

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE

An Episode of the American Civil War

BY STEPHEN CRANE

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT WOOSTER STALLMAN
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INTRODUCTION¹

By Robert Wooster Stallman

Stephen Crane is frequently spoken of as the most legendary figure in American letters since Edgar Allan Poe. A whole mythology of bizarre tales, some of them not entirely untrue, surrounds his ~~life~~ ¹⁸⁻⁹⁴⁻² elusive and enigmatic personality, and it is difficult to distinguish the real Crane from the mythical Crane when so much of the factual is itself fantastic. The fantastic pursued him beyond the grave in the fact that when he died his wife—an extraordinary woman and a faithful wife—returned to her former trade in Jacksonville, Florida, where as the madame of a bawdy house she presided over a mansion modeled upon Brede Place, the semi-medieval residence of the Cranes in England. Crane, by nature overgenerous, had an immense capacity for friendship, which he shared equally with defeated failures—Bowery bums

¹ Done with the research assistance of Mr. Sy Kahn of the University of Connecticut.

and streetwalkers—and with the literary great, Conrad and Henry James and Ford Madox Ford. Conrad affectionately attended him during his fatal illness, and Henry James, waiting upon him with oversolicitous devotion, treated him as though he were another Keats—a pet lamb in a sentimental tragedy. He lived violently and he died young, but even while he lived the real Crane was being converted into the conventional legend of the artist—luckless, penniless, creative only when fever-ridden or drunk. There is this folk version of the wayward genius, under which Crane's myth-making personality has been likened to Poe's, and there is the more classical version of the "stricken boy," the genius who dies young—Chatterton, Keats, Schubert, Beardsley.

In his reputation, even as in his life and his art, there is a duality of ironic contradictions. The Crane portrait hangs, as it were, between calumny on the one side and idolatry on the other, and from this latter point of view we get a sentimentalized impression—"I took him at once to be a god—an Apollo with starry

eyes." The reputation of Crane is as contradictory as the man himself. There is the popular notion that he died "tragically young"—"a boy, spiritually killed by neglect." The fact is, however, that no man of his generation was more admired and loved or received greater critical recognition. What killed him was not literary neglect but his own will to burn himself out, his Byronic craving to make of his body "a testing ground for all the sensations of life."

Crane wrote as he lived. He saw life, as it were, from a water-soaked dinghy, the sea tossing him about this way and that. It looked to him like an angry sea, the grim waves ^{2xH3}menacing and "most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt." If he won any grace from that cold voyage it was, I think, the artist's gift of ironic contemplation, that grace of irony which is so central to his art. Crane was intense, volatile and spontaneous, and what he wrote came unwatched from his pen. He wrote with the intensity of a poet's emotion, the compressed emotion which bursts into symbol and paradox.

Irony is the key to our understanding of the man and his works. There was, first of all, an ironic contradiction between his theory of creation and his art. It was Crane's theory that the closer his contact with reality the greater the artist. Yet his art was at its greatest when he wrote at some distance from the reality he had experienced, or when, to the contrary, he wrote out of no personal experience at all. In his quest for and immersion in experience Crane stands at the headstream of what has been defined as the dominant American theme and literary trend, exemplified in Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, and Thomas Wolfe, who put the same premium upon personal experience. Everything Crane wrote was motivated by the principle of truth and fidelity to the facts of experience. Crane's infrequent comments about art—oblique hints given out in an off-hand air—amount to no more than this single-stick standard of truth or sincerity. "My creed was identical with one of Howells and Garland," he wrote in a letter of 1896. The creed of veritism which Hamlin Garland preached, the theory that art is founded upon

personal experience and is copyistic of reality, Crane echoed when, not long before his death, he told a friend: "You can never do anything good aesthetically . . . unless it has at one time meant something important to you." Crane's best works, however, do not vindicate or support the creative principle which generated them. In contradiction to his theory that the artist can write about life only after first experiencing it, Crane reproduced the immediacies of battle in *The Red Badge of Courage* long before he had seen and suffered actual shell-fire. Not until four years later when he witnessed a battle as a correspondent in Greece did he test the psychological truth of his imagined picture. He found it to be surprisingly right.

Crane wasted his genius. Under the mistaken notion that only those who have suffered shipwreck can become its interpreters, he expended himself in a misspent search for experience. Willfully and needlessly he risked his life—among bandits in Mexico, under shellfire in Cuba and Greece as war correspondent, and off the Florida seacoast as a filibustering seaman in the disaster which befell him when he

survived shipwreck only after suffering thirty hours at sea in a ten-foot dinghy. But the result was that he ^{lost} ~~impaired~~ both his health and his art. Exposures endured in Cuba wrecked his health; consumption killed him before he had reached his twenty-ninth year. The pity of it is it could have been otherwise. He could have lived in one of his brothers' homes and done his writing there; he could have retreated from life to calculate it from a distance as Hawthorne and Henry James did, but instead Crane deliberately chose to get as close to it as possible.

Sentimental critics have shed literary tears over Crane's early death, but, as Conrad remarked, his early death was no loss to literature. Before he died (at twenty-eight) he had published in his eight brief writing years enough to fill twelve volumes—forty sketches and tales, five brief novels, three slim volumes of verse, journalistic memoirs and essays and articles. The greater part of this work is second-rate. After his initial achievements (*Maggie* and its companion piece, *George's Mother*, a little later *The Red Badge*, and then "The

Open Boat"), he wrote less than a half-dozen first-rate tales, and in poetry, after *The Black Riders*, there was the same falling off, the late work sharply declining from the early.

° Luckless in everything else, Crane had the great luck—¹⁸⁸²phenomenal among artists—to strike off almost at one blow two works of art, both works of major importance, and to write them both before he was twenty-two. The sensational success of *The Red Badge of Courage* (a best seller in England and in America which outsold Zola and Tolstoy and even Kipling) brought him into ¹⁸⁸²meteoric renown. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, an impressionistic painting notable for its bold innovations in method and style, and in "The Open Boat," that ¹⁸⁸²flawless construct of paradox and symbol, Crane established himself among the foremost engineers in the techniques of modern fiction.² He

²In poetry, too, Crane was an "experimental" pioneer. His poems, inspired by Emily Dickinson's poetry but not modeled upon it, derive from the Bible (as Amy Lowell was first to observe). They are singleturn epigrammatic parables in free verse. They have close affinities with the parable poems of Ambrose Bierce; they have a family kinship with the free verse of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and W. E. Henley; and they bear an accidental resemblance to the Vers Librist and Imagist lyrics of the poetic Renaissance of 1912, which revival Crane's experiments heralded and perhaps influenced.

first broke new ground with the then sordid realism of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, a work which initiated the literary trend of the next generation. *Maggie* is a tone painting rather than a realistic photograph of slum life, but it opened the door to the Norris-Dreiser-Farrell school of sociological realism. The two main movements in modern American fiction—realism and symbolism—have their beginnings in these early achievements of Crane. “The Open Boat” may be described as standing midway between *Maggie* and *The Red Badge of Courage*. It represents a perfect fusion of realism and symbolism based on realism—the two dominant technical trends of the twentieth century.

! INFLUENCES AND PARALLELISMS

The Red Badge of Courage was the first non-romantic novel of the Civil War to attain widespread popularity and, appearing at a time when war was still treated primarily as the subject for romance, it turned the tide of the prevailing convention and established a new

if not unprecedented one. In style and method Crane had no predecessors, but in viewing war from the vantage point of the unromantic and commonplace conscript he was following the line set down by Walt Whitman, whose *Specimen Days* is our first modern approach to the subject; he was anticipated by Tolstoy, whose *Sevastopol* and *War and Peace* are realistic accounts of the tragedy of the rank and file in the Napoleonic and Crimean Wars; and he was indebted to Colonel Wilbur F. Hinman, whose fictionalized reminiscences of the American Civil War, in *Corporal Si Klegg and his "Pards,"* portray the everyday life of the civilian soldier.

As for Crane influences, it has been claimed that Tolstoy's *Sevastopol* exerted a powerful influence on the conception of *The Red Badge of Courage*, and, by another critic, that but for Tolstoy it would never have been written. Yet no palpable debts can be established. Other source-hunters have thought of Stendhal's battle scenes as the model for Crane's, but Crane never read *La Chartreuse de Parme* and was angered when told that he had. Crane

is supposed to have written *The Red Badge* on the dare of a friend to do better than Zola, whose tragedy of the Franco-Prussian War is recorded in *La Débâcle*, which Crane sometime before writing his novel dipped into but never finished. Zola bored him. He disliked Zola's statistical realism, and he disliked Tolstoy's panoramic method, finding "Peace and War" (as he called it) tiresome: "He could have done the whole business in one third the time and made it just as wonderful. It goes on and on like Texas." Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Flaubert's *Salammbô* he resented on the same grounds. Even his own *Red Badge of Courage* he criticized for the same reason: it was too long.

Crane confessed that he had read the French realists, but it is probable that he absorbed them only through translations and from Henry James's criticism of the French novelists. Essentially uneducated, he was not a bookish man. "His reading was miscellaneous, desultory, and unguided. In general he disliked the writers of his time whom it was the

fashion to like—including Stevenson.”³ He judged literature and people by the criterion of sincerity and, hating the literary dandy, he detested Stevenson—the very man he himself most nearly resembled.

It is debatable, therefore, whether Crane took over anything out of his French and Russian readings. Most of these so-called influences are in fact, I think, nothing more than parallelisms.

The whole question of Crane influences is very difficult to pin down. It cannot be denied, however, that he drew his material for *The Red Badge of Courage* from contemporary accounts of the Civil War and very considerably, I think, from Matthew Brady’s remarkable photographs. He took his sources from books, such as Century’s *Battles and Leaders* and Harper’s *History*, and from the conversation of veterans—i.e., war reminiscences of his

³ From Vincent Starrett’s introduction to Williams’s *Bibliography*, p. 10. The contrary view is expressed by Ford Madox Ford and by Thomas Beer, who remarks that Crane “was yet a man of letters.” In this matter I share Mr. Starrett’s judgment.

brother William, who was an expert in the strategy of Chancellorsville; from the tactical accounts of General Van Petten, who was Crane's teacher at Claverack Academy; but above all from Colonel Wilbur F. Hinman's account of *Corporal Si Klegg and his "Pards"*—from which Crane drew for *The Red Badge* the conception of the new recruit who develops into a veteran. Hinman's book was, I think, almost certainly Crane's primary literary source. He created his own war novel out of all this material, but we are still left wondering where he learned *how* to write. The answer to that question is given, I think, in Hemingway's remark: "I learned to write looking at paintings at the Luxembourg Museum in Paris."

Crane had Brady's poignant photographs to brood over, Coffin's illustrations to Hinman's *Si Klegg*, the Monet paintings which he knew, and the apprenticeship paintings of his fellow lodgers at the Art Students' League in New York City, where he lived in 1891-1892. It was during this same period that he was composing the impressionistic painting of *Maggie*. He had used color imagery, however, in his

early *Sullivan County Sketches*, and his very manner of speech was quite as colorful as his prose or poetry. Here again little proof of influence can be established one way or the other, but whether he borrowed something of his technique from the studio or nothing at all, the fact remains (as H. G. Wells concluded) "there is Whistler even more than there is Tolstoy in *The Red Badge of Courage*."

Crane's style has been likened to a unique instrument which no one after his death has ever been able to play. *The Red Badge of Courage* seems unprecedented and non-comparable. But Chekhov, who was almost of an age with Crane, and a little later Katherine Mansfield, who adopted the method of Chekhov, were both masters of the same instrument. In its episodic structure and impressionistic style Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* suggests a legitimate parallel to *The Red Badge of Courage*. All three artists had essentially the same literary aim and method: intensity of vision and objectivity in rendering it. All three aimed at a depersonalization of art: they aimed to get outside themselves completely in

order "to find the greatest truth of the idea" and "see the thing as it really is"; to keep themselves aloof from their characters, not to become emotionally involved with their subjects, and to comment on them not by statement but by evocation in picture and tone ("sentiment is the devil," said Crane, and in this he was echoing Flaubert).

Crane stands also in close kinship to Conrad and Henry James, the masters of the impressionist school. All these writers aimed to create (to use Henry James's phrase) "a direct impression of life." Their credo is voiced by Conrad in his celebrated Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*—it is "by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*." Their aim was to immerse the reader in the created experience, so that its impact on the reader would occur simultaneously with the discovery of it by the characters themselves. Instead of panoramic views of a battlefield, Crane paints not the whole scene but disconnected segments of it, which, accurately enough, is all that a participant in an action or a spectator of a

scene can possibly take into his view at any one moment. Crane's style is composed of "disjointed sentences," disconnected sense-impressions, chromatic vignettes by which the reality of the adventure is evoked in all its point-present immediacy. Crane anticipated the French post-impressionist painters. His style, in brief, is prose pointillism. It is composed of disconnected images which, like the blobs of color in a French impressionist painting, coalesce one with another, every word-group having a cross-reference relationship, every seemingly disconnected detail having interrelationship to the configured pattern of the whole. The intensity of a Crane tale is due to this patterned coalescence of disconnected things, everything at once fluid and precise.

What makes Crane of such exceptional critical interest is the great range and number of comparisons with other artists, echoes and parallelisms which suggest themselves to any critic who has studied the man and his art. So many other artists collect or radiate around him to form, as it were, the spokes of a literary