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Orality, Storytelling & the Metafictional Space of Narration in Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage

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ABSTRACT

This is a reading of the brief, but quite significant, metafictional gesture in Stephen Crane's renewed war novel The Red Badge of Courage (1895). This metafictional gesture has gone unnoticed in spite of the prestigious bulk of Crane scholarship over the last hundred years. This incorporated metafictional gesture open the text of the novel to new insights on Crane's cultural and aesthetic politics. A wide range of critical spectrum is invoked in this paper to uncover the full significance of this aspect of Crane's novel.

At the end of his mostly retrospective first chapter of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Stephen Crane suddenly goes metafictional when his authorial self/narrator takes the reader off guard:" The youth of this tale felt gratitude for these words of his comrade. He had feared that all of the untried men possessed a great and correct confidence. He now was in a measure reassured." (11)

This does not qualify as an authorial intrusion, a not uncommon practice in the classic realist novel of the nineteenth century, because it is not the author or his/her authorial self who is being projected in his/her fictional world. It is the narrator who/disrupts the narration and lays bare the pure textual agency of this fictional world.

By declaring that this is a 'tale' the narrator shatters whatever allusion of reality that the narrative is conferring on the reader. This is faithful to the tradition of metafiction. This kind of writing, according to Patricia Waugh, "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." (2). It is plain that Crane succeeds to fulfill the first requirement of this definition but the second part concerning problematizing the reality-fiction boundaries is questionable. This narrative is a constructed artifact rather than a true account of reality and that Henry, its acclaimed Youth, is a mere fictional character in that tale.

However brief, this metafictional gesture serves as a sort of textual space where the issues of representation and agency are being re-negotiated. This metafictional gesture is inevitable as it signals the difference of the forthcoming narrative of the Civil War in what amount to a deconstructive difference where 'this tale' is simultaneously different and in a ceaseless process of deferral from the contemporary accounts of the Civil War which are contested in the opening chapter of the novel. In fact, this aspect of the novel is well noticed by Crane critics but never related to this metafictional gesture at the end of this chapter. Amy Kaplan's new historicist work on this issue pins point Crane's politics of representation as parodic- in the postmodernist tradition- of these contemporary accounts of the Civil War. She notices that Crane's "war novel does more than parody either generic conventions or historical novels about the Civil War; it specifically parodies those narrative forms used to reinterpret the Civil War and to imagine new kinds of warfare in the 1890s." (84)

Throughout the first chapter, Henry Fleming, the youth of the novel, evokes contemporary narratives of the Civil War and of the chivalric romance so popular in the 1890s to test their applicability to his own story that lies ahead. Kaplan identifies four major master narratives of the Civil War: narrative of emancipation, the domestic subplot of fiction, the memoirs of veterans, and chivalric romance. The ethics of representation which shaped these contemporary master narratives of the Civil War are

ideologically mediated in that ideology foregrounds both history and aesthetics to produce interpretations rather than mimetic narratives. Crane re-negotiates the ideological mediation in each of these four master narratives of the Civil War through the politics of parody.

Linda Hutcheon argues that "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (93). This is precisely the core of Crane's politics of re-negotiating these master narratives. Before the metafictional gestures, these narratives shape Henry's consciousness of his world-a consciousness typified as period-bound by identifying Henry as the Youth throughout *The Red Badge of Courage*:

> He had burned several times to enlist. Tales of great movements shook the land. They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them. He had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds. (4)

The effects of irony are unmistakable in the mocking of the epical language of the chivalric romances and the effective relocation of this chivalric glow to the space of psychic fantasy and day-dreaming. But Crane's parody extends beyond irony. What is at stake here is not the contemporary representation of the Civil War or even the ideology inscribing that specific mode of representation. The key word here is not the word 'tale'. It is, rather, the word 'enlist', which masks how the individual becomes subject to the power workings of ideology. The appeal of this representation of the Civil War as a chivalric romance is an instance of what the French cultural theorist Louis Althusser calls 'interpellation in which "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" (115). Althusser contends that ideology is that web of power relations and discursive practices which reconstitute concrete "individuals as subjects" (116). So pervasive is ideology in its constitution of subjects that it forms our very reality and thus appears to us as "true" or "obvious."

The metafictional space contests this scene of interpellation. Henry's enlistment is the textual threshold to a constructed reality structured by the signifying practices of war and fighting. "The youth of this tale" parodies this act of ideological interpellation as Henry the farm boy occupies the subject position of the youth/private in 'this tale,' as textually parodied in in the space of narrative tales as constructed reality. The tale is a metaphor for the web of power relations, i.e., the army, in which Henry, the concrete individual, is being ideologically interpellated as private, subject to the apparatuses of this institution. War and the army do structure the reality of Henry's world. Henry, however, is being identified as the youth, rather than the private of 'this tale.' The word 'youth, however, designates a character type and simultaneously speaks to the collective universality. By enlisting in the army Henry loses his concrete individuality and, like other soldiers, he is typified through the dropping of his proper name throughout the novel. This is a marker of Henry's appropriation in the symbolic order of the textual paradigm of ideological dissemination. But this is also a scene of resistance as Henry resists this act of ideological interpellation. 'Youth' designates a natural human attribute, quite relevant to being a concrete individual, whereas 'private' is an institutional marker, a real attribute of his subject position in that institution.

Henry's desertion in the middle of the battle testifies to this act of resistance to ideological interpellation. Henry's act of desertion is a direct violation of the ideologically promoted romantic image of the Civil War which foregrounds the literary representation of that war in American literature and historiography up to The Red Badge of Courage. Crane interrogates this literary representation of the Civil War in the metafictional space. The Civil War as an actual historical event is constructed as a literary artifact and, hence, it is a tale rather than a representation of the historical reality of that event. The real world, in Paul Ricoeur's words, no longer corresponds with the "work's world" (5). The historicity of the Civil War is opened to the onslaught of textuality. It becomes a text/tale which "assumes the status of a self-contained system of symbols" (5) typical of the literary text. This is why the historical reconstructions of *The Red Badge of Courage* as an actual Civil War episode have little, or no real, contribution to our understanding and appreciation of the novel. It does not matter whether Crane based his novel on the battle of Chancellorsville or any other great battles in the Civil War because that would not add to our understanding of Henry Fleming personality nor there is a reliable means to ascertain the factual reliability of such historical conjectures. Accordingly, Henry is a character in the work's world. He is not a real soldier in the real Civil War. The use of the word 'youth', rather than the proper noun Henry, is a signal of the fictional nature of this

narrative. The designation of Henry as a character type works to this effect and further eclipses his concrete individuality.

But resistance as engendered in/by the metafictional space in *The Red Badge of Courage* extends far beyond the politics of representation to encompass those of textual agency. The metafictional space negotiates the status of the narrative situation in the novel. By declaring Henry to be a character in a tale a reversal of narrative agency is being affected. Instead of the illusion of a narrative voice and a hypothetical reader the metafictional space relocates the whole narrative situation into an oral storyteller and immediate concrete audience. The Metafictional space assumes the form and rhetoric of an address which, in turn, assumes an immediate interlocutor/listener. The employment of the demonstrative article and the oral nature embed in the etymology of the word 'tale' are markers of this orality. The text of *The Red Badge of Courage* outside the metafictional space is not unaware of its orality. The narrative markets its model of the storyteller:

After this incident, and as he reviewed the battle pictures he had seen, he felt quite competent to return home and make the hearts of the people glow with stories of war. He could see himself in a room of warm tints telling tales to listeners. He could exhibit laurels. They were insignificant; still, in a district where laurels were infrequent, they might shine. (102)

This passage contains all the necessary pre-requisites of the traditional art of oral storytelling from the bardic personality of the storyteller to the warmth and intimacy between the teller and his audience. Probably it is the loss of the communal function of the traditional oral storytelling that Crane wants to emphasize here. The immediacy of concrete experience dwindled into impotent textuality as representation displaced interaction. The forms of war narrative, specifically those of the Civil War that Crane marshaled in the first chapter fail to communicate real experience as their written texts construct, rather than convey, reality of war experience. The reader/audience which The Red Badge of Courage seeks corresponds to this view; one which is actively engaged in the tale. This is captured in the description of the 'tattered man' who was listening with awe to the 'lurid descriptions' of a bearded sergeant. The narration suddenly bursts into a close-up of his face: "His lean features wore an expression of awe and admiration. He was like a listener in a country store to wondrous tales told among the sugar barrels. He eyed the story-teller with unspeakable wonder. His mouth was agape in yokel fashion." (59)

Is this Crane's ideal reader? What is strange in this view of the reader is that the whole focus is laid on sight, rather than listening. Eagerness, humility, awe, and admiration reflect the wide spectrum of the listener's mental and emotional response to the figure of the storyteller. Dust, blood, and powder are markers of the hard and brutal reality of physical experience oral storytelling is sharing with its listeners. The simile comparing pushes the idea of childhood wonder to the front to give insight into the nature of the impact of the tale on its receptors. "Unspeakable wonder" suggests the religious shamanic function of the storyteller figure. He is a seer, a sort of a visionary, who is entrusted by the gods to speak their visions and to preserve the communal heritage in the sacredness of his orally transmitted tales.

Unlike the audience of oral narratives, readers of written literary texts are passive receptors of experience encoded in the texts. The cultural theorist Walter Benjamin speaks to this effect when he stakes the novel against storytelling. "The storyteller," according to Benjamin, "takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale." (364) The novelist is just the opposite as he ostracizes himself from dynamic interaction with the community. Benjamin contends that " the birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others." (364) Information, technology, and above all the trauma caused by the horror of modern war helped sever this 'counseling' business which lies to the heart of the interaction between storytellers and their audience.

Benjamin's speculations are quite relevant to Crane's cultural politics in *The Red Badge of Courage*. For Crane, at least, the Civil War became a metaphor for the individual's experience in the post-Civil War age of big business incorporation and mass society. The cultural historian T. J. Jackson Lears suggests that these years, notably the 1890s, witnessed "a shift from a Protestant to a therapeutic orientation within the dominant culture" (xiv).

This "therapeutic orientation" included the fin de siècle yearning for authentic individual experience-physical, emotional, or spiritual. *The Red Badge of Courage* is about Henry's search for such experience, for what Crane himself has called in an advice to a younger writer, as "the real thing." (Sorrentino 30)

By relocating his tale into the realm of oral storytelling Crane was trying to restore the immediacy and primacy of experience that contemporary American war fiction, and equally journalistic reporting, lost. One way of doing this is to concentrate on Henry's psychological and mental reactions and responses to the horror of war. Instead of depicting a soldier-character interacting and trying to come up with his experience of war and fighting, Crane brings his readers in full impact with the vivid experience of his soldier. Crane manages to do this through the restriction of what the reader sees to Henry's perception of what happens. Even the narrator is limited to the data in Henry's mind. James Nagel points out that this technique is impressionistic in nature. "The central device of the novel," states Nagel, "is the rendering of action and thought as they occur in Henry's mind, revealing not the whole of the battle, not even the broad significance of it, but rather the meaning of this experience to him." (52-3) This relocates the focus of the novel from the war as an historical event into the living of that event. Perception gets the upper hand over depiction affecting a predominance of the pictorial-visual perspective over narration. The confinement of the reader to the visual perspective of Henry promotes in the reader a response similar to that produced by the then fashionable practice of tableaux vivants. Henry's sensory perception of war is presented as a series of static scenes with the sensation of a dream-like state. This is the very conception of tableaux vivants as series of static scenes from paintings and other art works, as well as literary and mythological sources, were re-created with living people in lavish costumes and sets. Perhaps because these productions often succeeded in giving the impression that static scenes had come to life, these productions created peculiar effects, among the spectators the sensation of a dream-like state, which intrigued and delighted contemporary observers. Henry's perception of war around him is structured to highlight the visual impact of the tableaux vivants. Take, for instance, Henry's visual perception of the Colonel of the regiment: "In the eastern sky there was a yellow patch like a rug laid for the feet of the coming sun; and against it, black and patternlike, loomed the gigantic figure of the colonel on a gigantic horse." (17) Nothing moves and everything is static. Spatial dimensions are blurred like in a dream or some phantasmagoria. The splash of colors and the telescoping of simile, personification with metaphor animate this exotic sensory painting.

How would a spectator respond to this verbal painting? Most probably his/her response would be similar to that "listener to wondrous tales told among sugar barrels" who stood stunned with a mouth "agape in yokel fashion." The connection is not far-fetched because oral storytelling works its effects on the audience through the power of visualization. Its visual perspective is so dominant to such an extent it turns its narration into the graphic space of the tableaux vivants. Although Crane posits his ideal reader as a listener, all the latter's responses are encoded as reactions to 'this tale' as a visual spectacle. The word 'listener' presupposes the engagement of the hearing faculty but Crane's reader as listener is caught in the storyteller's spilling power of visualization.

With this reformulation of *The Red Badge of Courage* as an oral narrative, the metafictional space comes to a full significance as a threshold for new, and fresher, insights into the aesthetic-cultural poetics of a 'controversial American classic.

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