The Factual Framework of *The Red Badge of Courage*,” *American Literature* 64, no. 4 (1963): 520.
2. *Ibid.*, 521.
3. Robert Johnson and Clarence Buel, eds. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil: The Opening Battles*. Vol.1. 1887 (New York: Century Co. 1887-88), X.
4. Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 80.
5. For further discussion of the relationship between Crane’s novel and capitalism, see Daniel Shanahan, “The Army Motif in *The Red Badge of Courage* as a Response to Industrial Capitalism,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 32, no. 4 (1996): 399-410.
6. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War* (New York: Bantam 1964), 89. All subsequent references are indicated parenthetically in the text of the essay.
7. Kathleen Diffley, “The Roots of Tara: Making War Civil,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1984): 369.
8. *Ibid.*, 362.
9. See also Alice Fahs, “The Feminized Civil War: Gender, Northern Popular Literature, and the Memory of the War, 1861-1900,” *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 4 (1989): 1461-94.
10. Elaine Scarry, “Injury and the Structure of War,” *Representations* 10 (1985): 38.
11. *Ibid.*, 1.
12. *Ibid.*, 7.

13. J. Culter Andrews, *The North Reports the Civil War* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1955), 77.
14. *Ibid.*, 77, 100-101.
15. Warren D. Anderson, "Homer and Stephen Crane," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 19, no. 1 (1964): 77-86.
16. See, for example, Joseph Conrad's discussions of Crane's fictive techniques in "Stephen Crane: A Note Without Dates" where he declares that Crane's greatest "gift" as a writer was his "impressionism of phrase." Further, Conrad notes that Crane
- had indeed a wonderful power of vision, which he applied to the things of this earth and of our mortal humanity with a penetrating force that seemed to reach, within life's appearances and forms, the very spirit of life's truth. His ignorance of the world at large — he had seen very little of it — did not stand in the way of his imaginative grasp of facts, events, and picturesque men.
- Joseph Conrad, *Notes On Life and Letters*, ed. J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 45.
17. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press 1982), 1-2.
18. Alfred Kazin, introduction to *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War* (New York: Bantam, 1964), xiv.
19. The original source is from a letter written to the *Dial*, April 16 1896; reprinted in Richard Weatherford, *Stephen Crane* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 138-41.
20. Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York: Viking, 1966), 195.
21. Sean Braswell, "War Stories: 'Truth' and Particulars," *War, Literature and the Arts* 11, no. 2 (1999), 148.
22. *Ibid.*, 148.
23. *Ibid.*, 149.
24. For a similar connective strategy, see James A. Stevenson, "Beyond Stephen Crane: *Full Metal Jacket*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16 (1988): 238-243.
25. Georges Bataille, "Concerning the Accounts Given by the Residents of Hiroshima," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Carruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 223.
26. *Ibid.*, 224.
27. Braswell, "War Stories," 151.
28. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3-4.
29. Georges Bataille, "Hegel, Death, Sacrifice," *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 19.

30. Ibid., 19.

31. Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 31.

32. Cathy Carruth, introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Carruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.



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