

«INSIDE THE BOX»:
STEPHEN CRANE'S THE RED BADGE
OF COURAGE

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The Red Badge of Courage deservedly takes its place as one of the great essential American literary war classics —arguably indeed as the very first in a considerable tradition— a novel of rare dramatic power which at once captures the national fratricide of the Union versus the Confederacy and at the same time subtly calls up far older, ancestral battles, not least those recounted in the Old Testament and in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. As a 19th Century American work, it also invites comparison with other major accounts of the Civil War, Walt Whitman's *Drum Taps* (1865) and Herman Melville's *Battle Pieces* (1866), to give two notable instances from poetry, or Abraham Lincoln's several war addresses, or Ulysses S. Grant's *Personal Memoirs* (1885-6), or cryptic, satiric stories like Mark Twain's «The Private History of a Campaign that Failed» (1885) and Ambrose Bierce's *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891), which in 1898 he re-titled *In the Midst of Life* and which contains gems like «An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge» and «Parker Adderson, Philosopher». Crane's novel also needs to be placed within the plethora of other lesser American commemorative odes and hymns, all in their different ways a tribute to the haunting power of the nation's fratricidal conflict¹.

As a novel of the 1880s, further, *The Red Badge of Courage* has come to be understood as contributing indispensably to the evolution

¹ In this respect one might consult Ernest Hemingway in his Introduction to *Men At War* (1942): «There was no real literature of our Civil War, excepting the forgotten 'Miss Ravenall's Conversion' by J. W. De Forest, until Stephen Crane wrote 'The Red Badge Of Courage'. Crane wrote it before he had seen any war. But he had read the contemporary accounts, had heard the old soldiers, they were not so old then, talk, and above all he had seen Matthew Brady's wonderful photographs. Creating his story out of this material he wrote that great boy's dream that was to be truer to how war is than any war the boy who wrote it would ever live to see. It is one of the finest books of our literature because it is all as much of one piece as a great poem is.»

of American realism and naturalism, a vivid, self-purporting «slice of life» (Crane himself uses the phrase to describe the book), a seeming actual episode from the Civil War. The tendency has been to see Crane, especially the Crane who also wrote *Maggie*, «The Open Boat», «The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky» and «The Blue Hotel», and the dark, sardonic poems, as one if not of a school then a generation of later 19th Century writers who, together with Twain, took American literature out of and beyond its earlier romanticism, and into a tougher, altogether more «realistic» phase. In this, Crane's name is joined to those of William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, and slightly later, Theodore Dreiser, and in an obliquer way, to Henry James and Edith Wharton, all of whom ushered in a more discernibly «social» fiction, one ostensibly drawn direct from life and freed of the Victorianized language of, say, Melville or Hawthorne. But just as Melville and Hawthorne in truth worked more directly from life than such category-making sufficiently acknowledges, so Crane especially equally embodies a more conscious *literary* intelligence than the term «realist» might on first view convey. *The Red Badge of Courage* certainly bids to be life-like, men enclosed inside the «moving box» of the Army and subject to fear, injury and death; but it also bids, in my judgement, to be read as another kind of moving box, the text itself as a means of enclosing the reader and making him or her subject to its own carefully designed claustrophobic pressures. For Crane also needs to be read within a context that goes well beyond American literary boundaries and which includes Zola, Stendhal and above all the figure he understandably felt flattered to find himself on occasion compared with, Tolstoy.

It would be remiss, too, if *The Red Badge of Courage* were not credited with opening the way towards later classic American war fiction: typically by John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and e.e. cummings to do with the First World War; Norman Mailer, James Jones and John Horne Burns with the Second; and latterly, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller and again Norman Mailer with those areas of absurdist military nightmare which have taken us from the bombing of Dresden into the Asian wars of Korea and Vietnam. Crane both initiates this tradition and —though a supposed pioneer American literary realist— calls into play an individual style which borrows brilliantly and perhaps unexpectedly from the then-controversial impressionist techniques to be found on the canvases of Monet and Renoir.

Perhaps, however, the most instructive way into *The Red Badge of Courage* is to consult what Crane himself, living the expatriate literary life in England, wrote in 1897, two years after publication, of the reception given his book in London:

I have only one pride — and may it be forgiven me. This single pride is that the English edition of «The Red Badge»

has been received with praise by the English reviewers. Mr. George Wyndham, Under Secretary for War in the British Government, says, in an essay, that the book challenges comparison with the most vivid scenes of Tolstoy's «War and Peace» or of Zola's «Downfall»; and the big reviews here praise it for just what I intended it to be, a psychological portrayal of fear. They all insist that I am a veteran of the civil war, whereas the fact is, as you know, I never smelled even the powder of a sham battle. I know what the psychologists say, that a fellow can't comprehend a condition that he has never experienced, and I have argued that many times with the Professor. Of course, I have never been in a battle, but I believe that I got my sense of the rage of conflict on the football field, or else fighting is a hereditary instinct, and I wrote intuitively; for the Cranes were a family of fighters in the old days, and in the Revolution every member did his duty. But be that as it may, I endeavoured to express myself in the simplest and most concise way. If I failed, the fault is not mine. I have been very careful not to let any theories or pet ideas of my own creep into my work. Preaching is fatal to art in literature. I try to give to the readers a slice of life; and if there is a moral lesson in it, I do not try to point it out. I let the reader find it for himself².

Several things immediately catch the attention. First, there is Crane's quite patent satisfaction in being measured by a highly literate Secretary for War on the standard of Tolstoy and Zola. Then, for a man who never in sober fact saw combat, there follows the further satisfaction of having so persuaded readers of the truth of his account that he was thought almost automatically to have been a Civil War veteran, and frequently of a specific episode, the Battle of Chancellorville.

From a more literary perspective Crane's insistence upon writing undidactically and upon offering «a slice of life» underscores at least two essential touchstones of his art; it might, however, have been even more helpful had he explained in detail what exactly he means by expressing himself «in the simplest and most concise way». For *The Red Badge of Courage* hardly reads as if it were straightforward, declarative prose; it uses a skilled impressionist idiom, meticulous in its pervasive allusions to colour, shadings of light and dark, and its insistence less on saying things directly than through the psychological and emotional feelings of its protagonist, Henry Fleming. If the novel

² Letter to John Northern Hilliard, January 1896. See R. W. Stallman and Lillian Gilkes (Eds): *Stephen Crane: Letters* (New York: New York, University Press, 1960), pp. 31-2.

is «about» initiation and life inside the «moving box» of the Army line, it is also about these matters in a highly artful, controlled way, one which uses its characteristic play of colours precisely as in a Monet or Renoir painting and its *leitmotif* of the «red animal, war, the blood-swollen god» to unique graphic effect. The notion of a «box» serves both as a way of understanding Crane's major theme, and his overall imaginative design and local details of style, throughout *The Red Badge of Courage*.

The book begins cinematically, the reader placed immediately inside the Army and space as it were cleared for him at dawn as the soldiers awake:

The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting. As the landscape changed from brown to green, the army awakened, and began to tremble with eagerness at the noise of rumors. It cast its eyes upon the roads, which were growing from long troughs of mud to proper thoroughfares. A river, amber-tinted in the shadow of its banks, purred at the army's fee; and at night, when the stream had become of a sorrowful blackness, one could see across it the read, eyelike gleam of hostile camp-fires set in the low brows of distant hills³.

The day thus opens its account. The cold and fog yield to reveal the resting soldiers and dark gives way to light and night to dawn. As the awakening Army sees about it, so does Crane's reader, and the sight hardly offers one of solace: liquid mud, an «amber-tinted» river and the distant watchful «eyelike» camp fires of the enemy. Crane's characteristic procedures establish themselves early, for his opening paragraph gives an impressionist miniature of just what it is to be part of a regiment, subject to orders, the weather, the discomforting hazards of the landscape. Just as Henry Fleming will find himself inside the moving box of the Army, so from the outset the reader experiences war —its *longueurs* as well as its high dramatic bursts of action— through his sensations.

The soldierly talk begins, animating still further the scene, heated, gossip-laden talk about possible coming actions and campaigns, much of it nicely set in dialect. To Henry's sense of things war can no longer

³ This and all subsequent quotations from the text are from *The Red Badge Of Courage* by Stephen Crane, Edited by Frederick C. Crews (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), pl. The textual question of *The Red Badge Of Courage* has become deeply controversial. For a full account of the whole matter see Henry Binder: «*The Red Badge Of Courage Nobody Knows*», *Studies In The Novel*, Special Number Stephen Crane, Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring, 1978.

reenact the older heroic notion of chivalric high romance, the classic Greek times of men gloriously under arms as he imagines it must have been:

The youth was in a little trance of astonishment. So they were at last going to fight. On the morrow, perhaps, there would be a battle and he would be in it. For a time he was obliged to labor to make himself believe. He could not accept with assurance an omen that he was about to mingle in one of those great affairs of the earth.

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

Crane's contrast between Henry's imagining of war as part of a heroic epic past and its failure in its modern face to present opportunities for such chivalry plays acutely on two illusions: that war ever was as he imagines it in the classic ages and that in any event the question should be whether it will or will not afford him personal opportunities of glory. His wish for more of the «Greeklike struggle», especially in a Civil War, merely underscores how little he knows, or how little he understands that his supposed ideal Homeric codes of war also must have entailed equal amounts of waiting about, talk, and general impatience.

The point is given further ironic weight by the reference back to Henry's pastoral domestic origins: his bravura enlistment, his mother's fond farewell, and the remembrance of the two girls, the one fair and bright like his illusions, the other, darker like the sadness which always must accompany war. For him, however, soldiering amounts to nothing less than «the delicious thing» (7), the entrance into the arena of manly greatness. The notion of departing from free space into controlled space is utterly apt, for Henry immediately finds himself locked into orders and military routine, and almost geometric set of restraints and controls:

He had grown to regard himself merely as part of a vast blue demonstration. His province was to look out, as far as

he could, for his personal comfort. For recreation he could twiddle his thumbs and speculate on the thoughts which must agitate the minds of the generals. Also, he was drilled and drilled and reviewed, and drilled and drilled and reviewed (8).

He is, in other words, already in the box, and we, taking measure of the world through his perceptions, equally find ourselves enclosed within an order of things which permits only the most limited autonomous action. In joining the «vast blue demonstration» he accedes to a greater will, a will not his own.

As the early chapters unfold, we begin to see the «green» Henry of these rural points of origin increasingly obliged to take note of Nature's other colours, its ominous reds and browns, but also the whole kaleidoscopic range of yellows, blues, purples, oranges and crimsons. His feelings thus become exteriorized, as if colour were the equivalent of the shifting, uncertain course of feelings. Consider the kind of allusions to colour we meet over the first pages. Uniforms glow «a deep purple hue» (14), for instance; «red eyes» (14) peer from across the river; the day becomes «the rushing yellow» (15); «dun-colored» (17) dust hovers threateningly; the «crimson rays» (17) of the camp-fires make «wied and satanic effects» (17). Crane, in other words, captures the changing path of the youth's emotions through these splashes of colour, brushstrokes which locate feeling, whether exultation or impatience or rising fear. Across its 24 chapters, like Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* whose meticulous control of detail it so much resembles, *The Red Badge of Courage* concentrates its effects into a continuing whole, not only the Army but the text itself as a form of «box», the novel's life at one with its imaginative form.

It is also within this context that we meet the phrase which guides us both towards the novel's essential subject and towards its design:

The sun spread disclosing rays, and, one by one, regiments burst into view like armed men just born of the earth. The youth perceived that the time had come. He was about to be measured. For a moment he felt in the fact of his great trial like a babe, and the flesh over his heart seemed very thin. He seized time to look about him calculatingly.

But he instantly saw that it would be impossible for him to escape from the regiment. It inclosed him. And there were iron laws of tradition and laws on four sides. He was in a moving box.

As he perceived this fact it occurred to him that he had never wished to come to the war. He had not enlisted of his

free will. He had been dragged by the merciless government. And now they were taking him out to be slaughtered.

The regiment slid down a bank and wallowed across a little stream. The mournful current moved slowly on, and from the water, some white bubble eyes looked at the men (23).

The «moving box» thus connotes both stasis and movement. The Army moves only to its own rules and on the assumption that the soldiers exist at its behest; they are indeed «inclosed» and bound by «iron laws of tradition». Free will, the autonomy to act, essentially are illusions. As a consequence Henry's persisting question —whether or not he will «run» when faced with actual battle— expresses both his individual self-doubt and the far deeper question of whether he, or any enlisted soldier, can ever in fact escape his «box», the destiny of a coopted Self within an authoritarian system of command and response. Not for nothing has Crane's Army been likened to Dreiser's later industrial corporation net-works.

Henry's rising fantasy that the Government, not he himself, coerced him into signing-up and that his «free will» has been stolen from him sets up the paradox of a man who has in fact willed his own «inclosurement», freely opted for his own unfreedom. As the regiment slides down the bank, the odd, almost mischievous, «white bubble eyes» of the stream look upon the men as if they were no better than dupes of their own making. Crane increasingly applies the claustrophobic pressure, the «run or be slaughtered» choice, so that the reader feels both the Army's grip on Henry and the text's manipulation of his own reading response.

Immediately following these apprehensions of possible cowardice, Henry encounters the first of a sequence of corpses, the pre-vision of the death of his former ingenuous neophyte self, not to say the death of his freedom. As so often in the novel, the emphasis falls upon eyes, the watchful stare of the witness:

Once the line encountered the body of a dead soldier. He lay upon his back staring at the sky. He was dressed in an awkward suit of yellowish brown. The youth could see that the soles of his feet had been worn to the thinness of writing paper, and from a great rent in one the dead foot projected piteously. And it was as if fate had betrayed the soldier. In death it exposed to his enemies that poverty which in life he had perhaps concealed from his friends.

The ranks opened covertly to avoid the corpse. The invulnerable dead man forced a way for himself. The youth looked keenly at the ashen face... He vaguely desired to walk around the body and stare; the impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question (24).

The dead soldier appears to stare; Henry in turn «looks keenly». Death so confronts life, and life death, the transaction underscored by the all too human sight of a shoe worn thin and with a hole in the leather. Amid all the colours which so enclose Henry, the corpse's face assumes an ashen, grey, de-coloured look. Even «the Question», presumably whether there is life after death, seems locked inside the cadaver's «invulnerable» stasis. For Henry, the whole conspiratorial military world he has entered becomes «a trap» (25), a means to steer him to his own death at the hands of «the red animal-war» (25), an agreed scheme of destruction by «the officers» (26), those agents of military determinism.

The box as operative metaphor takes on even greater force in Chapter 4 as the first shells begin to fall. The sheer concentrated attack on the men again forces them into a near death-or-flight panic:

A shell screaming like a storm banshee went over the huddled heads of the reserves. It landed in the grove, and exploding redly flung the brown earth. There was a little shower of pine needles.

Bullets began to whistle among the branches and nip at the trees. Twigs and leaves came sailing down. It was as if a thousand axes, wee and invisible, were being wielded. Many of the men were constantly dodging and ducking their heads (31).

This uncannily anticipates the photographs of aerial bombardment of later wars, the city bombings of Dresden and London, the recent jungle destructions of Vietnam. Nature seems no longer a refuge, more part of the conspiracy to harass Henry and his fellow soldiers.

For a moment he manages, wittingly or not, to lose all sense of self. He becomes «not a man but a member» (36), part of «a common personality», and Crane again reverts to his recurrent image:

He was at a task. He was like a carpenter who has made many boxes, making still another box, only there was furious haste in his movements... (36).

Boxed in by war —and the creator of his own box— Henry finally does run, blindly, absurdly, envisaging the enemy as «machines of steel» (43), and himself first as a scared, vulnerable rabbit (43), then the «proverbial chicken» (43). In his mind he berates his fellows for being «Methodical idiots!», «Machine-line fools!» (45) and later laments the «iron injustice» (48) of things. Nature serves to reflect only his

own sense of his actions; at first it has been hostile and conspiratorial, but in the calm of having run he sees its benigner aspect, that of «the jovial squirrel» (49) whose own flight seems to sanction his own. But the plain fact is that he has not escaped at all, and that the inexorable shadow of death stalks him as it stalks every army. There simply is no escape. The scene (at the end of Chapter 7) in which Henry confronts even more fully than before Death in the form of the soldier propped against the tree offers one of the most graphic moments in the novel, the perfect image of deathly stasis seen by the living:

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of bundle along the upper lip.

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. Then the youth cautiously put one hand behind him and brought it against a tree. Leaning upon this he retreated, step by step, with his face still towards the thing. He feared that if he turned his back the body might spring up and stealthily pursue him.

The branches, pushing against him, threatened to throw him over upon it. His unguided feet, too, caught aggravatingly in brambles; and with it all he received was a subtle suggestion to touch the corpse. As he thought of it his hand upon it he shuddered profoundly.

At last he burst the bonds which had fastened him to the spot and fled, unheeding the underbush. He was pursued by a sight of the black ants swarming greedily upon the gray face and venturing horribly near to the eyes.

After a time he paused, and, breathless and panting, listened. He imagined some strange voice would come from the dead throat and squawk after him in horrible menaces.

The trees about the portal of the chapel moved soughingly in a soft wind. A sad silence was upon the little guarding edifice (50-51).

The whole passage deals stunningly in horror and confrontation: Henry as live consciousness faced with the totally life-removed stasis of the corpse. Again there is the exchange of looks; the strange, hallucinatory

contract of the living with the dead; the newly arrived with the newly departed. The black ants, like grotesque victors, threaten to invade the soldier's eyes, indeed actually to enter the body like the final scavengers.

Henry blunders on through the landscape, seeking escape but in fact (by Chapter 13) re-discovering his regiment. His freedom amounts to the freedom only to move inside the box, according to its fixed parameters.

En route back to the regiment, he first sees more death:

The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him. Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses (53).

War, in other words, serves as the analogue of a vast industrial engine, its products not consumer or industrial goods but corpses. The sense of enclosure also draws on the ditty sung by the soldiers («Sing a song 'a vic' try, / A pocketful 'a bullets, / Five an' twenty dead men / Baked in a-pie»). Henry, no less than his Union brothers and Confederate enemies indeed are «baked in a pie», entrapped and infantilized as suits the words of a nursery rhyme. He acquires his own «red badge of courage» (57), almost absurdly, hit on the head by the rifle of one of his own side; so maimed, as it were, he joins the soldierly fraternity of blood, his true initiation into «the box». He also witnesses the grotesque pirouette of Jim Conklin's death (Chapter 9), reminder were it needed, that death still dances its dance before him. Like a dazed Kaspar Hauser he wanders across the indeterminate battlefields, through smoke, haze, the cries and alarms of war, and again he offers the impression of activity as if it were a hive, a frenzied and boxed-in arena of death:

The forest seemed a vast hive of men buzzing about in frantic circles... (79).

Henry's unknowing return to his regiment marks the half-way point in the novel, the initiation over and the embrace of his full soldierly destiny about to begin. Throughout, Crane offers Henry as no analyst of his own emotions; rather, he simply evolves to an accommodation of his role as foot-soldier. War so co-opts even those to whom it has first shown its destructive face. The irony will be that Henry, too, as one critic puts it, becomes the «efficient killer», the willing inhabitant of the box. As Crane puts matters: «He was no more a loud young soldier. There was about him now a fine reliance» (87). The irony is subtle; Henry has adjusted to his destiny in a way that «reliance»,

Emersonian or otherwise, means little other than submission, resigned acquiescence to the terms of the box. And the image recurs as the loud soldier observes:

«'All th' officers say we 've got th' rebs in a pretty tight box'» (88).

Henry becomes —has become— one more in the line of Bunyanesque incarnations, the Tall Soldier, the Tattered Soldier, the Cheery Man and so forth. He is described as «a man of experience» (92), the perfect complement to his subsequent fellows, first Jimmy Rogers (Chapter 18), then his friend Wilson. Crane nowhere suggests Henry has learnt morally; only that he is more efficient, calmer, and hence from a soldier's perspective, «mature».

Henry has also acquired, as Crane says, «new eyes» (106), eyes that accept and seek to work at one with the landscape of destruction. In his own undeliberated estimate Henry has become «reliant», but from an outside view he is mechanistic, even «insane»:

His face was drawn hard and tight with the stress of his endeavor. His eyes were fixed in a lurid glare. And with his soiled and disordered dress, his red and inflamed features surmounted by the dingy rag with its spot of blood, his wildly swinging rifle and banging accouterments, he looked to be an insane soldier (109).

Henry might indeed belong among those hard-jawed veterans captured on film by Matthew Brady; the soldier who censors all other sensations from his mind but survival and conquest. He has evolved Darwinly from neophyte to veteran, questioner to accepter. In the sequence in which he finally takes up the flag, becoming both its disciple and celebrant, his regiment is variously termed «a scurrying mass» (113), «a machine run down» (116), and the Confederates «a brown mass» (116), two armies transformed into gladiatorial masses and each moving one against the other. («The two bodies of troops exchanged blows in the manner of a pair of boxers») (118).

The last three chapters of the novel re-enforce even further this process of reification, the claustrophobic swirls of noise, colour, smell and blood, soldiers indeed trapped within their moving box. Crane refers appropriately to «the dark-hued masses of the enemy» (125), the «unspeakable» noise (126), and the «round red discharges from the puns» which make «a crimson flare and a high, thick smoke» (126), again a scene which relies on the reader's corroborating employment

of all his senses. These are, to be sure, impressionistic notations, the difference being that Henry no longer exists outside them, but actually at their centre, the flag-bearer and inspired man of war. His regiment becomes a blind, vulnerable concentration of bodies:

His emaciated regiment bustled forth with undiminished fierceness when its time came. When assaulted again by bullets, the men burst out in a barbaric cry of rage and pain. They bent their heads in aims of intent hatred behind the projected hammers of their guns. Their ramrods clanged loud with fury as their eager arms pounded the cartridges into the rifle barrels. The front of the regiment was a smoke-wall penetrated by the flashing points of yellow and red (128).

Behind that «smoke-wall», with its implication of a box-like configuration, Henry envisages his own ecstatic (and highly narcissistic) death, the soldier made heroic by his wounds:

It was clear to him that his and absolute revenge was to be achieved by his dead body lying torn, torn and glittering, upon the field (129).

His own corpse will thus do service for the larger wounded body of the regiment, rather in the manner Walt Whitman in «When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloom'd» moves from the murdered Lincoln to «all the slain soldiers in the war» (Stanza 15). The identification of self with regiment and the Union army as a whole is made clearer when he sees his own imagined death as revenge on all the officers who have taunted his and his fellow enlistees's efforts:

And it was his idea, vaguely formulated, that his corpse would be for those eyes a great and salt reproach.
The regiment bled extravagantly... (130).

Henry so has become the perfect military instrument; orders might be resented, but they are obeyed. Indeed, he feels increasingly the exultation of war. The old flag-bearers falls and yields to the new, first Wilson then Henry. Both young men experience war as sexual exhilaration, a kind of displaced ecstasy. Henry almost literally craves the submissive fulfilment of his new apotheosis as gladiator:

He himself felt the daring spirit of a savage, religion-mad.
He was capable of profound sacrifices, a tremendous death.

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. There were subtle flashings of joy within him that thus should be his mind (132).

«Thus should be his mind»: Henry no longer wishes to flee, but to welcome his soldierly fate. The Army —«the box»— has claimed him wholly. Just as Wilson feels in the aftermath of the fray «jubilant and glorified» (135), so, too, Henry experiences the quiet, certain knowledge that his manhood is certified by having taken part in and survived his most demanding battle. Crane's irony again seeps through as he offers Henry as a soldier whose manhood can so be confirmed by battle:

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 (139).

Manhood, by this measure, means facing military action enthusiastically, unprotestingly. Crane then invokes Nature as an almost sardonically neutral backcloth, as able to offer its warmth as easily as its wetness:

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 searing 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 (140).

The «liquid brown mud» returns us to where we began, as do terms like «bedraggled train», «troughs», men caught up in the determinist tracks of their fate. Henry neither resists nor questions this fate; he seeks only momentary restoration back to full strength. His bravery takes its definition from a closed system of assumptions, a system he now makes over into his own life («he saw that the world was a world

for him»). Like Dreiser's Cowperwood in the trilogy of *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *The Stoic*, he both serves and enhances those powers which have called him to them.

«Inside the box»: the term operates wonderfully to two ends. It exactly positions Henry's fate in having joined up and been absorbed by the regiment; and it keeps the reader aware that in entering *The Red Badge of Courage* he himself has entered a fictive «box» of Crane's own imaginative devising. Joseph Conrad, no stranger to the nature of military heroism, once perceptively referred to Henry as «the symbol of all untried men»⁴. He also, equally perceptively, called attention to the nature of Crane's craft in *The Red Badge of Courage*:

But as to «masterpiece», there is no doubt that *The Red Badge of Courage* is that, if only because of the marvellous accord of the vivid impressionistic description of action on that woodland battlefield, and the imaged style of analysis of the emotions in the inward moral struggle going on in the breast of one individual — the young soldier of the book, the protagonist of the monodrama presented to us in an endless succession of graphic and coloured phrases⁵.

The overall «marvellous accord» of *The Red Badge of Courage* lies precisely in its coalescence of theme and form, the ability of the book's design to draw into itself the very nerve of its drama.

A similar point is made by Ralph Ellison, in his celebrated Introduction to a selection of Crane's stories, when he speaks approvingly of *The Red Badge of Courage* as «a series of vividly impressionistic episodes that convey the discontinuity of feeling of one caught up in a vast impersonal action». Ellison, in other words, sees the local impressionist detail as the coloration within the larger imaginative whole, just as he sees Henry as part of «a vast impersonal action»⁶. In so matching his detail to the novel's theme Crane achieves a work of rare distinction, the «moving box» both as an expression of the compelling subject of *The Red Badge of Courage* and of its essential imaginative design.

⁴ CONRAD, Joseph: *Last Essays* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1926), pp. 119-124.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Introduction to *The Red Badge Of Courage and Four Great Short Stories* by Stephen Crane (New York: Dell Publishing, Laurel Edition, 1960), pp. 7-24.