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"The Red Badge of Courage": A Study in Bad Faith

"He is alone with the problem of courage", wrote Conrad about the youth in Stephen Crane's war novel. "In this he stands for the symbol of all untried men."[1]

These sentences, one might say, defined the focus of Conrad's interest in a friend's book which had affected his own literary career almost thirty years earlier. In none of his three essays on Crane does he explicitly admit to have known *The Red Badge of Courage* while he was working on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, though it has been convincingly argued from external evidence that he must have read it before writing his own book.[2] Crane, fourteen years the younger man, but with a longer publishing record at that time, did recognize the affinities between his own "creative experience",[3] as Conrad put it, and Conrad's. Joseph Conrad was the only English author Crane desired to meet after his arrival in London in 1897.[4]

> "Nothing could have been more flattering", Conrad recalled in 1923, "than to discover that the author of *The Red Badge of Courage* appreciated my effort to present a group of men held together by a common loyalty and a common perplexity in a struggle not with human enemies but with the hostile conditions testing their faithfulness to the conditions of their own calling.
>
> Apart from the imaginative analysis of his own temperament tried by the emotions of a battlefield Stephen Crane dealt in his book with the psychology of the mass — the army; while I — in mine — had been dealing with the same subject on a much smaller scale and in more specialized conditions — the crew of a

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[1] Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays*, New York, 1926, p. 123.

[2] Bruce Johnson, "Joseph Conrad and Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*", *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters*, Vol. XLVIII, 1963, pp. 649—655.

[3] Conrad, *o. p.*, p. 95.

[4] *Ib.*, p. 94.

merchant ship, brought to the test of what I may venture to call the moral problem of conduct."[5]

In order to stress the similarity between their works Conrad here neglects to say that Crane's is essentially a "monodrama", as he put it in his preface to Crane's novel in 1925, an "analysis of the emotions in the inward moral struggle .... of one individual".[6] The implications of their common theme are often considered in critical examinations of Conrad, but the nature of the test undergone by Crane's hero has usually been overshadowed by other critical interests. In recent years an acute article by Stanley B. Greenfield[7] and a chapter in Donald B. Gibson's highly pertinent book on Crane[8] have mainly concentrated on this issue by putting questions about the ambiguities of the novel's ending. Its interpretation, according to them, has to depend on the way in which nature and human action are correlated. In other words, the philosophic presuppositions as they are worked out by the author, determine the ultimate meaning of the story.

Usually Crane's book is considered as a picture of war, admittedly seen through the point of view of one individual, frequently as an image of murdering Nature which makes human plans irrelevant to the development of larger movements. Such readings, logically, associate the novel with naturalism and determinism, important trends in the spirit of the epoch. In such a context Fleming is only an "emotional puppett".[9] On the other hand, according to a history of American literature between 1865 and 1914, which does not make reference to any such universal trend of thought and rules out any possible European literary model, Crane "moved sideways through American society by translating it into the Civil War and himself into Henry Fleming."[10] The youth is "merely an aspect of the collective — not community, but — chaos."[11] Either way, we see, the stress falls on the total space of the novel. It may therefore be interesting to turn the tables and consider the novel as a vehicle used by the author for the sole purpose of allowing his young soldier to undergo his test.

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[5] *Ib.*, pp. 94—95.

[6] *Ib.*, pp. 124, 121.

[7] "The Unmistakeable Stephen Crane", *PMLA*, Vol. LXXIII, December 1958, pp. 562—572.

[8] *The Fiction of Stephen Crane*, Carbonsdale and Edwardsville, 1968.

[9] Charles Child Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism, a Divided Stream*, Minneapolis, 1956, p. 79.

[10] Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1967, p. 63.

[11] *Ib.*

The narration casually introduces him into the opening picture, which presents a company about to join a campaign. "There was a youthful private who listened with eager ears to the words of the tall soldier and to the varied comments of his comrades."[12] From here onwards the author's attention centers fully on the youth, soon formulating the preoccupation in the sign of which the whole story is told: "He tried to mathematically prove to himself that he would not run from a battle". The wish to have scientific certainty is characteristic both of the time (of Crane's writing!) and of the young man's need for a non-religous authority to account for his behaviour. Inapplicable as they are to the problem, the methods of science are further evoked: "He was an unknown quantity. He saw that he would again be obliged to experiment as he had in early youth. He must accumulate information of himself and meanwhile he resolved to remain close upon his guard lest those qualities of which he knew nothing should everlastingly disgrace him". This seems to be the only way by which a secular individual can attempt to control the suspected unidentified forces from within. His panic-fear about himself grows, and "as his imagination went forward to fight, he saw hideous possibilities. He contemplated the lurking menaces of the future, and failed in an effort to see himself standing stoutly in the midst of them".

The problem is presented starting from a zero level, that is by defining the hero's initial situation. It is a fundamental one, concretely enough delineated, but universally applicable. To experience it fully the person cannot be an average man. One would like to invert the thought of an intelligent early British reviewer and a seasoned soldier, George Wyndham: "In order to show the features of modern war, he takes a subject — a youth with a peculiar temperament, capable of exaltation and yet morbidly sensitive".[13] It is because he wants to explore man in an extreme situation that Crane places him into the condition of warfare!

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[12] All the quotations from the novel come from the Norton Critical Edition of *The Red Badge of Courage*, edited by Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long, New York, 1962. This volume is also the source for all the quotations from "passages not excluded in the original manuscript but not present in the first edition of 1895", whereas passages crossed out in the manuscript versions are quoted from the "Footnotes to *The Red Badge of Courage*" in the Signet Classic edition of the novel, New York and Toronto, 1960, edited by R. W. Stallman.

[13] "A Remarkable Book", *New Review*, London, XIV (January, 1896), pp. 30—40, reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition volume (see note 12). The quoted sentence occurs on p. 190 of that volume.

What annoyed Crane in the series of articles on "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War" in the *Century* was precisely that "some of those fellows .... don't tell how they *felt* in those scraps. They spout enough of what they *did*, but they're as emotionless as rocks".[14] Crane's hero, on the contrary, has the subtle capacity of questioning himself. Potentially this is a Jamesian quality which carries James's characters into multiple dramas, each unrepeatable in its kind, the terms of which crystallize as the hero progresses through a series of paradoxes. Crane's young man however undergoes the common curve of experience that can be expected in any war situation, and the point at issue is how he reacts. This general moral drama is a special type within a possible wider range. In it the world as a whole acts as opponent and partner, and cannot be analysed in highly individualized characters. Basically it is close to the cosmic scheme of XIX century American fiction.[15] For the human beings involved in it, elementary physical survival is at stake. To Crane, namely,

> violence is the very essence of life, not in the broad Darwinian sense of a struggle for existence or the survival of the fittest, but rather in the sense that the proving and testing of oneself, conceived both realistically and symbolically, entails the violent and the deeply emotional, that the finding of oneself occurs best in moments of stress and is often an act of violence. To Crane, therefore, war as an allegorical setting for the emergence of youth into knowledge embodies both the violence of this birth and the commonplaces of life which the birth reveals...[16]

This makes it plausible to treat Crane in the context of naturalism as a view of life and as an aesthetics of fiction. But, as Donald Pizer rightly warns us, naturalism is not "essentially realism infused with a pessimistic determinism",[16a] as the convenient formula has it. "Naturalism reflects an affirmative ethical conception of life, for it asserts the value of all life by endowing the lowest character with emotion and defeat and with moral ambiguity, no matter how poor or ignoble he may seem."[17] This view corresponds to what we find in the early Crane or in Dreiser, but *The Badge of Courage* transcends the provisions even of this enlightened definition of naturalism, because it explores the relationship

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[14] John Berryman, *Stephen Crane*, in The American Men of Letters Series, 1950, p. 66.

[15] This scheme is apparent from a number of studies on the American novel, most remarkably perhaps from that by Richard Chase (*The American Novel and Its Tradition*, New York, 1957).

[16] Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1966, p. 26.

[16a] *Ib.*, p. 11.

[17] *Ib.*, p. 14.

between individual action and environment. Maggie, on the contrary, is a passive creature, as are the other characters in Crane's Bowery tales. In Dreiser we see man's acts, but their effects are swamped by the total drive of society, the laws of which are identical with those of nature.

Crane agreed with the reviewers that his novel was a psychological portrayal of fear,[18] but if one studies the book more closely through the young man's perspective one finds that it deals with fear at one remove. "He dreads not danger, but fear itself",[19] as Conrad put it. It is about the fear of being affraid, the foundering in fear and the course of events in which it is overcome. Though it is a story, it is one in which the central theme is never twisted or sacrificed to the requirements of a plot; never abstract or merely general. By no means allegorical, neither a moral fable nor an exemplification of a thesis — it is universally valid and by force of the way in which it is presented it almost amounts to a general phenomenology of fear: one can perhaps consider it as a work unique in its kind in XIX century fiction.

The author himself was hardly aware of the originality of the book. Contrary to the XIX century novelistic tradition his inclinations were towards short fiction, a simple story line with hardly any ramifications, which develops in scenes, episodes, forming a causal nexus and psychological continuity, but achieves a staccato effect. Crane's ambition is to create an overall impact rather than to model full-scale personalities or life histories, His characters lack the Dreiserian density of specification.[20] They hardly have even names and there is only a general indication of their provenance before they find themselves in the situation which Crane chooses as his proper subject.

Crane did not tackle the Civil War out of any interest in history. The authentic circumstances from particular battles served him as furniture for the creation of his narrative space: he may have wanted to strike out from the claustrophobic world of the Bowery which fills his early stories, into a wider playground of human action. But the narrow perspective employed in the earlier works is maintained in the new medium. Names are used only in dialogue, individualized figures are few and denoted mainly by some external feature, the military operations are presented *in vacuo*, unrelated to

[18] Stephen Crane, *Letters*, Edited by R. W. Stallman and Lillian Gilkes, New York, 1960, p. 158.

[19] Conrad, *o. c.*, see note 1, p. 123.

[20] With reference to Crane, James's term can be more profitably applied to Dreiser.

the historical epoch which could suggest some purpose or reason for them, all indications of time and place being reduced to a minimum — the reader knows that the action takes place in America, 'rebels' are mentioned — and no ideology or even politically coloured sentiment is referred to beyond a reverence for "the flag". Stylistic patterns from folk-tale and biblical narration are used ('there was a . . .', 'one day', 'it came to pass'), so that the whole work assumes the connotations of a fable. But the story of Private Fleming's various battles is not the account of a specific event which would lend it suggestions of legendary or mythic quality, just as it is not a realistic acount of particular character or individualized environment which might invite parallels with Howells or Dreiser. It is a new type of fiction. Some sort of forbidding scrupulousness and consistency of execution make it, in its own context of the American fiction of its time, analogous to early Robbe-Grillet in the literary context of *his* time still dominated by psychological motivation in fiction: both in their respective moments refuse to engage in generalization or to give their assent to moral evaluations. A comparison with the depiction of war in Tolstoy and Zola — both of whom Crane had read — does not really serve. Not because Crane's ostensive subject was part of the American civil war rather than of European history, but because his artistic purpose was different: to extract a universal and basic human phenomenon from the all-embracing concatenations of warfare.

At the same time, Crane's work is *there* in terms of a magnificent texture which stands for a rich, varied and striking set of circumstances: the world as perceived from the point of view of a young soldier. The technique practiced by Crane is usually called impressionism. The first one to use the term seems to have been Conrad, in a letter to Crane of the 1st December 1897 ("You are a complete impressionist"[21]), and four days later in a letter to Edward Garnett ("His eye is very individual and his expression satisfies me artistically. He certainly is *the* impressionist and his temperament is curiously unique. Hih thought is concise, connected, never very deep — yet often startling. He is *the only* impressionist and *only* an impressionist").[22] Conrad's admiration for Crane's originality implied important qualifications of which more will be said later, and he obviously did not associate him with a school of painting. Nor had Garnett other arts in mind when he first publicly used that term in his *Academy* article next year:

[21] Stephen Crane, *Letters*, p. 154.

[22] *Ib.*, p. 155.

"He is the chief impressionist of our day as Sterne was the great impressionist, in a different manner, of his day".[23]

Impressionism as a literary term can only partly be an analogue to the same word used for music or painting, though R. W. Stallman even talks about Crane's prose pointillism and develops the parallel to some length.[24] His purpose is to show how Crane's imagery forms intricate and studiously achieved interrelationships. Stallman's penetrating reading has detected many such patterns, but his interpretations of them have often been contested. On principle, anyway, if Crane's text can bear a symbolic exegesis then the analogy with painting is misplaced, because, as Isaac Rosenfeld rightly objects, "the significant thing about the new movement in painting was its turning away from literary meanings to a preoccupation with purely plastic and formal values".[25] No doubt Crane's technique occasionally produces symbolic suggestions, but too heavy a bias should not perhaps be placed there as one reads him. Crane himself conceived the novel to be "a succession of sharply outlined pictures, which pass before the reader as a panorama",[26] and the basic pattern of his narrative seems to be part of this dominant stylistic feature. No wider perspective or judgement is offered which would exceed the limits of the young man's horizon, and the story has universal relevance because the individual occurences, the fleeting impressions, produce the trajectory of the youth's experience. Its principle of unity is contained in the initial situation: the story can be read as a working out of the young man's problem in confronting danger: "It had suddenly appeared to him that perhaps in a battle he might run. He was forced to admit that as far as war was concerned he knew nothing of himself".

The process starting from such a realization is a worthwhile subject in adult fiction of all times, and to the extent in which *The Red Badge of Courage* deals with it, Crane's novel speaks to the reader of today. Conrad, whose opinions on other writers are usually rather uninteresting, was the only one to underline this, because it came so near to his own basic vision of man, whereas the routine critics of his day stressed the *tour de force* of presenting a realistic picture of war, many of them not even knowing that the author had never seen a battlefield. Good readers of course have always admired Crane's

[23] Edward Garnett, *Friday Nights*, London, 1922 (The Saint Giles Library, No. 35, 1940, p. 161).

[24] R. W. Stallman, *The Houses That James Built*, published by The Michigan State University Press, 1961, pp. 83—85.

[25] "Stephen Crane as Symbolist", *The Kenyon Review*, Spring, 1953, Vol. XV, No. 2, p. 314.

[26] R. W. Stallman: *Stephen Crane: An Omnibus*, London, 1954, p. 190.

consistent exercise in a technique of self-imposed limitation and have been disturbed by the quiet brutality in his expression. These therefore need not be re-examined here.

The young man's anxiety opens him to the widest spectrum of emotional experiences. "He would have liked to have discovered another who suspected himself." His friend, the tall soldier, Jim Conklin, is perfectly honest in his "serene unconcern": he will fight if everybody will, but if "the boys" start to run he will too. The other man to whom he talks, the loud soldier, asserts that he will do his "share of fighting" — and does not even notice that the youth's question comes from a lack of courage and not out of boastful arrogance.

The level of sensitivity displayed by the boy in these enquiries contrasts with what we know of him from a brief retrospective account: he has enlisted because of his adolescent thrill about battling and because so many others around him have. Henry's history oscillates between the possibilities of self-awareness and a flat acceptance of self-illusion. Limited to the young man's moral and perceptual horizon the author's procedure also has two aspects, though they do not coincide with Fleming's. It partly offers great insights and partly does not reveal anything beyond the perceived surface.

To have enlisted has been the result of an ignorant acceptance of a standard of feeling and behaviour produced and boosted for mass consumption. Though outstanding among his fellow soldiers by his need to reflect on his personal possibilities, he enters his first battle again as an externally operated being: "one morning he found himself in the ranks of his prepared regiment", and when he perceived that "the time had come, (that) he was about to be measured" — his immediate reaction is fear.

Rarely however does Crane speak about fear directly, even when it is the underlying feeling; instead he tells us what goes on in Henry's consciousness. As soon as he sees that he is enclosed by his regiment as in "a moving box" it occurs to him that he "had not enlisted of his free will". He finds that he is in a trap, the generals are "idiots", and he "must break from the ranks and harangue his comrades". But he realizes that "the untested men, quiet and absorbed, deeply engrossed in this march even if tottering with fear . . . would laugh at his warning". So he assumes the attitude of "one who knows that he is doomed alone to unwritten responsibilities". The officers have no appreciation of fine minds, of his profound and fine senses. He is alone in seeing lack of purpose as the army covers the same ground by advancing and withdrawing.

However, as soon as the enemy appears he loses concern for himself. "He became not a man but a member. He felt that something of which he was a part... was in a crisis". A mysterious fraternity is born of the smoke and danger of death. "He felt the subtle battle brotherhood more potent even than the cause for which they were fighting."

The cause, never achieving formulation in the novel, is a vague presence anyway; but the feeling of brotherhood at this point could easily be mistaken for a more fully achieved value than it is: hardly can it be said to be more than a sense of coherence among men facing the same fire, which disintegrates as soon as the regiment is not exposed to the enemy as a compact mass. It is humanly engaging, this short-lived experience of unity in this first battle, where the youth together with the other men holds on to his ground with "a singular absence of heroic poses", has the proper sentiments for the flying emblem, and is, when the respite comes, surprised at the shining sun in the blue, clear sky.

> So it was all over at last! The supreme trial had been passed. The red, formidable difficulties of war had been vanquished.
>
> He went into an ecstasy of self-satisfaction. He had the most delightful sensations of his life. Standing as if apart from himself, he viewed that last scene. He perceived that the man who had fought thus was magnificent.
>
> He felt that he was a fine fellow. He saw himself even with those ideals which he had considered as far beyond him. He smiled in deep gratification.

Yet immediately the enemy appears again. The shock of the unexpected renewal of danger now causes the men to fly — and the youth seeing some others do it, runs too.

During his roaming in the wilderness, on the inroads and backways of the battlefield, he has, except in his two horrifying encouters with death, one nagging concern: how to justify his cowardice, his desolidarity with his fellow-soldiers. He tries to claim higher knowledge, a certainty that maintaining discipline and attempting to contain the enemy are in vain, a conviction that survival is the superior duty. He grudges the dead soldiers their unambiguous position. Experiencing an utter separation from his fellows he realizes that their defeat would serve his interests — it would cover up his escape. The irony of his wound — inflicted by another fleeing soldier — is that it becomes a palpable alibi.

When he returns to his friends, the lie that he was wounded in battle, succeeds perfectly. He is incorporated into his regiment, as some others are who had long been missing and considered lost. He finds the loud soldier Wilson changed after the day's experiences: "He showed a quiet belief in his purposes and his abilities. And this inward confidence evidently

enabled him to be indifferent to little words of other men aimed at him". Insensitively however, the youth bullies him and even intends emotionally to blackmail him with the letter to his family that Wilson had earlier in a moment of despair deposited with Henry. His criticism of the generals and the purposeless shifting through the woods is the same as before. He himself feels not to have changed, but his standard is what *he* seems in the eyes of *others:* "He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man".

Henry, readers have generally felt, is a fairly unlikeable character up to this point in the story, not simply an anonymous average mortal with the kind of feelings that can be expected from anyone in a similar position. But it is not just that Henry is not a naturalistic Everyman, a passive creature hounded by the overpowering forces of blind nature. It is true that he finds himself in his situation as a result of his non-individualized state of mind, but once he is there he reasons with detachment and a distinct capacity for self-observation. This double aspect of his personality offers the author two lines of development. Such a structure of fictional character is perfectly credible. Henry as a person has no moral core which would make his reactions independent from what immediately affects him. Crane credits him with a feeling of solidarity which lasts while he is tied together with others — before undergoing any crucial experience. Later however Henry tries to account for his antisocial weakness through a series of arguments which are to justify his immediate cowardice by a pretence upon timeless wisdom. When he is confronted by the fact that the resisters have survived and won the day his one concern is how he will appear to the others. The red badge is a visible sign which he rightly expects to enable him to escape the fate of an object in the eyes of others. The evidence of courage and suffering puts him beyond the reach of their possible judgement.

So Henry refuses to discover his authentic self either in its relation to his own behaviour or to other people. This dominant feature of Crane's young man, which Sartre would call bad faith,[27] persists throughout the novel (it is suspended

[27] According to the Glossary to *Being and Nothingness,* bad faith is: "A lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness. Through bad faith a person seeks to escape the responsible freedom of Being-for-itself...". (Jean-Paul Sartre: *Being and Nothingness,* New York, 1968, p. 800). Cf. Hazel Barnes, *The Literature of Possibility,* Lincoln, Nebraska, 1959, p. 65: "His bad faith — like all bad faith — consists in refusing to accept a true view of himself as a combination of being and nothingness and in evading the responsibility of free decisions, whether with respect to the past or the future". This refers to a character in one of Sartre's stories.

in the combat chapters XVII to XXIII, and this difference accounts for the contradictory readings which the book seems to invite). Even the usual naturalistic themes which are part of the *Zeitgeist*, quite apart from Crane's personal philosophy, are included in Henry's game of self-deception. Almost a parodic Emersonian, he detects around him signs intended for him by Nature. Watching a squirrel escape from danger, "the youth wended, feeling that Nature was of his mind. She re-enforced his argument with proofs that lived where the sun shone".

Later however he judges Nature to be malevolent or indifferent — a cause of mutual destruction of its creatures. Crane excised[28] several rather elaborate trains of throught to that effect, feeling perhaps that it gave the youth an intellectual complexity out of tune with his immediate reactions. He also left out meditations in which Henry sees himself as a unique creature which — although incapable of playing the role of a "prophet of a world-reconstruction" — sees himself "frustrating the plans of the unchangeable, making of fate a fool".

On his return to the regiment he is despondent because of "all his grapplings and tuggings with fate and the universe", but is consoled at having arrived at the opinion that there was a "universal resemblance" and that there "were many of his type". His sensibility towards others is coarsened: "he could no longer tolerate in himself a spirit of fellowship for poets". Happy for having justified his absence, he feels that "Nature was a fine thing moving with a magnificent justice. The world was fair and wide and glorious". His imprecations had been mistaken; "it was only the doomed and the damned who roared with sincerity at circumstance".

Except for the last quoted phrase, all the passages referred to in which Henry generalizes about his and his neighbours' relations to the universe, have been cancelled or omitted from the first edition in 1895. It is not simply that Crane excised sections stating the Naturalist creed. He almost completely left out the account of Henry's musings, that which carries the youth beyond the observed phenomena in his environment. It was perhaps a question of method, of wanting, for the purposes of the story, to keep the young man simple and ordinary.

According to the same logic Crane could have cancelled Henry's initial questioning, and it is lucky that he did not do so. This inconsistency namely gives value and meaning to

[28] The quotations from the excised passages are based on the "Footnotes to *The Red Badge of Courage*", (pp. 209—220) in the Signet Classic volume *The Red Badge of Courage and Selected Stories*, edited by R. W. Stallman, New York and Toronto, and London, 1960. Cf. note 12.

the concrete presentation of his perceptions. Thought and moral reflexion do not control the story. Instead, the thematic centre of the whole work turns out to be Henry's immediate experience of death, especially in two short episodes which are among the great scenes in American literature.

Near the battlefield Henry had observed dead men, but they appear as objects which make death seem a sort of sleep. Towards the end of Chapter VII Henry's withdrawal from his fellows reaches its deepest point in the obscurity of a dense pine forest, while the "high arching boughs made a chapel". Entering it he is "being looked at by a dead man", whose disintegrating body is being consumed by ants. "The youth gave a shriek as he confronted the thing. He was for moments turned to stone before it. He remained staring into the liquid —looking eyes. The dead man and the living man exchanged a long look." Confronted by a horrible sight of the material substratum of death the hero becomes an object under the look of death.

The connotations are many: the natural milieu had been described in terms of a place of worship, and at the altar an unknown body in uniform standing for any soldier assumes the meaning of a superior subjectivity against which the young man is powerless. This is a scene which by far transcends the trappings of naturalism and becomes an emblem of a fundamental relationship of human existence. One, we might add, pointing beyond the ontic level, open both to religious and to atheistic interpretation.

The other scene follows soon, after some casual encounters. It parallels the earlier one by containing a moment of mutual recognition, yet this time with a friend of Henry's youth, one whom he had known in his native village. Jim Conklin's torn body, his side "as if it had been chewed by wolves", imparts to the youth the horror of suffering before the actual act of dying in a semblance of a "solemn ceremony. There was something ritelike in these movements of the doomed soldier. And there was a resemblance in him to a devotee of a mad religion . . . ." (the manuscript even had "priest" for "devotee").

Though arguments for a Christian interpretation of the novel have been convincingly disputed, the connotations of a sacramental vision of human dying have been activated in this scene with supreme imaginative power. It is also the only one in the book in which Henry expresses a feeling of personal attachment and community ("I'll take care of yer, Jim! I'll take care of yeh! I swear t'Gawd I will!").

Together the two scenes form the peak of the novel and the second one offers a view of the experience of death in its palpable culmination: the moment of dying itself. This is what

warfare is really about — and Crane suggests that a "red badge of courage" is only a misleading irrelevant symbol of it. In the novel it first appears in a wish in bad faith for "a wound, a red badge of courage" to substitute "the letters of guilt he felt burned into his brow" — an interesting inversion of a well-known emblem in the American cultural tradition. If, as it is claimed, Crane got the idea from the red badge with which general Philip Kearny proudly distinguished the men under his own command in battle,[29] the cruel irony could not have escaped the veteran establishment. Their attack on the book when it first appeared can be understood not only on a general level of morale and ideology, but as an outburst of righteous anger over a quite specific act of nihilism.

To a modern reader the highmark of the book lies there, in the death scenes and in their implied rejection of both individual self-deception and official pieties, which extends over the whole work. Yet the shape of the novel, the trend of the action, point to a different intention. If the first sixteen chapters show the young man's problem, his attempt to undergo his test, his failure, withdrawal from and eventual return to the place of his initial situation the last eight chapters are devoted to showing him — by bravely fighting in three battles — as finally passing his test into manhood. On the level of physical action and of a conventional image of courage this part of the novel is unquestionigly most dynamic and ends in fulfilment. The writing in this part, however, is not so successful, it is full of "chromatic splashes that at times deafen and confuse"[30] as Wells said praising "The Open Boat" at the expense of *The Red Badge of Courage*. One would even go beyond this metaphor suggestive of impressionism, and compare the battle scenes with large Victorian canvasses recording historical events, which are larger tributes to the publicly acknowledged nobility of act and feeling than they are pictorial expressions of genuine human anguish and energy. And though the three battles are divided by interludes of comparative quiet and recuperation, the sense of rhythm between episodes, unobtrusive but aesthetically esential in the first part, is not sufficiently felt in the last third. So the overall effect of that section is tiring. The main reason for this however is that the inner human drama, which so far was the main sustenance and the core of the presentation, has evaporated.

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[29] Cecil D. Eby, Jr., "The Source of Crane's Metaphor *Red Badge of Courage*", *American Literature,* XXXII (May, 1960), pp. 205, 207.

[30] H. G. Wells, "Stephen Crane. From an English Standpoint", *North American Review,* CLXXI, August 1900, p. 237.

It is true that Henry's bravery is convincing and psychologically acceptable. His main worry, that he would prove himself to be less than adequate compared to others, has been laid — thanks to an affliction which turned out to be a trick of lucky chance — and at the same time this has secured him a vantage point at the moment when important experience has been achieved by the whole regiment. But now the enemy advances again. Henry's friend appraises the situation: "If they keep on a-chasin' us they'll drive us all inteh th'river". This makes the youth cry out savagely, and, in one of the rare views of his exteriors that we get, we learn of "his eyes burning hatefully and his teeth set in a cur-like snarl". To the youth the fighters now resemble animals and fear has been converted into hatred and aggression. In the last insight until after two more battles are over, "it was revealed to him that he had been a barbarian, a beast. He had fought like a pagan who defends his religion. Regarding it, he saw that it was fine, wild, and, in some ways, easy". He feels himself a hero. "He had slept and, awakening, found himself a knight".

From now on Henry's reactions are not considered in their niceties. He overhears the general and his staff discussing Henry's regiment as a "lot of mule drivers" who can be sacrificed for the purpose of a tactical move. His one reaction is a feeling of insignificance. This time, we may notice, the feeling is related to a human decision, while before it was attached to the world of nature. Yet no analysis, no reaction to the fact of being used and exposed to slaughter interferes with his entirely functional behaviour in battle. "He had no time for dissections, but he knew that he thought of the bullets only as things that could prevent him from reaching the place of his endeavor." Henry's pragmatism however is suffused with a basic awareness, which transcends his savagery from the earlier phase of the battle: "There were subtle flashings of joy within him that thus should be his mind." Yet as the final effort is directed towards the enemy's flag, "he had a gigantic hatred for those who made great difficulties and complications". The capture of that "craved treasure of mythology" is not presented in writing any more emotional than the rest.

Henry's "machines of reflection" turn again after the battle. In the manuscript, some other soldiers around him deplore the death of a friend. This passage has been omitted by Crane who concentrates entirely upon the self-absorbed youth. His "public deeds . . . performances" parade in shining prominence. "He saw that he was good." There is just a spectre of self-reproach that he had abandoned the "tattered soldier" (whose name we never learn and who witnessed with Henry

the death of Jim Conklin), because he could not stand his unsuspecting questioning during his roaming in the safety behind the battlelines. In the manuscript the author even made Henry find an advantage in that memory, as it might mean a "sobering balance" to the "workings of his egotism". And now again[31] he sees that his earlier railing against the universe could be despised. As the manuscript had it, "he was tiny but not inconsequent to the sun". He was a man. "He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death", and, said the manuscript, "it was for others".

When the end of the novel is considered the critical questions most often raised are whether Crane shows that human action can be meaningful and whether Henry has changed as a consequence of his experiences. According to Greenfield, the secret of Crane's mature art is a "balance between a sense of destiny and the haphazard workings of chance ... The heroic ideal is not what it has been claimed to be: so largely is it the product of instinctive responses to biological and traditional forces. But man does have will, and he has the ability to reflect, and though these do not guarantee that he can effect his own destiny, they do enable him to become responsible to some degree for the honesty of his personal vision".[32] To Gibson, however, it does not seem that the novel gives such a mixed answer in which the two poles qualify each other, but that *The Red Badge of Courage* are two novels: "one is the traditional story of the hero, beset by great odds, who through fortitude and endurance is able to achieve his ends";[33] the other "has as its theme that the nature of the universe is such that man can perform no meaningful action".[34] Crane saw that his novel lacked unity; "consequently he attempted to supply unity by striking out those passages antithetical to the image of the novel which he formed *after the fact of having written the novel*".[35] However, by striking out passages he "was not able to disguise the disparity existing between the two themes".[36]

In both views, the text is ambiguous and contains contradictions, reconcileable ones, according to Greenfield, in the author's generous vision of the world, mutually exclusive ones, according to Gibson. Yet these contradictions appear only if

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[31] This is suggested already in Chapter XV, especially in the passages omitted though not crossed out in the manuscript.

[32] Greenfield, o. c., pp. 564, 572.

[33] Gibson, o. c., p. 68.

[34] *Ib.*, p. 88.

[35] *Ib.*, p. 68.

[36] *Ib.*

we accept Henry's own valuation of himself and identify Henry's views of the universe with a basic philosophy of the book. A different reading would take Henry's perspective to be a medium of the author's cool and informed reconstruction of war, as indeed has often been done, but at the same time — and this seems not to have been realized as a basic focus of the novel — the narrative thread makes the novel essentially a study in bad faith.

Both the impressionist technique and Henry's own rationalizations together with his anxieties involving pride, arrogance, suppression of truth, make him a passive person, adaptable to pressures from without, reacting to the direct or potential look of others. He is sensible and intelligent enough to ask himself in the beginning whether he will be able to stand up to his situation. Yet his awarenes of the danger within himself — that he may run away — also implies fear of being judged. Crane's technique suitably presented Henry as a person without a moral centre and with no integrity.

The author's excisions do not only curtail Henry's views of the arbitrary power of nature, but also of his oscillating and superficial resolutions to oppose it. These cuts do not deprive Henry of any essential feature, but they simplify the image of his character. The simplification is in tune with the author's tendency to avoid moral issues which would add human complexity to Henry's situation. So for instance we are never told whether in his brave fighting he kills anyone. Emerging into a peaceful landscape after the last battle, he reviews his own behaviour with self-satisfaction, lenient towards his earlier betrayals of himself and others. He has not broken the spell of his self-deception, he persists in his bad faith. He has more knowledge of the external world and has proved to himself that he can endure and challenge mortal danger, but no awareness of his own capacity to appreciate himself in his relationship to others. The author however, and this contributes to misunderstandings, does not place Henry's final self-justification into an ironic perspective. It would appear from the text that after Henry had behaved valorously in battle, Crane does not distance himself from Henry's self-evaluation any longer. The idyllic feeling in the last sentences are a hasty attempt at rounding the story up satisfactorily to reader and hero, rather than a subtle attempt at qualifying Henry's optimism about himself, as some critics claim. Its original context earlier in the novel forgotten, the very title of the book has come to be taken at a face value.

The battle section, thus, whatever its intrinsic power and convincingness, is an aesthetic problem within the whole of the book, because it embodies a different level of awareness from

the rest. That Henry's ratiocinations should be suspended is quite justified both psychologically and for the immediate graphic purpose of those chapters. But Henry's behaviour immediately before the fighting and his obtuseness after are a framework which reduces the general meaning of his conduct in action to the activity of Fleming the soldier. The whole point of *The Red Badge of Courage* is that its longer section is a continuous sequence of profound insights into universal human relationship to the world of which man is a part. The end of the novel denies that his behaviour in battle manifests an achieved new freedom, for his relapse into bad faith shows him to be as "other directed", as inauthentic, as little ready to accept responsibility for his acts and thoughts as before.

To present human commitment in an armed conflict is highly difficult, and authors who have performed it have always done so within the terms of their pervading philosophy of their book, such as Sartre in *La Mort de l'Ame (Iron in the Soul)* or, with less sophistication, Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Crane's chapters, analogously, are in tune with the descriptive aspect of the rest of the book, but not with its basic existential structure. The later part of *The Red Badge of Courage* is an account of a successful test only if we read it superficially, in tune with the conventional expectations with which we go into an initiation story: it testifies of an acquired knowledge of some of the most brutal facts of life, but combined with unwarranted optimism based on personal luck; there is no growth into moral self-awareness, independent from change and the judgment of others.

Perhaps it was such an ending to a book which he otherwise found so meaningful, that made Conrad write to R. B. Cunninghame Graham: "Read the *Badge* . . . The man sees the outside of many things and the inside of some".[37] Two years later, he commented on some short pieces by Graham: "they are much more of course than mere Crane-like impressionism . . ."[38] And in the earlier quoted letter to Garnett: "I could not explain why he disappoints me — why my enthusiasm withers as soon as I close the book. While one reads, of course he is not to be questioned . . . His grip is strong but while you feel the pressure on your flesh you slip out of his hand much to your own surprise".[39]

Conrad's immediate allusion may have been to Crane's stories which he had just read, but *The Red Badge of Courage* must have always been in his mind when he thought of Crane's

[37] *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham,* edited by C. T. Watts, Cambridge 1969, p. 59.

[38] *Ib.*, p. 130.

[39] Stephen Crane, *Letters*, p. 156.

writing. Anyway, three days later he was profoundly hurt by W. L. Courtney's review of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* suggesting an impact of the example of *The Red Badge* upon *The Nigger*.[40] Later, as we know, Conrad himself bracketed the two books — in terms of theme, however, not of style. Whether in 1897 he was afraid to be thought an imitator or not, he seems to have felt that Crane's expression was inadequate to the theme.[41] A glance at *The Nigger* might help us to see *The Red Badge* more fully.

"It is the story by which, as a creative artist, I stand and fall, and which, at any rate, no one else could have written. A landmark in literature, I can safely say, for nothing like it had ever been done before . . .".[42] The quality of Conrad's prose in the *Nigger* is that of an artist who had practiced before but had finally struck onto a subject about which he had strong feeling and is confident to know more about than any of his literary *confrères*. To him it was an uncomplicated story of a cargo boat's journey from India to England in which he looked back to the life of hard work, discipline and fellowship which he had abandoned for "land entanglements".[43] In giving free rein to his feelings and convictions he did not want to be tied by a plot and the requirements of highly individualized characterization. Nevertheless, the negro, James Wait, develops connotations which transcend his functional role in the simple organization of the narrative. His relationship to the rest of the crew adumbrates the theme of pernicious fascination against sterling moral qualities in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* which Conrad fully achieved only after having invented the technical device of telling the story from the well-defined point of view of an experienced yet curious and humane sea captain. The quality of ambiguous and apparently profound symbolism which had run away with Conrad's story is not to be found in Crane's. What links them together is the test theme, though in one case it is that of a young man with the rest of the regiment in his background, and in the other of a crew of seventeen in which several members occasionally attract the author's attention.

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[40] David R. Smith, "One Word More About *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*", *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, Vol. 23, No. 2, September 1968, pp. 201—216.

[41] In his essays on Crane published in 1919, 1923, and 1925, he seems to have had a different opinion. E. g.: "His impressionism of phrase went really deeper than the surface". Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, London, 1921, p. 50.

[42] *The Library of John Quinn*, Part One (A—C), New York, 1923, p. 7.

[43] G. Jean-Aubry: *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, Vol. II, New York, 1927, p. 342.

In both works the action consists of episodes which follow in a linear way without implying a tight causal connection beyond the gradually accumulating experience. In both cases there is a rhythmical sequence of stress and lull, intensity and retirement, storm and calm. The basic tension to which the human centre in the two works is subjected can also be recognized as one — the temptations of malingering self-illusion — though the manifest form differs.

Yet whereas Crane, with all his detachment, conveys the artistic illusion that he does not rise beyond Henry Fleming's horizon, Conrad's procedure — which is soon to adopt comparable consistency — is rather unsophisticated. In spite of occasionally pretending to speak in the voice of "one of them", his perspective is mostly from above: knowledgeably, with an affectionate yet patronizing attitude towards the crowd. This, a far cry from the impersonal objectivity of the best omniscient narrators, like his own in *Nostromo*, includes the pointing out of moral issues as one goes along, and openly taking sides. However obnoxious Donkin, the ragged troubleshooting advocate of justice may be, Conrad's impassioned rhetoric at the moment in which he introduces him affects the mimetic quality of the novel or rather relegates its Donkin parts to the non-fictional literature of persuasion: "The independent offspring of the ignoble freedom of the slums full of disdain and hate for the austere servitude of the sea".[44]

It is in his letter to Courtney, which came to light only four years ago, that Conrad explicitly talks about his treatment of Donkin: "In my desire to be faithful to the ethical truth I have sacrificed the truth of the individual: I did not bring out that intimate, invincible self-satisfaction which shields such natures from humiliation and despair . . .".[45]

Conrad's insistence on "ethical truth" is reminiscent of the place in his Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* in which he suggests that the successful artist might hope to "awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity . . . which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world".[46] Did he miss a straightforward statement of a similar sort in Crane? Did he feel that his friend's evocation of the connection between man and the visible world was incomplete? Or did it seem to him that Henry Fleming's triumph over fear had not been accompanied by a maturity of insight?

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[44] *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, in the Collected Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad, London, 1950, p. 11.

[45] Smith, *o. c.*, p. 208.

[46] *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, p. X.

Yet, the modern reader, even if he denies Fleming that right to self-satisfaction which his author apparently grants him, and much as he may admire "the shape and ring of sentences"[47] in *The Nigger,* will probably find Crane 's book appealing to his sensibility. On the level on which Conrad himself liked it — he thought James Wait was "nothing"[48] — the *Nigger* is a Victorian book. Crane's youth, while fitting the externals of the traditional initiation scheme, is modern in the bareness and unsentimentality of his vision and in the unexplicit ambiguity it *presents.* He opens up into the multiple possibilities of a XXth century view of man, where Conrad — the dialectics of Wait apart — sinks back into the excellent, publicly sanctioned moral standards of a closed-in Victorian world-picture.

Crane may first have wanted to transfer his picturing of the human fighting for survival from the metropolitan slums onto the open field of undisguised mass conflict, and have then tried to end it with a demonstration of a succesful tempering of human steel. By now neither of the two projects could provoke more than a literary-historical interest — apart from the experience of Crane's poetic language: the exciting felicities of imagery, the curt sentences, the engaging clumsiness of many constructions. Yet Crane did more. As against the previsible choices — to produce a historical fresco, an epic involving the whole machinery of society, or to create a world of idiosyncratic imagination — he concentrated on the crisis of one individual constantly related to his immediate but dynamic situation. Thus he was able to evoke an image which is dense in particularities, and at the same time expresses the universal drama of man confronting his own being in the world. Though Crane's youth does not live his tension in the self-aware freedom of the greatest characters of fiction, the novel is more appealing and more pertinent to the modern consciousness than the cultural context of naturalism or the American eighteen-nineties would make us expect. With all its hesitations, its compromises, and its ultimate foundering as a fully realized insight, it adumbrates the twentieth-century novel of extreme situation. In *Lord Jim,* which he wrote shortly after encountering Crane, Conrad went beyond *The Red Badge of Courage* working in the same direction. By its impact upon that novel rather than upon *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus',* has Crane's achievement been seminal.

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[47] *Ib.,* p. IX

[48] *Conrad's Manifesto: Preface to a Career,* edited by David R. Smith, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 41.