

JAMES NAGEL

*Stephen Crane and Literary
Impressionism*

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\$16.50.

It is difficult to believe that Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* is nearly ninety years old. Its sense of contemporaneity makes it seem far fresher than much of the "important" fiction published in just the past decade. In seeking to explain why *The Red Badge* and so much else of Crane's work has this freshness of vision, James Nagel has written an extremely gripping, enlightening, and provocative book on Crane as Impressionist. It is provocative, however, as much for what Nagel excludes as for what he includes in his study, and I think this is because Nagel takes too doctrinaire a view of Crane and his writings.

The fact that a writer of great talent, and a strict political doctrine are antithetical—either genius must corrupt itself, or doctrine must be broken out of—is so taken for granted that it is a cliché. What is true of political doctrine, it seems to me, must also be true of literary doctrine. The writer of genius cannot be fitted into a Procrustean bed without great compromises being made. That Stephen Crane was not a man to compromise is obvious to anyone who knows anything about his life. He could grow and change his views, yes; but he was far too unique and rebellious a person to bend to any doctrine, whether it be Impressionism, socialism, or Methodism. He was far too protean to be engaged by any "ism."

Instead, he variously used aspects of Naturalism, Realism, Impressionism, Symbolism, and all the other artistic ideas of his day (Nagel rightly stresses that Crane was deeply aware of the new painting and writing of his day, rather than being the "natural writer" *cum* unlettered idiot-genius which some critics have considered him), just as William Faulkner, another maverick genius, would do a third of a century later. To look at Crane purely in terms of these "isms" is rather like the seven blind men of the fable who examined the elephant, one groping at its tail, another at its leg, yet another at its ear, and so forth. While each partial impres-

sion is true within its limitations, none of them arrives at any real concept of the beast's "elephantness."

So, when Nagel looks at *The Red Badge*, for instance, he ignores the blatant religious symbolism that is as much a part of the novel as its Impressionism: the wafer-like sun, the Jim Conklin-Jesus Christ figure whose death results in Henry Fleming's rebirth as a wiser and humbler and less self-conscious human being, and so much more.

If the theoreticians find Symbolism and Impressionism mutually exclusive, that is for panels at MLA conventions to decide. It has nothing to do with real artistry, with what goes on in the writer's mind. Certainly Crane combined the two frequently, and it is his synthesis rather than his purity that makes his works so alive.

Two things that would have added to the usefulness of the book are the inclusion of a bibliography (it is irksome to have to trace through the copious footnotes for the full title of a critical article, especially when the initial citation is incomplete), and the dating of sources, especially Crane's own letters. For what Crane may have revealed of his intentions in 1895, say, might no longer have been true two or three years later. While references are made to the appropriate volume and page number for such things, unless one has Crane's *Collected Works* immediately at hand, knowing what page a particular letter is on is not of much immediate use. However, for these omissions Nagel's copy editor is at least as responsible as the author himself.

Despite these flaws and the narrowness of Nagel's approach, the book is an extremely valuable addition to Crane criticism. As mentioned earlier, its doctrinal approach is thought-provoking, frequently stirring one's mind to argument. Anything that stirs the mind is of permanent value, and Professor Nagel's book is valuable for both what it includes and what it omits.

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