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**“Heroes Had No Shame in Their
Lives”: Manhood, Heroics, and
Compassion in *The Red Badge of
Courage* and “A Mystery of Heroism”**

The Civil War, the bloodiest conflict ever conducted on American soil, raged for four years. Far longer, though fortunately less bloody, at least in literal terms, has been the conflict over the meaning of the greatest novel of that war, Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*. The central issue in this debate is whether Crane intends for the reader to take the protagonist’s final assessment of himself straightforwardly or ironically. On his first day of battle, Henry Fleming flees in terror and endures various physical and mental agonies as a result, including being clubbed in the head by another panic-stricken man and fearing that his cowardice will be revealed to all, to his undying shame. However, upon returning to his unit that evening, Fleming finds his comrades willing to accept his lie that he was “separated” from them during the fighting and that his head wound was caused by enemy fire. Realizing that he “had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man” (86), Fleming fights fiercely the next day, winning praise from his officers and fellow soldiers. With these plaudits ringing in his ears, he concludes that he is “now what he called a hero” (97) and, indeed, as he had concluded earlier, “a man” (135). John J. McDermott is representative of the critics who argue that Crane wishes for the reader likewise to call Henry a hero and a man, discerning in Henry’s deeds on the second day “a final pattern of courageous action” and thus “genuine heroics” (330). Weihong Julia Zhu, on the other hand, offers one of the most recent statements of the opposing view, asserting that Henry’s courage is “absurd” on several counts.¹ My own view, based on a close reading of *The Red Badge* that synthesizes the separate insights of a number of other critics, and on the depiction of heroics and manhood that Crane offers in “A Mystery of Heroism,” the first Civil War story he wrote after this novel, is that the ironic interpretation is accurate but no single critic has probed the full depths of Crane’s interrogation of these subjects.

Most of the negative critiques of Henry's self-assessment examine the nature of the courage he displays. Howard Horsford argues that Henry's supposed bravery on the second day is finally no different from his flight on the first in that neither behavior stems from "conscious, willed intention"; his flight results from fear, while his courage results from an equally involuntary upwelling of the opposite emotion, rage (123). As John Clendenning more elaborately explains, "Henry's shameful cowardice, his archaic dependence on motherly solicitation—the specter of a primitive female identification—his fear, in short, that he is not a real man and others know it, turns to furious hatred" on the second day. He "now wants to destroy the enemy whom he perceives as somehow to be blamed for his impotence. His rage—or what self psychologist Heinz Kohut calls 'narcissistic rage'—is his revenge against everyone and everything that insults his grandiose, exhibitionist self" (31). Picking up on the note of narcissism, Zhu rates Henry's courage as absurd partly on the grounds that it "derives from vanity"—from his desire to gain the praise of his peers and superiors—rather than from the "righteous inducement" of true mental or moral force (3-4).

Support for these views is widespread in Crane's depiction of Henry's second day of battle. That Henry operates out of vanity, judging himself only on the basis of what others can see rather than his own moral sense, is clear both before and after the fighting. Early in the morning, while Henry is waiting for marching orders, we are told that "since [he knew that] nothing could now be discovered" about his cowardice, he "did not shrink from the eyes of judges, and allowed no thoughts of his own to keep him from an attitude of manfulness" (86). Similarly, when the fighting is over Henry is said to feel "gleeful and unregretting, for, in it, his public deeds were paraded in great and shining prominence. Those performances which had been witnessed by his fellows marched now in wide purple and gold, hiding various deflections" (133).

That Henry's prime motivation under fire is unconscious anger comes across most sharply in the account of the first combat of this day. The narrator says that "When, in a dream, it occurred to the youth that his rifle was an impotent stick, he lost sense of everything but his hate, his desire to smash into pulp the glittering smile of victory which he could feel upon the faces of his enemies... The youth was not conscious that he was erect upon his feet. He did not know the direction of the ground" (95). So all-consuming is this rage that Henry is not even aware that the enemy has retreated until someone from his own side forcibly points the fact out, at which time "there appeared upon the glazed vacancy of his eyes, a diamond-point of intelligence" (96). Even in a later moment when Henry might seem to perform a conscious act of unselfish heroism, recklessly exposing himself to enemy fire in an effort to rally his regiment when it has stalled during

a charge, vanity and rage are the true engines, for his goal in this endeavor is to prove wrong the officer who earlier predicted just this outcome in saying that the regiment fights “‘like a lot ‘a mule-drivers’ ” (101). Specifically, Henry wishes to prove that *he* is no mule-driver, as the description of his thoughts at this moment reveals. We are told that “a scowl of mortification and rage was upon his face... His dreams had collapsed when the mule-drivers, dwindling rapidly, had wavered and hesitated on the little clearing and then had recoiled. And now the retreat of the mule-drivers was a march of shame to him” (111).

Despite the seemingly condemnatory nature of such passages, a number of critics have suggested that negative judgment of Henry on the bases of anger and vanity is contained in the minds of readers operating out of certain twentieth-century paradigms of courage rather than in the text itself. Philip Beidler argues that the reader must be aware of nineteenth-century concepts of heroism, both romantic and Darwinian, out of which Crane is writing. When Henry’s thoughts and actions are viewed in the context of the contemporary “discourse of courage,” Beidler says, it is possible, while not disregarding a great deal of complexity, to conclude that, for Crane,

Henry has proven commonly battleworthy by common definition, and specifically that he is as courageous as he or anyone else might expect to be... Whether he is deluded or not *is* an issue and the focus throughout of a complex irony, but it is only so within this very specific context. He has simply been one of those left alive and accredited in the consensus of his fellows—and thus also in cultural memory—as having met the test. (250)

And even within twentieth-century discourses of courage Henry’s behavior may be regarded as normative rather than deficient. John Hersey concludes, on the basis of his observation of a marine unit’s combat experience on Guadalcanal in 1942, that “except for the hard knot which is inside some men, courage is largely the desire to show other men that you have it” (qtd. in Monteiro, “Guadalcanal Report” 199-200). Tim O’Brien offers much the same assessment of men in Vietnam in *The Things They Carried*. Among those things, he says, is “the soldier’s greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to” (20-21).

One critical response to this less judgmental measure of Henry’s courage has been to sever the connection Henry himself makes between heroism and manhood. Donald Pizer says that Henry’s bravery on the second day does not

differ in substance from his fear on the first “in their essential character as animal and instinctive responses to danger” (2), but he argues that Henry’s experiences have run him through the whole gamut of human emotions and have thereby conferred some measure of growth upon him. “To have touched the great death as Henry has done,” Pizer concludes, “and to have experienced as well the central emotions of life arising from this inescapable reality of the human condition, is indeed to have... gained some degree of manhood” (6-7).

This is a sensitive and intelligent reading, one that takes into account the uncertain relationship between courage and maturity, but I would argue, as do a number of other critics, that it does not take into account Henry’s lack of one emotion that for Crane is central to both manhood and heroism: compassion. In a letter dated January 12, 1896, just months after the publication of *The Red Badge*, Crane explained his view on this matter to Nellie Crouse, a young woman with whom he was enamored. “The final wall of the wise man’s thought,” he says, “is Human Kindness of course. If the road of disappointment, grief, pessimism, is followed far enough, it will arrive there... Therefore do I strive to be as kind and as just as may be to those about me and in my meager success at it, I find the solitary pleasure of life” (*Correspondence* 180). It might be tempting to dismiss such a statement in such a context as youthful self-dramatization, but, as Crane says in the same letter, “[t]he cynical mind is an uneducated thing” (180), and *The Red Badge* bears out the philosophy of the letter, for Crane seems clearly to show that Henry is at fault for deriving his pleasure in life from other sources while consciously refusing to act out of human kindness.

The most glaring example of Henry’s failure in this area spans both days of battle. Shortly after his flight on the first day, as he wanders behind the lines, Henry falls in with a column of wounded men, among whom he finds one of his best friends, Jim Conklin. Near death, Conklin asks Henry to keep him out of the road so he will not be run over by “ ‘them damned artillery wagons’ ” (55). Henry responds, “hysterically,” by the narrator’s description, “I’ll take care of you! I swear to Gawd I will!” (55). Henry at this moment clearly does feel compassion, but the adverb *hysterically* suggests that this response may be, like his fear and courage, not entirely a matter of conscious will. When he is presented with a chance to show a more considered compassion a few moments later, he fails utterly. Following Conklin’s death, another mortally wounded man who has befriended Henry shows solicitude for him, asking him where he has been wounded. Lacking a wound, Henry is afraid that this question will reveal that he is only behind the lines because he ran from the battle. As a result, he is “enraged against the tattered man and could have strangled him;” despite the man’s

entreaties that Henry stay with him, Henry walks away, leaving him “wandering about helplessly in the fields” (62).

At the end of the next day, as Henry is gleefully surveying his public deeds of courage, he recalls this man who displayed compassion and received none in return—“he who gored by bullets and faint for blood, had fretted concerning an imagined wound in another... he who blind with weariness and pain had been deserted in the field” (134)—and the memory depresses him. This feeling does not proceed from any deep moral regret, however, but rather from “the thought that he might be detected in the thing” (134). In this new mood he fears that his comrades are “seeing his thoughts and scrutinizing each detail of the scene with the tattered soldier,” but, as was the case with his flight on the first day, as soon as he realizes that this mistake too was performed in the dark his remorse vanishes. “[G]radually,” the narrator says, “he mustered force to put the sin at a distance” and is able to conclude that “[h]e had been to touch the great death and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man” (135).

However complicated Crane may make the relationship of courage to manhood, the irony in this juxtaposition of compassion and manhood seems clear: when Henry in fact confronted the great death in the form of the tattered soldier, he consciously *refused* to touch it, and so his assessment of himself is off by precisely 180 degrees. Pizer takes account of this flaw and acknowledges that it militates against Henry’s having attained complete maturity, but further evidence suggests that compassion is a *sine qua non* of any sort of maturity for Crane and that he equally “conceives of humanity in heroism” (Zhu 6); for, as Zhu, Kevin J. Hayes, and Mary Neff Shaw have all noted, Henry’s treatment of the tattered man is not an isolated episode but rather part of a pattern designed to show that Henry consistently behaves with “inhuman selfishness” (Zhu 6).² When Henry returns to his unit at the end of the first day with his story of separation and wounding, he is tended by his friend Wilson, who earlier had been boastful and quarrelsome but has been changed by his experiences under fire into the soul of compassion. He gives Henry his own canteen, dresses his wound, and puts him to bed in his own blankets. Henry is grateful, concluding that Wilson has “now climbed a peak of wisdom from which he could perceive himself as a very wee thing” (82), but he does not apply this analysis to himself and deal with Wilson in kind. Rather, when he fears that Wilson, like the tattered soldier, may unwittingly ask questions that will expose his cowardice, he recalls his knowledge of Wilson’s own earlier fears, the tangible evidence of which is a packet of letters Wilson gave Henry, and “rejoice[s] in the possession of a small weapon with which he could prostrate his comrade at the first signs of a cross-examination. He was master. It would now be he who could laugh and shoot the shafts of derision” (85). Less developed

but equally telling is Henry's behavior toward wounded men on the second day. Twice Henry encounters badly shot-up comrades, one "thrashing about in the grass, twisting his body into many strange postures [and]... screaming loudly" (99) and the other with his mouth pulped into "a pulsing mass of blood and teeth" (125-26), but in neither case does the vividness of his observation seem to evoke any sympathy for them; he merely notes their sufferings and moves along, intent on his own battle-fury.

It is this lack of compassion for the wounded that provides the link in terms of both plot and ideology to the short story "A Mystery of Heroism." Here Crane creates an equal number of significant parallels to and differences from the novel. Like Henry Fleming, Private Fred Collins, the protagonist of "Mystery," behaves bravely out of concern for the opinion of others, and like Henry he faces a challenge to act with compassion that entails personal risk in the face of the great death. Unlike Henry, however, Collins is capable of honest introspection and is therefore less sure of his own status as a man and a hero even though he passes the test of compassion as well as that of courage; and it would seem that his uncertainty provides a clear intertextual criticism of Henry.

The test of courage begins for Collins when, as his company is deployed at the edge of a meadow that is being shelled by Confederate artillery, he repeatedly complains of thirst and expresses a desire to drink from a well on the opposite side of the meadow. His comrades' reaction is to ask, "Well, if yeh want a drink so bad, why don't yeh go git it?" (50), which raises Collins's hackles. Before he fully realizes what he is doing, he takes the dare and asks his captain's and colonel's permission to make the hazardous run across the meadow. Although these officers deem his expedition foolhardy, they grant his request on condition that he take some other men's canteens with him, thus giving his action some semblance of purpose. At this point Collins's meditation on heroism begins. Unlike Henry prior to his first battle, he is not worried about fear; in fact, he feels none and wonders at this circumstance "because human expression had said loudly for centuries that men should feel afraid of certain things and that all men who did not feel this fear were phenomena, heroes" (53). Given this line of reasoning, Collins has no choice but to conclude that "[h]e was, then, a hero," but, again unlike Henry, he is not elated by this realization. Instead, we are told, "[h]e suffered that disappointment which we would all have"—all, apparently, but Henry—"if we discovered that we were ourselves capable of those deeds which we most admire in history and legend. This, then, was a hero. After all, heroes were not much" (53).

As downbeat as this induction is, Collins's meditation does not end here; rather, Crane has him descend from even this disheartening level. Collins finally decides that he is not a hero after all, for

Heroes had no shame in their lives and, as for him, he remembered borrowing fifteen dollars from a friend and promising to pay it back the next day, and then avoiding that friend for ten months. When at home his mother had aroused him for the early labor of his life on the farm, it had often been his fashion to be irritable, childish, diabolical, and his mother had died since he had come to the war. (53)

Once more, the distance between Henry and Collins is sharp: whereas Henry leaves compassion out of his definition of his own heroism in putting “at a distance” his own “sin” of abandoning the tattered man, Collins feels that his significantly lesser failures to consider the needs of others render him “an intruder in the land of fine deeds” (53).

Collins’s reflections end at this point, for once he begins his run across the meadow he has no time for introspection. Now, with shells exploding all around him, he does feel fear, but instead of wondering how this new access of emotion might affect his conception of himself, he is concerned only with getting out of jeopardy as fast as possible. Exasperated at how slowly the first canteen fills, he tosses aside all the canteens, instead fills a bucket he finds at the well, and begins the dash back to his own lines with that vessel. Then, out on the meadow, he encounters a mortally wounded Union officer pinned beneath his dead horse. In agony, the officer asks, “Say, young man, give me a drink of water, can’t you?” (55). Collins, “mad from the threats of destruction,” screams, “I can’t” and continues running (55). An instant later, however, he turns, comes back, and, despite his continuing terror, attempts to succor the officer, who, with “the faintest shadow of a smile on his lips,” gives “a sigh, a little primitive breath like that of a child” (56) even though all the trembling Collins can do for him is splash water on his face before dashing away again. In another moment, Collins reaches his regiment, his comrades cheer him—not, it would seem, for his small act of compassion but rather for the grand, foolhardy gesture of running the enemy’s gauntlet—and the story ends by living up to its title: where at the end of *The Red Badge* we are treated to Henry’s lengthy post-combat analysis of himself, here we know nothing about what conclusion Collins reaches regarding his experience; all we learn is that “two genial, sky-larking young lieutenants” wrestle playfully for the bucket until “[s]uddenly there was an oath, the thud of wood on the ground, and a swift murmur of astonishment from the ranks. The two lieutenants glared at each other. The bucket lay on the ground empty” (56).

Faced with this enigma, critics have wrestled as well, if less playfully than the lieutenants. Thomas Gullason sees this last image as Crane’s final word on

the mystery, asserting that “Collins’s journey... invalidates the age-old notions regarding the meaning and value of heroism... The empty bucket sounds and resounds with aftereffects—of the praise lavished upon Collins by his fellow troopers, and the hollowness of his feat, with Collins graceless under pressure, where pride, panic, and group pressure have ‘conspired’ to make him an ‘accidental’ hero” (188). Similarly, George Monteiro says that “the irony [of the empty bucket] is unmistakable. Collins has risked his life for nothing. His heroics have gone for naught” (69). These are insightful and trenchant readings, but I would argue that in their focus on the end of the story they ignore the possible import of Collins’s compassion for the wounded officer. My own view inclines more to those of Mary Neff Shaw and Patrick Dooley, who give attention to the final image of the bucket but also take heed of Collins’s act of charity when the bucket still contains water. Shaw perceives a satiric opposition between the dash across the meadow and the moment of compassion, arguing that the former embodies “a superficial, self-centered attitude . . . that heroism is determined by social acclaim” and that the latter demonstrates that “[t]he primary constituent of Crane’s personal concept of heroism is human kindness” (97). Dooley goes so far as to brand Collins’s dash “immoral” because of the great disparity between its “serious cost and . . . trivial reward”; by contrast, Collins’s giving water to the officer makes the point that “pain and suffering correctly appreciated by both the patient and the onlooker—and correctly responded to—[can transform] a foolish caper into a genuinely moral act of heroism” (125).

My affinity for these latter two readings is rooted in the fact that they take in more of the story than the first two, but even these two overlook still another mystery of heroism. Shaw and Dooley evidently assume that Collins’s return to the officer is a conscious, willed act, but our lack of access to Collins’s thoughts once he begins his race means that we cannot be sure this is the case. We are told only that he first runs past the officer and then comes back; we are not told what mental process, if any, has impelled this turnabout. Monteiro asserts that the return is in fact involuntary and that Crane thus “brushes aside the notion that heroism is an act of the will or intention” (69). I am not willing to go this far, but I concur with Monteiro’s final assessment that this story “questions the notion that heroism can be defined essentially—which may be Crane’s key to the mysteries of heroism” (70). Indeed, I would argue that when we read *The Red Badge of Courage* in the light of this story and vice versa Crane confronts us with not one but at least four mysteries of heroism: why men such as Henry Fleming and Fred Collins are willing to risk their lives for the sake of vanity, where the courage to perform a truly selfless act comes from, how Fleming can possibly regard himself as a hero, and how Collins can fail to do so.

Notes

1. For other discussions of this controversy, see Harold Beaver, "Stephen Crane: The Hero as Victim," *Yearbook of English Studies* 12 (1982): 186-93; Christine Brooke-Rose, "Ill Logics of Irony," *New Essays on The Red Badge of Courage*, ed. Lee Clark Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 129-46; John J. Conder, "The Red Badge of Courage: Form and Function," *Modern American Fiction: Form and Function*, Ed. Thomas Daniel Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989), 28-38; John Fraser, "Crime and Forgiveness: 'The Red Badge' in Time of War," *Criticism* 9 (1967): 243-56; Leland Krauth, "Heroes and Heroics: Stephen Crane's Moral Imperative," *South Dakota Review* 11 (1973): 86-93; Wayne Charles Miller, "A New Kind of War Demands a New Kind of Treatment: The Civil War and the Birth of American Realism," *An Armed America, Its Face in Fiction: A History of the American Military Novel* (New York: New York UP, 1970), 58-91; Donald Pizer, "Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism," *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1966), 11-32; Kermit Vanderbilt and Daniel Weiss, "From Rifleman to Flagbearer: Henry Fleming's Separate Peace in *The Red Badge of Courage*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 11 (1966): 371-80; Daniel Weiss, "The Red Badge of Courage," *Psychoanalytic Review* 52 (1965): 176-96, 460-84.
2. See Hayes's "How Stephen Crane Shaped Henry Fleming," *Studies in the Novel* 22 (1990): 296-307; and Shaw's "Henry Fleming's Heroics in *The Red Badge of Courage*: A Satiric Search for a 'Kinder, Gentler' Heroism," *Studies in the Novel* 22 (1990): 418-28.

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