

Stephen Crane's Private War: *The Red Badge of Courage*¹

--Louis A. Renza, Dartmouth College

In certain ways, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* concerns more how a later American generation has forgotten the Civil War than a realistic depiction of how that war was actually fought from the viewpoint of the common soldier. Such forgetting paradoxically occurs through the way Americans remembered--and continue to remember--the Civil War: the emphasis on major campaigns won or lost, or, to use the title of a text regarded as one of Crane's major sources for the novel, on "battles and leaders of the Civil War." *The Red Badge*, of course, obfuscates both battles (is the scene Chancellorsville?) and leaders (Fleming's army "superiors" go unnamed, the exception, "MacChesnay," being an unknown regiment colonel). The major cause of the war is notable, too, for its having become virtually forgotten, perhaps motivated by middle-class, post-Reconstructionist sentiments; the only sign of it appears with the "negro" teamster who "sits 'mournfully down' to lament his loss of an audience" (Kaplan 277). In Crane's novel, even the warring parties have lost their political specificity, being now reduced in cultural memory to visual metaphors, the "blue" and "gray" armies, as if mere figures in some game.

One can regard such forgetfulness as a duplication, so to speak, of Crane's general vision of epistemological solipsism. Just as Fleming never knows what his fellow soldiers are thinking ("His failure to discover any mite of resemblance in their view points made him more miserable than before" [2:428]), or from one moment to the next how to regard his desertion, so critics continually debate the issue of his final growth: either that he achieves it, or, relying on manuscript evidence, that Crane frames his protagonist's own sense of growth ("He felt a quiet manhood, nonassertive but

of sturdy and strong blood” [24:538]) in a definitively ironic (sic) light. How, then, can a later generation ever fully appreciate the social struggles an earlier one experienced?

More recent critical arguments make *The Red Badge*’s exposure of present historical amnesia or glossing of the Civil War less a matter of epistemological necessity than ideological convenience. From this perspective, the novel’s war setting allegorically represents (perhaps to criticize) the social turbulence, especially the class warfare, wrought by postbellum industrial capitalism in the 1890s: “The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to [Fleming]” (8:458). This was a war that, unlike the Civil War, Crane indeed witnessed first-hand as muckraking journalist and author of the earlier *Maggie*. In the interests of “national reconciliation,” suggested by Crane’s critically laundered version of the war, popular contemporary works treated it as a “spectacle” or ideological trope that, besides preparing people to accept American imperialist projects on the international stage, could effectively distract the late century American public from its present *social* “civil war” (Kaplan 271,279,285).²

But all this merely shows how *The Red Badge of Courage* provokes interpretations, epistemological and social, that no less effectively erase the Civil War’s radical contingency. Contemporary accounts of this war make *it*, like Crane’s protagonist, appear “merely [] part of a vast blue demonstration” (1:415), whether akin to an advertisement in the period’s burgeoning commodity culture, or to a public “spectacle” writ then (or now) for politically justified *or* egregious ends. One could further argue that the novel’s battle-scenes metaphorically adumbrate its own attempt to resist the specularity of human events, turning them instead into a series of chaotic occurrences (e.g., battles with unclear outcomes, acts of “courage” irrationally motivated), and qualified by information putatively representable only by language (Fleming’s private reactions to his circumstances).

Critics have often noted how Crane's narrative style mimics a visual realism purveyed by contemporary models of photography and Impressionistic painting (see Nagel 250-51). But instead of combining them to achieve a more comprehensive "realistic" effect, Crane's literary Impressionism calls attention to the representational medium, smudging would-be definitive images of reality with subjective associations indigenous to language. The sun, in that famous line at the end of Chapter Nine, is "*like* a wafer"--an objective observation? a religious or, in context, an anti-religious allusion? a sign of Fleming's transitory, mood-influenced perception of nature?

In exposing the vulnerability of photo-realism to indeterminate, interpretive codes, Crane also contests the mass media's displacement of how one recollects historical events like the Civil War. His contestant, in short, is the pervasive publicization or photo-pictorialization of private experience defining the American public sphere by the 1890s. And what better way to stage this issue than the American Civil War, which, after all, was one of the first wars to have received extensive mass-media coverage, notably including the use of photographs, Matthew Brady's being the most famous?³ Fleming, in fact, personifies this media in the way he constantly sees things as if he himself were a camera eye: "Each blade of the green grass was bold and clear His mind took a mechanical but firm impression, so that afterward everything was pictured and explained to him, save why he himself was there" (19:510). He even sees himself "pictur[ed] . . . as the central figure in blazing scenes" (15:495), "his public deeds . . . paraded in great and shining prominence" (24:535), back home. But in Crane's narration, these pictured media-accounts become overexposed ("save why he was there"), are quickly forgotten with changing events, or otherwise, like the officers whom Fleming sees "neglect[ing] to stand in picturesque attitudes"(5:444), keep going out of focus.

Public or media pictorialization conscripts Fleming's--an army *private's*--private experience of the war (cf. Cox 316). It also blocks an artist like Crane, who as a correspondent himself trafficked in the attractive power of the mass media, from being able to imagine the Civil War as it was actually lived. *The Red Badge of Courage* thus comprises a realistic account of Crane's struggle to render a realistic account of this war--the battle modern Americans must fight to remember it precisely in the face of voluminous archival documentation and photographic records the mass media uses to make the Civil War an entirely public spectacle. In the end, this novel underlines Whitman's observation in *Specimen Days* (1882) about how "Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of countless minor scenes and interiors . . . of the Secession war . . ." (778).

Endnotes

1. This essay was originally published as "Stephen Crane: *The Red Badge of Courage*," *Explicator*, 56 (Winter 1998): 82-84.
2. One can configure this social allegory in other ways. Henry's guilt over his desertion along with lying about it could allude as much to Americans having lost the communal spirit in a competitive capitalist world where one thinks to gain distinction--a "badge"--by moral mendacity, as to men over having missed or, like some from the previous generation, having escaped by paying others to fight instead of them in the Civil War. A feminist critique, in turn, might emphasize how the novel's war setting, underscored by its subsequent literary success and canonization, work to recover a notion of "manhood" increasingly beleaguered by the perceived feminization of American society during Crane's time. Cf. Kaplan 272.
3. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* similarly employed photographs of soldiers and war-scenes as well as veteran's written remembrances. Cf. the cover of the Norton *The Red Badge of Courage: An Authoritative Text*, ed. by Donald Pizer.

Works Cited

- Cox, James M. "On Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*." *The Red Badge of Courage: An Authoritative Text*. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Third Edition, 1994.

- Crane, Stephen. *The Red Badge of Courage and Selected Prose and Poetry*. Intro. William M. Gibson. 1895. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Third Edition. 1968.
- Kaplan, Amy. "The Spectacle of War in Crane's Revision of History." *The Red Badge of Courage: An Authoritative Text*. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Third Edition, 1994.
- Nagel, James. "Impressionism in *The Red Badge of Courage*. *The Red Badge of Courage: An Authoritative Text*. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Third Edition, 1994.
- Whitman, Walt. *Specimen Days. Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Justin Kaplan. New York: The Library of America, 1982.