

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage



Modern Critical Interpretations

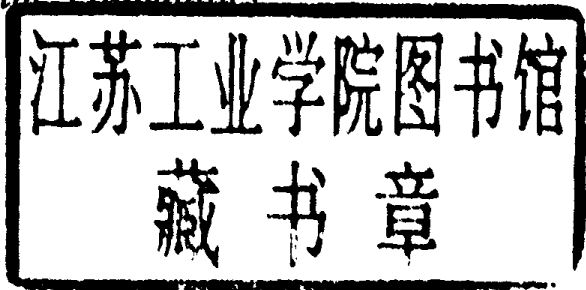
Stephen Crane's
The Red Badge of Courage

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Chelsea House Publishers

NEW YORK ◇ PHILADELPHIA

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Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stephen Crane's *The red badge of courage*.

(Modern critical interpretations)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

Contents: The freedom of the poet / John Berryman—
Psychology and *The red badge of courage* / Daniel Weiss—
Order in *The red badge of courage* / Norman Lavers—
[etc.]

1. Crane, Stephen, 1871-1900. *Red badge of courage*.
2. United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—
Literature and the war. I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.
PS1449.C85R3976 1987 813'.4 86-20687
ISBN 0-55546-004-6

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Stephen Crane's

The Red Badge of Courage

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best criticism devoted to Stephen Crane's masterly short novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*. The criticism is reprinted here in the chronological order of its original publication. I am grateful to Susan Laity, Frank Menchaca, and Peter Childers for their erudition and judgment in helping to edit this volume.

My introduction centers on Crane's originality in his representation of battle, with particular reference to the question of Crane's ironies. The chronological sequence begins with the poet John Berryman, who sees the *Red Badge* as a crucial transitional work between Tolstoy and Hemingway, two master visionaries of men at war. In his psychoanalytic reading, Daniel Weiss reads the fear of Henry Fleming against Ernest Hemingway's classic description of a "good soldier."

Norman Lavers, seeking an idea of order in the novel, finds in the book's imagery an implicit struggle for individuation. The important critical issue of literary impressionism in the *Red Badge* is addressed by James Nagel, for whom "the drama of the novel is epistemological, a matter of perception, distortion, and realization." Harold Beaver's reading endows the familiar critical trope of "the hero as victim" with the pathos of "nervous integrity" and of a pre-Hemingway code of self-possession.

The book concludes with three innovative recent reappraisals. Donald Pease, considering the book as a war narrative, argues that in the *Red Badge*, "narratives do not follow battles and provide needed explanation; instead, they precede and indeed demand battles as elaborations and justifications of already narrated events." Henry Fleming's battle-fury is studied by Chester L. Wolford in the context of Crane's preternatural control of the epic mode of the agonistic, of the contest of consciousness that takes place between the writers of this tradition.

In the final essay of this book, Michael Fried explores the fascinating analogues between the work of the painter Eakins and Crane's novel, since each equates artistic representation with processes of disfiguration. Fried fittingly ends this book by providing a refreshingly different perspective on the *Red Badge*, a perspective that is likely to be prophetic of much future criticism of Crane's masterpiece.

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Introduction

I

Stephen Crane's contribution to the canon of American literature is fairly slight in bulk: one classic short novel, three vivid stories, and two or three ironic lyrics. *The Red Badge of Courage*; "The Open Boat," "The Blue Hotel," and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky"; "War is Kind" and "A Man Adrift on a Slim Spar" —a single small volume can hold them all. Crane was dead at twenty-eight, after a frantic life, but a longer existence probably would not have enhanced his achievement. He was an exemplary American writer, flaring in the forehead of the morning sky and vanishing in the high noon of our evening land. An original, if not quite a Great Original, he prophesied Hemingway and our other journalist-novelists and still seems a forerunner of much to come.

The Red Badge of Courage is Crane's undoubted masterwork. Each time I reread it, I am surprised afresh, particularly by the book's originality, which requires a reader's act of recovery because Crane's novel has been so influential. To write about battle in English, since Crane, is to be shadowed by Crane. Yet Crane, who later saw warfare in Cuba and between the Greeks and the Turks in his work as a correspondent, had experienced no fighting when he wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*. There is no actual experience that informs Crane's version of the Battle of Chancellorsville, one of the most terrible carnages of the American Civil War. Yet anyone who has gone through warfare, from the time of the novel's publication (1895) until now, has testified to Crane's uncanny accuracy at the representation of battle. *The Red Badge of Courage* is an impressionist's triumph, in the particular sense that "impressionist" had in the literature of the nineties, a Paterian sense that went back to the emphasis upon *seeing* in Carlyle, Emerson,

and Ruskin. Conrad and Henry James, both of whom befriended Crane, had their own relation to the impressionist mode, and each realized that Crane was a pure or natural impressionist, indeed the only one, according to Conrad.

Pater, deftly countering Matthew Arnold, stated the credo of literary impressionism:

The first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly.

Pater's "object" is a work of art, verbal or visual, but the critic here has stated Stephen Crane's quest to see the object of experience as it is, to know one's impression of it, and to realize that impression in narrative fiction. Scholarly arguments as to whether and to what degree *The Red Badge of Courage* is naturalistic, symbolist, or impressionist, can be set aside quickly. Joyce's *Ulysses* is both naturalistic and symbolist within the general perspective of the Paterian or impressionistic "epiphany" or privileged moment, but juxtapose the *Red Badge* to *Ulysses* and Crane is scarcely naturalistic or symbolist in comparison. Crane is altogether an impressionist, in his "vivid impressionistic description of action on that woodland battlefield," as Conrad phrased it, or, again in Conrad's wording, in "the imaginative analysis of his own temperament tried by the emotions of a battlefield."

If Crane's impressionism had a single literary origin, as to some extent is almost inevitable, Kipling is that likely forerunner. The puzzles of literary ancestry are most ironical here, since Kipling's precursor was Mark Twain. Hemingway's famous observation that all modern American literature comes out of one book, *Huckleberry Finn*, is only true of Crane, the indubitable beginning of our modern literature, insofar as Crane took from Kipling precisely what the author of *The Light That Failed* and *Kim* owed to Twain. Michael Fried's association of Crane with the painter Eakins is peculiarly persuasive, since Crane's visual impressionism is so oddly American, without much resembling Whistler's. Crane is almost the archetype of the writer as a child of experience, yet I think this tends to mean that then there are a few strong artistic precursors, rather than a tradition that makes itself available. Associate Crane with Kipling and Eakins, on the way to, but still a distance from, Conrad and the French Postimpressionists, and you probably have stationed him accurately enough.

II

The Red Badge of Courage is necessarily a story about fear. Crane's Young Soldier, again as Conrad noted, "dreads not danger but fear itself. . . . In this he stands for the symbol of all untried men." Henry Fleming, as eventually we come to know the Young Soldier, moves ironically from a dangerous self-doubt to what may be an even more dangerous dignity. This is the novel's famous yet perhaps equivocal conclusion:

For a time this pursuing recollection of the tattered man took all elation from the youth's veins. He saw his vivid error, and he was afraid that it would stand before him all his life. He took no share in the chatter of his comrades, nor did he look at them or know them, save when he felt sudden suspicion that they were seeing his thoughts and scrutinizing each detail of the scene with the tattered soldier.

Yet gradually he mustered force to put the sin at a distance. And at last his eyes seemed to open to some new ways. He found that he could look back upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and see them truly. He was gleeful when he discovered that he now despised them.

With this conviction came a store of assurance. He felt a quiet manhood, nonassertive but of sturdy and strong blood. He knew that he would no more quail before his guides wherever they should point. He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man.

So it came to pass that as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath his soul changed. He came from hot plowshares to prospects of clover tranquilly, and it was as if hot plowshares were not. Scars faded as flowers.

It rained. The procession of weary soldiers became a bedraggled train, despondent and muttering, marching with churning effort in a trough of liquid brown mud under a low, wretched sky. Yet the youth smiled, for he saw that the world was a world for him, though many discovered it to be made of oaths and walking sticks. He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle. The sultry nightmare was in the past. He had been an animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war. He turned now with a lover's

thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace.

Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds.

More Hemingway than Hemingway are these very American sentences: “He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man.” Is the irony of that dialectical enough to suffice? In context, the power of the irony is beyond question, since Crane’s prose is strong enough to bear rephrasing as: “He had been to touch the great fear, and found that, after all, it was still the great fear. He was not yet a man.” Crane’s saving nuance is that the fear of being afraid dehumanizes, while accepting one’s own mortality bestows upon one the association with others that grants the dignity of the human. How does Crane’s prose find the strength to sustain a vision that primary and normative? The answer, I suspect, is the Bible and Bunyan, both of them being deeply at work in this unbelieving son of a Methodist minister: “He came from hot plowshares to prospects of clover tranquilly, and it was as if hot plowshares were not.” The great trope of Isaiah is assimilated in the homely and unassuming manner of Bunyan, and we see the Young Soldier, Henry Fleming, as an American Pilgrim, anticipating when both sides of the Civil War “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.”

III

Crane’s accurate apprehension of the phantasmagoria that is battle has been compared to Tolstoy’s. There is something to such a parallel, perhaps because Tolstoy even more massively is a biblical writer. What is uniquely Crane’s, what parts him from all prior visionaries of warfare, is difficult to define, but is of the highest importance for establishing his astonishing originality. Many examples might be chosen, but I give the death of the color sergeant from the conclusion of chapter 19:

Over the field went the scurrying mass. It was a handful of men splattered into the faces of the enemy. Toward it instantly sprang the yellow tongues. A vast quantity of blue smoke hung before them. A mighty banging made ears valueless.

The youth ran like a madman to reach the woods before a bullet could discover him. He ducked his head low, like

a football player. In his haste his eyes almost closed, and the scene was a wild blur. Pulsating saliva stood at the corners of his mouth.

Within him, as he hurled himself forward, was born a love, a despairing fondness for this flag which was near him. It was a creation of beauty and invulnerability. It was a goddess, radiant, that bended its form with an imperious gesture to him. It was a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called him with the voice of his hopes. Because no harm could come to it he endowed it with power. He kept near, as if it could be a saver of lives, and an imploring cry went from his mind.

In the mad scramble he was aware that the color sergeant flinched suddenly, as if struck by a bludgeon. He faltered, and then became motionless, save for his quivering knees.

He made a spring and a clutch at the pole. At the same instant his friend grabbed it from the other side. They jerked at it, stout and furious, but the color sergeant was dead, and the corpse would not relinquish its trust. For a moment there was a grim encounter. The dead man, swinging with bended back, seemed to be obstinately tugging, in ludicrous and awful ways, for the possession of the flag.

It was past in an instant of time. They wrenched the flag furiously from the dead man, and, as they turned again, the corpse swayed forward with bowed head. One arm swung high, and the curved hand fell with heavy protest on the friend's unheeding shoulder.

In the "wild blur" of this phantasmagoria, there are two images of pathos, the flag and the corpse of the color sergeant. Are they not to some degree assimilated to one another, so that the corpse becomes a flagpole, and the flag a corpse? Yet so dialectical is the interplay of Crane's biblical irony that the assimilation, however incomplete, itself constitutes a figure of doubt as to the normative intensities of patriotism and group solidarity that the scene exemplifies, both in the consciousness of Henry Fleming and in that of the rapt reader. The "despairing fondness" for the flag is both a Platonic and a Freudian Eros, but finally more Freudian. It possesses "invulnerability" for which the soldier under fire has that Platonic desire for what he himself does not possess and quite desperately needs, but it manifests even more

a Freudian sense of the ambivalence both of and towards the woman as object of the drive, at once a radiant goddess sexually bending her form though imperiously, yet also a woman, red and white, hating and loving, destroying and healing.

The corpse of the color sergeant, an emblem of devotion to the flag and the group even beyond death, nevertheless keeps Fleming and his friend from the possibility of survival as men, compelling them to clutch and jerk at the pole, stout and furious. Life-in-death incarnate, the corpse obstinately tugs for the staff of its lost life. Homer surely would have appreciated the extraordinary closing gesture, as the corpse sways forward, head bowed but arm swung high for a final stroke, as "the curved hand fell with heavy protest on the friend's unheeding shoulder."

Crane is hardly the American Homer; Walt Whitman occupies that place forever. Still, *The Red Badge of Courage* is certainly the most Homeric prose narrative ever written by an American. One wants to salute it with Whitman's most Homeric trope, when he says of the grass:

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

The Freedom of the Poet

John Berryman

The wars of men have inspired the production of some of man's chief works of art, but very undemocratically. Napoleon's wars inspired Goya, Stendhal, Beethoven, Tolstoy; a prolonged bicker of 1100 B.C. inspired the poet of the *Iliad*, who celebrated and deplored three centuries later a little piece of it near its end; the Wars of the Roses resulted in Shakespeare's giant effort, again long afterward; the Athenian empire's ruin was adequately dramatized by a participant, the greatest of historians; Picasso made something of the soul-destroying civil war in his native country. But what came of Cromwell's war? Or of the atrocious conflict between North and South in the United States?—thirty years after it ended came a small novel by a very young man called *The Red Badge of Courage*. The immediate literature of the Civil War has been beautifully studied of late in Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore*, but no one, I think, would claim for that literature any such eminence as belongs, after now almost seventy years, to Stephen Crane's novel. A critic seems to be faced, then, with alternative temptations: to overrate it, as an American, because it chronicles our crucial struggle, or to underrate it, in the grand perspective of the artists just mentioned, because it appears to assert neither the authority of the experienced warrior nor the authority of the historical artist—Tolstoy having both, Thucydides both. Crane was no scholar and had seen no battle. Yet some authority has got to be allowed him, and identified, for his work has not only brilliantly survived but was recognized

instantly abroad—in England—as authentic; professional military men were surprised to learn that he was not one.

It is hard to see how anyone, except a casual reader, could over-rate *The Red Badge of Courage* for patriotic reasons, because, though the book does indeed handle parts of the battle of Chancellorsville, it is not really about the Civil War. For instance, it shows no interest in the causes, meaning, or outcome of the war; no interest in politics; no interest in tactics or strategy. In this book, these failures are a merit, in opposition to the supreme fault of *War and Peace*, which is philosophical and programmatic. Here we have only parts of one minor battle, seen from one ignorant point of view, that of a new volunteer. One would never guess that what has been called the first modern war was being studied. All the same, as from the weird diagrams of Samuel Beckett, the helpless horror of modern man emerges: we learn, as we learn from few books, about the waiting, the incomprehension, rumour, frustration, anxiety, fatigue, panic, hatred not only of the enemy but of officers; about complaints of “bad luck” and the sense of betrayal by commanders. This is a losing army. Since every intelligent man has to be at some point afraid of proving himself a coward—which is what the ordeal of Crane’s protagonist is about—the story presents itself to us initially as making some claim to universality; and the claim is strengthened by Crane’s reluctance to divulge the name of the hero (it is Henry Fleming) or the names of the only other two people who matter—the tall soldier (Jim) and the loud youth (Wilson)—or the identity of the regiment, or the geography. By *leaving things out* the author makes his general bid for our trust.

But of course he has put in things, too, and our problems are where he got them and how he put them. The main things he put in are: reflection and action. Much of the book really is battle. Crane had read *Sevastopol*, Tolstoy’s short novel, and declared that he learned what war was like from football—after starring in baseball at the two colleges he briefly attended, he coached a boys’ football team in New Jersey. One of the staff at his military academy, a major-general, had seen action at Chancellorsville and liked to talk about it. Crane had played war games as a child, and talked with veterans, and read (with disappointment and contempt) magazine articles on the war. Later, after witnessing substantial parts of the Greco-Turkish War, he said, “*The Red Badge* is all right.” I don’t know that we can say precisely how he learned what he knew, except to recognize in him an acute visual imagination and an inspired instinct for what happens and what does